



Pushing the Boundaries of Storytelling: The *Misty* Interview

[00:00:19] INTRO

Duška Radosavljević: Hello, and welcome to the Gallery!

In this episode, unusually, we focus on a particular show, rather than an individual artist or company's body of work. The show is *Misty* – a mix of grime, autobiography and abstract visual theatre, written by playwright and actor Arinzé Kene, and directed by former associate director at the Bush Theatre in London, Omar Elerian.

As we find out in the interview that follows, *Misty* was a labour of love and took some time to emerge, but it was special in many ways, not least in that it led to two Olivier nominations in 2019, for Best Play and Best Actor, after being only the second play of all time by a Black playwright to transfer to the West End. Arinzé Kene also made an exception for *Misty*, his fifth full-length play, and personally acted in it.

Following the usual Gallery format, we work with our guests Arinzé Kene and Omar Elerian to re-trace their footsteps as artists, looking to examine where and how their individual creative paths intersected in making this extraordinary piece of gig theatre.

This conversation took place on Zoom on 3rd July 2020.

[00:01:42] BIOGRAPHIES AND BEGINNINGS

Duška Radosavljević: So hi! Thank you so much for coming into this project and offering your time. So yeah, *Misty* was quite a breath of fresh air. It came about in 2018 at the Bush Theatre in London and then took the world by storm, went into the West End and so on. I'm really interested as part of this conversation to unpack how that happened, how that phenomenon came about. And specifically, I'd be interested to take you back individually to possibly the first memories you might have around how you decided you wanted to make theatre and be a theatre-maker. What was it in your formative years that led you down this particular path? And what we have here are two very different journeys that met at a particular point in time. Shall we start with you, Arinzé?

Arinzé Kene: Sure.

DR: You were born in Nigeria.

AK: Yeah. So I came to London in '91, winter '91, and I've pretty much been living in East London ever since. We came straight to Hackney. That was the beginning of my journey in England anyway. Music has always been a part of my life. I fell in love with Fela Kuti as a very young man. And so I think that opened the door for things like performing. I feel like I've always been a bit of a performer.

DR: Your first love was music and then theatre came after. From what I can see in your biography your big break was *The Lion King* – playing Simba in *The Lion King*. But how did you get to that point? Did you train as a performer, or what was the journey to that point?

AK: I didn't train! I'm from a very traditional Nigerian family and my parents they wanted me to be a doctor or a lawyer or an accountant. I was at sixth form and I was studying chemistry and biology and I've always been very academic and I've always had this kind of healthy balance between I guess academia and sport. I've always played basketball and done athletics and studied well. I was in school and I just got a bit fed up, actually. I wasn't doing what I wanted to do, and so rather than go straight to university – I was going to go and study physiotherapy in the end – I took a gap year and on this gap year I said to myself I was going to give myself a proper chance, a go at it, you know? Because up to that point I had been creating work in the margins I was using my Saturday afternoons to go to this performing arts club and do that but I never actually devoted my time. And so after my last exam I became a runner for a sound company, 750MPH, which is on Golden Square, and I guess being a runner there, getting lunch and coffees for Ian McKellen and David Harewood, was my kind of introduction to being in the same room as some performers who I just saw on telly last night who were



great and brilliant. And hearing them, you know, do voiceovers for these adverts or do ADR, I think that made me really, really hungry. I was salivating on a daily basis because I was now what I felt was in the middle of this thing just not playing the role that I wanted to play within it, that's all. A few months after, I got an opportunity to play a lead role in a play called *Torn* at the Arcola, and so that was how I got my first agent. And then my agent didn't know I could sing, but in *Torn* there was a little song in there, you know, a little kind of moment where he sings, not even a verse. And my agent came to see it and he was like: 'You didn't tell me you could sing!!', and I was like: 'Yeah, I sing a little bit, whatever.' I didn't really want to do musicals – I wanted to act in plays and do TV and film and I don't think at that point I was really up for writing. I started going up for some stuff that involved a bit of music and full-blown musicals like *The Lion King*, and literally fast-forward four months and I'm in auditions doing pirouettes and falling on my knees and crashing, just crashing around the room while people were like: 'Look at this bull!!' And I remember my first round of auditions for *The Lion King*. I was learning on my feet, I was really learning on the job and that was a cool experience. Pippa Ailion who casts pretty much nearly all, like, a lot of musicals in the West End, you know, she taught me how to audition properly. She was the one who taught me, because in the room she would stop the audition and say: 'Okay, Arinzé, eye contact. There are people in the room, use us!' Things like that – because I didn't go to drama school and you get taught this stuff a little bit, how to do an audition and so on, but it's completely different when you go into the audition and there's 15 people and there's the Americans and they've all got their, at that time it was Blackberries, and it's kind of like – you're just like: 'Wait, I remember that I have to look at someone, but about when there are 15 people, who do you look at? I don't know that job duh-duh-duh.' Yeah, that's how *The Lion King* came about, anyway. The first time round I got down to the finals and I didn't get it, and then I did another job and then when it came round again I didn't have to go through the whole process because Pippa knew who I was – well she'd already gone through it with me so I just came in for the finals and then I went off and did it. That was a great experience, because I realised that kind of musical wasn't for me because while I love watching musicals – I mean *Wicked* is, I watched that a trillion times, and *Lion King* I think is one of the best musicals, you know, but I didn't have any kind of creative input in the role of Simba. You kind of get dropped into that role and you hit the notes and you hit your mark on stage and you do the triple pirouette and you stop at that time and everything is done. I felt a bit restricted and that actually was when I started writing. It was actually from there.

DR: What age were you when you landed the part of Simba? Do you remember?

AK: I was 20 and I turned 21 on that job.

DR: You started writing as a result of feeling you wanted to write parts for yourself. Or were you writing – was the early writing not actually for the stage?

AK: The first thing I wrote was a ten-page scene to get onto the Critical Mass Group at the Royal Court, right? See, I knew I wanted to write before I even started writing plays, you know. I just wanted to get onto the course and you could see that they were taking – you could send in a full play or you could send in ten pages at least, and so on. Right at the deadline I delivered these ten pages and I got on the course and yes, the initial goal was to create some opportunities for me. There were some parts that I wanted to play that I wasn't being given the opportunity to play nor had I believed at the time that they were written – and so I was writing them. But the first play I wrote, *Estate Walls*, it proved to me that writing was way more than something that I could use to expedite my career, you know, it was more than that. It could be more than that, if I let it, you know, if I get my ego out the way and I just write. I mean, after the first draft I realised that the play – I'm not in it, you know, and as well we did a reading and I was like: 'Ah god, this is–', I just didn't know that all these actors could bring all of these things to the reading. And I remember the first reading of it, like it just had some great actors, you know, reading. It was Ricci McCloed, it was Daniel Kaluuya, Alex Lanipekun, Kingsley Ben-Adir, Zawe Ashton – and they came and they read the hell out of my script. And I was like: 'Man, these guys are on fire!' [Laughter.] And yeah, there's nothing like that, that experience to make you go: 'Okay cool. Like, I need to humble myself and not try just be like: 'Hey I'm an actor.' That's what it felt like, the first draft. It was all kind of for me, you know, and then after that I was able – I felt much freer as well when I knew I wasn't writing for myself. Between when I first started writing and when *Misty* got on, that was 11 years, and all that time I hadn't written something for myself.



DR: So you wrote plays in the Royal Court sense of the word. That was something that was your starting point and then *Misty* had a completely different form. It was spoken word and episodic, and for you, right? Was there a particular trajectory in your development as an artist that then resulted in *Misty* as that form? As a form that wasn't a Royal Court type of play? It's billed as spoken word and gig theatre. So what I'm looking for is: had you been writing poetry before that maybe that led to this particular form?

AK: Yes I had. In my teens when I was in sixth form, when I was studying chemistry and biology, I was in two bands. I was in a band called Yoka, which means 'listen', and I was also in a band called *JH Collective*, *Jazz Hop Collective*. And I was a vocalist in these two bands and we were going around the country and making music and performing. And so I was always writing, you know, I was always working with musicians and yeah, it was fun. And even before then I was writing rhymes, I was rapping and I dropped these two mixtapes. I dropped a mixtape called *Let's Go* and then I dropped one called *Strictly Unrelated*. And then acting started taking off you see, and writing plays, you know, I was getting them on. I don't know what it was why I separated them, but I did that early on. I think it's because of that influence of at the time the things that I was exposed to. For a very long time my favourite playwright was Sam Shepard, right? He is still is one of my favourite playwrights, you know, I was like: 'Ah man, that's how you write a play!' And then I'm reading works of like Tracy Letts and I'm like: 'Yeah fuck, this is how you write a play!', you know? And then, you know, you see some August Wilson and you just develop your palette and you're seeing stuff. And then you see more devised work and you go: 'Whoah, what just happened?' I'd see work and I'd just be like: 'How does it look on page? I kind of want to understand how this will look', you know? I've always played with structure. With the first play, *Estate Walls*, the prologue, it's a song kind of thing: 'I'm on the estate wall, me too, me too, duh-duh-duh-duh, duh-duh-duh-duh', and it's kind of like a minute long and it's kind of like different characters saying different lines, and it rhymes, you know. And then we have the play and the play is, like: act one, act two, act three. And then, you know, *Little Baby Jesus* there are musical moments in there. At the very end, the epilogue of the play is musical, again: it's kind of like a similar kind of line I say: 'Duh-duh but don't forget to, duh-duh-duh-duh, but don't forget to duh-duh-duh-duh'. And yeah, *God's Property* didn't really have that at all, but I feel like I was always just playing with the idea, I was toying with bringing music into it, but I wasn't brave enough. And then I feel like a few things happened in a row. One of them was having a very bad experience in television as a writer, or two very bad experiences back-to-back and then one really tough experience while writing a film. And all of them me feeling like I wasn't understood, or like I was misunderstood as a maker as a creator. And then seeing the right work at the right time, like seeing Omar's – he directed *You're Not Like The Other Girls* Chrissy, the Caroline Horton play – going to Berlin and seeing some very incredible work at the Schaubühne, and going back in time and re-discovering Charlie Chaplin, you know, and looking at him as a performer and a creator and recurring character. And allowing these things, allowing myself to just surrender and just go like: 'What is it about all this that you really love?' And then, yeah, not throwing away the lessons I had learnt from the Court and from writing *God's Property* and from loving a traditional play but actually letting it be a part of what I'm doing from now on and not like, I guess, shunning the world of TV and the development hell and things getting green-lit and then going into turnaround but actually going: 'How can this inform me? How can this inform what I do?' I just let it in.

DR: I'm also interested in the way in which you both come from very interesting cultural backgrounds that are kind of combined influences of different cultures. So in your case, Arinzé, you were born in Nigeria, you were about four or five when you came to the UK. Omar, can you tell us about your background and what was your journey?

Omar Elerian: The story of my life is a bit more convoluted, I'm afraid! So my father is Palestinian, although he was born in Egypt because he was born in 1950 and my grandparents used to live in Jaffa, which is now the state of Israel so in 1948 they had to leave. They became exiles and refugees and they moved to Egypt first and then Kuwait and then back to Egypt and eventually the family kind of spread out in different directions, in the US, and my dad, after studying in Cairo in the '70s, then moved to Italy, a bit on a whim! At the time Italy was quite welcoming of Palestinians so I think he got a scholarship to go and study something and that was his kind of bridge to come in, and then settled in this tiny little town in the outskirts of Milan called Gorgonzola, which is where the cheese comes from.



And he met my mum, so they got married, I was born, in 1978 in Milan, and then soon after we moved to Kuwait because that's where my dad's family was. We stayed there for a few years until I was five, my brother was born there, and then we came back to Milan. My sister was born there in 1986. We moved to Cairo for a little while because my grandfather was very ill and he was passing away and my dad had to take care of family business at the time. Then the Gulf War happened in Kuwait. Most of my uncles and aunties had to leave and kind of flee to the US, Bolivia, wherever they could find asylum or refuge. We went to the US for a year when I was like ten, in Florida because that's where my aunt was living. And then my mum said: 'Enough! We're going back to Italy!' Back to Gorgonzola, where it all started. And they've been living there ever since. So I grew up a bit everywhere and then from the age of 11 I was there, back in Gorgonzola, in this town in the suburbs of Milan. And when I was in high school – we don't do drama as a subject there but you had this guy called Attilio who was an English teacher somewhere else, who was very passionate about theatre. And he had studied a bit with people who were in the Grotowski companies, Peter Brook, Eugenio Barba, all these '70s more experimental theatre companies – and he set up a Saturday after school theatre group and I was completely uninterested in it. I was playing basketball. I don't come from a family that's particularly interested in theatre or cinema. And what happened was one day a friend of mine stole my backpack on a Saturday and hid it in the room where they were having the drama class, and they had started the drama class, school had finished, I had to take my bus, I couldn't find my backpack, and I go: 'Where the fuck did you put it?' And then I kind of see the door, I see my friend inside, he's taking the drama class so I knock and say: 'I'm really sorry to disturb but this dickhead stole my backpack and I need it.' And Attilio, the teacher said: 'Well now that you've interrupted you can't leave. You have to stay'. And I'm like: 'No, no. I really need to go,' and he was so persuasive, I was like: 'Okay, I'll stay.' You know, that's how it started! This was when I was 16-17. I think I did two years of these drama classes and what he did – we were not studying drama, we were making stuff. He would make us write our own things, everything was created in collaboration. We were doing these super wacky exercises and of course – I mean I didn't know it at the time, I discovered it later, and Attilio is still a very, very dear friend and a guide, you know, in all that has to do with theatre and life in general – but he was really somebody that was interested in breaking down the conventions and societal prescriptions that are ingrained in establishment structures like schools. So we were writing this stuff, you know, that was all about like suicidal tendencies, and giving the middle finger to teachers, and sex – all sorts of stuff that at the time felt super taboo and we of course were not discussing. This is before social media, before the internet really! So it felt like an outlet to do something that felt both mischievous but at the same time really powerful, really liberating. In those two years I met a lot of people who were in that group. Actually, my partner, the mother of my children, was in that same group! [Laughter.] So after a couple of years of that, we then all went to university, I went to uni in Milan. And so a bunch of us created this – in Italy you call it 'cultural associations', like a not for profit. It was maybe a dozen of us and a lot of us knew each other from this group. Some of them were musicians, some of them were more interested in film, some of them were interested in writing, some of them were interested in acting. So a lot of our work was really a bit improvised and I think that came from that group rule of not trying to apply any sort of recipe or trying to imitate anything. And there was an old cinema in Melzo, this town just next door to Gorgonzola, which was part of a kind of old building in the centre of town and used to be a theatre before the war, was left abandoned. And they had a massive room with 400 seats and a stage, and then it had a little studio, a smaller screen room, and it was in the same courtyard as the public library. We went to the town council and said: 'Can we have it?', and they gave it to us! So we kind of took ownership of this space which was infested with rats and pigeons and little by little we just kind of refurbished it a bit and started running drama classes in schools and it became a source of income. I was studying literature and philosophy at the university in Milan and then kind of decided to specialise in theatre and directing although it was very theoretical. And we were doing shows, you know? We were doing our shows, organising festivals, we were doing films, we got funding from the European Union to make films, short films, and productions that then toured festivals. But it was all a bit like a bunch of friends doing the thing they loved really. And then came the moment I think when we all graduated, we had this big meeting where we all sat down and went like: 'Are we really going to spend the rest of our lives in Melzo and Gorgonzola doing this?' And then we all looked at each other and went: 'No, I want to do something. I want to see other places,' you know? And quickly we dispersed:



my best friend who was part of the company went to Paris to study cinema in a school called Eicar, and a year later, after I graduated, I applied for Lecoq. A bit because I had read the book and I really loved it. It was again something that chimed very much with how I saw theatre-making at the time, which was all about experimenting with different things and trying to bring different influences together. And also I felt I really lacked the practical side of training. We were blessed to have a really good theatre scene in Milan where all the big names came from abroad: Lev Dodin, [Eimuntas] Nekrosius, Robert Lepage, Peter Brook, Arianne Mnouchkine – I could see all that for five euros. But I didn't really have any kind of formal training, we were just making it up as we were going. And so I applied, I didn't speak a word of French, and they accepted me, so I went. It was a marriage made in heaven with the pedagogy at Lecoq – for me. I don't think it works that way for everybody but for me, for my sensibility, and for probably also who I was and who I wanted to be at the time and what I needed in my life, it was really great because it's a place where I met people from all over the world, from different walks of life. We worked in a range of different languages. The influences were so disparate from African theatre to Japanese theatre to Swedish, American, Canadian, South American, like, it was a real melting pot.

DR: How did you end up in the UK?

OE: Yes! So I stayed then six extra years in Paris and I came to the UK in 2009. Actually I did a show in 2008 for Daniel Goldman who was running the CASA Latin American Theatre Festival. He used to be at Lecoq with me, and many of the people that were in my year at Lecoq were British and had to come back to Britain. And I moved to the UK because my partner was studying here at the NFTS and also because I was a bit fed up with living in Paris. So I moved to London, and the first thing I did was Caroline [Horton] had started working on a scratch of this show, which was her first solo show / about–

DR: About her grandmother!

OE: Yeah. Who was French and came to England before the war and fell in love with an English man and then the war happened and they separated and then they–

DR: We are just elaborating on this because Arinzé also mentioned it as a piece that he loved and I loved it too, I saw it three times!

OE: So Daniel Goldman was attached to it originally and then he was quite busy and I was around and Caroline and I met and she said: 'Oh, would you like to work a bit on it while Daniel is not around?' And at the time it was just to create a 15-minute scratch for China Plate's Bitesize Festival and then it won the bursary that was offered there, and Daniel had to leave the project, and we finished it. We created the one-hour show, took it to Edinburgh. I was still working a bit in Italy and France at the time on other shows. I remember sitting in the living room of our apartment in London, which was brand new and unfurnished, and it was a perfect space to have rehearsals with Caroline and just going like: 'Yeah. This is just a show that we're doing'. And then it went on to have a really brilliant life and accolade. That was 2010, and around that time actually I met Madani Younis, who at the time was running Freedom Studios in Bradford. He offered me a job there to come on board as associate director for this big project that they were doing called *The Mill City of Dreams*, which was a kind of site-specific promenade show in a disused textile mill in Bradford. We were working with a mixture of community cast and professional performers and I had done a lot of that work in Italy of course. So we created this crazy show. It was an amazing opportunity to discover a whole sliver of history that I wasn't aware of in terms of Bradford and Yorkshire and the industrial revolution there, the post-industrial revolution. And then after that Madani was offered the job at the Bush and he basically gave me a call and said: 'Would you want to come onboard and join me?', and I was like: 'Oh, the Bush!? That's not my cup of tea' – because up to then really new writing in that kind of more traditional way was never something I had considered doing nor something that I would normally attend as a theatre-goer and I found it always quite literal. At the time of course coming from a more devising background, I was like: 'We are all theatre-makers so, you know, either we all sit in the room together or I'm not really interested.' [Laughter.] But anyway, that kind of quite black and white then dissipated in the moment in which I think Madani convinced me that it was a great opportunity because the Bush at the time was moving from a room above the pub onto the Shepherd's Bush library and there was really the opportunity to do something different and take this organisation to write another chapter. And so I came in. We started in late 2011 and then I stayed there for seven years, until Madani and I both left after we did *Misty*.



[00:29:11 to 00:30:37] 'City Creature' from *Misty* (2018)

[00:30:38] TOWARDS *MISTY* (2018)

DR: Shall we now get to *Misty*? So how did that encounter happen? How did you come onto each other's radars coming from such different directions?

OE: Well we did *Chrissy* in the opening season as part of a double-bill with Sabrina Mahfouz's *Dry Ice*. So that that first season was cobbled up quite quickly in a few months after we started. We brought in a few things that we had and we had seen at the Fringe and also a few plays that we were developing. And of course at the time I think Madani had seen *Little Baby Jesus* at the Ovalhouse – was it Ovalhouse, Arinzé?

AK: Edinburgh Fringe.

OE: I hadn't seen it but he gave it to me to read it. Madani said: 'Oh, we should definitely meet with Arinzé and we should commission him', and I was like: 'Yeah, sure'.

DR: And shall we hear a little bit about this piece then maybe, since it was so influential? What was the form of *Little Baby Jesus*?

AK: It was a triptych and so it was a three-hander that was mostly delivered direct address – so it was mostly, kind of like, in monologue form where you had these three performers all telling a story, like, their own version of a story and there was these three stories that kind of run concurrent but they kind of overlap. It's a coming-of-age story for these three teenage inner-city kids. They all grow up in the same area but they don't really know each other and so as their stories kind of wash over this one kind of passes the launderette, the other one's passing the launderette but on the other side of the street. And in the end, you know, there's like one scene in the whole script where the characters talk to each other. I wrote it for the Ovalhouse Theatre and so it was on there and then it went to – it did Latitude Festival and then Edinburgh.

[00:32:35 to 00:33:27] Trailer for *Little Baby Jesus* (2012)

AK: That was the one where in the epilogue there was a bit of a rhythmic kind of musical thing to it as well but it was still acoustic, still a cappella.

DR: Okay, great. On the basis of this encounter with *Little Baby Jesus* you programmed Arinzé into the opening season of the Bush, is that right?

OE: No, no. We didn't programme the show. We invited Arinzé in to offer him a commission because, of course, we needed to start a new slate of commissioned work from scratch. And, I mean – I don't know, Arinzé do you want to tell the story, or shall I tell the story?

AK: I mean it's funny because I think they would be different, because I've never heard you tell this story of bringing me in. Go on.

OE: Okay. Yeah. Well I mean, I think it was on a Saturday morning at the Bush Café. I think you had broken your Achilles heel playing basketball and you had just been part of an R&D we were doing. We were developing this play by Ché Walker called *Lil Benny* and that's I think how you and I first met in person or had been in the same room. And then we invited Arinzé in to basically offer him a commission and go like: 'We dig your work and what do you want to write?' And I remember Arinzé kind of cracking up laughing and going like: 'Ah, man, it's great but you know what they say about the Bush?', and we're like: 'No, what do they say about the Bush?' 'Well, that there hasn't been a Black writer commission at the Bush for ever!' And Madani was like: 'Ah, shut up! That's not true. That's not possible.' And so anyway, we do the meeting, we offer him the commission, and then Madani and I go back into the office and are like: 'We should check this thing about the writers on commission on the Bush before our time!' And then I remember we asked the literary assistant to kind of dig – we couldn't find a record of who was the last playwright of colour that had the kind of active commission at the Bush. And I mean of course we weren't naive to what the landscape looked like at the time but it was quite sobering to discover it and to hear it from Arinzé's mouth at the time, that this was a thing that was in the know, you know? But Arinzé was the first writer that we commissioned from scratch. We had already done that first season so we already had a couple of plays that we kind of picked up and produced, but he



was the first one we said, like: 'Okay, we're going to start a journey with Arinzé, offer him a commission, see what he wants to write and develop it to the end.'

DR: What was the development process?

OE: It wasn't *Misty*! [Laughter.] It was a different play at the beginning. So I think after that meeting was simply the invitation, I think, to come with an idea but the commission was there for the taking. And then Arinzé, do you want to say a bit more about what that first project was?

AK: I mean, it's such an interesting thing – I didn't know how important what I was researching at the time was. It's now, kind of, come back up in a weird way. But I stumbled upon some artists that I didn't know about from the Harlem Renaissance era and I wanted to tell a story about that. And I tried to tell this story. And I still have back there in one of the notebooks – it's like, filled with sand because I remember this is early 2014, I was in South Africa doing *Our Girl* the series, and I was really trying to make this thing work, right? We shot the whole thing on basically these sandy areas. We were shooting South Africa for Afghanistan. I was playing like a glorified extra somewhere so I had my notebook and it took ten minutes, 20 minutes, to reset the scene and get rid of the footprints in the sand and so I was going to get shade and I was writing and working on this idea. And it just wasn't coming together and so I remember coming back to the UK and trying to – I can't remember when it was that I tried to pay back the commission but I think it was in 2014, you know, at the end of 2014, right? It just wasn't right, and Madani refused to let me pay back the commission. I think what he said at the time was: 'I didn't commission a play, I commissioned you, the writer, you know, just take your time, whatever.' And yeah, I realised that I needed to think about something new: I kind of had to put that whole thing away and so I put that idea away. Yeah, I guess *Misty* was a thing that started coming, it started coming out. It started just developing because of things in my life that were developing. Like, as in moving back to Hackney for example, so moving from Queen's Park where I'd been living for a few years back to Hackney, seeing how gentrified Hackney – I mean my mum has always lived in Hackney and so even though I was in Queen's Park and Finsbury Park as well, I was still coming here regularly but to move back, to see the changes was always something I wanted to talk about, you know. And it wasn't a very dominant theme in the first drafts of *Misty*, but it was in there. There was something in there, you know, and it was a theme that came out through our kind of workshops that Omar and I would do and through experimenting and looking at the story and what I was saying and what we were trying to deliver and to explore. Yeah, that's how we got to *Misty*.

DR: And Omar, what was the kernel that you found in what Arinzé brought to you that would become *Misty* – that you kind of latched onto as a director? And a dramaturg – you kind of had a dramaturgical role in it presumably as well?

OE: Well, we had – I think to a certain extent for much of the work I do as a director there is an element of dramaturgy, although we had three dramaturgs on this show. I don't know, it's really interesting to try and understand exactly what that definition entails. I think for me there were two things happening. One was a very practical imperative, which was Arinzé had come with a bit of the stuff that he had written. It was written on a Moleskine notepad, we read it out like at 9am in the kitchen at the Bush. I remember his agent at the time, Fay [Davies] was there and Madani and I can't remember who the producers were.

AK: It was Desara [Bosnja].

OE: Desara. Yeah, I mean there was a bunch of the senior team and there was something in there but it wasn't a play, you know, it wasn't finished, it was handwritten – it was like a bunch of notes and ideas and it was quite mercurial. And I think this was April, and we had the Radar Festival coming up in November where we could present work in progress. I remember I said to Madani: 'Well, you know, let's see because we could go on a long journey with this but we have the opportunity to do something. What if we go in a room for a couple of weeks and see what we come out with and then we present in front of an audience for two nights, whatever it might be, half an hour, it might be 50 minutes, who knows. Let's see where it can go!' Because we didn't have a blueprint, or at least I didn't have a blueprint for what it could develop into, it was more about trying to be in a room and see what it could unlock. So that's what we did – I think we got like a couple of weeks in September. The music was already something that Arinzé felt needed to be there so it was already written, the 'Virus Story' as we



call it was written in verse and was written to a beat that he already had in his head. And so for me at the time it was just about facilitating those two weeks and going like: 'Okay, let's see what comes out of these two weeks.' And of course there was something that I was particularly interested in artistically – which was to work with Arinzé because I'd seen him on stage and I'd read his work – but also the conversation we were having about theatre and about the stuff that mattered for us in theatre and who you do it for, and how you do it, and form, I felt like I wanted to explore that. It felt like we were going for a language that didn't feel traditional or like: 'Oh, I need to note this script and put you on a good path.' It felt like there was a space for a collaboration. That's how it started really.

AK: Yeah, I mean just to add to that, you know, my experience of working with Omar is like – in fact something that's just occurred to me as you were talking, Omar – about the fact that a lot of directors don't get to... Actors get to see how other actors process things, because we're often in a cast with a bunch of other actors and we see how he and she work and they work but directors don't get that many opportunities, you know, to go through an entire project with another director. Working with Omar was my first time working with a director who was so experimental, so open and also – it was just the first time working with someone like Omar. I don't know, maybe there aren't that many directors like Omar but hearing things I didn't know about you beforehand that I learnt later, you know, about your journey through making work from nothing, I think that is what – it's what felt brand new to me. It felt like there was another writer in the room. That's a big energy – it's a big personality, it's a big energy in the piece, and it takes up a lot of space. As a writer, if you can leave your ego at the door and not be too wedded to ideas, you know – and even as a performer, if you kind of, come with nothing and you're just open and an energy like Omar's is definitely one that can really help the piece, you know? And *Misty* – the truth is I can't even see *Misty* as a different piece and it's because it's so much what we did in those workshops, in the room, and you know who you're writing for. I knew very early on who I was writing for to direct this play: 'I'm not writing this one to be directed by Rupert Gould or Dominic Cook' or whatever, you know. I knew it was Omar and so that influences you. As a performer I'm a learner before anything. I've always been open to pushing the boundaries. The energy of Omar and all this experience that he had from Lecoq and just making work in Italy and for so long as well because, you know, he looks young but he's an old man! [*Laughter.*] No, I'm kidding! No, he's been making work forever, you know, and so having that to, kind of, bounce off of, to learn from, to play with, was very good, man.

[00:44:57 to 00:46:42] 'No Justice' from *Misty* (2018)

[00:46:42] FROM TEXT TO MUSIC

DR: And what about the music? Omar just said that you were writing text to a beat and music was being written and then all of this came together in the rehearsal. Obviously you spoke to us earlier, Arinzé, about how you had this experience of working in bands and so on, and starting to incorporate rhythmic writing into your playwriting, but presumably *Misty* was a kind of experience of making something that went deeper into that territory of writing with music? So how did that collaboration happen anticipating the musical aspect of this piece? Because obviously in the show you had the drummer, you had other musicians – how was the actual music-making woven into the playwriting and the theatre-making process?

AK: I think the reason why I can never remake *Misty* and make it sound like *Misty* is because when I wrote *Misty* I couldn't – and in fact it's only now that I'm learning how to play instruments, like a bass guitar, and next it's piano, because it makes my job so much easier if I can play. Even if it's just a little – if I can put a demo together then that makes my job so much easier. Whereas with *Misty* I couldn't do any of that, I didn't know where to start! And so what I was doing was I made melodies and put vocals on top of that. And that's how I did it until we brought musicians in. And then it was like music. And then even still it's kind of like I hadn't done any instrumentation and so they had to play it, I just had a melody that I knew worked. They'd bring their music, their influence into it and it would make it better – my melody would change and it would grow. Here's why I think another reason why this collaboration of Omar and I works really well because in music – I started writing music, and when you are in bands you write music at the same time that you're making it. Rehearsals was we'd come in and I'd find – it's a room and you're sitting around and I'd find a seat, you know, I'd have a mic in my hand,



I don't have any lyrics yet but these guys are figuring out a way to start a song and they're just jamming. They're jamming, I come up with some sort of thing that I'm saying, you know, whether it's like: 'I keep my hands clean all the time', and I just say that again and again, you know: 'I keep my hands clean all the time', and before you know it it's not: 'I keep my hands clean', but like: 'If a child washes his hands, yeah, then he can eat with kings', you know? And it just grows! And that's how I made work and so you have to be open to that. And if the bass guy is like: 'Nah, we should do this instead', and it's more of a kind of collaboration.

DR: And an improvisation as well by the sounds of things.

AK: Yeah.

DR: Yes – what you started saying at the beginning about how different working on *The Lion King* was to what you ended up with having in this process. It's really interesting to compare those experiences. So what was the actual journey from the Radar Festival on? Did you then have another version or did it grow? What would you say was the full length of the development process for *Misty*? Did it change in those different stages between the Radar Festival, the full run, and then the West End run itself?

OE: Yeah, it did! I mean Radar was 2015 so there was still three years of development. I mean not that we'd been working 24/7 on it for three years because Arinzé was very busy, of course everybody was very busy, we were trying to get a week here, a week there. I think what the Radar Festival gave us at the time when we presented roughly what could be a kind of bare bones version of the first act of the current *Misty*. So with no set and parts of the story, especially the meta-structure still very different. But roughly, you know, part of the music, part of the energy, and the style were there. And we had a brilliant response from the people in the room. So that gave us confirmation as producers at the Bush that there was something there. We had gotten along quite well in making those 50 minutes so we really wanted to continue the work. And then because I think of the nature of the play that was kind of sprawling – it'd be fair to say I think that in terms of the writing that was in verse, that was pretty much always a quite solid bit to start from. Parts of that have changed, have been refined, have been re-written, but all in all I would say that the bulk of it was there, the heart of it, was there. Other stuff that was around it, what we used to call in workshops: '*Misty square*' – so, this kind of meta-structure–

AK: Don't start that again! That was confusing! [*Laughter.*]

OE: Yeah, it was! That was still up for grabs, we were discovering it as it went. And also I think what was really interesting and what I think ended up affecting the final show, the final play, is that we were integrating within that – Arinzé mainly writing but all of us in terms of the creative team – we were integrating what was happening to the play as we had performed it and as people gave feedback into that meta-structure. So I mean, I remember there was one point I think I asked him: 'Did you have conversations with people?', and Arinzé said: 'Oh yeah, this is what my sister said, and it was quite damning and so what do we do with that?' I was like: 'Well, maybe we should put it in the show but we can't put it in the show straight. We need to find a way to translate it.' And that has been much of the process – we were trusting what we found and we were trusting that because the subject was so idiosyncratic and unpinnable, like the whole thing is about what are the pot holes – what one of the themes, one of the tag lines that we had for ourselves in the room was like: 'What are the potholes that a Black writer needs to go through and avoid while trying to write a play? They are not obstructions that he puts on the table but obstructions that come with being a Black writer or being perceived as a Black writer, whatever that means.' And some of them were just materialising in front of us as we were doing it and instead of, kind of, trying to morph it into just dramatic dialogue we would just, kind of, embrace it into the structure and try to respond to it in a more lateral way. And we did this throughout those three years, you know, we took tangents. But most of the time was just like: 'Okay, let's do a scene about this', and treat it as a live performance art thing, you know: 'Okay, and here come in balloons, and in this one, here we want to do microphones.' And we weren't bound in by the idea that it all needs to tie in together because what tied it together was it's being like an unsolvable knot. And I think that was what I really got excited at one point about was the fact that we could do anything with it because the dramaturgy was about making a show and writing the show at the same time. And the actual dramaturgy didn't lie within the writing, but was lying within the performance and in how the audience was receiving that performance. And so that's why the end-end of the show, 'Jungle Shit',



didn't come until week two of rehearsals. We didn't know how it would end! And then, you know, we were doing previews and weren't even sure – I think a lot of people were like: 'Oh, should we really end it with "Jungle Shit", could it be something else?', and then we did it in front of an audience and were like: 'It cannot be anything else!'

[00:55:05 to 00:57:13] 'Jungle Shit' from *Misty* (2018)

OE: The amount of times that we were doing workshops and then sharings and people were just sitting there with a puzzled look on their face because there was no set, there was no music, you know, in these workshops, or barely something. There was no performance, like Arinzé was reading from a lectern and, you know, he couldn't engage. And we needed to trust – and Madani, for instance, trusted that it would all come together. So I think as a director my job in there was to go like: 'Okay, we need to see beyond this step. We need to imagine it.' And I think for everybody in the building it wasn't clear until they sat through the first dress rehearsals and they went like: 'Oh, holy shit! I can see it now!' But they couldn't see it before and that wasn't on them, it was just on the fact that when you're developing something that is so entangled with the way in which it is performed and the way in which it is presented, and the fact that there are people in the room with you to consume it and to live through it, you can't mock it up.

DR: Right.

OE: A model box doesn't do anything. It does it for the artist because they know the end point of it, roughly. But for the layman, you know, and even for people working in theatre who are not part of the process of imagining it, it's very difficult – so I think we all need to be very thankful to Madani and the Bush for really going on the long haul and all in with this show. And if you had asked me during my seven years at the Bush which of our shows would have been the one that took us to the West End, I think nobody would have said it would have been *Misty*. And yet it was! So that was a real moment for everybody and something we were all very proud of as makers, as artists, because of what the play says and what the play looks like and how it feels and the people come through the door to see it. We couldn't have imagined a better way to celebrate what we were all about during those seven years.

DR: Amazing.

OE: I'm getting a bit sentimental now!

[00:59:44] USING FEAR AS A COMPASS

AK: And Arinzé, has it changed – has *Misty* changed for you the way you think about making theatre? How is a stepping stone for the next phase of your career do you think?

AK: It's made me more courageous as a storyteller. It's made me trust my ideas more. It's made me not try to write with someone else's voice, to write with my voice. And it's also made me not afraid to be afraid actually, to use fear as a compass, to use the information. There's a lot of information with fear – it's a whole thing that we try to avoid, right, we're taught to be quite selective about where we get our information, you know, when it comes to creating work. Everybody knows the feeling that you get when you come across an idea that you think you know is going to work and it's kind of like that warm fuzzy feeling like: 'Ah, eureka! Like, you know, I've got it and people are going to love it.' Or you know what it feels like to write a good joke like, or to think of one even, the feeling of dopamine that once you think of it before you even say it, you know it's going to work because $1+1=2$. And with fear again it's the same thing, it's information. Unfortunately I haven't been conditioned to enjoy that bit of information but it can be so useful if you transmute it in the work. Omar spoke about the development of the sister character. We wouldn't have had that character if it wasn't for the fact that – I mean, by the way, I didn't want to bring her in the beginning, because it's my sister, you know, and I respect my sister! She had kind of spoken about it, she said some things about the play, she questioned it, and around the kitchen table, my sister, me and her husband Trevor, we all kind of spoke about the play because they had seen – oh no, he hadn't even seen it. He wasn't there at the sharing and yet he was still chipping and saying: 'Here's why you shouldn't put this play on.' The discussion that we had just got my blood boiling. I remember just wanting to cry because I was like: 'Ah man, I can't believe you guys don't know what I'm saying!' And coming into the theatre, going into the attic and exploring that



with Omar and actually putting the discussion on the wall, you take it out of your mind, it's no longer identifying with your emotion and who you are. In fact it's what people are saying, you know, it's just what someone has said about the thing that you've written. That's it – it's on the wall, it's not attached to anybody, you know. It's no longer attached to my sister's face, it's like some other woman, you know. And then you can kind of like do whatever you want with it. It's about being open and welcoming to those things, like bring it into the room. And so yeah, what has *Misty* done? It's kind of changed the way I look at work and it's made me more courageous because now I know I can go into the fear, I can bring the ugly stuff in because I feel like now that I have done some things with it, we can continue to because that was one thing but the other things in the play that I felt really nervous about discussing, you know, about saying it in the room. And yeah, now that we did it, it's done, you know? I haven't been stoned for talking about those things.

DR: This is an excellent way to finish maybe, but I just want to return briefly to what you said about those sandy pages and maybe how they're finding their relevance now as a result of what's happening at the moment. Do you think that there is a future again for those sandy pages that you were trying to write in South Africa?

AK: Oh, 100%. What I'm realising about my ideas, right – man, what can I describe it as? You know, there's this rock-climbing thing, there's a wall, right, where you have the sticks and you stick it in that hole, right, and then you stick the other one into another hole, and then this one, you know, you've stuck it into that hole so you use that as a leverage for your legs. Like, that feels like what I do very often as a writer. Some ideas that I have years ago, I think it's the thing that's going to get me up the mountain, right, until I stick it in the hole and I realise: 'Oh no, actually I need my hand free, and it's just a thing to get my leg up', you know, and then I just... And with that idea it's definitely one of those, you know. I needed to explore it in order to go to this other area and now I've come back to that stick and I can use it, I can actually really use it. So those sandy pages came out and I'm developing something. You won't even recognise the inspiration behind it, but it's useful. This is why I don't throw any old drafts away or any rubbish plays or whatever, rubbish poems or rubbish song that I've written. I just keep everything because you just never know because there's going to come a time when you just think: 'Oh, I know what to do with that now.'

DR: Great. Excellent. Well, thank you so much, thank you for your time.

Transcription by Tom Colley

Clips Summary

[00:29:11 to 00:30:37] 'City Creature' from *Misty* (2018)

[00:32:35 to 00:33:27] Trailer for *Little Baby Jesus* (2012)

[00:44:57 to 00:46:42] 'No Justice' from *Misty* (2018)

[00:55:05 to 00:57:13] 'Jungle Shit' from *Misty* (2018)

Audio available at <https://www.auralia.space/gallery4-misty/>.

To cite this material:

Radosavljević, Duška; Pitrolo, Flora; Bano, Tim; Elerian, Omar; Kene, Arinzé (2021) LMYE Gallery #4: Pushing the Boundaries of Storytelling – The Misty Interview, *Auralia.Space*, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, <https://doi.org/10.25389/rcssd.14027606.v1>.

