

2. IMMERSIVITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY

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Jadé: I think that if we're talking about privilege in the world, I wonder about the connections and the disconnections. Privilege is not just something that is entrenched in immersivity, it's actually entrenched in the arts in general.

I think there was a Labour Party initiative and it was called 'Acting Up'. What was interesting about that, in terms of breaking the class ceiling, was that it was treating everything as a leaky pipeline, and you were able to see all the stages at which working-class people fall through the gaps.

That was starting from primary school, to secondary school, to drama school or not. And then to things like having to get an agent and then to casting and then being typecast into very narrow roles for working-class people, low-paid roles.

And that's even if working-class people become quite established. So, it's important to mention that it's not something that's peculiar to immersive theatre, not at all. And the other thing is, I want to declare at the top of this talk that I'm not going to have an objective distance from the things that we're talking about, and I want to be really clear about that.

So, in academic terms, I suppose, I'm an embedded subject, meaning that I am absolutely of that world. I'm not an objective outside perspective with the privilege of being an observer. The stuff that we're talking about is the stuff that's made up my life and the stuff of my experiences and of my memories.

Silvia: I think, I suppose, being practitioners, we are necessarily embedded. Like, we are going to have a point of view because it's our practice. So, I suppose it will definitely not be a rational, academic, kind of, look at privilege in general, but our own experiences. So, yes, that's an important position to come at this from. The position of subjective experience, where you are also able to critique what is occurring within that experience.

To be immediately controversial, I'm always questioning the validity of conversations like this one. There is an incredible amount of privilege in having access and time, to be part of a conversation on privilege within the art world, facilitated and distributed within the academic world. Of course, it's always important to talk about issues on privilege in any environment. It's important to raise awareness but sometimes, I wonder... I mean, once we talked about it where are the findings going to go? Who will have access to the conversations and how will they be distributed to raise awareness. How do these conversations translate in practical action for change?

I suppose I'm talking about privilege within this privileged academic world.

Jadé: Yes, I think that's absolutely right. I think there is something a bit bourgeois about being able to sit around and have conversations like this. But I also feel a little bit old, actually, and I feel like I'm getting to a stage where I am looking back

more than I'm looking forward. And in that sense, it's important to me to be able to articulate what I've done with my work and what it's meant in the context of a scene overall. And, particularly as a brown-skinned woman, what I can offer as an example to other brown-skinned women that are coming after. How can I position myself a little bit more upfront. Like, be seen.

Throughout all my career, I've been very shy. I've been very hidden and that is also partly to do with working in male partnerships. I tend to be in the background. I don't go to meetings. I'm not really the face of the company. I'm not talking about performing because I have also been a performer, which has put me right on stage, but I'm not the one talking about process. I'm not the one that people email. I'm not the one that people phone. I'm not at the front of the company in that sense.

So, I've always felt... I struggle with anxiety, but now that I've hit 50 a couple of months ago, I've felt a shift. I have felt a real shift in myself, on an emotional level: looking at legacy, I want to be able to be on the panels now. I want to do the keynote speeches. I want to, even though it's horrible to me. I feel like I have to because I want to add to that discussion about it. It doesn't always have to be a white middle-class cisgender bloke that is up there. I'm just so sick of seeing panels with white middle-class men on them and so this talk that we're doing is my 50th year of trying to be more public facing.

Silvia: Yes. It's great to be visible and visibility and recognition are also a door to more validation from the outside world and therefore more chance to reach a wide audience through the work as well.

It does make a difference whether you put yourself out there and talk about issues or not. It is hugely important to instigate conversations and debate around issues to do with privilege, but as a practitioner, I am more comfortable to make my work speak, inciting a poetic and imaginative worlds, rather than explain and question the status quo through academic platforms. I'd rather make brilliant powerful work as a female artist, then talk about the problem of gender inequality. This is, obviously, just my personal preference. But then, I also recognise that it's important to tackle issues personally around inequality and privilege and generally being aware of the present and it's failings, in order to try and change things.

Considering gender inequality and the biases that we all have for example, I am fully aware of the importance of a female artist to be present at debates, to be an active part of the conversations and a vehicle for change.

In my experience as a deviser and theatre maker, often working with male directors/writers, I have noticed how the assumption is that the male figure is leading and the female is following. Exactly because of this preconception, which fully distorts reality, it is important for me to make sure my name becomes familiar as a creator, part of the current conversations, in order to normalise diversity in panel discussion to break the preconceptions.

Jadé: There is something important there about you taking ownership of the work and the discussion of the work as well. It is important to take a position of power within that analysis, because the creation of the work is for a wider audience. The work does speak for itself, certainly with both of your practices, that work generates discussion and analysis and is highly regarded in public and academic contexts. I understand what you're saying about how it is a privilege to engage in academic discussion and analysis, but that is taking action as well. There is a relationship and there is an exchange that goes on here that does lead to action and that's kind of what you're saying.

The work that you produce (and maybe we'll get onto that), and how much your personal experience and your political leanings become really relevant within the work that you create is, in itself, speaking to this end. So, that's something that we can come back to. But I think there is something there about the artist taking the space and owning the work and discussing their work, rather than other people doing that for them. I think there is an important relationship there that, in the arts and specifically in performance, is, on the whole, really respected.

But it's interesting because, talking about the white cis male, middle-class panels: it's usually academics as well. So, by being present and leading the debate and defining what that debate is, there is an action within that act of discussion.

Silvia: I suppose, actually, it wasn't about whether you should be part of discussions like that, and whether there is a validity in actually creating the discussions and being present in them. I suppose I was only pointing out how interesting it is that we're talking about privilege from, like, already, you know, within a very privileged platform. That's all. Jadé, you look very... (

Jadé: Yes. Yes, of course. I mean, you're completely right. We are. This is a moment of privilege, being acted out. I don't come from privilege. That's the thing. I don't come from it. I don't think you do either. And I worry about that discourse making people who don't come from privilege even less likely to step up and take that space. I think it's really important that we are seen to be taking up the spaces that are traditionally occupied by a certain kind of person, like Jo said. Traditionally, all the oxygen gets sucked up. I've now got to elbow my way in and it takes the confidence that it's taken me my whole life to build.

I was not born or brought up with that level of confidence. It has taken me an embarrassingly long time. Such a long time that I feel a certain amount of shame. I feel a certain amount of sadness about how long that's taken. So, yes. I'm definitely in agreement with you, but I also feel like there's a level of having earned it, which is different to having been given it.

Silvia: Sure.

Jo: Yes.

Jadé: And I don't know why that's making me think of identity politics in some way, because I think with what you're saying, Silvia, in my case, it's also having to be

quite careful of not being used. I think that might be what you're talking about. That there are these institutions like academia, that's only one example, which have all the infrastructure and the power, etc. And then when they want to look cool or look woke or look right on, they're inviting cool or woke or right on people in the hope of smashing their image a little bit, and I think, it's all-

Like, institutions don't really exist. People exist and what I do - I don't know if you do this as well - but I look very carefully at who it is that's inviting me. And if I get a sense that their heart isn't in the right place... With PIN Network, I felt like there was a well-meaningness, but you have to be really careful, as artists, as women, as brown-skinned people, not to be used as signifiers of how modern (Laughter) - "How modern of you," - how modern institutions are. And that's a problem for me because that creates marginalisation on another level.

I can't just be there. I would never go somewhere that was inviting me as a practitioner but didn't know my work. Didn't know my work, didn't appreciate it, didn't like it, didn't believe in it, or it was the work that they wanted to find problematic. As opposed to me, you know, me, the body. And as a woman, that is just such a tricky line. And that is a problem because, there's been a lot of identity politics creating a certain kind of marginalisation, hasn't there?

There's been a lot of talk. People much more eloquent than me are talking about it, about how funding which is specifically for BAME artists is not actually very helpful. In my early days, in the '90s, when that started - funds that were directly for establishing diverse artists - it created a silo. It created this, kind of, "Oh...". It just wasn't helpful, at all. It was supposed to represent the interests of minority or marginalised groups, right? But then it was generally defined according to very abstract categories like gender or race. Then, later, it was much more about disability and later about trans issues.

And so, in some ways, my early work was already forced to relate to ethnicity and gender. And that was problematic because it took me quite a long time to transcend that into the work that I'm not able to do which is to be free. Like, to be able to start from zero is actually a really privileged position. And that's what I feel like all these other people have. I have a chip on my shoulder, that they already get to start from zero. Does that make sense, what I'm saying?

Silvia: Yes. You're already boxed into something, in a way, because you have, very, very loosely, the 'privilege' of having access to certain funding. I'm being sarcastic of course, obviously, there's no privilege there, there is simply a funding body that is specifically aimed at a minority of underprivileged individuals. But yes. I can totally understand.

Being a foreigner working in the arts hasn't always been easy for me. I guess this is not just a UK problem, but it's probably a widespread issue. Applying to funding is harder as the language required is often quite particular. It is not just about being grammatically correct or eloquent in the way you describe a concept and a project, it is about knowing what the language required is.

I completely agree on having to be able to articulate your ideas and communicate them correctly but at times, especially towards the beginning, having just moved to the UK, certain obsessions with form meant that I was not being taken seriously.

I mean, even getting a job is difficult, as a foreigner. (Laughter) You know, you're not given the same opportunities because you might not be trusted to understand the subtleties of form of the culture you are in. To begin with this happened even with my collaborators. I was shielded from representing the work as I might not choose the right words. Even writing an email to a producer was not considered desirable and I had to fight to be able to be seen as a creator rather than 'just' a performer.

I spent months being tortured about my pronunciation to make sure you would not detect an accent. I am also grateful for this of course as I recognize that accents and language is often an obstacle to being included in official discussions.

Recently I've gone back to being a bit more Italian. I personally love accents and languages and I want to wear mine with pride, but I would say I have definitely experienced the difference between being UK-born as opposed to being a foreigner, in the way that leadership is perceived.

Jadé: Yes.

Jo: It strikes me that you're both picking up here on something around the privilege of discourse, of knowing the correct discourse and being part of that group, and the power that that gives you. And you're absolutely right. Filling in the funding form is knowing how to play that game. Taking part in a panel is knowing how to contribute to a certain type of discussion in a certain type of format. A shifting of how those panels might be comprised and run is occurring, but there is something very relevant there about who owns the discourse, who is leading on it, who is setting that agenda as well.

Jadé, I'd be really interested in you expanding on an observation you've previously mentioned in regard to working with male co-directors; how in meetings and the like any discussion would be directed toward your male counterpart as if you were invisible. I was interested in how you intimated that this was partly because you chose to stay in the background and I wonder if this was due to your frustration at being ignored or if it was relevant to roles that you were taking in the meeting?

Jadé: The problem was that it was a mix of them both, I think. Because if I'd been more bolshy and more confident, then I would have just refused to be ignored. But really, the coupling of the two things meant that I just became very invisible. And I think this is a very, very Asian-looking - I mean, I'm Arab, actually, but in terms of how I present in the UK, a lot of people just assume that I'm Asian. So, for an Asian-presenting woman, the problem of invisibility is a very real one. There are lots of tropes. One of them is just that we're very quiet and passive and not opinionated.

I think that stereotype really carries with me unless I force myself to participate. And sometimes I'm over-participating because I'm over-compensating and trying to take a place. I think it doesn't help if you're working in a duet. What is slightly different to Silvia, perhaps, is that Jorge is also the producer of the company. So, in some ways, he is the one. He is the one that has to go and pitch our work. He is the one that's taking responsibility for that. And that's not something that I'm very good at doing, but he's very good at representing what we're about and talking to our partners and things like that.

However, he's good at it because people have taken him seriously all his life. I'm not good at it because no-one has really listened to me all my life. So, all those things are like the chicken and the egg, aren't they? You just don't know which came first, but certainly, they work together. Like, this last year, I've been coming to the PIIN Networking things. Ordinarily, I wouldn't have. I wouldn't have met you. I wouldn't have been there. I would have just not gone, but recently I've been forcing myself out of a slightly more hermetic lifestyle where I work with small teams.

I tend to work with the same people again, over and over again, because with those people that I've worked with for more than ten years now - some people, like, fifteen years - I don't have to get to know somebody and get them to get over what stereotype they might have of me. And the stereotypes can be very different. There's a lot of projection. There's a lot of projection on women, anyway. You have probably seen that in your life as women. I think we have to deal with projection all the fucking time. Ooh... all the time.

Dealing with projections is problematic, and so working with the same people over and over again means I can just get straight to the work and not have to deal with a lot of that nonsense.

Jo: It's interesting, as well, because what you're picking up on there is also something related to those experiences around operational structures and business management, versus those experiences of artistic collaboration, which you might want to expand on as well. Silvia, did you want to come in on that point?

Silvia: Having worked with lots of male collaborators as well as female, when it comes to the creative dialogue I always prefer female collaborators.

This is not necessarily to say that men will always try to prevaricate, but it is about finding women much more effective and practical and quick. It's much easier to have arguments with women. I don't know. I think being Italian, I do enjoy a good argument and I can get quite fiery when I care about an issue. With a woman, I find I can do that and then move on without it becoming an obstacle to the creative process. While I have had more of an issue with male collaborators who tended to close off and get defensive about arguments. This is off course a generalisation but I do feel more productive when working with female collaborators.

Jo: This relates to what Jadé was saying earlier about projections and expectations. Might this also have something to do with perceptions of 'angry women' and that being seen as a negative rather than an attitude that is about getting the work done, having a clear vision and knowing what you need and want.

Silvia: We all project, all the time. You know, I project as a woman and we're always constantly doing that, but definitely, definitely. Passion often gets mistaken for aggression, but it's just passion and enthusiasm.

Jo: It also reminds me of something that Jadé said way back when we were chatting at another point; "Why should I be nice?" Why, just because I'm a woman, should there be this perception of the way in which I function. Of course, it is important to be kind and to create good working spaces, but-

Jadé: Yes, yes.

Jo: -the moment a woman is seen to be assertive and not to be demure, not deferring to gendered expectations of 'niceness' - Jadé used the term 'bolshy' - there is a discomfort around that. Jadé, do you want to talk a bit more about that?

Jadé: Oh, yes. Definitely. I come from a training background where the way of being led... I come, culturally, from a very strict prescribed way of teaching physicality, so with my cultural background, how we learn is very much like you copy the master and you copy and copy and copy, and you do it like the master says, and you don't speak, you don't have a voice, you are the student, just get on with it, and you work really hard. And I also trained in the Grotowski method and that was the same thing. It was very, very Russian, hardcore. If you weren't breaking bones, you weren't working hard enough. I got all my training and leader persona from those experiences.

So, when I used to train people - and I did train people a lot - I had this reputation as a taskmaster and I was a taskmaster. I totally owned that. That was the way that I led and the way I achieved a lot of very high results. Looking back now, I feel that that was a very dubious practice that I was involved in. It could be construed as reckless with people's bodies, not very responsible, definitely not caring, and I, in the end, also did break my back very, very badly.

So coming from that world and having this kind of persona meant that I also was an accomplice in this projection onto me and I had that reputation. Then people would come from far and wide to experience this reputation. But the problem, really, was that this was something I'd learned. I noticed, over and over again, that when people were speaking about the male leaders, who were similar, there was a, kind of, positivity around how they described men who led like that as well. There was a positivity around it, like, "Oh, he really knows what he wants and he really goes for it. He really leads," and da-da-da.

And then I notice the vocabulary around me, doing the same sort of thing, is, "Oh, she's a taskmaster. Oh, she doesn't take any shit." It was slightly negative and kind of like, "Oh, no," and my favourite one, as in my least favourite, was, "Oh, she's really scary. She's, like, really scary." And I'm, like, "Okay." Thing is,

I'll take it because I was owning that side of me that existed, but what I did feel confused about was why it was different when I did it, compared to my male counterparts, and there weren't very many other women who got to my level of leading, really. Very few. So, I was always, even in training, pitting myself against other men.

So, if we're running or climbing or jumping or doing acrobatics or whatever - I didn't have other women around me. I just didn't. There were always only other men trained with men. And then we all got older, moved away, did our own things, became leaders in our own rights, and I noticed this pattern of really gendered language around leadership. I'm not defending the leadership style but I'm just saying that there is a real difference in how I was spoken about. By other women as well, not just by other men. By other women.

I remember that there was an article that I had to say something about in Total Theatre, and the woman who had written the article... It was a really great article. It was lovely. It was about one of our processes in Brazil, blah-blah-blah, but she called me a taskmaster in it, and I emailed her and I said, "Don't do that because I think it's rude, and I wonder, if I were a man, if you would have written that." And she changed it. Maybe I was being over-sensitive. I don't know.

Jo: Out of interest, what was it changed to?

Jadé: I have no idea. I can't remember. I can't remember. That is a good question, though, Jo.

Jo: I'm interested in what your individual experiences are in relation to gendered exclusion within the immersive arts industry and specifically around instruction-based work that incorporates digital technologies.

Silvia: This relates to one more thought about gender and about preferring working with women. I have experienced this thing where the industry, as well as the general public, will tend to think that if a man and a woman pair up to make work together, the man must be the leader and the woman the follower. Do we still see women as the muses and men as the geniuses? Is it so strongly imprinted in our mind due to past inequality that we can't see past it?

This is still an existing issue for me when it comes to rotozaza and my work with instruction-based performance. Even though both myself and Ant Hampton, with whom I have worked for ten years under the name of rotozaza, are very careful about giving the right credits and information about the creative team, people still assume that Ant is the driving force of the company and I am the performer. This keeps happening over and over, despite the fact that we are both really pushing towards making people aware that it is both of us who are leading on projects.

Often with devised theatre the person who takes on the role of the director will be perceived as the leader of the company and the deviser-performer the follower. Yet the company is the combination of performer/deviser and director.

I guess this is also why I now work as an individual artist and choose my collaborators ad hoc for each project depending on what form I choose. This way there is no confusion on roles.

I find this kind of thing happens much more in theatre than in technology-based performance, where, even though the general stereotype of it is that it is a male geeky world, there are loads of women doing really amazing work. And maybe because it's a different world, a younger world, maybe, in a way, it isn't weighed down by old stale preconceptions.

Jadé: Yes. I think I agree with Silvia on all of those three main points. First of all, if you work in a duet with a man, the man always gets the questions asked of them and you're bypassed. I am quite lucky to work with someone who is really dedicated to making sure that credit comes to me when it's due and that my name is equally on there. He's very persistent in confronting other people's biases. We've been in situations a lot where we've gone to visit a venue, and they always come to him and say, "Where do you want this? What do you want? How do you want this?" and he always says, "Can you please go and ask Jadé?"

And he has to be really defiant because he could easily answer the question. The question could be really stupid but he will purposely not answer it and he will say, "Can you go and talk to Jadé? She's the director. Could you go and speak to her, please?" And they're, like, "Oh..." and that's just constant. That's a thing that I appreciate, because it points it out to the person. Rather than me coming in and going, "Excuse me, I think you'll find, you have to ask me," and pointing it out myself. It's actually stronger, in some ways - it's still the white-presenting male that is buffering between me and public space, me and the outside world. So, in some ways, I still end up relying on him, and that's just the way it is.

So, that's quite tricky. As you know, it's been quite difficult to be considered the director. Just by saying the words 'the director', somebody who looks like me just doesn't come to people's minds, at all. With technologists, though, there is something a bit different. I work mainly with sound technology so the sound designers and sound technologists that I work with - I don't know if I've just lucked out with who I've ended up with but they are both very, very interested, actually, in my ideas, and I think that's the key. I think it's about being recognised for your mind and your ideas.

Further to that, I would like to posit the suggestion that the work that we do is somehow necessarily... There is a feminised aspect to it, and I think that that's really appreciated by people who don't have that vision. So I think that perhaps there's something essentially failing in the way that we work, around communication, around listening - if it's instructional work. It always is around listening.

It's around questions and more subtle, you might say softer, qualities. I's not "Bish, bash, bosh. Action." There's something around encouraging people's humanity to come to the fore and vulnerabilities to come to the fore. Perhaps that is something that the technologists that I work with appreciate in terms of

the working environment that I create as well. Also the experience that I bring, as a woman, as a mother, as somebody who is quite influenced by that... I'm quite interested in being a woman and a lot of that comes through in the work. So, I think some of the technologists that I work with don't have that point of view and they actually appreciate that point of view.

Silvia: As you were talking, it just struck me. It's just the world, the industry and the perception that comes from the outside. It's not the people you're working with.

Jadé: Yes.

Silvia: You reminded me of this incident, which I have observed many times before. I just suddenly heard the voice of this brilliant sound engineer I was working with at a festival where I was presenting my show *Macondo*. I had no technician with me for the show so I was taking care of directing the whole technical staff.

The sound engineer loved the show, the complexity of synchronisation of many different devices, video and audio, pre-recorded as well as live, got him really excited about the work and he said "You are mad."

Why mad? Why, if I do something complex, the immediate reaction is to think that I am somewhat insane?

Jadé: That is interesting. Because that is the feminised version of genius.

Silvia: Yes, but why do I have to be mad?

Jadé: Well, yes. Yes, that sense...

Silvia: It's really an interesting thing because I hadn't thought about it and, as you were talking, it clicked and it was, like, "Yes, he did say 'You are mad.'" Why? Because I did something really complex which it took him a very long time to process.

It did take me by surprise though so I didn't really reply. I ignored the clumsiness and focused on the fact that he was impressed by the strategy used but I was definitely thinking... "Well, yes. I mean, it's not a sign of madness but-

Jadé: Yes, yes.

Silvia: You know, it's brilliant to work with collaborators, whether they're a male or a female. And you are very lucky in that, that Jorge is really so committed-

Jadé: So pro.

Silvia: ...to pushing that, to saying to the outside, "No, actually. She's not mad. She's a brilliant director," and that's the work that should be done constantly.

Jadé: Yes, and that's really problematic, isn't it? That, yet again, I'm still relying on a white male to buffer that relationship. Even though it's beneficent. This is something that Jorge says that I think is really beautiful: if you have privilege, you use it beneficently. Be generous with it. I think that he does that on my behalf. But working with a male co-director and going to meetings and stuff,

what's beginning to happen is that, when we pitch, we're kind of balancing each other out.

It's very deep and relies on the psychology of wanting your mum and dad, somehow. There's this father figure and - it doesn't have to be gendered. Sometimes, the woman is the father figure and the man is the mother figure. In our case, it happens to be that the father figure is the one that reassures. He has a very - Well, you know him, he has a very calming and reassuring presence. He's very diplomatic. He's smart. He is logical. He is not mad. (Laughter) He's un-mad. (Laughter) He is everything that people need to feel safe, and then comes me.

I'm a bit pushy and maybe try to be a lot stronger with pushing the boundaries of what the project can do and trying to be a little bit more punk within our limitations and pushing them and being a bit more bolshy, a bit more rude. But it's also the spark that they need to not be bored. So, you have these feminine and masculine, old-fashioned ways of looking at these trades, that we perform. I feel that: are we performing this? I think I'm quite interested in when things become performed.

When I speak about class, I suddenly have this feeling that I am performing my working class-ness. Or if I'm talking about my ethnicity, I have a feeling that I'm performing it, or I'm performing my female-ness. It's just very interesting when these things become part of a presentation and when they are used for... I don't know. Growing up, in the way that I did, I had to have lots of different ways... When someone phones and then your mum has a posh voice for the phone and she doesn't talk like that, no-one talks like that, actually, but there's a posh voice.

It's a bit like that for me, in the sense that I have to adapt to where I am constantly. Constantly. I have to adapt to certain spaces. Everywhere, I would allow myself to perform a certain aspect of myself... It's all about navigating constantly. It's quite tiring. You have to read the room really, really quickly. You have to convince people that you belong there, even when you feel like you don't.

You have to deal with walking into big spaces and being asked... One of the things that I get really annoyed about recently is when people, generally gatekeepers like security guards or receptionists - You've walked into somewhere posh, where it doesn't look like you should belong. Especially if I'm not dressed up. I mean, that has a lot to do with it. These institutions have people guarding, and they'll say things like, "Yes, can I help you?" A bit like, "You don't belong here. You're lost, clearly," instead of, "Who are you here to see?" Which is what Jorge would get. I get, "Yes, can I help you?" (Laughter) It's those really subtle differences that are actually weird. If we return to this idea of institutions, that I'm quite interested in, what they represent. When I started out working, it was about having this freedom to be a bit punk - When I say punk, I'm not talking about mohicans and green hair and stuff. I'm just talking about being able to be free to have that feeling of being anti-establishment. In the beginning, that just meant making more site-specific work, the non-narrative work.

So, it's non-literary. It's a very physical theatre-style of work, and all of that was quite punk because it was giving a middle finger to the establishment. The establishment, in a super-general sense, was anything that had the word 'royal' in it, or drama schools, or The National Theatre, or reviewers from The Telegraph, or whatever. So, in that sense immersivity, in the beginning, was located for me in squatting culture and making experimental music.

That's actually how I got into that world, through experimental music and making what, in those days, was more like multimedia work, performance art-style stuff. And it was very, very, very DIY. And it had to be DIY. It had to be DIY because we didn't have anything. Didn't have anything. And that, coupled with the connection to Grotowski, was a total revelation because that was taking the audience and actor relationship to another level.

But, come full circle to now, what I think we see is that it's just like conventional theatre in the sense that the same kind of privileged group, like white middle-class men, are able to occupy spaces with their work which, in some cases, is really... They tend to be able to get away with much more shit work than you or I could, Silvia. I think that when a posh white bloke is saying to you, "Look at my work. Isn't it amazing," everyone's like, "Oh, yes. Well, you're a posh white guy. You must know what you're talking about."

Whereas when I'm coming along with my work, or a foreigner is coming along with her work and we say, "Look at our work," you'd better be good. You'd better be more than good, to be taken seriously because they are shortcutting to the top. And when I say 'the top', what do I mean? I mean, venues. Funding. Festivals. Gigs. They were able to get a seat at those tables where we were still continuing to make and make and make and make and work our arses off and build a reputation. And my name, Persis-Jadé Maravala, is not the sort of name that was instilling confidence in people. It didn't open doors. I didn't have connections at The National Theatre. I didn't have any connections at all.

So, that sense of rebelling against those institutions is interesting because those very institutions are now offering workshops in our methodology and they have the power and the ability to become a space that offers learning about immersive practice. Whilst, all the time, it was actually their own stagnant and hierarchical design faults that pushed us into making work outside of that, and so become a marginalised art form. All I'm trying to say is that those spaces are problematic because they do exclude certain people. And when I say 'certain people' I mean brown people and I mean poor people, and they exclude them from feeling welcome.

Now, I can walk into those spaces and I demand to be welcomed. My posture is different. I've earned my stripes. But back up to twenty years ago or even ten years ago, there was a constant feeling of impostor syndrome. "This is not anything that I could belong to. I'm very much here as a gate-crasher." There's just lots of irony around what the dominant culture is and how we rebelled against it and, now, how alternative culture has just been co-opted by the mainstream, which means there is no alternative anymore.

Silvia: And it's going to be even more apparent now, in the current situation. As theatres struggle to programme big shows ensuring safe social distancing is respected and so on, suddenly, the kind of work we make is going to be more and more visible. I find that really interesting and kind of infuriating at the same time because the original push to do things in cafes, in supermarkets, in conference rooms but not in the theatre was exactly that; 'I don't need the theatre'. I don't want to have to deal with technicians and big institutions with their rules and regulations. I want to be able to present whatever I make without having to go through a middle-man.

Off course there always is a middle-man of some sort, but to be able to show work outside of the confines of theatres, was a necessity I had. An urge to create something different, where reality would take centre stage but framed within a poetic narrative.

To be able to be independent. To be able to take my car with Gemma [Brockis] and three audience members, and drive through the city without having to ask anything of anyone. To turn the world into a stage and the audience into the players is what I have always been interested in.

And now that will probably become the new mainstream, which is great in one way, but also really troubling when you come across an industry which is used to relying on big names to push shows, rather than to open up to new lesser known names because of the validity of the work itself.

The irony is that we started making work of this kind exactly to try and escape the mainstream, to look for alternative places to turn into stages, incorporating reality into fiction and the other way around. Now the mainstream is looking exactly for that. A new form. Theatre that doesn't need theatres is what the industry is looking into. I just hope it will not follow the fate of immersive theatre, which has conquered the mainstream and become so commercial that I sometimes cringe if I have to use the term to describe my work. I do understand the necessity to find terminology which can be widely understood and shared, although I fear this does nothing but divide people and work into boxes, taking us back to the initial point of feeling that we are constantly being labelled.

Jadé: Totally, yes.

Jo: You've brought the conversation nicely to thinking around the responsibility of these big institutions. Those in positions of power and their responsibility in addressing access and inclusivity, which necessitates attention to levelling representation for female practitioners. This must include redressing historical imbalances which urgently attend to intersectionality here, acknowledging class, race, heritage, gender, sexuality. But you've also led us into the idea of appropriation in immersive practice; where experimentation and innovation is appropriated by the mainstream and exploited to commercial ends. Consequently, a sudden shift to those dominant voices that are then deferred to once that appropriation has taken place. Attached to this is an, often hidden, cultural appropriation that exists within those forms, which Jadé, you have

touched on before. You're both suggesting that it feels like now we're living through a time, under Covid-19, where interactive practice and instruction-based work that uses digital platforms is really coming into its own. Might this then become a space of opportunity for those misrepresentations in form to be addressed?

Silvia: I think it's definitely a space of opportunity and a dangerous space at the same time. As I started off saying, "What's the point of this conversation?" I am now, at the end of this conversation, going to say, "There *is* a point in these kinds of conversations." To make sure you are included and recognised as an active and original artist. To make sure that we can remember where things come from. And I am sure there will be plenty of instances where different experimental strategies are adopted by more recognised commercial names. I am sure we will see big personalities making some instruction-based online performances, and it's totally fine.

Jadé: Yes, they will. If it hasn't already happened, yes.

Silvia: So, there. At the end of this conversation, I go back on myself to say, actually, there is a point in these conversations. This is why it's relevant to be present in the debate: to remind people the importance of the roots of an idea, as well as its developments and potential commercial success, to make audiences are aware of the history of a particular form.

Jadé: Yes. Coming from Silvia, the way you're saying it, something that gets me quite annoyed, is this idea that some white, middle-class guy has discovered something or invented something that actually has been borrowed or has an incredible history behind it. And I think it is about colonialism, really. We're living in this world after 500 years of colonialism and the culture of colonialism is now the dominant culture. White dominance tells us that it owns this practice or body-related knowledge. My work is a lot more rooted in body as well as technology. I work a lot with human-to-human interaction and there's a lot of bodily influence in that. Things like ritual. Things like eye-contact. You know, all those things that we were told previously were somehow a bit primitive or a bit invasive, or it's hippie, or it's lame.

It is always degraded, in some way, but I think in the case of immersive work, we see how there is this pick-and-mix approach to choosing what bits can be stolen and what bits can be used. I've been writing about this and hoping to make something out of it. This idea of commodifying and sexing-up practices that are really, really old is something that the West does very well. It also relates to things looking like personalisation but it is personalisation en masse. Where participants don't have any more agency than choosing between a red door and a blue door, but they all end up in the same fucking corridor.

I think that colonialised culture, which is now a dominant culture, is a very white, Euro-centric or Western-centric way of being. That decides what is the standard. That decides what is the norm. The way I work, we're all the time encouraging behaviours that are more aligned with the cultures that Jorge and I come from.

Jorge is white-presenting but comes from a black country. And I come from the cultures that I come from and we have a certain amount of cultural practices that are part of our backgrounds, our origins, a way of being embodied with each other.

A way of physically navigating space, for example. A way of creating intimacy that might be profound but not sexual. Bodies in public space. All of those kinds of enculturated knowledges, all of those inherent knowledges we've put into our work. When you see spaces now that are considered to be spaces of culture, there's always an idea... You'll always see the kind of person that is attracted to the latest cool thing to go to. When we did *Hotel Medea*, for example, by the time it got to Southbank, it was really attracting thrill-seeking culture vulture-type people who wanted to be cool and trendy, who wanted to be there because they wanted to be ahead of the game.

They'd heard about this all-night show and what we realised was that they were just there for being there's sake. They weren't there because they were interested in the idea of it or interested in the myth of Medea or anything as profound as that. It was to tick it off their list. Like, "Oh, yes. Done that. That's cool, that means I'm cool." I remember specifically performing that show and there are moments that get very dense, and they get very thoughtful, or it gets very sparse, and in those moments, I saw those audiences and they would be bored. They were bored.

Yes, it's just this feeling of, the higher up I go, the more successful I become, the whiter my world is, and I was losing the kinds of people that I made the work with and for, in the beginning. They weren't able to- weren't coming anymore. And we were really fighting with Southbank to keep those prices really low, and we do have a policy of keeping our prices either free or very, very low. But the fact that it was located at the Southbank meant that a certain type of person would come.

The body-based work, I'm not sure, in Covid, how that's going to work out for us because it's very much about rescuing the knowhow, the knowledge of body-related practices and hoping that it's something that people are going to appreciate more, post-Covid. As opposed to going, "Oh, yes, but actually, why go out ever again? I can just do everything and experience culture on my laptop and maybe I never need to go and hang out in a room with other bodies ever again." I think it could go either way, really. I'm not sure.

Jo:

I think it's proving a need for human connection - physical, human connection as fundamental to cultural experiences. It's marking the significance of conviviality, communality, and some sense of shared experience, whether that be via intimate one-on-one encounters or in a larger group. This current situation is proving that there is a vibrant space for work that does function effectively in digital contexts, but there is also a desire to hold fast to that work that is very human, very physical, that plays with the experiential and all of the possibilities that that affords.

In drawing our conversation to a close, is it useful to ask what do we do with our privilege? What are the changes that we want to see and the ways in which we can be part of the solution? What do we hope for? What do you hope for, for your future practice and for those artists who are coming through?

Jadé: I'd quite like to think about the systemic problems. The systemic economic and cultural positions of the class system. It's a really tricky one. There are so many different levels that I think change needs to happen on. For myself, I can only say that the change I hope that I can make is by being more public-facing. For people to be able to see that someone who was on the dole for as long as I was, somebody who doesn't come from privilege, has earned her place here. And that means providing ways in for other younger artists, I suppose.

I think that's what I'm trying to do with the more educational side of the company. Giving people confidence, and also being unpopular, and making sure that that's alright, as a woman, to not be nice. To be very ethical and have a sense of decency and not confuse that with being nice. So, that's the other thing I'd like to change.

And mostly, it's about encouraging people to get out of the fucking way because there's no point in everyone clamouring to get to the top and trying to let more people have the same rights to get to the top when there just isn't space because no-one moves out of the way. So, a whole re-thinking of the shape of what decision-making, at a national level, looks like for culture.

Silvia: Yes. Sounds good. That sounds great. I mean, I think it'd be great, yes, for institutions to be braver and not to follow and to be more knowledgeable. Braver and more knowledgeable would be brilliant. (Laughter)

Jo: And, that's a brilliant place to end.