

Nadia Latif, freelance director, writer

Interview with Nadia Latif, freelance theatre/film director and writer

Sue Dunderdale

Right, your thoughts about your background, where you come from, what turned you into wanting to work in theatre?

Nadia Latif

Yeah, so, my background is that of a professional theatre-goer, and the child of professional theatre-goers and the grandchild of professional theatre-goers. And so, I have the kind of privileged point of access of people who have no theatrical background themselves, I have no artists in my family at all. They're all like teachers, and businessmen, and architects, generally teachers, and for whom, going to the theatre is a very necessary and automatic part of living, it's like, why wouldn't you go to the theatre, if you live in London. Not that I did live in London, obviously I grew up in Khartoum, but we came for summers to London. We would go to the theatre every week, sometimes twice a week, sometimes twice a day. You know, we'd go to like a Saturday matinee and an evening show and partly because I think you know if you grew up in a place that has no culture, I mean no publicly allowed culture at all.

And well, you know, the very Islamist government, the music halls were closed, and the cinemas and TV and radio were state controlled. And so, in a way coming to London every summer, and being able to access quite a lot of things for free, we didn't live that far from the Natural History Museum, or the V&A and you can just kind of walk into these things, it was like, why wouldn't you do that. And, but also, I think, you know, I'm one of six, and actually the summer holiday in Sudan is quite long, It's from April to August. So, it was just like a lot of time to fill.

And my mum was like – what can I do with these kids, you know, keep them busy and it was quite a good way to do that, we also went to the cinema a lot.

I think she just had kids who responded to it, all of my siblings liked going to the theatre, even the youngest, and

they fundamentally understood it as a ritual, I think we kind of got into, like, you go in and you buy a programme for a quid, as it was back then. And you've got another quid in your pocket for an ice cream. You watch a show – how bad can it be, it's like two hours of your life, and then you go home, It's just like the cultural outing with food, brilliant! And so yeah, I came from, I come from a theatre-watching background:

Sue

Is there anything in particular that stands out that impacted on you?

Nadia Latif

I grew up around the corner from the Royal Court and that was our local theatre. I mean, probably as a child I went more to the Polka and the Unicorn, back when the Unicorn was at the Arts Theatre and also the Young Vic. But also, I think that just walking past the theatre [Royal Court] every day, and understanding that a theatre is fundamentally a building in a neighbourhood, where you're just like, oh, that's what that is and then, there's [department store] Peter Jones opposite, and it wasn't something you necessarily had to go to the West End to go and see. I saw some of the very early work at the Royal Court but not a massive amount because it wasn't very family friendly and definitely, I had a younger sibling and so sometimes my mom used to drop me off on my own, and then she asked them, you know, when's it finished, we'll be here to pick her up. I was seeing things that were quite adult. Then I think my mom put me in various kind of summer drama workshops, which I didn't really like because I didn't really want to do performing, I wasn't interested in being an actor. I did school plays, but I didn't really like performing, you know, I was like a fat, black teenager. So, the chances are you're going to play the comedy parts or the old parts. And even when I ended up going to school in Brighton and I did school plays, I mean I was playing second fiddle to people like Rebecca Hall.

Like, there are, very clearly, those of us who can act and those of us who can't, I'm really okay with being mostly "can't", because I think fundamentally, it's a bit annoying, being an actor. And I didn't want to write because I just sort of, you know, I remember, I had a really profound experience reading *Frankenstein*, when I was very, very young.

And, you know, thinking about this 19-year-old woman, writing this book, and being like, God, they're just people who have a talent, and they're born with it on this planet, and if you don't have it, that's okay. I just thought that writing a play was the hardest thing, I couldn't conceive of how you could do it and so directing seemed like a really natural thing. Don't act or write, I want to boss people around.

Sue

Can you locate around when you became first conscious of directing as opposed to acting?

Nadia Latif

Really early on, I've got a schoolwork [essay] from when I was 11, about wanting to be a director. I think if you watch films, you're very aware of directors, no, I knew who directors were really early on. Also I think, in a weird way you know it, if you ever do like a school play when you're little, you know because the teachers are like the director during it, so you kind of fundamentally get that this is the person who sticks the whole thing together. And I think genuinely, even though I went to a school in Sudan, we did do like rudimentary school plays. You kind of know it from what the teacher does, kind of tells people where to stand and say their lines stronger or louder, and that appealed to me as an authoritarian.

And so, I never wanted to be anything else, I just think it comes from watching plays, and just being like, this is really cool.

Sue

Were you conscious of being a different person in Khartoum to London, of compromises or adjustments, disjunctions?

Nadia Latif

Yeah, I think I went from being the whitest black person in Sudan because my mother is half white, and to coming to England and then not really understanding black Britishness as well. Partly that's through being an East African and sitting across Arab and African identities and neither one really works. And I think that this followed me for a long time, I think it followed me all through the early part of my career of not finding black Britishness accessible as a concept. I realise now why that was, and that's because I wasn't raised in a minority, I was raised black in a black country and all that, although there are subtleties as to why I had a different experience to that, fundamentally, I didn't experience what it is like to be a black minority, and so I think when I came

to this country you're engaging mainly with West African and Caribbean blackness. And here, I was like, oh yeah, it's actually because we don't have a lot in common, because I haven't grown up with concepts of Empire. I mean, not obviously, Sudan was part of the British Empire, but it's different if you're there. And, but also having to protect yourself in some way. I think also there was quite a lot of in-jokery in a lot of early black theatre that I saw. I mean there's quite a lot of like jokes about pounded yam and egusi soup, and I was a bit like, I don't get what this is. Then I was like, Yeah, actually if you were from a minority from in this country, you would feel the most amazing explosion of feeling about seeing this thing that feels very small to you put on a national stage, so I understand why it is, but I didn't feel any particular access to it. And I also think that, in Sudan, one of the things that we fought for was a black intelligentsia, you know that that was what was being crushed. And so I think I found I had very little tolerance for something that didn't reach to big ideas, generally, and I was, but why are we wasting our time as black and brown people in entertainment, when actually there are big notions of freedom and liberty to tackle, and I've become slightly kinder about that in my old age. I'm like, you know what, if you want to do a comedy about black hair, fine, it's okay. I'm not mad at it, I'm tired of being angry. And so yeah, I think there are, and also I think, you know, one can experience racism your entire life. Obviously, I think that the genteel racism of the British theatrical classes, it's got its own very specific taste.

Sue

Do you speak Arabic?

Nadia Latif

Not brilliantly, not enough. English is my first language, and actually I was just editing this film, last week, and I realised that the film opens and closes with Arabic and I was, "God, I'm actually very moved by this" and it's not subtitled as well. And it was really moving to be able to make a film in your own language. I'm writing and directing this feature film for Film 4, that's quite bilingual. It's about a white English woman and a Yemeni refugee teenager. And I really want to root for his scenes in Arabic, which is not a huge number of scenes, probably three when he's speaking Arabic to his other friends, that they're not subtitled, because I'm like the film is shot from her point of view, so she doesn't understand it and that's part of the joy of it

I remember having quite a formative experience at the Young Vic when I was like, 15/16, and going to see *Alive from Palestine* and I think that was the first time I'd seen work in Arabic on stage and I took my whole family. It's so

rare to go to see something in your own language. I think particularly in that it made me think about how poor most translation is because there were so many jokes that you couldn't have captured and it was full of loads of things where you realise translation is not the same thing as transliteration. I was like, you've literally translated this but actually you have not understood its meaning at all. And it felt really nice to be in on an extra level of meaning. All the audience understood what was happening but, if you spoke Arabic, you were like, there's an extra gag in this for me. And I think that's something that's really stuck with me as a trick.

Now I refer to it as Easter egging, you know, I'm just gonna put a little Easter egg there. My designer said my directing style is "if you know, you know." All right, all right, she's wearing a certain piece of clothing, or they've got a certain book on the shelf or just something where you go, "Oh yeah, I understand what you mean because we have the same background." I think that turns up in all of my work now. In fact, the film I just made, which is about a Muslim man having mind control de-radicalization devices implanted in his body by the state. And the actor Scott Karim came up to me and he was like, you know you've put that device in his left hand and we all know why that is. And I was like yeah that's because if you're a Muslim, the left hand belongs to the devil and the right hand belongs to God, so the idea that they would implant in his left hand. But I was like nobody else is ever going to know this. It's just for us and only if you're really thinking about it. And I kind of don't mind. *Fairview* was constructed around, oh yeah, some people are having one experience of a thing and another group of people, a totally different experience. And that is sort of the opposite of what all that early noughties dramaturgy taught us, which is that you should make things so that everybody in the room understands in the same way. And that's because you think only one group of people are in the audience but if you embrace the fact there are different types of people in the audience, you can't make something that can be understood the same way by all of them because of the differences. Yeah, and I think that I really enjoy an audience where one set of people get a joke and the other set of people don't get it, but then they're having their own experience of that at the same time. So, your experience is you don't understand this joke and why don't I understand it and why don't I think it's funny, whereas other people are like it's the funniest thing I've ever heard. And that is the liveness of theatre for me, because you say, yeah, there's an interplay between different groups of people, but both of these things have to be precise, you have to know exactly what you're doing, at any one moment. So, you can't just go this route of, this group of people are finding it funny, I don't know what anybody else is going through, it's like those other people

have to be going through a very specific experience that I have also planned for. Because otherwise you're leaving them out. I do feel that everybody needs to be included by the process of making a play, but they can have totally different experiences of the thing.

Sue

You went to Oxford?

Nadia Latif

No, I went to [University College London] UCL. But my sister went to Oxford.

I don't think I would have survived it.

Sue

Why?

Nadia Latif

That level of racism and classism and misogyny and all that stuff, in which they become trained. I think if you were a minority person who went to Oxford, you have to just be the strongest person in the world, and I'm not sure that at 19 that's what I want to be. At 19, I don't want to be the strongest person in the world, I want to mainly, like, drink, take drugs, read books, kiss boys, actually I think it's totally fine to want to have like a totally normal uni, not that UCL is rubbish, UCL is freaking amazing. And, you know, it's a really hard degree but I just don't think I'm, necessarily, ready for the whole hothouse argument – "if you just like cane it for three years, you get this amazing thing" and I'm like, I'm fine. And I didn't go and I'm absolutely fine, and I read lots of books.

Sue

What theatre work did you do at UCL?

Nadia Latif

None.

Yeah, I didn't do any. I think I took myself quite seriously and because I knew I was going to be a director, and I had no problem in that being a long-term strategy, I think I looked at university drama and I didn't like any of the plays. It was always doing old plays, whether it's kind of Miller or the Greeks or whatever. I also didn't really like the people who did it and was sort of I don't want to be part of a club and I didn't have anything to say, yet.

So I was mainly focusing a lot on having something to say, I'm just reading loads of books and watching loads of plays. I just went to the theatre all the time. And I think you just begin to amass the material that you're interested in investigating and I was kind of fine with that. I mainly focussed on getting a degree, just having a perfectly normal university experience.

And so yeah I didn't really do any drama at university, I mean I studied a lot, that's where I got the kind of grasp of the classics, when you're like, right, now I understand what Renaissance and restoration are, you know what these things mean. And ironically, I became really quite obsessed with Victorian fiction which is not particularly great for drama. And I was still alright with just like ploughing my head into loads of books for three years, and just having a nice life.

Sue

So what theatre that you were seeing was impressing or affecting you?

Nadia Latif

I think that was a time where I went to the Royal Court [Theatre] a lot, but also because you have the joys of being a student. You know, we got tickets for two pounds, it was so cheap, so I saw loads of things in the West End. And actually you could do it and then roll it into a night out. When you're spending that little money on it, you sort of feel like you don't hate as many things. I feel like now I go into things, and I'm really cross at them because I've spent loads of money on them and I'm like, that was a terrible evening at the theatre. Remember when I was a student, there was a Labour government, so the provision was much higher, and I just think that I was seeing everything. I remember going to see Kwame Kwei Armah's plays, and Debbie Tucker Green's plays yes but also Ayckbourn and Hare and whoever. Honestly, I wasn't discerning, I didn't have any taste yet, I was just going to see everything. I didn't really go to the fringe all that much because I was living in the centre of town, my halls of residence were on Grays Inn Road and then all my student digs were in central London. And so, I had this like weirdly quite high glamour version of theatre. I tell you the one place I didn't go to, because I remember very specifically going to this theatre for the first time aged 24, was the Old Vic, the Old Vic was always a mysterious place to me.

I went to the Barbican [Theatre] a lot. And I still think the Barbican is one that I have a very early memory of, you know, all the doors that will close at the same time, I have such a childhood memory of that – like the play is starting. I also went to Sadler's Wells [Theatre], I watched a lot of dance. And because actually dance was weirdly popular when I was at university, you'd

get a lot of people who would happily go see a modern dance piece. And so it made me informative in terms of like “oh my God, there’s just so much you can see, living in London,” the greatest city on earth.

Sue

You came to RADA straight from UCL? And did you know what you were looking for from it?

Nadia Latif

Yeah, I literally walked my stuff up the road.

I applied to one drama school and got in, so I like to think that’s because I did have a clear sense of purpose and, but actually I think I had a more kind of amoebic - you know, I didn’t know what anything is, so I’m sort of willing to try anything. And I do think within my first term there I began to draw quite clear lines about what I was and wasn’t interested in. So I wasn’t as much of an amoeba as I thought, I actually did have quite firm ideas, I don’t want to do classics, I do want to do new plays. I think I had more struggle with what I saw as the failings of the actor training, because actually all of the director training was great; but I wasn’t sure I could buy into RADA as a place. We directors were on our own kind of track and then you obviously intersect with all the actors. And I just remember thinking that half the teachers are charlatans and the things that were focused on were things that were least helpful. You just need to be doing loads of plays all the time and practising through doing.

But also, just finding quite a lot of it deeply racist as well.

And because I knew those actors and some of them were amazing actors, like Wunmi Mosaku, and finding my experience of them as a people and their connecting to me totally different from how the institution treated them or their casting. Also, how much they prized star power, just the way that it really focused on the immediacy of star power, rather than actually what is the real long-term plan, like, this person is going to be like the defining actor of the generation in 20 years’ time. And I found quite a lot of it quite sexist and kind of lookist. So, I think my disappointments in director training came from the actor training, rather than the director training itself.

Sue

Which directors did you assist?

Nadia Latif

I think I only assisted men. And I think that the two or three directors I assisted when I was at RADA were Sergei Chernyshevsky is it? the Russian from St. Petersburg, I think, Bill Gaskell, and Mike Bradwell.

Then I went to work straightaway, when I graduated, with Mike Attenborough, like wow okay white dudes. Like, all very different. Sergei was a real arse but the rest of them were perfectly nice. But seeing this generation who came before you and its various failings, but you benefitted because of all of the kind of classical training they had, you're like yeah I'm gonna learn something from you and I learned something from all of them except for maybe Sergei. You're sort of realising that there's something quite weird about them being older than I was, like, oh, but you're gonna stop working soon or die or whatever. Because in many ways, they're no longer fit for purpose, it already felt in a way like it was in the past. Maybe I think people assume I would have resented them more, but I think that's like saying you can't learn anything from previous generations, it's very childish, and very short sighted. And actually I learned a vast amount from Mike Bradwell, that was an amazing experience, I still use exercises that he did in the rehearsal room because they're still great. They're still like the best thing ever. And I think that that's part of things becoming history and I took what was useful from that, and then I did my own thing, over here.

I think now when I encounter young directors like, during my time at Theatre 503 and the Young Vic, I really feel bad for them because specific director training feels like such a fantasy for so many of them, and there's so many of them that it would absolutely benefit. And very often it's not those people who get access to it, more like he was a kid who jumped from Oxford, because your mom's a film producer, straight to director training and you're probably going to be fine. Whereas, for so many it's just not possible, it's just not possible financially, the opportunities seem to have halved in the last decade.

I feel the major anxiety for a lot of directors, and I'm not just talking about very young directors, I'm talking about directors like Roy Alexander Weiss at the Royal Exchange [Manchester], who is a working-class black man, feel their real anxieties are about not understanding classics, how do you direct a classic? And I'm like, I don't not direct classics because I don't know how to, I totally do know how to because that's what I was trained to do. I just choose not to and if you turned to me tomorrow and said, direct Julius Caesar, I fundamentally understand how to take apart a classical text, how you break

it down into actions and units and all of that stuff. That's what my director training gave me. It's one of the problems of that kind of premium theatre, big fancy classics that obviously draw star power and continue to be directed by middle-class white men. It's because they still have much more access to classics.

I think that a lot of times people think the direction is something that you can just do because actors turn round and say I'm going to direct, and I'm like, cool, but you know it's like a highly skilled thing, it's something we actually practised for years in order to be able to do.

Well, as a teacher will tell you, lifelong learning starts at school and doesn't end there. You're just giving people a set of questions to go and interrogate for the rest of their lives. And actually I feel like very often directors now feel like their notions of their lives and their work practice are somehow separated. And so they always have this idea that they have to have an approach which they apply to work and I sort of sit in the Bill Gaskell school of thought which is your practice is who you work with. I sort of feel like there's who you are, and then there's the work, and the process will come out of that. I mean you could be like a Frantic Assembly with, there is one process for all of the work, and we have a brand and that's how we make things and that's totally legit. But I think the majority of people want to be able to make different things and to disappear a little bit in the work. And some people don't. Some people want to be Rob Icke or Ivo Van Hove and they want to be a brand. It's not surprising that all these people are men. I don't think that there are women who have, maybe Katie Mitchell for a time. She had the same helicopter that turned up in every play at one stage. I was like, I've seen this helicopter before. I just think that I want to be skilled enough to feel I could do anything, I could do a panto and I could do Euripides – I don't want to do Euripides but that comes through director training, helping you understand that.

Sue

How did you start off after RADA – with Michael Attenborough?

Nadia Latif

I left Rada in July 2007.

I started rehearsals at the Almeida in October, on *The Homecoming*. I remember because I'd also applied for a job at the Donmar [Warehouse], and that would have been a longer job, being the resident assistant director for a year, and this was still when [Michael] Grandage was there. And I couldn't have done both, and I pulled out of the resident assistant director at the application

process because I thought that that's always going to be there, but Pinter is going to die soon. Maybe here's the last chance that anyone will have to assist on a Pinter (while he is still alive). And he was there, and he did die not long after, so I was right on that. It's funny because I think now that's kind of amazing that was my first job. Because he cast Ruth as a black woman. And it wasn't Mike Attenborough being particularly radical, he just really liked Jenny Jules as an actress, so he was like you should play this part and Pinter approved. And it was a great show to come up on because you experienced both things. I experienced the kind of suffocation of white masculinity and you're on a play that is about that. It's about generational white male cruelty, but also a room full of all white male actors, white male director, and a female white stage manager so you're kind of seeing it, the kind of cockfighting. But then you've got one black woman and she's the most powerful person on stage by the end, by the end, she's ruling. And in a way, Jenny Jules really exhibited that in the space, those men respected her, absolutely.

I remember because she used to get migraines, and everybody was, like, incredibly conscious. They didn't want to trigger a migraine because it would make her really ill and actually watching all these men take care of her was very sweet, but I mean it only gets you so far. Jenny and me got on like a house on fire. Jenny Jules taught me a lot about how, as a black woman, when you have to blend in and when you have to stand out, what is soft power as well. And you know, I guess as a whole you catch more bees with honey. And she was very good at that, I think now. I would have been a bit more like yeah but there's also shit you can put your foot down about, but actually Mike Attenborough was very good about that, I think he was super conscious of there only being two women in the room.

Yeah, I think his real skill was just get some great actors, and the right play, and you're probably gonna get a pretty good show. And honestly that's how we got through *The Homecoming*. So, we had Ken Cranham, Nigel Lindsey, Neil Dudgeon, Danny Dyer, and Jenny Jules, it's not gonna go that horribly wrong. The design is pretty basic but we're here to see the acting. And I remember going there to see the production of *Rosmersholm*, directed by Anthony Page. And I remember thinking sometimes you've just got to throw the right actors at the right play and get like magic. The cast was Malcolm Sinclair and Helen McCrory and I can still remember it. That's the weird tension between a directors' theatre, and an actors' theatre and a writers' theatre. Actually, I think in this country what audiences want is an actor's theatre. They want to go and see Matt Smith or Andrew Scott tackle Hamlet, or whatever. And actually I sometimes feel like we're always having to fight harder for a directors' theatre and that's not a bad thing. I think that's quite an interesting three-way tension to

have. But fundamentally, someone like my mom wants to go see Brian Dennehy doing *Death of a Salesman*, because she knows it's going to be really good acting and that what people respond to. We're like the invisible artists, right.

But I think that's a good thing. I think it's great that people first and foremost respond to performance, because that stops theatre from being like an intellectual exercise, it's an emotional exercise. One of the things that was really strange to me about *Fairview* was that it was not an exercise in acting at all.

In that the play is the star vehicle or the experience of the thing is, and I think that's why it's a really clever play because it disguises itself, but actually Jackie Sibblies Drury, the writer, is the star. She also wins because she's not on stage. I mean, it's like, haha. I'm not here but, here is my genius. And I really enjoyed it. I mean I think the performances were very good, but even the actors knew that they were in service of the play, and the experience with an audience watching the play.

Sue

How long did you stay at the Almeida?

Nadia Latif

Just one show and I think I did some participation work

Sue

Did you have a career plan or were you more open to what would happen?

Nadia Latif

Wide open to what appeared. I mean, I had my own company but it's just a company so that I could make work.

And I'd been left money, so I was privately wealthy, so I had enough money to help put together shows

I didn't use that often, I think I only did like five shows for myself in over ten years, always co-producing with other producers. But I knew I didn't want to be an assistant. And so, I only assisted three times in my career. I assisted Mike Attenborough at the Almeida. I assisted Indhu Rubasingham at what was the Tricycle on *The Great Game*, which was an amazing job. I mean this was like the perfect job for any young director. I assisted Rupert Goold when he was at Headlong [Theatre Company] and that was my last one.

I was actually a pretty good assistant, but I just was like, I can't be part of a production where I can take no responsibility for what ends up on stage. I

remember very specifically on the show I did with Rupert, which was again a great hoot, and I was totally empowered and had a lovely time working for him, but fundamentally this project was governed by his experience of the world and his worldview. And the show was about the ten years since 9/11. And the fact that he thinks he can put the show together without a single writer of middle eastern origin and we've got white actors on this stage pretending to be Arabs and you've got black actors pretending to be Benazir Bhutto.

And we have no attempt at an authentic global debate around this idea, and particularly for me, remembering all these moments from the outside and I thought, "Oh yeah, my lack of connection to this subject is because you and I do not have the same worldview." And I can't support somebody else's worldview anymore.

So yeah, I didn't really have a plan at all. My plan was doing plays I really wanted to do and only new plays. And so, I sort of just like scrambled through a bit.

Actually, working for Indhu on *The Great Game* was a real career-making move because a) it put me as somebody who worked with quite high-profile writers; I worked with Abi Morgan, Colin Tevens, Simon Stephens, David Greig, and Steven Jeffries and that was great. It was a real example of how you actually should use an assistant, which is there should be so much work that the assistant almost has to have their own room that they are running all the time. The skill I got from that, of making multi-authored, massive-scale, 18 cast work, was what then got me offered a job as the Associate Director of Theatre 503. They were saying that you know how to work with writers. When I was at 503, I did a big multi-author piece of work, called *Coalition*, which was ten writers and ten collaborators, creating ten plays in response to the coalition government. You know, we did it within eight weeks of the coalition beginning. And that created such a fuss that Rupert offered me a job working on *Decade*, because by then I was the person who could do big multi-authored work, it set me up as somebody who had a skill set, as that this is a thing that I can do and actually I'm quite good at it. But also, I think it just meant that I had worked with like 50 writers by the age of 28.

I think somebody said to me the other day, you're disproportionately well known for how little work you've made.

It's like, thanks, I think. And that was partly working at 503, and I was there producing Alice Birch's first play, and Ella Hickson and so many writers, Beth Steel, they all come through and then you kind of come up with them, Tom

Morton-Smith, Rex Obano. And so, yeah, I just I think that I'm becoming part of writers' theatre rather than a directors' theatre. The community it brings you into is a lot stronger and clearer, somehow, and also you get yourself a reputation as somebody who loves writers and is not going to treat them badly, because I think that writers are terrified of having a bad experience. I mean rightly, I don't think that's wrong.

Sue

Who was the American writer you directed at the Arcola?

Nadia Latif

Kristiana Colón. So I did *The Great Game*, at the Tricycle, 2009. Then I went straight from there to the Lincoln Centre to do the directors' programme, which is like a month. Somebody had sent me her play which was her graduate thesis from the University of Chicago, and which was this homage to the work of Ntozake Shange, and I'd read it and it was amazing, and then the Lincoln Centre had said, if anybody has a piece of work they'd like to work on, we select like eight projects for people to work on while they're here, and I was like "I've got this play." And they were like "we pick you." It was an amazing month because I'm working with African-American actors and Ntozake Shange came to work with us, which was bonkers. And so yeah that play that reopened the Arcola downstairs I remember that was 2010.

And I think I'm still at the 503, because I was there from 2009 to 2011.

I did *Slaves* at 503 in 2009, then I did Kristiana's play *but I cd only whisper* in 2010 at the Arcola.

And then I went to join Headlong in 2011.

And then not long after that I did Brad Birch's first play at the Soho Theatre. He was somebody I met at 503 and then I did Kristiana's second play, upstairs in the main space at the Arcola. And then it was NYT [National Youth Theatre], so that was 2015. 2015 was *Homegrown* and Kristiana's play, and that was my annus horribilis of theatre, because if *Homegrown* wasn't bad enough, I had a horrible time directing Kristiana's second play. So, I'm like I'm never, ever doing theatre again. And 2016 is when I started making films.

Sue

So Kristiana's play was...

Nadia Latif

Octagon – the one about poets.

I've only ever directed plays at the Arcola, 503 and the Soho Theatre. That's about it.

Sue

Did the NYT come to you with the project or did you take it to them?

Nadia Latif

NYT had originally approached Omar. Me and Omar had met because of *Decade*, the show that I did with Rupert, because on Twitter he had said, imagine doing a show about the decade of 9/11 and not having any writers of Arab origin. So, I emailed him saying, "Yeah, I know. Do you want to get together." So we started hanging out and he was asked by NYT to do this play about radicalisation of British Muslims. So, they signed me up after him.

Little did I know. And so yeah, it sounds like action-packed as a decade, but actually there was loads of like no work, loads and loads of having no work.

Sue

When you were doing NYT, how long did you rehearse and when did you get the first indication something wasn't right?

Nadia Latif

So we were writing. I would say for six months, but writing with workshops, like, two or three rounds of workshops, which are also good because they could be casting workshops as well, there's a very long casting process. And I will say that the NYT are remarkable in that they actually pay you for every step of the process. So, you're paid for every single set of workshops you do. And so we had done so many sharings of the work at that stage, but actually the decisive moment came when we would make inquiries around copyrights and about the copyright of YouTube clips and about whether we needed to rewrite certain material or we could just list it *verbatim*. And I remember because Paris and Keziah were my assistants (two other RADA directing graduates) And I remember them saying, you know, but the bigger problem, Nadia, is how do you keep 120 kids busy for three weeks at the same time. So, we had original material, and then we had like stimulus, which would probably have made up about 30% of the show. We were like we have to have the nuts to devise this work in three weeks, rather than trying to write it, so we always knew there's going to be this like third of the work that was devised during the process. And, which actually was a real godsend because how do you keep 120 kids, kids, you know, 14–25 year olds, busy for a four-week rehearsal process. I think it was always surprising because it was so like the jewel in the

crown of their season. You know, it was going to run for three weeks which is very unusual for youth theatre projects as well. And, but yeah, I think if you ask Omar, he'd say he twigged earlier than I did. And I would tell him that was because I was trying to rehearse the show with 120 people, and he had time to think about the meaning of things. I'd say probably, I think we were sacked at the end of week two of a four-week rehearsal process.

And we probably twigged something was going wrong about 36 hours before that. But I mean, as we have learnt now through various legal proceedings, by the time that we had started rehearsals, they were already planning to cancel it.

I think me and Omar are still really traumatised by it, and actually don't like to kind of think about it too much.

Sue

Did they not sit down and talk through their worries with you?

Nadia Latif

Not once. All we got was an email dismissal. So, every member of the team received the same email at the same time, you know, don't come to work tomorrow, we'll send you your stuff.

Sue

I mean they could have lost their jobs.

Nadia Latif

Yeah, and I think it was really disheartening to me. I mean, we went for meetings with the head of the Arts Council, there was no stone left unturned really and partly that was because Shami Chakrabarti offered to be our legal counsel, you know, so we were being taken care of by Liberty, and so, I'm really grateful for that because actually, I think that if that hadn't happened, we would have just sort of like disappeared into the ether. And, but I think that what was really disheartening to me, I remember very specifically going to meet Nick Serota, and that we were there with Liberty, and English Pen, and Index on Censorship, so when they're in this kind of consortium of people, you know, and he's like, oh, it just feels like every August we're talking about censorship, and I was like, but the only people who are ever affected by that are people of colour. So, actually, what you're talking about is racism and let's not get it twisted.

Recently, the National Youth Theatre tweeted when George Floyd was murdered and there was kind of like a spate of people pretending like they gave

a shit about black lives. And, and the NYT tweeted, oh yeah we stand in solidarity with our black members, and Omar, who never has commented on this publicly, tweeted about it saying, I think you are disgusting, repellent people, because you are responsible for a trauma that will haunt me for the rest of my life. I remember Bill Gaskell being really useful when it happened, emotionally, because he was like, they will, I remember he emailed me almost immediately when it was in the news, they will say it's because the play is not good enough, this is the oldest trick in the book.

He said it's the same thing they said about Edward Bond and it's the same thing they said about Sarah Kane. It's just the quickest thing they say is that the play is not good. And, you know, he's like it genuinely means that you are actually doing something right – I think actually what me and Omar went through was a really intense level of loneliness. And actually because of social media, watching your kind of life get played out in front of your eyes and people being like they were terrorist sympathisers, and we're like, Well, have you met me, and actually understanding that, for a lot of liberals, islamophobia brings out a very specific, quiet bigotry and it doesn't matter. I have been at dinner parties with good liberals, good liberal artists, quote unquote, and, and because I'm not visibly from an Islamic background, they say the most insanely Islamophobic things in front of me all the time. And so, I was like that is actually the level of conversation that's happening behind closed doors. I think that is propped up by some very redundant programming. I remember we went to see the National show about Muslim terrorism in Britain by Nick Kent and Gillian Slovo, and I was like, hey imagine the tone deafness, let's get two white non-Muslims to talk about this. Imagine, you know, the deafness, of getting a load of stick-on fake beards and doing bad accents and, yeah, well that, but also for me the level of threat that is therefore implied in making that work. I remember going to see a show by dv8 at the National, it was called *Can we talk about this*. And in that they created a fake Muslim protester. And I was like the level of disjunctive conversation about the arts in this country is that you have to fake an intervention that does not exist because the people you are talking about are so uninterested, they're not even buying a ticket. So, like I always think that the kind of "Behzti" myth, the myth that all these brown people will come and shake their fist at your theatre, is something that is exclusively propped up by white people. And actually, the majority of times, these people aren't protesting. I mean like people are actually like I don't give a shit, I don't pay 40 pounds to go to your theatre anyway, you can do what you fucking want, you know, and actually, it shows the real gap that theatres have from communities.

Sue

When was the Index On Censorship presentation?

Nadia Latif

That was March 2017. Yeah. and it felt really great.

You know our publishers dropped us, our original publishers who were Oberon. They dropped us because they, quote “didn’t want to be the next Charlie Hebdo.” But our editor at Oberon, who no longer works there, stuck by us through and through. And so, he was “I’m going to find you another publisher”, and we went around all the other publishers, we went to theatrical publishers, non-theatrical publishers, you know one point we were talking to Verso. So, and they all kind of entertain the idea, but then sort of they don’t want to touch it, and then I remember Omar was the first person who suggested self-publishing, because he was like, I don’t understand why we would pay somebody else to do something that fundamentally we can do on our own. And so, George who was our editor, offered to come on and edit it and do all of the work. So, then we just had to finish it, and of course we didn’t have any money. And we were very conscious of wanting to make it with the original cast and wanting to make it using the original methodology, as well as stimulus and then generating material and then crafting that. So very often what we would do was give them a piece of footage or a piece of writing, and then send them away and say make this in your own self-image, it could be whatever you want it to be, and then come back and be like, “we’ve done it as a rap battle”. Alright, we say, cool, let’s see that we don’t really love that, but we like that, that was how we did it. Obviously, this is quite time consuming. So, we had to do it over the course of nearly two years, like evenings and weekends, and also you’re trying like to favour school holidays, so that the most people can be there and, you know, they were amazing and none of us are being paid as well. Actually, it made me reflect a lot on the weird tension that there is in youth work about like, at what point are kids paying to work with you. And so, the only thing we could say to them is that you know you’re all going to be credited in the script. And so, we published it in March 2017, and we continue to self-publish it. After that people were, oh do you want to publish it under our thing and we were like, you know what, we’re fine, it’s on the internet, you can buy it.

Sue

Has it been produced by any other companies since then?

Nadia Latif

No, it’s endlessly on lists.

And imagine if anyone had the nuts to do it. I mean, it's huge. It's like massive. It's quite cleverly put together because the whole idea is there are five plays within it so you can do the whole thing with 100 people, or you can do one play. And I don't know if anyone will at this stage. I'm sort of past it, I did it, I've got what I needed from it, which was I published it and put it out into the world. And, and all it did was reveal the failings of a cultural industry which is morally bankrupt.

I think me and Omar wanted to move on because it's not helpful to sit in your trauma.

I also think because when that happened, I went straight into another job. At least I was like there is life after this. And I think, you know, there are lots of people whose careers have been ended by trauma. There are lots of people who were like, I had such a horrible experience, I never went back, and I've met those people. I've met them in their 80s and I've met them in their 30s, where they just go, oh yeah no, I tried that and didn't want to do it, like it sucked. And I think that theatre gets a weird kick out of being a war of attrition, this is something like you must suffer. You must continue to suffer, and I think it's because we're so focused on getting a show to press night or getting a show to reviews, whatever, it's so kind of goal focused and not process focused, that actually we don't care who has a terrible time. I was in a mad Zoom conversation with a bunch of directors the other day. It was all about how do you make your rehearsal safer, and a director was like, I've worked with this actor who is famously horrible to his dressers. And so, we made sure that the dressers were really clear about what the complaints procedure was and who they should talk to. I'm like, imagine thinking that's the solution, rather than that they should just not hire that actor. Like, if one person makes three people miserable. It's much easier to get rid of that person than it is to help these people because, I'm like, the trauma has already happened to them, just because they complain about it doesn't actually like fundamentally make a difference to them like that still happened to you. I don't know a single stage manager who didn't burn out. They're always women, you know, and very often that's where women of colour find their way into the industry, and they all burn out because it's fundamentally like a really tough job, and they just think like it doesn't take any responsibility for the fact that it's badly paid and sometimes terrible. A terrible experience. And so, I think we should focus more on making sure that everybody has a positive experience. Fundamentally, you shouldn't feel worried about going to work. That is a mad situation to be in and something that is just experienced far too often.

Sue

Talk a little bit more about your move into film. Is it something you wanted to do or were you asked to do it?

Nadia Latif

I was kind of asked. *Homegrown* happened in 2015 and then I was like, I never want to work in theatre again. But also, I didn't know how to work again. I felt like my name had been, you know, I remember getting the bus home and literally seeing my face on the cover of the Evening Standard, and it was some picture that had been like grabbed off my Facebook and I just felt like utterly humiliated, just like an injustice had happened. And so, I was like, fuck this I've had enough. And a friend of mine who worked at the BFI [British Film Institute] was like, Oh, you know, BFI does this film development work called Network@LFF, where they pick 15 filmmakers every year, and it's around the two weeks of the festival, writers workshops and meeting filmmakers and talks etc. And I was like, yes but I haven't made any films and he was like, it's fine. Don't worry about it. I applied to Network@LFF and got on. And I wasn't the only theatre person, there was one other theatre person as well, so it acknowledged that theatre people can move into TV and film. And the year that I went, it was all people of colour. It was the year that the BFI had launched Black Star, which was their season of black British cinema. I think it was exclusively British. It was also the year that *Moonlight* was out and won best picture. So, it was quite an oddly interesting but tense time to be black and in cinema, obviously Steve McQueen had already happened, and also like "12 Years a Slave" felt like such a thing. And it sort of felt like, things were slightly more possible, but also like eggy as shit. And there are some amazing filmmakers, people like Kibwe Tavares, who I think is one of the best film directors in this country, and who makes these amazing kind of sci-fis, also Aleem Khan whose film just got into Cannes.

Some people had already made their first feature, and some were making a second feature, some people had made a few shorts, and then there was like me, who didn't even have an idea for a short film. I remember meeting Mira Niar, I'm like desperately trying not to cry because I love *Monsoon Wedding*, I've watched it every week with my mom, and she had been a theatre director. And also meeting Benedict Andrews who'd been a theatre director, I think he had his film *Una*, which is an adaptation of the play *Blackbird*. There were like a few theatre directors who were making films. I remember talking to Mira Niar and asking did you have to adjust your brain at all because a few of the film directors were slightly mean to the couple of us that were from

theatre. She said, you know, all you have to remember is its objects and space, and where they are makes a difference in meaning. And when you're feeling a bit sad, remember that you've worked with more actors and writers than this lot have had hot dinners, and you'll be fine. Yes, I have worked with writers, and that is an advantage that nobody talks about, that you simply have done more work than most film directors. I've done like 20 plays in various ways in my life, probably more than that actually. Whereas, very often they'll be like, singularly focused on one thing for like three years. And actually, it gives you a different skill set, but one that is no less useful. Then off the back of that, the BFI said, you know, you should make a short film, and we will finance you.

So, I knew Omar was going to write it and we went in there with two ideas, and they picked one and we made it. And that was it. Which is kind of amazing. I mean I also had like a horrible experience through it. My first short film was a real smorgasbord of experiences, it was a joy to prep for it, it was a joy to shoot and absolutely a nightmare to get through post. So, in some ways it was good because it wasn't like I had this amazing experience. Then I moved to another film, and it was incredible. I know it's equally hard as theatre, it's just hard in totally different ways. I think after a few years of feeling like I was everybody else's bitch in theatre, it felt nice to do something where it's all back on you, like, shit, it's on me, I'm actually the lead artist on this, and, if I fuck up, I've really only myself to blame. Because at that point, you've got the director's cut right so there's no producer there. I'm just making a short film, but really focusing on what is important to you, and deciding on what things you will compromise on, which things you've worked for, that's really nice actually, thinking, "Oh, it's just as simple as moving it 18 frames that way or 18 frames the other way". I mean I didn't enjoy that edit but it taught me a huge amount.

So that was kind of that, and I never had an agent in theatre or anything like that and then, I think, because the BFI did quite a lot of chatting about it.

And you know because it's got a quite an aggressive title (*White Girl*).

And so, I got an agent before I even finished the cut on that.

Then we were signed up to do a feature film with the BFI and Film Four. And that was really it, and now you're off.

So, Omar's writing it, it's called *Welcome*, that's the one about the refugee and that's the one we went to Sundance with.

I find my experience at the moment of being a black woman trying to be in the film industry is like the experience I wish I'd had of theatre, back in the day, because actually it's felt like there is a renewed interest in filmmakers of different backgrounds, and it will be temporary, I'm not like it's been cured. Because film is very acquisitional, it wants to get the idea before anybody else can get the idea right, they want to make sure that they're making it and not those guys over there.

I mean you have to abandon 60% of these projects in your head, they're never actually going to happen but as long as you pay me to write a draft, I don't mind. But that's really a quite healthy thing, like, okay, you can be paid. And you can do work, and sometimes that work doesn't happen. But you know what, you managed to do your bathrooms with that money that they paid you so it's alright. Whereas I think in theatre it can feel like, I've been talking to this Artistic Director for ten years and they haven't given me a show or do I have to cut off my feet to get a show? I feel I can be more philosophical about that because my film work is going ahead at a good pace and like they see things are kind of balancing each other out but I found it very hard not to resent this. How many amazing people just got lost to not being able to hack ten years of not working and, purely from my financial privilege, I'm able to still be here after twelve years.

There are loads of amazing writers and directors I know, that went and did other things. And I think COVID is gonna have the same impact, you know.

Sue

Yes, talk about COVID now

Nadia Latif

I think that the worry I have about a post-pandemic world is going to be about securing audiences back and that's going to be the kind of regular audiences and kind of, you know, an older audience, the white audience, a richer audience, obviously. I think the reliance is going to be on Star Power, again, and what that means and I just think there's going to be like a "safe hands" thing. And you know, I may now have technically become one of those safe hands, thanks to *Fairview*. Like "you can do it" and I'm like "cool, so I must prove myself with the last play that happened before COVID, so I just made the test." I mean, I know loads of young directors who've just quit, they're just like, I'm gonna retrain as a yoga instructor, I'm gonna go and do whatever. And I don't blame them. It's miserable. At least before, even though I was privately wealthy, even if not, it didn't feel like a complete fiction being able

to self-produce a show. When I was young when I was 22, 23, it felt like something you could do, hard, but you could do it. And now it just feels impossible, the pure money of it just feels utterly impossible. And there is not a theatre in the country, who isn't having a reckoning with the fact that the numbers don't work, they just don't work, you know. I say that having worked with the Young Vic for two years, the numbers just don't work. There's no universe where they can work because they're constructed on the notion of subsidised theatre. And we've now reached a point where theatre is kind of assisted rather than subsidised. Suddenly, the whole thing doesn't work, it doesn't work on an administrative level. Also, I just think that it doesn't work on a performance level, actors are not getting paid enough, creators aren't getting paid enough, designers are not getting paid enough, that always gets me – I don't understand how you guys make this work. Fundamentally, this doesn't work. The only solution is to pay everyone more so that people can actually survive in the industry, but where's that going to come from? What are we going to do, put it on ticket prices but that's 100 pounds per seat like in New York? That doesn't work. Then you have a Conservative government who historically hate the arts. So, I don't mean to be doom and gloom, because I do think that like radically interesting work happens, I just think it doesn't happen in the theatre spaces.

Sue

What about you, your future?

Nadia Latif

When I finished *Fairview* I said that is the last play I will ever do.

Genuinely I was done. Not because I was bored

I actually left my contract to the Young Vic four months early, just because I was done. I was like, I have no interest in being part of institutions because I have my own pace of change that I need in order to sustain me creatively and spiritually and morally as a person, and institutions fundamentally move slower than that. And so, it is a little bit like, why I didn't want to be an assistant, it was like I can't be part of somebody else's worldview, I have to be responsible for my own worldview, and I can only take responsibility for that. I thought *Fairview* was a brilliant swansong, because I was like here is something that I made in a totally uncompromised space, partly because I was the associate director and so I had the ability to say to Kwame, this is going to be the team of people who makes this show, and I'm not willing to compromise on [the fact] that most of them didn't come from theatre. I think only one

member of the team was white, the rest of us were you know, black, brown, trans, immigrant, queer people. And, you know, the cast had no famous people in it, I wasn't interested in that. I was really interested in this group of people you didn't know anything about, making a show.

I also thought it was a piece of work that was really once in a lifetime, where your beliefs as an artist, as a director, are totally matched by the intention of the writer, as if I had written the play myself, because it says everything I want to say about the world. The last proper play I'd done had been at the RSC, and ever since then I'd kind of been sitting in more of a performance art space and film space. And so, I was interested in different values of relationships with audiences and here was a play that did, whilst also showing off that I could basically do a traditional play with loads of spoons and a sofa, it's like, oh yeah you can do both. And so, I was very happy for that to be the last thing I did and for a good long while. And then Jackie Sibblies Drury wrote another play.

And I was like, maybe I want to do this one as well. So that'll be next year. And I think I'm very fine to go through the world like this. I would be fine with popping up every couple of years and doing a play. It's brilliant, and just abandoning ideas of being a jobbing theatre director. It's not because I couldn't do it, it's just because, if I'm not that into something with every fibre of my being, then I don't care. I think when I was younger, I was more like, oh yeah, the practice of doing plays is the thing. And now I'm getting older – unfortunately, this is a quote from Quentin Tarantino – but he was like “your only responsibility as an artist is to your body of work.” And I think the older I get, the more I'm like, yeah man, the thing is about how do they all fit together in expressing who you are. His argument is that all pieces of work are connected to each other, he's like the work you do on that then becomes the work you do on other things. So, I've got two plays theoretically lined up for the next couple of years, or whenever theatres open again. I've been sent dozens of plays and just said no to most of them because I'm sorry I don't fundamentally care enough; this would make some other person very happy, [but] that person is not me. And in my 36th year, I'm very comfortable with that, very comfortable just turning down work, and that is also because of financial privilege, but that's partly financial privilege that comes through doing film and television.

So, the privilege of film and television is that it gives you financial fluidity. I mean, it's hectic trying to plan your year around when you're going to shoot. And the financial freedom it gives you is glorious.

Yeah, and I think I'm also realising that I can write, I didn't think I could write. I still don't think I'm could ever write a play, but actually I can write, because in film and television, you have, a 360° vision of what the thing is

going to look like. So, you're not just writing the words, you're writing what it's going to look like.

Sue

I think every director on camera has in some way to become a writer.

Nadia Latif

I think I didn't realise that and so I've been working on this Walter Mosley adaptation for a year. And I've been chipping away at four drafts of it from him. Endless notes, I've probably spent 100 hours on the phone and giving notes. Then I work out that the only solution to this is for me to write a draft, he can then write the draft after that, he can write the polish. I think that's a really good way.

I just think that the other way, you never have a chance to show somebody what you mean. I just need to show you what I mean and then you'll get it and it'll be great. And, and that's been really difficult because I think before I was "but I'm not a writer," you know, most films are horribly written in terms of dialogue, overwritten. I always have difficulty with dialogue, and I can, it's fine. But you have to have that 360-degree grasp of what the material is. And I think with Walter Mosley, it's hard because he wrote the novel as well. And I'm like, you know, you need to start remembering a bit more that this is an adaptation and not the filming of the novel, we're not filming the novel, we're adapting the novel into something else.

I think that, like a lot of theatre directors who get into film, end up making these films and, I'm like, how is that anything to do with you? What you want is a film where your theatrical background states itself visually. And I think that a lot of theatre directors that make movies don't really give a shit about what it looks like. I think the difference for me is that I fundamentally care about cinema and things being cinematic. I also think that loads of theatre makers end up making films that really have got too many words in them, it's unbearable. And it's because I think the balance about obeying writers isn't quite right. You know you can ignore them. You know you don't have to write a scene where he's on the phone and you don't have to use the whole scene. Like it's fine you can just use two words, or none if you want.

I think there are not a lot of theatre directors who are minority, that end up being filmmakers. It's been the more privileged, it's been the men, Danny Boyle or Stephen Frears, they're quite privileged. All that lot ended up being film directors. So, I still don't think it's a particularly well-trodden path for everybody else.