

## Edson Burton

in conversation with Colin Grant

**COLIN GRANT:** My guest today is Edson Burton: poet, drama writer, curator, and historian. His BBC radio credits include the supernatural trilogy, *Deacon*, starring the wonderful Don Warrington. His theatre writing spans a range of theatre-based promenade and site-specific work including *The Ithaca Axis*, a show called *Curry Goat and Fish Fingers* – a great combination, *Frederick Douglass: An Abolitionist*, a dramatization; *An Abolitionist Returns*; and the game show-themed, *The Edge*; as well as the ribald *Anansi and the Grand Prize*. That's just some of the work that Edson's been doing. I've known Edson for a few years now and I remember talking to you, Edson, about *The Last Blues Song of a Lost Afronaut*.

**EDSON BURTON:** Yes.

**CG:** Before we get into that, can I just get a sense of how you arrived at that first word in your biography: poet? What's your journey to becoming a poet, and why is that the first word we see in your biography?

**EB:** I guess, in a sense, because for me poetry is at the heart of most of my writing and I have to sometimes slap myself when writing drama. I said, 'Nobody would ever say that Edson. Come on, you can't get away with that one!' [Laughs] But when I was at school, it was my first medium of writing.

I won some awards locally in my hometown of Bedford and that's very much how I saw myself – as a poet. And so, the other opportunities for writing kind of grew afterwards; but I always loved the challenge of poetry. I would say it's the most exhausting of mediums, in a sense, because it's that concentration and constantly questioning of the fit of words and musicality of meaning. And sometimes trying to nail that, knowing when you've nailed it, you know it's um... it takes a while.

**CG:** Yeah, I wonder though how you arrived at that idea that you could become a poet. When I was growing up, not very far from you in a place called Luton, I knew no poets, apart from my uncle, who wrote poetry. But when I read poetry at school, it seemed to be an 'alien' occupation that only alien people did. And when I say 'alien', I mean foreign to me. It didn't seem to be speaking to me as something that I would possibly consider doing myself. So, I wondered whether there were people who inspired you towards poetry and whether there were particular poets that lit your flame, as it were.

**EB:** Yeah. Thank you. I lived in a very sort of schismatic poetry world; a world of language. And I didn't in some way see the programmes like *Reggae Sunsplash* that would come on TV... they'd show snippets of it in some of the Black magazine programmes that were on in the 80s; and you might see a little bit of Mutabaruka... Um... '*Jus' me one jus' a travel the lan' with my little dutty pan.*' [Laughs]

**CG:** [Laughs]

**EB:** That sticks in my mind for some reason. And then Linton Kwesi Johnson's 'Sonny's Lettah'. I think that really captured my attention because I couldn't work out what it was. I was used to reggae; Mutabaruka

was Jamaican, and it belonged to that compartment of my upbringing and my life growing up. And then there was this dub poem song and I thought, 'Oh, is it poetry? What is it?' And meanwhile at school, I very much enjoyed I think, in particular, the war poets. I was always quite attracted to sort of visceral stuff and Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon come to mind, and then Keats later on. I was always writing and I was encouraged by a teacher at middle school, Mr Lind. He always took an interest and encouraged me. And I think what I guess teachers like Mr Lind saw was a degree of diligence. Gosh, it's extraordinary, really, thinking about the current interest in Black lives, growing up in the 70s and 80s, to try and imagine writing in that context, or even just configuring oneself in that context... You know, I would say that the classroom was often like a battleground with us disgruntled kids, victims of low expectations sometimes, but also at war, and the teachers were... Sometimes, they were not so much the enemy, but they were the victims of our anger – the anger we didn't understand about stuff that was happening at home, our nascent sense of where we stood. So, we weren't an easy lot to manage and teach, I think, even regardless of where some of the expectations of our teachers stood and sat. So, in some ways, amidst all the drama of the school setup that I was in, I guess, I can put my hand up and say that – as a young person who was always in love with language – I put my hand up a lot... I think I was spotted for that reason and encouraged. But it was a very sort of youthful enthusiasm, you know? I felt that poetry had a power, but I didn't think of poetry as an occupation, or as a stream of life in some ways other than a personal endeavour, and so on, until actually I came to Bristol. And then, when I arrived in Bristol, the need for a community became quite urgent.

So, I landed in Bristol from London and Bristol is quite zoned in terms of where people of colour, Black people live, Black and Asian communities live. So, I discovered the Kuumba Centre, which was a recently renamed

arts centre in the St. Paul's area in Bristol. And Kuumba had been going for some years. It was associated with the Rasta community. It was a connecting space for Black creators and for the community to encounter artists that they might not get to see otherwise. So, I arrived at Kuumba and bumped into Bertel Martin, and they were restarting Bristol Black Writers Group. And it was really through joining Bristol Black Writers that I began to write again. Bristol Black Writers really sort of resituated and repositioned poetry for me. And also, being aware then through Bristol Black Writers of the wider poetry scene. Bertel started publishing, so I was one of the writers he published.

**CG:** Oh, so Bristol Black Writers then was a kind of portal for you into the wider world of publishing and poetry.

**EB:** It was. It was through Bristol Black Writers that I also wrote my first bits of drama. It was a workshop with Winsome Pinnock.

**CG:** Oh great. The great dramatist, the great playwright. Yeah, right.

**EB:** Yeah, so again, I want to say the importance of these connecting spaces is because it's one of my bugbears that models now of arts funding seem to suggest, you know, that we can find our way without them. But um... I actually felt that we were as young Black writers (Black in the wider, inclusive sense)...

**CG:** Can we just... can we just explore that what you've just said? Can we just explore 'Black in the wider and inclusive sense', because there's been a push in this culture coming from America in the last year or so to capitalise the word Black? So, no longer to answer and write lower case black but capital Black. I wonder whether you would applaud that, and whether you

understand the new use of the word Black, as opposed to one that you've just described.

**EB:** Hmm. Can I... So, I've not been that conversant with the American discussion. Perhaps what I've encountered here is the subtext to that, or maybe even the more explicit push; and that is, I guess... In fact, this has been gestating for a while because even when I was curating Bristol's Black History Month's events when I was working at Kuumba, there was a kind of confusion around what 'Black' was in the room.

**CG:** Yeah.

**EB:** So, local authorities, when they began to take more interest in Black History Month, were using this wider political context and then, occasionally, programming with that in mind. Whereas the community that had galvanised Black History Month were very much talking about people of African descent. And eventually there were some conversations around should we just call it African History Month, and I felt, 'Well, actually that's a journey for many of the Caribbean people that we serve and we know'. And while some activists are placing and positioning their Africanness, I kind of felt, well, you know... you kind of need to move in tandem and in step with the people, to put it bluntly. And I sort of feel that this is now... this tension has resurfaced among younger people. Some people want to reinvigorate 'Black', but there's been a... use of 'people of colour' as a way of understanding the shared experiences and distinctness of people who are former, I guess, 'colonial subjects', as the overriding principle. My concern is that 'people of colour', for me, recognises something which... the underlying push to see the alliances; and I've always felt that there's been a real loss since the 80s inclusivity of Blackness around being able to recognise sharedness. But also, the solidarity and the profound solidarity

between artists and activists that existed and, you know, the Race Today Collective and Southall Black Sisters, and so on. And I think you know; I was just bemoaning this siloisation that seemed to have developed when we pulled away from that perhaps more in the 90s and the early part of this century. So, to see it in some ways being recognised, not resolved, I think at least begins to re-open a discussion. But I still wonder whether we've made sense of that. And the complexity of it today...

**CG:** Yeah, it's curious, isn't it? Because as you were speaking then, I was thinking of what some people might think of a contradiction between an exclusive Black writers' club, as it were, and one that is more inclusive of other people. And it seems to me that you were saying that that was possible... That there was an openness, and that it wasn't necessarily exclusive; whereas there's been recently the creation of a Black Writers' Guild which I sort of sat in on in a Zoom call. And it was clear to me that the people who had created that were seeing themselves as a silo and embracing the idea that they wanted to be separate from anyone who might be described as Asian because, they argued, that the people of Asian ancestry, South Asian ancestry, were looked after quite well, thank you very much! But the Black people, and we all know who were Black apparently, were still being left behind.

**EB:** My sense of that is – but then what happens to those commonalities?

**CG:** Yes.

**EB:** What happens to those shared experiences? We have no space to talk about the obvious. And also, I grew up with a mythology of 'Asian conservatism' and you know, 'Black wildness', you know. But which... This was perpetuated by the media, whereas my experience was of working-

class Asian and Black communities side by side, and kids growing up with quite shared experiences of racism, but also culturally quite a bit of osmosis going on. I almost feel that not to have a space of owning, recognising, celebrating that makes me feel it's inauthentic. I mean, one has to strive really hard to cut away and amputate these shared experiences. Perhaps in other parts of the country, people haven't lived in that way; but for me to not recognise that my Blackness is informed by and has been in ... more than solidarity... solidarity sounds like something political, but just at a deep soul level has been also with people of Asian heritage and others. And yet, at the same time, we have distinct stories. And we can respect the distinctness of story while also, in a sense, celebrating the overlaps. But again, the problem is that if we then assume that, 'Well, this is African experience and this is Asian experience', it essentialises both people. And I feel for... what I get from some of my Asian creative friends, is that they, too, are... find themselves in a silo around what Asian art is and sort of the 'Bollywoodisation' that has nothing to do with them. They have much more affinity with the kind of the questions of identity and authenticity which has been posited by writers of Caribbean heritage. That's why we vibe...

**CG:** Well, that's wonderful because you've just made a case for *WritersMosaic*; which is exactly what we're trying to do with our platform is to provide a little bit of space for all sorts of people to come in under 'the big tent' and recognise that there are these commonalities. As an outsider, you think though that somewhere like Bristol that that's successfully been achieved. I mean, when you think of the power and the dynamism of the people who objected to the statue of Colston and the determination to change that – either to remove that, or at least continue the debate for why the Colston statue should be removed – it led people like me to think things are really happening and there's a debate that's really rich and vibrant going on in Bristol and that should be maybe a place that we should look to as a

model for the future. Do you not share that enthusiasm that I've just described?

**EB:** My concern with Bristol, the optics from outside might suggest a greater coherence and an ideological coherence than exists on the ground. I think for young people, there is a generation that immersed in the language of allyship and camaraderie that came together and really sort of led that agenda. You know, I'm really not into the fetishization of all things under-25, but it was, I think, a moment of youth-led activism that helped to create that 'moment', and also respect of Black young people being in space and occupying space by their White peers and friends, that inspired that. Conceptually with Black Lives Matter and this 'moment' with the toppling of the statue... I guess I'm someone who quite likes clarity because I think clarity just saves a lot of energy and helps us to be more precise in what we're trying to achieve when we've got limited time. And the question then –which I've thrown to some people who've been working around curriculum reform – is when we say we want to create a Black curriculum, we want to decolonise the curriculum, and then I say, 'Do you mean for all former colonised people, inclusive of Black? Do you mean people of African heritage, you know, and so on?' Because there are other communities of colour that are equally invisible in the curriculum, or other kinds of educational fields. And I've not yet had a coherent answer.

**CG:**Edson, in the past we've had very interesting and amusing conversations about where we're at culturally now and what White people can do to help with this 'moment' that we find ourselves in... this interesting cultural moment. A lot of White people I know feel a little bit scared and feel as if their time has come and gone, and it's 'Black people's time' now. But also, a lot of concern and liberal White people want to know what they can do to make sure that this 'moment' doesn't dissipate and



that we go from peak to trough, in terms of interest, as has happened in the past. So, what can White people do next and what *should* they do? They shouldn't, presumably, intervene and start putting up statues where previously statues have been toppled.

**EB:** They need to think about power, and think about power in its kind of more essential sense. What position do you occupy and how, in a sense, if you're really committed to change, how do you disperse power? How do you create opportunities? It struck me during this pandemic, actually, that... and it was quite a depressing thought, that I realised that even among my privileged White friends, close friends, leftie, liberal friends, that um... they never really thought about the asymmetric positions that their Black friends – equally talented and creative – occupy as themselves. Didn't seem to be really curious about that. That sort of 'race relations' was somewhere else, in another part of Bristol, or was to do with Colston, and so on.

**CG:** Yeah, I think you're right. Um, but also, we've talked about, or you've talked a lot about in the past, the dangers of Afro-pessimism – about a kind of culture of complaint, about a culture of focusing on deficit rather than credit. And I wondered whether your show, your interesting, enterprising project, *The Last Blues Song of a Lost Afronaut*, was a way of changing the conversation, a way of saying that Afro-futurism is a positive thing to work towards.

**EB:** In terms of Afro-pessimism, there is a danger that we see all social phenomena through the lens of 'race', and there's times when 'race' is appropriate and there's times when it's not. There are elements of class or there's elements of just bloody-mindedness on the part of government that has an impact on everyone. But we're so busy looking at, in our own silo, we don't know that White people in Hartcliffe are also under the cosh under

this regime, on being sold a kind of a notion of former British imperialism to keep them quiet. So, it's that pessimism which also doesn't kind of honestly look at how we *have* moved; and I think sometimes it takes being a few years older, if not also being someone who has an interest in history, to put your hand up and say, 'Well, look. You know, in the 1960s and 50s, all kinds of social measures of British attitudes...[showed that] ninety percent of British people would say that they would be mortified if their daughter or son married a Black person.'

**CG:** Yeah. Yeah.

**EB:** And, you know, I don't think we're there now. It's so many ways in which we've shifted. Even the presence of Black people in public life, you know, on the news or whatever else... I know this can sometimes seem like window-dressing but there are shifts happening. The point for me with Afro-futurism is to question the direction of travel and whether or not there is something... I met someone the other day who wonderfully said that Afro-futurism can replace Afro-centrism. And um, I've not seen it like that. But in a sense, it's for me, around how do you think about the offer of Black 'genius'? You know I use 'genius' in quotation, but it strikes me that colonialism blunted the opportunity for people to be able to see what the global offer of a particular space and people... uh... um, the alchemy that happens in a space and time; not in a mystical way but, for some reason, there are energies that are different here and there.

I think with Afro-futurism, it suggests, for me, that what if we could move away from this Punch and Judy around 'race' with 'whiteness', to think about that offer, to think about the different ways of seeing self and society that could have been a contribution to the global... It is. I mean, that's the interesting thing; it is a contribution to the global world. When we think

about, you know, the cultural forms of jazz and music and protest, but often they're not respected, partly because of this Cartesian divide between intellect and body. And, I think, in terms of Black expressive culture, it's the unification of those things – the sense of moving away from the body as a site of carnality or brutishness rather than a place also of spirituality in which we can express... That's what I think Afro-futurism can offer and that actually we can assume that mantle of potentially being pioneers of a contribution, excavators of a contribution, rather than assuming we're in a deficit model that we're trying to catch up. We're almost trying to push forward a truth that is there but is not being recognised. In a sense, it fires the world; it's the oxygen and the oil of the spirit of the world and culture, but it's not accepted in that regard.

**CG:** Finally, I'd like to turn towards this notion of intergenerational, conversational dialogue. And I think you achieved that really well in your *Deacon* trilogy, this supernatural trilogy, where *Deacon* is a supernatural force... and I'm not clear, and maybe you could help illuminate the point here, about how old he is? He seems to have been around for centuries. He seems to be a bit of a time traveller. But what he seems to be doing also, and what you seem to be doing with that character, is connecting generations and revealing to the younger generation that there is wisdom to be found in and amongst the older generation who are sometimes overlooked and marginalised.

**EB:** So, Deacon is cursed. So, he's been cursed by his gods. So, he's immortal, tragically so, until such time as they decide what to do with him. In a sense, what I would love to do is to be able to write some of the earlier chapters of Deacon's life. And so, he was someone born in West Africa who was enslaved and then finds himself in the diaspora. I guess, for me, I'm also really keen to just write the world that I know. And that

conversation between generations is part of my fabric. I have friends who are in their twenties, so that conversation with young people and their outlooks is real and authentic to me. And also, I guess, the myth for young people is that you get wiser as you get older and you don't make the same mistakes; except you might make fewer, but often return to the same ones. [Laughs]

**CG:** Because Deacon in the first iteration, he appears to be a broken man, almost like a homeless, itinerant man who is an object of ridicule; but in fact he has depths to him which are revealed in the way that he takes a great interest in the welfare of these younger people whom he comes across. I mean, in a way, as you say in my mind, in the first iteration, he's almost like one of those early pioneers of the so-called Windrush generation who has been in the margins and not really recognised as an important person who can act as an anchor, almost, for younger people as they're going through life.

**EB:** I think with Deacon, what I wanted to also show is it's almost like the alternative of a Christ figure that, rather than taking on the pain of the world and nailing himself to the Cross, he's been exhausted and fatigued by it. He has a sense of responsibility. He has a social commitment, but it's broken him. Immortality is a curse. To see successive generations of young ones and also how he became cursed was when he had assumed this mantle and owned this mantle of leadership. So, it's the pain of...

**CG:** Oh, because we learn, don't we...? We learn in the second episode that he was a pastor, or a priest of a church and that church burned down with his daughter inside. Is that correct?

**EB:** Yeah. Yes. So, this is again going back to trying to make use of my historical knowledge and stuff but... I imagine Deacon as being in Jamaica at a time when it was not possible for slaves to become Christians, or rather, slave masters frowned upon it. And I know that there were murders of Christians, of Black Christians, you know, preachers, and so on. So, it imagines the time in which he is the leader of a slave community, having discarded the gods with which he had come from. So, I refer to – *legbas* would be the voodoo [term] – having discarded them and sort of seen power in Christianity, he'd begun this church community which then was burnt down as a punishment by these slaveowners, and his gods, recognising that he was a person of enormous spiritual power, rather than just allow him to live in the other world, kept him linked to, as a liminal person, neither in one or the other.

**CG:** Oh, so were you thinking of the Baptist War then in Jamaica? These Baptists were great abolitionists, weren't they? And they were also put upon by the slaveowners, then sometimes brutalised and sometimes killed.

**EB:** Yes, so very much so. So, it's the Methodists, the Baptists... imagining that kind of critical eighteenth-, late-eighteenth-century period and then, as we know, going into much later with Sam Sharpe, and so on. Um, that's the kind of historical area of the... the birth of Deacon. And so, in a sense, he has this reservoir of wisdom and, I guess, in a way it's funny, Colin, you've kind of illuminated inspirations for me and I'm seeing faces that I remember from my childhood. Those kinds of gentlemen, almost gentlemen of the room, rough, rogueish types that my father knew... my father kind of had a wide circle of friends; but they had life stories and they had life lessons and sometimes they would share them with you. And I see Deacon as someone in that sense, but his deeper morality, his sense of responsibility, pulls him constantly back into human relationship.

**CG:** When I walked around Bristol with you, and I hope you don't mind me saying this, Edson, I imagine now that you *are* Deacon. I imagine that Deacon has a similar sensibility to yours and that you are plugged into several communities in Bristol, and are a caring, creative figure. So, I suppose the question I really wanted to finish with is where Deacon came from. I mean, he's obviously a really formed character as we see in these three dramas in this trilogy, but I wonder where... how he arrived. He obviously didn't arrive unbidden. He must have been conjured by you. [Laughs]

**EB:** [Laughs] He came in, to be honest, through a side door. I was given an opportunity to come up with some ideas for a series for radio. This was, gosh... 2016 or 2015, something like that. I was completely looking at something else and then this gentleman knocked on the door. This immortal slave, burnt alive, long story unravelling, just knocked on the door and said, 'I'm here'. And um... I said, 'I don't know about this', and then I wrote it. And then the more I wrote it, the kind of... I often feel as a friend, an older friend to different people, sometimes someone who has had the opportunity to come from a working-class space and find myself in academic spaces, spaces of different discourse, that often I can share conversations, share information that might change a way of perceiving or looking for some of my peers, who haven't had that. People who have been in those more privileged spaces sometimes... There's a real issue around connection, I think, in society, whether you're on the left or the right, whether you're Black working-class, Black middle-class... Connection: being able to actually understand the outlook and the life, the bread and butter of people's lives and experience. In some ways, just by being in neither one or the other, but flitting between several, you get to see more

and see the tragedy of that disconnection and missed understandings. And I guess, in a way, that's what informed me with Deacon, that if there is a sense of *me* in Deacon, it is that moment at which he doesn't necessarily, is not the agent, but for the people he encounters, he's that 'voice', which just causes them to pause. And it's in that pause that they begin to perceive things differently and...

**CG:** He seems to be quite an indomitable character, though, and he's not going to shy away from wrestling for someone's soul, is he? He's not going to... desist. He'll persist until the right outcome is achieved.

**EB:** Yes. It's almost as if Deacon... and this is where he does have agency. There is the sense that he does understand evil; he does understand innocence; he does make judgment. And so, there is the point for Deacon where he often encounters souls that are lost. And there are souls which – particularly in *Deacon 2*, that he cares less for. And so, in a sense, he'll fight and desist for that soul that he identifies to be given a chance, a second chance.

**CG:** Well, our time is sadly done, but I must say I was enthralled by your series, and it made me think back to my childhood and the old stories I was told by elders that, 'Be kind towards people because the stranger in your midst might just be Christ returned. And, who knows who that person will be? So, treat everybody well and you won't run the risk of disowning Christ, disowning God, when he comes back to Earth.'

**EB:** Thank you, yes. I just want... [Laughs] I just want to write a new episode now. [Laughs]

**CG:** Well, I hope... I hope you do write many more episodes. I mean I was so taken by your characterisation of Deacon and the other characters around him that I thought, 'This is... something's really special here, I haven't seen or heard on television or in radio before, and the complexity of the character and the richness and the fact that he's not, in all aspects, a kind-hearted person. There are deep wells of resentment and, as you say, he has... there's capriciousness there. I found it ... I just wanted more and more and more. So, hopefully, you are writing more. *Are you writing more?*

**EB:** I am petitioning Radio 4. Yeah, I'm petitioning and I'm really hopeful that if not this year, then next year that we'll see Deacon again.

**CG:** Yeah, and had you thought of providing another platform for Deacon in... on the stage or television, or is it... are you solely thinking of him as a character that has found the best format for him on radio?

**EB:** It has been suggested to me around television. So, it's just literally I'm at the point now I'm thinking, 'Where do I... Who do I make the overture to?' Because I'd love to see it... I just want Deacon to live on. I think his character is just at the beginning of his journey; just at the start really of what we can do. And also what we can say about Black life and, you know I mean that in its inclusive sense because, you know, I think listening to *Deacon* trilogy there are Asian characters there, there's white working-class, there's, you know, professionals. It's the world I... you know the slice of Britain that I navigate, and I think others do. There's just... we're really at the start ... sending Deacon back in time, or at least doing like a prequel of the episodes. There's so much and we're at the start and I would certainly love... some sense or lead as to where to go with television, if radio is, you know... And, you know, Radio 4 have been encouraging to say, 'You've done it. You know, why not explore other platforms, too?'



**CG:** Well, Edson Burton, thank you very much for appearing on *WritersMosaic* and for all the work that you've been doing and for giving us a quick whistlestop tour through the evolution of Black writing, Caribbean writing, African writing, African-Caribbean writing in this country since your birth. So, thank you very much.

**EB:** Thank you.

**CG:** Before we go, I'd like to just thank you for your wisdom, your words, for your work and for giving us a snapshot of what can be achieved in a creative life; so, from me and *WritersMosaic*, thank you very much and we look forward to hearing what Deacon and what *you* might do next.

**EB:** Thank you.

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

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