

*ABZ - "Between Twenty and Thirty: Conversations for the New Moon"  
Robyn Orlin and Nicola van Straaten in conversation  
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Hello and welcome to the "Between Twenty and Thirty: Conversations for the New Moon" Podcast, brought to you by ANY BODY ZINE! Between Twenty and Thirty is a podcast initiative started by ANY BODY ZINE featuring myself, Kopano Maroga, and Nicola van Straaten talking to different artists and cultural workers about their lives between the ages of twenty and thirty, for between twenty and thirty minutes. Where were they? What were they doing? What did their lives look like? How did they make it work? Join us every new moon, to find out.

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Nicola: Hi, this is Between Twenty and Thirty: Conversations for the New Moon with ANY BODY ZINE. This is Nicola and today I'm in conversation with Robyn Orlin. Robyn, please, tell us about what you were doing in your twenties in the years of 1975 to 1985?

Robyn: Okay, so 1975 I was still at school, at the London School of contemporary dance. And I think that's when I started.

Nicola: Started?

Robyn: Ja. I mean, wait, let me just let me just work this out. I... when did I? I mean, I'm 63 now. So I don't want to waste your time here but anyway, I mean, I'll just talk about, you know, I was at school at the London School of Contemporary Dance and I went back to South Africa, after one year to see my family. And Sylvia Glasser had a Dance Umbrella on and she said to me, did I want to do something? And I did. And I did a piece called *Miles from Home*. And it was about my experience living in London as a South African and it was hard, it was me trying to work out pretty much what you've probably gone through.

And I used music by Miles Davis. And then I went back and I carried on studying. But I think when I came, I mean, I finished my studies when I was 21. Okay. And I went back to South Africa, I found that there was no place for me in England. And at the time, we were not recognized as part of the Commonwealth, it was still an apartheid structure in South Africa. So I was basically forced to go back to South Africa. And I went back to South Africa and...

Nicola: To Johannesburg?

Robyn: To Johannesburg. And a few things were happening for me. I mean, I'm obviously just talking about the things that I remember. Because I forgotten a lot of detail now that I have to think about it. I had a bit of a breakdown. When I went back. I did not want to be back home. I did not want to be in Europe. So I was... and I had to earn a living. I mean, my parents said that's it. You know, we've given you a certain amount of money for you to study overseas, even though I was on scholarships. And they said, you got to... So I had to - I started teaching.

Nicola: What were you teaching?

Robyn: I started teaching kids and adults...

Nicola: Dance?

Robyn: Dance. Ja... dance. In a big vacuum, I started working. The Federated Union of Black Artists was formed by Siphso Sepamla. I started working there with Sylvia Glasser, we both were working there. And I started making work and performing, out of necessity. Because I had to earn a living and that was the only way I knew how to earn a living. I was not going to go and work as a waitress, I'd had enough of it.

Nicola: Were you working - did you have, like, waitressing jobs in England? Or...

Robyn: I worked as a waitress from the age of 15 in South Africa. And in England, I didn't... I worked a little bit as a waitress, but I work more in the kitchens, in restaurants. And I work for a big whole food place and I also worked as an usherette, an usher, at the place.

Nicola: Okay, okay...

Robyn: Ja. No, it was it was not easy. It was hard. It was very... I had very little money. Very, very little money.

Nicola: And I don't know, I mean, today most artists... like, the word "practice"; your artistic practice is very trendy. What was your...

Robyn: What was my artistic practice? My artistic practice was survival.

Nicola: Ja, okay!

Robyn: I really went into survival mode and things like 'modern dance' didn't exist, you know? I mean, so Sylvia Glasser and a few people were doing modern dance. Sylvia was doing the most interesting. The rest was, you know... What was her name? Adele Blank was doing jazz. And I mean, it was just like... there I was, you know, I had just come out of studying the Martha Graham and Cunningham techniques into this... couldn't find a place for myself in in Europe. So came home and realized that I had to start something up, you know? And realized very quickly that I wasn't really interested in the white community. They weren't interested in me. They felt threatened by me, because I was coming with new stuff. And I wasn't particularly interested in them. I was quite political. Already. You know, I live in South Africa quite political. So it... actually, FUBA (the Federated Union of Black Artists) fed me and a kind of a structure... and we tried to create the... a dance company, which we did, there was a dance company.

And obviously, there was a lot of flak because I was white and it was a black dance company and it was Federated Union of Black Artists. And but, you know, literally, I mean, guys were coming off the streets to do dance classes. And it was lovely. I mean, I don't think any of them are still working. There was Lucky Diala. There was another guy. What is his name? He started something in Soweto. I can't remember. And I got involved with trying to set up a thing with... Oh god, what was his name? He was killed in a car accident. He was at theatre director and a writer from Soweto. I can't think of his name...

God! It's terrible! His wife is still in dance, I think, his ex-wife is still in dance. I was quite involved with setting up things with Maishe Maponya. And there was another guy... it was all in The Market Theatre, I taught at The Market Theatre.

Nicola: I was about to ask, like, where was the like hub or the home of all of these activities?

Robyn: Yeah, it was around The Market Theatre. There was no Dance Factory, there was, you know, it was really The Market Theatre, the Market Laboratory. I taught students at the Market Laboratory. I opened, had open classes in church halls. And I mean, I really...

Nicola: Hustled

Robyn: Hustled, I mean, I had to earn a living. And then there was PACT. No, that was afterwards. There was... in Pretoria, at the college in Pretoria, Pretoria Technikon, a dance department was opened up. And I was asked to go and teach contemporary dance. So they recognized it, you know, contemporary dance had a formal structure and a formality. And that was really interesting. So I taught a lot there. But it was all Afrikaans kids, you know? They were... Mamela. That was - Mamela was one of the first black kids that came into that structure.

Nicola: And now she's heading up the Dance Umbrella.

Robyn: Ja, it's great. It's really great. I think it's really, really great. Ja, and then I remember at one point, I was living in Crown Mines in a big, quite a political structure. And, I mean, I was a bit of a thorn in everybody's side, because I wasn't exactly... Dance wasn't exactly seen as a... It was seen as a bourgeois notion and sort of gained a little bit of respect when Wally Serote contacted me and I went to work in Botswana with some kids of - whose parents were in exile, you know, to sort of keep them buoyant.

But we, also, you know, there was also - John Nankin was around and Ivor Powell and there was a lot of people trying to... I was living with a film director at the time, and there were a lot of white lefties, you know, trying to create structures. A lot of it was teaching. I mean, there was no such thing as residencies. And, I mean, it's very easy for people now to survive, I think. And apply for funding, there was never anything like that.

Nicola: The internet changed everything, I suppose.

Robyn: Well, the internet changed everything and the art world evolved in a different way, you know? It evolved into something more, I mean, it's never been, and it never will be, as much as Jay and Mark Fleischmann are trying to create, you know, a School of Performance Art Dance Theatre, there was never anything like that available ever. And sort of an American structure basically. So you can bash America as much as you want but they did open the door for the arts to be more recognized...

Nicola: And accessible...

Robyn: And accessible and degrees and... but for me, it wasn't about, you know, being this big talent, it was actually about surviving. Making a living, paying the rent. I guess my parents did me a favour.

Nicola: Ja. I guess also there was this, more of a culture, kind of like...

Robyn: Well, we - it was also that, you know, it was... we, you know. I mean, I really started working from '78 onwards, even '79. Even '80, I mean, I remember going back to try and study anthropology of dance in London, I got a scholarship from the British government. It's where Gary Gordon got his doctorate.

Nicola: Okay.

Robyn: I hated it. I found it too academic.

Nicola: You started the program and then you or...

Robyn: I left it, ja, I was kicked out because I was questioning too much... by Bonnie Bird, she kicked me out. Ja. Ja, no, I've really been around the block.

Nicola: And then you went to Chicago? Or?

Robyn: And then I came back here, came back to South Africa and worked... I met, I started working with Chris Pretorius, who was a theatre director. He had a place in Cape Town called the... God, what was it called? It was a very hip place. The Glass Theatre. He started The Glass Theatre with John Nankin and company. And, you know, it was it was a very... we connected with The Market Theatre, we formed a company. Barney Simon was very much my mentor in those days and I was involved in making stuff, you know? Stuff was banned often by the government. But we just kept on going. I mean, we just kept on going and going and going. I don't know how we - we just kept on going. And then I got a... but when I got my scholarship to go to Chicago, I was 30. I was 30, 31, probably...

Nicola: Okay, so that was a new kind of chapter...

Robyn: It was a new beginning for me, ja. And you know, in that period, from 30 to 40, apartheid was dismantled. I came back to a very different South Africa. Interesting South Africa. Now it feels like - I just don't know what's going on. I don't know what's going on in the world, anymore, so it's... I mean, it's very... the world is just a very strange place.

Nicola: Yes, I can agree with that.

Robyn: At the ripe old age of 63, I just think what the fuck is going on? It just hasn't, you know, I mean, now I, you know, I've got to accept the fact that I'm older. People are more interested in the younger choreographers. So where's my place now? You know, you never stop asking questions, you know? Where am I? Where do I belong? Quite frankly, if I had another profession, I would do it rather than be in dance, because dance just feels so... you know, I look at the audience this year, that go to theatre and dance and I think, you know, It's such a small world. Everybody thinks they're fantastic. And it's a very small world.

Nicola: Can you see any correlations between the questions you were asking in your twenties and the questions you're asking now? Or does it feel like...

Robyn: Well, I mean, to be honest, I've never stopped asking questions. Sometimes the questions have changed...

Nicola: Yes.

Robyn: And some of them, I have to earn a living. So, you know, some of them have stayed the same. And the question about the elitist attitude of the performing arts still exists for me. And, you know, when you do look at something like hip hop, which is really the dance of the people, how it's pushed aside and not taken seriously, and how it has to make money in order to survive and it's seen as "the other" by the dance world, you know?

I don't know who the dance world is anymore. I don't really care, quite frankly. But, you know, I just... I've just been taught for two weeks in Brussels, at a choreographic school. And I'm just... and I just thought, Fuck, you know, what's it all about? Really, what is it all about it? You know, here are these sweet little dancers, people that want to become choreographers. And it's a total indulgence. This is very hard for me to teach and believe in what I'm doing and... with the knowledge that I'm thinking "Fuck it".

I'm a cynic. The cynicism has always been there. But I think it's healthy. You know, I don't think it's... I don't think it's an unhealthy place to be in.

Nicola: It's...I think being, like, thoughtfully or generously critical all the time is a valuable thing. Especially as an artist, especially when you're trying to kind of reflect or comment, which is, I mean, one idea of what art is...

Robyn: It's totally what art is about.

Nicola: I've been thinking also about creative practice as... and especially with, maybe not dance, but especially with like embodied practices, but as a method of healing, as a kind of way to resolve embodied traumas. And I think in South Africa, so much of the violence and the trauma and the memory of the past is, obviously...

Robyn: ... And the present...

Nicola: And the present. Well, it's manifesting, always...

Robyn: It's a very damaged society.

Nicola: Ja, and that damage is an embodied one because it's based on the skin, on your skin colour, it's based on...

Robyn: Well, it's based on skin colour, and it's also based on class.

Nicola: Ja.

Robyn: And I mean, I still say this and I probably, in terms of the struggle, would be shot if anybody heard me say this but I don't understand why we have still the highest rate of rape and incest in the world, one of the highest rates and... I mean, women are treated really badly still and we've got so many women sitting in Parliament. What are they doing? And those women were raped themselves. They were all in exile, in the rest of Africa, in camps, in ANC camps and on a nightly basis those women were raped. They're saying nothing. You know, we had a president who was a rapist. And you know, I just - I don't... I don't know if, I don't know if any healing is happening in South Africa. Yes, put these women

in Parliament, but they must talk. They must speak up and they're not. They're filling their pockets, also.

Nicola: If you could speak, if your 20 year old self...

Robyn: Could speak?

Nicola: Well, no. But that's also an interesting question. It just, like, appeared in the room and you could have a conversation with her. What... would you give her any advice? Or what do you think she would say to you? Like, what would the conversation look like?

Robyn: You know, I have to tell you that I'm 63 and I still feel like I'm 23.

Nicola: Ja?

Robyn: Ja. Unfortunately because I think it's been my downfall, because I haven't really been able to... I've carried on working as an artist and I've kept on - kept the flame going. I've never gone into - I've never chosen to own a company. I've never, I've never wanted to move a company forward. I've never been established in a school or an organization. How I am now is how I was when I was 23. And it's very frightening. Because I've got nothing to fall back on. You know, it's like, I just carry on working. I mean, I work more now in opera or with puppets. Or in the second half of this year, I'm directing a play in French. And I... nothing's changed. I'm still - I mean, a few things have changed. I'm very critical of what's happening in dance now. I mean, everybody's becoming these sort of artistes and working in galleries and museums, and with the result that the theatres are empty. And we have to keep those theatres open. I think it's really important. Because they will not... once they close they close; they won't reopen, they'll become

Nicola: Relics.

Robyn: Relics. So the thing is to find a way of colonizing them.

Nicola: Re-colonizing...

Robyn: Re-colonizing them and the staying in those spaces and trying to find a way to, to make those spaces work. But there's structures that are much higher than us, you know? We - you know, and I see this, and I just wouldn't know where to start. Yeah, I'm too tired to start. It's your job. But it is much easier to perform in museums and gallery space. You know, it's...

Nicola: Ja, in some ways, it's more accessible, it comes with comes with a lot of new questions, I think, about...

Robyn: Well, yeah. Because the kind of people that go into those spaces are bourgeois people. You don't find your average man on the street walking into those spaces, as well as not walking into the theatre. So you're still left with the big questions of who you're accessing.

Nicola: Ja. Ja. And how you're being looked at because that's traditionally a place for objects. And...

Robyn: Absolutely

Nicola: I think especially now with, like, the art world really seeking out like subversive, queer trans bodies, it can also be really, I mean, all of those bodies, like you say, also need to survive so they'll take every opportunity. But there's also this question of, am I now, like, kind of helping your institutional space to be seen as progressive and...

Robyn: Another object.

Nicola: ...liberal and ja, my body becomes an object to like, push your kind of neoliberal politics.

Robyn: Totally.

Nicola: Which are trending. It's also about trends. Like it's always feeding back into the broader structure you speak of which is basically capitalism. Um... ja.

Robyn: Ja. And there's structures, you know, my husband is presently, he's been working for a long time in the industry here. And now all of a sudden, all his jobs are going to women. And I said to him, Well, that's very handy because they have to pay them, they pay them less. So it's suiting, it suiting them to be...

Nicola: It ticks two boxes.

Robyn: You know, it's suiting them to tick the box and get their funding. But they also don't have to pay them as much.

Nicola: Wow, that's crazy.

Robyn: So it's like a catch 22 and nobody's seen this.

Nicola: I mean, I'm also kind of interested in what you said about, like, back into your 20s, about carving out these spaces. These like home, DIY, hustled spaces where something can happen, I feel like, there is also something very potentially optimistic about a practice that kind of forces you to make something out of nothing. Because as much as these spaces, like, these institutions that are emerging that can make homes for artists. They also come with, with a whole lot of problems.

Robyn: Major, major baggage.

Nicola: Ja...

Robyn: Major, major, major problems.

Nicola: And there's something, ja, potentially exciting about...

Robyn: I don't think I could have done that now, though.

Nicola: Ja?

Robyn: Ja, I - you know, maybe now I can, if I'm really lucky, because of the training that I've had, I could open a space and do pilates to access people on the street. Because people now are more interested in their bodies and they want to... but they don't necessarily want to dance. You know, everybody wants to do yoga and pilates now. I, you know, I just... I don't really understand what anything is about it anymore. I just know that I'm not encouraging my daughter to be a dancer. (Laughter)

Nicola: Did you feel like at one point you did understand?

Robyn: Ja. Ja. Ja... Especially when I was working in Soweto and at the Federated Union of Black Artists. I really felt I had... that it was an interesting place to start working, to understand an African culture that I've never been able to access because of the colour of my skin but I very quickly realized that I - it's not my territory. So, you know, I moved on, but at least one could create. What's her name? Nomse Manaka. What was her husband's name? I can't remember. It was Nomse Manaka and Maishe... I can't remember his name...

But, you know, also in South Africa, you know, in those - in my 20s, it was a very, very, very, you know, it was like, it wasn't... we were in the thick of it with apartheid. And Neil Aggett died. You know, people were disappearing. We were discovering spies where we were, you know, in Crown Mines, you know, white people that were spying, spies from the government and you know, we were filled with other stuff to deal with. But I also had to earn a living. Ja.

Nicola: Great. Thank you. Thank you.