

Ben Kuffuor

in conversation with Jonny Wright

JONNY WRIGHT: Okay, this is Jonny Wright here for *Writers Mosaic*, interviewing Ben Kuffuor. I'm in his house. He greeted me in a dressing gown like Tony Soprano, on the street, and then served me strawberries. I know Ben... we met through another writer, in a pub. Was that the first time we met?

BEN KUFFUOR: The first time we met was on your birthday.

JW: So, yeah, I came across... the first piece of your work I saw was *It Always Matters*, right?

BK: *It Always Matters*, it's called, yeah.

JW: So, it was great reading that. What was the inspiration for *It Always Matters*?

It's got a couple – Joseph and Sophia...?

BK: Sophia, yeah.

JW: You have a black guy and a white girl; and she's in her twenties and he's in his thirties.

BK: Yeah, early thirties. So, she's late twenties, he's early thirties.

JW: And they're engaged?

BK: Yes.

JW: She's been assaulted by a group of black boys.

BK: Yep.

JW: And they live in... Where is it? It's in London, a specific place?

BK: It's south, deep south, so it's like Clapham, Clapham area. Being from Walthamstow originally, yeah. Part of it was observing interracial relationships where often they weren't exempt from external politics, if you know what I mean. Although both parties or one party might assume that those things didn't exist within their love, I think often it's kind of naïve, and I think the couples who really flourish in that kind of setting, understand that they're both from different cultures and try and incorporate all of that. It's the couples who ... where they're like, 'We don't see colour,' where the problems often occur.

JW: I loved all the unspoken things where you talk about the kind of 'dangerous area' or 'I just feel uncomfortable in this area'.

BK: Yeah, yeah.

JW: It was never like 'I feel uncomfortable because there's too many black people'...

BK: Yeah, yeah... yeah.

JW: But that was the subtext. It's full of amazing subtexts, I thought. And I thought that was a much more nuanced view of racism than a lot of the things I'm reading and going to see, where it's very 'on the nose'. And, actually, I think British racism is not.

BK: Yeah, I'm glad you said that because... I mean, part of it is age: I'm 32, so I didn't grow up in what somebody like a Roy Williams would have grown up in, where there was overt things happening, like direct moments of racism.

JW: Most of racism is, it's stuff you're not quite sure... 'Is it racism?'

BK: Yes, yeah, yeah.

JW: Happens so many times that you're like, 'it probably is'.

BK: The thing in my mind, I was aware of writing a very British race play. I'd often seen writers who are kind of in and around our age and they were writing, strangely, like Roy Williams, or like I guess like 1960s Mississippi, which I understand because dramatically it offers the most potential, for structure. And it's easier for a reader. But it's tempting for, I guess a reader who's outside of that world, to only understand racism presented in that way. So I suspect the writers are kind of operating from two places. I don't know entirely; this is just my estimation. Some of it may be that it's easier for dramatic text. Some of it may be that if somebody's reading it who doesn't know about this stuff, they're going to understand that version more, opposed to my version, where it's kind of... it's unclear in the sense of – he's in this family dynamic and everybody's getting along, but he's quite clearly the outsider, after a result of what happens long before the play, if you know what I mean. But that's more my understanding of how I think racism functions in the UK. It's like, nothing's ever overtly said. Nothing really exists that explicitly. But ultimately, it's very difficult for you to be on the inside of things, even if you are on the inside of things.

JW: What is that happy medium? So, you have one character... they live in London, I mean they both live in London, but she's from Oxford. So what's the happy medium there? One person feels more at home in Oxford, one feels more at home in London. Is there any... is there a happy compromise?

BK: I mean that was more a dramatic thing... I mean because if you are dealing with somebody who doesn't come from London... I guess in a dramatic sense, I had to pull him out of that environment physically in order to fully communicate to the audience what I was trying to say. So, it more so comes from that place. That's a craft thing.

JW: And then he had his drinks, his only remedy.

BK: Yeah. [laughing] And the point being made there is that now he wasn't just feeling alone, now he's truly alone. Even though he's still in love with this woman and is still essentially part of their family. So, it's slightly more grey. He bought into a narrative that achievement and education and attainment meant that he was no longer that other thing. So, in order to be in love with this woman and accept all of this world, he had to almost rid himself of all those other things. But then, when the incident occurs, he realises those things are more important to him than he actually thought. So, that's the thing that's pulling at him. Those are the two things.

JW: I thought it tackled white liberalism very well. And I thought Sophia represented that kind of *Guardian* reader... non-racist with colour-blind, *Guardian* reader very well; and actually, if you really interrogate there's kind of skeletons in everyone's closet.

BK: And I think as well, in some instances, how things can work is there's an acceptance of the individual but not necessarily an acceptance of the broader community. So, Joseph no longer represents the idea of blackness and whatever else.

JW: Yeah, because he's not really black.

BK: He is... he is.

JW: No, but in their...

BK: Yeah, in their rendering of him.

JW: You're not like them.

BK: Yeah. You're not like them. You're kind of better, you're more refined, you're educated, you're smarter. In that, there's an acceptance of Joseph as something other than, and it's only the incident that throws up the fact that, Oh... well he is..., you know even for Sophia too and for her family.

JW: And in the arts world now, I saw parallels in Joseph's life and how Joseph has to act to be successful. It's almost like, you can be black, but you can't be too black. Do you find that as a writer? Do you find that as a struggle between how black you can be?

BK: That's a complex question. I deliberately made jokes that Joseph worked in finance because I felt, because it was about stats and numbers. He's in a profession where he could exist for a longer time without having to think about blackness because ultimately, it's about figures, you know? Sure, there will be moments that

throw themselves up, but if you can ignore those and ride them through, you can get to where you want to.

I don't think there's a way you can be in the arts and not be aware of your ethnicity; because there are certain instances where I think your ethnicity is kind of key as to why you're in the room in the first place. But I think if you represent a version of it that perhaps is too 'confrontational', I want to say, or perceived as such, it could be very difficult for you.

It's interesting though because I think... I mean my friend and I had this discussion recently about what time this parallels the most, the era we're living in now. And we think there's a lot of similarities with the sixties and stuff. Where there was this idea of a counterculture. Why the sixties? Because I think it was the time where the commercial world worked out that the counterculture was something that could be sold. And I think now with the (quote-unquote) 'woke' movement or in some instances, the faux-woke movement, there are now commercial enterprises realising that radicalism, as long as it's contained, is commercially viable. So, a lot of the work that's come over mostly from America at the minute, all has kind of radical intonations within it. And I guess the difficult part for authors like us, is some of the time that's not all you want to talk and/or write about.

JW: It's not and you certainly don't.

BK: Right.

JW: And what I would say about your work is it's very British and I mean that in a good way.

BK: Okay.

JW: Even *Somewhere In Africa*, which I loved, and is mostly set in Ghana, and it's about a mixed-race kid Sean who is kind of getting back in contact with his dad, Alfred, who he's never known. Even though most of that's in Ghana, I read it as a very British play. It wasn't what I expected from the title, and I wasn't disappointed. I thought it was brilliant and really had this kind of... You have this guy trapped... he was trapped in between two worlds, in England and Ghana, but he didn't know Ghana at all. And I wondered what was... and so yeah, I think you have a British stamp and P.O.V, a black British stamp P.O.V on your work, a lot. How do you find that as a black British writer?

BK: I guess what you're asking about isn't something that I'm entirely conscious of, if you know what I mean. More than anything, what was always important to me... all of the people who really excited me when I was young... whether it would be Woody Allen or Billy Wilder or Shane Meadows or Spike Lee... what always excites me the most, are the people who let me know where they were from and what that looked like. And I think that's always been why I've been so ruthless, in terms of being as specific as possible, even if it meant it was commercially more difficult to write that version of that thing.

JW: And *Somewhere In Africa* I found very interesting with the foreign influence. You have this Lebanese businessman...even though it's a very family-based – almost kitchen-sink, in a way – drama, you have massive global politics in the background, on a very small scale, on an intimate family scale. What was the inspiration and the thinking behind that?

BK: The reason why I planted all of those seeds in there is because I wanted the show to do two things: I wanted it to do the very personal stuff, but I also wanted it to do the hyperpolitical stuff, in terms of what's going on in West Africa right now. I don't think there was a version that I could write, where this kid goes there and isn't affected somehow by what's going on, particularly because – spoiler alert (this is never going to get made anyway but...) – his father passes away at the end of the episode and bequeaths him this big plot of land. So, then it becomes a fish-out-of-water story.

JW: And his five other siblings?

BK: Yeah, yeah. So, there's a conflict between his Ghanaian siblings over the land but also a conflict with...

JW: Because he's the eldest son?

BK: Yeah. There's also a conflict with foreign investors who want to own the land which he has, because they feel like there's oil underneath it. So, there's a grander story there going on about people being disenfranchised; because what Sean, the central character, finds himself in, is having to keep this plot of land in order to keep the people who work on it, in employment.

JW: You write for the stage, and you write for screen.

BK: Now I do, yeah.

JW: And what do you find the differences are between the two? What are your relationships with both of them? Also, what I read was a piece of yours called

Ageless, which I thought was great. It's about people with... they get a pill where they can be young for...

BK: ...Eternity, well not eternity...

JW: Until they die.

BK: Until they die, yeah.

JW: But they look young. Their bodies are young until they die. So, you have that stage play which I've read. You have also, *It Always Matters*. What do you find the difference is between the two mediums but also, what's your relationship like with the two mediums, both as a writer and also as a fan?

BK: I went to the National Film and Television School, so I was actually training to write for screen. I guess more so feature films specifically. But when I came out, I sold a television script and I guess that funnelled me into that more. I guess there was more of a proliferation even then of black authors on stage writing specifically black things, in a kind of slightly more unfiltered way. My only concern about it... with hindsight, was I felt like they were all writing quite similar things. They were getting work made but there was still a barrier in terms of the variation, in terms of what they could actually write about. Whereas on television, it didn't exist in that form. When I think about it, I guess the bigger things that were made with big budgets with people of colour in it... they've only really happened recently anyway but they weren't... the authors were certainly not what was represented on the screen. So, really the transition from television to thinking more about stage and thinking more about theatre actually was originally a professional thing. It wasn't because I loved the stage so much that I felt compelled to do it; it was because I

felt like that was the only way to start making inroads as a writer. Because if I just kept writing specs, that was going to blunt... because there was no momentum behind them in order to justify people giving me the relevant amount of money to... And also, the other thing is, there wasn't that many... outside of continuing drama, there wasn't that many writer-for-hire type jobs. So now we have Netflix and stuff like that. There's more 'writer's room' type, American ways of working. But back then, if you weren't writing on a continuing drama, or you weren't writing your own thing, you were not writing on screen.

Some of it comes a lot from access and exposure. So, certain things are driven into your mind as a storyteller just by what you experience as a kid. So, for instance, I guess just being from that working-class background, you weren't going to theatres. So, television was more my first understanding of how storytelling worked.

JW: So yeah, what is your background? How was your childhood and how and when did you get into writing?

BK: I mean, I grew up with my sister and my mum in a council estate. However, even within that, I still don't want that to be...

JW: The defining...

BK: I don't want that... not that to define me because the truth of the matter is it is defining. I wouldn't be the man or the writer that I am if I had not grown up that way. Because often with these type of things, the story they want you to tell is hip hop New York type stories where it's like, you know, you're running from cops and your friend got shot when you were twelve, all of that kind of stuff. Part of that, a

lot of that isn't... it does inform my upbringing but I don't want to paint myself as that thing.

And also, as well, I think some of the time being in a mi-... Sorry to cut you... but coming from a migrant background... I mean this is obvious to say, but you exist in two worlds. So there's the external thing like what's going on, in terms of, there wasn't much money around and where you're from people were doing quite... whatever they had to do. But then there's something when you go into the home where just being Ghanaian or whatever, things like education are really important, and I think a lot of that stuff is probably how I find my way to writing, probably.

JW: You said you did a degree before your film studies.

BK: Yeah, yeah.

JW: What was your degree?

BK: I did creative writing.

JW: Creative writing.

BK: I knew... when did I work this out? Probably round about the time I knew I wasn't good enough to be a footballer. There was no sign of me being that. I knew I wanted to write. So, that's like fifteen, sixteen. I wrote a lot when I was young... A lot.

JW: How was your mum? Was she encouraging or was it like...?

BK: [laughter]

JW: Did she want you to be a doctor or a lawyer instead because you're doing this creative writing degree, right?

BK: I don't think she wanted me to be a doctor or a lawyer, but I know she didn't want me to be a writer. I don't think she didn't want me to be a writer because of the nature of the work; I think she didn't want me to be a writer because it's not a... you may be making money; you may not be making money.

JW: She's right.

BK: But yeah, yeah, she's spot on. And the thing is, it's easier when you come from a background where your family can facilitate that, but she could not. So, in her point of view... but I think part of the reason why everything happened so quickly and why I was so quick in terms of how I was doing things... I remember even back at uni, I would do things where it's like... I was writing... obviously I had to write some creative writing stuff like scripts and whatever, but I'd do things where I was like, for three hours in the day I would write scripts that had absolutely nothing to do with the coursework, if you know what I mean. So, by the time I come out of university, I had written a ridiculous amount. So even like going into the NFTS straight after made complete sense, because I had already written so much.

JW: Yep.

BK: I had already done a play with Stratford East. I had done the Young Writers Programme at the Royal Court. By that time, I had already sent a formal screenplay to the Arts Council, which they invited me to talk to them about. So, so much had kind of happened in quite an early space of time because I knew that if I didn't work quickly, my mum would make sure that I didn't write any more.

JW: You mentioned your migrant background and going to Ghana. What's your relationship like with Ghana?

BK: I've been three times and I've been like three very different times. The first time was like the debut. My mum took us... twelve, thirteen... and it was an extreme culture shock at that age. I remember the first time I went there, I hated it. I think part of my mum's motivation of taking us there was so we wouldn't hate it. Part of it was so that we would get to see exactly what the alternative was in a weird way, if you know what I mean.

That and the fact that I think she just wanted a holiday. But there was something in us seeing... because I remember us going on that trip and it wasn't the type of trip where we went there and just kind of only met family and whatever; we were specifically going to historic places and learning things every day, near enough, if you know what I mean.

So, it was really learning about what it meant to be Ghanaian and the fabric of that culturally and what that meant. But seeing stuff in terms of... I mean... I couldn't articulate as well then... There was kind of vast disparity, but it was the places where people had a lot less; that kind of really chimed with me then. It was like it really stuck in my mind and at the time, made me dislike the place, even though that's not how we were living or whatever. It was enough to just make me think, I didn't like that. And I think interestingly, that's a part of the whole African experience, that people who are African but not born there... they don't articulate in the same way or talk about in the same way, because it almost sounds like you're downing your culture or where you're from. But you've got to bear in mind as a twelve-year-old who, even in a council estate in Walthamstow, I had never

seen anything like that, if you know what I mean. At 12, 13, it's a very, very extreme thing. The second time, I was 20, 21 and I was at the film school. And I went there actually in part to research something I was writing there. And my... because I went with a friend and I didn't go with family this time, my understanding of it was completely different. And I think because we were young, so much of it was about fun. It was about nightlife and clubs and all of that stuff, you know 21-year-old stuff. So then I loved it. And then, the third time I went, I was significantly older; I was like 29, 30... and this was the time I went with more of a political lens.

JW: Was this where you were writing *Somewhere In Africa*?

BK: This is when I was writing *Somewhere In Africa*... yeah, which the BBC gave me a little bit of money for. This time, I went with that political lens and after a while, it was less about the story and more so about understanding how the infrastructure of Ghana worked... how the money worked. Like I said earlier, who it went to and who it didn't went to... why things are the way they are. And I think some of that can only come from age and looking at the world differently. Funnily enough, interestingly when I went there, the biggest parallel that I was thinking about a lot of the time was London. It reminded me a lot of the discussions that had been happening in London prior to me going...

JW: Who's buying a house? Who's getting houses?

BK: Yeah, it was all about property and land and people being disenfranchised and people being moved out, and all of that stuff.

JW: What was your relationship with music and how does that influence your work? Or is it something you keep separate and you just box it off and you just enjoy both, but they're separate things.

BK: I think it does in that, the artists I think that who chime with me the most are the people who are coming from a thing that is very, very specific... who are drawing on something that only they and they could do. Most of it is kind of linked to different sounds that come from that place; whether it's like the garage skank or the grime stuff... you know what I mean, all of these different sonic ideas that come through that.

JW: And I respect that. You know, I'm more of an old school, kind of golden era hip hop fan.

BK: Yeah, yeah, yeah... that's your thing.

JW: But what I do respect about modern 'urban' music (in inverted commas) now, is that it's no longer trying to be American. I think it's that time when we were all trying to say, me included as an artist, that we were from Harlem or Brooklyn or wherever and it's like we don't know that life.

BK: Yeah, yeah... and sonically, again the two things relate because there's an evolution in terms of the musical identity. Like, when I listen to old school UK hip hop, probably why I never really got into it, is even sonically, it was very much 'boom bap'...[laughing] It was very much in that space, and they didn't feel very British to me. Yeah, I just like the fact that there's more rappers coming from different places other than London in the UK.

JW: Yeah, you put me onto that Birmingham documentary. That was great. Jay Kay.

BK: Jay Kay... he's someone that I'm excited about, yeah. But I love the accents because it's like... I mean I guess the thing people used to take the piss out of is the thing that makes it uniquely them, you know. And ultimately, all I want my writing to do is bear my accent. That's it.

JW: And it does.

BK: I hope so. That's why it's difficult to sell. [laughs]

JW: If you keep talking, people get used to your accent. That's what you've got to do: Keep writing, keep talking.

BK: Yeah, that's a really good analogy. The more you keep talking, the more people come around to you I guess, to your way of thinking.

JW: Exactly.

BK: You hope.

JW: Yeah.

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

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