

*ABZ - "Between Twenty and Thirty: Conversations for the New Moon"*

*Jay Pather and Kopano Maroga in conversation*

*Cape Town, South Africa.*

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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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Kopano: Hi to everyone that's listening. This is the Between 20 and 30 podcast with ANY BODY ZINE. I am Kopano Maroga and I'm sitting here with Jay Pather. Hi, Jay!

Jay: Hello.

Kopano: Can you tell us a little bit about who you are, what it is that you do?

Jay: Well, I'm at the University of Cape Town (UCT). I'm a choreographer and a curator and an academic. I direct the Institute for Creative Arts (ICA), but I also curate a few other festivals like Infecting the City, the ICA Live Art Festival and also a few festivals abroad in Madrid and Amsterdam and Munich. Yeah, and I write papers and that kind of stuff. And I think in between all that I.., there was a time that I really wanted to say, first and foremost, I'm an artist, because that's something that I forget.

Kopano: Mhm. That's nice, thank you. So take us back to your 20s.

Jay: Yeah, you do realize that I go *way* back? (Laughing)

Kopano: I mean, what is time?

Jay: Nasty. (Laughing)

Kopano: But where were you? What were you doing? What did your life look like?

Jay: You know, when you when I first got the email about this project, which I think is fascinating, and it seems like you touched on a pressure point that is quite profound, for some reason, because when I go back to what

was 20 to 30, for me, my own life, it was pretty darn significant. And it was really something, there were some very powerful moments. For me it was 1979/1980, we were going into a state of emergency at that time- this is now pure apartheid. And, I was doing my honors in English at that time, I was four. (Laughing)

Kopano: And where were you doing your... [honours]?

Jay: At what was then the University of Durban Westville, it was the bush college that [has] now become the University of kwaZulu Natal, which then combined with the University of, what was then called, the University of Natal. So, most of the year I spent we were on boycott, so we were outside the classroom... And it was it was a very powerful way of understanding where my formative education was happening. That, of course, some of it was happening inside the lecture room. But so much of it was happening from the outside. So from that moment to... understand how activism, and my own art making, and my own art practice, all of that, you know, remains. And it's just such a significant year for that to have happened because it was... basically when, you know, when you reach your Honours and fourth year... you feel a lot more agency to, you know, to get away from family and get out and do what you have to do. So that was quite significant. But then I went on to do a Theatre Honours as well. And that also took me into another place of understanding, or developing, a formative interest in political theatre, at that point it was just about political theatre. And it was purely about... it was unashamedly - my thesis was *Creating Theatre for Propaganda*. And it was just... (laughing) simply *that* (laughing). There was no decolonial... *what what* going on.

Kopano: No “queer theory”...(laughs)

Jay: It was just, “How can I get this propaganda right?”. You’ve got to understand, that's where your “20 to 30” becomes quite significant. I remember telling a very close friend of mine that I don't believe that I will live beyond 30, I don't believe that we will survive beyond 30. Because at that point it didn't seem possible that, that this could be that... society, as it was, could actually function beyond the 30 year old ages and the thought of an international perspective, or being somewhere else doesn't cross [your mind]. You know, I grew up in a working class family and working class environment. So the idea of being anywhere else besides where we were was the furthest from my mind. And then I got the Fulbright scholarship (laughs). So, a friend of mine applied for me, another friend of mine applied for me, and I just kind of filled in the details, because everything was happening so quickly and so fast. And then I was awarded the Fulbright scholarship.

So it was, it was another massive change. Because then in 1982 I actually left the country for three years and went to New York University. And that was a whole other thing. Because New York in the 80s has nothing to do with New York now, it was dirty and dangerous and fantastic (laughing). It was absolutely incredible. You know, the kind of doing class all day and then going to rehearsal and then at 10 o'clock then you go out and you go out to see the most incredible performance work. And at that time a lot of the performance artists, that we now of course study in our curricula etc, were at their height. And it was dangerous. And it was none of that kind of performance art festivals like we do now. It was it was just simply happening on the staircase of a club or, you know, down in the basement. And it really rubbed up against the life that was outside which was, you know, New York was then a place where you didn't use the pavements, you walked in the street because of what happened on the pavement... (laughs) I always say I was mugged twice in my life and both were in New York.

And during that.. I mean, I guess the whole thing there was that it was also interesting that the United States was then developing the fascism that is now part of the United States' psyche. [It] was actually entrenching itself there because it was a response to the freedoms of the civil rights movement and the 70s. It was almost like it went too far for the American psyche and then these systems were coming back to claim it. So it was an interesting place to be because I was trying to study political theatre there and working with some really interesting people, and then going to the west coast as well, with like the San Francisco Mime troupe, the Bread and Puppet Theatre, all these quite radical, at that time, radical performance groups... and working with Mexican migrants and all that. So, it was a really fascinating time to find parallels in South Africa and parallels with the continent. And with what was happening in places like Central America, in Guatemala, and America's interventions in Central America, and connecting with artists and activists at that time while also connecting with artists and activists that were working in South Africa.

So it was a very wholesome experience (laughing), if I can call it that. It was one of the most... I felt so wholesome because I felt I was getting such a holistic education or a holistic sense of where the art needs to be, and why it needs to exist as... anarchy or...in opposition, in opposition to whatever there was. So, I presented my thesis production and I separated the audiences [by race] and the white people had to, even if you came as an interracial couple you had to sit [apart]. And it caused so much... not just discomfort, but there was a lot of chaos. And, you know, because there was the sense that for the Americans that we'd come away from "all that", and they knew that they were coming to see a South African production. But there was also a sense that it was so fragile, and that they were sitting on their own political time bombs with regards to other parts of the world.

So, all that, you know, just like really shut up my head but when it came to about 1984, and when my dad passed away... and I felt a need to come back a little bit earlier, I didn't complete... I finished my thesis etc when I was in South Africa. But then was I was offered the chance to do a PhD to continue at NYU, and I turned it down because we were going into our second state of emergency in South Africa and I felt I needed to come back. And then I went straight from... well, I spent a year in Durban at the same Durban Westville University and it was for university teaching and then I went to the University of Zululand. So basically, I went from New York to Zululand and it was, you know, to *rural* Zululand at the time and I stayed in Dlanga [sp?] and Esikhawini and, basically, I was sitting with all this energy from New York and everywhere I went with it. And trying to establish this at the University of Zululand it was... there were blocks, deep-seated blocks. And that's the only way a university like Zululand University could survive at that time. It was [all about] "how to say no?", "how to really take out your sense of inspiration, your sense of being able to do something". Because you must understand that, in Zululand it was a very particular case in point. It wasn't Johannesburg, it wasn't even Durban it was, you know... the IFP was very strong then: the Inkatha Freedom Party. So there [were] a lot of clashes between Inkatha and the students who were ANC [African National Congress]. So it was a really difficult time. But somehow we managed to establish a lot, experiment and all of that.

And then after that, I got to, I spent four years in Zululand and [then] came to Cape Town. I was invited to do a series of workshops by JazzArt Dance Theatre, directed by Alfred Hinkel, and yeah, and then I slowly began to think, "Well, I've got to actually move in order to make, you know, create the work and develop". And all of that time I spent working as a performer, you know, as a dancer and really hated it! (Laughing). I spent all these years training as a dancer and I just hated it! It was really, you know, the very thought of listening to somebody tell me what to do. And then being part of a group and doing the same thing, at the same time, moving from

like a modernist spectacle into like a solo and all of that was really... And I didn't realize how much I hated until I realized that I was actually depressed and that I had to stop performing like that... and then go back to where I was a few years before that when I was in New York doing crazy performances on Washington Square Park with Richard Schechner, and all of that. Kind of doing these... really radical performances, but then coming back to South Africa and, you know, working my way through systems that just certainly didn't allow for it. So yeah, it was then I began to think about making my own work and created my own work. And I worked a lot with Peter Hayes as well, doing a lot of queer work. We did *The Homosexuals Out in Africa*, which was the first work that was about queers that was written and performed by queers in South Africa. It was quite an amazing thing. And it was interesting being in that production, and there were three, the other performers were white, there were three white performers and myself. And I was asked the question about being a token black in that production. And that question kind of stayed with me because it was from a white journalist, Matthew Krause... (laughing)

Kopano: We'll find you Matthew! (Laughing)

Jay: ...who is both an irritant and, you know, at the same time, you know, it kind of really made me think about authorship, and who's authoring who and becoming very aware of the kind of work that I was doing. Even though they were referencing the politics at the time and all that was still going through quite a series of eyes that were not aligned to my political ones: they were - there was systemic... And I mean, it is just interesting, at that time I was applying to a lot of the universities in South Africa - and now we're talking about the late 80s, yeah, we're talking about the late 80s, early 90s. And it's just interesting that you know, the university is now talking so much about, you know, employment [and] I was one of the highest qualified dance people in the country. And none of these universities: Cape Town universities, UCT, Wits university, none of them were offering me a post at that time. And it took me a while to understand exactly what was happening systemically and trying to figure out how to do the work. Because, I guess what I'm just saying is that [that] "20 to 30" period is a period where a number of impulses are awakened, and you know, where the world just seems so *possible*, everything is just so *possible*. And when you, when in my case anyway, awake to the radicalism of the body and what what is possible... And then to find all these structures when you come back and how debilitating they can be, and then understanding that you've got to morph into something else; you have to keep morphing; you've got to keep thinking about how to recreate; how to make on your own and how to develop your own kind of work. And I then was invited to direct Siwela Sonke in Durban. And that's when I began... which was launched and then retrenched (laughing) a year later.

This was the tribute to development in this country. It's like, how do you replace RDP (the Reconstruction and Development Program) of Nelson Mandela with GEAR (which was introduced by Thabo Mbeki) and turn us from a space of development into a space of, you know, world economy and getting us on the markets, which is the mess we are in today actually. Because that... trying to go beyond what needs to actually happen, the levels of deep transformation that need to happen and the shifting of the psyche, as well as economic equity, and, you know, redistributing the wealth, all of that kind of quick blind sightedness made, you know, it really brought home that, you know, this, the idea that this is going to all, you know, beautifully flower. All of this happens now between 20 and 30. And that's really interesting that the possibility and the realism hit. And the realism hit a... I kind of understood how much of it I've got to, kind of, take in my own hands, and that these institutions that now will talk about how they "open their doors". And UCT really also talks about its own

liberal philosophy in that time. But, you know, the big question is why were black academics, like myself, not being employed. I mean, I was, you know, on a part time basis or whatever, but to actually work within the curriculum, it took, what? - 20 years before it even began to shift. So, but, I think all of this is fortuitous, and I'm not like, just, trying to find a silver lining in anything, but that it was really important to understand it, for me, by the end of my 20s into my 30s, understanding how I have to make for myself. And that was the most sobering and the most exquisite lesson to end my 20s with.

Kopano: Yeah, kind of like [a] sense of authorship or, not even authorship, like, "the thing will only exist when I make it". I think there's like a [James] Baldwin quote, that...

Jay: Yes!

Kopano: "The space into which I will fit will only exist when I make it". And, I suppose it's quite... everything that preceded that was very difficult. So, obviously, no false silver linings, but I think that's very useful to understand or to appreciate that, like, opposition can be an opportunity to be creative about how you navigate around it.

Jay: And it's also that there are layers of consciousness. Because, I mean, even now to understand that there is... there are layers of this darkness that, you know, one needs to keep moving and opening up, opening oneself to because you accept the situation as it is and you've got to create for your own and then keep working to move these layers apart. Because, you know, there are too many people that...or many of these structures come across as enlightened, you know, and so you kind of stop short and go, "Well, how could I possibly be critiquing these structures?" So, ja, I guess it is just interesting for me during that time having so, so many different experiences both in Durban and New York etc, but also in Cape Town. And understanding how much people were getting away with on the ticket that they were liberal. And then the whole consciousness shifts, right, and it all keeps changing. And and then you realize how short it all was.

Kopano: Yeah.

Jay: But the constant thing of course is change. The constant thing is the - is moving and moving through it. And I think that in... because I was in so many different, quite drastic contexts, I mean, even when I got the Fulbright I didn't kind of go to a college in Tallahassee (laughing) or, you know, to the Midwest somewhere. I went to, you know, I went to dark and, thank god, dirty New York, you know? And it wasn't the gentrified mess that it is now, you know? It was challenging it really asked for a level of commitment or a level of application, certainly, of what you were doing. You couldn't pretend it, you couldn't talk through it. Your body was in that space and you had to navigate, you know, you had to navigate drug dealers and muggers on your way to class and you know, understand how to be creative and make work in that kind of environment, but also to, for me, to think about that in relationship to a much more abject place which was South Africa at that time and the kinds of urgencies around that.

But these extremities... like, you know, and then Zululand University and then even with developing a company in Durban at that time but then being retrenched and this kind of backing and forthing of *this* current democracy, the kind of promise and the dashing of promise, the kind of sense of impotence that sometimes

comes up as a result, that sense of living in a vacuum. I mean, that 20 to 30 period is quite profound for understanding and this project - thank you very much - has made me reflect on how it was like a microcosm of so much else. So much else that...so many things that have continued but have, you know, have thickened.

Kopano: Mmm. That's very, ja, that's dense. That's dense. It is kind of like a concentrated period of everything in 10 years. I wondered if there was one final thing that you might want to sign off with? Maybe something that you're working on at the moment?

Jay: Well, I'm trying to go back to making an artwork... (Laughing) God forbid!

Kopano: Back to the basics. (Laughing) Oh, the trauma!

Jay: Well, you know, with all due respect to midwifery but I feel like I've been a midwife for many years and I do, I mean, I want to continue to do that because of course, it's not... I don't do that for altruism, I do it because I love it. And I think that it's a really important part of the way I think and the way I want to work. But, I'm creating a work called *Surface Tension*: it's a large work, it's site specific. And I'm hoping to be in it myself and so I'm going back to the thing of not performing or not wanting to perform and address that while I'm performing but also to talk about authorship. And also around blackness and ranges of blackness and then also reflect on my own Indian ancestry. And "Indianness" from Durban and what that means about me also talking about black African bodies, and working in...working to create... because there's a certain point when blackness has become one, you know, in the Biko sense, has become one thing. And it was really, really positive and all of that, but I think that with... as this democracy tries to unravel, and re-puts itself together and with the emergence of the EFF [Economic Freedom Front] and really strong submissions from that party and... I'm beginning to be more wary of taking any of that for granted. And so wanting to be more self conscious about that in it and performing in it myself while talking through issues of authorship as well.

Kopano: Dope! Looking forward to it! (Laughing). Is there kind of like a release date that's slated or is it still in...

Jay: Uhm, I'm hoping in... I'm hoping towards the end of the year.

Kopano: Exciting. Around, as part of Infecting the City?

Jay: Well, no, I can't feature my own works...

Kopano: (Laughing)

Jay: ... but I should (Laughing). No, I... actually, probably middle of December.

Kopano: Okay cool. That's exciting and terrifying (laughing). Cool. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to us.

Jay: It's a pleasure. Thank you. Thank you for making me think about that time. (Laughing together).