

WRITERSMOSAIC

Leah Chillery

in conversation with Jonny Wright

Jonny Wright: It's Jonny Wright here with *WritersMosaic* with Leah Chillery, who's a sitcom writer, playwright, screenwriter, actress, part-time marathon runner, part-time bodybuilder.

Leah Chillery: [Laughs] That's right.

JW: How do you define yourself?

LC: Define myself? Ah... I'm not sure I'm definable. I'm not sure I am. I'm everything. I'm a writer-actor if I had to sum it up briefly.

JW: A writer-actor?

LC: Yes.

JW: And it would be that way around? That's where the hyphen would be?

LC: Yes, it would be... not necessarily, preferably. When I was a youngster, I wanted to be an actor... I wanted to be famous, but I got encouraged into writing when people heard my writing. And then, writing took over basically. So, I write more than I act, but I'd like to act more.

JW: So, like I said in the introduction, you write all these different types of genres, so do you have a preference?

LC: I think the story dictates what genre it is, for me. I'd say most of my ideas are quite big. Television kind of suits them in a way. Radio is great for big ideas as well and I've actually written four radio plays. So, no... I don't think I've got a preference at all. The story just dictates what it should be.

JW: And I guess with radio – although that's not an area I'm very experienced in – you have less of a budget constraint. If you want to set something in space, you can set it in space.

LC: Exactly... that's the beauty of it and you can really go out there with it. The last one that I wrote with Gary Brown – that's my producer up in Manchester, who I've written all my four radio plays with and he's nurtured me, in a way – the last one that we wrote was a little bit surreal because it was based on this guy who was having an affair and then his wife died, and she actually started haunting him. I would never really write that normally but because it's radio, it lent itself to that.

And it was a comedy... it was like a dark comedy as well. That was one of the great things about working with Gary as well [...] we'd sit down and sort of 'chew the cud'. You don't necessarily do that... you don't normally have someone to do that with as a writer.

JW: Well, it sounds like you have an excellent relationship with Gary. What advice, for any writers listening, would you have for cultivating relationships with producers?

LC: Oh, goodness. We just hit it off really. I mean I got into writing radio... the very first instance I wrote a play and sent it to The Writers Room.

JW: BBC Writers Room?

LC: BBC Writers Room. And they invited me down to do a short... to write a three-minute radio play which then got produced. Gary somehow read one of my plays and he liked my style and invited me...

JW: Which I do as well...

LC: Well, thank you very much. And then [he] invited me in to discuss a series that he was writing. When I say series, I don't necessarily mean TV series, it's like a themed ... say, five radio plays.

JW: Would it be different writers on each episode?

LC: Yeah... and he's got me into a few of those and I think that's a great way for sort of a baby writer as they call it... when you haven't had something produced yet... to get involved because you're part of a big family of writers rather than just out there on your own.

JW: So, I've always thought you lived in Nottingham. Got here to the train station... Uber – half an hour... Where are we? Describe where we are.

LC: We're in Nottinghamshire... Well on the cusp of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. I did say it's rural Nottingham, no?

JW: It is. It is.

LC: It's definitely rural, but it's just easier to say Nottingham than to try and explain...

JW: These Southerners don't understand. Have you always lived in this area?

LC: No. I moved to the city when I was a teen to work at a theatre and things, youth theatre. And then I moved to Manchester for about three years, four years. And then I came back near where we are now because that's where my mom is... to be closer to family... and then I've just stayed really.

JW: How has being a Northern writer... how has that shaped your career and your writing? How have you found being a Northerner and a writer?

LC: I think I milk it a bit, and I think because I lived in Manchester for a while as well, I had a Manchester acting agent and I've got a Manchester acting agent now, I adopted a lot of... I made myself more Northern if you like.

JW: How interesting.

LC: I've dropped the accent now, but I used to have quite a strong Manchester accent when I came back because of going to auditions and speaking and being from the North. So, I've always made it a thing.

JW: So, you played up to it?

LC: I played up to it, I milked it. And I think I still do, to be honest with you. I mean it's about finding your own voice, isn't it? As a writer, they drum this into you. And I think what that means is how you talk, how you think, how you express yourself... like how you live... everything that you are and then I think make it just that little bit more.

JW: And with... *Earl of Mo'Bay*. I found that very authentic Jamaican and the same with *Patty's Patties* as well. Even though that was... so *Patty's Patties* is set in Chapelton in Leeds, right?

LC: Yes, that's right.

JW: Which is about a woman's patty shops. They're kind of like... they're first and second-generation Jamaicans there. Whereas *Earl of Mo'Bay* is set in Montego Bay with these two Jamaican characters chatting up these two English girls. But in *Earl of Mo'Bay*, I found both voices from the English girls – one white English and one mixed race girl – and from the Jamaican gigolos, I found them both really authentic voices. But how do you find slipping into different voices?

LC: Yeah... well, that's where I find being an actor helps, because we have to do that anyway. We have to embody all these different characters who are different from us. The writer has to write them obviously, so I find like... the two go hand in hand. I find it quite easy, I think. I've got very strong empathy, which also I think what makes me a decent writer.

JW: A very decent writer. I would say your dialogue definitely jumps off the page.

LC: Thank you very much. Most of my characters do have quite distinctive... If I have a character and their voice could be anybody else's, I have to get rid of the

character or do massive work on... It's just not working for me, if that's what's happening. And that's an important thing for me.

JW: Do you start with character, or do you start with story?

LC: Bit of both. Um... it depends. So, like... the character of the Earl of Mo'Bay came from a guy... an actual Earl of Mo'Bay.

JW: When you were in Mo'Bay?

LC: That's kind of a true story, a heightened version of a true story. The guy, I know him very well. Even now I still know him pretty well. I was like... I have to write something about him because he's such a character. People will not believe that he exists. And actually, one of the bad reviews I got for that play was that they didn't believe him. And I was like... truth is stranger than...

JW: For our listeners, *Earl of Mo'Bay*... so, Earl is a character who goes along the beach and is looking for women and has a Filofax, a Rolodex, a black book of women, which actually your character rips up.

LC: Yes.

JW: But he has a backup. But what was great there and what I find, well with *Earl of Mo'Bay*, and *Patty's Patties* especially, is characters looking for love. Is that something...

LC: It's something I've realised that that's what I write about. The theme in my work is love... it's looking for love in all the wrong places.

JW: Which is really funny. So in *Patty's Patties* when she's looking for love... kind of like... with the pastor... It looks like she's going to get with him but actually in the end, this Jamaican lady, she gets with the white... is he an electrician?

LC: He is an electrician.

JW: But she calls him every other name... plumber. But it's almost like she can't see the man that's right in front of her eyes because there's a cultural difference with them. Did you find... Was there time pressure on that? Did you find that you might forget those voices if you didn't write the play straight away?

LC: Well, it was one of those lightning bolt moments. In fact, I hold *Earl of Mo'Bay* up as my lightning strike moment, where I wrote it in one sitting. And Theatre Writing Partnership commissioned it, the first draft... and I hardly made any amendments to it. So, it's like the Holy Grail for me, and it's like it came from that super wonderful place you know, that's downloaded to me, and I wrote it. And people said when they read it, they were turning the pages.

JW: I was.

LC: They were like... they wanted to know. It was like a little blessing. I think it's the best thing I've written and I'm still... I'm chasing that inspiration again.

JW: Is that frustrating then when... because I've had it as well when you write something in one sitting, and normally it's not like that. Is it frustrating? Are you trying to fight to get back to that?

LC: I have done. I've grappled with that for many years thinking, 'If it's not like that, then it's no good.' But I've also then found... actually from TV where it's never going to be like that. You're always going to get notes and you're always going to do re-writes... That actually you can structure something beautifully.

JW: And with *Whitewashed*... *Whitewashed* is a sitcom. So, Leah and I were both on the Felix Dexter Bursary which was a competition which we won... we jointly won, and we got to write a sitcom each and have a read of it. Leah's, which was a great sitcom, was called *Whitewashed* and it was about a girl called Sissy who finds out... she thinks she's white and on her eighteenth birthday, she finds out her white father is not her father and she's mixed-race. Her real father... her biological father is black.

LC: So yeah... So, it is based on finding out you're not who you thought you were. But what's extra, and what excites me the most about the idea, is then... the pilot is her finding out that she's not this middle-class white girl, but she's actually mixed-race and her dad's a big, beefy, Black Rastafarian.

JW: Her mom's almost exact words, right?

LC: Yeah, her mum's rather too excited about that.

JW: Her mom and her nana are straight down the line... don't pull any punches.

LC: No, exactly. So, but what excites me the most is ...not the pilot, which is frustrating me a bit because I want to write the series... is that the two worlds come together and that she gets to explore that. It is based on a truth, but then again heightened and then again exploring what it would be like into imagination.

JW: Exactly. So, then how has your... what's your connection been like with the black community having... I guess you don't have any black family who you can...

LC: Well, oddly I do, because I have aunties who are married to black men, and I have mixed-race cousins. And that was part of leaving home quite young as well. I went and I lived in a Caribbean hostel. So, I kind of... like London's adopted you, I kind of went and got adopted with the black community and learned everything

that I should have probably learned when I was younger – through strangers. You know... I think there's a story there.

JW: Yeah, there is.

LC: Actually...

JW: Do we have a pitch right here?

LC: Like... even like learning to cook and food, you know.

JW: So, you learned some flavour?

LC: I remember, her name was Momma G (like, of course!) and she would cook Sunday dinner... not the kind of Sunday dinner I was used to.

JW: No boiled carrots?

LC: No... and I would be able to sit and watch. I just loved it and submersed myself in it. And then I started youth theatre and things and got involved in... I think I wrote in my article... getting involved in rap, using my poetry that I used to write then I would add some rap flavour to it. I just really got... really started... as a teen it was great, and it was a positive thing. Some teens go off the rails, they go drinking, they go smoking, that sort of thing. Well, I got involved in youth theatre

and rap and freestyling and all that. It was great. I was finding myself... kind of thing. Yeah, and it was the best thing I did, you know... because it got me on the path to what I really wanted to do anyway. I always wanted to be an actor.

JW: So, there was no... was there any alternative career for Leah Chillery?

LC: I tried to be what my mom wanted me to be when I left school.

JW: Which was?

LC: A dental nurse. I tried it. I'm squeamish. I used to actually have to go boss-eyed, I think I wrote it in one of my scripts. One of the characters has to do something they don't like so they go boss-eyed. I did try... I went to college to do health and social care, then that wasn't working. Then I tried public services... I thought maybe I'd be a firefighter. I tried everything else other than what I wanted to do, which was act. Looking back... well, with my own daughter, if she wanted to act for example, I would encourage her to...

JW: Run for the hills.

LC: No... Chase her dreams if she wants to, but go to drama school, apply for all the best drama schools, give yourself a good shot at it. I'd pay for her to have drama lessons, singing lessons, movement, all that sort of thing. I'd encourage it. Whereas, in my day, it just wasn't something that, it wasn't really a possibility. You

know, people around here don't get famous. They're not on telly... actors don't come from around here.

JW: So, what gave you that fire and drive to do it and go against the norm?

LC: Well, that's what I mean. It feels like it was meant to be, because I wanted to move to the city to experience more culture. And then, when I got there, I realised I was free to do what I wanted. And then, I was around rappers and other musicians and stuff so when they were not in the playhouse, they put out for auditions in this youth theatre. PRESH, I think it was called... a production they were doing. I went and auditioned. I didn't get in... I was shy and scared. In fact, I think I ran away from the very first one and then I went back for another one and I didn't get in, but I agreed to do stage management and stuff. And I started writing: monologues and scenes, and then they put me in one and the rest is history. And the next youth theatre production, which was directed by Benji Reed, who used to be a choreographer, dancer... now, he's a photographer, doing amazing. He cast me as the lead in the next one.

JW: Boom! You've gone from not getting in... to lead.

LC: Exactly. Right. So, that gave me the confidence I needed to go, 'Yeah, I think I can do it.'

JW: And what would your advice be to someone wanting to get into writing?

LC: Into writing? God, it's a cliché, isn't it?... But write, firstly. Definitely look for *The Artist's Way*. It's an amazing book. It's like a twelve-week program to basically unlock any blockages you've got, and you work through all these wonderful things and figure out what you want to say and what you're all about. It's wonderful. It's quite a spiritual book, but I think even if you're not a spiritual person... if you're someone trying to be creative, it's useful. So, I'd say get *The Artist's Way*, write whatever it is that you want to write, whether it's a book, whether it's scripts, songs... Whatever it is, write it and then 'massive action'. So, probably once you've got the thing that you've written in good enough shape... that's quite a tricky one, that's quite a few parts to that, but let's just say you know what I'm talking about... and you've got it in good shape then massive action. Send it out to everywhere you can think of that's something to do with that industry because that's what I did with that play *Blue* which I put on with Arts Council money. I sent that play out to at least 50 different places from *The Writers Handbook 2005*. I went through it and found all the producers, the theatres that accepted scripts, BBC Writers Room, anybody that I'd met during youth theatre and all that sort of thing... anybody that I could think of, I sent it to. Through doing that, I say this, and I mean it: *That launched my career*, because I got so many meetings and phone calls... It was ridiculous and I got inundated with work after just doing that.

JW: And how do you keep the motivation to continue doing that?

LC: Well, that's the thing... because once you get some momentum going, you don't feel necessarily that you have to do it. Although, I think it's worth doing no

matter what. You have to just keep it going. I don't think there's any easy way because life's going to happen, and you know... it's not always going to be ... a bed of roses.

JW: [Spoken simultaneously] A bed of roses. Jinx.

LC: It's not always going to be a bed of roses, is it? Because you're going to grow up, writing is like a lifelong career. I started when I was a teen basically. Now I'm forty, and I've been through a lot of things. I've been through childbirth, I've been through divorce, I've been through... So many different things in your life, writing is not always going to be able to be at the forefront. So, there's going to be times when you've got to re-wind and come again. There's going to be times when you've got to sort of look and go, 'Right. What now? What next? What's the next phase?' And I've had many different moments of that, like when I decided during that five-year break from acting I was going to focus solely on sitcoms. I was going to see... can I get one made? I'm still in limbo about that, but I gave it my all. For a period of time, I focused solely on sitcom. So, yeah... you'll go through different phases as a writer, but I think just continue writing. And if you ever get stuck, this is why I say *The Artist's Way*... I just recommend it to everyone. Go back to *The Artist's Way* and it will get you unstuck.

JW: Are you on a commission for *The Artist's Way*?

LC: I'm not, but I should be. I should give you my Amazon link!

JW: And you write... you've told me you write every morning.

LC: Yes.

JW: Just something.

LC: Morning pages.

JW: Morning pages. So, what type of stuff do you write in the morning pages?

LC: It's three pages... three sides of A4. *The Artist's Way* is twelve weeks long, so for twelve weeks every single morning, before you've eaten anything... literally as soon as your eyes are open, you're writing.

JW: What did you do? Did you do it this morning?

LC: I did do it this morning.

JW: What did you write this morning?

LC: I tend to... I've got a little flow going where I write about anything I'm concerned about, anything I've got to do, anything that's on my mind.

JW: And I know you've done some teaching as well. You've been doing some teaching workshops with The National Theatre.

LC: Some talks... Workshops.

JW: How do you find that?

LC: Petrifying because I've got a teen and I know what they're like. But I thought, I going to push myself and I'm going to do it. How do you grow unless you face your fears? And then actually, it'll all be lovely. You do worry that they're not all there, that they're not listening... but yeah, they're looking a bit blank at you. They don't get a lot of my references... You know, when I talk about things that have influenced me. They've never watched *Two Pints of Lager and A Packet of Crisps*. They don't know what that is. When I spoke about the Felix Dexter Bursary, they didn't know half of what I was talking about because most of them don't watch telly, you know. Or they wouldn't watch iPlayer or whatever, they watch YouTube, don't they and whatnot? Some people didn't know *Mrs. Brown's Boys*. Out of everything, that's what they knew. So ...

JW: Interesting.

LC: Yeah. So, yeah there's a bit of disconnect there, but I think they really enjoy the exercises. I find they're not very confident in their ability to write. I think

younger ones, you know [aged] six or seven would be more believing that they can write than the teens. You really have to boost them up.

JW: And what are you giving them... writing exercises?

LC: Yes, I get them to write one side... morning pages ...just to free themselves up a bit. Various exercises... The reason why I say nobody seems confident is that nobody wants to share what they've done. I think they're just at that awkward sort of stage where they care about what everybody thinks. So, you really have to kind of entuse them to the best of your ability. So, basically instead of my worries were that they were going to be rude to me or whatever, they're not at all. They're just quite shy and retiring and you have to sort of try and make them feel better... uplift them is what you have to try and do. So, I enjoy that, actually. I enjoy trying to uplift people and it's actually been enjoyable and I'm going to do it again

JW: Good.

LC: I've told myself I'm just going to do it this once, one year; but now I've done it, I'm like, 'I can do it again, I think.'

JW: Good. I mean... You see, you are a very uplifting person.

LC: Thank you.

JW: Bring smiles to people's faces... Inspiring.

LC: Well, I try to be more positive. That's the way I am.

JW: Yeah. And what inspired you as a writer? What would you say were your favourite shows or books? Who inspires you?

LC: Lots of things but mostly people. Again, going back to that... I know it sounds a bit cliché whatever but again, meeting people and their stories.

[noise outside the room]

JW: There's a barney going on in the streets it sounds like.

LC: I know... yeah. Like just hearing people's stories inspires me. That's why I started writing... not just my own stories... nobody's safe. But if somebody's got an extraordinary story I think, 'I want to write something about that.' Real life excites me more. I don't actually watch much television and I don't really watch... People say to me, 'How can you not watch things?' And I only watch things if somebody recommends it. I don't watch anything because it either infuriates me or it frustrates me because I think, 'How is this on? How has this been made?' Or it makes me want to do it. So, I won't even finish it probably because I want to go off and do it. So, I just find it a frustrating thing.

JW: And as a writer who doesn't have a day job so... This is no shade or... No, I'm kind of the same, especially as I get older. For example, with Ricky Gervais making *The Office*, it's like, 'Oh God, you must have had that nightmare job.' But when it's more like me or you, where you did the six months as a dental nurse and that's it, how do you find this inspiration from real life?

LC: Yeah, well it will be from different experiences. And again, going back to your life, it's going to go through all these different phases. So, I can see how *Motherland* was made, you know. In fact, I wrote something about yummy mummies some years ago with some other women and we actually put it on because I've been through the school gate drama... the school yard drama. So, you get it from life. It can just be from simply living across from the Co-op. You know... what that entails. Life is full of inspiration and ideas.

JW: And that's what inspires you for your writing?

LC: Yeah... the world.

JW: I mean... the world comes through in all the pieces of yours that I've read or seen, and I like Leah's world.

LC: Aww.

JW: And I think other people if you don't know Leah Chillery's work should also tune in to Leah Chillery's world. She's a writer and an actress to look out for and I just want to say thank you very much for doing the interview. It has been a pleasure.

LC: Thank you very much.

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

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