

*ABZ - "Between Twenty and Thirty: Conversations for the New Moon"
Caroline Calburn 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: Hi to everyone that's listening! This is the Between 20 and 30 Podcast with ANY BODY ZINE. And I'm sitting here with Caroline Calburn. Hi, Caroline.

Caroline: Hi.

K: How're you doing?

C: I'm good. How are you?

K: I'm fantastic. Thank you for coming to sit with us and with us.

C: Always.

K: Could you tell our listeners who you are and what it is that you do?

C: So currently, because it always has to be current, I run [Theatre Arts Admin Collective](#), which is essentially a theatre space to share resources for local and national and international artists. That's what it's turned out to be. But it... ja, it's a place to come and rehearse, to have conversations, to present work to have conversations about the work. I kind of see it as a space that's before... it's that in-between space, between people who are stepping out of the supported tertiary environment, into the industry. And for some people that's a short period, that's a year. For some people, it's a longer period. And interestingly enough, also it's a space for experimental artists, particularly older experimental artists who've never had it mainstream and have never had a home, really. So it's become it's become that space as well. And I've been doing that for 10 years and I feel like it's time to move on.

K: That's great. So can you maybe take us back to 20? Where were you? What did your life look like? What were you doing?

C: Oh, gosh, well, when I was 20, I think I was in... I was either in... finishing off my first year or my second year of varsity. So I studied at Wits [University of Witwatersrand], grew up in Joburg. Went to Wits Drama Department. It was, obviously, the 80s. It was an incredibly volatile period. So ja, I turned

20 in 1985, which was my first year of varsity. And the Drama Department felt like a very volatile space, because a lot was beginning to change. Understanding that when I went into first year, there were only two black people in the entire department.

K: And were they students or were they teaching?

C: Students. No, no, no, no teachers, only students. There was, when I was in first year, there was a Zane Meas who most people know from television, a fantastic television actor. He was the above me. And then there was Ntshavheni wa Luruli, who became a filmmaker and did a lot of work with Spike Lee. He was in his fourth year, and he'd come into the department as Paul Luruli. And so it was the awakening of all of that period. They were big signs all over the department that said, "Paul now would like to be known as Ntshavheni". So, you know, it was a kind of a... and there were, I think, two, there were three black people in my year. Out of a department of 130. Yeah?

So it was a very the department, the department was in a volatile space. The Wits Drama Department was quite a political space and I came in with the understanding that, actually, my education was going to be far more political than it was going to be around drama. And so when I say that I spent more time, and I think a lot of us did, except for those people who were really, really focused - we spend more time in marches and out on campus than we actually spent... We spent a lot of time, obviously, in the rehearsal room and in classes and whatever. But I mean, the moment there was a hint of anything going on outside and there were I mean, police were on campus, all through my four years of university. We really spent most of the time out there.

So when I came out of the Drama Department, skill wise, I had nothing. I really had nothing. I was absolutely not ready to enter into the industry at all, and was terrified of it, and didn't really know what I wanted to do or... I had absolutely zero sense of myself in terms of the work and in terms of what I'd gone in to become.

K: So you, you felt like maybe you didn't have a practice yet, an established practice?

C: No, nothing! Absolutely nothing.

K: And did you go into university...

C: And the drama department did not encourage that at all.

K: Ja, they didn't encourage personalization...

C: No, there was no... No, it was like a jack-of-all-trades at Wits. And, and it was very hard. I think the lecturers must have had a very hard time. It was very, very hard to try and instil a practice because life was so volatile. And, and because there was so much change that was happening and because, I think, students were very split. We were very split between why we were there, and what was going on in the world, which felt a hell of a lot more important. And don't forget that it wasn't just - I think the difference between like, the Fees Must Fall movement, you know I was sort of looking at how the universities erupted over the Fees Must Fall movement and Rhodes Must Fall, that was very contained to university. You know what I mean? It wasn't... sure, the conversation spilled out into the broader South African context. But in the 80s, it was the broader South African context that was spilling out into the universities.

So we were very much engaged in trying to overturn the government, really. And so one's education felt, well, certainly I speak for myself, my education felt really, really, really secondary. And I mean, I took it quite seriously and I loved it and it was really a period where one's brain is really receptive and open to concepts and ideas and to things, but to be perfectly honest, I think what really excited me more, was being on the Student Union, listening to Mzwakhe Mbuli reciting poetry that kind of like, stirred up a, you know, a whole university campus, than being in a rehearsal room, rehearsing a scene from a British play.

K: Ja. (Laughs) *King Lear*...

C: Exactly.

K: Ja, while the country burns. (Laughs).

C: No, no, no, exactly! And it was... I loved it. So I'm not denying that I loved those moments in the rehearsal room. But it was very, very hard to make the connection between what we were doing, in terms of our education and what was going on in the country.

K: Ja.

C: Whereas I think that students now in their twenties have got a far greater connection between those two things. And as I said, because the, in a way, the kind of the revolution started within the university in 2016, it didn't start, you know, it didn't start outside. So it was a very, I would say, a very fragmented, my twenties were very fragmented. And I mean, you know, the other thing was, is that I found myself in a gay relationship in... before the first year, the first gay pride, where there were 20 people with brown paper bags over their heads marching. Do you know what I mean? That was the first first gay pride we... I don't think we want to call it a "Pride March" if everybody's got paper bags over their heads. But in that sense that, you know, being gay in the 80s and in the early 80s, while there were many... Nobody was open. You know? Nobody was open. So well, people were open, but it was harder. You know? It was hard. And actually, it was less hard for me than it was for my partner, who was a human rights lawyer at the time and representing people who were fighting for the ANC underground and her fear was greatly around how the ANC felt about homosexuality. I mean, she didn't know. You know?

So it was the time of Simon Nkoli, when Simon Nkoli was still in prison. It was, you know, it was very much, that period of time. So one's life is very, very fragmented. And as I say it didn't, one didn't grow confidence. One didn't... I mean, I could really honestly say that my twenties were winging it. I was literally winging it from moment to moment to moment.

And then added to which we had come out of an education, school education that hadn't prepared us for the world in any way. I mean, I'm sort of thinking about my education. I went to an all-girl private school, where there was not one opportunity, at all, ever, in our education to make physical contact with somebody. We didn't do drama. So there was no... Do you know what I mean? There was no physical contact. Walking into the drama department and having to do exercises that required physical contact completely blew my mind. And absolutely made me realize how terrified I was of my own physicality of, you know, of all of that stuff. And so the twenties really became a... my twenties were a process of building up a sense of self confidence and understanding of myself, understanding of the world that I

was in, understanding the role that I wanted to play in the world, and kind of really coming down to what my core values were, which I think that I only really discovered in my early thirties.

K: Like, that kind of consolidation period. (Laughs) Ah, I'm looking forward to that.

C: Ja, absolutely. When I was 30, I lost my... the woman who I had been living with for four years. We weren't in a relationship, but she felt like a soul-mate and she was killed very suddenly in a car accident. And that kind of... that closing, that death, was kind of a closing of my twenties. It closed off that whole period. And it surprisingly opened an incredible door, which has been the journey that I then took through my thirties, forties and now in to my fifties. And that was around - what was of value? What was the work that I want to be doing and what is its value and how has it shaped me? And how do I want to help shape the world?

K: And what did the years after your university education look like? Because that four years?

C: Mh, I did a four-year degree. Well, that was really interesting. I came out of university not like, honestly they should have - I should have been failed. And I really, in my heart of hearts, wanted to be failed and I had no idea. I was living on my own. I mean, I think it was like, I was total child. I was living my own. I suddenly had to be financially dependent, I mean, independent. And I mean, back then one's rent was R130 a month. It was still... (Laughs)

K: Still money.

C: You when you're earning R1000 a month, which is I think what I was earning, but I mean, rent was R130 a month, or something like R140 a month. I had a very old car. I lived in Yeoville and I thought, What do I want to do? And this is an interesting thing because I'd had a conversation with my father about wanting to write, and saying that I had wanted to take the year off, after my final year of varsity. I wanted to take the year off to write. I had the sense that I wanted to write children's books. And in this telephone conversation, my father said, 'You're far too young to write. You've got nothing to write about.'

And I remember thinking, bloody hell, of course, I've got something to write about. But that stuck with me. And I remember sitting down and going, what I'm going to write - I've got nothing to write about. And that comment plagued me and I think still does. It was like a flippant comment that my father had made. And it plagued me for years and years and years and years and years of going - I've got nothing to say. You know? It was really weird and you know, if I were to replay those years, I wouldn't even know... I think they would still have the same impact now. And I think... so I remember that, as a parent, I would never say to my child ever, 'You've got nothing to write about.' Or, you know, a different way of saying it, maybe: 'Why don't you go out and experience the world, go and live the world, go and find yourself in the world, go and find out what your passion is.' But don't tell a child: You've got nothing to say.

K: That's so absolute. That's a full stop. Like, you have not lived.

C: Oh, ja, it was a total full stop. And sadly, because my father died shortly after that, it stayed with me. It really, really stayed with me. And it was weird because he was an artist himself. It was so weird for him to have said that.

So what did my years look like? So when I, when I finished varsity I took a year off and it really was about looking at how I could support myself in order to be able to do what it is that I wanted to do. And what I wanted to do was write. So I had... because I can be a very structured person, I structured my life so that I had a waitressing job, and I waitressed at lunchtime. I wrote for an hour, one hour and a half before I went to waitress at lunchtime, and then I would come back at about three or four and angst about what I had written, what I had not been able to write, whatever, and I'd try and write for another hour. I was, you know, while I was quite structured, I was also quite undisciplined. Like, I had quite a lot of high anxiety around what I expected of myself, and a total perfectionist. So I would spend like, three days, on one paragraph, trying to - whatever.

But absolutely zero support. Absolutely zero support. Like I didn't, there was no... I was kind of locked up in my flat on my own, page 22, trying to write, waitressing, trying to hold some sort of semblance of a relationship together. And with absolutely no support, like a support writing group or where, you know, artists meeting together and chatting - like there was, like, none of that, if I really think about it now, none of that. So at the end I produced one children's book at the end of the year (Laughs). It was like nine pages long but then could never find an illustrator who I could... who could take the book anywhere. I had sort of ideas for the illustration.

And I think I did that for two years and oh - but, I think where the life changing thing happened for me, was every weekend I used to go, because it was part of the chinks down, boycotts, so schools, township schools had pretty much come to a standstill. I worked for an organization, which was called DAAD, which was a German - it was a German funded organization, which did education, weekend education enrichment for township kids who were going through grade 11 and 12.

So every weekend I went through to Mamelodi in Pretoria and worked with a group of grade 11s on their English and it suddenly made me go - oh my god! This is actually - I love teaching. And I was teaching them poetry, poetry and fiction. And you know, their school set workbooks and school poetry, and realized that... I remember doing a simple exercise with them like - the poem was a Guy Butler poem about, I don't know, I can't remember what it was about, it was about, about the Karoo or whatever. And I kind of asked them to close their eyes to try and imagine the landscape. And they couldn't, because not one of them had ever been up a mountain, been to the sea. And realized that their education had never really taught them to imagine.

And so I used to do a lot of imaging, play a lot of imaginative games. So there's a real sense that they could know - they couldn't imagine a world outside of the world that they existed in. And it was a real kind of analysis for myself of what Bantu education had been and was and looking at how I could try and change that. So, so I used to, yes, every weekend, I used to do that. And it was based on that that I decided that I would go back to university and study Drama and Education. That was really what I wanted to do. So yeah, those, what those two years looked like were kind of - a bit of teaching. I guess like, but in very strange... Very strange, through very strange organizations. You know, it was all, ja, I was winging it. As one does.

K: Ja. As one must. And did you find that through teaching through these organizations, you found like that was your training in amalgamating your drama education and your desire to teach?

C: Well, it made me realize that that was what I wanted to do.

K: And then from there, did you pursue that in any kind of institutional...

C: Yes, so then I came down to UCT. I came down to UCT and I did a one-year Honours in Drama and Education, which completely blew me apart. Absolutely blew me apart, so different being in a university in 1991, as opposed to 1985. It's like the world had significantly changed in some respects. But also because the UCT education, because the UCT Drama Department had been set up around a performance diploma, you went to UCT to study acting. You didn't go to study anything else. You weren't going to be a theatre maker or a director or whatever. You went to study acting. If you went to Wits, you did film, you know, in first year we were making one-minute movies. We were acting. We were doing movement, whatever, we were in the theatre designing. We were painting. Do you know what I mean? Like, the course was this wide.

UCT was acting and everything was geared towards acting. Acting was a tiny part of what Wits was about. So coming into, like a really intensive education, not that I was studying acting, I was doing drama in education, but I was in that environment where that's what everybody was doing, you know, made me realize the gifts of my education at Wits and obviously its shortcomings. But I really looked at it as being gifts, real gifts. But it had opened my eyes to a lot of... kind of an understanding of how everything worked together, as opposed to just being a performer being given direction by somebody.

So the second half of my twenties was spent doing... I came down to UCT when I was 26. And so the second half of my twenties were really skills development and learning to teach drama from grade one through to university students. And the Honours turned into a two-year Masters and in the second year of my Masters my supervisor went on sabbatical. And so I took over some of her teaching so ended up teaching in the drama department, which led to, when she came back, it led to... so I was still teaching, a teaching poster at UCT. So I taught there from 27, 28, 29 and then got fired.

K: Fun! (Laughs). It's a fun story!

C: It was a fun story. I got fired when I was 29.

K: And how did that happen?

C: It's such a long story, I can't even begin to talk about it. But again, it was around values. It was around everything that I'd learned at Wits, which was - if something is wrong, you stand up for it. And when you stand up for it, you are in the firing line. And that's basically what happened. I stood up for something that I felt was absolutely unethical and got fired, literally and figuratively. Which was a great thing actually, because I had always known that I had never gone to UCT to end up teaching privileged white kids, which is essentially what I was doing at UCT because UCT hadn't transformed all that much, really. If you're thinking about '91, '92, '93, '94 - more and more black students were coming into the university but the Drama Department's staffing profile hadn't changed. It was entirely white staff.

So, it was a blessing. It was a blessing in disguise. But really, those last four years were really about skills. It was really about learning skills. And then learning to be good at what I wanted to do and also discovering what it is that I wanted to do, which then got more refined through my thirties. But ja, twenties were an interesting time. I think, for me, the most exciting part of my twenties... I mean, in your twenties everything that you do is new, you know, so it can be really scary. You know, it's the first time you doing this, it's the first time you doing that, it's the first time first time you living on your own, the first time you driving in a car, first time you are - I don't know, getting into some sort of relationship. You know? It's a series of firsts in everything. And.. but the thing that excited me the most

was.. a kind of academic. I wasn't an A-student by any means but I was, I guess, I'd always been the student who was challenging the status quo all the time. So if we were given a project to do that ran along A-lines, I would always do the project along B-lines, and then try and justify why I was taking B as opposed to A. You know? So, I saw the twenties as kind of breaking the rules all the time. I loved breaking the rules. In fact, I didn't love breaking the rules. I felt like I had no option but to break the rules.

So it is interesting being much older, being able to look back at that period...

K: And see how they kind of, like, set up a kind of precedent for everything that followed.

C: Ja. And just understand what it was about.

K: Ja.

C: I've never actually really done that.

K: I'm glad this offered an opportunity for that.

C: Ja, it's been fantastic!

K: Thank you for making the time to talk to us.

C: No. Absolutely fantastic. Totally wonderful. Thanks.