

## **Linda Brogan**

in conversation with Gabriel Gbadamosi

**Gabriel Gbadamosi:** Linda Brogan, hello there. Here we are, sitting in a lovely high white room, in the Whitworth, at the University of Manchester. A very fine gallery, and you a playwright in residence here for a year. How did that come about?

**Linda Brogan:** I excavated The Reno, a nightclub in Moss Side, and while I was doing the excavation, I asked the Whitworth Art Gallery for two pieces of plywood to make a sign, and they said, 'Oh we've heard about you. Do you want to come and do an exhibition at the Whitworth?' So, we came a month after we did the excavation. I called it 'Colonising the Whitworth': on the stairs we projected all of our team photos. We had a small film of the excavation on the outside screen which is the size of the building, and we had memoirs projected on major works of art in the Whitworth.

My most anarchic moment ever in my life was, they had to put tissue paper on the works of art so that our films wouldn't destroy them. On Picassos and Cezannes and all that, and project us talking onto them, and that was me saying, 'we are worth as much as them'.

**GG:** So take us back to the beginning. When you say that you excavated the Reno – tell us about the Reno and why did you, a playwright, excavate the Reno? How did you become an archaeologist?

**LB:** In 2011, I was writing a play for the Royal Court. I had got it in my head that if a black person and a white person read out my life story... I was

going to write my life story in monologues, then I was going to give them to a famous black actress and a famous white actress, in different chapters. I knew, or I felt, when the audience was listening to the white actress say certain parts of my life, she would get more empathy than when they were listening to a black actress. I also wondered if they realised it was the same story, the play would happen inside them and they didn't have to tell me what they were feeling. So, I sold it to Vicky Featherstone at the Royal Court and it would be called, *Why I Want to Stab a Blonde White Woman in the Royal Court Bar*. She loved the title. The title came from when my play, *What's in the Cat?* was on there in 2005, and I was sat at one side of the table without a carrot. It's my press night, I've only made ten grand (£10K), the play took me about two years to write, and I'm sat in the Royal Court with nothing, no dinner, no red wine, no water, no carrot – nothing. I looked over in the Royal Court bar, you know those women with grey-blond bobs, and they are obviously high middle class and their table is abundant with everything, and their husbands are going backwards and forwards to the bar. I think it was part jealousy. 'Why haven't I got what they have got? It's my play and nobody cares about me. And that's my mum and dad in the poster on the wall and everyone's giving them love. The Royal Court are set up in a certain way and I'm here sat here on my own, with nothing and nobody.' And I wanted to throw over the table with the abundant food, not to stab them, but to cause mayhem at their table and fuck 'em up. I knew though, if I did that, I would get chinned. Even though I am a woman like they are a woman, I would not be treated the same as them. Or the other way round, if one of them had knocked my table over, they would have got help and understanding and 'oh, something is wrong with her'. But in the eyes of the world, I can be punched, I knew that without a shadow of a doubt.

So that had been harbouring, you know what I mean? So, I got a meet-

ing with Vicky and sold her the idea.

**GG:** This differential treatment between white women and black women, it's the same story but let's see what happens. Is that it?

**LB:** Yeah, let's see what happens and see what people say about the play. She loved the title, she loved the idea. So, I came away and thought, in order that she couldn't have control over me, I wanted money out of the Arts Council to write it, and not from her. So, I had to write an Arts Council proposal. As I was writing the Arts Council proposal, I explained it as I'm explaining it to you. And the last line, I wrote and it shows to two different sides of me. So, my mum is white. But if I'm a black woman, I'm also a white woman. Do you know what I mean? I'm a mixed race woman, but if the world can look at me and go, she's a black woman and I'm like my dad, then I have to be also like my mum.

**GG:** You put this in the last line of your application?

**LB:** Yeah, the last line of the application. But all night, I was thinking nobody would believe me and I can't say that in the world. Nobody will believe me. I can go anywhere as, 'I'm black Linda, a strong black woman'. But I can't go anywhere in the world and say, 'I'm Linda, a strong white woman'.

**GG:** So it's really about being dual heritage, bi-racial, mixed race? It puts you in a situation in which one half of your identity is not admissible in the world and that's where you got to.

**LB:** That's where I got to that night. The whole world decides who I am. I can't be who I am. I can't decide who I am either. Immediately, the one

place where I could be anything was the Reno. It popped in my head. It was absolutely a badge of honour.

**GG:** That night club that you went to in Manchester, you could be half-caste.

**LB:** Half-caste was the thing that everybody wanted to be. We were in the majority.

**GG:** That's what it was called, half-caste.

**LB:** That's it, half-caste. We were the majority and we were super cool, man. You know in there, we all knew each other, we would all nod. We had like a social structure. Who was at the top, who was in the middle. We rarely slept with each other as we were like brother and sister, you know. I'm going to dig up the Reno, it's there.

**GG:** I see. So, The Reno was a club that was open until the mid-eighties, I think, closed down and then was knocked down as an unsafe structure. But somehow, the basement club, the basement was still there, and you could excavate it and that's what you did? You and I could recognise each other as this, we are between cultures. We have this skin colour, we have this kind of ambivalent position in our society. But, we have complete solidarity with each other, because we know what each other has experienced in some way.

**LB:** Totally, and especially our age group. We've all got things like you and I were talking about at lunch. Our mums were ostracised. There are certain

things one hundred percent, and we don't have to talk about them.

**GG:** White mums get ostracised for being with black men. We know about these things.

**LB:** Definitely, in the fifties and the sixties.

**GG:** And in your exhibition here at the Whitworth on the Reno, there's quite a deal made of the 'Fletcher Report' which came out in the 1930s, saying that the children of mixed couples would be somehow degenerate, socially outcast and so on. So it was a stigma.

Please tell me some more then about the process of digging up and going through the process of becoming an archaeologist of our history. Peeling, as you say, layers of pain and alienation.

**LB:** I'm gonna dig up the Reno. So, I went over and sat on where the Reno was, and it was covered in poppies, and that was like a sign. You know, like remembrance. But when I thought about digging up the Reno, another feeling immediately came out. You know, like 'Open Sesame!' in my head from all the struggles that I had, to be something in the art world. I really wanted to be a writer, Gabriel, and that meant, I had to try and get in. Do you know what I mean? Like, to get them to believe me? I don't even know if I thought what 'in' was. But the minute I thought I was going to dig up the Reno, 'in' didn't matter anymore. It's like something opened and it was like fuck them, I'm in. You know what I mean, like...This is true. My mum used to say people spat in my pram, and I used to think she was just being extra and Irish and drunk, whatever she is being. Before I excavated the Reno,

when I had the idea to get engaged with it, I collected Reno memoirs. And at least six other people said that their mums said someone spat in their pram.

**GG:** These are other people who were of the same time from the seventies onwards?

**LB:** Yeah, yeah.

**GG:** They went to the Reno to find community?

**LB:** Yeah, yeah.

**GG:** So, actually, what this 'Open Sesame' image tells me is there you are, trying to get into the literary world. But actually, that wasn't the world you wanted to get into with your writing. You wanted to get into our own history, our sense of being on the planet, in the city at a certain time.

**LB:** My ex-husband Tom, who I owe a great deal to (a lot of my intelligence – and he is completely uneducated – comes from the way that he thought), when I used to sit down and practise writing – I'd go to writing lessons all over the country – he used to say, 'when you dare to be you, you'll be famous.' I used to say, 'what the fuck is he talking about?' Another thing besides being mixed race, he's working class.

**GG:** So, he was Manchester Irish?

**LB:** Yeah.

**GG:** So, he was also in the Reno?

**LB:** Yeah.

**GG:** So, it was actually a combination of working-class and mixed-race culture?

**LB:** Absolutely, yeah. The next day I had a meeting in the Arts Council, I remember when I thought about digging up the Reno, I started to think the way I talk with my friends. So, I started to think fucking bastards, do you know what I mean like, kind of in the way. And I remember in the meeting, and it was around the table and they just looked at each other and say, 'did she just swear?' I was so passionate about what I was talking about, and from that moment what Tom had said started to happen, when I dared to be me. When I noticed that, when they looked at each other and said, 'did she just swear?' I said, right, 'I've got you now. I've walked out of your circle, I don't care.' Do you know what I mean? I had cared too much. I cared about getting crumbs off the master's table, basically.

**GG:** And now, you were no longer involved in that. So, this whole process began with your engagement in theatre at the Royal Court, proposing this play in which you would see the differential ways in which a white and a black woman responded, and carried that into your audience. But as you sleep on it and think about it, there's a part of your identity which isn't addressed, and you think, I need to address that. And that's the moment

when actually you understood you were yourself, and that's the Reno, that's the significance to the Reno. Can you tell me something about the wider community you have engaged in the project?

**LB:** We did a little interview and a reading before, and I walked out of this room and we got accosted by a half-caste, mixed-race person and he goes, 'I love what you've done, I love what you have done, I want to tell my story.' This happens every week without fail, possibly every day. You know, somebody who has not had a voice, basically. That's what it's about. He has not had a voice, or has been given a voice that is the way the arts – which is predominately white and middle-class – think of us, the voice that they give us and the story that they give us. The best way I look at this project... *is it Douglass Frederick or Frederick Douglass..?*

**GG:** Frederick Douglass, the ex-slave who became a great campaigner against slavery and a writer of his own experiences and his people's experiences.

**LB:** Absolutely. He talks in the language of the people that surround him. He talks in the language of the master and he dresses like a master. He's got a side parting, he's got a frock coat. He never directly points at them. He keeps his story to the fact that we shouldn't be treated in a certain way. And he's a politician. I sat there wondering, what would a slave say if he is being honest and really just carried on being a slave, going, 'look what you did, you bastard!' They kind of manipulate our story to still save themselves at the same time. Am I making sense?



**GG:** Yes, you are making sense. What I'm hearing is, in a sense, that black, we can only be black. Black writers must speak about black issues and how hard that they have it and we've got a container for that and we'll put a lid on it once you have done and move onto the next thing. Because that's your issue, slavery is your issue, it's not the fact that we were the greatest slaving nation the world has ever seen. And we helped to create a new continent of black men in the Americas. And it's a case of, 'Linda, this is your job, you do your job', and these are limits in which you can speak.

**LB:** Absolutely.

**GG:** You have transgressed that, and part of your technique is to use the archeological method, to peel back layers of who we actually are. Can I ask you something about that?

**LB:** Yeah.

**GG:** You are many things, like me. You are Irish. In fact both of our mothers came from Limerick, you are also Jamaican. You have Jamaican brothers and sisters, you have Irish brothers and sisters, as well as your own brothers and sisters with your mother and father here. You're from Moss Side, here in Manchester. You are many things. You are the extremely accomplished, powerful and direct writer. You are an original thinker who thinks out of the box. These many layers of identity. How do you keep them all in play? Are you creatively playing with your own identities, or are the layers of your identity, things in themselves you still want to stabilise and assert?

**LB:** They are why I am excavating. In truth, they are the only thing I can excavate. The other people alongside me, like 'The Reno Twelve', people who did the memoir, they were loyal to the excavation. So, I invited them to come and be part of the residency with me, to help curate it and evolve it. They excavate themselves.

**GG:** I like the term 'The Reno Twelve', because normally we would say [something like] the Reno Twelve were involved in a miscarriage of justice. So, you are modelling yourselves on that kind of struggle, of the rights we had in this country, around rights, around race and identity. But this core group reaches still further out to this community. As you say, you walk out of a room and there's a mixed-race person who says I was involved. I want to kind of say, that I was there too.

**LB:** Yeah, it's amazing that, and it is from transgression and it is from going, 'no, I don't believe you, I'm absolutely saying, I don't believe you.'

**GG:** Let's speak about that transgressive voice. At times it can be to swear in an Arts Council formal or official meeting under the stress of passion, but certainly to use your own voice. Tell us something about your voice. What formed it? Was it Moss Side, Manchester? Was it the initial crowd that you were with? Was it Jamaican speech? Irish demonstrations of passion? What is it?

**LB:** My mum should have been who I am, but she didn't have the facilities at the time. Even when I go against the Arts Council, to say that I've only been allowed a certain voice, I have, at least, been allowed some platform.

And my mum, who was thirty-three when she had me, she was born in 1926. She was Irish, she was born in Ireland, she wasn't allowed any platform, as a female, as an Irish woman, as working-class.

But a lot of my thought patterns come from my mum. So, she would think what I'm saying and say it in drink. So it got diffused or seen as a mad woman. A lot of it is from that Jamaican way of calling something what it is. So, in Jamaica, if you got one leg, you call it one leg. It's like, say it the way it is. From a mixture of them two together – both my mum and dad could tell a wicked story with a great punchline, and would hold the room, and would fight for the audience – it comes from that, it comes from the Reno and anarchy in there. And the great conversations that I would have with Tom outside of the box. He was uneducated but had a great mind.

**GG:** There are two things I want to ask you, let me ask you this small thing first. The way you speak about the 'master's table' – I don't have a background that comes from the Caribbean and that direct historical experience, or inherited experience, of the slave or the master. We come from West Africa and the West of Ireland. Also, I was brought up in London rather than in Manchester. I get a sense that they are very different places, and we may have had very different experiences of exactly what the master's voice or the master's table or master's style might be. So, could you focus just a little bit on what was it like to be mixed-race or black or non-white here in Manchester as you were growing up in the 1960s, 70s and 80s.

**LB:** Definitely, it was wonderful to be my colour in the nineties. Because of the Reno experience and because of its counterculture of the time. Black is Beautiful, afros are in. Mixed-race kids grow great afros. So, you can walk

round being black when it suits you. This is quite criminal, not a lot of people are going to like me about this, but you are pale enough to be inoffensive to white people. So, in my actual real experience, being mixed-race at that time, was not a problem, it was wonderful.

**GG:** The Reno was in Moss Side and we all know about the Moss Side riots. Was that just an aberration, that kind of sense that we had a revolt of non-white people here in Manchester against the forms of discrimination, oppression, policing, whatever you experienced, poverty?

**LB:** I don't know. I've never seen it as a political thing, and I've been in trouble about this before. I've just seen it as an opportunity, a reason to have a total blow out and a total load of looting and what's happening. Like you have been mad drunk and all that.

**GG:** It's just a violent dream, it comes and goes. Okay, let me leave that kind of variance and see perhaps how different it was here in Manchester. Let's go to the emotions, some of the quality of violence that can erupt in this dream-like way. Across your writing, I just see these extraordinary outbursts of anger, jealousy, love, despair, excitement, joy. You have almost an unrivalled access, direct in the way that you feel. How has that impacted on your development of your own writing?

**LB:** It's all about entitlement. I am entitled to them feelings as much as a white person is entitled to them feelings. If I'm reading a white book, okay say *Little Women*, I can innocently cry about Beth dying, because she's dying and it's terrible because she's a human being.

And every single thing that a black person writes... I'm a bit confused about this. There is an issue and humanity has gone out the window. The issue, I'm not sure if it's our issue any more or perhaps, the powers that be...

**GG:** Has left us.

**LB:** Yeah, so, me being angry, or me being whatever, is me going, 'I'm entitled to feel the fuck I feel.'

**GG:** It's a practice of freedom.

**LB:** It's a practice of freedom.

**GG:** So, your writing is a practice of freedom?

**LB:** Absolutely.

**GG:** You've written all these plays at the Royal Court, national tours, Fringe First awards coming out of your ears. What do you still want to do?

**LB:** I want to create a sustainable arts practice for us, working class females. Colour goes out the window for me. Those two are greater. I want to turn this into real artists. So, we've watched this other community project, how lovely for them. Give them a round of applause.

**GG:** In the Whitworth?

**LB:** Yeah, but now, I want to take all that we have learnt along this journey, The Reno Twelve as well, could now produce an event, I could turn them into designers and directors. I want to pay them. Not just to free memoirs that go on the web. I want to turn those memoirs into books. I want to release the ghetto pound, like there was the pink pound.

**GG:** A productive practice of freedom.

**LB:** Absolutely, mate.

**GG:** In that case, what would you like to say to a young Linda Brogan now?

**LB:** I have no idea, because 'your time will come' is the first thing that is coming. Because without your voice or my voice in the past, and us getting used to our own voice, I wouldn't be able to do what I'm doing now. Or, you wouldn't be interviewing me for the Royal Literary Fund. We had to make this journey, it's a bit like crossing Selma Bridge. We have to learn that we are entitled. I practice it all the time in really small ways.

**GG:** So, if I were to extract from this very short conversation we've had, some sort of an offering, a piece of advice to a younger person, it would be to engage in a practice of freedom, in the way you creatively sidestep through the containers, the frames, the official print of what you are allowed to do, and you just do as you want. You're a playwright? Go be an archaeologist.

**LB:** I know a good way to say it. What would you do with your mates? You

know, when I used to write, prior to digging up the Reno, I used to want to please those who were going to commission me. Do you know who I want to please now? The Reno, Moss Side, people who I grew up with. If I think that I'm not talking to them, then that ain't good writing. I would say that to a young working class person, please write yourself first, but you've got to be able to talk to those you recognise and don't be ashamed of that, and don't be afraid of that. They'll pay good money to hear you.

**GG:** Just concluding, with a question of the exhibition here of the Reno dig. Can you tell us some of the things that you discovered?

**LB:** Excavating ourselves out of the mud, that we are alive. We have purpose, we have freedom, we have a life, we're not nothing, we're not dirty, we're not nobody, we're not unwanted. We wanted each other.

**GG:** Remembering, re-meeting and healing?

**LB:** Healing, I love listening to the memoirs as well and I love, that they weren't trusting me, but I felt like that. I would say, tell me about the first night down at The Reno. People would begin there and spiral into all sorts. People were put into care because half-black babies would come out of a white mum. That's unbelievable, they were taken from the bed.

**GG:** It happened, it happened.

**LB:** Yeah.

**GG:** Some people turned up and felt you were profiteering from their history in ways that sort of alienated their history even more.

**LB:** That was just one family. The family of the person who had owned The Reno. Because I got carried away with the poetic idea of, now that we have excavated, it should be a site, an archaeological site like you have dug up the Romans or Hadrian's Wall, right? And I should, with my blooming knickers outside my pants like a super hero, stop Manchester Council from being able to build on that land. And we should build an art centre completely designed by us. So, I do all this. I declare this land in the name of The Reno – all poetical and beautiful – and then the family of Phil, who owned The Reno, decided that I was profiteering off his name and off the Reno. So, it's no big deal. I just dropped it. It saved me years of my life.

**GG:** Fantastic, what a suitably sweet, swift resolution. Linda Brogan, thank you very much.

A recording of this interview can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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