

## A Legacy of Love

Wally Jiagoo

About a week before the Covid-19 pandemic came to our British shores, the people of this country fell into two camps: those who were in a state of frenzy about the killer virus, and those who were in complete denial about it all. This short period of what I've coined the '*pre-Covid zeitgeist*', as well as being quasi-terrifying, also contained a very interesting spectacle to behold. Seemingly normal people were going about their business on public transport, only now wearing facemasks, brandishing hand-sanitiser, and spraying surfaces to ensure a germ-free carriage, and panic-buying loo rolls and leaving supermarkets out of stock. Then there were those who laughed in their faces.

We were a nation of headless chickens, unknowingly going through a process of grief, all of us at different stages. Denial that this was really happening. Anger at how unprepared our government had left the NHS for a crisis like this.

Bargaining ... *it's not that bad, it's just like the flu*. Depression ... *life was so much better before Brexit, before Prince and Bowie died*. And then, finally, acceptance. Nobody was going to save us this time. Our so-called British exceptionalism was just a myth. We were just as doomed as everyone else, with a rising death count, and our hospitals overrun. Then Boris Johnson inevitably announcing what we all feared: we were going into lockdown. Who was going to live through this pandemic? Who was going to die? Would life ever be the same again?

Full of existential dread myself, it was during this period of *trepidation* that I happened across a quote by the American playwright Tennessee Williams, which gave me something completely unexpected. Hope. It read:

The world is violent and mercurial – it will have its way with you. We are saved only by love – love for each other and the love that we pour into the art we feel compelled to share: being a parent; being a writer; being a painter; being a friend. We live in a perpetually burning building, and what we must save from it, all the time, is love.'

This quote comes from an interview with the writer James Grissom not long before Tennessee Williams died in 1982. In a strange but beautiful coincidence,

Leo Tolstoy also wrestled with this topic shortly before his death in 1910, when in a letter to Mahatma Gandhi he came to a similar conclusion, writing that 'Love is the only way to rescue humanity from all ills.'

Whilst Tolstoy's quote undoubtedly came first, it was the precision of Tennessee Williams' writing about what love is in people and art, as well his poignant evocation of this world being a belligerent host, that really captured my imagination. For Williams, love was a considered act that beamed its light not just into relationships and friendships, but in art and writing, too. Love was about expression. It was there to save us but, more importantly, it was ours to save, from the otherwise inescapable violence and hostility of this world.

It made me meditate upon the importance of expression, of expressing oneself. Freedom of expression is a democratic right that we in the West like to garland ourselves on having; it makes us feel superior to those other countries with oppressive regimes in which people can't speak up for fear of imprisonment. Why, then, I wondered, in spite of our freedom, do so many of us struggle to express ourselves – artistically as well as in the everyday? What is this fear that holds so many back? Are we *that* ashamed to show our true selves, for fear of judgement, or ridicule?

Human nature *is* inherently judgemental. Throughout our evolution, the ability to assess situations and individuals was a crucial survival instinct. We needed to know who was trustworthy and who was a threat. We depended on social cohesion. However, somewhere along the line our instinct for survival became warped. The primitive life or death situations we once faced no longer exist, yet our innate capacity to judge remains, turning its attention to new, more superficial contexts: body image, social status and cultural conformity. According to a 2022 report by the anti-bullying Cybersmile Foundation, 89% of users of social media aged 16-24 in the UK believe that it negatively affects their mental health, in line with increased levels of anxiety and depression from our rolling news, Tik-Tok-and-Instagram-selfie-obsessed culture. Given that the juggernaut of capitalism and advertising breeds inadequacy so that businesses can sell us products to be less fat, or old, or stupid, or ugly, is it remotely surprising that we live in a constant state of fear and insecurity? Might it be that every pithy comment we make, every negative act of judgement towards somebody else, is nothing but a misplaced act of survival? Far from being able to express ourselves freely, who would dare stick their head above the parapet and share something from the heart other than the extremely courageous?

But then something completely unexpected happened in lockdown. As scientists battled to develop a vaccine to bring an end to this pandemic,

ordinary people across the world ended another pandemic that has plagued us all: our socio-economic and technologically conditioned state of self-repression. Confined to four walls and a roof for months on end, our human yearning for connection inspired us to step outside of our inhibitions, and to create. We made music, jamming online with others, using internet sharing platforms as our metaphorical garage space; we shot short films on our smartphones inside our tiny flats with our pet cats as the stars; we lovingly curated quizzes for our friends and families to enjoy on Zoom; we discovered passions, old and new – acting, painting, baking, gardening, writing poems. We all became artists. During this surreal epoch in our history, the genuine fear of death that was happening everywhere outweighed our everyday fears and the insecurities about ourselves. We were expressing, without fear, and making connections that were genuine. In our darkest times, it was love for each other, and the love we poured into art that we felt compelled to share, that saved us.

I was a bit sad when lockdown finally ended. Of course I was happy we all got to leave our confines and rejoice with loved ones again. But as normality resumed and the French press of capitalism squeezed us back down into submission, I was deflated to see so many people who took up a passion drop it like a hot potato, minimising it as merely a 'distraction' that got them through this difficult year. When, really, it was the opposite. It was them unearthing their authenticity in creative play. I wish the world didn't need a pandemic to

facilitate that. As so often in life, the things that are revelatory, even revolutionary, aren't necessarily new teachings, but old ones we've forgotten in our quest to be accepted into the conventional club of society: adulthood. We forsake the frivolity of play, and swap out our innocence for the serious business of growing up: we get nine to five jobs; we fret over house deposits, or mortgages with decent interest rates; we manicure our socially acceptable self-portraits, and somehow develop the misbelief that creativity and self-expression are pipe dreams, something that only children and non-conformists do. In our quest for so-called security, we trade in our openness to our vulnerability. But what if I told you that exploring our vulnerability was the only way for us to be truly secure?

Expression is vital because it helps us to connect. But to truly connect with others, our expression requires us to be vulnerable. As the rapper Tupac Shakur intimated on his track 'Changes': 'It takes skill to be real, time to heal each other.. The advice of an old drama teacher still lingers in my memory: 'You have to be ugly to be beautiful.' To be real is to be vulnerable. That's what reaches deep into the hearts of people; it's what sheds light, and helps us to understand and love one another. Tupac was right – it does take skill to be real, and it's through our realness that we heal each other.

Observing people during lockdown being their carefree selves, confirmed for me the importance of being able to express our vulnerability creatively. We must let it flow through us, uninhibited. Give it away. If only so we can show others that they shouldn't be afraid to do so either. The creation of a piece of art or literature is an act of love we should never take for granted. Because one day, it will impact someone, bringing entertainment, provocation, inspiration, and even hope – an enduring legacy I want to be part of. From this perpetually burning building, what we must save, all the time, is love.

### **Wally Jiagoo**

Born and raised in London, Wally is a writer of Mauritian heritage. An alumni of Soho Theatre's Writers' Group, he's previously had work performed at Soho Theatre, Theatre Royal Stratford East, Trafalgar Studios, and The Albany Theatre. He's also an alumni of the prestigious Channel 4 Screenwriting Course, and BBC Writers Workshop.

Wally's pilot script *Rasheed/Rasheeda* won the BAFTA Rocliffe New Writing Prize for TV Drama in 2016.

For TV, Wally has written episodes for *Malory Towers*, *The Dumping Ground*, and

*Phoenix Rise.*

His essay *Glass Windows & Glass Ceilings* is included in a collection of 'essays on the working class, by the working class' called *Know Your Place*, published by Dead Ink Books 2017.

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

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