

Rikki Beadle-Blair

in conversation with Jonny Wright

Jonny Wright: This is Jonny Wright, and I am here with Rikki Beadle-Blair – who is just polishing his sunglasses – on the 20th floor, in his flat looking out on London. Rikki Beadle-Blair is an amazing writer, director, artist, musician. How would you describe yourself, Rikki?

Rikki Beadle-Blair: Creative entertainer. The sub-sections of that are: writer, director, performer, composer, designer, producer, publisher, choreographer, dancer – and mentor, I think that is important. My mission in life is to be myself entirely and to use all my faculties: my brain, perceptions, emotions, empathy, vision, all of them. Everything that is available to me is there to be employed, and everything that I have to offer, is there to be offered.

JW: How would you describe your process as a writer, which is very unique?

RBB: I assemble a bunch of actors like shopping for a cake, or it is like putting together an Olympic team or football team. Imagine that you are in an area and you need to put together a good team... So, you go around the factory, and you watch people playing and you chat to people and you see that so-and-so would be good. And you put together this team.

JW: You cannot afford Cristiano Ronaldo but Jonny Wright's around?

RBB: Yeah, that is how it is. You get a vibe: is this person going to be a

great team player, are they going to vibe with everybody? Are they going to represent? And I usually have a theme. In that case, the word was 'home'. I wanted to do a play on these various ideas of belonging. I'd been talking to my younger brothers ... we have a lesbian mother, and so the younger ones were born through artificial insemination. That means you could have a lot of brothers and sisters you've never met. And that was an interesting idea – that I have brothers who have other brothers that I hadn't met. Are they my brothers? What does that mean? And then, of course, it led me to [the idea that] people may have grown up with their dad but do not know that their dad has made other people pregnant.

JW: So, they've got other brothers and sisters anyway...?

RBB: ...that they don't know about. It could be even their neighbours, which is more common than you think, because of affairs. I just wanted to do a play about the hidden kind of kinship that comes about from that 'organised' way of having babies, through IVF or whatever. But also, who am I? Where do I belong? And who are my siblings?

So, I put that together and, at the time, in the case [of the play *Home*], it so happens that I had actors who did not look at all alike but were all mixed-race. And it was an interesting idea that maybe this one black man had donated his sperm to all these different families. That is what that play is partly about. But also about people who had been adopted into care and coming out of care and going into homes.

JW: Halfway homes?

RBB: Yeah, and how that can disconnect you from your racial roots and how our mothers are 'homes': we have all been inside their bodies. Somebody

was a 'home' to somebody else. I put together people who are going to inspire me. I did not know it was going to be about that exactly, but I knew it was going to have those themes. Suddenly, I had these great mixed-race actors and I thought they would make great siblings who were very different from each other but could have this one connecting aspect. It was exciting because that play had a big cast, 14 or so, which struck me as everyone kept saying, 'You don't get to be in a play with eight mixed-race actors. I'm always the only one.'

JW: So, how did that work? I remember you were gathering the actors together, a bit at a time.

RBB: Yeah, some of them I knew already, some had written to me, and some had stopped me in the street, like you did and usually, I can't remember if I did then, but I almost certainly put an ad out saying, 'I'm looking for actors.' Then people came in and talked to me, and I had an interesting mix of people. I put together all these interlocking stories, where the people seem to be very separate, and of course they had common themes which were: parenthood, belonging, whether to keep or give away your child, trying to find your family. And so, I essentially made a family out of the actors, and you all come together, and we all talk. And gradually, I start writing the script which kind of works like a thriller, because we never know what the next bit is going to be.

JW: Explain these 'talks' for the listeners. During this process, when I was an actor in this play of Rikki's, *Home*, it was not rehearsals as you would expect... It is not the same as other projects that I have worked on.

RBB: We don't talk about 'characters' at all. That is for the actor to work out

and talk about with me, if they want to. But we don't do that until there is a script. I don't talk about the characters and then create a script out of what they talk about. I ask everybody to write down a name they want their character to have. Sometimes I am going, 'This person needs a partner to act with, or this person needs a child, or these people needs a parent... or a co-worker.' And then I will go out and find another actor and introduce them. That happens quite a lot; you are adding ingredients.

I'm fortunate that people do approach me and ask to work with me, and people will just always have stories and people will talk. I am not searching for them to solve the problem like, 'give me a storyline'. But I'm waiting for them to inspire a storyline in me. You are looking for the white rabbit that will take you away from lying in the sun and into Wonderland. The more I hear stories about what people have done, the more those subliminal seeds are planted, and I write quite tight in those circumstances. I honestly don't know how it's going to end, or where it's going, and I rely on a sense of urgency. Yeah, it's a play, we just do it, and we learn it as we go along. We put it out there; it's done, and I go onto the next play. That's really it.

I've done short films where I am writing the script every night, the night before we do it, we don't know what the film is as we are filming it, which is even more risky. That has worked very well. I've been doing this so long... it's not something I would advise to someone who hasn't been writing ... I am fifty-seven and I have been writing since I was three. Sometime next year, I will have been writing for fifty years. So, it is second nature to me. I can work very quickly under difficult circumstances. But there are so many distractions that I like to create deadlines to make sure that I get things done, otherwise there are always other things that I fool myself into thinking are more urgent, and they're not.

But I [also] work on TV shows like *Noah's Arc*. That is something where you can't write it at the last minute. You have to write it ages in advance; you have to storyline all together, as a team. I'm actually very good at that and I'm very good at running a writers' room and making sure we really work out our storyline.

JW: So, *Noah's Arc* was in America, right?

RBB: Yes.

JW: How was that different from working in Britain?

RBB: It's a team. [In Britain] I'm usually just the only writer. On American TV, there are several writers. I was head of the writers' room. One of the other writers, who wasn't head of the writers' room but is the show runner, was Patrik-Ian Polk. He's got a million distractions and isn't coming up with his scripts on time. And it's my job to go, 'We've got to know what the storyline is.' I cannot do what I do in my play and go, 'I don't know how it ends.' We have to all know how it ends, so we are writing in concert.

So, let us say you have 10 episodes per season, and you work out your season arc, which takes a few weeks. Then you work on who is going to work on each episode's arc. People kind of put their hands up and go, 'I want that episode, I want that episode', and then you try and please everybody and then we may swap them around and go, 'I need someone to put more romance into this, I am not strong at that. I need someone to put more comedy into this.' So, then you're fixers for each other's scripts. Then you're doing it. In the writers' room ... what's exciting about that is that you

have to lose a lot and it is painful to have a great idea and have it shot down.

JW: Do you think all actors should write?

RBB: Actors should write, and all writers should produce. They should always be a part of the producing team; they should own their property. Producers won't like me saying this, but if you're smart, you will allow your writers to become producers, so that they can a) benefit from the fruits of their work and b) help you understand what it is you're producing.

If you are going to adopt a child, try and meet the mother, if you can. There are crucial things you will learn from them. Even just knowing what their DNA is, and thinking, OK, this is something that may happen here. You have to have both brains going. If not, you're making it up. It's fine to make up yourself, but do not complain no one is coming to see it, if you are not in control of how it is disseminated. As far as delivering the baby is concerned, I would like the mother to be conscious and tell me what she is feeling and what is happening with this baby. They have that right, and they have that wisdom, and you can benefit. Ask the patient what they are feeling and you will be a better doctor.

It is horrible because the writer goes, 'I don't like it like that' [and as a producer, you think] 'Oh, I just want to blast this person out of the room.' But they are there to help you. They have a vision and if you cannot sell your vision to them, then you are not going to sell it to the public either. Which we have seen, and they all go out and say, 'Oh, I've read this play and I've read this book and they ruined it.' That is why I think a writer should be able to be a producer. And so, all my writers sit in the room with me, and every now and then we clash but mostly it has been amazing.

JW: We are surrounded by books and a few DVDs and loads of vinyl. What inspiration do you get from all of this?

RBB: All of this? And galleries, too. My books are really important. I am a big fan of Pinterest. I make a lot of libraries for myself there... images, designs for shows that I might do, pictures I like, icons I love. I will have a whole thing of 'heroes', which will be from Bob Marley to David Bowie to Einstein. Then I will make scrapbooks for my projects. Sometimes I keep those private so people can't see them. I am a big person of 'library ideas', so I can go to look at images. I even have one for all my clothes. I take photos of all my clothes, or take pictures offline when I buy them, I put them all in this big library so I can pick out what I am going to wear today.

JW: You do have a sweatshop-worth of trainers.

RBB: Yeah, I really do. This is like a shop, and my bedroom is all clothes. I do designs for my projects as well. All these things are all galleries for me to remind myself and I love going to galleries. Every city I go to. New York, I'll go down to MoMA, I'll go to the Whitney, I'll see whatever the latest exhibition is, have a quick look again at the ongoing collection. In London, I'm a member of Tate, I go to Tate. I go to all the galleries I can, all the exhibitions, all the films... seeing shows, sometimes two or three a day, seeing films. I am a member of BAFTA... I have got the DVDs that come in every year and I'm watching those and voting. I'm a fan of the work which is important. You have to immerse yourself in it and you have to immerse yourself in it all the time. I love going to a fashion show, I love going to an art gallery, I love going to a book reading, I love wandering around a bookstore. I am always

looking for inspiration, I am looking on the street, I am taking photographs. My job is to be a reference library for my work.

I am working on a short film now written by a young writer and young producers who have asked me to work with them on this script; I have developed it with them. They wanted to film it in Brighton, and it was great. We went down to Brighton to look for locations, and I could immediately say, 'Great, we are going here, we are going there, we are going there.' Every time I have gone to Brighton, I have been clocking locations in my head. Any city I go to, I am imagining that one day I am going to film in it.

JW: The antenna's up.

RBB: Yeah, so, if you asked me to make a film in New York tomorrow, the location manager would be like, 'Oh my god, we are working as a team here!' I have a great location manager in London called Andy Williamson and when I work with him, he's always like, 'You're half the team, Rikki', because I always know there is a factory there, or those shops look like they could be in Greece or Amsterdam or whatever, so, we could do that location there...

I have to have this Rolodex in my head for potential aspects for anything I want to do. I am always looking for music.... it just goes on and on. Everything in my flat, really has a practical purpose... other than the ones that you sit on and ones that you eat off – they are for me – everything else is for the work. I am all about the work. This is a working man's flat.

JW: And how do you find the energy for it all?

RBB: I love it. I'm doing what I love. If you want to be great, you have to be great. You have to do great things and you have to do them consistently, and you have to constantly revise your approach and make it great.

Prince didn't get that good just by phoning it in every few weeks. He was doing great stuff all the time. He would famously do a gig and go and do the after-party as well; he was the gig at the after-party. That is how you get to be a stone solid genius like that. You do it till your feet bleed, your fingers bleed, and then you have to rest. But you rest because you want to work.

JW: If you couldn't do any creative things, what would your alternative job have been? Or, have you had an alternative job?

RBB: It would be tempting for me to say, 'This is the only thing I can do because I have done it all my life, and I have done it so consistently for an entire lifetime.' But the truth is, I would have been an anthropologist. I absolutely love human behaviour, working out where we come from, why do we do things, why we respond the way we do. Human behaviour is fascinating to me.

I would have loved archaeology, history. I love history, Again: Where did we come from? Where did we live? What civilizations were there? What were the details? The Egyptians fascinate me. Africa must be filled with archaeological sites beyond Egypt. Where there are lost civilizations, I would love to know about them. Archaeology would have interested me, being a lawyer would have interested me. I love arguments. Again, it's human behaviour. I love arguing the toss on, Is this legal? Is this right? What are the ethics on this? And I would have loved to defend people who were unjustly

convicted or accused, and I would have loved to prosecute people who need to see the errors of their ways. I would have loved law and arguing points of law; it would have been fascinating to me, and formulating law, so, to be a judge, I guess. The list goes on and on. I think I would have been a good teacher, but I think I would find the structures frustrating. I would have liked to have started a school, but maybe one day I will. But it would be very much 'alternative' education, like I experienced.

JW: Talking about 'alternative' education, you experienced an 'alternative' upbringing, and you've been doing *Pride* recently ... a lot of your work, like *Shalom Baby* and *Bashment*, has been about the gay experience, different aspects of the gay experience.

RBB: I like to include the gay experience, but not always.

JW: So, how has your work been informed by you, as a gay black man? Is that a secret? It is not quite a secret, really? Your upbringing, having a lesbian mother, how has that continued to inform your work?

RBB: It has informed my work inasmuch as it has made me aware that injustices exist, but it has made me passionate that that should be addressed, and all lack of representation should be addressed. I have had somebody say to me, 'Oh, I want to be in one of your plays, but I'm not black and gay'. No, everyone's welcome, except bigoted idiots. But, actually, even bigoted idiots are allowed to work with me if they are willing to open their minds and have an experience. I have worked with people who have said and done things that I don't agree with – in the (slightly arrogant, but so far justified)

confidence that I can open their minds simply by being in their company. And understanding that a lot of people have these thoughts and feelings because they feel underserved. Therefore, they are projecting their sense of inadequacy or sense of injustice upon themselves.

It is interesting... people are very frustrated with the Black Lives Matter movement because they feel like we have not got round to, saying, 'working class lives matter', or so on and so forth, which of course is a foolish thing to say, but understandable thing to think. We all want to be represented and we all think we should be first on the list. And we all feel threatened when we are not the centre of attention.

I want to work with everybody. I feel like everybody is everything. There's that line in *Bashment* where the characters basically have an argument about the word 'queer' and the word 'nigger'. One of them says, 'We are all niggers, and we are all queer'. And of course, that does not mean there is not a black experience that is distinct or a gay experience that is distinct, but the fact is everybody feels in some way aggrieved that they are unseen, under-represented, misunderstood, stereotyped – and they often play into it.

Over the last few years, we have seen Boris Johnson and we have seen Donald Trump play extraordinary stereotyped versions of who they are, with a real sense of persecution and grievance. Particularly Donald Trump, he spent almost all of his time in the public view over the last few years as an aggrieved victim, because he cannot understand why black people are seen as vulnerable when he is working so hard to be so strong and manly. And, so, he therefore, like 'underclass' people sometimes do, falls into a ludicrous stereotype of himself. (Sometimes they do that. I am not saying that they all do, but sometimes they do.)

And we see that happening at the very top with the Eton boys. Boris Johnson behaves in a complete and utter caricature of his own brand. But it works for him in a weird way, but we'll see how that story continues to unfold.

What I see is the same thing happening with him, as I see happening with say, Tupac and Biggie who pursued that kind of ghetto identity to the point of death and they did not need to. They could have survived and they could have said more, but we are all trapped in this kind of idea of ourselves and sometimes it is powerful and liberating and defiant, and sometimes it's destructive and limiting. And I would like to help people find out what works for them.

I feel like the Bullingdon boys of this world could use that privilege and that painful history they have of inadequacy and knowing that people see them as dinosaurs and that arrogance – it could all be used to really take the world forward and then we would not need to 'cancel' each other. We would be able to go 'let's understand who you are'. So, that is my mission to really get these people to use art to understand who they are and respect who they are and therefore, relax about who they are, up to a certain extent. So, they can find room in their hearts to empathise with other people, to use what they must to help other people as well as themselves. Because until you have a good relationship with yourself, you cannot have a good relationship with anyone or anything else. You literally cannot do it. That is what my mission is: to get people to express themselves.

So, I mentor lots of gay people, lots of black people and 'people of colour', and working-class people – they are my favourites, if you like. But I am just as interested in middle-class white heterosexual male and female people. And I work with them to expand their ideas of themselves, to include their neighbours, and to include their peers.

JW: Well, I attest that Team Angelica, the company you run, does include everyone from all walks of life.

RBB: It really does. When many people say 'diversity' they mean 'find black people'. If you are a person who is in a perceived minority – I'm in several – then we must get in majority positions in our own businesses and our own creative endeavours, and then demonstrate the siblinghood that we wish other people, who have had the power for so long, were able to do.

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

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