

Luke Mallet interviewing Julia Pascal re Dancing, Talking, Taboo! for the Bloomsbury Radio 9 October 2021

Luke: Hi Everyone, this is Luke with Bloomsbury Radio. I've a highly esteemed guest with me today, the incredible Dr Julia Pascal. Julia founded the Pascal Theatre Company, who are putting on the Dancing, Talking, Taboo event at this year's Bloomsbury Festival. The event is on Saturday 16th October at St Pancras Church. Hi Julia.

To get started do you mind introducing yourself and telling the listeners some of the many things you're working on at the moment.

Hi Luke. Some of the many things - yes, I'm a multi-tasker by nature, so that's a good question. Well, obviously I'm totally focussed on this at the moment, which is an extraordinarily interesting collaboration with London Contemporary Dance School second year students and it's a new venture for me, so the core of it is the recordings, which are online and the scripts of these women who have been interviewed during lockdown. These are women who have been living on the margins, from exiles and refugee countries, and extraordinary experiences. What I call half the world is missing, so narratives of social and political importance that you never normally hear. And those texts have been used as an inspiration for choreography by the students. So, the students are talking and dancing and exploring the church in a site-specific performance that moves, so the audience moves around them, and it's about 20 minutes, 25 minutes we think, so we'll be running it and then taking a short break and then running it 2 or 3 times more. And it's very exciting, I love it.

Brilliant, yeah, it does sound very exciting. It sounds like it's going to be a very together experience. Particularly with them moving around, I wasn't aware of that.

Yes, it's an enormous church once you go inside it. I mean I walked in and I thought, "How am I going to make this work? It's massive." And it has no focal point. I'm used to working in a theatre which is often a black box with lights and you have a very focused area. This is enormous. It's diverse, it's got very strange light, which is obviously natural light coming in and out, and it's not destined for performance. It's destined for the performance of the vicar obviously, and the congregation. It has a very different architectural aesthetic. So, then I realised actually, if I focus on small landing stages where the audience walks around, then I'm creating tiny theatrical spaces, and that then becomes a whole new experience, and each space has its own light and sound dynamics, and I'll have to make sure as a director I'm aware of how the cast can really fill this small space and engage the audience, and then move on. So, it's constantly moving, which is a challenge as a director, but also a good way of expanding how that storytelling can happen. And at the same time, each place has a different style, so we have music hall, we have poetry, we have straight storytelling, we have dance, we have vaudeville, we have comedy, we have jokes, and we have very serious

areas. So, it's constantly changing and nobody's going to be bored. It's engaging and exciting and shocking and disturbing and amusing, all at once!

It sounds like a very emotional performance in many different ways. What the emotion is going to be will vary from performance to performance but you'll be able to drag something out of each stop around the room. Before we get too deep into the event, let's talk about you a little bit. What was it that got you started? What's your origin story in acting, writing, educating, all the different things you do?

OK. Well, when I was a child, I wanted to be a dancer, which in a way hooks into this and ballet was my great love. But then it shifted and I became interested in text and drama and I went to drama school and became an actor for 4 years and then I realised I think I'm not really a natural actor, I think I'm a director, because I began to feel that I was outside, analysing in the rehearsal room, and thinking how would I do this. And this could be extraordinary if only you didn't scream and shout at the actors - directors in those days were very bullying - but I didn't know how to be a director because there were very few women directors, so then I went to university as a mature student at 24, I went to London University and then went back into acting at the National Theatre and was part of a company and directed a platform performance called 'Men Seldom Make Passes' which was something I adapted from the stories and poetry of Dorothy Parker, and that was with Sarah Kestelman and David Schofield, and it ran for 2 years. It was extremely successful, and it had that kind of vaudeville element that I'm using here too. Then I went to the Orange Tree as an Associate Director. Then I formed my own company working on new writing from other playwrights, but I was poor, so I was doing a lot of journalism for most of my life as and actually I lived quite well on it at a certain point. I was a dance journalist and an arts journalist, and I wrote about culture and Jewish history and decided that perhaps I should start writing plays because I really know how to write a play from the ground up because I've been an actor. I know what the problems are, I know what a rehearsal room is, I know how staging works. So, I then began writing - this is about 1990 - my first important play which was Theresa, which is a play about the collaboration by the British Authorities on the Channel Islands with the Nazis during the occupation, and that was a hidden history, a hidden women's history, and it was a history I knew nothing about because this narrative of British collaboration with the Nazis is not one that's told, even today. And I guess that was the beginning of the journey of looking at the stories that are not told - particularly women's stories of history, and then I wrote more plays. There's a whole catalogue of them, and I found that I had to be a producer as well because I had to raise money, so that's been a part of my life - not one I particularly relish, but it has to be done to make things happen, and the work's been seen in other countries as well so I've done a lot of travelling, and then later on in my life I decided I wanted to do a PhD, so I did a Doctorate at the University of York, and that was about the absence of Jewish women characters on the English stage, 1945 - today. And it got me to looking at British history - why is there hardly any mention of Jewish life in it? And today that's very important to me today, when we think of Black Lives Matter,

Jewish Lives matter too, and all these histories which are not told became a passion- and still are a passion - of mine, and women's histories too. I'm interested in who tells the national story and what is it. There is no one national story, there are many national stories, and a little bit of what I do is try and find those other national stories and international stories, which of course is what they are because the immigrants who come here bring world history with them, and that's what I'm interested in showing in any tiny way I can. So, it was a website, it is a website and now it's developing into a piece of performance theatre, dance theatre and a whole new generation of young people are discovering these stories as well and making them their own. It's disturbing for them because they're coming across stories of racism and obviously the piece is a critique of that racism, but in order to reveal, you have to show what the racism is. So, some texts which are of course racist - "Shut your mouth Jew!" and "Dirty Gypsy!" - are spoken by racists, but remembered by the women who are telling the story, so the students at first were very hesitant - "Oh, people will think I'm a racist!" I could see that on their faces, and I had to explain to them, "No, this is an anti-racist piece, but we have to show what people experience in order to critique it." So, it was quite a learning experience for them as well. So, it's a huge journey! I don't know if that answers your question.

I think you summed it up. It's very interesting and inspiring the way that you've managed to cover almost the entire landscape of theatrical arts, including the journalism side of things as well - I mean my job at current - and it means you've truly got the full experience and now you've chosen to use it to tell those stories that might not have not been told before and really should be getting a lot more shined. You see that with quite a lot of the events at the festival as well, there's all these different events celebrating Jewish history, and this year it's big for the Bangladeshi community as well, it's great that we're getting told these women's stories, who have been hidden away in history and even nowadays. I really like that you're doing this work. Another piece that I came across when investigating the theatre company, was your work with children as well. There's these classes that are run by the company, workshops for writing and drama, to help people towards maybe a similar career to yourself, where you might write or produce, get a taste of it all when you're younger. It's been interesting recently, the dialogues about whether the arts should, or maybe should not, be part of a traditional education. Have you got a particular take on this?

Yes. I think studying the arts teaches you everything. For example, I was terrible at maths and geometry but now I realise had they been taught through an art form it would have helped me. So, for example, to know that in ballet you would lift your leg to 45 degrees or 90 degrees, I would have understood why are we measuring degrees. Or, if you were learning tap for example, and you were counting and you were doing a beat and learning a rhythm, you would understand why sums matter. Or, if you had to fill in a form to get money for an arts project, you'd have to know how to budget. These kind of areas are I suppose are sciences, and had I learned them through the arts I would have learned them

with great pleasure, or physics for example, I now regret that I wasn't better at physics, but I couldn't understand how it applied to my life, it was too abstract. So now when I'm writing a show and I'm working with a lighting designer, I understand and I will say to him or her look, I want this tone, or I want half the face lit, and I understand this as the physics of light, but I can't express what it is exactly that I want because I don't have the physics, but I understand that I'm missing the physics, so had I been taught it in that way... I think you can teach almost anything of what they think is 'hard' through what they think is 'soft' -but it's not at all - through the arts and it will be much more exciting to show the application of science through the arts, and the complete melding of the two. You need the totality. We're wrong to split them off and to divide people into artists and scientists. They are totally connected and that's how I think education should happen.

Yeah, I completely agree with you. I'm now a chemistry student. I'm more in the scientific realm of things but my secondary school was a performing arts school, so we had the opportunity to go into the music, you could do drama, creative writing, anything you wanted to you could go and experience. That was quite nice for me getting that broader education. When having these discussions I have been able to connect to these two sides that have been for now, temporarily split into what's considered soft and hard, like you say, when really they should probably be brought together and help teaching for all sides of things.

The whole person. You were talking about journalism. I think a lot about structure. I know as a writer I'm very good at character, but not very good at structure. So, I now think a lot about structure. When I watch whatever, whether it's trash or really well made, I'm looking at the structure of it and I'm finding words like architecture, and I think of the architecture of a project and the architecture of writing and the architecture of directing, and I realize that when I look at a building I realise oh, it's like a play, but it could be a square house or a piece of Bauhaus or it could be a bridge, it could be anything, but architecture I suppose is a science - but why didn't I learn it? And now I'm only just coming to understand the importance of it. So it's the totality that I think is important.

Yeah, I agree. I think you can find the arts in anything you look at really. The arts embody so much of what we do as a culture, as a society, and science then dictates what is possible within that. The creative mind is infinite, I suppose to an extent, and science narrows that down, yet creativity almost expands when that box is made smaller. It's interesting the way they interact, and they probably should be told to interact a little bit more than they are at the moment. That would be nice to see.

It would be wonderful, we need it and we're the people to do it.

It was interesting, particularly in the past year with COVID, seeing people sit with their own creativity when they're at home during isolations. For some people it put quite a strain on them, but also allowed them the freedom to explore their creativity and hobbies and things like that. But, obviously being a theatre company, COVID must have been quite

a strain. Theatre as a whole was struck quite hard by COVID. Can you tell us what you and the rest of the company did to adapt and move around these struggles?

Well, we had planned to do a huge site-specific project, which was heritage funded, called Discovering and Documenting England's Lost Jews, and we were going to do it at the Novo Cemetery which is at Queen Mary, and COVID struck. So, the whole thing had to stop, so we sat down as a company, zoomed each other, and said what do we do now? And we were planning a website and we thought well we'll have to make a much richer website than the one we're doing. And, luckily, we had an enormous amount of research, and a lot of film from workshops that we've done, so we found a way of making a website that was indicative of what we'd been doing and was very theatrical, and we employed actors to voice a lot of material and we asked them to film themselves at home, so we made theatre on the website. And it worked! It was incredibly stressful but we did it, and it taught us an enormous amount about transferring everything immediately to a website, and, to some extent, we've carried on doing that and we now have those skills. I think that's why the giving voice project is so rich because it meant we could pay actors, and contribute something to fellow artists, and applying for grants that would then enable us to contact people on the margins and involve them in classes and artistic projects. It was a problem because not everyone was computer literate or able to get wifi, or able to use the digital components, so we then began to train people but you can't touch everybody because of course there were still a lot of people who were not keen to use digital platforms, but we widened and we made an enormous number of contacts within many more community groups and we now have more - bizarrely enough - COVID meant that we now have more networks than we had before, so now we need to make the next transition, which is what this is about now, this project, - of going out there and starting to interact with the public again. We'll see how deeply we can do that, depending on the health restrictions. COVID was both a terrible thing and also a huge learning area of what we could do digitally. It stretched us to a maximum and we're still learning. Adapt or die. That's it isn't it.

Yes, COVID is a challenge, and as you say you could come out the other side of it better and if you don't then it's adapt or die. Particularly with the Giving Voice project which this event is based around, for those that haven't come across it yet, they're stories of women across the world, immigrants, migrants, anyone who needs a story told, there's a space on the Pascal Theatre Company website where these stories are collected, and then voiced over by these actors, as we were just discussing, and told in a safe space, completely anonymous if needs be, and I had a chance to listen to quite a few of them and some of them are really touching, it was so interesting to hear all these different perspectives and cultures and things like that. I just wanted to talk through some of the ones I did listen to and some of the quotes I took away, the first one being from the Gentle Warrior story by someone with the initials CH, and the story ended with, "An artist is a leader too, isn't she?" and that hit me very, very hard. I sat there and thought about it. And you're an artist yourself, I think everyone's an artist to some extent, but you're one of the strongest

examples of an artist that I've come across, and have helped and inspired so many more people to become artists through the company and all the things that you do, so could you talk about how empowering the art can be, particularly for those women around the world who may not have a voice otherwise.

I think it's the art of telling your story and realising it's important and realising that each individual carries not just her or his story, but the story of grandparents, and that is a huge archive that we carry on our backs without being aware of it. If you speak to your grandparents and ask them about their childhoods you can go back probably a hundred years and they may remember stories from their grandparents, and we the artists are the ones that transmit these stories and it's a choice to do it, to write it down or to paint depending on what it is you want to do. I feel a kind of duty to reveal these stories. I'm not a religious person, but what are we on this earth for but to transmit the beauty and poetry of our lives however painful or alienating or disturbing. They are the history and we are the storytellers, and I think the storytellers are the Kings and Queens of our society and we should revere them and encourage the next generation to become them. And it's the smells and the tastes and the music and the atmosphere and all those intangible areas that make up the tapestry of our lives; that is the treasure. That to me is wealth. It's not money, it's not gold, it's these, and they're precious and I suppose I feel a moral duty to record them and help others record theirs in whatever way I can.

Absolutely. I was having a discussion with one of the artists at the festival and she was discussing how all of our experiences become these stories and these stories are what we live through and we had quite a deep discussion about it, and it's interesting that it's come up here again. We were discussing our own stories, whereas in this case we are building a platform for the stories of others and I think that's something we need to do a bit more, I think we do get lost in our own stories sometimes, but sharing those of someone that can't is a very good project, as you say you might not be spiritual or religious but I think that's a very good purpose to go about your life with.

The enabling of other people and realising their surprise that their lives are important through the process of listening to them, and then picking out key moments and then perhaps - this is to do with the journalists' ear which you'll know about, someone says something and you'll think hey, that's interesting, and you ask them to go there - I'm thinking of Claire Manley's story. She does give her name so I'm giving it. A woman with learning difficulties and she was talking about the struggles she was having with the council and other difficulties and then suddenly she said something about judo, and I said What? Judo? Tell me about that. And I got her off the stories which everyone has - the struggles with their everyday lives, but this concept of Judo, of being a warrior, that this woman who's been told all her life that she's nothing because she has learning difficulties suddenly comes out as a warrior on the mat and beats this policeman. It was a wonderful story, but it's about I think, the enabling of the other person by just having your ear wide open to something they may not think is important, and you realise if you bring that to the forefront

of your conversation you'll get something that might even surprise them. And the enabling of the other to find within herself or himself something that is so deeply hidden that it's not known about is very pleasing and then you feel that you've got the nugget out of the soil.

A lot of these stories are highlighting a lot of the struggle that these women have been through, but one of the really good things about these stories is that they highlight the triumphs as well, the good things that are going on, as you say, there's this one about becoming a warrior on the judo mat despite other things that might be making her feel otherwise and I found the same in another one of the stories by a lady named Josephine and she was talking about her struggles with her education and the unforgiving nature of a university in a foreign country for those less fortunate, those with wifi issues as you discussed before as well, but she eventually made her way to achieving one of her life dreams which was starting nutritional cooking classes for women and lots of different cultures and things, so it was really nice seeing that highlighted, particularly nowadays where we have such a culture of social media and the news highlighting all these terrible things in the world and we see it every day when we wake up and we scroll through the news and we see another school shooting or something, and we can get very lost in the suffering that is going on but having these stories that highlight the really nice things, the triumphs, that people are succeeding despite that...

It was interesting that some of the women wanted to be anonymous because they were either ashamed of their stories or they didn't think they were very important, but during the process they would say to us, "No! I'm going to put my name there. I'm going to own my own story." And that was really interesting to us because we didn't expect that to happen. Sally and I were working together and Sally would say, "I need to tell you, she doesn't need a pseudonym, she's going to put her own name." and we were overjoyed. I think yes they are triumphs, and then the women understand them as triumphs because we as outsiders - they don't know us, they've never met us - acknowledge that they are triumphs because they're published online. And once they're published online, the world recognises you. So, there's yet another triumph on top of the first triumph, so there is a double, even triple, layer there that is satisfying.

Yeah highlighting that positivity that can come out of these stories is really nice. It's one of the major successes of the project - all this positivity and empowerment that almost frees them of the bad things and really celebrates the successes. Is zoom the main way that you've been collecting the stories?

We had problems at first because we were trying to reach the hard to reach which we couldn't reach because they are hard to reach. So, Sally Mijit, who I've been working with on this project among others, Sally said we have to go to - remotely, because it was real lockdown - we have to go to the community centres where these women go. And they were zooming into them or had found a way of going, so we would contact the director of the community centre and have access to five or six women and we would explain what we

were doing and they then understood that we were safe and they agreed to tell their stories. Quite a lot was on the phone after that because in a way it was liberating not to see each other, they felt freer on the phone. And we were surprised at how much we were on the telephone. It felt quite old fashioned to go back to calling landlines and finding people, going back to them several times and then getting readers to read them so the process was long and old-fashioned but it was great because I'm sure they revealed more than they would have done in a group or even on zoom so that's how we found them in the end. And I'm sure there are many we haven't found because of their situation, and there were some community centres who were in touch with women who were refugees who wouldn't be interviewed because there were agents in this country who could track them down and attack their families in their own countries. There was a terrible sorrow inside me thinking there's this woman from x country who I would love to talk to but she's too frightened to talk to me and I'm certainly not going to put her family in peril by insisting. So there were gains but I'm aware that there's a lot out there that we would love to have but the women are still living in terror, even in the safety of Britain.

Yeah, absolutely. If there is anyone out there listening at the moment who feels like they want their story told, what would be the best way of coming into contact with you to get their story told?

If they emailed sally@pascal-theatre.com, Sally will be in touch with them. That would be great.

Everyone should definitely get the chance to tell their story, and if this interview does anything for people hopefully it kind of backs away from the fear of telling it and maybe realise how much of a triumph it would be to get it off your shoulders. To move on into the event itself, all these stories have been collected and they're being used in the event in multiple kinds of ways. Was there a selection process or did you hand them all over to the contemporary dance school and say take your pick?

No, I selected them, because some of them are very poetic and reflective and I thought this is never going to work with dance, it's too personal, so I looked for what was quite active and could be used theatrically. So I guess it's the journalists editing head and the theatre makers editing head, which looks for areas that are active and poignant and have nuance. And in the end I think there are about 5 or 6 stories but there are fragments from the other stories that come in, which are very poetic: 'My mother married the wrong man.' 'I married the wrong man.' 'My name is Ruth.' The importance of saying it comes through, although Ruth's story is not told. The name Ruth means pity. And then someone says, "No, my name is Irena." and it's the story of a Polish-Jewish child who pretends to be a catholic Pole in order to survive the war. So, the importance of even your name and what that reveals about your past and what might put you in danger, so we have that as a motif running through. Who am I? About identity, so there are almost songs spoken, singing moments that come through and repeat and return as haunting moments of identity motifs, and then the stories

are edited so they're very, very tight. And then the dancing will take over. And then there are comic areas - a woman who has a knee replacement and almost Marx Brothers jokes and vaudeville that goes into popular working class music hall techniques, which the dancers had no idea about because they're not exposed to that kind of back culture, so they learned a lot about that as well as other types of genre of revealing stories. There's one point in the chapel and we use nursery rhymes in the chapel and we tell the story of banging on the door in Paris in 1940 to take a family away, and it's from the baby's point of view. The baby has to stuff her fists in her mouth to shut up because the mother shows her to do this, so you've got a baby's point of view of horror, but at the same time you've got children's nursery rhymes in French, so you have many layers of discordant aesthetic going on. It's very Brechtian in its style. And again the dancers were saying, 'Why is this happening?' and I'd have to explain the process and the philosophy and aesthetic behind it. But we were using the chapel which is a bit like a little bit of France. There's a figurine of Mary, although it's Anglican, you can imagine that it's Catholic. So it's very interesting to use different parts of the church to explore these different aesthetics.

It must have been an interesting creative challenge, to sit down and say, ok we have these stories that are currently just words on a page, or recorded voice messages, and say, okay, now we need to convert this into some form of performative art.

That's right. First of all, I edited quite a lot of the text that I thought would work, then I went in and did a lot of rehearsal with the dancers, asking them to experiment. And take into their bodies the text. What was hard for them was using their voices. And although the project is called Giving Voice, and was aimed at women telling their stories, it became something else working with the dancers, which was how do dancers learn to speak on stage, because they're not trained. I went to drama school and learned how to use our voices and train our voices through our bodies, and that was seamless, whereas these young people had never learned to use their voices. I must have said so many times, "Your voice is in your back pocket, I want it in your gut". And I don't know if that meant anything to them but gradually they began to own their voices and connect their voices to their bodies, so for them that was a huge learning process. It's years of training to learn how to use your voice, and that means to express your identity and to dare to stand up in society. It has many psychological implications which it's hard to assimilate when you're very young. I think it's the beginning of a process which they're still enjoying and learning to use.

It's really interesting how this all links together. The project itself is about giving voice, but you found that you gave voice to these dancers as well, who initially didn't want to be very loud, and kept quiet but telling these stories loudly is going to be so important - in the piece, but also in life I think. You can't just whisper it at the back of a pub or a church, it has to be shouted. The listener base for this radio station is largely young students, young creatives, people interested in culture. Is there any advice you can give them about breaking into the professional world of art?

Yes, I think find people whose work you enjoy and speaks to you. I often get people who haven't seen the work, not even looked at the website [approaching me]. They've sent a blanket email to 25 or 100 people. That doesn't impress me. Take the trouble to investigate who you want to work with. Don't just think you want to work with anyone at any time. Yes, there's value in doing that, but it's important for you to find your natural home and the person who's going to nourish you and to whom you're going to bring something. It's a two-way conversation. People can learn from you, even though you're very young and you might think you don't know anything, I think it's a two-way journey. So, I think do your homework, find mentors, find people you admire, find people who you would like to be, or would like to emulate and get in touch with them, most artists will take time to be with you and to share knowledge with you. We like to transfer knowledge. I mean, I didn't really have many mentors, there were people who were important but no one really did that for me, so I make sure I really do encourage people and help them and point them to people who will aid them and nourish them in a way that I wasn't nourished. Amongst my peers I'm seen as someone who is very keen to help other because it's part of our own growth, and we want to see the next generation, and we want to work with them, and we want to help them. Investigate is what I would say. RB: I've taken a lot from this interview, and I know I'll be thinking about it as I go away. Go away, have these discussions, talk to people. You'll gain experience. That's the main piece of advice. Right before we end, I'll let you do a quick plug. What's next for you and the theatre company after this performance? Any particular projects that you'd like to plug?

I've written a play that I'm discussing with the Imperial War Museum, which is about another secret history. In May 1940 there was an arrest of foreigners, called 'undesirables', in Paris, and amongst them was Hannah Arendt, the great political writer and philosopher and Charlotte Salomon who was a wonderful artist and a distant relative of mine, and 8000 women were incarcerated in south west France in a camp which was constructed for Spanish Civil War Republican fighters, by the French, so this was before the Nazis came, so I've written a play about that called As Happy as God in France, which is an ironic title, and I'm plugging that because I'm looking for funding, and I'm hoping to do it at the Imperial War Museum and in other places when theatres resumes properly, so that's what I'm working on. And we want to extend this Giving Voice project to the whole of Britain, so Sally and I are working on finding funding for that. So that's more stories, and more projects and connections to more groups, and enabling more people. That's what we're doing.

That's wonderful. If anyone's listening who can fund either of those projects, make contact we soon as possible, it would be great to see both of those as soon as we possibly can. I think we'll end it there. Thank you so much for having this talking to me, it's been so lovely having this chat. For anyone that's listening at home and is interested in coming to the event there will be more information on the Bloomsbury Festival website, which is bloomsburyfestival.org.uk.