

WRITERSMOSAIC

Renu Arora

In Conversation with Sita Brahmachari

'The more we can inhabit the different facets of us and tell stories that bring everything, the whole of us, together, the more impactful they'll be.'

— Renu Arora

[Music]

Presenter: This is *WritersMosaic, in Conversation*. Sita Brahmachari talks to the actor, singer, writer, and composer, Renu Arora. Renu reflects on her writing and on *The Burgundy Book*, a concert album inspired by a life-changing accident and near-death experience.

[Music]

Sita Brahmachari (SB): This is Sita Brahmachari, and I am in conversation with Renu Arora, in her beautiful, beautiful home, surrounded by pink. [Both laugh]

Renu Arora (RA): Exactly.

SB: And this is a very signif—as we have actually worked together for over a year on your extraordinary work, *The Burgundy Book*, which we're going to talk about today, we both know that colour is an absolutely vital part, not only of what you write about, but how you write and how you think. And we have discovered on the way that we are both synesthetes, haven't we?

RA: Exactly, 100%.

SB: So a pink palace, I think people describe this as [laughs].

RA: People really do. It's a pink palace. And I spent a couple of years making it my own, [laughs] and I'm very happy to be here.

SB: Beautiful. And we have spoken about you moving into this flat, so it's very lovely for me to come here because I know that you moved to this flat after your accident, is that right?

RA: I did. I did. It's lovely to have you here in the flat after the accident [laughs].

SB: Yeah, you had an accident in 2017, didn't you?

RA: I did.

SB: And it was a life-changing accident.

RA: It was.

SB: But also life-changing in the sense of your near-death experience being absolutely part of what *The Burgundy Book*, in fact central to what *The Burgundy Book*—

RA: It informs *The Burgundy Book*. It informs everything that I do, the conversations that I have, and how I live my life, down to big profound decisions about work to, *what do I want to eat today?* I mean, from the mundane to the profound.

SB: So, Renu, can you—can we go back in time? In *The Burgundy Book*, we go from your childhood—it's an autobiographical concept album that you've created.

RA: It is.

SB: And we'll talk a bit about the form of the work as we go on, but can we go back to your childhood in Wales?

RA: Yes, of course.

SB: Tell me a little bit about that.

RA: I grew up in South Wales, as you know. And it was interesting because I look back now on my childhood, having spent the last sort of 20-ish years or so in London, and I can really see how, even though there was no music in my house growing up—because my family, coming from India and having the upbringing that they did, were mathematician. My dad was an accountant; he's retired now. Mum was a maths and English teacher, also retired. So they were very cerebral. And a lot of people, like a lot of people who came over after partition, their focus was just to make ends meet and to make a life for themselves after coming here with three

pounds in their pocket, literally. And so it was a very different—they had no time to think creatively. In fact, my mum is just getting into playing the recorder now, in her 70s, [laughs] which I think is so nice. And I'm helping her, and she's trying to help my dad to play the recorder too, and that's really lovely. But being in a school in South Wales, we had Eisteddfods every year, school shows. Music was a big part of life outside of the family home. But of course, it was a time where Madonna was big and *Neighbours* and *Home and Away* and Jason Donovan and Kylie Minogue, so my dad would come home sometimes with a CD, going, 'I've just bought a Madonna CD', because he thought it was cool. But he never listened to it. That was for me to listen—to do. So I would make up dances in the living room, just feeling amazing, going, 'This is so cool', [laughs] to Madonna and to Jason Donovan and all of that [laughs].

SB: Wonderful. In *The Burgundy Book*, you touch on an early memory of your schoolmates realising that you had an amazing voice.

RA: Oh yeah.

SB: And that you had kept it to yourself for a long time.

RA: I didn't know myself. Yeah, I didn't know myself.

SB: The journey for you as a singer, your voice as a singer, from childhood to post your accident and NDE, is very much what *The Burgundy Book* is about, but also, I think, will relate to many, many people who have had various kinds of trauma in their lives, and they think about what their voice, creative voice, is before that fissure or that change and then afterwards. You talk a lot, and we've spoken a lot, about how you integrate your experiences in life into your voice and into your creative work. And it seems to me that at every stage in your life, you've considered how your voice is growing and changing and how you can adopt that into your creative work.

RA: Well, I lost my voice after the accident. For the first two, three years after the accident, I couldn't sing. Even my speaking voice was, I mean, [whispers] it was this quiet. This was the level of my speaking voice. And therefore, I couldn't get any sound out to sing either. And I literally thought there'd been some physical damage to my larynx or somewhere inside that had affected my larynx. And I went to see an amazing voice rehab coach, and she'd said, 'You haven't lost your voice. It's been swallowed by the trauma.' And I said, 'Oh, so it's been left under the wheel of the bus?' I had a serious accident involving—I was hit by a bus in 2017, and my leg was crushed, dragged under the wheel. And I said, 'It's left under the wheel.' And she said, 'Yes, I think it is. You may not sing the same way, but you will sing.' So it was

a—and of course, I can't stand up now because of my mobility challenges, so I have to do everything sitting down. So I learnt to sing sitting down and use all the muscles that I was using standing up, sitting down.

SB: It's been extraordinary to explore with you how your professional life as a singer has grown also since your accident and near-death experience, which I know that we're being a little bit cautious about talking about because it is central to *The Burgundy Book*, and I know that you express it in the way that—in the poetic way that you want to in that concept album. But I know that going back to this flat, you moved into this flat, and something miraculous happened which linked your professional life as a musical theatre singer and took you back onto the stage. Can you talk to us a bit about that?

RA: [Laughs] Yeah, of course. So to go back in terms of the flat, I was going to move before the accident, but of course, the accident happened, and I was obviously then traumatised and couldn't walk and just not ready. So it took about three years, three, four years, actually, to feel ready enough, strong enough, able enough to move. And I—better the devil you know, I was a bit worried and a bit anxious. And I remember my dad saying to me, 'Once you move, your life will open up. It really will.' And I was sort of saying, 'Oh, really, really? Shall I just make the leap and just do it?' And he said, 'Yes, you really, really must.' And my dad isn't one to be—an

accountant. He's not one to sort of predict or have spiritual conversations with me.

Well, he is a little bit, but not about things like this, so—

SB: There's a beautiful photograph of your mum and dad on the mantelpiece here.

RA: Behind you.

SB: Right behind me.

RA: [Laughs] Exactly. So I did. I took the leap, and I moved here, and I'm extremely grateful to my family. So I moved to this flat, started work on *The Burgundy Book*. I was literally three weeks in, sitting in this spot, at this table, in a meeting with the producer for *Burgundy Book*, and I got an email from the RSC to say, 'Will you audition for the next new musical, *Magician's Elephant*, and play the role of Madam LaVaughn?'

SB: *The Magician's Elephant*?

RA: *Magician's Elephant*.

SB: At the Royal Shakespeare Company?

RA: At the Royal Shakespeare Company. And I almost said no. I was looking at it going, *but that's not—I'm doing Burgundy Book*. But actually, when I read the script, I literally had a moment where I just felt like it was written for me. It was meant for me.

SB: You played the part of Madam LaVaughn. Can you tell us a little bit about that character?

RA: I did, yes. So Madam LaVaughn—so for those that don't know, it's a show set in the town of Baltese. Madam LaVaughn was a member of the aristocracy, a philanthropist, a very well to do woman. She was at the opera one day, in this town, and a magician had come onto the stage to perform his regular set of tricks. And he did a trick to pull out some lilies from a hat, and this trick went wrong on this day, and instead of lilies, an elephant crashed through the roof of the opera house, landing on Madam LaVaughn legs, crushing her, so she could no longer walk. And I literally read the script just going, *how often in an actor's life do they get a chance to play something that they have lived?* I mean, I wasn't disabled by an elephant; I was by a bus, but nevertheless.

SB: Would have felt like an elephant.

RA: [Laughs] Exactly.

SB: Or several.

RA: Still 10 tons. Yeah, exactly. Very similar story. And I just thought, *oh, this is absolutely meant for me*. So I literally did everything I could to get that part. And three weeks later, I did. And it was phenomenal because it was the entry back on the stage that I never expected would happen because I didn't think I could perform again after the accident.

SB: So your dad's prediction did come true.

RA: Absolutely.

SB: And here we are now talking about *The Burgundy Book*, which is almost complete, which is your autobiographical life's work, really, as a writer, as a singer. And it's been a real honour for me to work as part of your team on this extraordinary piece.

RA: Thank you.

SB: Can you tell us a little bit about, without giving too much away, obviously, about what *The Burgundy Book* is because it also will tell us really about your journey from your accident and near-death experience?

RA: Sure. So *The Burgundy Book* is my debut concept album around my accident and near-death experience that happened in 2017. And it fuses poetry, song, spoken word. So after the accident, after the NDE, the near-death experience, happened, being so traumatised, I fell into a deep dark hole, and I didn't think I could sing again, perform again, create again. And several friends and colleagues within the industry kept saying, 'Well you can. You've got so much—there's so much you can do.' And I relayed the story of *The Burgundy Book* and the experience and the accident. And everybody kept saying, 'Well, you can make a show or it can be an album or it can be a book. And there are so many things that you can do with this.' And it took a couple of years for that to sink in. And I remember over time, just thinking to myself, *they're right. I can't be on stage and dance anymore, but I can still do those things. It's just got to be from a sit down position.*

SB: And you call yourself a sit-down artist. I think it's a term you've coined yourself.

RA: I do. I do. Because I realised that I am. I'm just doing the same stuff sitting down, the same thing sitting down. The skill set's all still there, I've just got to do it sitting down. So it felt very right. And I carried the seed of *The Burgundy Book* in my heart for several years, and as you know, I was about to start working on it before the show at the RSC came up because we had the funding in 2020—2021, sorry, from the Arts Council. So coming back from the RSC, it just felt so completely right to start working on it properly, put the team, a new team, in place, and just make this the second thing that Renu does after the RSC—after the accident [laughs].

SB: It's your own work.

RA: It's my own work, yes.

SB: And had you focused on your own writing before that or—

RA: Yes, I have. I did quite a few things for the BBC after the accident. Made a pandemic trilogy, and I've written songs my whole life and came number three in the Songwriter—National Songwriters Showcase when I was 17. So lots of things. I sang my own stuff on BBC Radio Wales when I was 18. So I have written quite a lot before, but it's interesting because I really feel like one of the things the accident did was it uncovered latent gifts. I say that because what I feel like what it did was it

made me really take my writing seriously and really own it in a way that I really hadn't done before. I was doing it, and I'd written shows, and I'd composed for other people's shows and written my own stuff, but in my brain, I was an actor and a singer and partly a writer on the side a bit. Whereas after the accident, I realised that not having the same mobility that I did before, my brain was very much in writing my own stuff, and it just became very natural to do that because I had to, because I had to start writing about things. It was just such a visceral need after the accident. And interestingly, actually, for a couple of years after the accident, because I was so traumatised, and my nerves were on fire from the trauma, I tried really hard to find an artistic response to the accident that I could immerse myself in, that was bite-sized, that wouldn't batter my already frazzled, battered senses, that would nourish my artistic spirit. And I read everything I could find on post-traumatic stress, post-traumatic growth, NDEs, but I couldn't find anything artistic, especially auditory, audio work, because I didn't want anything visual at that point because my senses just couldn't cope with too much.

SB: One of the things that we've talked about in terms of creating the pieces, you wanted to create something that somebody in the state that you were in, in that moment, could also absorb and be nourished and fed by, and that the pieces mustn't be too long. I think that's one of the things we talked about.

RA: That's what I mean by bite-sized. It had to be relatively short, so that I knew that people who were traumatised could immerse themselves in it and not feel like—because if I was listening to something then, I wouldn't have wanted something that was 20 minutes long, half an hour long. It had to be 5, 10 minutes max because that was the duration of my attention span, my traumatised attention span. So I made *The Burgundy Book* for people like me, or for me.

SB: I love the way that in *The Burgundy Book* the poetry and the voice and the music flows so melodically through the whole piece. And your voice as a child, your voice as somebody that was working in professional theatre before your accident and then afterwards, is really honoured in your story. And I wonder what it feels like for you as you come to the end of this first incarnation of *The Burgundy Book*? Because I know there are plans to take it into theatre. I wonder what it feels like as part of your journey to have gone through that process?

RA: It feels believable and unbelievable in equal measure [laughs] because on the one hand, I'm having to pinch myself that we are now making a show about it or starting to make a show about it, and we have a lot of theatre interests, which is wonderful. And on the other hand, it feels like I'm where I need to be because the journey has taken me and the team to this place, so it feels like a very natural

progression. And there's also a part of me that goes, *oh, my God, if I thought that this was going to be how my life expanded six years ago when I was massively traumatised and thought my life was over, I wouldn't have believed it. Not in a million years. Not at all.*

SB: You have been honoured by an inspirational NRI award.

RA: Oh, the NRI award [laughs].

SB: Can you just tell us a bit about it? Because I think, for me, working with you over this time and also finding ways to work in order for you to have your creativity most fully seen, because there are needs which are about the actual practicalities of writing together that we have navigated over this time, which are, actually, in order to create this work, you've wanted to hear it spoken aloud by somebody else in order to do that minute eye of editing. We found processes, and it's been quite an extraordinary journey for us really, isn't it? How do you create access for artists that, in many, many different ways, may have had a trauma in their lives, which means that they've had a fissure, but they are really needing and wanting and can offer some beautiful creative work into the world, but yet maybe the situation that they've been in means that that is so much harder? That journey for us has been all about constantly listening, hasn't it? How would this be easier for you? How can we make it

work? And the award that you got was for yourself being an inspiration to other people.

RA: Yes, it was an award by the NRI, which is non-resident Indian, for most empowered and—I think it was most empowered and courageous artist, I think. It was—well, it's behind you over there [laughs].

SB: It's behind us.

RA: It is.

SB: Oh, wow, it's quite a gold plate.

RA: [Both laugh] It's quite a gold plate. It really is.

SB: I don't know how I've missed it, really.

RA: And I did a speech at the event, and it was a lovely event. I feel—I felt very honoured to have that.

SB: What did you say?

RA: Well, oh, I wish I'd listened to it before this. I spoke a lot about how important it was to honour your own story. I spoke about *The Crossing*, the show that I made about my grandmother's partition story ten years ago. Because I'd made stories about my own—not my own but family's experience before, doing this didn't feel altogether alien. Of course, it was different, but because I had the means and the skill set, it felt like the next thing to do and the right thing to do after the accident. So it was wonderful to be there and to feel—I had no idea—just to feel like people are listening and watching and want to feel like there are other people that look like them and speak like them and may have a disability and may feel like life is closed and there are spaces they can't occupy. And so I was saying how important it was to be able to both inhabit and then occupy spaces that many people, for whatever reason, might feel that those spaces aren't open to them, whether it's because they're a person of color, like us, or because they're neurodiverse, like us, or disabled or whatever it might be, or a woman. Whatever it might be. And how important it is to just inhabit every aspect of yourself. And I really think that the more we can inhabit the different facets of us and tell stories that bring everything, the whole of us, together, the more impactful they'll be.

SB: That feels so, so true and I think could be so inspiring to so many people. And when we've been talking about the connection with Frida Kahlo in your work, it's

one of the things that I have really connected to in your storytelling is about the way in which she manages her own story and the way in which she decides how she's going to present herself and she decides the frame that is going to be around her work. I know that you love that about her work. I wonder how that plays out when you go out, say, to work in theatre or even to do this interview, for example. What do you need to do to inform other people about your needs in order for them to access your work? What's been your experience?

RA: An understanding and the responsibility to own what you need and what you need to make the best possible work. And I suppose the accident, for me, also really helped me to own other needs, like I wasn't—I've been neurodiverse my whole life, I've had dyslexia my whole life, it's not new, but what it did was it really helped me to come back into myself in a really deep way. And that meant being neurodiverse, owning the dyslexia. I'd spent so many years just struggling and going, *oh, but for me to be at the same level and to do that, I need to work a thousand times harder, and that's just the way it is.* And it doesn't have to be the way it is. There's help available, and there are—if you own it and say it and take responsibility for your needs and share it with people, everybody's willing to help, and everybody wants to help, because people want you to fulfill your potential. I've really seen that.

SB: In terms of managing your work and naming yourself as a seated artist and claiming that space for yourself and saying, 'This is who I am, and this is what I want to do and present my work', you're also engaged in producing your own work as well, which is extraordinary, and getting funding for your work, along with your team. So it's taken you into a different place, this work, hasn't it, as well?

RA: Oh, massively. I mean, I feel like, in many ways, the accident was no accident. I mean, [laughs] it obviously was an accident, but I feel like there is—there are so many things about it that have been so—have really, really allowed me to come home, to come home into me, into my body, into deepening myself as an artist, into owning all the different facets of me, into taking myself more seriously as a writer. So many bits of me, I was just—it just felt a little bit chaotic before the accident. And so much about the journey has been about just coming home.

SB: I'm so tempted to say things about *The Burgundy Book* [both laugh] because it's been such a precious work to work on. And in a way, it is a kind of love story, isn't it?

RA: I'd love to hear your experience of working on it.

SB: Well, that's for another day.

RA: Oh, what a shame.

SB: But it has been an amazing experience because we've worked online completely. And this is an example, isn't it, about how you can create creative, different ways to enable artists to continue creating work after trauma or a fissure in their lives. So we've worked fully online, really, haven't we, for a year and a half? We've literally worked live together, so as dramaturge and writer. What's been really fascinating is the tug and tussle of words, and then occasionally, saying, 'No, this is what I mean, this is what I mean.' You'll tell a story, and because it's difficult for you to do that narration and write—

RA: Type.

SB: —type at the same time, so I then become your scribe, in a sense.

RA: That's right.

SB: And then because it's poetry, where do the line breaks work? So as a fellow writer, it's a fascinating process for me too. And then occasionally, every single session that we've had, we will say the exact—there's a little top knot that needs to be untied. It's not quite working, the rhythm isn't quite right, the syllable isn't quite

right, it's not quite the right word. We're searching, we're searching, we're searching. You're looking for synonyms; I'm looking for synonyms, and then we'll say the exact same thing at the same time.

RA: At the same time. [Both laugh] At least once in every session.

SB: At least once.

RA: And we look at each other and just smile because we know it's going to happen now.

SB: And I don't think I told you that I also am a synesthete before I started the project.

RA: No, I didn't know.

SB: But then you said, when I think I was working at the Courtauld at that time, and you said, 'You see colours? You see everything in colour too?'

RA: I did.

SB: [Laughs] And I went, 'Oh yes, I haven't really talked about that to anyone.' So it's very interesting about this—what you mentioned about how you live with something, and it's just naturally part of you. And children—I mean, I'm a children's [inaudible]—children often just go, 'Well, that's how it is. Of course, Friday is green. Why wouldn't it be green for everybody?' It's ridiculous if it's not. And you live like that, don't you, as a child growing up? I think sometimes people live with difficulty for a long time as well without expressing it as they go into the adult world. As you said, you were very, very tired even before the accident, and you said that you'd lived with neurodiversity for a long time and struggled and being an actress on the stage, and then actually, not said, 'Sometimes I need a bit of a break or sometimes I need these things.'

RA: Or more time learning lines or more time to assimilate a note or all those things that neurotypical people take for granted. And I felt like I was always having to catch up, always catch up, always catch up, and don't show the cracks, don't show there's any issue, don't show that I might need a bit more time or any of those things.

SB: So creatively, we've had an amazing journey because sometimes you come into the Zoom, and we've known, you'll—I'll say you, 'How are we, both of us, doing today? We're going to address this bit of the story', or whatever, and you might say, 'Well, I'm coming with a bit tiredness.' And then we will play, we will play with some

of the ideas, and from that play, has come this beautiful poetry. So, for me, as well as a dramaturg on this project, it's made me really very, very responsive and creative to a communal listening. So I think that sometimes that's not talked about very much, is the enriching experience for everybody in this process.

RA: And I think it's what—you've touched on something really interesting there. And I think it's very much about, as you say, I might come to the session with a tiredness or whatever it might be.

SB: And so might I [laughs].

RA: And so I was going to say, as might you. And it's really about bringing the fullness to the session, and I think that that is really, really, really important. I mean, I really feel like—this might sound like a strange thing to say, but I really feel like in our sessions, my leg is in the session all the time, all the time. You might only be able to see my head on Zoom, but it's there, it's there all the time. And just that feeling gives permission to just be and play and find ideas and be in your fullness as an artist. And I think that's really what is needed a bit more in the industry, especially as disabled artists now, is bringing everything into the room, whether it's a Zoom audition, whether it's a Zoom room, whether it's—you're going to the venue to audition or whatever it might be, or you're meeting a producer or whatever it

might be, allowing yourself to be that full self but also not being afraid to expect that from the industry. Because I think the onus is on the industry and other people too to bring everything about you in, especially when they know, especially when they know. And that's one of the things I really noticed in one of my very early RSC auditions for the show. I remember actually auditioning for it in the kitchen over there. And it wasn't an audition. It was a meeting with the MD of the show. It was an hour-long vocal singing session, singing through the tracks and the songs and changing the keys and all sorts of things. And I felt very, very much like this was part of it, very, very much. And it made such a difference, such a big difference because I could just be just be, be me, and sing from my core. And sometimes it's not even said. You just feel it in someone that they're holding that space for you, they're just holding it. And then you can then hold it back, and then there's that meeting of minds that you know where that creative spark just—

SB: It's a growth mindset for the whole industry. Personally, working on *The Burgundy Book* has been a growth mindset for me.

RA: Has it?

SB: And it's a communal listening that I think you talk about COVID in *The Burgundy Book* a little bit and the world in which we are now, where there are so many

fissures, people are looking for a different way of communicating, a different way of listening, which is not part of this reactive world that we're in. As an artist, it feels to be the lifeblood of what we do, to be fed in that way by the work that we do. I just want to say how excited I am that *The Burgundy Book* is going out into the world. And there is a quote about wings and feet by Frida Kahlo that you talk about. Could you just finish by giving us that quote [music] because it just seems to be so quintessentially you and linked to you?

[Music]

RA: 'Feet, what do I need you for when I have wings to fly?'

[Music]

SB: Renu Arora, thank you very much. It has been an honour to be in conversation with you.

[Music]

RA: Thank you, Sita.

[Music]

Presenter: Sita Brahmachari was talking to Renu Arora. To hear more writing, go to writersmosaic.org.uk

[Music]

Renu Arora was in conversation with Sita Brahmachari

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

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