



Theatre as a Sample-Based Artform: An Interview with JQ (Q Brothers)

[00:00:19] INTRO

Duška Radosavljević: Hello!

In the Gallery today we rewind back to 2002, and further back to the 1990s, 1980s, all the way to Elizabethan England in fact, and then fast forward back to the present day. Our guest today is JQ [Jeffrey Qaiyum], Creative and Musical Director of the Q Brothers Collective – a hip hop theatre ensemble based between Chicago, LA and New York. Back in 2002, the Q Brothers' version of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* under the title of *The Bomb-itty of Errors* took the Edinburgh Fringe festival by storm, melting the hearts of even the staunchest theatre critics.

In the conversation that follows we find out how the piece emerged out of the New York's Tisch School of the Arts in the late 1990s, through a collaboration between JQ's brother Gregory Qaiyum (GQ) with Erik Weiner, Jason Catalano and Jordan Allen-Dutton as well as JQ himself as a musical consultant. The piece eventually led to a comedy sketch show on the MTV, but the Q Brothers' theatrical career also remained closely linked with the Bard: *The Bomb-itty of Errors* was followed by *Funk it Up About Nothin'* in 2008 and by the company's inclusion in the Globe Theatre's 2012 World Shakespeare Festival with a specially commissioned *Othello Remix* in the language of American rap.

This conversation took place between Chicago and London on Zoom on 16th July 2020.

[00:01:59] DISCOVERING A STYLE

Duška Radosavljević: So we are doing a research project where we are looking at this intersection between theatre, speech, sound, music, and we are really interested in what this means in terms of how we think differently about theatre-making now with different technologies, different ways of making performance that are available to us. When you look at the trends that have been vying for dominance on the theatre scene over the last couple of decades – or maybe more, three decades say – we had a phase when everybody was doing physical theatre and maybe this was the time when you guys came on the scene and you weren't doing physical theatre, you were doing something quite different. So I really wanted to talk to you about your work and how it came about, how you guys as a company, the Q Brothers, chanced upon this idea and this format of working. *The Bomb-itty of Errors* was something that stayed – it's very memorable in my mind, I've remembered it ever since, it was exhilarating. So in this conversation I'd just like to trace this very simple journey of how it started, how you worked together to make a show like that and then what's happened since, because I've seen a lot of you have pursued individual careers in different directions and I'm interested what's happened since then.

JQ: Yeah, sure. Our form began with my brother, GQ, who's my actual brother, we share parents. He was at NYU, at Experimental Theatre Wing [ETW], where they teach physically-based acting, right? So you're right that it did come out of that. It was very much about clowning, about being larger than life, and then about experimenting with whatever you wanted to and really getting adventurous with your passions trying to bring those in to the artform you were learning.

DR: This was the Tisch School, right?

JQ: The Tisch School of the Arts, yeah. There's different wings, there's the playwrights, and then experimental theatre wing is one of them, and that's where all the weirdos go! [*Laughter.*] And my brother was one of those weirdos, and he was taught by I would argue even weirder people than him. And they offered, as your senior project – it was an optional thing actually – it wasn't like he needed it to graduate, he was done with all the credits, they just gave you like a \$200 stipend and space if you wanted to make a project. And he said: 'I want to do something, and I want to combine theatre and what we're learning with hip hop', because I was his brother and I was pulling him into rapping and making beats and all this, and he was pulling me towards the theatre. And he got a few of his friends who were also rapping. So like, in New York we would just like hang out all weekend and, you know, these acting students are very – they weren't shy, let's just put it that way! So when I would



say: 'Let's just freestyle', and you know, there was a lot of marijuana involved and a lot of drinking and we would end up outside of a bar and there would be eight to 12 of us sitting around in what we call a cypher, and we would rap. I would beatbox and then somebody else would beatbox and I would rap, and we would just trade in complete freestyle off the top of the head, not this like half-curated freestyle. This was the golden era of hip hop in the '90s where freestyle meant you made it up 100%.

DR: Sorry, I'm going to stop you here and actually I'm going to rewind even further back. So you grew up in New York City?

JQ: Chicago.

DR: Chicago. In Chicago, okay. Is this where you began to learn these skills, in Chicago? The skills of freestyle rapping.

JQ: You know, I think like most kids who end up rapping, I learnt it at school in bathrooms, smoking cigarettes in the bathroom, sneaking in, you know, in between classes and beatboxing and trying to mess around with other people I found that were into the same music. At this point hip hop was not pop culture, hip hop was a counterculture, and so you had to dig it out. Nobody was advertising, the record companies were surprised that these records were selling. They were putting no marketing effort into them, and kids were eating them up and couldn't get enough, right? So we would copy tapes for each other, make mix-tapes for each other, pass them back and forth, and inevitably sometimes you would just be like: 'I want to do this!', or you know: 'I want to at least try it', you know, and I was fortunate enough that I had like a little, crappy, '80s drum machine and so I would actually try it, you know, in my basement, going through like a practice guitar amp and then eventually I learnt to like imitate those beats with my mouth. Instead of hearing a drum machine, I just heard sound that I was able to imitate. And I was able to imitate sounds – I don't know if that's just because half my family is from South Asia and half my family's not, and so I would listen to my relatives speak and then I would do it and I was able to change the shape of my mouth and make their accents perfectly. And so that was like the beginnings of being able to imitate, and that's really what any art as you begin is, right? It's imitation, imitation, imitation until you do it so much that somebody says: 'You know what, that's such a you thing to do', and then all of a sudden you have a style, right?

DR: And you were more into music than GQ, were you?

JQ: Yeah, yeah. I was just making beats, DJing, rapping all the time, non-stop. I never wanted to do theatre. I just wanted to rap, and theatre was my available channel to make a living rapping because I didn't really want to do it any other way.

DR: And how did GQ then decide to pursue it? Did he want to be an actor to begin with? Is that why he went to the Tisch?

JQ: Yeah.

DR: So when you say he was at the Tisch School doing this project and you were rapping with your friends, at that point were you both in New York City?

JQ: Yeah. So like, he was in university and then I was in a different university, in the country somewhere. And then he said: 'I got this project going.' One of his friends when he got them together, you know, he said: 'I want to do hip hop and theatre', and they had five weeks to make a project and, you know, two weeks into it he said: 'We don't have anything yet', and one of the guys said: 'Why don't we just adapt something?' And, you know, I think G said: 'What does that mean?' [*Laughter.*] He said: 'It means we take something that's public domain', and G probably said: 'What does that mean?', and he said: 'That's free.' This was Erik, Erik Weiner, who was one of the original Bomb-itty [International] members, he said – we call him Dragon – and Dragon said: 'I saw this one awesome production of *Comedy of Errors* by the Flying Karamazov Brothers, and it was a four-person take on *The Comedy of Errors*, so I know that it can be done plot-wise with just four people', right? My brother went to the public library and watched the Lincoln Center version and was like: 'Ah, that's awful. Somebody should do something with that!', you know!? So he started writing it and actually at that point I didn't have many classes so I would spend – and I was at a really hippy school where like class was optional.

DR: And, what did you study?



JQ: Music. Music Tech.

DR: Music, okay.

JQ: Yeah. So I was basically writing rhymes and DJing, essentially. But I would come into New York for weeks at a time and just live with G – so he was like: ‘Hey, if you’re going to live with me I got to write this project, you write rhymes, take this Shakespeare book and just start translating these pages, this is what I have to bring in tonight.’ So actually the first rhymes in the *Bomb-itty*, I wrote! [Laughter.] And I remember: ‘Are you trippin’, your house is at the Phoenix, that shit is more ridiculous than a Puff Daddy remix!’ And it never ended up making the album, they didn’t want to make that deep of a pop-culture reference at the time because we wanted to keep it more classic: ‘Hands full of Kleenex’ is what it became. But anyway I started writing rhymes for them, and G was like: ‘This is...’ – and they tried it, put on some beats on, instrumentals of other people’s music and they tried it, just out loud because that, they were ETW kids, you don’t talk about things and you don’t think about things, you don’t figure out theatre by noodling it out. You figure out theatre by getting on your feet and putting it in your body and saying: ‘That felt right’, you know? Or: ‘That didn’t feel right.’ And, so they tried it and they, like – lightbulb, bing-bing-bing!!! – they could not believe what was happening. It was really special. And I think they realised something very early on and their professors ended up doing it too. The first version was very rough but it was a hit at NYU. Like, I remember the students and the professors freaking out and going back and watching. Like, I have a tape of that, it is pretty awful but the kernel of what we had discovered was fantastic, because the irony was everyone was like: ‘You’re taking Shakespeare and hip hop, these two things that are unlike each other and smash up, mash up,’ you know. And it turns out that they were nearly identical and required very little mashing up.

[00:12:29 to 00:14:23] ‘Your Husband Sends Me’ from *The Bomb-itty of Errors* (1998)

[00:14:23] ADD-RAP-TATION

DR: That was a really interesting discovery, I think, the way in which Shakespeare lands himself, if you like, so well to – why do you think that is? What’s the point of commonality between Shakespeare and rap?

JQ: People think that when they read Shakespeare in school, I think that even if you cognitively and like intellectually know this isn’t true, there’s still part of you, because it was so long ago, that believes people just talked like that, you know? You think people walked around talking like that – they didn’t. It was like a totally heightened, poetic way of describing how people spoke at that time. So you know, that’s what hip hop is of our time. It is the heightened, poetic way, a musical way of speaking. It’s not as if we walk around speaking in rhyme, in rap. Some of that language we use and certain some people more than others, you hear the musicality when they speak. But it’s not like they walk around with beats on them and they rhyme to you the whole time, right? That’s heightened, just like he was. So if I can put it this way, the hot verse of its day, in his day, was iambic pentameter. It was catchy, really, it was truly just catchy. And, for us like four-four time over boom bat beats with snares on the two and the four, that’s like: ‘We found something with hip hop!’ And it probably comes from R&B and blues and even like late ’70s rock where the breakdown and they would suck out all the guitars and it would be [*SFX*], you know, Steve Winwood and Steve Miller and all these big, stupid – when rock was getting into like hairband territory and they would pull out at two thirds of the way through the song before they brought it back for the big, final chorus – they would pull it out and sort of chant over the drums. So it’s no mistake that then Rick Rubin took that sound and made an entire genre out of it, you know.

DR: You then chanced upon this magic formula with rap and Shakespeare, and was this about ’99 that the first version of *The Bomb-itty of Errors* was created?

JQ: ’98. Spring of ’98. We went up in New York by fall ’99 and ran for seven months. Then – I’m not sure, some of the trajectory gets fuzzy there – but eventually we went to the HBO Comedy Festival in Aspen and we won that, and then we ended up in LA with a movie deal from MTV and a TV deal, and we had to send a second cast to Edinburgh for that first show. So the first show you saw was not the original cast. Yeah, the second one was.



DR: What I'm interested in is how long it took to make the show? And to what extent was it an exercise that you described at the beginning was actually translating Shakespeare's verse to rhymes on paper, and to what extent was it a process whereby you were developing this show in front of the audience over some period of time before it reached this stage where you were able to hand it over to a different group of actors?

JQ: Yeah, dealing with a new artform is pretty difficult because there was a lot of tech involved that people were not used to in theatre. We worked on it for – after that initial version we actually just worked on 20 minutes of it and then we threw this like sort of backers' audition and from that we ended up with a director and a producer. And they took us to like a workshop situation up at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, and we ended up working for I want to say four weeks, three/four weeks on it, and writing and rewriting and rehearsing and then doing shows. So we had feedback for the first time with all this new material, and we knew we had a hit and so much so that the producer who had originally intended to do it a year from now said: 'I got to put this thing up right away. We're going up next month', and she took this – it was like a lumberyard in NoHo, in Manhattan, and it was being changed into a theatre – and she funded the rest of it being changed into a theatre just so she had a space to put us up. We got fast-

tracked very much. I'm sure we were young, you know, it was the heyday of boy bands – I'm sure there was an element of like: 'Look at these young 19 to 22-year-old kids who made their own work', and you know, we ended up on like Rosie O'Donnell for that. It was very – there was some stuff around it, the MTV stuff was related to the art and sometimes unrelated to the art. But it went through periods of incubation and when we ended up going up out at 45 Bleecker, in Manhattan, was the first place Off-Broadway, and I remember just fighting with the sound people and just being like – they were like: 'We can't hear it!', I'm like: 'You aren't the ears this is for, you know, this is a louder artform than you're used to. Everything needs to be louder, everything needs to be louder.' And I was the DJ and I would fight and fight and fight and fight and fight and so, you know, now, because hip hop is pop, people are used to drums being very loud and hearing words over them. So it's much easier to get the sound we want and it's easier for sound designers and board ops to achieve what we're looking for because they have a reference point frankly, you know?

DR: So then there was a string of other – you call them 'rapdaptations'?

JQ: 'Addraptations,' yeah. Because you 'add rap to it', right?

DR: Add rap to it, yes! So then you did another two Shakespeares, from what I understand. There was *Funk It Up About Nothin'* and more recently *Othello*, but presumably there was other work as well that you might have made either together or separately in parallel. I'm interested in why

you chose to stay with Shakespeare when you did those other two 'addraptations', and then what else was going on as another layer of your work?

JQ: So the reason – we ended up in LA, obviously, for TV and movie stuff and my brother was in a bunch of movies, and then we took – there was an actors' strike in LA and there was no work and G said: 'We got to make some money and we've got to get back to what started this whole thing. Let's finally do the second play.' And we talked to our eldest brother and he liked the Kenneth Branagh version of it, the movie, and he was like: 'You should watch that.' So we watched it and were like: 'Yeah, it was really funny and I bet we could do something really funny with that.' So we took it and we made this, you know, sort of celebration of *Much Ado*, with a bigger cast, we wanted to use women, we wanted to open it up and bring more dance into it. The reason we went with Shakespeare was because that's what we knew, it was free, and we had an outlet for it. We took that play and we brought it to Chicago Shakespeare Theater and called them and said: 'Hey, we're the Q Brothers', and they were like: 'We know, we did *The Bomb-itty*', they didn't do it with us in it but they did it, and: 'You know, we would love to show you this new work.' And we brought it in and read it for them and they said: 'Hey, let's make this thing. We've been dying for something new.' When you have a company and your playwright has 37 plays and he's, you know, 600 years old, I think you're looking for ways to spice it up a little! [Laughter.]

DR: Yes. Yes.



JQ: They ended up producing us all over the world. We went to Edinburgh with that, we ended winning awards at the festival, and because of that the Globe heard about us. So following our run in Edinburgh we were in east London at Royal Theatre Stratford East and I think Dominic Dromgoole was the artistic director, AD at the Globe at the time, and he came and brought his family and his kids freaked out at the show, at *Funk It Up*, and so he said: 'Come to my office tomorrow.' And we showed up and he said: 'I'm doing this thing called the Globe to Globe Festival for the cultural Olympiad in 2012, are you guys interested? I can't not bring America into it, that would be weird, but we're doing 37 plays in 37 languages so it would be weird if you just did English and we did English.' So he was like: 'I'm thinking of bringing you guys in and calling the language "American hip hop"', and I thought: 'Wow! What an awesome opportunity for hip hop to be recognised on a global level, and for us to be the ambassadors of America, of American art, you know? American Shakespearean art', and was like: 'You know, what a great – pff!', you know? I'm just like a little kid from Chicago who just wanted to rap. It was a big deal. And, so we said: 'Hey, we're already working on *Midsummer*, we have this one started', and he said: 'Well, this is the thing. I only have *Othello* left!', and so we said: 'We'll make *Othello*!' So we started making *Othello*, and *Othello* ended up – we were able to swing it with just four people, and it was four guys, and it was the four guys from *Funk It Up*. So it was founded on this touring the world together. We had started a rap group during that time, we had started to learn each other's shorthand, I knew how to write for their voices, they knew how to rap on my beats, it was very, very seamless. So those parts were written for Jackson and Post, and then when we ended up going up and opening at the Globe that was, you know, the first time there was amplified sound at the Globe. That was the first time there was mics at The Globe, that was the first time there was a DJ at The Globe. And, since then there has been some, they've had – prior to that the most they had was like a guitar amp, and all the rest of the sound was acoustic. So we broke the dam, and they said: 'Now the requests are rushing in', they can't just say: 'We don't do that,' anymore! [*Laughter.*] They were like: 'Now we do it for you guys so we have to do that for other people.' That was quite an interesting thing being on this ancient stage and, you know, in this sacred place and being able to have someone say what you're doing belongs in this sacred space and is not relegated to outside of here, and that this is important and what you do is not. And to Dominic's credit and to the other folks over there – Tom, and Davina and Dominic were really spearheading it – and they truly embraced hip hop. Because everyone wants to invite hip hop, all theatres want to invite hip hop into their theatre because it's cool and edgy and then when you start saying things they're not comfortable hearing, whether that's language, content, activism, calling out racism, loud music, showing up late, all shit that's hip hop as fuck, they all of a sudden they don't like hip hop anymore, right, and you need to respect the institution, you know. So we didn't get that vibe from them, so props to them for that, but we have gotten that vibe a lot through our 22-year career trying to bring hip hop to theatres across the world.

[00:26:51 to 00:28:41] 'Beatrice and Benedick' from *Funk It Up About Nothin'* (2008)

[00:28:41] HIP HOP AND AUTHORSHIP

DR: There is definitely a contribution you've made in terms of bringing hip hop to theatres, but has it been perceived the other way around, the way in which you've brought Shakespeare to hip hop? What do the rest of your hip-hop friends that you used to rap with, how do they feel about this sort of work? How is your work perceived within the circles of hip hop?

JQ: They love it if you get them to show up! [*Laughter.*] That's what I'll say – like, everyone from that world who's come to see it has been like: 'This is amazing!' You know. I don't know how to get people here. 'Someone had to drag me', you know? I don't think they see the theatre as a place for them.

DR: Another thing that I'm interested in, and we can cut it out if you're not happy talking about it, is how has *Hamilton* changed things? I mean, do you consider *Hamilton* to be within this lineage, or is it something else?

JQ: There is a societal habit of taking something that you don't understand or is new to you, and deciding that everything that is related to that is in the same sliver. Whereas when you live in that sliver, the spectrum of those things feel very, very different. So from the outside, you could look at *Hamilton* and say: 'Oh, look at that evolution', or you could go to *Hamilton* and then see us and say:



'It's like *Hamilton*', right? But hip hop by nature is thievery. We sample, we steal other lines of stuff and allude to things all the time. You might see that in Shakespeare. It's a sample-based artform. So hip hop is not like other artforms. It is invasive and it is a parasite. So trying to relegate it to one thing is laughable, right? We see the biggest song from last year was a country song, the biggest hip hop song of last year was a country song. So we don't care – we'll steal anything and make it cooler. That's the whole bottom line of hip hop. If we can steal it and make it cooler, we will do it. So if somebody is going to steal Shakespeare and make it cooler, you know, we did that. If somebody wants to steal *Les Mis* and make it cooler, it looks like to me that's what that feels like that is. It feels to me like the creator is taking an artform he reveres, which is Broadway musicals, and taking a hip hop spin to it, right? Now, the argument could be made that *Hamilton* follows the musical theatre format much more than breaks it. And having only listened to it – I haven't seen it yet – having only listened to it, it does sound that way to me. There's two things. Hip hop can be used in many ways – so is hip hop being used on something? Is it sprinkled on it? Is it in the batter of the cake? Is it the foundation? Those are questions that everyone needs to ask as they go through it and, you know what, all of those levels of hip hop are to be enjoyed and embraced. And, I wish, you know, hip hop would invade everything! So I'm a proponent of it invading everything from the nightly news to *Les Mis* to Shakespeare to cooking with my kids. I would always turn everything into rhyme, so I would like to watch my news in rhyme if it was possible, I would like to watch my Broadway theatre in rhyme with beats if possible too.

DR: That's excellent. Thank you so much. That's so valuable what you just said! Actually there's so much in it, very rich as well. I'm interested in what you said about this notion of sampling being a different kind of authorship. It's not in the tradition of having a single author writing a play and then handing that play over to a director who then wants to be an author. There is so much more of a sense of shared ownership of something, it seems to me, in terms of also how you've described your work as a group of people. And then there was another question I wanted to ask you when you say you 'write' a particular piece of work, I'm then interested how you write. What is that process like? How do you start writing a new piece of work?

JQ: It changes each time because it's evolving, but in general G takes the original and just very mildly flips it so that the ends rhyme and shortens some lines so that it's not sounding like da-dum-da-dum-da-dum-da-dum-da-dum. So that you're not having one line for every two bars of music – if that makes sense – and then a pause, and then the next line. He just shortens the lines and then makes them all rhyme. And then I come in and read it and say, like: 'We don't need that, we don't need that, we don't need that', and we start like chopping pieces and formulating like a compressed version of the story because, you know, the theatrical artform has changed. You had to repeat yourself a lot more then, because there was no mics, it was loud, you know, people had their goats and chickens, or the groundlings did, you know, they were yelling and heckling. It was not ideal sound settings and attention settings. It was a much more interactive and vibrant artform at that point from what we know and so it was louder, it was crazier, they had to repeat information all the time, like: 'Hey, see this poison? I'm going to take this poison and put it in that cup, putting the poison in the cup. Hey, remember that cup I just put the poison in?', you know, it was like every scene begins and ends with like six reminders of what's just happened. And, we were just like: 'Come on!' Because now theatre has become this high artform where you pay an insane amount to go sit, so you're like: 'I'm getting my money's worth, I'm going to sit here and listen to every word.' And then if somebody doesn't, they get shushed, and so there's this kind of culture of, you know, that it's very precious or something. That's why we make it loud so you can say it once, they can hear it even if someone is yelling and talking and singing along.

DR: So he writes it, you then read it and edit it and make it fit the musical meter?

JQ: While he's doing that I'm making beats that are just generally the vibe of the play. That's all I can say. So like if it's like *Funk It Up*, I start making goofy, circusy, fun kind of beats, and if it's *Othello* I start making some darker stuff, you know. I just start making some beats, just skeletal beats, and I try to keep them various tempos and things so that when he's writing a scene he just throws one on and he starts adjusting, whether he knows it or not, to that beat or to that tempo, which helps us keep the tempos throughout the piece varied. And also, there's a lot of thought that goes into the composition. What we do is a lot more like opera than musical theatre. So you're going to look at something like – like you were talking about *Hamilton*. *Hamilton* finally, you know, did the thing that we've been doing



for 20 years, which is didn't stop the beat. It's still much more of a musical theatre style because of just the actual style of the music but he didn't stop the beat and had just a scene in between. And we were like: 'Thank you! Finally!', you know, because we've been doing that for 20 years, we don't take the beat out, you know, do not take the beat out. But that requires – and I can tell that they learned this as well during *Hamilton* – that requires you to strip down and simplify the music between the big numbers. So what that means is like frequency-wise, you want drums, you want something very regular, like metronomic – I don't know if that's a word – but like a metronome, so that it's like dum-dum, you know, repetitive little hits, bass, simple drums, something, kind of ethereal or blinky on top to keep some melody and playfulness or to give the edge, or to give – basically, to tell you what the emotion of the scene is. Now, if you start filling in too much in the middle you don't leave a big enough frequency pocket for the voice and the actor, then – an actor probably wouldn't tell you this but I can tell you because I've acted in it, I wrote it, I composed it, and with my brother we directed it, I know this to be true – they will become one-noted because they will only find one frequency pocket with which their voice cuts through and then it will get them stuck in that one emotion. So they don't have as many ups and downs and dynamics to their scene. And, the scene-work is really like a song is an explosion of one emotional moment that's stretched into three minutes. It's fine if that's more one-noted, but the in between the tissue, which is the real meat and the joy of our plays, that's like where the good, good stuff is. That's the Shakespeare, that's the stuff you come back again for because you heard six new things each time you watched it and listened to it. So that stuff you need to leave a big pocket, and you have to have that stuff on top – that melodic, harmonic content at the top of the beat – you need that to be vaguely of the scene. It cannot be too specific or, again, it will be too prescriptive for the actor and they don't have enough ways to go and then that scene in between won't be as rich with like: 'Should I, should I not?', if Iago is convincing Othello that his wife is dishonest and disloyal and you don't have him saying: 'But how could she do this?' and: 'You're lying to me!' and: 'Thank you for telling me, you're my only friend' – if you don't have those dynamics and [are not] able to play those, that scene doesn't work.

[00:40:10 to 00:42:35] 'You Made Your Bed' from *Othello the Remix* (2018)

DR: When you say it's more like opera, how does it compare to opera specifically?

JQ: You can tell that the music – there's a big song and there's like a scene and they're still singing the whole time and there's sort of light music under it, right?

DR: I see, I see.

JQ: So it's similar dynamically to what we're trying to achieve with the story. Obviously, we want it one third the length, you know.

[00:43:06] ENSEMBLE, AUTHORSHIP AND REHEARSAL

DR: Great. So *The Bomb-itty of Errors*, which has been published as a script, is credited to you as the whole ensemble. All of you appear as the authors on it. How does the authorship of the others work in it?

JQ: Everybody wrote it. Yeah, everybody wrote a lot of their own parts for that. When you have multiple authors in hip hop you are going to achieve multiple voices for your characters. When you have a single author in a piece of hip hop theatre and you're using Western music and Western scoring, and the words have to be said at the exact same spot, and there is one author, all of the characters sound like the author. And so we really want to achieve a dynamic range of characters and it's really important to us to get different voices in there and get different perspectives. Our collective is also, you know, white, Black and brown and we think it's important to hear all those voices and to fight, and to fight and see what – if the four of us can agree on this I think we might be onto something, you know?

DR: So is the rehearsal process part of this process of developing the script? Because what you've described so far is GQ writing, looking at adapting the actual text, and you filtering that through a musical prism, and then what happens next?

JQ: Yeah. With those two plays, and then the guys that were in *Othello*, we opened up the writing process, and so it was me, G, Jackson Doran and Postell Pringle, and the four of us have become the



Q Brothers Collective. And with them the rehearsal and writing process is completely the same thing now.

DR: And what happens in rehearsal? How does that group authorship work when you get together?

JQ: It's a bunch of guys sitting around a table with laptops, all in the same document, editing their own stuff, or now online – and we're all on Zoom and all in the same document. And I'm sitting here making beats, that's happening at the same time, we're discussing, people are writing, people are highlighting other people's writing and making notes, or editing as they go, and before you know it we crank out a scene, you know. By the end of the day and we go: 'Let's try it', and then press play and we try it out over the beat. It's very organic and it's like just put all the elements in the room and go and try not to judge or steer too hard.

DR: You describe it as though it's like common knowledge but actually it's quite an interesting process that, you know, probably a lot of people wouldn't think of writing in that way.

JQ: Yeah. I mean, I think it's pretty crazy. You have to be with people that you've known for a long time, that you love and trust, and you have to be with people where frankly you're of an age where you've dropped your ego. Having somebody live-edit your words can be infuriating and pride swallowing.

DR: Yeah. Yeah. So what are you working on at the moment then?

JQ: Obviously, all theatrical events right now are on hold, so postponed, but we do have a *Romeo and Juliet* we're working on. We did veer away from Shakespeare and we did a couple more Shakespeares. We did *Rome, Sweet Rome*, which is *Julius Caesar*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, which is called *Dress The Part*, we did *Ms Estrada*, which is a hip hop adaptation of *Lysistrata*, we did *Christmas Carol*, hip hop adaptation of Dickens' *Christmas Carol*, and – I'm missing something, but anyway, whatever. Yeah, so we're always working on those – any chance that somebody produces it or a university brings us in we teach and use that time to keep reshaping the piece and make it better and better. *Othello: The Remix* is published now with DPS. *Christmas Carol* is near completion. One of the cool things I should mention actually is that because we don't use Western notation, Western music notation, we use: 'DJ begins here.' There's a DJ as part of the cast in our shows and it's like: 'Press play around here', and we give like a spot, and we tell them which track. So a DJ is going to be able to scratch, going to be able to put effects on stuff. So there's a looseness to it that we enjoy when we go see one of our shows, it's pretty cool. The other thing that we've done is instead of writing out – let's say some regional theatre in Arkansas wants to do *Othello: The Remix*, and let's say they want to do it because it's gonna speak to their community and they have great actors, but the director or the producer, or whoever, doesn't really understand how the words go on the music – we needed to give them examples. And even sometimes the actors will read a line and this one's kind of long and this one's short, it's like: 'How do I navigate this?' Well, in a play that's scripted, you just look at the bars and you say: 'I say this at this moment, then I say this.' Well, we don't have that and so what we did is we recorded us doing it, just like one take, you know, just like a one take. Not only that so you get an idea of a good way that it can be kicked by people who have done it hundreds of times in front of an audience so they know how to get punchlines across and how it's going to land, but the best part is we recorded it super pro so then when I was making tracks we made the tracks for the DJ to spin, which you get when you license the play, but you also get these practice tracks and one of them is an entire track of a full demo, and then for each of the four acting tracks you have the whole play minus everything you say. You get to sit there at home and play the whole play and then stick in your own words and it will work out perfectly, because everyone else's is already in there. So it's a really cool thing that I don't think anyone's ever done with a published play. It's like: 'Here's your rehearsal!', you know? So people can take this play, rehearse it at home, the actors can come in fully off book. So if you're producing this play, and you have your shit together in terms of blocking, they can come in and just block and go up. It's pretty amazing, you know?

DR: It's actually, in a way, what Shakespeare used to do with like individual actors having just their individual parts and you kind of turn up and just do the—

JQ: Yeah, you show up and stick them together! Yeah. [*Laughter.*]



DR: So to what extent does it leave space for individual actors to improvise? Because presumably the DJ has some freedom to scratch, as you say.

JQ: Yeah. I mean, the DJ can manipulate the music live. The beauty is that, like: 'Oh, I fell off.' There's a conversation, a tacit conversation that happens, between the DJ and the actor, like: 'Am I going to speed up to get back on or are you going adjust for me? Or, is this a song where there's a built-in chorus or is this just a scene and I just have to get back on the right half of the beat?', because it's just a two-bar loop, right? So it's that, kind of, that's what makes live theatre live theatre and that's what makes it fun. And yeah, there's a lot of freedom to kicking rhymes and when you start to memorise the way somebody has done it and then do it live with breath control, with audience reaction, with movement, it's going to move and drift every time you do it. So it's fun to figure that out and sometimes you'll accidentally expose something in a better way than you had thought before because of something you saw as a detriment and then you'll go: 'I'm keeping that', and then you do it every time, you know.

DR: Great. Are you all based in Chicago still, or is it just you?

JQ: No. No. One's in New York, Post is in New York, Jackson and I are here, G is between Illinois and LA. He goes back and forth.

DR: Yeah. Yeah. So that's why distance working is still part of your methodology as a company because you're not all in the same place?

JQ: Yeah. We've been doing this for years, so hopping on Zoom and opening a Google Doc is what we've been doing for years and years, so it doesn't feel very strange to like set up a work session and be like: 'Okay, where are you calling in from?'

[00:52:48] BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

DR: I maybe want to go back to what you said at beginning, just for the end of this conversation, of how you feel that your mixed ethnic heritage might have been a factor in you finding your voice. And, I just wonder whether there is anything else that you might feel there is a kind of continuity to your cultural background in what you do today.

JQ: Yeah. Absolutely, yeah. Being that my mum is white and my dad is brown, I have always seen, and me and my brother have always seen a bridge where other people see a divide. And so when people say: 'Shakespeare and hip hop, how does that work?', I always think, like this is the same kind of voice that says like: 'Interracial marriage, how will that work?' It's like this has just been engrained in us, and that's sad to me. So one of the things that we feel we can bring in, the gift in, is to show people the bridges. Because we have been engrained with seeing connection as opposed to seeing divide, because we are literally the product of that connection.

DR: Oh, wow. What a way to finish! Thank you so much. That's brilliant. I mean, you know, also in terms of what you've just said about how you as brothers have been able to continue working together so closely. I mean, it's not necessarily the experience of a lot of other siblings, but you've actually, you put it out there as the Q Brothers, it's fantastic. Thank you so much.

JQ: Yeah, no problem!

Transcription by Tom Colley

Clips Summary

[00:12:29 to 00:14:23] 'Your Husband Sends Me' from *The Bomb-itty of Errors* (1998)

[00:26:51 to 00:28:41] 'Beatrice and Benedick' from *Funk It Up About Nothin'* (2008)

[00:40:10 to 00:42:35] 'You Made Your Bed' from *Othello the Remix* (2018)

Audio available at www.auralia.space/gallery1-jq/.



To cite this material:

Radosavljević, Duška; Pitrolo, Flora; Bano, Tim; Q, J (2020) LMYE Gallery #1: Theatre as a Sample-Based Artform - An Interview with JQ (Q Brothers), *Auralia.Space*, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, <https://doi.org/10.25389/rcssd.12982277.v6>.

