WRITERS MOSAIC

Rianna Simons

In Conversation with Luca Newman

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>
> — Rianna Simons

[Music]

Presenter: This is *WritersMosaic, In Conversation*. Luca Newman talks to Rianna Simons about the stepping stones of playwriting.

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Luca Newman (LN): Welcome to an episode of *In Conversation* at *WritersMosaic*. My name's Luca, and today I'm In Conversation with the playwright, Rianna Simons. Jeremy O. Harris has called her one of the funniest writers he knows, and her debut play in development, *White Girls Gang*, has taken her from England to Italy to America and back again. She's also an archive coordinator at National Theatre's Black Plays Archive, where we cross paths, and we're crossing paths again today. Rianna, how are you doing?

Rianna Simons (RS): I'm great. Thank you for having me.

LN: You're welcome. Just before we get into the journey of your play, let's talk about what is *White Girls Gang*.

RS: So, *White Girls Gang* is a play about a group of white women in a book club, and they're reading Audre Lorde's *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* for the first time. This is very unlike anything else that they've read before, and it really rattles them and shocks them. And things from their past start to come to light, and their lives start to unravel, and things take off from there.

LN: So, before we get into the journey that your play's taking you on, what are the central themes of the play?

RS: I think paranoia [laughs]. I'd say, I think definitely paranoia, I think impulsiveness, and I would say terror, I think. I think all the women are, in various ways, terrorising each other and terrorising themselves. There's definitely this air of anxiety throughout the whole play. It feels like things are just—everything's very tense, and they're all very—they're not very forgiving with each other.

LN: Yeah. Do you think there are projections of their—they can feel their own secrets coming to light?

RS: Oh, yeah, yeah, 100%. I think they—there's an element that they might know what's coming.

LN: I think another thing that, definitely when I was reading it, popped up to me, I don't know if this is one of the central points, but for me it was white guilt that was a big part of the unraveling. And I suppose, well, first, how might we define white guilt?

RS: I think white guilt is a—it's almost a non-feeling. It's this feeling like if you're, and I say this obviously as a black woman, but for me, I think white guilt is white people feeling afraid of things that either they have done directly or things that they have not done directly based on who they are as people and this paralysing fear that they should do something, but they don't know what that is. And that's something that just hangs over them.

LN: Yeah. I suppose there's another element to it where perhaps white people might feel, *oh, well, I should feel*. At what point does this guilt become unproductive?

RS: I mean, that's a good point. I think guilt as a feeling is an almost unproductive feeling. It puts you in this place of being paranoid and afraid to do things as opposed to actually take action. Yeah. I think it, yeah, I think it largely is an unproductive thing. And if it—I feel like in the play, it takes these women on this wild goose chase of being like, *let me do something*, and that increasingly just becomes crazier and crazier.

LN: Where did this idea start for the play?

RS: So, this play [laughs] first started not really being a play. I had to write a scene for a class I was taking at Central School of Speech and Drama. We had to write a five

minute scene, and I based what ended up being this play around a piece I'd read by an American journalist named Poppy Noor, who had written a piece called 'Why liberal white women [pay] a lot of money to learn over dinner how they're racist' for *The Guardian* in February 2020. And in that piece, she follows these really rich white women in these facilitated sessions with these two women of colour, almost unpacking their racism and their actions and feelings towards black people and people of colour largely. And I thought that was really funny [both laugh]. I thought it was really deranged. And I thought, *well, what would these facilitated sessions look like if they weren't being held by women of colour? What if these white women were left to their own devices*?

LN: I see. I see. So, I suppose in the play, the woman of colour in the room is Audre Lorde, who isn't there to lead the discussion. I see. There's also something that I remember when we talked about it for the first time, you said it was—that was one of the early term things, that was one of the first things you wrote there. I guess that was your big introduction to the class when you think about satire and everything like that.

RS: I think that's my niche. I really like writing comedy more generally, but I think satire is really—it feels really fun to write because you feel like, I don't know, I think for me, it feels very empowering to write satire and knowing that I'm satirising a specific group of

people. It just feels really, not natural because I think it's really hard, but it feels really like it's a good impulse to do, I find. I find I'm drawn towards it.

LN: Yeah, yeah. Where was the next place that you ended up with that play?

RS: So I, like every person who writes, not every person, but I think a lot of playwrights in the UK, in order to get their work seen, we'll just write a play and then send it to a lot of unsolicited script competitions. And so, I sent this to a competition based out of the US called the Yale Drama Series Prize. That's an international prize. It runs every two years, I believe. I might have that wrong. Anyway, I sent it off there expecting nothing to happen with it, and then it got shortlisted. So, it was me and four other writers who had been shortlisted for that award. And at the time [laughs], Jeremy O. Harris was the president of that prize. And separately to the prize, he was—I got an email being like, 'Oh, we want to do a writing residency with the shortlisted writers. Do you want to do it?' And I thought it was a scam email [laughs] because I couldn't believe it. I though—I was like, *wow, these scammers are getting so hyper specific*.

LN: It was sponsored by Gucci as well.

RS: Yeah. It was sponsored by Gucci. We were in the Tuscan countryside for a month. It remains the most insane thing that's ever happened to me. And it was very nice. And I got to work on this play and work on a couple of other things, meet some other writers, some of whom I'm very close with now, which is very lovely.

LN: I guess I want to ask about the—how much you felt there was—you really gained from having a lot of time and space just in somewhere that's completely away from everything.

RS: Yeah, I mean, I think for the first two weeks I was [laughs]—this is my fear and anxiety coming through. I was just very—I couldn't really believe that it was happening. And in a way, I felt really—I keep saying guilt is a useless emotion, but I felt really guilty [laughs] cause I was in the countryside and all my colleagues were at work and all my other writer friends were just at work. But it was just really nice to just have that time. I was working on a TV pilot while I was out there, so I was writing parts of that. Yeah, it was just nice to have the space to talk to other writers and go for a little walk if you wanted to go for a walk. Yeah.

LN: At the same time, you're also—you were developing *White Girls Gang* further there as well?

RS: Yeah.

LN: Another thing is you're obviously being mentored by Jeremy O. Harris. I suppose that's where he got to know you and made his mind up that you were a very funny person to be around. Why do you think satire was the form for what you wrote?

RS: I think satire was the form because there's some—I mean, there's something, for me, deeply funny about watching someone try something really earnestly and get it very wrong.

LN: It's quite cruel.

RS: Yeah, it's a sick cruelty, a sick humour in me to want to do that. But I think there was just something really almost natural to wanting to write about these women messing up. Also, I think white women in culture, we're used to watching them mess up or we're almost predisposed to almost want to watch them fail. That sounds very cryptic, [laughs] but I think for this play, these women, it just made sense. The play came together really quickly. When I properly started writing it, I wrote the first draft in

three days, and I've never done that again [laughs]. I couldn't imagine this play not being satirical, I think. Yeah.

LN: Yeah. And I suppose beyond that, satire is a genre. I suppose this is the big question for all art, really, but what do you think the effectiveness is of satire?

RS: So, there is a critic [laughs] named Harry Levin, who talks about satire being akin to putting pins in the effigies of your enemies, which I think it makes you feel good as a writer. It makes you feel—I think there's a danger in it being almost self-righteous and being like, *Oh, look at me. I have this pen, and I'm going to write about these people*. But I think satire as a form, it's important to—I think it's important for comedy, but I think satire in particular to hold people to account, and if we can laugh at that as an opening and then think about it more deeply, I think that's a really good thing to do.

LN: Yeah, yeah. I think your play in particular is in an interesting spot because as you said, it satirises liberal people, who perhaps the theater world is primarily made of, one. And two, I think in these times, I suppose, what would you say to people who might say with the right on the rise, now's not the time for this. Now's not the time for this conversation.

RS: Yeah. I mean, that's been something I've been terrifyingly thinking about [LN laughs] the whole time I've been writing this play. There's a fear in me that this play will, quote unquote, 'end up in the wrong hands.'

LN: [Laughs] That's interesting you say that because when I was reading it, I was thinking, *well, someone from the opposite side of the political spectrum could also walk into this and go, oh, this is for me.*

RS: Yeah, I think that's my fear. Sometimes I've been talking to people about the play, and I'm like, *Do you—are we on the same side? Are you? Are you?*

LN: But I think a lot of the best things are.

RS: Yeah. I think it speaks to universality in a way that we're all watching these women in particular, watching them fail, and it's almost 'what can we learn', so to speak, quote unquote, from them, even if that's just don't do crazy things, don't be impulsive.

LN: Coming away from the play for a second, although not entirely, to the Black Plays Archive. What is it that you get up to there?

RS: So, I'm the Black Plays Archive Coordinator in the Archive Department at the National Theatre. It's just me. I'm a one-man band at the moment. I largely catalog plays, so that means I make records of a play happening. So, when it was on; who was in it; who wrote it; what's the play about; if it's been published, where can you read it; if it's not been published, where can you access it in a library archive collection? So, a lot of what I do is cataloging. I commission teaching resources. I manage all this on a website for the National Theatre. I talk to writers. I sometimes take in their scripts. I mean, I do various things in a day. I think every day is different.

LN: What plays were really influential in writing *White Girls Gang*?

RS: Oh, that's a really good question. I always come back to a play called *Talking in Tongues* by a writer named Winsome Pinnock. That's one of my favourite plays, if not my favourite play. It's—in the first act, it follows—so, the play largely follows this duo, these two friends, who are both black women. It's set in 1994; that's when it was written. Anyway, they're both being treated badly by their partners and by people around them, these largely white spaces that they're in. And so, in the first act, they're at a house party, being just ignored and not very well respected. And then, the second act, they decide to go on holiday to Jamaica, and then, they end up being the people that they hate [laughs] in the UK. So, they go on holiday and end up just causing chaos

and just being so impulsive and just running riot. And in a way, it's almost euphoric, but in another way, it's really [laughs] devastating to watch the things that they get up to. So, I think about that play a lot. I also just think it's a gorgeous, beautiful play that I haven't seen staged in my lifetime, which is very sad. But it's also almost symptomatic of a lot of the plays in the Black Plays Archive. Often those plays will be on for short runs, and then they won't get staged again. So, a lot of what I do as well is trying to get them out there into the public.

LN: Yeah, yeah. I suppose, at the same time, there's plays that will have directly influenced you, there are some that may not have influenced you but you still think are worth getting out there. Are there any that you've got on that list as well that you can think of?

RS: Yes. There is one play who I—I talk about this play probably 10 times a week. I talk about it to anyone who will listen. It's called *Island Life* by a writer named Jenny McLeod. It's about a lot of things, but the summary of it is that it's about three women [laughs] breaking out of an old folks home. I think it's brilliant. It was one of her early plays. I think it was on in '87 at Bolton Octagon, but I might have that wrong. But yeah, I've been desperately trying to track down Jenny the whole time I've worked at the

National because I think her writing is great. She's got other plays in the novel, but it's just a fantastic play. And I don't think anyone knows about it, which is crazy to me.

LN: Yeah. Was this the—I remember you told me about the one that got away.

RS: Yeah, this is the one that got away. Yeah. I spent a lot of time trying to find people who knew or know Jenny. This is the thing; I don't actually know if she's still with us. But I ended up finding her agent who published her novel. And he was like, 'Oh, Jenny's great. Haven't heard from her in years.' It's like, ah! Yeah.

LN: Was this—did you put this one up for revival at any point?

RS: Yes. So, when—so, the National Theatre staged a play from the Black Plays Archive at the start of 2025 called *Alterations*. But before *Alterations* was the final deciding play, I put a list in front of the director, Lynette Linton, because she wanted to do a play from the Black Plays Archive, and this was very high up on my list. But we couldn't find anyone who would sign off the rights, and I desperately, desperately was trying to find someone and just was driving myself crazy.

LN: Now, we'll head off from London again, as you did, over to America. The first time you went to America, that was to Williamstown Theatre.

RS: Yes. So, in the summer of 2025, I had a reading of *White Girls Gang* on at Williamstown Theatre Festival. That was, again, through Jeremy O. Harris, who is the, I want to say—I don't know what his actual title is. I want to say it's the Creative Director. Artistic Director?

LN: He's the big cheese.

RS: The big cheese. Yeah, so, the big cheese at Williamstown. So, I had a reading of *White Girls Gang* on there in the summer. I was there for 10 days working on the play, also seeing a lot of other stuff at the festival. Yeah, it was just very nice. Very overwhelming. Very nice.

LN: Yeah. Yeah. There was also a big name involved here, wasn't there? There was—

RS: So, an actress named Kaia Gerber was in the play.

LN: Yeah. For any older listeners, she is the daughter of Cindy Crawford, I think.

RS: Yes, she is. And she's very talented. She's very good. She played a character in the play called Lizzie, who's holding everything together and is trying to keep this book club afloat by any means necessary. She was great to work with. She was very nice. Yeah, I felt very awestruck. It's crazy how it all came about because I was approached, being like, 'Do you want Williamstown to look at this play?' And I was like, 'Yeah, sure, if you want.' [Laughs] And I think the nature of a theater, working with different writers and stuff, I was hearing things and then didn't really know what was going on. And then it was like, 'Oh, Kaia is really interested in the play. She really likes it. Do you want her to be involved?' And I was like, 'Yeah. Yeah, she wants to.' [Laughs].

LN: I mean, she also hosts a book club online, doesn't she?

RS: Yes, I think that was part of the whole—she runs a book club called Library Science, and she also interviews writers.

LN: There was also another American moment for you. There was [RS laughs] the Soho Horizons FX Fest. There was a bit of a cultural exchange.

RS: Yes, [laughs] so, bizarrely.

LN: So, you came back to England.

RS: Yeah. So, Soho Theater, I've been working with on the play, they're very interested in it, so hopefully it goes there. Who knows? I don't know. But yeah, Soho got me in touch with Playwrights Horizons, which is a theater in New York. They predominantly, I think only in their history, have produced work by American writers. But they were doing a cross-cultural exchange between Soho Theater here in the UK and playwrights in the US at Playwrights Horizons. So, four playwrights from Soho went to the US, and then four playwrights from Playwrights Horizons came to Soho. And I was one of those writers, which was very nice. So, I had another reading of this play, which was very nice [laughs]. I'm not trying to be cryptic. It was very nice. I think it was just—I think any time I've—I feel really lucky to have had readings of this play. I know some writers who have never had any readings of their work. And it always feels out of your hands. The theater is like, 'Oh, we want to put this play up because we think we want to do something with it.' And I'm always very surprised by that [laughs].

LN: I suppose you've probably seen quite a few, I suppose, renditions of it as well. People playing in different ways.

RS: Yeah. And it's always interesting to see how actors approach different parts. Yeah, I feel like every time I learn something new about the play, which is great.

LN: Were there any differences between UK and US audiences in how they reacted?

RS: Yes. I mean, I had to rewrite some of the play for the US because some of the jokes just weren't landing at all.

LN: Really? That's interesting. Can you remember any?

RS: Yeah. There was some hyper-specific jokes about them living in Clapham. Yeah, things like that. And then there was certain phrasing things, like one of the actors I worked with was saying, 'We wouldn't say stood up, we'd say standing up.' I'd be like, 'Okay.' [Laughs] It was small things like that. But yeah, I think largely, the play, for the most part, stayed the same almost, apart from those minor things. But just hearing it in an American accent, I was like, oh.

LN: I hope this isn't too much of a spoiler, but as the play goes on, some of the people who initially suggested Audre Lorde to be read in the book group are some of the people who come off with some of the skeletons in the closet. It's almost like they're

doing it as penance. I guess I wanted to ask whether you feel like people need to redeem themselves in that way or whether there even is such a thing as being able to redeem yourself from the past.

RS: That's a really good question. I think there's an impulse, or I think what I've tried to do in this play is note this impulse of trying to right a wrong, but trying to right a wrong isn't necessarily the thing to do, if that makes sense. Trying to—I think it's the whole thing of let me do something as opposed to doing nothing. Some of the plots in the play are very highly extrapolated versions of things that I've seen happen in real life. So, at the height of the Black Lives Matter movement resurgence in 2020, I had a friend who was almost insatiably posting.

LN: A white friend?

RS: A white friend. Yes, naturally [laughs]. I had a white friend who was just posting loads about how to help. And I really appreciated her doing that, but it was also very scary, alarming. It was scary and alarming how much she was posting. And I was like, 'Are you good? This is a lot.' And I think—and that's not to say that she's, quote unquote, 'done anything'. I don't think that's why she was posting. But I think there's a—I think there's two things going on in the play that I try to do. One of them is the

characters trying to do something as opposed to doing nothing. And then, there's the whole thing of being seen to do something as opposed to doing nothing. And I think those two things work in different ways in the play. There's this genuine impulse, and then there's an almost aesthetic impulse. And those two things can bump up against each other quite badly.

LN: I mean, it's a word that we've seen have a real resurgence, it's performative activism and things like that. And I guess that's why, I mean, coming way back to when you said, whether this is the moment for it. For me, that's the reason why it is the moment for it. Because, I might say—I don't—it's probably not my place to say as an interviewer, but I might say that the reason—part of the reason we're in this predicament is because the people who are meant to fight this were mainly doing it aesthetically.

RS: Yes, I mean, very famously doing it aesthetically with black squares on Instagram, which, to this day, drives me crazy because I think it's the whole thing of, *Oh, let me do something*, and that something is to post. And it's like, *How is that going to help? People are being killed. How is that going to help?*

LN: How long have you been working on this play now?

RS: So, I started writing this play—the first time I saved a document that had 'White Girls Gang' as the title was February of 2020. So, it's been almost six years. Yeah, it's been six long years [laughs]. But I think any good play takes over your life a little bit. I was saying to someone ages ago, I was like, 'Oh, I started writing this play in 2020.' And they're like, 'Oh, if you had had a kid then, the kid would be however old.' And I was like, 'Why would you say that to me?' [Both laugh].

LN: In all the years that it's changed, was there one thing that you were really reluctant to change, and then when you did it, you were like, *Oh, there it is*?

RS: For the longest time, this play had seven characters, and I've recently cut it down to six. And I feel really good about that, [laughs] which is nice. I felt really bad about it at first, but now I think the play works a lot better. And I think the other thing is, for ages, I kept wondering what have they read previously and why are they reading this book now? And I almost was wondering what would this play look like if they were reading something else, if they were just talking more generally? But I think them talking about Lorde's work really steers the conversation, especially because some of them have such strong reactions to it in all these different ways. So, that's something that's—it's

been a constant, but I've been constantly been like, *How do I—does this need to change?*

LN: Would there be any general advice that you've gotten over the years through the mentoring that you would give to people? I know it's a horrible question.

RS: No, no, that's a good question. I think I have a couple of things. The thing I've had to realise, and I was thinking about this today, is a play—a piece of advice I wish I got earlier, especially in this process, was you can just let a play be bad for a while. I think for me, I have this real desire and drive to make a play perfect immediately, even in a first draft. And by definition, a play is not going to be perfect in a first draft because you're still trying to figure out the characters and the tone and what people are saying. So, I think letting a play sit for a while is always a good thing. I'd also say read voraciously. I think that's one thing I definitely tried to do on my degree, but also just in general, [music] just read so, so much. And also, read things that you think you're not going to like because I think that really develops your taste.

[Music]

LN: Yeah, I guess knowing what not to do as well as what to do. It's been a pleasure as always. We've crossed paths in lots of places. Hopefully, we cross paths again.

[Music]

RS: Great. Thank you.

[Music]

Presenter: Luca Newman was in conversation with Rianna Simons. To hear more writers, go to writersmosaic.org.uk

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