

Zena Edwards

in conversation with Trish Cooke

Trish Cooke: So, here I am at the Free Word Centre in Farringdon, London, with Zena Edwards. Hello Zena.

Zena Edwards: Hello.

TC: Nice to be here with you – and my first question that I would like to ask you is: How do you define yourself?

ZE: That's such a tough question. Sorry, I've got to be really difficult about this, because I think we spend so much time fighting off other people's definitions. I almost feel like I want to rebel and not define myself because I don't really want to be another person trying to define myself.

But if I was to say the things that make up parts of who I am that I feel that I know, solidly, about myself: I *have* to write! It's not a thing of 'I write to commission', or 'I write to deadlines', it's a thing of writing because if I don't write, I feel a little bit insane.

It's the kind of thing I have to do to clear my head, to make sense of the world. I process so much of the world through my writing, things that don't make sense, things I feel where we find a lot of injustices, where we find people being unreasonable or... Yeah, there's things that I know that I'm definitely sure of... I'm a bit of a nature bunny: I love being outside in nature, I love the trees, I love being connected to the earth, I love water, being next to water – and those things for me are constant, they make sense – people don't! I've found that through writing.

It's enabled me to see, how I understand we are all as confused as each other; we're all pretending to act like we know what we're doing.

And some of us do a great job at that and some of us are more clued up, but, ultimately, we're all just trying to find our way through life and be here with all the complexities that we bring to quite simple situations. And I think through writing it's enabled me to work out what some of the things, unreasonable things, that people do, including myself, you know.

I'm an only child. I know that for a fact, and I guess there's things that define me, from being an only child. I do enjoy my own company; I love being alone and that's not because I don't like people. I love people. I just really like being on my own sometimes! Because it enables me to have that dialogue through writing or just daydreaming or watching movies that help me make sense of things. I'm definitely one for stories. So, if I was to say anything that I know for sure about myself, it's that I love to consume stories, I also like to tell them because of that as well.

TC: So, from all of that, I would say, storyteller, writer, but you're a very strong performance poet, and all of that, combined with everything that you have just said, gives us a picture of who you are.

ZE: The performative side of things is an interesting one for me. I've wondered whether or not I was just... am I just a show-off? Do I just want attention? Because there's a lot of people who can write poetry that are just happy for it to be put in a book and let it be that. But why do I want to get up in front of people and say these words that came from me? Why do I want to do that? And if I'd be honest with you, I think a lot of that is an experience... The stage has also been a place where I found I had a bit more of a personality, that I'd never had a chance to explore, because I was always quite 'in my books' and stuff like that.

But what I found about the performance stage is that it allowed me to have this bigness. You have this permission, you're expected to be big on stage, that I can't have in normal everyday life, and I think that's a UK cultural thing. Americans can be really big and bolshie. We call them bolshie and a bit arrogant and stuff like

that. Actually, they're just in their skins, a lot of the time expressing their personality. The same with a lot of Caribbean and Latin American cultures, they're just being in their skin, being expressive, flamboyant and, you know, they might burst into a song, whatever, and that's not necessarily a very UK thing. So, on stage, I get an opportunity to just... literally open up my wings and go, *and stretch*. That's what it feels like on stage.

TC: That's quite unusual for someone who, like you've said, has spent a lot of time, quite... quiet inside their head.

ZE: I was originally in stage management... that was where I was going, down that road. So, theatre, lighting and sound was originally what I wanted to do. Stage management was what I wanted to do and then I actually fell in love with lighting, more than stage management. But then I was asked to do the lighting and the sound from a very small young poetry group called the Rhythm Writers.

That was in 1991 and I'd never seen such a cool, trendy group of young black writers before, I'd never seen so many black people in a room before like that, who were on this tip, on this vibe, you know. There was about fifteen, but there was a core of ten. We used to get together, and I would go all the way up to Earls Court and do some writing for them and then they said, 'Your writing is alright, you should perform. Share one of your poems at our next thing.' And I was like, 'No, no, I'm just backstage. I just do the lighting.'

And then I did, and I got invited somewhere else. Now, this was before there was a spoken word theme. This was when black poets were just hitting cultural events, like Kwanzaa – it wasn't even Black History Month, I don't think, back then properly, but, you know it'd be cultural events like Pan African National Day and those kinds of things, and very tiny, little events happening around south London, mainly. That was when I went up on stage and I read a poem and people liked it. It was nerve-racking for me, to be honest with you, but I felt very supported because there was nine other people on stage.

I don't know, it wasn't about even getting the 'bug', it was more of a case of, OK, I can do this. You want me to read it, OK I'll do it. But I didn't feel like I was

a writer at that point, I really didn't. I was just doing this thing because of a group of cool folks who had similar minds to me. But I think for me to call myself a poet it took me a good few years, and then to call myself a performance poet I had to really defend that, because a lot of people were like, 'No, you are just a poet. "Page" poetry and "performance" poetry – they are two different things and performance poetry isn't considered as respected....'

I just remember one day, I found myself walking towards the stage and I did this song with a poem and then I got the 'bug', and that was at a place in Camden called WKD. That was when there was a different energy that coursed through my body and I thought I want to do more of this, actually. That was really interesting. Yeah, afterwards I just went back to focusing on the craft of performance. I love theatre, I love radio plays. I think I like radio plays more than I like theatre, to be quite honest, because I get to use my imagination and I love all the soundscaping and stuff like that.

So, I got into the idea of how the voice actually carries a lot of the story, not necessarily through performance or gesticulating or being loud or whatever. But more a case of, how does the voice carry the story? And I think, from the singer's perspective as well, I'm very aware of intonation and cadence and timing and all these things that I'm aware of from a singer's perspective and, as a storyteller: how the voice carries so much power, to make a story have impact.

I think particularly when the feelings are so conflicting and complicated... like I can try and attempt to go to a page and like, 'English is a rubbish language! I can't express what I need to express, with this rubbish', which isn't true. But what happens is, that's when poetry kicked in. Because I'm like: there's some things that you can say with poetry that you can't just say with regular diary writing or regular prose. You *have* to engage the metaphors, you *have* to engage, you know, all of the really strong imagery to get the senses in, to say something that logical, rational writing can't convey. I think because we live so much by what's reason and what makes sense and the science of things, I'm like, Well, nature does work with science, definitely, but we can never define which direction it's going to go in. Only nature knows and that's the same thing, I think, with our human spirit. You know, the human spirit can be put in these incredible pressuresome

situations, but it will always find a way. That's how we innovate new things, you know, and where really interesting writing comes from; it comes from pressure. That doesn't mean we should go around expecting or wanting pressure, I want an easy life. But, at the same time, when it happens, all those complex emotions come up. I feel under pressure, I really feel the pressure happening, and then there'll be a day where suddenly there'll be a string of words... *That's how I feel.* Get it down now, if you don't get it down now, you will never get it down.

That's why I'm grateful for writing. I'm grateful that I can write because there are some people who are illiterate who can't write and they have got these incredible stories in their head, and they probably become the amazing orators and oral storytellers, right, and I'm grateful for those folkses. *Folkses!* See, I am making up my own words to make myself comfortable and hugged!

But writing, there's something about the writing experience because it's quite physical as well, the way it goes through my body and down my arm and into my hand, and just seeing marks coming out on paper. Just visualising, seeing the words appear on the page, that's a great experience as well. Sometimes it goes off into doodles: I will just doodle and maybe one line of poetry, and then I'll be back into what my thoughts are for the day, or what I'd like to achieve for the day or what I thought about that movie, or what that person did the other day.

TC: It is a very physical thing; I know even when I'm sitting at the computer, I'm reaching for words. I can kind of feel the word, but I can't remember what the word is and, you know if anybody is watching... it's such a process.

ZE: It's true, you find yourself saying, 'What's that word?' You do find yourself just doing all of these movements and staring off into space and stretching and looking for it and that's what's really interesting. But I really believe that it's all up there and it's waiting for us to listen and hear it being sort of downloaded or transmitted to you, and we're just like this antenna, but it requires a profound type of listening and when it gets to a really tricky complex idea or feeling or sentiment, that's when we are asked, as the writer, to... 'It's your turn, make sense of this, add to this.' And then also, you know, then I'll give them my style and all of that. In terms

of our style of writing and our approach, is what makes the story *ours* in some way, *ours*.

TC: It's like a sculpture, I suppose, with that piece of clay, it's all there and just kind of ... find the shape of it.

ZE: I guess what I am trying to say is that I feel like I'm... I've got this quality clay that I want to work with, which is all my life experiences, knowledge that I have, the gift that now is really seasoned. But I have to attack it *reverently*, which is beautiful for me to be even saying out loud. Like I said – I would probably be surprised at the things that I might say today. Because that's a real affirmation in me, that I have to take myself, my artist self not just seriously, in a severe kind of way, but really respectfully, really honouring where I'm at right now. It's not even about self-care and being kind to yourself. No, Zena Edwards. People say, 'Oh, queen!' That kind of queen status they give you. Actually, if I were to call myself a queen, how would I conduct myself right now? How would I make sure that I am taking care that I'm getting enough sleep? How would I make sure that I have a beautiful preparation space for writing and making my art? Because I'm taking this seriously, because I want to offer this thing to the world, this new voice to the world... And I'm saying that, knowing that that's what I would want for anybody I was mentoring if they were at this stage in their lives. Does that make sense?

TC: It does, and it kind of leads me on to one of the questions that I wanted to ask you. How *do* you take care of yourself, your mind, your body, your spirit?

ZE: That's a really good question. I don't know if I've found the formula or, you know, the time management strategy.

TC: It's a process, but what have you done so far? Because you've recognised it now and you've obviously taken stock.

ZE: So, in terms of self-care, if I'll be honest with you, it's been difficult, very difficult. Yeah, I mean all day I'll be procrastinating, and I'll be sending emails and saying that's more important and I'll be doing research and trying to develop a project and completely avoiding the writing, which is just sitting in the corner saying, 'Hello? Hello? You have got this to deal with – Hello?'

TC: But you are not really avoiding it, like you've said, it's percolating underneath.

ZE: This is different, this is different, this is different. It's like, I know I know things, but the words are failing me. I cannot find the words. Now, there might be a reason for this; there might be something even more practical. It might be that I am spending way too much time online, which is where everything comes in soundbites. So, you don't have that same concentration span that I used to have.

TC: I relate to that.

ZE: Because I really believe that's the thing. It's useful – to enable you to consume things very quickly, as a skill. But if you are in that space too much, it just disturbs these other kinds of capability, to have long meditative times of concentration around whatever it is, whether it is writing or just reading a book.

TC: Yes, and some writers do turn off all of that. They turn off the online stuff. What's your process then? What do *you*, Zena Edwards do, when you're starting a piece of work?

ZE: When I feel like I am really in that zone, like I think I'm ready, I think I'm actually ready to write something, it feels so good, it's almost like I feel... this is going to sound really weird... it feels like a Sunday, it could be any day, but it feels like one of those Sundays when you can have a really slow breakfast, get everything ready around you, get comfy, get your onesie on, and have a cup of tea by the side and then just relax into it and then get into the zone and it doesn't matter what you write, just let it be what it is.

When it's a good day, that's what it feels like because there's no judgment. Other times, it feels as though there are other things that are intruding and demanding attention and that could be like... Oh, I haven't sent that email, or I haven't done that budgeting for that thing, or I forgot to phone my neighbour... that kind of thing. Those things just intrude on that space. There's a moment, which I think might take a couple of days, to prepare myself to get to that space – which is a shame that it takes two days. In the past it would have taken me an hour, half an hour, you know. What I've really come to enjoy is, I really love editing and cutting things away. I actually really like it. I thought I was one of those really precious people to start off with, but I've got better at it, because whatever I've written has got to be valuable for something else later. It was something I needed to write. So, that's another thing – I've got it off my chest. It's an opportunity to flex my skills as a writer. So, I don't worry about the stuff I cut away... I don't think, 'Oh, I've got to keep it in. It was really good writing.'

So, being able to have a much more refined eye, to know when that's enough, you've made your point – stop. *That* is such a good feeling, because for me it's like melodies, and it's got to sing right and feel right in the body as well.

TC: So, let's talk about *Travelling Light*. Can you tell us what that's about?

ZE: *Travelling Light* started off with me wanting to write the story about my mum not having a mum, and how does a woman who doesn't have a mum, mother a girl child? Because I think, it only just occurred to me one time that my mum actually grew up with her dad. She didn't have a mother figure around her, so I can't really be mad at her; the times when I've felt I've been misunderstood by her, I've felt that I can't really be mad at her because she's never had a mother. She's never had someone to tell her how to be a little girl or to be a teenage girl or to be a young woman – at a very difficult time, because she came here during the Windrush era. Her dad – Grandad – would have been just working hard and she would have been pretty much fending for herself. My mum's not a talker. She wouldn't have gone into the details about a lot of stuff. I did interview her though for *Travelling Light*; the show that I did, which I haven't done in the UK before. I

was invited to do it in Holland, Canada and South Africa, but I've never done it here. I used some soundscape, I used movement, there's a little bit of film that was involved in it, just me filming myself in the process of making the show because I'm very much about... I don't think we should hide the bare bones or the mechanics of the process of making a piece. I think that sometimes that's a very interesting part of the process. A lot of people don't want to know. They say, 'Just give me the shiny thing that I can just sit there and consume. I don't want to think about anything.' Whereas me, I'm like, 'No, this is how hard it is actually to write this kind of piece. This really, difficult, tricky part of this show, took this kind of work to make. I don't just fart and I've got a show, I have to work really hard at it.'

Travelling Light was really a few things. It was that journey of my mum's, finding her mum. It was what it means to be a woman. It was what it means to be a black woman in the UK: complex emotions of anger and coming into your power. It's also got that, looking at mental health and well-being. It's got a lot in it as a show, I feel; but it's literally just like a snapshot themed around me going to find my mum's mum... helping her to find her mum.

TC: What you told me about that play was that you read it from your iPad when you were performing it and so ... we will talk about *Security* in a little while. But there was obviously a completely different Zena at that point of performing to the one that did *Security*. When I looked at *Security* online after I'd read it, I thought, 'How on earth is she remembering everything?' The words, the amount of words, the amounts of characters, the changes in the characters, the voices. The way you were in the story, that was... there was so much to remember, and you were just on cue with every single thing. That must have been *exhausting*.

ZE: I *loved* it! I absolutely loved doing *Security*. *Travelling Light* was different because I think I was shaky because it's a personal story. It can destabilise you a little bit, and I was really asking a lot of myself to really expose a lot. As I've said, I really don't write for myself a lot and that this was one of those ones like, 'I *have* to tell the story, because this is me being very angry at the colonial experience, because you fractured my family, you broke me, you denied me the opportunity

of having a family. I'm an only child; I'm the last of a line. After me, there is no more of the Edwards clan. There's no more. That's it! I am the last of the line and that's it. And, I think say, I think this is where an estuary ends.

TC: There is a word, 'fragmented' that you used in that. Could you explain that for the listeners?

ZE: Fragmented, fractured, anything that, you know, you have a whole vase and then you smash it, because that's what you feel like doing. Which is what colonialism is like to me. And wherever the pieces scatter, you don't give a shit about it, and I'm annoyed at that.

So, when I say 'fragmented', it's like things that are broken apart, that have been deliberately broken apart and how there are systems in place to keep them broken apart and I'm angry about that. I actually feel angry about it and that's where *Travelling Light* came from because it was like when my mum decided she was gonna go and find her mum, like I say in the play, there is all these versions of her saying, 'Oh one day I will find her. One day I will look for her. Oh, one day,' and then she phoned me up one day and said, 'Zena, I want you to help me find my mum.' I was like, 'Right, I'm on it!' and I was. This lady came into my life, who just happened to be crazy, enthusiastic about helping us because she's from Nevis, a Caribbean island girl... like a proper island girl, always so bubbly and laughing, no matter what's going on in her life, and she just wants good things for people. And when we got to Nevis, we found my mum's mum in ten days, and she was living in Bromley.

TC: In England?

ZE: In England. About half an hour, forty-minute car ride away from where I had moved to from Tottenham, right, to south London. So, it was meant to happen, and mum asked at the right time; and I was ready, and I had funds at the right time to be able to pay for us both to do it. It was meant to happen, but *Travelling Light* was definitely a response to being very, very angry at this system.

Colonialism, the whole slavery experience, the whole colonial thing. I'm an only child; I don't know my dad, or apparently, I met him when I was three weeks old. And it was my mum's choice to not follow him, because he was from America and he said, 'Look, you're pregnant, come over to America.' And she said, 'No.' Her choice – that's her choice and I'm not even mad about it. I don't think I have ever been mad at mum for making that choice. I understand how it happens. Like I said, she was a young woman here on her own, with her dad, on his own, in the fifties. You know this country doesn't have a very good history of taking care of young working-class women. Why are they going to give a shit about a young working-class black girl, and making sure she gets provided for and supporting her?

So, she is here by herself, on her own, and I think that's a really important thing to tell; that there are other parts of the Windrush story, where people came here alone, on their own, with just nothing but their hopes and their dreams and their will to make something different and determination... and the whole thing is going to be alright. I'm going to make this... I'm going to make this; it's going to be alright.

My grandad did that with me and my mum, and my mum's done that, and I'm doing that, you know. So, *Travelling Light* is that narrative of resilience and making something out of nothing from your life, and just having sheer tenacity of spirit, to just grab life by the balls and say, 'I'm going to make something out of this!' Do you know what I mean?

Travelling Light is that kind of show actually... super-exciting when it gets towards the end, because it moves at such a fast pace towards the end. But, like I said, it's because of how we found family, and then meeting my grandmother and just knowing – like my whole body, my blood just started bubbling and resonating, and I thought this is real... this is beautiful.

TC: You've managed to maintain that connection...

ZE: Yes, grandma passed unfortunately, about three or four years after we met. We found her and that's the point and I became the oldest grandchild of about a hundred and nine... there are so many grandchildren. My mum's like the first

daughter and I'm the niece to seven uncles and aunties. So, I suddenly went from being an only child to being a part of this massive network of beautiful Seventh Day Adventist, Caribbean, homely, love, food, people. So, I'm happy for that.

I guess *Travelling Light*, again, when we were talking about the process of writing – what we do it for. I've been able to tell that story when I have gone abroad, and people have said, 'I have really resonated with this and "Thank You" for telling that.' Now, in South Africa, there was a lot of people talking about fractured families in South Africa during the apartheid era that really related to that. So, that was beautiful, to have those kinds of exchanges, like cultural exchanges of information, which is just related to like blood and family, you know. So, *Travelling Light* was a special show. I would like to do it here.

TC: And you were saying with *Security*... there's no personal story within there?

ZE: Not so much, except there is a character, two characters in there, Mahmoud and Aileen and ... Tottenham is a really funny little area, you know, and it's changing a lot now, unfortunately, and becoming gentrified. But originally, there was all this mish-mash of cultures coming together. Haringey has the highest intake of people from different countries around the world – refugee status, asylum seekers, just immigration. A lot of people come to Haringey.

There was this guy, this Turkish guy, I mean he's just built like a square, everything about him is a square – there's soft edges, but square – and he opened this tiny little coffee shop, I swear about the size of this room, and I would just go in there, have very nice coffees, but he was always just looking at me, and I was just like, 'Alright?'

TC: How old were you at the time?

ZE: So, *Security* was 2010, so, thirties, you know.

TC: OK.

ZE: But he was always polite and always pleasant, and he would always make me a nice coffee because I would sit in there for ages and just do my writing and then he got a massive shop, so, he was there working hard or pulling strings whatever he had to do, got a bigger coffee shop. Mahmoud is modelled off of him. Just his demeanour... just a nice guy who's just keeping his head down, knuckling down and just getting on with work.

And there's me, this Tottenham girl, just vibing with this guy. We don't want anything from each other, just that we *see* each other. And that's the two main characters in *Security*, is that they see each other and the thing that they have in common when they do actually talk, is that she's lost her brother to violence on the streets, and he's lost his brother in the Palestine Gaza conflict there ...occupation. They meet through grief.

TC: It's beautiful how you put that story together, they are so different, and yet they connect. The characters were like little stories within themselves, but then when you saw the connection between the characters – the overall story of how it fell into place, it was very cleverly done, not in-your-face. It just kind of unravelled at the right time on how they all impacted on each other.

ZE: I mean I loved making that show. It took two years and I decided I wanted to take two years. I wasn't going to succumb to the whole pressure of commercial theatre-making where you get three weeks rehearsals and that's it. You're devising for three weeks and then three weeks rehearsal. No, I wanted to take as long as I wanted on this because I had very, very clear goals I wanted to meet. Things that I wanted to learn... I wanted to learn about movement on stage. I wanted to embody my character. Like I said, the voice is so important to me, so I had four distinct voices that I had to flip between, and I worked very hard on each one of those because that's how I hear dialogue in my head. So, I needed to be able to get it out in my body. I went to the London International School of Performing Arts to do clown work there. Then I worked with a guy called Guy Dartnell, who uses voice and the body, the body to inform the voice and vice-versa: 'Voice Emotion' is his workshop. Did mentoring with him, and then I had a

great director: Anthony Shrubbsall, who gave me all this space to explain where it comes from. He literally just facilitated me to be the best of what I've got on stage. It was him that said to me, 'I want to showcase your best. I don't want to put you on stage being weak because you like the idea of it. If you can't do it, I'm not going to let you get on stage and do that.'

So, he was really quite instrumental in my development as a performer who's going beyond just standing behind a microphone gesticulating, and literally embodying all of the characters and that really enabled me to, as you say, 'flip between all of the voices' and everything that I had to do quite quickly. 'Cos it enabled me to have that speed because – I was – what's the word I'm looking for? – the channel was clear. I could hear everything clearly... I could move clearly. Ah, it was stamina. I had to really work hard, I had to get the rest, eat the food, make sure I was fit as well, because that kind of hour-long focus is really hard to keep when it's just you and one bag with about five props in it and a chair.

TC: That chair was very useful for that purpose. All of your skills fell into place, the rhythm of it, that whole rhythm of it. You could hear the song within it.

ZE: Yep, that's beautiful. Thank you for saying that. I loved that show, just because of everything that I have learnt from it. I can feel the adrenalin rush of playing the characters, and even now as I'm talking about it, and then people talking to me about it afterwards and saying... One little boy came up to me and said, 'I'm not being funny, right, but I forgot you were a woman.' I thought, 'That's great. That's what I wanted. Because I'm playing a male character, that's what I want.'

TC: Yeah. I read the play as well, and saw the sketches and the drawings as well, and you had already created that within your body, but then seeing them there drawn, as well, as the characters, it's just wonderful. Having heard them as well; it's a beautiful, beautiful piece of work.

ZE: I think so as well, and I also don't want it to be limited to it being about knife crime – I don't like using the word 'crime' – knife violence.

TC: It's much more than that.

ZE: Unfortunately, you know, I love working with organisations that get the direction you can go as an artist and flourish as an artist, but if you get pigeonholed, which can happen as a black artist, into, 'Oh you're doing this thing and it's got violence in it, it must be about gangs.' No, it's just an aspect. It's actually about grief and its connection between two disparate worlds and I play a Palestinian man of forty-seven years. Why are you focusing on that I play a black boy that dies? I play a Palestinian man of forty-seven years and I play an old, eighty-year-old black man. So, why don't they get the same amount of attention?

TC: So, going now to your greatest influence – the poet or the playwright that inspired you.

ZE: Lots of different people, for different reasons. I think, Maya Angelou, and not strictly for her writing, more for the fact that as a woman...a strong woman and she was tall and, you know, she had that tenacity of spirit to go out and make a life for herself. Many, many lives. I read the *Caged Birds [I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings]*, I read all of those books, and I was like, 'This woman has led so many different lives. I can do that! I don't have to make a decision and it be one thing and stick to that, and if I fail at that, then I'm a failure. There are all these different things that I can do and can experience. And she did all these different things in her life. She was an activist, she was a dancer, she was a mum, she was this writer. She was all of these different things. She even had to resort to prostitution to be able to pay bills, but she was writing her life, as she was going along.'

TC: Very inspirational.

ZE: Yeah, so that's why she inspired me, and again, like I said, having a strong woman in my life as an inspiration... that's who she was, for me, and I saw her performing. I was completely jet-lagged after being dragged from a holiday in

Spain which was going terribly wrong, and I got to New York for this performance, and they took me straight from the airport to see the show of her at the Apollo; and through the blurriness of my eyes – I couldn't see her, she was miles away – I'm like, 'I want to do that! That's what I want to do.' Because she was incredible, you know, she did a whole thing, 'I want to be a rainbow in someone's cloud.' That piece that she did, I thought, 'That's what I want to do'. Because I couldn't see her, but I could feel her. I thought, 'That's what I want to do.'

From a writer's perspective, I would have to say Octavia Butler and Toni Morrison and James Baldwin because they take the layers and shades and the nuances and they make it... you can follow the through line... like James Baldwin can write a paragraph that's a big chunk of a page about this long... and that will be one sentence. But his punctuation is amazing, and you follow all the way through. From a writer's perspective, I was always told when I was growing up in school, 'Your sentences are too long. You have to make them shorter.' But no, I don't. James Baldwin doesn't. So, that was really inspirational.

Toni Morrison – because of the fact that she writes with such realness... there's just a rawness and a realness. She just knows how to penetrate to that place and is completely unapologetic about it.

Octavia Butler because of the science fiction side of things, the fantasy, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez as well, for the magic realism. He's another one. There's another book that he has written which is like a free flow. Like it will be a whole page and there will be no full stops or punctuations, and you just have to follow, but it's beautifully done. But you get taken down a rabbit hole. Be prepared... You can't put it down. You can put it down at a certain point when there is a full stop, after a whole page, and then you have to literally put the book down and just muse over what he's done.

TC: That's so beautiful that somebody can play with form like that and master it and have the confidence to just say it in the way they want to say it and you then have to follow.

ZE: Charles Bukowski is another one who I really love because he writes amazing dialogue poetry just like in terms of being able to see the relationships of people and the whole world that he can create in one poem, in one scene.

A lot of musicians as well, there is a lot of music that inspired me. Dianne Reeves, Cassandra Wilson... Particularly Dianne Reeves because she's just an amazing storyteller, through her songs, as well as being a formidable force. Seeing her live, she can front an orchestra, you know, like a big band, and she's at the front. She doesn't get overpowered by anything and I think that's how we have to be in life as women as well. We have to be at the forefront of our lives and not allow anything to overpower us because we will get swallowed up, you know, and that's a dangerous place for us to be... to get swallowed up. We have to stand in front. It's almost like having all these ancestors or whatever, or these life experiences standing at your shoulders behind you, because life is coming at you and demanding so much and, well, you can demand as much as you want. This is what you are getting. This is who I am.

TC: That is the confidence that, I suppose, maturity gives you, that you may not have had when you were a lot younger because you are still trying to work it all out. But then, you know things matter less as you get older.

ZE: Well, I think it's also that you suddenly realise what the bullshit is. There is nothing to doubt anymore. When you're younger, you are so full of doubt. I work with this group now called Blacktress, and they're all black women actresses, and they are in the theatre world, huh, poor them. I've been in theatre, and I walked away from it because I can't take the facades and the pecking order. It's just, for me, I find it quite toxic, and they know it's toxic, but they choose to be this thing because they love the craft of acting. But they need somewhere to go to decompress, and they need somewhere to go to feel normal again... you know, just to feel OK. And that's one of the biggest things that we have to talk about, is how they are able to not doubt themselves, because they have to make themselves a blank slate for the director to hang the characters on. If they're not

careful, that could spill over when the theatre is closed and that's just them walking home.

What I like about Blacktress is it's a place, like I said, to decompress, to be normal, to talk about these experiences, to laugh and create things. I recently got into tarot and oracle work, which has been a beautiful addition to my practice as an artist. I take those to them as well and we look at cards and tell the stories within the cards and how it relates to them in their lives and write poetry about that. Write diary work or journaling work, draw, paint. They can do whatever they want, but it's just an opportunity for black women who are... let alone being in the theatre of the world, they are in these other theatres as well...

TC: To find that balance.

ZE: To come back to self, as well.

TC: One final question.

ZE: Sure.

TC: I'm probably exhausting you with all of this.

ZE: No, I'm loving it.

TC: The question I would like to ask is, do you have any advice for new writers coming into this industry?

ZE: Write for yourself all the time, because you need to stay in touch with that voice that is telling your story back to yourself, and if you have something that enables you to have a truthful dialogue with self, always do that. Know when you're a product, and when it's just you. Have a very clear line, draw or ringfence you and also put some boundaries around when you are a product.

I would also just say, understand your writing processes as early as possible. Like I said, when I realised that it takes me three weeks to write a commission, it freed me up so much, I could relax. I'm just like, I could just chill and do that thing, or just pay attention for three weeks, and that was a great process; a great revelation.

Find out what your writing process is as soon as you can. One of the ways you can do that is by sitting and talking with other writers but you just ask each other questions, and you get each other because you're writers. Sometimes your friends just don't get it; they really don't get it.

TC: That is very useful. Thank you. It's been such a pleasure talking to you, Zena.

ZE: Thank you. I really enjoyed it. I really, really enjoyed it.

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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