

Conrad Murray

in conversation with Jonny Wright

JONNY WRIGHT: Hi, it's Jonny Wright here with *WritersMosaic*, and I'm here at the Battersea Arts Centre with the amazing, multi-talented writer Conrad Murray. How are you doing, Conrad?

CONRAD MURRAY: Yeah, good, man. Cool, cool.

JW: Yeah, man. And we're here. At first, in fact, I first saw you here in the Battersea Arts Centre, performing *DenMarked*. This is before we knew each other. Now we've kind of come full circle; we're back here.

CM: Yeah.

JW: What does this building mean to you?

CM: It means a lot, man. It's like I'm home. It's also like my home, my church, my school. It's a lot.

JW: Yeah. How was it in the start of your writing journey?

CM: Well, I kind of... I started here basically. I did youth theatre here.

JW: So, this is the genesis.

CM: Basically. Yeah, yeah. I started 22 years ago. I think a lot of people would go to... like a class, or go somewhere, a group... and the aim is that they leave. But I'm kind of a weird person. I'll be watching... I'll be like, I want to stay there. I mean, I was watching the other directors running it thinking, 'They're cool'.

JW: Yeah.

CM: And like, even when I went to other things, I want to be there. I didn't want to leave. I don't know, I just get attachment to things quite a lot. So, I wasn't thinking, 'How can I use this to go somewhere else?' I was thinking, 'Imagine if I could be the person standing at the front', like, so it's kind of weird, but it worked out for me, really.

JW: So, you just wanted to become king of this place.

CM: Basically, yeah. Basically. Like, it meant so much to me, like I still feel like I can't believe I'm here. That I could just get a room, you know what I mean, or just come into the building and they'll let me in.

JW: Yeah.

CM: And, you know, I run the most successful programme here.

JW: Yeah.

CM: But I still feel like I'm not worthy; whereas other people, it's their first day and they might be on an internship, and it's like they have a sense of entitlement straight away.

JW: It's like inbuilt confidence.

CM: Yeah, and they'll be trying to tell *you* what to do.

JW: So, you still you still have this imposter syndrome, despite all your success?

CM: Yeah, yeah, I do. Obviously, I'm not in other people's heads. Maybe everyone has it, but I do feel like if you're from a particular background, you're having to fight against a lot of things because from home as well and like... it's a weird job being an artist. What is that?

JW: Yeah.

CM: Like... it's a weird one.

JW: And what is your particular background? I saw, like I say, I saw *DenMarked*, and I re-read it in preparation for this interview; and it's an amazing... I call it a piece of hip-hop theatre. And it seemed to be very autobiographical.

CM: Yeah.

JW: So, how much is the story of *DenMarked*, which if you wouldn't mind sharing a brief synopsis of... how much is that your story, and what is your story?

CM: Just 100% real everything, because I thought at the time making it, that everyone's... when they say it's a real story, everything has to be real. So, it's about... it starts, the premise started that I wrote a short piece about my dad going to jail. But it starts off with me having bad dreams. So, I've always had this repeating dream that I end up in jail. And as a kid, I was always, and as a teenager, and a young adult, I was always preparing myself for jails. Because I remember thinking, 'That I'm not going to be the bitch, and how am I going to make that not happen? Like, I'm not going to fight someone, or what am I going to be like?' And at the same time, I had this repeating dream about my dad going to jail. One Christmas, he violently attacked someone and scarred them up and went to jail.

And like, I just made the connection with maybe it's because that once you've had the experiences of the people you look up to getting arrested and going to jail, that's what you imagine for yourself as well. And then talking to my friends who are in that jail, I was like, 'When you was a kid, did you prepare for jail?' And it's like, 'Yeah, yeah, of course. You think like, "What am I going to be like?"' For them that fear ... In other environments, and theatres, and uni – you talk to people and they're not preparing for jail! They're preparing for great schools and stuff.

JW: Yeah.

CM: So yeah, I started off with that premise and then like, at first it was just a short piece. It was received really well. And people were like, 'Oh, you should make it into a full, into a full thing.' I thought, 'That's going to be hard because this is totally real. If I keep making this really real, that's going to be really difficult.'

JW: So was a short piece, kind of like concentrating on these bad dreams?

CM: Yeah, yeah. Um...

JW: And did that still involve hip hop, as well?

CM: At the time it didn't because it was just a short spoken word thing.

JW: Yeah.

CM: People would come round and watch it one on one. So it wasn't ... it was very intense, by candlelight. You tell the story. And I had people cry; I had guys talk to me to me like, their dad left, or their dad went to jail. I never expected it to have this impact. And I also did it partly because I had to be convinced that you want to do this thing. And because I got paid.

JW: [Laughs]

CK: I'm thinking, 'Alright, I've written it, but now I've got to perform it. I wrote it, but now I've got to perform it. Alright, I'm going to get paid.' And then when people were like, 'Make it into a full show', I thought, 'Am I really going to do this?' And then I started to think about it and think, you know, like, I always tell people to write their stories and to be honest about things that can help other people; and I thought I got... I got younger brothers and if I don't tell our story and my story and we own who I am or my background, we've just got generations and generations of people still in there. I'm not saying the show's helping them in a way; they're still struggling with it, but you have to try, do you know what I mean? You've got to, kind of like, deal with these kinds of like... it's about identity at the end of the day – who you are. I was never thinking about an audience; I was only thinking about me! [Laughs] Getting paid and how it was going to help me – how the show would help me. I never once thought about, like, an audience at all.

JW: [Laughs]

CM: You know, I know about theory and performance but, to me, it was too, too much of a big thing.

JW: Yeah.

CM: And I just kept developing it and people kept watching small sections. And one time I performed the scratch – so it was like a rough version of it – and I remember on the day, it was the first time I'd performed quite a significant amount. I had this weird feeling in my body; I thought, 'How am I going to do this?' You know, because you lock yourself away, you're writing the stuff and then, all of a sudden, you're thinking, 'What have I just made? What the fuck is this?' And I started telling one of the stories and I didn't even say anything that deep. It was just like, I said something about my social worker; something very brief, and I just burst out crying. And like, I didn't realise how much I must have been holding, do you know what I mean, inside and like how much it all meant? And why it annoyed me is because I couldn't stop crying. And there's a whole room of people who will know me, and they're all producers and artists and writers, and I'm crying in front of them. And I'm thinking, 'If someone had told me...' It actually taught me a good lesson. If someone had said to me that they were crying in their performance and couldn't stop themselves, prior to that, I would have thought, 'pussy'. I would have been like, 'This fucking pussy'. Like, you're trying to get some sort of like...

JW: Oscar.

CM: Yeah. And like everyone, 'Are you okay?' I wouldn't have believed it. And the fact, the horrible thing about life is sometimes it's hard to understand, unless you've gone through it. And then what's happened to me, I was like, 'Fuck! Like, I cannot stop!' And then I had to pause, leave a long, long, long silence, until I started again. And the room was just like really affected. Obviously, they've seen a grown man crying in front of them, and they're reading this fucking story. And I'm thinking, 'Fucking hell!' So, the whole the whole show was just a mad experience.

JW: And did you come out feeling better?

CM: Yeah, I did. Much... I felt like a new person. I felt like a whole new person; I felt re-born. And people would come and talk to me afterwards, after the show, and want to tell me their story. And social workers came and spoke to me and cried. Adults come and cried, because my social worker doesn't come out of the show totally negative or positive; it's like a conflicted relationship. But because I said that I loved her, a lot of social workers came and were like crying, because they're like, 'We never really get to hear back from these people ever again'.

JW: Yeah, they kind of... they work with them when they're kids, and then they...

CM: They disappear.

JW: Yeah.

CM: And a lot of them... a lot of them if they... I felt like it was me just talking, seeing one of my kids on stage growing up. And we're thinking, what I like to show that actually, like not to like blow smoke up my own arse, but it's mad important just to tell these stories. Like, even regardless of like, the form or how I'd done it, hopefully, I did a good job, and it was a good piece. But just to tell these particular stories is important.

JW: We've talked about your journey a little bit, but how being from this background, you said your dad wasn't very educated, and your mum grew up in care, not a big reader, so then, and in front of me now I have a book written by you... how's that happened? What made you want to write books?

CM: I think it was, I always knew that I wanted to be the opposite. I wanted to actually do *something*. Everything that they did, I'd just think, 'I'm not going to do that'. And also, sometimes it works. Sometimes you somehow you find yourself; you know we *are* our parents at the end of the day, so we are going to fall into those patterns. But I just wanted to be different. And also like when I look at people, my family, a lot of institutions, whether it be care, or... or prison, or other things, or other places, you're just like, 'I don't want to end up like that. I need to do something I need to do something, or what I like. I need to keep going. I need to keep going'.

JW: And so, *DenMarked*, obviously being autobiographical, but also *High Rise eState of Mind*, what I loved about that is you've got... it's um... you've got a high-rise as a kind of metaphor for... for capitalism, really. And the higher you go up in this high-rise, the more successful you are. When you start, there's loads of shit would happen at the bottom, which is *allowed* to happen, but the whole... it's kind of like carrot and a stick, carrot and stick, right. You get up, and you get up, and you get up to the top floor. And yeah, so what's the inspiration behind that, and how did you incorporate music into this story as well?

CM: I guess the inspiration was the film by Ballard, but I thought it was done really bad. Then I read the book, and he uses a high-rise, but it's executed really poorly. And I thought, 'It's a good concept, but it's shit.' And I thought that I could do this a lot better. And I think we did. Like, I just feel we need to make it clearer about class and capitalism.

JW: Yeah.

CM: And also, I didn't think that what I wanted to do is make it... Like, it hurts all of us. When the bad guy gets on top, he kills himself.

JW: Yeah.

CM: Like...

JW: Spoiler.

CM: Yeah, spoiler alert. On the other levels, they ruin their relationship. It's falling apart because all she wants... or the couple; is she wants better than this, better than this. And she gets the guy that she wants, but he's impotent.

JW: Yeah.

CM: He's doing so much drugs and fucked up.

JW: Yeah.

CM: And none of them are happy. And, actually, the only person that's happy is Luke, innit, who, well he's not that happy because she leaves him right at the end. But he was just like, 'Why don't we just try to enjoy what we have?'

JW: Yeah.

CM: Just for a minute, just like this is all right; I've got everything we need right now. And I don't think we're taught that. We're taught to... Sometimes you should enjoy it as well. Do you know what I mean? Just take some time to enjoy what we have.

JW: Absolutely. And how was... with *High Rise eState of Mind*, that was a collaborative process, right? It was a bunch of writers on that. So, how do you find collaborating on a project like that, as opposed to writing something individually like *DenMarked*?

CM: It's more fun.

JW: Collaborating?

CM: Yeah, because on your own, you could be going mental. You could be going mad. And like, I like concepts. So, like I grew up quite good at creating ideas for shows. It feels good to give someone an idea, or think these are the characters, and getting those ideas from other people, because their words coming out of their mouths are going to be different to what you would have done. But it's still the concept that you had.

JW: Yeah.

CM: And it brings more life to it because they have their own life experiences. But also in the show, it's also their life experiences as well. So, that was really important to me is that we get those different voices.

JW: Yeah, absolutely. And, and then so we... we met. So, I saw you in *DenMarked*, but I don't think I came up and chatted to you afterwards; but I was like, 'Yeah,

this guy, this guy can act, this guy can rap.’ And then I reached out to you. I don't know how I got your email or number or something, but that's when we met in real life. And you're... you're amazing. Like, it was... it was, what was great... we only did, like what, three songs or something in that show, but what was great is you brought all these kinds of different flows and different delivery to... to what I had already written. And it was like it was still in the beat, but it was kind of maybe it was still like on beat but it was maybe a slightly different pocket to how I would rap it. And I just really liked your versatility as a rapper. How important is actually the rap music... because you use to rap, right?

CM: Yeah, yeah.

JW: As in, you used to be a rapper before you were a theatre artist, right?

CM: Yeah, yeah.

JW: So, how do you find combining the two?

CM: I love it, man. I love it. I feel like I still feel like a rapper. [Laughs]

JW: You still look like a rapper, man. [Laughs]

CM: [Laughs]

JW: Like, you've got like a Run DMC... you know, like Adidas get up. You've got the cap, yeah.

CM: Always man, always. Like, no, I just wanted to be a rap superstar, innit. So, like I get to live out my rap superstar dreams, but in a different context.

JW: Yeah.

CM: And it's important, like, that's just my toolbox. So, to me, it's important that the shows have rap in it because that's what I love.

JW: Yeah.

CM: At first people would laugh it off, you know. They would say it's stupid.

JW: Yeah.

CM: A gimmick. But that's my art form. You know, whether that's grime, whatever, but it's all rap. So yeah, I'm proud of it, man. I love fusing the two. And I feel like even though hip hop is 50 years old, it's still new.

JW: Wow!

CM: It's new to a lot of people, you know. You still got to convince people.

JW: Yeah.

CM: I write this thing a year before, I think. And everyone gets sent... or maybe two years, I don't know. And they kept saying to me – *Hamilton, Hamilton* – but I've never seen it before. And back then, it was quite new then; it wasn't here yet.

JW: Yeah.

CM: But I'm like, 'Well, I've been doing this for years.' I mean, over a decade, and it's like, 'Oh, *Hamilton, Hamilton...*' And it's like, 'Huh? What?' And, again, I do like *Hamilton* and some of my friends don't know why I like it, because they're like, 'It's not like real rap ... or like real hip hop.' But I'm like, 'But I get the craft,' do you know what I mean? And also, I do like theatre, so I get it; but there needs to be in the next step, where it's not like this hasn't been... it's been watered down basically.

JW: Yeah.

CM: It's watered down.

JW: Um, so it's a real... yeah, so well, it's a real fine line to navigate and how do you find navigating that line between pleasing the ... between pleasing the external voices and pleasing your internal voice?

CM: It's always hard. I don't think it's ever easy. I feel like I'm good at saying what I want, and what I need, and like, what I think. I think when other people are involved then I'm... when I am thinking, what I say can have an effect on other people.

JW: As in other collaborators?

CM: Yeah. And I'm thinking like, everyone needs to get paid.

JW: Yeah.

CM: Like, maybe we need to just do this thing; do like, you know, take, take, take the L [Laughs] because it's a win, at the end of the day. But, you know, really, you just want to go all out, and like just do what the fuck it is you need to do in your heart. But, again, this is a career like, because I can't do anything else. I've been doing this for so long that you always got to think what... make sure that you're still working and still going. And it's even horrible to think of it like that, because these are all my friends that I work with, and this is what I do as a hobby.

JW: Yeah. And is there a part of you which, because you're very well established in theatre, but obviously – well not obviously, but screen work is more financially lucrative often. So, is a part of you that wants to do more screenwriting and get involved in that?

CM: Yeah, kind of for the money. Yeah. And like, I had offers and like, you know, really cool people want to talk to me, but it's just a shame; I'd rather... I love theatre; I love *real* people.

JW: Yeah.

CM: You know, being in there, vibing with each other, and you can make weird shit, fucked up shit. For screen, to me, everything's got to be a lot more obvious. And that's a craft in itself. I said, 'You know, not everyone can do it. And, who knows, maybe I can't do it?' But people do offer me the opportunities, but I don't know if I'm sensible, you know. You do a couple of those, and then fuck it and just go back to what you love, do you know what I mean?

JW: So, theatre is, theatre... is the theatre the love now, or is music still always going to be the number one love?

CM: It's both those in collaboration, because like when I mix it, it's always got music in it. I don't ever think of making theatre without music. Um, they're combined.

JW: They're not... they're not mutually exclusive.

CM: No, no, no.

JW: And they'll always be... they'll always be combined for you?

CM: Yeah, yeah. I can't imagine sitting down wanting to make something that's just like, talking.

JW: And would you... would you ever want to just do... like go back to just making albums?

CM: If I could. If that... if that was sustainable. But I don't know if... I don't know if... I don't know if that's financially sustainable enough – for anyone.

JW: Yeah.

CM: I just feel like it's so hard. It's all about marketing. Whereas I just don't think that's sustainable, do you know what I mean? I think that is like a passion. But it's difficult to make money. Recording music doesn't make money.

JW: And how did you find the kind of record label system, because you were involved? You had a deal, right?

CM: Yeah, yeah.

JW: And you're on... was it Dizzee Rascal's label?

CM: Well, he was being shopped at the time.

JW: Okay.

CM: So, we had the same lawyer.

JW: Okay, same lawyer.

CM: Because he eventually went to XL, but I was on Polydor.

JW: Okay. And how did you find that, that machine and the marketing side of it, where I know there's you... they said... you said... they wanted you to be 'mixed-race, but don't mention Asian'?

CM: Yeah.

JW: So how did you find that?

CM: It was fucked up. It was really weird, like. My... my manager would call me every morning, or leave it a few days, or call me, and be like, 'What is this industry about?' And I would say, 'Music.' [He'd say] 'Sex!'

JW: [Laughs]

CM: And then he'd put the phone down. And then he'd leave it a few days and I would say, 'Writing and making a good song.' He'd say 'Sex!' and put the phone down. Because that's, that's, that's... about sex. It's about my image and the things that I'm saying. Yeah, it was weird, like. When I went into the offices, it was like, 'Oh, I'm surprised you're not high, right now.' And I was like, 'Oh, Okay.' 'I thought you'd be... I can imagine you're here, just getting high.' I was just like, 'Oh, Okay.' 'Tattoos. I think you should be covered in tattoos.' 'Oh, alright.' 'And you should have all your boys around you, getting high.' 'Ah, okay.'

JW: Wow!

CM: When the guy was saying that, he was sitting so close to me, his knee was like almost touching mine. Like, it was really off-key.

JW: Wow!

CM: I was sitting super tight on this couch.

JW: Wow!

CM: And like, they kind of like saying that... they're kind of telling you what they want you to do. And it's really mad even to get to that point to be like, with the majors, like you know, I had people like, proposition me for sex. And like really put

me in some really like, fucked up situations. So, I know what some artists have to do and have to ask to do in order to get into those situations. And it's like, you know, it's fucked up, because people talk about the women, but don't talk about the men. They don't talk about the men. And I know it happens. And I met other young guys and like, they had a crack. Some of them walked straight out of care, actually. They were staying at these people's homes. Always staying at people's homes. And like, I remember thinking like, 'This is fucking... This is weird.' Now I realise like, shit! Like... as you get older, it's even worse; because you're like, Wow! It really takes... it really out... it was really, really fucked up.

JW: That's really fucked up. And do you think specifically they were targeting who they saw as like vulnerable children?

CM: Yeah, I think so, because like, I'd had long conversations online first with this person. And so she knew my whole background. And then it's like I go to his house and there's loads of other boys there. And then you're like, 'Oh, really weird.' Then it's like, if you ... if you're going to get all this money, you're going to get all this, then what do we get?

JW: Wow!

CM: And it's, I mean, it was said that blatant. I spoke to my brother, and he was like, 'There's no shame in just like coming home.' It was really fucked up.

JW: Very.

CM: This was like to get to the major. Once you're on the major and people go through all of that... Now I realise that I was carrying a lot.

JW: Yeah.

CM: After all that. And I had to like, basically cut people out of this deal, because like, because of this mad shit; mad situation.

JW: It's sad you should have to go through any of that. It should just be about the talent, about the records, about...

CM: Yeah, yeah. It was... it was. In the end I just... I knew that... I was coming to BAC at the time, and I was like, 'I'm just going to... I want to go down this route.'

JW: You came into where?

CM: The Battersea Arts Centre.

JW: Oh, yeah.

CM: So, actually, like, that's a choice that I made and like you know what, I have... I enjoy my life, do you know what I mean? Generally, I actually do really enjoy my life, whereas I would have had some fucked up problems.

JW: Yeah, and it really shouldn't be like that because what was, kind of, like beautiful about the... when the #MeToo movement kind of started really kicking off, was that safety in numbers thing. But there hasn't been that groundswell of the same thing of men being able to feel comfortable and we've got a lot to answer for as men ourselves for how we make our peers feel. But there definitely – not yet – hasn't been that groundswell of like, yeah, as in, 'this isn't cool what's been done to us'.

CM: Yeah.

JW: I'm not saying anything's been done to me; nothing has, but like I mean us as in men. And so, there needs to be that kind of like 'this isn't cool', but actually this is a safe space within not only the wider world; but like within our own groups of like male friends to say like look, 'Come on, like we're here. We're here for you.'

CM: It would be great. I think that, but I think we're a long way off. I think we're a long way off.

JW: We are. We are, but I mean... I mean, hope I mean, even, hopefully, like with this review saying about your experience, you know, hopefully, this is... people

listening out there are like, 'Yeah, like tell your friends', because it's not good holding on to that shit.

CM: No, no.

JW: It's not healthy.

CM: I've always, kind of, with the music industry stuff... like I've always thought like, 'What can I do with it?' Because how many artists out there have been... you know, I could have... I do think that had I stayed with the label, I'd probably be some sort of drug addict now.

JW: Just to kind of to wrap up. Have you got any advice for any... I was going to say young writers, but they don't have to be young... any up-and-coming, newer writers? What advice would you give them?

CM: Write, keep going, persevere. It sounds corny, but you never know. Like, someone will like your writing. If it turns you on, just keep writing because, I don't know if you can follow this, but sometimes I think, 'What is it the fuck I do?'

JW: [Laughs]

CW: Like, what the fuck am I writing? Just believe in what it is you do and keep going. I feel like, although everyone will say like, 'Believe in yourself', the fact is

people don't. People don't. And I've pursued... to get to where I am now was taking a long time. But it wasn't that self-belief. You know, I feel like you've got to be a bit crazy to really believe in yourself. But if you don't, no one's going to. That's it. Know what you have to. You have to believe you're the shit. You need to know that it's going to be hard. If you're not passionate about it, if you don't love it, although it can hurt you... 'cos what's the point?

JW: And to close, finally. I want your top five. It can be either plays, or albums, or pieces of art.

CM: Top five pieces of art. That's hard, man.

JW: It is.

CM: Alright. Let me try, let me try, let me try. Jay-Z, *Blueprint*.

JW: Okay. *Blueprint*, one.

CM: Tupac, Makaveli.

JW: Nice. Don, was it Don, *The Don Killuminati*?

CM: *Don Killuminati Theory*. [The] *7 Day Theory*.

JW: Yeah, yeah.

CM: Yeah, I loved that album.

JW: Yeah, yeah.

CM: Yeah, Tupac all day. *Hamilton*.

JW: Okay.

CM: Because I think, you know, I enjoy it but it's a great reference point for people; but also, not only that, like I'm not a fan of everything else he does, do you know what I mean?

JW: It's okay. It's okay if you enjoyed it in a nicer movie, man.

CM: *Breakdance – the movie*.

JW: Okay.

CM: Have you seen it?

JW: No, I've not seen it.

CM: It's called *Breakin'* as well, that's the other name. Sick film.

JW: Okay.

CM: It's from like, '84... '83, '84.

JW: I'll check it out.

CM: Ah, yes. Too good, too good. Um...

JW: And what gets the fifth slot?

CM: The fifth slot. That's hard, man. You know what? The film called *La Bamba*.

JW: Okay.

CM: It's about Ritchie Valens who... [Hums]

JW: Oh, okay. Yeah, yeah.

CM: Because, as a kid, it was a Hollywood film...

JW: Uh-huh.

CM: ... but the people on it were brown. Now, they're not Indians, they're
Mexicans.

JW: [Laughs]

CM: But, for some reason, I just somehow, you know how as a kid your mind is
really weird, innit.

JW: Uh-huh.

CM: So versatile. I just like, imagined that, like, that was my family. [Laughs] Like,
somehow, like, they were like me, and I was like them.

JW: I understand why that film kind of resonated with you anyway.

CM: Yeah, me and my brother would just watch it over and over and over again.
Yeah, so that's my five.

JW: It's a good five. It's been an amazing, amazing conversation. We've talked
about a lot of shit.

CM: A lot... a lot. [Laughs]

JW: But, thank you very much. I'm looking forward to reading this book called *Making Hip-Hop Theatre: Beatbox and Elements*. It's by you and Katie Beswick, as well. I'm going to check this out.

CM: Cool, cheers.

JW: So, yeah, man, good luck with your career. I feel honoured to be... I feel like an honoured guest at the Battersea Arts Centre, because I feel like you're a king around here.

CM: [Laughs]

JW: So, thank you very much. It's been amazing. This has been Conrad Murray. So, please check his work out and thank you for listening.

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

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