

## **Patricia Cumper**

in conversation with Trish Cooke

**Trish Cooke:** Patricia Cumper, MBE, FRSA, playwright, author, producer, director, theatre administrator, critic, commentator, swimmer. Welcome to *WritersMosaic*.

**Patricia Cumper:** Oh, I sound like an interesting person.

**TC:** You do, and you are. So, who is Patricia Cumper?

**PC:** I do not know; it seems to change every decade or so. I think what defines me right now is the fact that I write. That has become clearer and clearer about what I essentially want to do, but I acknowledge hugely that I am a creature of liminal spaces. I am very strongly Jamaican in the sense that I grew up there and that's where part of my family is from. I also see myself as black British in a sense that the Britishness that is constructed of an English father and having lived in England. So, I am many things, I am a mother, grandmother, as you say, an ex-swimmer. Yes, what mostly defines me is that I do have the time and space to write.

**TC:** Wonderful. So, what is it that gets you out of the bed in the morning?

**PC:** That is an interesting question. Sometimes it is just routine, sometimes I must help with the grandkids.

**TC:** Okay.

**PC:** But sometimes there is an increasing urgency that there are stories that I really, really want to tell. I have a backlog of about five or six that are sitting there. That feeling that the writer has; you go around and you pick up little things: 'Oh, that would be really good for that story', or, 'Oh, I need to do more research on this one'. I have got this kind of production line of stories that I need to get out, but I have also put in proposals for work, another adaptation, and various other things. So, there's kind of balance between the practical and the idealistic. All I want to do is write and I cannot afford to do that, so I need to do some other things as well.

**TC:** So, I am interested in your journey. What led you to write?

**PC:** When I look back at it now, I think it was really growing up in the family that I grew up in. My father was an academic, my mother trained as a lawyer but then became an academic. Really what animated the household was conversation and interest in public affairs and the arts. We saw every single production that came through Jamaica. We had a lot of interesting productions coming through. We had The Russian Ballet company, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. There were masses of cultural activity. We went to absolutely everything.

**TC:** When did you say to yourself 'I am a writer'?

**PC:** That is interesting because I wrote my first play at about the age of twenty-three, and I wrote masses of radio drama. Saying to myself, 'I am a writer', did not happen until ten years after that.

**TC:** Why do you think that was?

**PC:** In retrospect, I did not particularly understand the gift that I had. Maybe I took it for granted. It's something that I did on the side, something that I really enjoyed, something that I earned a little extra money from. But to make it central and to take on that responsibility, particularly as a single mother and particularly with all the other things I had to do, I did not do it for an awfully long time. But I think also, the reality of it is, or was for me, that for me to write, I had to do other things. I felt as though if I am a writer, I ought to be paid as a writer. I ought to be able to live as a writer and that is not necessarily what happened.

**TC:** So, what were those other jobs that you did?

**PC:** Well, I have done masses of them. My degree is Archeology and Anthropology, so very briefly, I was an assistant at an archeological project in Jamaica at Port Royal, oddly enough. I then went and worked with a publisher briefly, then worked at the Jamaican Broadcasting Corporation and was made production assistant eventually at the drama department. I wrote my first play as a challenge. In the radio drama department, I came to understand a lot about how radio drama is produced in basic conditions. It is a ribbon mic; it is a door that opens and shuts, and you have a couple of cassettes and tape recordings and ambient sound and that is it.

**TC:** So, how hard has it been for you to maintain a career as a writer?

**PC:** It is not easy to maintain a career in the UK as a writer. I was lucky in that Hugh Crosskill, who used to work with the World Service, sent a letter ahead of me to BBC World Service Drama. So, within three months

of getting here, I had my first commission to write a radio play. And I have slowly but consistently built a reputation of being able to write radio drama.

That has helped me and sustained me all along, but it has never been truly enough to live off. And then because of Talawa, again with the Jamaican connection of Yvonne Brewster and eventually Christopher Rodriguez, I was commissioned to write a play for them. This is the key. That was my first major goal into theatre in the UK. Basically, I have earned a living doing odd jobs, so it has been a constant movement between writing full time and then realising I cannot live like this any longer. Poverty is a trap.

It is necessary to have a lift, but I did not find it after six years at Talawa. I was going crazy... complete and utter frustration. And I loved facilitating other people's work and I had loved all the wonderful young people doing all the things that they were doing, in the Young People's Theatre. I saw Jeffrey Kissoon and Patrick Robinson do an amazing version of *Waiting for Godot* but my stories were going, 'Please tell me, please tell me!' And it became too frustrating, and it physically takes its toll on you when you are that frustrated, I think.

**TC:** Is there any advice that you would give to new writers who are starting out, how to maintain a career? Or how to leave time for writing even if you are doing other work?

**PC:** It is difficult I think, just in terms of writing. I would say, and I think it helped me a lot, is never say no to work. Doesn't matter what it is. I have worked with young adult colleges trying to put together a play. I have taught in schools. I have gone into workshops. Anything that allows you to work, being in a rehearsal room to talk about your work is valuable. The other thing,

the obverse for that, is to be able to maintain a sense of vulnerability, you can be angry and childlike to allow yourself to have that emotional range.

But it is also in the jobs that you do. Try and find jobs that are compatible. Either that they pay you well and the hours are short. The other thing that I find to encourage writing is a deadline. Somebody gives you a deadline, you will be amazed how creative you can become. And the other thing I would say when someone says, 'I would love to see your first draft,' make sure it is your fourth draft.

**TC:** Let them think it is your first draft.

**PC:** Yes, but make sure it is your fourth. Give yourself time to put it away, go back to it and think about it.

**TC:** But have there been times when you have thought, I am throwing this in, I am not going to write?

**PC:** Oh yes, absolutely and I have thought about all sorts of things. Should I go off and do a business degree? I started training as a psychotherapist. There were all sorts of times when it was just too much. And even now the funding situation is so bad. Everything must be a co-production. Nobody ever tells you that they only do half productions. As far as new writing is concerned, everybody wants to have a guarantee. They won't take risks. They will restage all kinds of stuff, but the commissions for new work, as you well know, are hard to come by.

**TC:** How does that affect your personal life? I know there is writing versus life. How do you find that balance?

**PC:** Some of the things that bother me I suppose are: how do you survive financially? There is not a sense that somehow, because our lives are not feast or famine, there is anything that builds us up. It would be nice if there was some sort of system that allowed us to maintain our sanity and get on to the work that we must do. So, I think financially it would be important and it takes a toll, not just on you but on the people around you. Sometimes you are quite withdrawn from the family situation and not always present. You try extremely hard to be, but you're not necessarily always there.

**TC:** You say you like to tell stories that make the ordinary, or the ignored, central and celebrated. What do you mean by that?

**PC:** To me there is something heroic in the ordinary, just the fact that people get on with things day to day. They get up, look after children, they endure. Certainly, coming from a Caribbean perspective, certainly coming from a black perspective, if you look at who our heroes are, they are not celebrated in the way that they should be. The writing I deeply admire is that which shows the extraordinary in the ordinary.

**TC:** When you get that burning desire to write something, that initial seed, how different is that idea from the finished product?

**PC:** As I have gotten older, it has gotten more complex, oddly enough. Because I was writing when I was incredibly young, and literally I would just

blurt. And because I could hear voices quite clearly, I mean characters and voices and stuff, it had its own flow. But as you get older, you understand the templates that you need to apply, in terms of the structure of things.

You understand what you are trying to do, so, sub-textually you kind of examine that. I do make a difference between art and craft. The art is getting it out there, then the craft is the shaping of it. Let's look at *The Key Game*, one of my plays. One of my jobs was working as production manager for a media production house in Jamaica, and an American crew came down and wanted to shoot something set in an asylum in the southern United States. They asked to see our mental hospital as it was built at the same time. So, I took them there and while they were walking around and looking at buildings, I saw the patients just going by, walking by, and one of them thought I was his mother, and he came up and talked to me. They are very shocking sights that you see and that's kind of the core of *The Key Game*. Watching how a society looks at people who they think are beyond repair and absolutely warehouses them. And how magical and special those people are, but unless they get that support, how dreadful that outcome could be. That sounds so bleak, I know.

**TC:** It's not bleak at all, because with that play, you do not just talk about the asylum, you do go on and talk about other things. Like home and that sense of not being where you are most comfortable. And being taken out of somewhere and put somewhere else. Which are things I think are in a lot of black women's writing of a certain time. And so it's not just about the mental asylum, it is about a lot more. It is a beautiful play. The style that you have used to write it in, the 'Theatre of the Absurd', was that a conscious decision?

**PC:** Oh, I love 'Theatre of the Absurd' – it was so much of an homage. There is depression, there is schizophrenia in my family, so the idea of exploring mental health and how it affects the internal world that some people create, that I thought was fascinating. But I have to say the most gratifying moment I guess, and I rarely watch my own work, but when you sit in an audience and you can feel something land, you know you have got something of worth. You think: I have found my way to these people.

**TC:** As you are watching your work, did you sometimes see something that you did not even know was there?

**PC:** Yes, and that is what I love about good actors. A good actor and a good director can take what is there and at the end of it you think, 'oh my goodness'.

**TC:** And how different is that from, for instance, writing a novel like *One Bright Child*?

**PC:** Well, *One Bright Child* came out of the radio scripts. So, in essence I had a shape and then I made it into prose. And I think if I were going to write it again now, the huge kind of luxury you would have with prose, where you can describe things and you can have long sequences. I couldn't do that because all I knew was cramming everything into dialogue in few directions. So, I would probably rewrite that story now. It is the story about my parents and how they met at Cambridge University after the war.

**TC:** It is interesting that you started off with the script and then went into the novel.

**PC:** There is a lovely lady called Rosemarie Hudson who is a publisher, and when she decides you are going to write something, you do not tell her 'no'. And she said to me, 'That was exceptionally good. Now make it into a book.'

**TC:** You did your research, found your words and did it. But the thing is with the novel you put so much detail there that you might not have had to put into a script, because then actors can find that and develop it. You do not typically have to stay true to your parents because the actors and directors can find different things. In the novel, what did you need to research?

**PC:** Quite a few incidents in it, which led to some turning points, which were a part of family lore. You know that my father's tutor told my mother, 'Don't marry him, or you will never have a future.' And you know the business of the gloves, being told she is Haile Selassie's daughter and having to argue with them that she is not.

**TC:** And we just have to say that you are half Jamaican and half English. So, your dad is English?

**PC:** Yes, and he went to Cambridge on a demob scholarship, from Burton Grammar School. And my mother had just done her law degree in Canada and came to do her second law degree at Cambridge.

**TC:** And what year was that?

**PC:** That would have been the end of 1945, early 1946.

**TC:** That was a really difficult time for mixed relationships?

**PC:** Yes, I think that is why they ended up going back to Jamaica to live, really.

**TC:** What age were you when you came to England?

**PC:** The first time I came to England, I was about eight or nine. We used to come regularly on holiday. And then the first time I came to live in England was when I was eighteen, because I got a scholarship and studied at Girton College. When I got to Cambridge in the mid 1970s, oh my goodness, did I bump into a different England. Because even in Jamaica, we had not confronted the idea of race particularly, in the same way. But when I got to Cambridge, it was there, most definitely there.

**TC:** If I remember rightly, your mother was the first black woman to get a degree in 1948 at Cambridge?

**PC:** Yes, I think it was the first black woman to get a degree in law. I do not know if there were other people who got there before her. They have done some research and they have not found anybody. Her portrait was up in the University Library. But you will have to understand that she got a double first, she was brilliant. Then I think she was born fifty years too early. She went back to the Caribbean and no law firm would take her on. She had been called to the bar, and they would not take her on. So, when the

university started, she became an extra-mural tutor and then branched out to doing other sorts of things, legislation mostly.

**TC:** You were born in Jamaica, lived in England and you have written for both places. Has your dual heritage affected your writing? And how has it affected the audiences you have written for?

**PC:** I think it has affected my writing in the sense that certainly in Jamaica when I was writing, I think what happened was because I was part of a family that were so interested in literature and theatre and all these other things, I had a kind of an instinctive idea of what the shape of things should be. You know, I read English literature, so, I had an idea of what a play was and that kind of stuff. So I had, I think, a slight advantage over what other people were writing at the time. There were not that many jobs for writing anyway. I was lucky to get quite a few, and I generated my own work by starting the radio soaps and I think that was my biggest education of all.

And then I come to England, and although I am familiar with radio, I have to prove it here. Because anything you do in the Caribbean is not seen as valid. I found the editorial process a lot more rigid here and I think more rigorous as well, I would say that, because certainly when I was writing in Jamaica nobody would edit me. I just wrote the scripts and went into the studio and we did it. Even writing for *Westway* [the World Service soap], I would write two episodes a month. I was writing twenty a month in Jamaica. I am not comparing quality or anything else. But the fact that I had that hands-on practical experience, I knew what was happening in the studio, I knew certain things that allowed me to write well enough to get into things.

I occupy a strange position here and maybe it is just my paranoia that, actually, I am seen as more Jamaican than British. When the TV series *Baby Mother* was being written they were calling on a lot of writers in but I was told that I was not British enough, not working-class enough. Then you have other things that happen where you are not seen as a black British writer; you are seen as a Jamaican writer. And sometimes I play on that. If there is work or something of interest, I will play on that. It is much more interesting with the audience, then you must make all sorts of decisions and stand outside of yourself and see if the Jamaicaness that I insert in some of the things that I write, whether if that alienates audiences, or I am pulling them in to understand something about it. Because it is so easy for me, I do not want to assume that this is comfortable for them.

You walk the streets of London and the speech on the street of so many young people is so based in the Caribbean language, and so based in Jamaican language, that I have probably the mistaken idea that they are much more comfortable with the dialect, then I just have to think, how do I write it. To some extent my compromise is that I hold to the rhythms of Jamaican language without necessarily the phonetic spelling and all the other things that go with writing patois. And then I trust to the actors to bring that energy to it.

It is also that I feel that often I am not trusted to write standard English. I am frequently used for black American texts, oddly enough. I co-wrote an episode in *Tommies* where I created a black America woman in WW1 who went to the front line. And I am entirely trusted to do that, and to work with Toni Morrison's stuff and whatever, because you know you occasionally must put in bits, but not necessarily with English characters in the same way. So, I am trying to kick against that. One of the plays that I have written

is writing black British characters and black Caribbean characters who get together to see what happens.

I do sometimes feel as though I am seen as Jamaican and not necessarily writing about this experience in the UK. But I have lived here for twenty-five years and I have lived in the middle of things for twenty-five years, so, I kind of feel it is my time now.

**TC:** Don't you think that sometimes you are put in a little pigeonhole and expected to stick within that?

**PC:** Yeah, I found it hilarious in 2017 I was put on the new hot list of writers.

**TC:** It is frustrating when you have had a career such as yours that in 2017 that should happen. What do you think needs to change for that not to happen?

**PC:** Well, I think for me why I am hesitant sometimes to push harder is – because I would love to write for television, I have a couple of film ideas I would like to write – that I have done so much by the seat of my pants, taught myself so many things. It would be nice if there was some practical support, not – 'oh, let us do five writers and pat them on their heads and never have their work broadcast' – but proper, practical support to get you from being a skilled radio writer and into somebody who writes for film and television. Because I have never been able to find that route. And to sit around and generate enough of those scripts to get your skills, it is ferociously demanding.

What I would really like to see now is some sort of a ladder, because I have stories to tell. What I would love to do is just to have that editorial support to help in the research into that kind of stuff. I have a story set in Scotland. How the heck do I do the research in Scotland to get it written? That for me is the frustration at this point. I feel confident in some of the things that I do, but I have a real sense that yes, I have been pigeonholed. Yes, she does this, she does black women stuff.

I find it quite fascinating: you have got Shonda Rhimes, and things seem to be changing. But I do not know how much they are. It might be childish, but I take huge comfort in things like, for example, *Black Panther*. Because you are looking at something... it was such a basic thing to walk out of a theatre and feel affirmed by what you have just seen, the movie. And that was such a lovely feeling, I have to say.

**TC:** Tell me about swimming, your career.

**PC:** You know, it has defined me in an awful lot of ways. I started swimming competitively as an age group swimmer at eight years old and it taught me a huge amount of independence, because on the team, I travelled to Mexico, Colombia, El Salvador, Trinidad, Bahamas, Puerto Rico. And it was just the team and the chaperones and that was it.

**TC:** How old were you?

**PC:** I started at eight and stopped doing that sort of thing at age sixteen, and it was five to six days a week. Swimming was always about how you could express yourself physically. Because I knew I was good at it, it gave

me confidence when I was kind of too tall, my glasses were too thick or whatever. It gave me that balance and it is something that I have carried through life; that you need three legs on every stool, you need to have a family life, a creative life, and some other form of achievement to keep yourself sort of balanced.

But now, I love this: at my father's behest, I went to Cambridge. I struggled to find my way there. I must have gained about fifty pounds and lost about thirty. And then my father said, go and join the swimming team, and I wore glasses at that point, they were glass glasses and I walked into the heated swimming pool and they fogged up immediately, so, I could not see anything. So, I squinted my way over to where they were training and said, 'can I try out please?' And they said 'no, we have started training for the term already.'

Well look, I said to myself, I have come this far, why don't I just change into my costume and go for a time trial or something. I cycled there, and I was not going back without a swim. I got my swimsuit on, did two lengths and they stopped me and said, 'can you compete next weekend?' So, I joined the swim team, which was odd because I was used in Jamaica to swimming all year round. But not here, we do not do that. This team did not do that. Back in Jamaica there'd be a lot of noise; and here it was 'jolly good swim, terribly good.' And then there was these endless banquets after each swim, straight after. But I had good Jamaican hair, I could not come out of a swimming pool and then turn up half an hour later at a banquet looking like anything. So, it was a hugely different experience for me, and I think by the third year I had had enough and that was it. But yeah, I was lady captain of the Cambridge University swimming team.

When you are really in the groove swimming, you swim quite long distances, you can meander off inside your head and think about all sorts of things, in a way that allows you to play around with all sorts of ideas and stuff. Sometimes I would just go and swim when I am trying to think of something; and I think that balance between physical and mental is quite important. For me, oddly enough, these are some of the happiest times of my life; being at the beach, snorkels, goggles and just bumbling along just watching the fish. Not deep water. And that sense, that sound and just being in that space; that to me is happiness. You get out of the water with some good fried fish, maybe a mojito and life is perfect.

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

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