

WRITERS MOSAIC

Carol Russell

In conversation with Trish Cooke

TRISH COOKE: Carol Russell is British-Jamaican and trained at the Jamaica School of Drama, now known as the Edna Manley College of Visual and Performing Arts. As a writer, Carol's screenplay, *House of Usher*, was one of six short films made by Crucial Productions for the BBC. Her book, *Invisible to Invaluable: Unleashing the Power of Midlife Women*, co-authored with Jane Evans, was published in May 2021. Carol is also the founder of Fresh Voices UK, a company founded to support and amplify the work of ethnically diverse writers of theatre and television. Carol Russell, hello, and welcome to *WritersMosaic*.

CAROL RUSSELL: Thank you so much for having me.

TC: It's a pleasure. But before we go on to your writing, I want to give the listeners a bit of background about you. So, let's talk a little bit about your childhood and your Jamaican heritage. Were you born in England?

CR: Yes. I was born in the UK, born in London – in Balham, in fact. Went to school here up until about, what we used to call third year (Year 9 now); and then my parents decided that... we were in the middle of the 70s by then... and um... I had been accused of stealing my own pen. And um, my

father said, 'You know what, take the children home, Mavis,' to my mum. That's what he said to my mum. 'Take the children home, because I don't want them to be criminalised by staying here.' So, I went back to Jamaica.

TC: So, how did you find that compared with how you'd been brought up in England?

CR: On one level it felt very, very familiar because my parents were *proper Jamaican parents*. So, they spoke patois in the house even though they wouldn't allow us to. I kind of felt at home quite quickly but I missed all my friends, and that was the big thing for me. And then to go to school in Jamaica... to go to a high school in Jamaica, I had to live in Kingston, because my mum lived in St. Catherine, in Linstead.

TC: Okay.

CR: And that was a long journey. It could take up to two hours to get into Kingston. That's why I was boarded out.

TC: Okay.

CR: So, I was boarded with a family and so the story of, you know, me reading James Baldwin, that's where that comes from.

TC: Okay.

CR: It comes from me being alone in a house staying, you know, staying behind, when everyone else was going home to their family...

TC: Yes.

CR: ...and needing something to read. I was a reader. I would read... I would read the cornflakes packet.

TC: Yes, yeah. You enjoyed it.

CR: Yeah.

TC: And did you know your grandmother... because I remember reading in the book about your grandmother, Doris Francis Richards, a farmer?

CR: That's the one. Yes, I knew her really well.

TC: Good.

CR: Really well.

TC: How much did the... because I could tell she was a strong woman from how you write about her. I know you're a strong woman, so how much did these women in your life... how much did they influence your writing?

CR: Oh, hugely. Hugely. It's very interesting because my mum wanted to play the guitar when she was younger.

TC: Mmhmm.

CR: And so she asked her mum, and her mum said 'No!' And so when she went...when I came along wanting to... she couldn't afford for me to play the piano which is what I wanted to do. But she encouraged me to read; she encouraged me to tell stories; she encouraged me to write. I was the

child who... my brother was quite sickly when he was young, and my mum would often have to shoot off to the hospital while my dad was on night shift and leave me. And she would leave me in front of the television saying, 'Tell me everything that happens.'

TC: Mmhmm.

CR: And she'd get home and I'd tell her all of the stories I heard on the telly.

TC: Okay.

CR: I really became happy and glad that my parents had taken us back to Jamaica.

TC: Yeah.

CR: At first, in the first couple of months, I was just kind of, you know, um... a sulky child going, 'Not fair. I want to be back in England!'

TC: Yes, yeah.

CR: But the more I stayed, then the more I saw myself; I mean, and that was without realising... I didn't realise all of this at the time. I just felt myself getting more and more comfortable and feeling more and more at home. By the time I came back, I knew it had been the best thing that had ever happened to me.

TC: Uh, so when you came back to England, how easy was it for you to settle back here?

CR: It wasn't difficult because I'd come back the year before; and I had met up with friends from school days. I'd found them. I tracked them down. I was like a bloodhound. And so, in the interim, in that year, we wrote to each other. So, by the time I came back, it was easy to settle back into the relationships I'd had.

TC: When I first met you, it was around 1985/86.

CR: Yes.

TC: We were working together on a play that you had written, um... for a theatre company called Options Theatre Company, a community theatre company; and it was about mental health and how black people can be misdiagnosed, due to our cultural differences. You were directing it and Jan Blake, who's now gone on to be a renowned international storyteller, she was performing with me. It seems like such a long time ago, but I just remember you; you were very much a conscious black woman, which you are still.

CR: [Laughs]

TC: You were 'little but very *talawah*', as you would say.

CR: [Laughs]

TC: You were strong, you were focused, you know. You were always determined to get on and to do, and you've managed to keep that energy up; and I'm curious to know what it is that gives you that... I don't know... that bite to carry on, to keep fighting. And I know you've had knockbacks,

as we all have. What is it that you think drives that relentless energy that you have?

CR: I think it is partly sheer stubbornness.

TC: [Laughs]

CR: I really will not be told 'No', and I won't accept 'No'. So, I will keep pushing, unless I then decide this is something I don't want. But, in terms of the arts, it was what I trained in, in Jamaica. It's what I worked in at the beginning of my career. And, for me, we belong here. We belong here!

TC: Yep.

CR: Our stories need to be heard here. And so, the thing I can't do is let that go. I just can't let it go. The other thing I realise and write about a bit in the book, is the fact that mid-life people like us, you can't Google us.

TC: No.

CR: You can't Google our early careers.

TC: Nope.

CR: You can get to a small... maybe we're talking about maybe late 90s, beginning of the 2000s, the noughties... you can find us there...

TC: Yeah.

CR: But the things we did in the 80s are gone.

TC: Yep.

CR: And also, I find that therefore, means stories that not just we tell but *our parents* tell... would tell, those stories would be lost, if we didn't include them, too.

TC: Yeah.

CR: If we don't tell the stories of our parents before all of our parents go, then there'll be something missing from our culture. And by... when I say *our* culture, I mean as British-Caribbean people or British-African people. But, in particular, British-Caribbean people, because I know that it took my mum a long time before she started to talk to me about the things that happened to her when she first came here.

TC: It's almost like they didn't want to taint us. They didn't want us to have a... I suppose... they wanted us to see the place open-minded...

CR: Yes.

TC: ...and fresh, and not be tainted by what they had been through.

CR: Yes.

TC: Um, but by keeping that to themselves, they didn't realise that they were actually not giving us the full story so that we could be equipped and armed and ready, in a sense.

CR: Absolutely. And what I do know is that our generation have then gone on to our children saying, 'Listen...'

TC: We tell them everything. [Laughs]

CR: [Laughs]. I'm not leaving you without equipment and weapons to fight; and to understand where you are, who you are, and that you belong. Yeah, it's about knowing that you have the right to fight for what is... what you should be getting – like everybody else.

TC: Yes. Yeah.

CR: I think that's the thing that I have passed on to... I don't have children, but I have *many* godchildren and children I've helped to bring up.

TC: Yeah. What does it mean to you to be called a black writer? A black writer. Not just a writer, but a black writer.

CR: I used to mind; you know. I used to not want to be called 'a black writer'. I used to want to be called just 'a writer'; I'm just a writer. But now I think of it as an honorific, the word 'black.'

TC: Mmhmm.

CR: I feel like it tells people what my interests are, whose stories I'll be telling; because I used to fight wanting to tell our stories. I started, when I was playwriting, writing *our* stories. And then, when I went into my thirties, I was thinking, 'No, no. I just want to be a writer. I just want to be called a writer.'

TC: Yes. Yeah.

CR: And then, as I met resistance to that idea; to the idea that I could write white characters... Oh, that did infuriate me! So, that kept me banging on a door that really wasn't the right door for me to be banging on. And when I hit about 37, 38, I went, 'You know what? I want to tell stories about black people. That's what I want to tell – without the white gaze. I want to tell stories without the white gaze.' So, I'm not explaining *us* to anybody. You either get it, or you don't get it.

TC: Yep.

CR: If you know, you know. If you don't, you either learn, or you don't.

TC: Yep. How do you cope when people who are not of your world tell you what your story should be and how your characters should behave? How do you manage that?

CR: What I do is I create the characters I want to create. There was one particular series that I was commissioned to write, and write the pilot script for one of our larger broadcasters, shall we say? And they insisted on giving my character (who was male) a white girlfriend/fiancé. And I was getting ready to fight that, but I've got a wonderful mentor and I spoke to my mentor. I was going crazy, I was going, 'You know, they want to make her white. I don't want her to be white. It's not... I just want... Why? Why do I have to make her white? Why does she have to be...? I'm tired of seeing this image on the screen. I want to see two black people in love.' And my mentor said to me, 'That can change. Look at the story you're writing.' And I looked at the story and I realised, 'Of course! This character is going to lose everything, including that white girlfriend.' And I had decided... I had

already decided we were going to be bringing in a black woman that he'd gone to university with, who was a barrister, who was going to help him get out of his problem; and the conflicts that they used to have at university were always – in my mind anyway - they were always like the precursor to... You know when you really like someone? But you don't want them to know, and you argue with them? – it was that. So I went, 'Oh! Yes, my mentor, she's right.' I'll do what they want *now* because, come further down the line when girlfriend is gone, I can create the relationship that I want; and, actually, this is a better way of doing it.

TC: Good advice from your mentor.

CR: Yes.

TC: It's such a wise thing to know what battles to fight and what not to.

CR: When you were introducing me, you talked about my company, Fresh Voices. And that's what I wanted to be able to give back to everybody: my peers, because, if I hadn't had that, I would probably have dug my heels in and kicked and screamed and been branded as a difficult writer to work with. As it was, and as it is, nobody thinks that about me. They think I'm a dream. 'Oh, she's wonderful. Oh, she's so charming.'

TC: [Laughs]

CR: Yes. That's me. Because I've learned from my mentor which battles to fight.

TC: Yep.

CR: I've been lucky to work with a couple of production companies that have black development producers and/or execs. And that has been an absolute dream... because I'm not having to explain anything, number one. And, number two, if they ask me to do something that I'm a bit dubious about, they're able to tell me why they think it would be a good idea to do it now, and how we can use doing this thing now, to allow us the bigger thing later.

TC: Yes.

CR: And then I can go, 'Right, okay, I hear you.'

TC: So, it's important to have people who you're working with, who are in positions of power, or the gatekeepers; it's important to either, for them to be either be black... some of them, or to have some insight or willing to learn, and willing to listen to you, and listen to what you know about a world that they might not know something about, you know?

CR: Absolutely.

TC: And it's that communication thing.

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CR: Yeah, yeah.

TC: Because a lot of the time you're in isolation; you're the only one there that's having to explain things that no one 'gets'...

CR: Yes. Yep.

TC: ... and it's horrible. It's soul destroying.

CR: Yeah, it's really hard. And so I find myself now wanting to work with production companies that have already worked with us. And I found myself the most wonderful agent now who, while he is racialised as white – he is – he 'gets' me. He understands me.

TC: And that's all you ask for.

CR: Yeah. And he wants the stories that I want to tell... told.

TC: Brilliant. So, I've always known you as a scriptwriter, Carol. So, recently...

CR: [Laughs]

TC: ... you've written a book, co-authored a book called *Invisible to Invaluable*, and I'd like you to just give us a quick summary for the listeners about what this book is about.

CR: This book is about unleashing the power of midlife women; because one of the things that my friend and I realised – and have been talking about ad nauseam for the last five years – is that as we have become midlife women, that the world is trying to turn its back on us and we're not having it! And so, we decided, as a black woman and a white woman, that we would come together to write this book, because we believe not only is ageism something that affects us all as women; we believe that it is really important to show the sisterhood that we believe needs to be there. So that's why the book is the way that it is.

TC: Okay. So how did you get the deal to get it published? Was it something that you were commissioned to write, or was it something you wrote and then approached the publishers later with?

CR: We were commissioned to write it because... It was so funny. It was in the middle of COVID.

TC: Okay.

CR: And my friend called up and said, 'Look, you know we've been talking about women and ageism and all of that stuff for a while now.' She said, 'I think we should write a book.' And I was like, 'Yeah, alright then.' And she said, 'Um, I met somebody who's introduced me to an agent, so if we get a proposal together and send it to her, then maybe she'll be able to get us a publisher.'

TC: Okay.

CR: I said, 'Oh, okay, then.' So, we put together a proposal, we gave it to our agent and, blow me down, if less than two months later... less, I mean it was literally six weeks... and we had two deals.

TC: Wow!

CR: I was like, 'Well, that's okay!' And then we wrote it. So, we wrote it from June to the end of August. Yes, I remember delivering it. I think it was the 1st of September or some weird date like that.

TC: That is such a short time to write a book. So, what was your process, between you and Jane Evans?

CR: Yeah, Jane Evans... the fabulous Jane Evans. We split the chapters between us. The structure of the book is all *her* because she decided on *Invisible to Invaluable*.

TC: Okay. Brilliant title.

CR: And she looked for...

TC: Brilliant title.

CR: Yes. And then she went through all the 'in' words in the dictionary...

TC: Okay.

CR: ... and plucked them out and then we would go, 'Okay. What's this chapter saying? What do we want to write a chapter about? Oh, I know, I know, I want to write something about inheritance. Right, okay, *inheritance*.'

TC: Wow!

CR: That's how we did it.

TC: Wow!

CR: So, we batted it back and forth in that way and we jammed the whole thing together; and then we'd read through it and read through it, get on the phone, and talk and talk, and talk some more; and then give it to our agent to have a read so that she could tell us what she thought and then

we delivered it. Our editor came back with... I thought there were going to be more changes.

TC: Okay.

CR: But there weren't. She was just, you know, kind of, 'Can you tighten this a bit please? What do you mean by that here?' And that was the nature of the notes we were getting, so it was brilliant.

TC: Wow! And it's so well written and it just touches on things that are not always spoken about and when I was reading it, I was nodding and agreeing and thinking, 'Yeah, I get that,' you know? And it was just how things like how women of a certain age have intuition and they can recognize things and repeated patterns...

CR: Yes...

TC: ... and how we instinctively know how to... you know, what things to avoid and what to enjoy; and it was just conversations that you have in your own head were suddenly on the page. And you just realise that you were part of a larger community. You're not going mad; it's just this is how it is, and everybody else is feeling that same thing and going through that same thing, and that wisdom that we kind of get at a certain age.

CR: Wow! Yes, at which it just can be with us.

TC: It's just...

CR: We're more than the menopause.

TC: Yes. Yeah.

CR: That was a really big thing for us because I'd also written a chapter for a menopause book that came out last October. We were just saying, 'But, we're more than just our menopause.'

TC: Yeah.

CR: We're in the prime of our lives right now.

TC: Yes, and it's fun. And I think at a younger age you're... Well, I was in the kind of scared and nervous and not sure about things... Now, a lot of the things I don't really care about.

CR: Exactly.

TC: It doesn't matter. Nothing matters as much as it did then.

CR: And we have so many fewer 'F's' left to give.

TC: Yes. Yes.

CR: [Laughs]

TC: You know, and it shows in our face; all the expression. I go past women in the street of my age, and we look at each other and there's a knowing.
[Laughs]

CR: [Laughs] Yes. It's almost like we're nodding and going, 'Yeah, yeah, you, too, yeah.'

TC: Yeah, I get it. [Laughs]

CR: Absolutely! Because those were the conversations Jane and I were having.

TC: Brilliant.

CR: Sometimes, you know, we tussled with the racial things because Jane didn't *know*...

TC: Yeah.

CR: ... and I'd be talking to her; we were such good friends that we could say anything to each other.

TC: Good. Yeah, yeah. That's so important; to be able to say things without feeling that you're offending someone.

CR: Yeah.

TC: They'll take it as it's spoken, and you can fight it out between you. That's friendship.

CR: Yeah, or explain why that one there... I'm not wholly offended but somebody else you say that to might be...

TC: Yes.

CR: ... because of this reason...

TC: Yes.

CR: We had all of those and she is such a willing ally.

TC: Yeah, good.

CR: So willing. Yeah, it made all the difference.

TC: Well, and I wish you all the best with the book, because I really enjoyed it. It's um... Yeah, it's a piece of writing that I haven't seen before – that freshness and a fresh approach to the menopause – which was uplifting.

CR: Yeah.

TC: You know and it's um, yeah, I did... I really enjoyed that.

CR: Oh, I'm glad you enjoyed it.

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

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