

# WRITERS MOSAIC

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**Ryan Calais Cameron**

**In conversation with Del Jessop**

'You know, I never wanted to get to the point where I was in my acting, where you could ever put me in a box. If that was the point, what's the point of having all the creativity in the world and you can only talk about one aspect of life?'

- Ryan Calais Cameron

**Del Jessop (DJ):** Today I have the pleasure of being joined by writer, theatre maker, and actor Ryan Calais Cameron. Ryan, thanks for taking the time to join us. How are you doing?

**Ryan Calais Cameron (RCC):** Thanks for having me, man. I'm really good.

**DJ:** I appreciate you coming in. I know you're a busy, busy man, so to get this little sit down, it feels good.

**RCC:** Sounds good. It's all good, man.

**DJ:** I guess I'd like to start at the beginning, if I may. As I just said, actor as well. Many people know you as a writer right now.

**RCC:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**DJ:** But actually you studied performance at the University of Arts Bournemouth on the South coast here in the UK.

**RCC:** Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

**DJ:** I wonder if you could tell us a bit about what was it that pulled you down to the South coast? What was the intrigue initially?

**RCC:** I wanted to live. See the way, the way my mind works is if I have an idea then, then it just has to be fulfilled, doesn't it? It doesn't really... logic doesn't really need to be a massive part of it. So I was like, I kind of want to live near the sea. And that was just big and bold as it needed to be.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** I was like, I want to live by the sea. Despite the fact that all the best schools were in London and I'm from London, I was like, I just need to get out a little bit. And I felt, I felt like that, I felt like I had, as an artist, I knew what it was to be nineteen and to live in London and to be from a working-class background. But I

had never really ventured out; I didn't know anybody outside of my neighbourhood. I didn't know any other kinds of walks of life or opinions or ideas or concepts or philosophies. So I was like, yeah, if I can go away for three years and see what this is about, and it really did that. I think the biggest thing that drama school gave me was an idea of different perspectives and different worlds and opinions and stuff. And I was like, wow, you come in for the first day and you're talking to a guy and he's like, yeah, man, I'm from a village. Like, we've got one pub and one club. I know everybody. And I'm like, God, like I'm from London.

Like, do you know what I mean? So that was the kind of big, bigger picture. I wanted to, to get a sense of freedom as well.

**DJ:** Mm.

**RCC:** So yeah, I was up there for three years in Bournemouth. Big.

**DJ:** Yeah. Yeah, yeah. No doubt.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** I wonder if you can speak, obviously, I appreciate it's a long while ago now, but you can speak a bit to the course. How did that impact you?

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** What did you learn?

**RCC:** A lot about myself. I think I learned about a lot about myself. I learned a lot about how driven I was and how, you know, a lot of the stuff then at, you know, 19, 20 quite similar to myself right now in terms of like, if I want something, I'm going to, I'm going to get it, you know?

And I wasn't, it is interesting because I got... they gave me a doctorate last, was it last, not last year, the year before. And it was funny. So we had the course leader, my wife, and obviously I would tell my wife stories about being back at Bournemouth and stuff, and I'm thinking like, you know, that's like 12, 13 years ago. No one's going to remember. And like, we're eating dinner and the course leader was like, 'Yeah, just letting you know, your husband was a terror, man.' And like...

**DJ:** Even... Wow!

**RCC:** Yeah. And I was like, 'Whoa. Like you still, like how many students you've had since.' But the way my head was, was like, so for instance, at that time she was the, the head of... she wasn't the course leader, she was the head of musical theatre.

**DJ:** Right.

**RCC:** And as an artist, I was like, cool. Like, I ain't really singing, man. Like, I ain't coming out here and doing *Lion King*. Like, it's not really my thing. Do you know what I mean? Like, I know what kind of... so that makes sense to me. As a course leader, that is incredibly destructive. Like, you have a whole entire course...

**DJ:** A hundred percent.

**RCC:** [continued] ... your course planned and this guy is refusing to turn up.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** So, they'll come and they'll be like, cool, well you, you need a certain level of points to get the grades. And I'll be like, 'Okay, cool. But what if I got a first in this and a first in that, then I could actually really make...'

**DJ:** Like a negotiation. Yeah, yeah.

**RCC:** I'm doing all of this dumb stuff. Just go to the lesson, bro. So I like, that was my thing. I didn't do my end of year production because it wasn't in London and I was like, well then what's the point? So I left the course, I went to London to go and get an agent. Then my mom was like, 'What do you mean? What do you mean you're not graduating?'

**DJ:** Mm.

**RCC:** You better find yourself back.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** So then I came back and then they gave me like a smaller part because I was like, what do I need to kind of graduate? So again, I learned a lot about like the way my head works in terms of like, everything needs to make sense to the bigger picture. It needs to. And obviously if I could go back now, you know, I would've taken those classes and stuff; I would've learned a lot more.

But I understand at the same time where my head was at the time in terms of like, this isn't just a course for me; this is training to be the guy that I want to be.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** And if I don't feel like it's, if I don't feel like something is in line with that, then I got to take matters into my own hands.

**DJ:** Yeah. Right.

**RCC:** Yeah. Yeah.

**DJ:** I mean, I wonder how much of the actual acting did you pick up there? I've known you obviously in, in various different capacities as an actor as well. I wonder how much of that course you took and actually applied.

**RCC:** A lot. A lot. You know, I think one thing that we had on that course was a lot of freedom to express ourselves. There was a lot of devising and in the Shakespeare course headed by Petronella, which was really, I think that was the first time that like I needed a level of discipline and like that course really, you know, you can't, there's no two ways about Shakespeare. You can't improvise with that. Like, you know, that is the text.

It's hundreds of years old, you know? So I think something like that really gave me the artistic discipline to kind of go, okay, I need to get on top of this, and I need to do this. You know, imagine you go out on stage every single night performing this text and everyone in the audience knows it, man. Do you know what I mean?

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** You're not getting away with like messing up a line here or there. And I feel like at that particular time, this is at the beginning of the second year where my head was all over the place, man. And I was like, yeah, I need this course and I

need this text. And I need to master the Bard in order to kind of get to the next step of where I need to be as an artist.

**DJ:** Mm.

**RCC:** So, I think it gave me a lot of that, man. It gave me a lot of, yeah, discipline at the same time, freedom. But it's interesting, by the time I left, I knew, I felt like I knew what kind of artist I wanted to be.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** And the kind of work I wanted to make.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** So even from then I was, I wrote my final, my end of year piece, which was a piece on Malcolm X. But, you know, I was writing from then. I wouldn't consider myself to be a writer, but I was like, yeah, like the way my mind is working, I want to create a piece that's different than the name of the text that I've been offered. Like, I need to create a piece that's unique for me. Yeah, man.

**DJ:** It's really interesting. You touched on, you wouldn't have considered yourself a writer.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** Obviously the people that are listening now, that's primarily, I think what most people know you as.

**RCC:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**DJ:** When was that shift?

**RCC:** I'll say that shift was about five years into my acting career, man.

**DJ:** Right.

**RCC:** Like, I was working. I think a lot of the time, the kind of traditional story is somebody that feels quite frustrated because they're not working and then they go, you know what, I'm going to create work. And it actually wasn't that case for me. Like I was bagging jobs.

**DJ:** I remember. Yeah.

**RCC:** You know, I was bagging jobs.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** And that's why I think it was a massive shock for my agents. It was a massive shock for even my friends and family in terms of me going, 'Yeah, I don't feel fulfilled as an artist anymore.'

**DJ:** Mm.

**RCC:** Like, I felt like I had hit the ceiling in terms of the kind of work that was being offered for me. And casting directors had got to a point where they were not being creative enough. They were putting me into a kind of box and going, that's the kind of... so therefore I understood that my option at that particular time was to go to the U.S.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC: And** everybody that I knew was kind of going, 'Yeah, we feel the same way.'

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** We're all jumping out to the U.S where they can just see us as we want to be seen.

**DJ:** Mm-hmm.

**RCC:** You know? And I was like, yeah, I don't feel like doing that though.

**DJ:** Mm-hmm.

**RCC:** I just don't feel like doing that at this particular time in my life. So I was like, okay, what's the, what's another way to get around this? And I was like, I, I always

wrote bits and bobs, you know, and at that time I was talking to three or four people that were in the same kind of state of mind, and we were like, let's come together and do something. Do you know what I mean?

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** Let's create a company. None of us knew what that was or what that, what that meant, but it was a case of let's do something a bit different. So I know that I was... I was doing Casualty for the second time, so I imagine I'd done certain projects and I'm doing them again.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** You know? And I was in the middle with a well. So I think my injury was, I think I rode a bike over... into, in the middle of this well.

**DJ:** Right.

**RCC:** And I was in this harness and, you know, filming day, you're doing that up and down about eleven times that day.

**DJ:** Mm-hmm.

**RCC:** And I think I was mid-air man, like one of the times I was coming out of the well, and I was like...

**DJ:** No more.

**RCC:** [continued]... I don't think I want to do this no more, man.

**DJ:** There's always a moment.

**RCC:** I don't know if I want to do this. Not right now anyway. I've got so much going on in my mind.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** Like, I just, this ain't what I want to be doing right now. And I remember I got on the phone to my then girlfriend. I was like, yeah, cool man, I'm going to, I'm going to do this writing thing for a bit. And she was, and we're getting married in about nine months. So I think she, you know, she's like, yeah, maybe not like, give up your day job, but like, do you know what I mean? Respectfully, do you know what I mean? This is crazy.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** You know, I've never spoken about being a professional writer or anything like that before. And then I remember I spoke to my agents, and we were having a tricky time at that time because there was a lot of stuff they were sending me up for and I was just like, declining. And they were like, what's going on? Like,

and I would like, I was just like, I'm not doing nothing that I don't feel good in. And then I was just like, you know what? Like, I'm going to take some time off and just write this play that's just burning on my heart. And they were like, yeah, go do that. Go do that.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** And then come back next year. Refresh. Just get this play out your system.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** Come back, refresh and we can hit the ground running. And yeah, I never went back, bro. Never went back.

**DJ:** Just like that. I mean...

**RCC:** Never went back.

**DJ:** When I was thinking about this conversation we're having now, part of me was like, was there not space to do both? If you're finding a lane in writing, finding your voice and excelling at it, and also you are making good money from TV...

**RCC:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**DJ:** [Continuation]... most performers I know are like, 'Look, if I can do both, I'm going to oscillate between these two worlds and almost write the parts that I'm not seeing for myself.' Was that never a...?

**RCC:** I think if that's the objective, I think initially I was like, I want to write parts for myself.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** And then when I started getting into the writing process and being able to create whole entire worlds that have characters from anywhere in the whole entire universe, I was like, okay, this is so exciting.

So when I spoke to my agent, there was never a, there was never a time where I was like, yeah, I'm not coming back. You know? And then when I started, even when I started writing and getting a commission, it was still, I still like, yeah, I'm definitely going to come back because that's what I am; I'm an actor.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** That's all I've ever known. I went and trained in it. That's all I've ever known. And then naturally, the writing just really took centre stage. I was just like, I just feel so at peace in doing this; in being in control. You know, something that I

never really felt like I had as an actor; I was constantly waiting for somebody to create something that I knew that I already wanted.

**DJ:** Mm.

**RCC:** And then I felt I could also create as well.

**DJ:** Mm.

**RCC:** So, it gave me a sense of agency authority and a bit of power as well in that sense, where I felt as an actor, man, constantly auditioning for stuff that you already know I can do.

**DJ:** Mm.

**RCC:** It's just quite humiliating in a sense. Do you know what I mean?

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** It's interesting that that's... that's what was born out of that response.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** It's definitely something I know many actors to shoulder and take and just go, well this is it until it tips.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** Until I have autonomy. But actually you were like, no, I'm going to, I'm going to change that for myself.

**RCC:** A hundred percent. And I think a lot of changes in my life as well. You know, like I was saying, I was about to be married, I was getting older, and I was like, I can't, I don't, I need something substantial. So, it wasn't just the writing; it was also creating the business around it. You know, being a... turning into a producer. So, I never had to wait for somebody to give me a green light. I could green light it.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** And not just for myself, but for other artists I also felt like needed that kind of platform. Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

**DJ:** I'd like to talk about two of your more recent works: *For Black Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When The Hue Gets Too Heavy*.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** And of course, *Retrograde*.

**RCC:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**DJ:** If we start with For Black Boys...

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** [continuation]... the title alone.

**RCC:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**DJ:** Now I was, I was, again, I was... been mulling over this thinking, 'Where to start with Ryan, what to look into?'

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** I decided on these two pieces: both, obviously I loved. *For Black Boys Who Considered Suicide When The Hue Gets Too Heavy*, that's a serious title.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** Not only is it a long title.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** So much so, I'm looking back so I don't fumble it, but it's a loaded title.

**RCC:** Of course.

**DJ:** I wonder if you can speak to me a bit about how you came up with that title.

**RCC: Yeah.**

**DJ:** But also, was there a fear in alienating a certain, a certain part of your viewership, so to speak with a title that is so direct and aimed at a group of people?

**RCC:** A certain demographic. Yeah, of course. Good question, man. So the title came from, *For Coloured Girls, For Coloured Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Was Enuf*. And that's by Ntozake Shange. 1970s play in New York did wonders.

And I, I read that whilst I was in drama school when I, when I was looking for contemporary black playwrights. And I was just like, this is incredible, man. Like it, it's so free flowing and it's so real and raw and organic. And I was like, I didn't realize that as an artist you were allowed to express yourself in that type of way.

I didn't know that you were able to hit on those level of nuances that, like you're saying, maybe only a certain demographic, only people that are local to you would understand, but it still felt so universal.

**DJ:** Mm-hmm.

**RCC:** And I was like, my days like, I would love to be able to create something that did that for my boys back at home.

**DJ:** Mm-hmm.

**RCC:** But I would never dare to try it. Do you know what I mean? And I, and I left it like that. And I feel this, this, the concept came back to me like probably every single year of my life to the point where I decided that I was going to write something. But I needed it to be in a certain type of way, and I needed to have a certain level of skillset, like in terms of being able to write poetically, being able to have access to movement practitioners and whatnot.

So I get, I set myself a kind of deadline for like, you know, over the next six years, I want to be able to write a first draft. And I went to, like, poetry nights. I looked up like Button Poetry from YouTube. I was just studying, studying, studying. And then I had written this play called *Timbuktu*, which was like, that was going to be the version of it, and I just kept getting stuck. There was just certain parts of it that I just couldn't answer. And I left it for another five years, man. And in that time, like I was saying, I started a business, then another one, I got married, I had a lot of kids. And then the pandemic happened and I was just like, man, like I wish there was a piece that spoke to the young men in this neighbourhood, that

I can see, visually see that I'm going through it right now. And I was like, 'Hey man, remember I touched on this, this subject matter,' and the kind of level of life experience that I had as a, as an artist, as a gatekeeper in a sense, and as a father, lent itself to finishing the questions that I had had five years ago and being able to write the Act Two.

So, the first act was essentially what I had written five years prior and then the Act Two was now me kind of answering the kind of questions that felt, that made me, that put me in a position where I couldn't finish that particular play.

**DJ:** Right.

**RCC:** And then I was like, 'Cool, I got something.' I don't know what it is, but we got, we got, we got something now, and I feel like, you know, a lot of the success of that piece was hitting on that zeitgeist of that time: you know, what people were dealing with but could not articulate.

**DJ:** Mm-hmm.

**RCC:** Yeah. And so that was how we got about it, man. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Yeah.

**DJ:** I guess for our listeners, a brief synopsis almost.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** So, we've got six men of colour on stage in a group therapy setting.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** And essentially, they're speaking about what's going on and addressing back and forth fine monologues, movement, colour, music.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** All these things sewn in together to paint this really present backdrop of what's going on. I wonder why did you use the group therapy setting as a backdrop, almost as a vehicle to display these moments of monologue? Why, why that in particular?

**RCC:** I think that was the first thing that set me upon wanting to touch this play again. You know, it was the idea that therapy was a dirty word in the Black British community. Do you know what I mean? And you find the same in like Black Caribbean community, you know, African American community, Black African community, like therapy is a word that, you know, to go through therapy means that you as a, as a, you felt...

**DJ:** Mmm.

**RCC:** You know what I mean? And I was like, I'm getting older man, and a lot of stuff is happening in my life. And I'm seeing that actually there's a lot of helpful... there's a massive reward of actually being able to talk about your thoughts and your feelings and your emotions, especially among other men.

**DJ:** Mm.

**RCC:** You know, that we can breathe life into one another; you know, the power of fellowship, you know. I've seen even just from like the brothers in my church. Do you know what I mean?

**DJ:** Mm-hmm.

**RCC:** Like, just being able to kind of speak, but as men.

**DJ:** Mm.

**RCC:** And I was like, okay, cool. Do I set this play in like this void, you know, where people are just speaking. But I was like, if I set it in a particular place, then I want to really shed a light on that place. Of course, it's not going to be hyper realistic. Do you know what mean?

**DJ:** Mm-hmm.

**RCC:** A massive part of the play is almost being able to explore the thoughts and feelings inside of these boys' hearts and mind. And we see that across the stage. You know, so if somebody is feeling a certain type of emotion, we express that through, whether it be through song, through dance, you know? I really wanted to see what it would be like for a young black boy to cry, to be, to feel pain, but also to feel immense joy.

**DJ:** Mm.

**RCC:** To light up a whole entire auditorium with all those aspects of joy that we bury inside. And I was like, I feel like even just to answer your earlier question about audiences, I was like, this is a uniquely black male experience, but it's also a massive universal experience. Anybody that's ever loved before is able to understand what these boys are going through. Anyone that's ever hurt, anybody that's ever been a man, loved a man, raised a man, will be able to relate to aspects of this play and showing that the young black boy experience is as humane as any other experience in the whole entire world.

**DJ:** Mm.

**RCC:** And I think that was a massive part where, you know, I spoke to a lot of people that were like, oh, I didn't know that. I was like, yeah, bro, like we're human too, man. Like, do you know what I mean? So, yeah, I think, yeah, man.

**DJ:** And as you said, like that time, there's so much going on socially.

**RCC:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**DJ:** We're in our houses, like lockdown come out. There's been almost a shift in consciousness collectively as a public and...

**RCC:** [Interrupts] Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**DJ:** [continuation]... as a world, you know, in regards to that. And it almost felt like that was dropped in our laps, and it's like, here we go.

**RCC:** A hundred percent. If we had done that play five years prior, I don't think it would've gone on, regardless of what I had written. There just wasn't space for it.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** Nobody was, nobody was... had time to listen. I think that's what the pandemic did; no one was going anywhere.

**DJ:** It forwarded you out.

**RCC:** So if you're talking, I'm going to, I'm going to, I'm going to at least hear you out. Do you know what I mean?

**DJ:** So true.

**RCC:** Yeah. So I feel like it was a unique, a unique space and time, man.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

**DJ:** Thank you. [I] wonder if we can speak about *Retrograde*.

**RCC:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah.

**DJ:** *Retrograde* starts life at the Kiln Theatre North London.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** Transferred to the Apollo Theatre here in London's West End.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** It looks at, I guess, primarily the golden age of cinema.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** '50s America and we have Sydney Poitier; a young Sydney being offered a deal essentially as many of these artists were at this point in time with a network. But obviously there is a twist, as there always unfortunately is. There's

always something in the contract: 53, 54 page. You have a look and there's ah, there's a sticking point.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** Why Sydney Poitier?

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** Why this little snippet?

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** Why? Yeah.

**RCC:** Yeah. I think for me, it was about finding another challenge. You know, I never wanted to get to the point where I was in my acting, where you could ever put me in a box.

If that, what's the point? What's the point of having all the creativity in the world and you can only talk about one aspect of life? You know, I was like, what are the things that I, myself want to write about?

**DJ:** Mm-hmm.

**RCC:** And that for me was a massive... there was a massive moment coming off of the back of *For Black Boys* where it became a huge commercial show and people are going, 'What's next?' And you've almost got this, almost like a cult following in a sense, right?

**DJ:** Mm-hmm.

**RCC:** And I'm going, 'Yeah, I'm writing about this guy that you lot might not know about from the 1950s.' It's like, what? Like, do you know what I mean? Like, you know, it wasn't what people would expect, but I had to stick to my guns and go, well, that's what I want to talk about though.

**DJ:** Mm-hmm.

**RCC:** And for me it was about, the first thing was about I didn't know, I didn't feel like I knew enough about who Sidney was.

**DJ:** Mm-hmm.

**RCC:** And I think a massive thing in my writing as I'm also, I, I always look at two aspects. I'm like, how do I entertain you? You know, I want it to be worth your time and your money to come out. Like Theatre for me as a child was a massive event, you know?

**DJ:** Mm-hmm.

**RCC:** So when you come out, I want to make sure that you are looked after. This is a massive event.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** So, entertainment and also education. Anything that I ever write, it's also, I also want to give you something that you might have known, but you didn't know this much. You know? So for me it was like, this is a man that I think we all should know about.

**DJ:** Mm-hmm.

**RCC:** Not just people from the arts as a society, we should know more about this guy, what he stood up for, what it was in his time. You know? And the level of loyalty that he had to himself, to his community. Do you know what I mean? And to his aspect is part of the industry. So I was like, okay, cool. I want to write about Sidney, but I don't know what I want to write about. And then I came across an article that was about him turning down disloyalty of, in the heat of McCarthyism, you know, and I'm like, 'What? Like, this sounds like a thriller.

And I was like, someone must have written that. And then I was looking more into, you know, like the Hollywood blacklisting and stuff, and a lot of that stuff I

already knew about. Like, I knew about McCarthyism, I knew about people being cancelled and stuff like that. But I never read it from the perspective of a black actor in the golden age of Hollywood.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** You know, how many people are talking about that? And I was like, yeah, there's my education.

**DJ:** Mm-hmm.

**RCC:** Do you know what I mean? And the entertainment comes naturally in the fact that this guy had 24 hours to basically make up his mind, you know, as to whether he's going to succeed in this industry or be held back by it.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** And I was like, that's also something that feels quite relevant because, you know, I don't care what industry you're working in, there's going to come a time where someone's going to put something before you and you're going to go, 'Ah!'

**DJ:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. Right.

**RCC:** I need that. I kind of need that money, you know?

**DJ:** Mm-hmm.

**RCC:** So it was, you know, for me, it was the making. You know, I would've loved to have sat down and spoken to Sidney.

**DJ:** Mm.

**RCC:** God rest his soul, you know, but I feel like putting all of his life in order, like this seems like a massive moment where he stood up and went, this is what I'm going to be.

**DJ:** Mm.

**RCC:** Do you know what I mean? This is who I'm going to be. I've stuck up to the system now. If they're going to destroy me, they're going to destroy me now. And if not, to the Stars, man.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** So, yeah, that was my entry point.

**DJ:** I mean, oh, I find it really interesting you said about entertainment and what theatre can do. So when you're coming out and you're leaving your house, primarily I want to entertain you as well as having that didactic element to it where it's like educate you as well.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** Perfect. These two things can live in conjunction.

**RCC:** Mm-hmm.

**DJ:** Your work is profoundly funny.

**RCC:** Yeah. Yeah.

**DJ:** It's humorous.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** *For Black Boys.*

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** Has these real laugh out loud moments in it where literally, I remember watching it, everyone's chuckling. And on different levels as well, because the joke hits differently.

**RCC:** Exactly.

**DJ:** Again, *Retrograde*, we're laughing.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** But in conjunction to that, on the flip side, you've got some really dark, dark moments.

**RCC:** Oh yeah. They're deep plays. They're deep plays, man.

**DJ:** You've got some stuff. We're laughing, but then we are laughing at stuff that's still relevant.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** *For Black Boys.*

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** The issues that we looked at: mental health, racism, oppression, similarly across...

**RCC:** It's a play about suicide, man.

**DJ:** Suicide, right.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** And again, with Retrograde...

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** [continuation]... racism, you know, being put in your lane, being held down, but yet we're laughing.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** I wonder how important is it, comedy, humour as a device in your working, right?

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** Is that something you set out with initially or you go, it has to; the two have to coincide.

**RCC:** A hundred percent. I like, I think, you know, essentially my work has to be a reflection of me and my mind. And I feel like it doesn't matter. If you know me, you know that I'm going to laugh through everything. Do you know what I mean? Like, I'm laughing when my wife's giving... in the middle of labour. Like, do you know what I mean? I'm putting the pee pot on my head and trying to do Charlie Chaplin dancing. Like, I can't get through serious moments in life without a little bit of giggles.

**DJ:** Yeah, yeah.

**RCC:** Do you know what I mean? And I feel like that is a central part of my work as well. I'm like, okay, I'm going to take you for, through this journey because education is a major part. But I know for a fact in school, like no teacher could get through to me if they, if it was just boom, boom, boom, boom. Do you know what I mean? It was like I needed a teacher that I can vibe with, man.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** I trust you and like, we can laugh together. You know what I mean? So for me, that's almost a mask. Like, I feel like you can. You are allowed to tell; you're allowed to say anything to anybody on any kind of level if you can also make them smart whilst you're doing it.

**DJ:** Right.

**RCC:** Do you know what I mean?

**DJ:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**RCC:** It's a way that I can get so much information across. You know, if you look at the start of *Retrograde*, man and you've got these two, these two guys going back and forth together, that's my exposition. Do you know what I mean? Instead of having a narrator come in and be like, 'Okay, so Sidney Poitier was a

guy in 1955,' I'm like, 'No, I want to give you all the exposition you need for act one.'

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** But because you're laughing, you're not ready. I'm giving away my tricks right now.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** Because you're laughing right now. You're not going to, you're, you're not going to realize that you, and by the time the action starts, boom, Sidney comes into the play. You know everything. You don't know how you know it. Do you know what I mean? So, I use it in certain elements to, you know, kind of the same way I use drama, man. You know, I, I figure that a lot of the time during drama, what drama does and... is it allows you to say stuff a lot of the time that you wouldn't say otherwise. So if me and you were having an argument right now and I needed you to get a level of exposition, I might be like, 'Oh yeah, in 1995, man, I remember when I had to do this for you.' Do you know what I mean? I'm allowed to say that because I'm angry right now, but actually I'm giving that to the audience. Take that because you're going to need that for later.

**DJ:** Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

**RCC:** So, yeah, comedy, and I want... again, it goes back to how I want my audience to feel, man. I want you to come out and feel like you've had a full meal.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** Do you know what I mean? Yeah, it's important. I don't know about anybody else, but I know, like I was saying like theatre was like maybe a once in a year kind of experience. Maybe once in a two years' experience. And I felt the pressure of that sometimes, man. I remember sat in *For Black Boys*. I think it was the fourth time we had brought it back, and I sat down and I was talking to this family, and they were like, oh my gosh, we're so excited to be here. They had no idea I had made the show at this point.

And they were just like, yeah, like we, we bought the whole family tickets from last Christmas. I'm sitting there and this is like first preview, man, I'm just like...

**DJ:** To have that in present day UK you know, when we're talking austerity measures, cost of living, and it's like you bought the whole, the whole family. That's correct.

**RCC:** The whole family. Do you know what I mean?

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** But then I feel that pressure because I know exactly like this would've been costly. And that's the reason why you've come to the first preview. Not just, not just because you're really eager, but because the tickets are a bit cheaper, right?

**DJ:** There's an economy behind it.

**RCC:** You understand?

**DJ:** Mm-hmm.

**RCC:** So then there's a massive pressure for me also as an artist, when my whole entire team are like, 'Ah, it's preview one, don't worry about it.' And I'm like, nah, worry about it because...

**DJ:** Mm-hmm.

**RCC:** [continuation]... this is where I would've, you know, 15-year-old, 14-year-old Ryan would've been here.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** Going, I've saved up money for the last six months to come to this performance today.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** And of course I know that it's not going to be the same performance as the press night performance.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** But I'm like, can it still be something that, this, that, that somebody that came today could go away and go, 'Wow!' Do you know what I mean?

**DJ:** It's an expensive business.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** I mean, I've sat behind restricted view poles for a good ten years, leaning tight up in these sort of old Victorian theatres.

**RCC:** Exactly.

**DJ:** There's a cost behind it.

**RCC:** Exactly. Exactly.

**DJ:** And it's nice to know and hear that you as a writer appreciate that.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** The stakes being high for people.

**RCC:** Yeah. Yeah.

**DJ:** I wonder if we can touch on Nouveau Riche.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** How it came to fruition.

**RCC:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**DJ:** What that means and what you guys stand for as a company.

**RCC:** Yeah. Yeah, for me it was, you know, at a time where, as an artist, you're trying to get your work out there.

**DJ:** Mm-hmm.

**RCC:** And you realize the kind of systems at play. Quite soon you realize that it's not as easy as I'll write a play and it's quite good. It's going to go on. Like, you know, there's a lot of other people that are... and you know, like, like writing from drama school, I'm very impatient and I feel like when I'm ready for something, I'm going to, I'm... you know, so like we had a... there was a competition and like, not competition, it was... yeah, I'll say a competition, a commission.

**DJ:** Right.

**RCC:** But what you needed, like, like quite a few commissions is you needed a company already attached for you to be considered. And I was like, well, no one's going to want to produce my work because they don't know who I am. You know? So I was like, cool, let's start a company so we can commission our own.

Do you know what I mean? So that was it essentially. Don't ask me what the paperwork was or anything like that. So all of the contracts I did initially were for my performers, were my acting contracts; just redacted the name and just put people's names. Like, I don't know what I'm doing. Do you know what I mean?

**DJ:** Yeah, right.

**RCC:** But it was, it was the way to kind of start. So that was it. We, I wanted us to be our own middlemen. I wanted us to be able to go, if we've got a production, we can do it. And like I was saying earlier on, it was about grabbing a group of like-minded friends that felt the same level of frustrations and were like, cool, what we want to be able to do and stand for is to... like, I don't like asking for stuff; like that's just my character. I don't like asking or begging for an opportunity. I was like, we can create it. We're smart enough and we're talented enough to be able to do that. So let's bring together work that comes from the Black African Caribbean diaspora and work that is more experimental.

I felt like I felt at that particular time in my life that like western kind of storytelling was put on this pedestal of like, that is, if you don't tell it in this kind of way, then you don't know how to tell the story.

**DJ:** Mm-hmm.

**RCC:** And I was like, 'Well, like, stories have been told before Western civilization even existed.' My guy, like, do you know what I mean? Let's not do that. I was like, okay, let's actually go out and look for and create works that are more diverse and nuanced and experimental in their kind of nature. That was the only kind of stuff we were looking for. Yeah, man. We set off, we made it, we got the first commission, which was two hundred pounds. We were like, 'Yo, two hundred pounds.'

**DJ:** Yeah, yeah.

**RCC:** Do you know what I mean? I just couldn't believe anyone was giving me any money to make anything. And we made that stretch, boy. We made two hundred pounds and then off the back of that... so that was like a twenty-minute production of our first play, *Queens of Sheba*.

**DJ:** Mm-hmm.

**RCC:** And then off the back of that, there was another competition that the prize was three grand and to go to Edinburgh. And we were like, you know, for any kind of fringe kind of theatre company, Edinburgh is like the pinnacle, right?

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** Exactly. So we were like, if we can even dream of going there. So we put it all together, man. We came, everybody volunteered their time, and we performed in front of New Diorama, and we won that competition. We won three grand. Obviously, it wasn't enough. We didn't realize how expensive Edinburgh was, so we needed to raise another six over that summer. And we did. We did a lot of... we did a lot of events and stuff, and we had this big event where I was like, I'm not charging anyone to come and watch the show. But if you do like what you've seen, then you have to put some cash to help us get there.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** And people would just throw in the cash. They were like, 'Oh my goodness. You guys are incredible. Oh, oh, wow. Wow!' And from the back of that we went to Edinburgh and me and Jessica L. Hagan, who were the writers of that play got agents. A lot of the girls all got top, top agents. And then we got offered our first TV deal, man.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** And then from that point, I was like, okay, I feel like I might be able to do this professionally.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** I still had a full-time job, but I was like, it's, things are starting to look up a little bit.

**DJ:** Mm-hmm.

**RCC:** And then from there we continued, man. One of the, one of the big strategies for us is the success of our box office is, has been so much that we were always able to put the money back into the business.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** And then obviously producing *For Black Boys* and fighting to be able to produce that as well. You know, a young company from South... working-class company from South London, being able to co-produce a show on the West End stage, it's unheard of, you know. So, making sure that we got the right type of contracts and that, and being able to really funnel that money directly from the West End straight back into the community. So I have a studio in Catford where I

grew up, which is essential for me to be like on the ground. You know, I never want to get to the point where it's like Ryan's not in touch with, he can't really talk on these things anymore because he's out there in the high tower. Do you know what I mean?

It's like, okay, cool, we can funnel that. So, everything that we get from those productions being on the West End goes back into the community and to new writers and to commission them and stuff. And for me, it just feels, it feels right. Do you know what I mean? It feels right. A lot of people come into... into that neighbourhood and we could talk about gentrification, this and that, and also, but some of us have also... have something to come and regenerate our neighbourhood as well.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** So, yeah, man. So that's where we're at the moment. We just did the, our second scene festival, which is a borough, whole of Lewisham borough.

**DJ:** Mm-hmm.

**RCC:** We grab artists and we do like a proper, almost like an Edinburgh Fringe festival for a whole entire week. But it's, it's, it engages every single part of the community from the footballers, boxers, to street vendors. We do markets, we do everything to really just show off. Like, there's so much in this.

**DJ:** There's talent, there's a richness.

**RCC:** Yeah. So, and we got our first season coming out later on this year. Can I say that? Yeah, I said it. So yeah, we, we're going places, man.

**DJ:** I mean, you've done the lifting for me then. You've almost sign pointed like for the future and to close, I guess.

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** What, what's in store for you personally...

**RCC:** Yeah.

**DJ:** [continuation]... but also as a company and where do you see your work going?

**RCC:** What's in store for me at the moment, man? So I've been doing TV a lot.

**DJ:** Mm.

**RCC:** I think because TV's such a long process, I think people don't really know sometimes what you're doing when you're, so, you know, every TV show could take three to four years.

**DJ:** Mm-hmm.

**RCC:** So, I'm currently on five different shows. Hoping there'll be more information about them later on this year but I'm working with some really, really good companies, man, doing some stuff that I wouldn't, I didn't think I was going to be doing at this point in my career. And then I've got another play on we're recording it later on this year.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** That is crazy. *The Afronauts*.

**DJ:** *Afronauts*.

**RCC:** Yeah, about a group of Zambian would be scientists and astronauts that are trying to get to the moon before Russia and the USA, man. So, it's a nice slice of history.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** That kind of does what my plays have always kind of done in that sense. And then yeah, man, I've got, I've got a play that's opening in South Africa and then one in Australia. So it's a busy year.

**DJ:** Yeah.

**RCC:** It's a busy year and then, yeah. And then Nouveau, yeah, we, well, we had a little hiatus where I got really, really busy last year, but we're coming back with a brand-new season, so it's exciting times, man.

**DJ:** Lots of stuff going on.

**RCC:** Exciting times, man.

**DJ:** Ryan, listen, thanks for taking the time to speak to us.

**RCC:** Bless you, man.

**DJ:** Exciting times. Thank you.

**RCC:** Thank you for having me.

**DJ:** Thank you. Thank you.

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

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