

# WRITERS MOSAIC

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## Nicôle Lecky

in conversation with Jonny Wright

**JONNY WRIGHT:** Hi, it's Jonny Wright here with *WritersMosaic*. I'm here with the wonderful Nicôle Lecky who's an amazing playwright, writer for radio, writer for telly and screen. Her first play, *Superhoe*, which is fantastic, got nominated for the Stage Debut Award and also for the Alfred Fagon award as well. And it is a brilliant play, I must say. I read it numerous times.

**NICÔLE LECKY:** Thank you. That's a good introduction, isn't it? [Laughs]

**JW:** It is and thank you for inviting me to your new home.

**NL:** Yes, you are very welcome.

**JW:** We're high up in North London.

**NL:** We are. We're looking at the miserable, miserable, rainy day but that's okay.

**JW:** Um... near the miserable Arsenal Football Club.

**NL:** I'm a West Ham supporter because I'm still a proud East Londoner.

**JW:** I mean I'm a big Arsenal fan but I'm missing Arsène Wenger.

**NL:** I'll be honest, I got into this chat about football and now I don't know how to get out of it. I'm going, 'Please don't talk more about football, because that's literally [laughs] as much as I know of...' Somebody told me they got relegated the other day and they were joking; and I had no idea because yeah... I don't know anything about football.

**JW:** But I like that you've still nailed your colours to the West Ham crest. Can you nail colours to a crest?

**NL:** Um... yeah, sure. [Laughs]

**JW:** And that is because you're from East London? Very proud of being from East London?

**NL:** This is it. So I had to pick one. It was that or Leyton, Leyton Orient. So I took that, yeah.

**JW:** *Superhoe* has got a lot of good heat.

**NL:** Yeah, it has. Yeah, yeah.

**JW:** And I also saw your episode of *Ackley Bridge*, which you co-wrote, which is great.

**NL:** Yep.

**JW:** And very Northern. And I'm from there, *Ackley Bridge*.

**NL:** Are you?

**JW:** I am.

**NL:** I like to see myself as a half-Northerner as well.

**JW:** Because your mum is from...

**NL:** Haydock, St. Helens. That's where she was from. So, I've got a lot of love for the North. I've spent quite a bit of time there.

**JW:** Does it influence your writing, or is it just you feel comfortable writing in that dialect because you know it?

**NL:** Well, I can do the accent, which was helpful for *Superhoe* because I guess the other...

**JW:** The friend?

**NL:** ...The friend, Carly, is from Merseyside. So, it probably does help quite a lot actually. I was about to say she's my favourite character, and then I was like, 'Oh, no that feels bad!'

**JW:** I think she is *my* favourite character.

**NL:** Oh, okay right. You can say it.

**JW:** I mean she's funny. She's a com... She's... I mean the play's funny anyway but she's a lot of comic relief. There's a real endearing story there as well.

**NL:** I mean, yeah, she's got a quite troubled past but clearly but, yeah, she's loveable in the same way. So, you kind of go with all the rude and outlandish things she says, I think, and the way she behaves.

**JW:** Yes, she's loveable.

**NL:** Sometimes it's freeing to see characters do bad things, isn't it? Because you're like, 'No, I'd never do that,' and so it's fun to write them.

**JW:** He's an insensitive, honest Northerner.

**NL:** Yeah. [Laughs]

**JW:** There's not enough of us.

**NL:** No, there isn't.

**JW:** Not only have I read *Superhoe*, but I've also listened to your radio play with a French name.

**NL:** Yes, and that was on Radio 3.

**JW:** And it was inspired by Gershwin's *Cuban Overture*.

**NL:** It was, yeah. It was an interesting one because we had to write to a brief that was basically like... pick one of these songs and however you feel inspired, listen to it, and then write this like fifteen-minute monologue, basically. And I don't think I'd heard that song. It's not sort of the style of music I listen to.

**JW:** It's not the same music that's in *Superhoe*?

**NL:** No, no it's quite different; just sort of like Rap and R&B and stuff. I mean I do listen to some classical music but it's really quite specific this type; like, I usually listen to... sometimes when I'm writing and it sort of like chills me out and I can have it on in the background and sometimes I do listen to Rap when I'm writing because I'm like so in 'the flow' and I'm just going at it and I'm typing, typing and I'm like, 'I'm a boss.' And then, other times, I need to be a bit more reflective, so I'll throw on some kind of, you know, classical, but that *Cuban Overture* is really dynamic and it's not something you can put on in the background. It's really like quite full on and I just loved it.

**JW:** [The play was called] *Le Festival de Men*, and was that for the series, or was that yours specifically, because ... was there three of them altogether?

**NL:** I think there were six, actually.

**JW:** Six.

**NL:** No, five. I think there were five, because they played one every... yeah, they played on every day of the week.

**JW:** With *Le Festival de Men* but also with *Superhoe*; one theme I see is characters looking for love.

**NL:** Mhhmmm.

**JW:** Have you noticed that in your work? How there's a kind of intersectionality with that and technology, looking online?

**NL:** Yeah, I mean, look... I'm probably a romantic at heart actually and I think, ultimately, I'm probably an optimist. Hmm... no, people would say I'm lying. I'm probably a realist. And I think love is like an all-encompassing kind of theme whether it's like self-love or the love of somebody else or sort of self-acceptance and things like that: those warming kind of things that you seek out and then I feel like with social media I have my own love-hate maybe relationship with it. And I think, it's definitely complicated it. So yeah, I think that's something I kind of naturally will think about exploring because it's something I encounter day-to-day, I feel.

**JW:** And I loved how in *Superhoe* you used social media and with the main character, Sasha, and she's from... from people viewing on social media, she looks to have an amazing life. She's going to Dubai, she's doing all this stuff, but then the reality of it behind that 'best life' which you present to everyone, is much darker; and I just found that fascinating. And all your characters really spoke truthfully. I kind of... I felt like I knew those characters, or they were friends of friends and going... I have a compound question. So, the first part is... do you feel that now, because I felt like then you were an actress, and – ooh – you did a bit of writing on the side; do you think that has flipped now?

**NL:** Do you know what? Because, I guess, what that was about was my confidence at saying I was a writer; because I guess it might have seemed that I was like an actress and writing on the side, but I was still a writer. It's just I wasn't calling myself a writer because I was going, 'Ooh... Excuse me please, can I be a writer?' [Laughs] Like... and being so 'tail between my legs' but like I was writing scripts and just wasn't sort of giving them to

every... like now, I'm quite free with it and I'm just proudly like 'I'm a writer,' and sort of wear that as a badge of honour.

**JW:** For the listeners, there was a fist there.

**NL:** [Laughs] There was.

**JW:** There was a Black Power fist of a writer.

**NL:** So, no, I guess just what's changed is that I kind of talk about both of them a lot more and equally. I audition still as an actress, and I write, and they both pay my rent.

**JW:** You said it was a confidence issue, so how has the confidence increased? What's that journey been?

**NL:** Ooh... I think the more I shared my work, the more it didn't feel as painful every time; like, 'Oh, I've got to send this to somebody.' I think I'm just a bit of a believer in... You don't have to go the whole hog and write a film first, or like, you know... I do genuinely think you can start off writing a twenty-minute play and building up to writing an hour, to writing an hour and a half. And then, so I think the more you practice and just get better, your confidence also develops. I guess I enjoy my work more now and actually I probably have confidence that I can fix issues with it; whereas maybe when I started out writing, I'd be a bit like, 'This just looks like a mess on a page,' but I could see a good... there was goodness in it, if you know what I mean. Whereas maybe it's less messy now. And if it is, I actually quite enjoy being like, 'Oh, that doesn't quite work, so how can I go back and like change that?' kind of thing.

**JW:** And what was the genesis of you as a writer? Did you know you wanted to be a writer from like two years old?

**NL:** Yeah... Do you know what? I found this old box of um... books I'd written, and I probably was about five or six, right. And I'm saying 'books,' which is really strong. You know, they were books; but they were stories I'd written, so I guess I was always writing. And I was always very good at English and Drama, but I just think people naturally told me to be... 'Oh, you should be an actor... You should be an actor.' Not once, you know, genuinely did anybody go, 'Oh, why don't you think about writing...' and I know a lot of people say that, but people sort of say, 'They were never told that', and I just think that is the truth – that until somebody tells you, you can be something, you're not really aware of it as a job prospect. So, that's why I say like I was always writing on the side, and I just loved it. I didn't know I could make money off it and do it as a living; whereas acting, I got an agent, whereas writing literally wasn't even a concept in my brain. It just wasn't.

**JW:** And how have you found being freelance, both for acting and writing?

**NL:** I think you've got to be a bit of a hustler; don't get me wrong... being quite tenacious and having that wily energy. If you don't have... you know, I'm not from any particular sort of family money or... I don't really have that safety net, so I think I work a lot. I do, to be honest, to meet deadlines. And I also do love it. I do feel very fortunate, so...

**JW:** Do you find acting in someone else's stuff different from acting in your own stuff now?



**NL:** Yeah, yeah. Very different. Potentially trickier, actually. I'm a bit choosier in the roles because actually why go and do an acting job that's 'alright' when you can sit at your desk and write something you actually enjoy? So, it's given me a freedom to just do work that I love in having both of those kind of income streams, I guess, because I'm quite happy to write for a year and not do any acting.

**JW:** I know you've been in some writers' rooms recently. How have you found being in a writers' room?

**NL:** Yeah, I love it. I really, really do. I think writing can be so solitary. You are really in your head a lot, so you need to find ways to like to get out of the house and do, do different things; I'm finding anyway. So, I think having those opportunities to go into a room with different writers... I'm all for it. I'm a Chatty Patty: Like, I want to go into a room and chat shit and just, you know, have everybody pile in with what they think and throw it all up.

**JW:** Something you'd want to set up in the future for your own stuff?

**NL:** Yeah, it is. Yeah, it definitely is. I have a project that I'm in development for and that I will have a writers' room for it. You know, I think there's a world where you go, 'Oh, I'll write all of those eight episodes,' but then there's so many projects you want to do that I'm like, 'Well actually, to write all eight of those is quite a long task.'

**JW:** Yeah.

**NL:** Whereas if you gave a few to somebody else then, one – it's other people to share the workload, but also just ideas to bounce back and forth. So, I don't think every project is right to have writers on, like if it's very

condensed. If it just feels too, too authored, or even feel too personal maybe you wouldn't have a writers' room, but I think it's important because also the way that we will structure our writers' rooms, in who we probably would interview for our own writers' rooms and have... naturally, they're going to be a lot more diverse and probably a lot more exciting, to be honest.

**JW:** And how have you found that diversity in the industry? How have you found it's affected you? Do you think things are changing?

**NL:** I don't know if I can say things are changing because I don't feel like I've been at maybe the level I'm at for a long enough period of time. Do you know what I mean? To sort of look back and go, 'Oh well. A few years ago, it was this...' because I kind of wasn't in the rooms I'm in now. It isn't very diverse; I don't personally think. I think people are more receptive to diversity but now in every writers' rooms, I think people are like, 'Oh, we better have somebody Black or somebody Asian.' Like they kind of know that, so they do that. But still often [the] lead writer is a white man and it's still his 'voice' that's being filtered out; it's just now you've got somebody Black in the room who's doing his work. Like, there's not enough Black and Asian people still getting to lead their rooms. It definitely is changing. Yeah, more work still.

**JW:** Someone told me recently, a friend, who's a writer... they got asked to come into a script. The two lead writers were white, and they got interviewed to make the script more authentic.

**NL:** Yeah, I think that happens quite a lot. [Laughs] I think that happens a lot. Sometimes you see the face of the writer is like a Black person, but then you realise that behind the scenes...

**JW:** Yep.

**NL:** ...these are actually the people who've done it, and these are the people who've written it. And you could see it in a positive way: Again, they're supporting people who maybe wouldn't have got that far in their career, or they're using diversity to advance their career because actually they are maybe not getting the same opportunities.

**JW:** What I found fascinating about your stuff like *Le Festival de Men* for example, where one of the characters is described as looking like John Boyega, or in *Superhoe*, where 'race' was underneath the surface, but it wasn't... it wasn't your typical... So, the lead in *Superhoe*, Sasha, who's mixed-race and she ends up being in an all-White family; it wasn't your typical mixed-race story of, 'Oh, this person is not feeling Black, not feeling White.' I find it interesting, the way you deal with race in the opposite of a heavy-handed way. It's a very light touch, but it's there in a lot of your work; especially in your individual authored pieces. Is that a fair comment that I'm making?

**NL:** Yeah, I think that is a fair comment. I mean, I think not just with race; I think with lots of issues. Allowing people to kind of make their... like you've come up with that. Do you know what I mean? Whereas, if I could have bulldozed it into you; the old race, race, race, race... It's probably how I feel as somebody being Black Caribbean and White-British, English in London.

**JW:** It's easy to say British rather than English.

**NL:** Yeah, it's like British and I'm like, 'Well...' But growing up in London, I don't think I really thought about being the colour I am or the race I am.

Like, I had Black friends, White friends, Asian friends; like we were all just out and about. So, I never really had to go like, 'Oh, where do I belong?' Because everybody was just... everyone was just around.

**JW:** Yeah.

**NL:** And how I feel, a mixed-race, dual-heritage – whatever, that's often the narrative you hear, where it's kind of like either you don't feel like you 'belong', and I think that's a fair point but it's not my story ... of being dual heritage; and I feel quite comfortable in both worlds. I feel like 'race' is often put upon me. So, I'm not sat around thinking about 'race'; it's when people kind of highlight race to you. So, like, Sasha is in this family; everybody is White apart from her. And it's only I think when she leaves, or when she's out and about, maybe having lunch with them, that suddenly she's aware, 'Oh, how this might look...' And it's other people that probably make her feel uncomfortable, as opposed to she feels uncomfortable *because* she's mixed-race.

**JW:** And with the dating as well, with the friend who is like, 'We can be ebony and ivory'...

**NL:** Yeah.

**JW:** ...or the people who were fetishizing her. Black guys weren't going for her really much. White guys were going for her. She ends up with an Asian guy. And when she was in Dubai, she was told to pretend to be...

**NL:** Egyptian.

**JW:** ...Egyptian, yeah. I found that really interesting that... that... they weren't issues she had per se, it was the outside world telling her, 'We're going to fetishize you because you're Black. We don't want you because you're Black, or mixed-race, or pretend to be something else.'

**NL:** Yeah. People like to throw on their baggage to you. I think that's probably something I've taken from my own life. Like I say, obviously, I'm acutely aware of race and it's just really interesting when you pick apart the things, how people behave around you. And I think allowing people to come up with that in regards to Sasha and unpick that as a story is kind of what I wanted. But it's just an actuality I think of life that you can't really help what people want to put on you; it's just whether you choose to have it affect you or not, I guess.

**JW:** Yeah, I guess it's really interesting when other people's baggage becomes your baggage.

**NL:** Yeah.

**JW:** I mean I found that with Sasha, she's a really fascinating like character study; and I wanted to know... I wanted more. I wanted...

**NL:** Because it's also with the sex work, it's like... it's kind of okay until other people comment on it and make her feel really awful about it. Obviously, it's based on different women I spoke to, and I did a lot of research into young women who sort of had fallen into this; and when it's private and before they've been exposed, it's a different thing. But once somebody says, 'Look, we're going to tell everybody you do this and then everybody is going to think this about you,' suddenly you're confronted with everybody else's perception of what I'm doing. Even if you're okay with it,

the way you're going to be treated for it means you're probably not going to be okay with it then.

**JW:** And how do you find that process of research? How do you go about doing research?

**NL:** Well... I stay up 'til very late. I just go to the dark, dark world wide web and find all I can, really; and I spoke to some women. I just hit people up on like Snapchat, at the time, and Instagram because, obviously, I didn't know it would then go on to be at the Royal Court. At the time, it was just a reading, and I was just like, 'Oh, hi, I'm a writer. Can you talk to me about this?' And people were so receptive – all the women I spoke to. So, I just said, 'Obviously, it will all be anonymous and can you just like chat to me for a bit?' And that was it.

**JW:** So you've worked in theatre, radio, and screen as well.

**NL:** Yes.

**JW:** What do you find the difference is between the three and do you have a favourite?

**NL:** Um, I don't have a favourite. It's definitely case by case. I just think naturally an idea will jump out at me and I will just go like, 'Film, telly, theatre or radio.' Do you know what I mean? And I would just kind of... I feel like it comes quite formed. And, in terms of the differences, pretty vast really. The differences are pretty vast. I don't have a favourite because I think when I did *Superhoe* this year, it felt like quite an intense period and obviously that was my debut play on... and kind of working with a proper budget and doing all that stuff and a designer and I was, 'Okay, I've kind of

done that.' So, then I quite naturally worked with screen and just wrote for screen because I felt like I'd had that play, so I was doing that. So, I think I would probably just organically rotate what I work on. You know in theatre you can get away with being a bit more expositional I think and yeah you can, because obviously you don't have the stuff you might not have what you're talking about, and your set might not be able to do everything. So, I feel like it can be a bit broader at times; but you can also do a lot more because people just go with their imagination; whereas when you're writing for television, because I'm adapting *Superhoe* for television...

**JW:** Congratulations.

**NL:** Thank you. The differences in translating it is that just everything doesn't work because you can't just have a character on screen just telling you absolutely everything they think. You're going to need a 'cut to', at some point. [Laughs]

**JW:** [Laughs]

**NL:** 'We're going to need to move'. So, yeah that is probably what the obvious difference is.

**JW:** And were... are there any people who've been influential in your career, who you're here because of?

**NL:** Well, I think I mentioned in my pieces actually some writers like Bola... Bola Agbaje is a friend but also, I saw her play um...

**JW:** Was that *Gone Too Far!*...?

**NL:** Yeah. I saw that and that kind of blew my mind that she had written it. I think just seeing somebody like her, I was like, 'Oh, wow! That's so doable.' Levi David Addai, who's mentoring me on this scheme I have at the minute as well... It's funny it's gone kind of full circle, but he was... brought me in the writers' room for *Youngers* – quite a few years back now. And that was the first ever writers' room I went in and he just... yeah, just like brought me in and he knew me as an actress, and I had sent him a script and he had brought me into that room. And that was probably like my second or third intro into working professionally in telly. So, I guess I definitely feel they have both opened doors, otherwise maybe I wouldn't have been dreaming as big as I am now, if you know what I mean; because other people and obviously Michaela Cole, I just think what she's done is incredible. So, huge, huge props to her. Looking forward to seeing everything she does. And then it's funny; I have like random ones like Julia Roberts, because she had curly hair! As a kid growing up, I was obsessed with her because I have curly hair and I was like, 'Oh my god. I'm Julia Roberts, right?' And that's what I mean, I don't... in terms of like 'race', I wasn't looking at her going, 'Oh, but she's White but has like...' I just saw curly hair and I just was like, 'That's me! So, she's a famous actress; I can be an actress because she has curly hair.' [Laughs] So I just... that's why I think I'm just hugely, you know, like big on representation because I think your mind can... your mind can kind of only conceive of so much, really. You do need those trailblazers to kind of... They don't have to be like huge Hollywood stars, though. Different people can really just hugely encourage you; like at the minute, my writing agent is probably one of my biggest, biggest supporters. And I think that's really important, actually, just by the way of representation, that the people that are sort of selling your work effectively are a bit obsessed with you. I'm obsessed with my agent, so I mean... it's good.



**JW:** And, finally, because I know you've got to dash off to an interview... because you're very busy and I've got to get my non-existent hair cut because I'm in North London... so my barber's actually up here... Um, what would your advice be to the up and coming dreamers, people who maybe have never picked up a pen, never typed a play or a screenplay on a computer? What would your advice be to them to start off?

**NL:** I would just say, 'Just...' My big thing is always, even if you are not there yet, you will get there; which I know really sounds probably really airy fairy. Like if you haven't picked up a pen yet and in your head you're always going, 'Oh, I haven't picked up a pen, I haven't picked up a pen,' don't be too hard on yourself, because I feel like when you are ready to actually sit down and write something... Like, now I literally write all the time. There was a point where a thirty-page television script was like, 'Oh my god. I can't believe...' and then now I'm writing sixty pages and now like ninety. Do you know what I mean? So, I just think... and I started off doing nothing... Literally. I would tell myself for quite a long time, be like, 'Oh, you should really write that script,' and in my head I'd be like, 'Oh yeah. I'll get to it; I'll get to it.' And I did get to it; maybe later than... But I think that was just the right time. So, I think like just immerse yourself in as much as you can. But I just really think do not be too hard on yourself because, yeah, once you're in 'the flow of it', you will just work hard and you will just love it so much that, you know, I just think what is for you won't go against you type of thing, you know?

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

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