

*ABZ - "Between Twenty and Thirty: Conversations for the New Moon"  
Kristina Johnstone and Kopano Maroga 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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Kopano Maroga: Hi, everyone that's listening. This is the Between 20 and 30 Podcast with Any Body Zine. I am Kopano Maroga, and I'm here with Kristina Johnstone. Kristina, can you give us an introduction of who you are, what it is that you do and an interesting fact about you?

Kristina Johnstone: Sure. Okay. Um, I'm a dancer. I'm a choreographer, so I'm a maker of dance, I suppose. I live in Cape Town now, I have for the last three years. I move around a lot. So it's hard to locate myself geographically. I'm a mom of a four year old. Ja, I teach, I make, that's what I do.

KM: And those are all interesting things

KJ: Yes!

KM: So I got more than one. (Laughs)

KJ: Right.

KM: So take us back to like... twenty. Twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two. Where were you? What were you doing? What did your life look like?

KJ: Ja, okay, so twenty... I think I was, you would have found me at university. I was at UCT [University of Cape Town] studying in the dance programme. I almost feel like I want to go back to eighteen, nineteen. (Laughs)

KM: That's also fine!

KJ: Is that also fine?

KM: Rules are meant to be broken (Laughs)

KJ: Ja because I finished... So, I did my high school in Belgium and I graduated, I was 18 years old. And then I moved to South Africa. I really didn't know... I knew that I wanted to go into dance, into performance, into teaching dance, making dancing.

KM: And you were raised in Belgium?

KJ: I was raised, ja, I was born and raised there. But I'd travelled to South Africa sometimes. My dad is a South African. My mom is from Finland. And when I turned 18 it was literally like, should I go to Finland? Or should I go South Africa? (Laughter)

KM: Two opposite poles.

KJ: Ja. I could... ja, and sometimes I think back, now, like - if I like said Finland, wow, I would have been on the other side of the world potentially. And, like, what that would have made for my life. So that was like really a very important point at eighteen, when I decided to come here. And then I found out about the Dance Programme at UCT and I registered for that and just started doing that. And it's - and I think that was an important moment because I never really went back to Belgium, not to live anyway. So it really just like - wah, a big direction change my life in terms of where I wanted to be geographically. Ja, so twenty, early twenties I was finishing a degree in Dance Studies.

Um, so I knew, going in, that I loved this thing called contemporary dance, you know, what I knew as contemporary dance. And growing up in Belgium, I'd seen companies like Anne Theresa de Keersmaeker, Rosas, Twyla Tharp, like - I'd been exposed to contemporary dance. I remember I arrived at UCT and I on registration day, I said, Ja, I really want to do contemporary dance. And people were like, What?

KM: What's that? (Laughter)

KJ: No, no, no, just - someone literally said to me, "No, just write ballet, just in case." (Laughter)

KM: And was that a just not knowing what contemporary dance was? Or like - knowing and being like, if you're going to do the dance thing, just do ballet.

KJ: I think it was just a really marginal thing at the department.

KM: Ja, because they recently made the change...

KJ: I think so, that you had that option of majoring. So it was - it was very, um, I want to use the "word" segregated, actually.

KM: Ja, because I mean, previously, it was the ballet and...

KJ: African dance, ballet, contemporary dance.

KM: Ja.

KJ: And you... Ja.

KM: And you had to choose a stream.

KJ: Ja. I guess who you were was like, what your identity culturally, was linked to what you would choose, which form you would choose. But so I was very clear that I wanted to do contemporary dance and then, (laughs) I took this person's advice and I wrote 'ballet'. (Laughter). But I changed it later, in my second year.

KM: Relatable content, wow. I did a similar thing. And so, did you know that when you were registering at UCT that you would be doing dance? Or did that come when you came to register?

KJ: No, I just really wanted to get away from Belgium. And I just, I really wanted to go somewhere else. I had gotten into a few dance programmes in the Netherlands and it was sort of financial thing for my family, that it was hard to go there. And I got into a program in Belgium as well and they wanted me to stay at home, to live at home and commute. And I was like, No, I want to go somewhere and do something and I just had to leave home. I think that's also like a consequence of growing up in a culturally really mixed home, like you... and in a country that has never felt like, fully your own, where you're always a little bit a stranger. So I had a very big sort of drive to go away because of that. I didn't know that... I didn't come to do dance necessarily. I was getting away...

KM: And dance was a vehicle to get away. (Laughs)

KJ: Ja. And it was actually a vehicle to stay because I was only meant to be here for a year. And then go and be serious in Belgium.

KM: Okay, so then you started with dance and then that extended you stay because of the degree, to finish the degree you'd have to be here for...

KJ: Ja, because then I could say to my folks like, well, I'm actually doing a degree, I'm at a university. Now you have to let me do four years! And then, at the end of those four years, I thought, well, now they're going to expect me to go back to Belgium, because that's where you go be serious. And so then one of the lecturers just one day, you know, in her office shouted, "There's a job, there's a teaching job in Uganda. Does anyone want to apply?" And I was the only one...

KM: Why does that sound like Sharon? Was that Sharon?

KJ: Yes! I do a good Sharon (Laughter). Um... and I was the only one who was like, ja, sure. I'll send an application and it was a position to teach ballet, actually.

KM: Full circle!

KJ: The universe, you know, spoke earlier.

KM: Yes.

KJ: Um, but I thought, ja, why not? That way, I can keep moving. I can, you know, go to the next place. I didn't have to go back.

KM: Ja, ja, ja. So then that was your twenties to twenty-four?

KJ: Ja, twenty-two

KM: Oh wait, eighteen to twenty-two.

KJ: Twenty-two to twenty-four, I was in Kampala, I was based there.

KM: Ja, teaching ballet! Where were you teaching ballet?

KJ: At the Queen's Ballet School.

KM: Where else? (Laughs)

KJ: Ja, so the Queen of the Buganda Kingdom, which is one of the big kingdoms in Uganda, there are many sort of monarchies in this country. She, I think she studied in New York and she had seen like New York City Ballet and had become really enamoured with this style. And when she became the Queen, I think she liked the association of ballet with royal. And she had a little girl at the time; I think she wanted this little girl to have a place to do ballet. And I really think it was that association of royal equals ballet, that is very, very strange.

KM: That is hilarious...

KJ: And she started this, ja, she started this ballet school, the first ever of its kind in Uganda. Ja, and I winded up teaching there. And it wasn't at all what I wanted to do and I knew that going in, but I was like, this is a... this is a way to go to an interesting place. And it really was a very, very, very interesting. Ja, so I had that teaching job which paid the bills. They accommodated me in flights home and that sort of thing and that's how I met one of my mentors, Jill, who's... she's Ugandan American. She had a company. She was working with developmental movement work, Bartenieff Fundamentals, she's Laban trained and I feel like that's where my training started, you know? That's when I really started learning about the practice of dance, creating. Ja, and there was like a really vibrant little community of contemporary dancers also choreographers, who had studied in Senegal with Germaine Acogny, were teaching the technique there. So was my first introduction to that kind of - to things that are happening in other parts of Africa.

KM: Yes.

KJ: If you will. Ja. And I know a couple of festivals, also happening in Kampala and so, like, I got to see work... Ja, in the first month that I was there, I worked with this amazing choreographer from Madagascar, award-winning choreographer who I'd never heard of, like, having just finished this like degree program in dance at this really, like prestigious African University, but I had no idea of like, what was...

KM: ...Who was practising on the continent.

KJ: Who practising on the continent! Ja, and Kampala strangely was like this little hub in east Africa of like, people coming in from all over the world, really. I mean, it's where I met Tetsuro.

KM: (Laughs) How did you meet Tetsuro in Uganda?

KJ: I met him in Uganda! Ja!

KM: That is fantastic.

KJ: This amazing, amazing Japanese Butoh artist...

KM: Yes.

KJ: I met him in Uganda. And, you know, 10 years later worked with... I was able to work with him again, you know, so I really got very important relationships then.

KM: Ja, that was quite catalytic time for you...

KJ: Ja, it really...

KM: So it was your mentor, Jill. It was Tetsuro, it was the discovery of the kind of developmental movement that then became a very big research interest...

KJ: A very big research interest into my practice. It's how I teach now. It's really my approach to the body and to the art form of dance. Ja, that and I met dancers from DRC, Ruanda, Kenya, Senegal, Nigeria, it just like... Africa opened up, I think.

KM: Ja. Which is interesting, because that - there's kind of like a Southern African block to the rest of the continent. And even like, whether it's Madagascar whether it's, ja, there's like a... ja, I think it filters into that conversation around South African exceptionalism, where the gaze is... it like, it just, it misses the continent and goes straight to Europe, you know?

KJ: Right.

KM: Or it miss is the continent and goes straight to America. Ja, because I had a similar experience, like after my university experience, my undergrad experience, not having a sense of who was practising on the continent. It was only when I went to... I think it was only when I went to Belgium that I found out about Patrick and Germaine Acogny and other people practising.

KJ: Because that's also the French connection.

KM: Yes.

KJ: So it, ah - Kampala, it was so eye opening in terms of how things are mapped on this continent, you know? Like, language-wise and funding-wise and... because the two main, I was quite lucky, I got involved in like organizing some of these festivals and I learned some fundraising tools just being there, you know? And the two main funding bodies in Kampala for dance, for contemporary dance, are the Goethe Zentrum and, so that's the German connection into East Africa, and Alliance Francaise and that's the Francophone connection. And you're right, it completely cuts off Southern Africa from participation with that part of the continent, but there's a huge hub of work going on.

KM: And they're all connected to each other.

KJ: And they're all connected.

KM: And what if it's like a... I mean, this might be a reach but it might be like a kind of colonial block because...

KJ: Oh ja!

KM: We had the Commonwealth in southern Africa and then like, what - there's Germany in Namibia and then the rest is kind of like Francophone and a little Portuguese here, a little German there. But I think ja, that kind of Berlin Conference annexation extends to today, even in the kind of dance...

KJ: Ja, it really really does. I mean, Uganda is Commonwealth as well.

KM: Oh is it?

KJ: It is. I remember, in 2007, they had the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting and like, it was really interesting to watch, because all these hotels just like popped up in the city. It was like major infrastructural change. And it was the *best* when that meeting happened because we had electricity for the whole week.

KM: Wow. (Laughs)

KJ: You know, because, ja, before that it was, I mean, it was just, ja, I had to learn to cope with you know, electricity one day on, one day off, one day on, one day off. It was like, I had to work with the resource differently. You know? And I'd never been placed into that in that position before. Um, but what did I want to say, the roots and the colonial mapping. Oh, I remember these Ugandan dancers telling me that at some point to go study in Senegal, they had to, they would have to fly to Paris and then you connect from Paris to West Africa.

KM: Wow...

KJ: Ja.

KM: Okay.

KJ: That is just... I mean, like, that's like on a plate, so interesting.

KM: Ja, there it is. (Laughs.)

KJ: There's the map. There's the colonial map of Africa...

KM: There's the connection...

KJ: And what I learned about... there, then, was that that's also how art moves or how dance practice moves in the continent. And I think it also links to how the festival circuits work and it relates to funding for arts and ja, so it was a huge learning, just through like watching how people were, like getting their skills.

KM: Mh. And from being in the place and from taking up Sharon's offer...

KJ: Yes!

KM: To go Uganda to teach ballet!

KJ: And nobody else wanted it.!

KM: Ja. So we're at what? That's twenty-four? Cool. And then did you come back after Uganda?

KJ: Ja, and then I came back to Cape Town to do a Masters degree, so I came back to UCT. And I think, ja, got some bored by that time. So there were these little creative moments of exchange, like when the French funding, you know, brings, like, you know, some amazing choreographer. And then you have a few weeks of like, really, really interesting, creative practice, like vibrant time. But then it dies out and I got bored teaching ballet and, you know, ja, and I needed the next challenge. So I came into that did a Master's degree. But then I had all that, like, fuel from, from my experience there and I wanted to do research that, so they brought me back here.

KM: And was there a particular reason why you came back to do your Masters here?

KJ: I think it was familiar network. It was easier. So when I registered to do my PhD, which I'm doing now, I was more serious about finding options in Europe to go and study. But as soon as like, I would write these emails to like institutions in Europe, the ones that I liked, and that were, like, working with performance studies, I thought, or - are... and every time I mentioned, like, my interest in like, artistic practice in Africa, like specific to a post-colonial context, or my experience in Uganda, South Africa, they would always say, "Oh, you should be in touch with anthropology department" or "You're doing ethnography" or "You're not doing performance studies, you're doing ethnography." And so that...

KM: Wow.

KJ: Ja. So I realized, oh, okay, I've actually I've got to do the studies here. Ja. And I think it was a similar thing with my Masters although I wasn't as serious then about looking for a European institution as with my PhD. Ja, I think it was easy to come here. I thought that I knew people and then what happened was I started this work with Underground Dance Theatre. Like, I started collaborating with people around me and they were all a little bit younger.

KM: Can you tell us a little bit about the formation of Underground Dance Theatre?

KJ: Ja, it was really organic. You know?

KM: Ja, like what it was and...

KJ: Like, ja, so it... It basically just started with this work that I made with Thalia Laric and Jamila Rodrigues um, but we made this work called *Featherweight*, and I think was part of their Honours programme or something like that. And then we took it to Dance Transmissions Festival in Uganda. But it was organic in the sense that, so the three of us made that work together and then Steven was doing the lighting for us. And then it was like, Okay, well, next time, Steven will make the work with us and so then he joined the team. And so people moved in and out of this formation, but the idea was

basically that we wanted to make work, we wanted to get on to like main platforms, we wanted to perform at festivals in proper theatres, let's pool our money. Like if we can't get the funding, if we can't get the space, if we can't get the theatre hire, like, let's just pay it out of our own pocket but if five people pay, you know, it was that sort of thing.

KM: It's viable, ja.

KJ: Ja. So that was the point of Underground Dance Theatre. And it was, we did that for a couple of years. And it was so... I learned so much, like through working with others. It was such a valuable, valuable thing, to be collaborating artistically. Because you... I remember some - I had friends who were critics of this idea, you know? They were like, well, you're not developing your own artistic voice, you're always, like, lumped together with others. But actually, sometimes you need like that helping hand, you know that if you have an artistic collaborator, you're always going to have someone in the rehearsal room who can like, direct something for you, or like be a dramaturge, or will be an eye and, you know, who supports you in the practice.

KM: Or even, you know, almost to be just like a counterpoint?

KJ: Counterpoint!

KM: To, to push back or to refine or to ja... I think that's, ja.

KJ: Ja, it was really about that, that sort of support structure, that idea of like having a small community. Ja. And it worked for a while, because we like made some pretty interesting works, I think. And then eventually, as you get older, like your views on artistic practice start to shift and on what performance should be. And then and then, and then it sort of dissolved. And that was fine. You know, it was really fine for that project to dissolve. But it did its work at the time.

KM: Mh. And it was robust work, I think it's like, it's nice to have, having worked with you guys before, like having that as an example. Because I think having that example, was quite catalytic for Any Body. Because it was, I remember it was on the tour for *Love Zero* and *Bok* that it was created, because that was the first time that myself, Julia and Nicky were in one space for a concentrated period of time talking about our ideas.

KJ: Oh wow! Oh!

KM: So it was that point, that was on that level. But it was also like having the example of like, creative people doing quite niche creative work, collaborating to make your ideas viable. So it really was kind of like a... an economic example, and also like an artistic example of like, co-collaboration. Ja, I think that's really nice. And I think it's also, especially for dance, because I think - if you think about most dance practitioners in Africa, most are solo practitioners?

KJ: Ja.

KM: And that's also like, by virtue of economic necessity.

KJ: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

KM: So when you see people that are working as a company, and are encouraging the creation of company works or ensemble work, it's really like energizing and exciting. And it's nice to have that counterpoint because that doesn't exist a lot. I can't think of many... any, right now, companies that are that are not the kind of established companies that have been here since kind of the mid 90s, especially in the contemporary dance form. So it was nice to have that as kind of like a, here's another way that you can do thing. It was kind of like a communist dance party. (Laughs)

KJ: It's very interesting that you mention this thing about the solo, the solo artist, because I know that was one of the things I took away from Kampala as well is that there was this kind of smashing together of the performer-creator. That this was very much a role that I'm... like, I am my work, you know? That kind of approach. And I think, ja, it's often - it's economic things, because when they want your work in Paris, you know, it's easier to fly one person over from east Africa, you know?

KM: Ja, ja.

KJ: So, I think it's really just that; it doesn't allow the skills to transfer or to... And this idea of transferring the skills and sharing... so it was for us to share and make something happen. But we also had this sort of altruistic view of wanting to share it with others, outside of our little group. And why we started, like, having auditions and trying to get interesting, movers and performers to work with us, it was this really great opportunity to do that, also. But I should say it was never economically viable. It was just, it was a financial drain. Oh, that's depressing.

KM: (Laughs) I can imagine though!

KJ: You're supposed to talk about how to make it work, but...

KM: Ja, no but it did work. It just so happened that the financials of it, the books didn't balance at the end of the day.

KJ: No, they couldn't, and it's because we opened the net too wide, actually. Ja. At a certain point, we thought: Ah, we just, we have to make the work only on ourselves. But ah, then the sense of community disappears, you know? So it couldn't continue, really. Ja. Plus, also ja... And that brought us to the point, I was probably what? Twenty-seven or something, we've skipped a couple of years ahead. I was maybe twenty-seven, twenty-eight by this time, by the time this project was ending. So because it wasn't commercially viable, it's either: do you change, you keep the kind of work that you're making? Are you still... do you want to be innovative? I suppose. And like, question the methodology, question the practice and cut off - make the community smaller, so you can keep doing that, like keep being niche. Or do you make something commercial then? And we were like, we were pulled across like those two directions. Like some people in the group wanted to make more... well, just make it entertaining and you'll sell more tickets, like - that's the answer. And we can keep the size, like, you can keep the circle big, you know, if you make commercial work. But then for me and others, you know, I wasn't willing to go that route. Ja. And that's when... Oh, no, then I went back to Kampala. Ja. And I think that was... that overlapped a little. So there was a time, so I finished my Masters. I taught at UCT for another year. And I did not enjoy that teaching situation at all.

And I decided, you know what, and this time, I didn't go for a job but I went back to Uganda. I felt like the two years that I'd had, they weren't quite enough. And then also because, it felt like the wild west, you know, like, you could just go there and start something new, like fertile ground. You know, it's a

very fertile kind of artistic community. So I went back there and spent another four? Four years? Wait - 2013, 14, 15, half of 16, ja - almost four years. Ja, I went back to Kampala.

KM: Ja, it was long that you were gone.

KJ: Ja. But I would, I would travel once or twice a year back to Cape Town and come and do some Underground work. So that was kind of overlapping. Ja. But I went back to there and that wasn't for a particular job. That was just to... I did end up teaching ballet again, to pay the bills.

KM: At the same?

KJ: At the same place, ja, I went back to the Queen.

KM: (Laughs) The Queen beckons! (Laughs) So does that bring us to your thirties? So there's, at the end of the four year period in Kampala?

KJ: Ja, but I'm trying to think what I was doing at that time, I'm trying to remember what I was doing in Kampala. I was teaching ballet. Oh, ja. That's when I really got involved with organizing Dance Transmissions Festivals. Ja.

KM: Were you doing the artistic direction, or?

KJ: It was with my son's father. We worked closely on all aspects of the project, really. But I learned fundraising. Ja, we got a big grant from like a Dutch Foundation to do this festival. And he really gave me the opportunity to get really like stuck into like, who do we invite, like, put out a call for, you know, what does it take to like organize a festival and we had people from the US, Madagascar, Ruanda, DRC again, Norway, Tanzania. It was like a really an international festival and I had the chance to like run this thing. You know? It was amazing, that opportunity to just like get stuck in and learn like that. But I had to go there to do that. I wouldn't have had that opportunity here. You know? So sometimes I think it's useful to go to, like a smaller place or just like take a chance.

KM: A different context.

KJ: A different context, ja.

KM: Because, I mean, that really was quite a seminal moment in all the kind of like branches of your practice. Like, that going away to an unknown context brought in all those kind of like, the kind of developmental movement patterns, the experience in the funding and structural organization of like an artistic festival. And that wouldn't have been viable here.

KJ: Right. No, no, it wouldn't have been.

KM: That's amazing. (Laughs)

KJ: Ja, so if I think back over my twenties and thirties like, what did I do during that time? Like, I got all these... it was like relationships, you know, and some have continued and some haven't. But it was about who I was working with, and what I could take from that. And ja, it was this sense of community.

And I think it's just become more and more and more, now that I'm in my thirties. Like, that's, you know, I always know who I'm working with, it's about who I'm working with. Ja.

KM: To wrap up, is there anything that you're working on at the moment that is - that you'd like to talk about? Current project? If anything?

KJ: Ja, well, I'm doing this PhD, I suppose. Um, I think it's important to say why I decided to register for a PhD. I realized that it was a way for me to stay in the industry.

KM: You mean, like, quite tactilely? Like economically?

KJ: Economically a resource, you know, so I, ja, I think what I did, at the end of my twenties, is I put myself back into an institution. And not UCT this time, so I'm at Wits and I've got great supervisors. Ja, so education was like a way to keep making. Ja, it's kind of like a PhD is an excuse to like, stay in artistic practice. And then I'm quite fortunate in that I'm in this department where they're really having really, really interesting conversations about what artistic research is and what it means on this continent and so I'm being fuelled by that at the moment. But then I do think, you know, there should be another way.

KM: The institution cannot be the only way.

KJ: The institution cannot be the only way! Ja...

KM: Ja, and I'm sure there are ways and I'm sure people are doing the things in other ways. But good.

KJ: Did we end on a depressing note?

KM: Maybe, but that's what post is for (Laughs) We'll just put a little jingle in there. Great. Thank you so much for speaking with us.

KJ: You're welcome.