

# WRITERSMOSAIC

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## Matthew Xia

In Conversation with Trish Cooke

'My job as a director is all about big picture. Literally to sit at the back of auditorium and ensure that the story is being told, and then lots of other people will worry about the details.'

— Matthew Xia

[Music]

**Presenter:** This is *WritersMosaic, In Conversation*. Trish Cooke talks to Matthew Xia about being able to see the bigger picture when directing plays.

[Music]

**Trish Cooke (TC):** Today, we'll be talking about Matthew Xia's role as a theatre director and how he works with writers to tell their stories on stage. We'll also be talking about the importance of new productions of already performed scripts. Matthew, welcome to *WritersMosaic*.

**Matthew Xia (MX):** Thank you, Trish.

**TC:** I want to know more about you first before we go onto *Small Island*. So, give us a bit of your background. I know your background, but just so everybody else knows, give us a bit of your background, how you started as a DJ, and what it was that made you go into theatre directing.

**MX:** Yeah, cool. I always feel like I have to start slightly before any of that, really. I grew up in, really, what I can only describe as abject poverty, in—not a difficult household. The household was full of love and compassion and protection and all of those good things that a house can have. But we were stretched. And I guess one of the things was that it meant that I acted out, and I was quite naughty. A naughty little boy. Of course, as you get older, you understand the reasons for behavioural difficulties and things like that. And I think, ultimately, I was crying out for attention as an only child growing up. Mum was out trying to make money, grandad was out trying to make money, so as an

only child, I think I felt lonely, which meant that I, yeah, I acted out a lot and would try and get attention in school in ways which were possible unhelpful to people who were trying to get an education, if that's what we were doing in East London in 1987.

And then a brilliant woman called Mrs. [missing name] came to my primary school, and I got a little snippet of what it was to do some drama classes and some acting. Really enjoyed it. Loved it. Moved up to secondary school at the age of 11, started doing drama as a subject, and the drama teacher at my secondary school said, 'Oh, you should pop down to your local theatre. We've got a really incredible local theatre.' And she was not lying. It was Theatre Royal Stratford East. Obviously run initially by the brilliant Joan Littlewood, who looked out that front door and said, *Who is here? Working class people are here*, and started making stories for working-class people.

**TC:** And who was running it when you started?

**MX:** When I joined at 11 in 1993, it was the very brilliant Philip Headley, who had also opened the front door and also seen working-class people but a much more ethnically diverse group of working-class people. So, his thing, of course, was about putting black stories on stage, Asian stories on stage, as well as the white working class who also lived in East London at the time. So, it was acting, really, that was the first thing that

took me that way. And actually, if I think back to my household again, my grandad had, despite being a working-class guy, growing up in Custom House in Canning Town, had always had a love for ballet, opera, the arts, the great artists, fine artists. Very, very knowledgeable man, all of his own learning. And it was through Stratford East, I guess, that I grew in confidence. I think as a young, mixed-race boy growing up in a white household, which is what it was – my mum and grandad were white, my dad lived in Plaistow – there was also a bit of a search for a cultural identity, and I think that's where the DJing came in.

**TC:** So, the theatre came before the DJing? Okay.

**MX:** Yeah, theatre—age of 11, joined the youth theatre, which gave me, I guess, a place to vent, to express, to open, to be vulnerable, to play. And then around the age of about 12 or 13, I started writing rap lyrics. A friend of mine, Jonathan, got me into hip-hop. And again, I say all of this in hindsight, with a retrospective understanding that I was looking for a sense of my blackness at the time. Didn't know that at the time, just thought rap was cool – still think rap is cool. I guess I wasn't a right rapper because I ended up writing lyrics and things, but I didn't enjoy it enough. And I guess, moved from the foreground to the background, so from being an actor to being a director, from being a rapper to being a DJ and producer.

I then started making music for youth theatre productions at Stratford East. And this brilliant man walked up to me – his name is Ultz, U-L-T-Z – he’s a designer, a director, and even an associate artist at Stratford East. And he said, ‘You’re the man to help me make a musical,’ which is a very Ultz thing to say, I think. And I said, ‘I don’t—sure. What do you mean?’ And he said, ‘Well, I’ve got this idea that Jay-Z has just sampled Annie’s *It’s The Hard Knock Life*, from Annie. Can you sample a whole musical?’ And because I think I was about 17 at the time, I said yes because I thought I might get paid for it. And we did it. We did a Young Company production of *The Boys from Syracuse*, this Rodgers and Hart musical from the ‘40s, and remixed it, updated it, made it contemporary, turned it into a hip-hop, reggae, bashment, garage musical, all the genres that were there at the time. Philip Headley loved it and said we should do this as a professional piece, so we then moved it into the big auditorium and did it essentially as a hip-hop concert but with the story woven through it.

And then maybe two years after that, Ultz said, ‘Oh, I’ve got another idea: Jean Genet’s *The Blacks*.’ It went right over my head, had no idea what any of the words that he had meant—that he had said meant, didn’t know who Jean was, didn’t know who Genet was, and didn’t know what *The Blacks* was other than a bit of a slur. But it turned out to be this cutting, biting piece of theatre from 1957, I think it was, about what whiteness

had done to Africa and in Africa and to blackness, I guess, as a concept, over a period of 400 years, by this brilliant man, Genet. And Ultz said there are these incredible poetic rants in the piece that he thinks share some of the energy of political hip-hop, Public Enemy, some of the stuff gangsta rap had been doing with a violent edge to it. And he said, 'Do you think we can do a similar thing and turn some of them into songs?' And I said, 'Yeah, absolutely.' And he said, 'Oh, and I think you should co-direct it with me.'

TC: Okay, so that was your first step into directing.

MX: That was it. And I thought, *I don't know what that means, but I'll sit next to you while you direct it.* And he said, 'Yeah, that's kind of what that means.'

TC: And how easily did it come to you? Did it feel natural?

MX: Not at the time, I don't think, no. I think I enjoyed making choices and curating bits of what we were seeing and going on that design process with Ultz and working out where would everyone come in from and where's the Queen going to go, because the Queen of England, played by Tameka Empson, was of course in it.

TC: I saw it way back then.

MX: Yeah, full whiteface makeup and all of that. I guess what was really interesting is we didn't call it—we called it *The Blacks Remixed*, and we changed the character of Archibald, who was this person I played on stage, to Excalibah, which was my DJ name. So, I was just playing a version of myself on the stage, but I had this degree of power that meant I could send people off the stage and say, 'Well, let's do this bit next,' which is what Archibald does. And I remember Ultz saying things like—I'd say, 'I think you should say it like this,' and I'd give a line reading. And Ultz said, 'No, no, no. You should never say to an actor how to say the line. You should help them find how to say the line.' So, it was a bit of a baptism of fire, absolute fertile teaching ground. It got one-star reviews, it got two-star reviews, three-star reviews, four-star reviews, and five-star reviews. It was really—really divided opinion. But I thought, *You know what? I have got a bit of a taste for this.* And then when I was talking to Julia Samuels, who has just finished a stint as interim artistic director of Theatre by the Lake over in Cumbria. She said, 'Do you not remember when we were in youth theatre?' Because she was also my youth theatre leader for a couple of years. She said, 'Do you not remember asking us—' Can I swear?

TC: Yeah.

**MX:** She said, 'You said to me, "Acting's great, but when are we going to do the real shit?"' [Both laugh] Which apparently meant writing and directing, so I clearly had a taste for it. I also—I did a short film with Armando Iannucci directing, which again came through Stratford East. And I thought it was the most boring three days of my life, sitting in this trailer waiting to be called. And then you—and then they roll film, it takes them an hour to set up everything, and then you film for about 20 minutes, and then they send you back to your trailer. And I just thought, *I don't want to do this for the rest of my life.*

**TC:** I totally get it.

**MX:** And meanwhile, all the other people fiddling with the cameras and pressing buttons and having talks and looking at scripts and scribbling things out. I thought, *I want to be doing a bit more of that.*

**TC:** Yeah. When you're working with a playwright, I'm quite interested to know how do you make sure that you and the playwright are on the same story?

**MX:** Well, I think my job, and particularly if it's a new play, is to serve their story. They're the author, they're the architect. I'm the obstetrician. I help bring the thing to life that they've created. But it is a relationship, certainly. And it depends on which point in that process you join. So, if it's me commissioning a writer, I feel like, in a way, I have a much more hands on relationship with the work dramaturgically, supporting from conception through to staging and production. If it's me picking up a play that is already developed and written, then I really do believe my job is to get inside their head, understand their intentions in writing the play, what they were hoping to reveal through the writing, and to do that. But my storytelling is different to a writer's. Mine is much more about the visual and the aural and the kinesthetic and the emotional. I think a playwright is story structure, architecture, character, what is the arc, what is the journey? But then I have to intuit all of that and understand all of that.

I call the first week of my rehearsal process 'data extraction'. And I talk about—I got dreadful metaphors, Trish—but here's one. Before you build your Ikea flat pack furniture, they advise you count all the screws, make sure you've got the right little fittings, take it all out, lay every—have we sent you all the right parts? And that's what I have to do with a play. I have to deconstruct it. What are all the elements? Who are these people? What are their relationships? What is the world we're in? What are the

facts, the questions, the backstory, the history? And then from that point, we can now build the thing together.

**TC:** And have you ever worked with a playwright and got it wrong and not quite understood or been on the same path of what they're trying to say in the script?

**MX:** I think I have. I think I've had, not a clash, but I, again, a play that I had commissioned, an adaptation of a classic, and we've got a brilliant, brilliant writer, much more experienced than I was, and I think we had slightly different ideas. Not about the big structure, but about some real key moments in it. And I remember putting my suit of armour on and going in to be like—I can tell you what it is. It was *Frankenstein*. And—

**TC:** In Manchester.

**MX:** In Manchester with brilliant April De Angelis. And we all got to the point that we had to get to ultimately. And I think, again, I'd misunderstood what she wanted. And I had this idea that we shouldn't show the creature's face. We must not see the creature until act two. And she said, 'But then we're not going to care about him, are we? If we've not seen him.' And I said, 'We will. We will have heard his voice, and we'll have

seen him moving around in the shadows with his big cloak on. But actually, I think we should hold back.' And that was because I'd gone down this rabbit warren of how does fear work, what's the science of fear, how do you get people to really be afraid of a thing, and suspense? I was really fascinated by suspense. And I thought, *If we can just delay the moment we see his face.* And she was absolutely right. So, at the very end of act one, the cloak comes off, he reveals his face, and he gives us this brilliant speech. But also, what I'm learning is I'm neurodivergent, and sometimes it takes me a little while to come around to a new idea.

**TC:** But that's good. Because those conversations have to happen in order for—I mean, the writer then discovers new things within the script as well. If the conversations don't happen, then it's them and you, and you've got two separate things going on. Whereas once you've had that conversation, they know where you're coming from, you know where they're coming from, and you find that understanding. And if it's something that the writer is trying to say that you totally just haven't got at all, then at least you fight it out, you battle it out, until you get there.

**MX:** Yeah. Yeah, I do like to think that I'm, even in a design process—Dave Harris, who I'm about to work with for the second time—he wrote an amazing play called *Tambo & Bones*, very provocative play about, I guess, the relationship between capitalism and

fascism, ultimately. I'm about to do his second play. And he just sent me a message saying, 'Thanks for the design images explaining what the design will look like. It's like you're in my head. It's like without me ever telling you what the set should look like, somehow you work out what it should be.' But I think that's because I try and sit in the play as much as possible.

**TC:** It's brilliant. When you find collaborators that actually get what you're doing and what you're trying to say and then they apply their skill to it as well, there's nothing better really, because then you can just both fly.

**MX:** Yeah. Absolutely. Yeah. And like you say, you inspire each other. You see something in their work that moves you forward; they see something that you're doing that moves them forward. And it's that thing isn't it that Simon Stevens says, 'A script is just a blueprint for a night in the theatre.' So, it's a live document really, and it can chop and change and shift just to make the story work and to have the most impactful effect on the audience.

**TC:** That's the main thing, the story. We've just talked a little bit about new plays. But if—when you work with plays that have already had productions, what's your approach then?

**MX:** Yeah. Well, I'm doing one now, aren't I, really? I think it's interesting. When a play is more historical—so, I've done a lot of Athol Fugard's plays; a brilliant anti-apartheid playwright who passed away last year, maybe the year before. There have been 500 productions of *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead* and 500 productions of *Blood Knot*, so you feel like you can be a little looser with those, you can play a little freer with something that's had many iterations. And maybe, actually, maybe what I'm starting to think now is that maybe it is the same process, which is to sit inside the play and try and understand the intentions of the author and to work those intentions. I never want to do what I call '*Macbeth* in a fridge', like just a really wacky concept because you can, and you impose it on the play, and you can almost feel the play pulling away from this concept that you're trying to trap it in. But with *Small Island*, so there has only been one production before, and it was seismic. It was the National Theatre on the Olivier stage.

**TC:** Plus, the BBC.

**MX:** And the BBC drama as well, yeah. So, I think I just come at it, and I go, *Well, I'm not doing the book, and that's really important*. And I keep reminding the actors. They say, 'But Queenie is a bit more like this in the book.' And I go, 'That's great. We're not doing the book. We're doing the play.' So again, if we just do our data extraction on the play,

what does that give us, which is slightly different to if we did it on the book, which has—well, it's richer, it's more detailed, but you get to know everything they're thinking. Whereas in the play, you only get to hear everything they're saying, and you've got to work out what they're thinking.

[Promo for *Small Island*]

**'Actor:** No wife of mine will be on her knees in this country.

**MX:** *Small Island* is a play about four lives that become intertwined forevermore.

**Mark Arends (MA):** In a rapidly changing world.

**MX:** Hortense and Gilbert, who are two Jamaican migrants, and they have a dream to live in England. And their lives become forever entwined with this white British couple, Queenie and Bernard.

**Rhys Stephenson:** You're crossing continents in 1940s Jamaica, and you're going into London post war, and the contrast is huge.

**Daniel Ward:** It's a beautiful story about where people fit in, where home is. It is very, very funny [laughing].'

**MX:** I think my immediate response with something like *Small Island* was to move as quickly and as far away from the National's production. So, you go, *What did they do?* Well, they did it on the Olivier stage, and it was big, and it was epic, and they had this massive back wall of video. So, the very first thing I said was, 'We should have no video. No video at all.' Then you read the play, and every scene starts with Pathé News letting you know where you are. Okay, so we've got to have video. Okay, well let's not use video to create environments. Let's not use video to give additional characters or a different movement or any of that stuff.

But I think, really, you've just got to start from scratch with a designer, with those key creative team members, and read the play, and break it down, and work out how to do it. So, what is this play really about? What's the gesture at the heart of it? It is about four characters who become intertwined. What is the moment they become intertwined? Oh, it's there in scene seven when that event happens. No spoilers because not everyone's seen it, so I'm trying to hold back. But we know it's a Windrush story, and we know at the end of act one some Jamaicans are going to get on a boat because that's what happened in 1948, and they're going to come to England because

that's what happened. Work back from that. Okay, the first act feels like this expansive, fluid memory play. We meet our three narrators, and they set the scene for us, but each of their first scenes are hopping all over the place in time and place and moment. And then we go more linear. And then in act two, the whole thing is told in two rooms; in Queenie's front room and Gilbert and Hortense's tiny little room upstairs that they rent off of her. So again, how do you do that? And slowly, it starts to reveal what it wants to be and how it wants to express itself. So, we've got a revolve. Never worked with a revolve before. That's quite fun. So, we can go from one room to the other room to the other room to the other room, back and forth, back and forth. But of course, how does that manifest in act one when we don't want to be doing that bit of the story? It's just very light and fluid and free. And the moment you say the word 'fluid', you're like, *It's a play about water, isn't it really?* It's a play about people crossing a huge expanse of water, going from the hurricane. We start with a hurricane; that's water and wind. And we end up in the grey drizzle of London; that's also—it's a soaking wet play. And so again, how does that inform it? And hopefully, you'll start to see those elements in the design, in the costume, in the musicality, in the text. So, it is data extraction. Pull it all out, what does it tell you?

TC: So, going back to you said that it's not the book, it's the script. Okay so, you have the adaptation. So, when did you get involved? You were just looking at the script, or did you ever look at the book at all?

MX: I read the book after I'd read the script. I read the script after I'd seen the National's production, and in between those two things, I watched the BBC show, about eight months ago where I thought, *Actually, there's enough time for me to, not carry any of this over, but to understand the story in a different medium of telling that we could never replicate because film and theatre are wildly different art forms.* And then went and met with Helen Edmundson, who did the adaptation, and I asked a bunch of questions I had about some choices that had been made. 'Well in the book, this comes before this. Why has it been moved?' She told me about the work she did with Andrea. She worked really closely with Andrea. Andrea was quite poorly. I think she saw a rehearsal room run, but she never got to see the show on stage. But then also I guess you're aware that you are dealing with something that was now a dead woman's wish for how she wanted the text to sit on the play.

TC: So, did you have to deal with her estate during this? I mean, you might not have—well, Helen would have.

**MX:** Helen would have been dealing with the estate. The Playhouse would have been dealing with the estate. But what was really beautiful was on our second day of rehearsal, Bill Mayblin came to join us, Andrea Levy's widower. And he said if she was here, she'd be sitting in this room with you cheering you on, supporting everything you're doing. She loved the story. She loved the storytelling, and all she wants is for the story to be told in the best possible way. And then we learn how autobiographical it is. It's all of that stuff. And actually, that's the useful stuff, isn't it. I can't talk to Andrea, but I can talk to people who knew her and loved her and understood her, and they can share things with us, like the fact that the story started as an in-joke between Andrea and Bill. They met as a black man—sorry, a white man and a black woman, I think in the '70s, maybe '80s. Their parents, as far as I understand, never met. And they always made a joke, 'God, can you imagine if our parents met each other?' And that is a story of *Small Island*, essentially. You then learn that Gilbert Joseph, of course, she's given Gilbert a Jewish surname, like Levy, because she has Jewish heritage, like a character in the play. Her mother came over here full of certificates and letters of recommendation to be a teacher and was told she couldn't be a teacher because those certificates meant nothing in this country, so she became a seamstress, which is what is suggested in *Small Island*. And it is like all great writing isn't it, write what you know?

**TC:** Most definitely [laughs]. And change all the names.

MX: [Laughs] Change all the names, so no one can come knocking on your door.

TC: You've also done—you've worked on *The Harder They Come*, which had several productions before. Well, it had a film. Is that in 1970—

MX: '74 or '72.

TC: 1972, yeah. And then in 2009 at Stratford, they had a production of *The Harder They Come*. And then you did it in 2025, and then it's going to be on again in 2026.

MX: It's going to be on again.

[Promo for *The Harder They Come*]

TC: When you first started working on your production, were you not a bit apprehensive with it having been on at Stratford before? What were your thoughts, and what was your approach?

**MX:** Yeah, I was apprehensive for many reasons. One, because it had been done at Stratford before, where they were doing it again. Two, because it was a different script by a different writer. So, this was Suzan-Lori Parks's version.

**TC:** Yeah, and how did that come about?

**MX:** They interviewed me for the job. I was petrified. I was like, *Suzan-Lori Parks, the Pulitzer Prize winning Suzan-Lori Parks, wow. Always loved her play Topdog/Underdog, In the Blood.* Seen some incredible work by her. And then I was asked to watch the American production that had already happened of *The Harder They Come*.

**TC:** The stage?

**MX:** Yeah, the stage version, which wasn't the Stratford East version, which had been adapted by Perry Henzell, Ultz, Kerry Michael working together. And their first notes, sorry, their first questions were, 'So what did you think of the production that we had in New York?' And I said, 'I didn't like it. I really didn't like it. It didn't seem to have any degree of authenticity to me.' I think later on, once we'd made our version, and we were all sat around a table, I may even have called it a reggae pantomime, which is not to be sniffed at. I've seen some great reggae pantomimes. You've written some of

them. [TC laughs] But a reggae pantomime is not *The Harder They Come*. And so, the largeness of it and a slightly caricature way of presenting Jamaicans on the stage just didn't sit well with me. So, I said, 'Look, if we're going to do it, and if you want me to do it, I will be bringing authenticity to every single moment of this, and that will start with who's choreographing it, who's orchestrating it, who's in the band. Let's infuse as much of what we're going to do with people who understand what Jamaica is and what Jamaican culture is.

**TC:** And had Suzan written the script by then, or was that something that you were developing together?

**MX:** No, so that was the version that they'd done in the States. Yeah. So, I then worked with Suzan-Lori, just in giving notes, really, in a kind of dramaturgical capacity. 'I think this song could be more functional at the moment. It's just transitional. It just helps us get from here to here, but actually, if it could move this character's journey on a little bit more, if the character could be changed.' And this is all the great stuff I learned from Fred Carl and Robert Lee, when we did the musical theatre writing workshop at Stratford East in the early 2000s.

**TC:** They were very, very good at just allowing people to just express what they wanted to say but then using a model to be able to write a musical.

**MX:** Yeah. And going, 'Look, here's how a musical works, doesn't mean it's how you have to make a musical work, but these things are tried and tested tools and tricks.' But I think the key thing is, if someone opens their mouth to sing, by the time they've finished singing, something should have changed, either in them or in the person who's hearing them or in the circumstances.

**TC:** And they've got to have a reason to sing. I just don't like musicals that just sing for the sake of singing.

**MX:** Yeah. I love that thing, what is it, 'They sing because they can't talk anymore.' They've got to move into a new mode of communication.

**TC:** What I noticed with—although I didn't see the American version, what I noticed with your 2025 version was that the songs, A, had moved, different characters were singing songs. There'd been some different characters in the one that I saw in 2009. Was that a choice to move the story along? What was the—how did you work with

Suzan to make those decisions and then for her to add other songs again that were her—that she'd written?

**MX:** I mean, I remember—so, it never used to open with *Funky Kingston*. It used to open with *You Can Get It If You Really Want*. And literally, lights up, curtain rises, Ivan runs on and says, 'I'm here to be a star.' I said, 'We don't know where you are? What do you mean I'm here to be a star?' So, I said, can we establish location? A bit like an establishing shot in a film.

**TC:** I love how it started actually.

**MX:** Yeah, really slow and gentle. A woman says 'Morning', another woman says, 'Morning.'

**TC:** The percussion.

**MX:** And all the percussion and the rhythm of people in a market square or people playing dominoes. And so, *What is the sound of Kingston*, I remember thinking that. And Suzan-Lori had written that into the piece, actually, the second time. So, after these notes, she wrote *The Sound of Kingston Comes to Life* eventually becoming *Funky*

*Kingston*. It was the producers, actually, the American producers, who said, 'I think we could open with *Funky Kingston*' after I said, 'I think we should have an establishing shot. Where are we? Let's start with Kingston. Let's meet all of the key players and then bring in star of the show, and then we'll know where he is and what he wants much clearer.'

TC: Tell us more about ATC first.

MX: Yeah. So, Actors Touring Company was founded in 1979, I believe, by a guy called John Retallack.

TC: And you're the artistic director.

MX: I am the artistic director and recently sole CEO. I used to be joint CEO. So, essentially, making lots of major decisions about the organisation and what it should be, what it should be for. Historically, it's been a kind of European, slightly art house theatre company. More recently, it moved into presenting international work, modern international work, lots of German work, lots of Russian work. And then when I took it over, I just remember thinking, *Oh, the internationalism that ATC often seems to have been interested in maps onto the borders of white Western Europe, and there is so much*

*more international to explore. Where are the African writers? Where are the Asian writers? Where are the East Asian writers? Where are the South American writers?* So, started initially by reaching out into those different areas to see what we could find. And then, yeah, we have the power to commission. And one of the other things I thought is also Britain is gloriously international, which is causing some people problems at the moment, isn't it? But there are lots of migrant voices in the country, glorious, wonderful migrant voices. And so for me, I was like, *Also, we can commission British, international writers.* And the first person I commissioned was Mojisola Adebayo, who is, I believe, she's dual heritage, Nigerian, Danish, raised in Woolwich, lives in Berlin. That's international, isn't it?

TC: That's pretty international.

MX: Yeah, it's four places on a map, including Woolwich. And so, we started talking. Why did we start? I can't remember why we started talking in the first place. But I'd always enjoyed some of the work that I'd seen of hers. And she said—ah, that was it. I'd always wanted to make a play about Henrietta Lacks.

TC: Who's Henrietta Lacks?

**MX:** Henrietta Lacks was an African American woman who died aged 30-something, young 30s, maybe 36, from cervical cancer. And they took her cellular tissue post-death without asking, and it became the first ever immortal human cell line. So, it's still here now. It's multiplying. It wouldn't stop multiplying. It spread faster in petri dishes all around the world. They've sent her to space. They've grafted her onto the back of a mouse. I say her because I believe it is still her cellular tissue they're working with. But her cellular tissue was involved in the polio vaccination. So, it's what they use to develop the polio vaccination, AIDS and HIV treatment, cancer treatment, COVID vaccinations. There's a brilliant quote, I think by Hilary Mantel, on the back of the book I read about Henrietta Lacks, that said, 'No dead woman has done more for the living.' And it's true. It really is true. And I was sitting with Mojisola, having a chat, and I remember we were at the ICA, talking about ideas and plays. And I was about to say, 'Have you ever heard of Henrietta Lacks?' And she said, 'Have you ever heard of Henrietta Lacks?'

**TC:** That's weird.

**MX:** Yeah. And I said, 'You've got to write me a Henrietta Lacks play.' And she said, 'I would love to.' So, it's often that. It's often those moments of synchronicity and spark together that lead you to a thing. And then she wrote this incredible pitch that I can

almost remember some of the start of. Someone walks up and they say, '*Family Tree*. It's a play about farming humans, human farming, soil and the soul, seeds and cells, selling cells, imprisoned cells, prising open, dividing, multiplying.' And she just went on this massive, epic poem. And I went, 'Well, that's a checklist for everything that the play is going to be about, isn't it?' And it was. And she's really into permaculture and indigenous relationship with the soil and having a better relationship with earth, literally the earth and the ground and nature. And somehow, she's folded all of that into this play called *Family Tree*. And I think one of the things that it's my job to do as an artistic director who wants to put a play on is get the play to a point where I believe I can produce it and get it on stage. So, that's a big part of the work. But another thing is to see what I think the writer is trying to do and to push them closer and closer and closer to that thing that I think they're trying to reach for.

**TC:** And that's the work of the dramaturg, isn't it?

**MX:** That is it. Exactly. Yeah. And again, not to get in the way, not to create obstacles, to ask useful questions, to point people in useful directions, and mainly just to say, 'Remember you were heading over there. Keep going. Don't stop. Don't give up.' She had this wonderful, wonderful idea, and I could feel her pulling back from it. So, Henrietta Lack's cellular tissue has been used, like I say, to cure many, many illnesses,

to help advance our understanding of medical science. Therefore, she is powerful, all powerful, omnipotent, you could say. She also exists all around the world, everywhere. If you opened a fridge in a laboratory—you can order her now. You can go online, and you can order her cellular tissue, and it will turn up at your house in about two weeks, and you can put it in your fridge, and it will keep multiplying, and your eggs will be covered in Henrietta Lacks. So, she's also present everywhere, omnipresent. So, she is omnipotent, omnipresent and all-knowing, omniscient. And I said, 'Well, they're the three requirements, aren't they, to be a god?' Which was what I could sense Mojisola was suggesting through the work of the play. She had this Orisha, this Nigerian Orisha, a Yoruban Orisha turn up at the end of the play.

**TC:** As a writer, to have a dramaturg that just can steer you and remind you of what you're writing about, because it's so easy to just go off [laughs].

**MX:** That's it. As you said that, it's not even steering you. You've got your hands on the wheel, and I'm going, 'You've just come slightly off course, actually. Do you remember you were trying to get to the centre of the target?'

**TC:** Yeah, and it's so easy to do because you're just so wound up in what you're writing that you—you're wound up in the moment of what you're writing that you forget the

bigger picture because this thing is just so interesting at the moment. And then it's when you pull yourself back or you have someone to help you to pull yourself back that you can actually see, *Okay, it's gone a bit heavy on that bit.*

**MX:** Yeah. I've spent too long with this person. It was never their story in the first place. I was trying to tell this person's story. But you're right. And again, you just said some words that made me think. My job as a director is all about big picture. Literally to sit at the back of the auditorium and ensure that the story is being told, and then lots of other people will worry about the details. Anna Critchlow will worry about Hortense's journey. Daniel Ward will worry about Gilbert's journey.

**TC:** Each actor.

**MX:** Yes, each actor can look after their own character and their own journey. And the stage managers will worry about where the props are, and the designer will worry about the set dressing, and my job is to look at the whole table and make sure the feast is being served in the right way while everyone else worries about their own plates. [Music] Another dreadful metaphor, but there it is.

[Music]

**TC:** It's been wonderful talking to you today.

[Music]

**MX:** It's been lovely. Thank you, Trish.

[Music]

**Presenter:** Trish Cook was in conversation with Matthew Xia. To hear more writers, go to [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk).

[Music]

Matthew Xia was in conversation with Trish Cooke

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

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