

*ABZ - "Between Twenty and Thirty: Conversations for the New Moon"
Joni Barnard 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 to everyone that's listening. This is Nicola, for the Between 20 and 30 Podcast for ANY BODY ZINE. I'm sitting here with Joni Barnard in her very nice flat in Berlin and ja, Joni...

Joni: Hi, hi.

N: Maybe you can start by telling us a little bit about yourself. Just briefly introduce yourself and maybe you can try to describe the sorts of things that you practice or that you do or make.

J: Ja, okay, so a little bit about myself: I recently moved to Berlin, which feels quite big and a little bit overwhelming, but also very exciting.

N: From Johannesburg?

J: From Johannesburg, ja. So I was living in Johannesburg for... well, I'm from Joburg originally. Studied in Makhanda, at Rhodes University and then I moved back to Joburg and I was working in Joburg. I studied Choreography and so I come from more of a choreographic dance background. And I make a lot of work in theatre, in kind of more physical theatre. And that's what I was doing in Joburg and so I feel like I have a lot of different, a lot of different disciplines and a lot of different projects. So I have this dance background and this dance practice, embodied practice that I love, which feeds a lot into my theatre practice; making a lot of, kind of, stylized, absurdist theatre work, working a lot with Roberto Pombo, I don't know if you know who he is? In Joburg, working a lot with him. And then I'm also in a band.

N: Okay!

J: Ja, called Stash Crew. So I'm also performing in the band, rapping mostly.

N: Dope!

J: Ja, it's super, it's very cool. I'm in this like, queer electro rap crew. So these are kind of the three, my kind of three trajectories that I'm doing. And then I teach, so...

N: Okay, okay. Theatre or dance?

J: Dance. I was, well, across the board. I, kind of, my teaching and my practice went kind of hand in hand a bit. I was, for seven years, lecturing at Wits in what is now the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies, and I was head of the choreographic research portfolio and curriculum, so kind of, I was holding the movement courses.

N: Okay, all right. And so always in the world of performance, basically?

J: Yes, in performance, live performance, ja.

N: How old are you now?

J: I'm... this week Monday, on the 21st, was my birthday.

N: Happy birthday!

J: Thank you! I turned 34.

N: Okay. Libra - nice.

J: Libra, yes.

N: And then, ja, if you can maybe take us back to your twenties, what your life looked like. I'm guessing you were studying?

J: Ja.

N: And ja, if you can, like conjure up your twenty year old self and kind of, maybe, if you want to, like, find a sort of pathway that you can share with us of like, how you progressed and any kind of big moments that brought you to where you are now. And also, I'm sorry, I'm gonna let you talk now but I think something that a lot of young creative, cultural workers, artists are always asking themselves like, how do I survive? How do I make it work? Is it possible? Maybe you can also share with us how you kind of... that's always a question that's unfolding right? So if you want to also bring that in...

J: Okay. I was twenty, I think, in 2005. I was in my second year of studying at Rhodes University. And, and just discovering dance actually. And being like blown away by the potential and possibilities and feeling very attached and curious and moved and excited about dance practice and embodied practice. Ja, I come from quite a - both my parents are athletes, so I come from like, a very like, rah rah sport-family. And so I feel like I also already had this kind of physical discipline in my upbringing? Or this kind of investment in the physical, you know, as a kind of... I don't know, measure of success in a way, if that makes sense?

N: Yes.

J: If you have physical virtuoso and skill in sport then you also, I don't know, have some sense of success.

N: And your identity also becomes attached to this physicality.

J: Ja exactly, and very much attached to the body as well, you know, so I already had this and what I found quite exciting is that I... there is this also in dance practice, you know, there's this athleticism, and this like - deep athleticism. And this was like, oh! Okay, I understand this. Then it's mixed with this, you know, other deeper, expressive opportunity, or more kind of, like somatic approach to the body, which is not so militant, you know? It's not like a militant approach. And this was like blowing my mind completely, you know? So I was like, oh - I can do this thing. You know? And that really changed my trajectory a lot in terms of what I thought I would study.

N: What did you think...

J: I thought I was going to act, you know, and be an actress. This was what I had when I was 18.

N: Alright.

J: And, ja, I mean, I was confused by what movement was, what they meant by it, how it was integrated into performance. And then ja, after my second year, kind of completely changed my direction or my focus into choreography and dance practice. Very much because I was inspired by the people who were teaching me, as well, Gary Gordon and Juanita Finestone-Praeg and Andrew Buckland, also - mime, these mime artists. And, in Graham- Makhanda, Grahamstown is now Makhanda, in Makhanda, I'm very grateful for the kind of intense and immersive practice that I found there. Even though it is a bit of a bubble, this I also know, but at the time that I was studying, and I went through to do My Honours, so I was doing kind of English Literature and 'Dramatic Art' - what they called it then. And then I went on to do my Honours in Performance and then to do my Masters in Choreography. Ja, I got a scholarship to do that, which was great. And there was a real investment, at the time, in what I felt, in the department and the teachers and the facilitators, really pushing you to, kind of, find your own style. So this was this was really... Ja, I felt very grateful for that. I am trying to think of other... Ja, I think for me, when I did my MA in 2008 / 2009...

N: Which was also in Performance Studies?

J: Which was in Choreography specifically.

N: Choreography, specifically, okay.

J: Choreography specifically, yes, and there were eight of us, at the time doing our MA. So it was a big group. Ja, so it felt like there was a little ensemble, you know? And I think this was a very big moment for me because we were all a little bit competitive, you know? So we pushed each other a lot, which I'm also very grateful for, you know? I was in the same group as Nicola Elliot and Shaun Acker and this was, ja, I feel like this time, we were in the bubble a bit, you know? We were diving in and really kind of exploring and embodied practice in experimental and crazy ways and it was really kind of, very fulfilling and a very rich time.

N: Okay. And were you're working... This thing of choreography; it's always, like, this question of n yourself or on other people, you know? Like, did you - or maybe a more interesting question is like, you said that they were pushing you to, like, find your voice. Do you feel like you found your voice at the time? Or your style or your like, thing?

J: Ja, at the time, I feel... I mean, I think I'm still finding it now. You know? It's continually developing. I think at that time, I was like, quite young, quite naive, quite arrogant. You know, like, Yes! I am Choreographer Master! You know? But ja, totally, I really am into kind of minimalistic, gestural kind of choreography, which has now changed a lot. But at the time, working a lot on yourself, on kind of solo performances, and then working slowly on other bodies. And then for your MA, it was kind of like, you could do whatever you want, really. And, ja, I think I really just cultivated a kind of, like a deep appreciation for somatic practice. In the way that it can be used as a healing practice but as kind of a way to understand the world. You know? Through the body. I think this is the main, the biggest thing that I took from my studies, ja.

N: All right. And then after graduation?

J: After graduation, Oh my god! After graduation... (Laughs). Unprepared for the world! (Laughs)

N: As university tends to do, radically unprepare you, despite their best efforts.

J: Oh my god. I moved back to Joburg and I moved back into my mom's house after six years, which was also very interesting. And ja, and I was also, I was finishing my MA, I was finishing writing, you know, while was still in Joburg. It was also stressful, I submitted late and you know how it goes. And I was trying to find a job, basically and I started teaching. So I kind of fell a little bit into teaching. I was - I had to teach as part of my scholarship for my MA and for my Honours, a little bit. So I was teaching already while I was at Rhodes and I found, like, I really enjoyed it a lot, engaging with other people. And I got a job teaching drama as, like, a extracurricular at my old school in Joburg, which was great as a way to make some money, you know? And for me, this is how I have survived. Yes? I've always, like, taught. I've had these two, which I thought were like two very separate worlds, which I'm now realizing they're a little bit more mixed. And it's... ja, I started teaching at a school where I met also a lot of other artists. I met Kyla Davis who runs a theatre company called the Well Worn Theatre Company. We were teaching at the same school together and she got funding from the lottery to do this educational theatre program, she does a lot of environmental, educational theatre. And I auditioned for this, and this was my first job as an artist, you know, was performing in her company. And ever since then I've kind of just performed in her company. I mean, that was 2009... 2010 - Ja, so almost for the last 10 years. And through that she was also running a kind of weekly class. It was called 'Le Club'. And it was - there were a group of fifteen of us and we would meet once a week and it was all based on improvisation, or improvisation techniques, like not so much... Not only theatre, but like more physical, ja? More physical based. Through that group I also met Roberto Pombo and Toni Morkel and they were running this group called 'Causing a Scene', which is like a theatre improv, like for theatre sports only. So there was a lot happening in Joburg, at that time. Ja, my mind is like, going into a lot of different direction.

N: That's great.

J: Just stop me if I'm...

N: No no, this is really interesting.

J: Okay, cool. Good.

N: This is great. I'm like, wow, I really want to go to Joburg.

J: Ja, (laughter) I don't know if it's the same but at the time, Joburg was really generous to me, actually. I met a lot of cool people. I got work really easy, this was also quite interesting. So I was teaching extracurricular drama at school to, like, young young kids, like grade naught, so five year olds and then eventually, like, all the way across the board, grade naught to matric. And then I started lecturing part-time at Wits, just first year movement with Jane O'Connell at the time, she was - someone recommended me to her, which was nice, I think through Rhodes because she also used to go Rhodes. She also studied at Rhodes and then I started teaching there and slowly at Wits, I was like, on a part time contract and then I was on a 50% contract and then I was on an 80% contract, and I was like, you know, so slowly, I kind of - I got sucked in.

N: Is that how I felt?

J: Agh, it kind of - by the end of it, it kind of felt like that because I never... I really enjoy teaching and it took me, like, two or three years to realize that it's also a skill that I have and that I enjoy it a lot. But I feel like I wasn't, like, pursuing it, you know, it wasn't like this. I think it was, like, what we were talking about before this. It was my fear of, like, I couldn't claim to be an artist, you know? So I couldn't be like, oh, but I'm an artist. In my family it's like, what does that mean? You know? But what are you doing? How are you making money? You know, this is, like, the big question. So I was always, like, a teacher who was then making work. You know? So that was how I was kind of pushing, or how I was kind of hiding behind the identity, you know, of teacher-facilitator and academic. Which I think is also, I don't know, a very murky terrain. You know? Also I think, in Joburg and in universities in South Africa, like to be an academic or...

N: Were you writing?

J: I was writing, yes. I was writing and teaching and I was doing more kind of curriculum development. And most of my research was falling into this kind of curriculum development side but I was also writing. I was organizing, I organized a festival at Wits, which was great. It's like where I learned the most, I think, about festival organization and dance politics in South Africa.

N: Okay, what was the name of the festival?

J: It was called 'Detours'. Detours Rerouting Movement Composition. And I co-directed and co-ran it with Jane O'Connell Crewe at the time and it ran for five years. Ja, like every year for five years, obviously hosted by the Wits Theatre and the Department and it was really interesting. It was like, we called for kind of shorter works, you know, like 10 to 15 minutes experimental works and by the end of it, we had... I mean, in the last year that it ran I think it was the most successful because was the most, kind of, compound, you know? We had workshops running, we had a project like, with a university in the UK, with - I can't even remember now - but it was a kind of a student exchange programme. We had some international, kind of, interest in it. There was... I mean, definitely one of the highlights for me, there's this practitioner called Mersiha Mesihivoc. She's Bosnian but she lives in New York. And she found out about the festival on her own, funded herself to come down and took some workshops and her kind of dance practice is extremely moving and extremely interesting. And it was super inspiring for me, as well, to meet her and I think when I met her and she took this workshop, it was another moment for me to be like, Oh, okay, wait, there's this other world out there, you know? I'd been teaching so much and like, output, output, output - that I'd forgotten this kind of world of somatic dance and dance practice and art practice. And she kind of, like - Boof! I went to the workshop that she

gave, she gave to the students and then I also just went and it was a real moment for me like, Okay, I haven't been doing this and then she said to me, 'You can! You can you have all these facilities here, you can also make this happen.'

N: All right. And what year was this? So...

J: This was in twenty... Wow, where are we? 2014?

N: 2014.

J: 2014, maybe? Ja. But if I can just add one thing, if we're just talking about like work and art, the way that I was doing it, was that I was teaching and making money and then using that money to self produce. You know? And to kind of, make smaller dance solos at smaller festivals like the Sibikwa Solo Arts Festival or The Dance Umbrella that's based in Joburg, putting work on there, and then ja, kind of making also more theatre work.

N: All right. What kind of sowed the seed of leaving Joburg and of starting again, in a different city, in a different continent. Can you speak a bit...

J: I started finding it very hard to navigate myself in an academic institution. And to kind of make work and research within the kind of paradigms, you know, the academic paradigms. I was doing a lot of experimental work at the time, and this, ja... I couldn't - I feel like what I was interested in and what I was trying to research - and I couldn't... Ja, I couldn't juggle and navigate what was expected of me, which was quite difficult. And also there were a lot of different changes happening in that department; Name changes, managerial changes, you know, it's like, in the six years or seven years that I was there, we had five different HOD's [Head of Departments]. Like, a different HOD every year, with a different intention, with a different idea of where we should go, with a different trajectory. So I found it very difficult to navigate.

N: And were you still teaching there in 2015?

J: Yes. And I think for me, this was... I mean, during the Fallist Movement and the protests. I mean, I think I learned more in three months, than I did in six years through also, like a lot of tension and violence and you know. Which, I think, I mean, I'm super grateful, you know? I think I'm really, really grateful and I was also disappointed, by the way that university managed, you know, the protests that were happening on campus. And I was very grateful to my students who, you know, were very open with me and very honest, very radically honest with me about what they wanted, what they were expecting, what - like, you know, what does it mean to decolonize an educational curriculum? These are like such big questions. And through that, I also realized that I had been educated so much in this white canon, European canon, you know? And that I was attempting a lot to break this, but that in a way, I didn't have the skills, you know? I didn't have the kind of, you know, I just didn't have the skills to do that on my own, you know? I think there has to be a real kind of... a radical or a drive or a want, to kind of radically change an entire curriculum or an entire department. Ja, so this was quite, quite big. And I... ja I had a really good rapport with my students, at the time, which was good. And then I was searching for some kind of... I also wanted to study again, you know, I wanted to study again, and I wanted to learn more so that I could influence my teaching practice and kind of rediscover what it means to be an artist. I was a bit lost, you know? I was applying to do my PhD at a whole lot of universities in the UK, you know, just before the protests happened, and I was like, Okay, why am I doing that? Because it's

like feeding the colonial machine or... like, I don't know. I was a bit lost and then I had, ja, in 2015, I had visited Berlin to come see my very good friend, Mmakgosi Kgabi, who has also done an interview here. She was living here and I came for my 30th birthday, between 20 and 30, ja, just to visit for two weeks and to see what she was doing and how she was living and I was, ja, I was really excited by the city. And then I don't know how it happened, like through my search of trying to find something to study, I got an email from this course called SMASH Berlin button. So it's like a three-month intensive training for physical performance based more on improvisation. And ja, I kind of applied and I got in.

And so in 2016 I came to Berlin to do this course for three months and it was a, it's like an international program, with like twenty, I think like, twenty-six people from all over the world. And I learned, again, I learned so much in those three months, you know, then I had in the past seven years, since I had left university. And this really shifted my whole pedagogy and approach to teaching and really opened my mind to like, Okay, what are we practicing? Why are we practicing? Why do we dance? What is the, you know, this kind of - what is the motivation? What is the meaning behind it? And then this was kind of the catalyst for me to be like, Okay, I'm gonna... I'm gonna quit, I'm gonna quit my job. I went back to teach for one semester and, just, was experimenting more with this kind of approach, which is much more based on improvisation and ensemble performance, which I found... and then heavily based in like a somatic approach to the body as the technique. And I found this founders to be very exciting. And then, and then ja, I kind of got more courage to be like, Okay, let me try this thing. Let me explore what it means to just not have a full time job and not teach so much in a kind of more rigid structure.

Ja. And it was cool and 2017 was like - wah! A crazy year for me. I was traveling a lot. I had like a residency, a dance residency in Athens with some people I met, I travelled with the band that I'm in to San Paolo, to kind of a queer festival and back to Berlin, also with the band. And then I did this residency in Mpumalanga the Forgotten Angle Theatre Collective. So for me, it was like a very rich year of like, feeding back and finding out and you know, kind of figuring things out. And then ja, finally deciding to come and try and work here in Berlin. Ja, I also met somebody, which is also part of the motivating factor to come here. So, my partner lives here. She's a film editor, documentary and experimental films. And we were kind of deciding where to go, what we should do, like Joburg or Berlin and I was like, okay, let me let me try it.

N: If you could give advice or input or some sort of comforting mantra to your twenty-year old self, like, if you could maybe say something to you, ten years ago.

J: Yoh, it's tough one.

N: Ja.

J: Maybe like something about... That it's okay to... Ugh, this is going to sound like so esoteric.

N: That's okay, I'm esoteric as fuck. (Laughter). I'm like... ja.

J: Ah, so esoteric. Ja, okay, I'm going to jump on a trajectory, I think also, what I left out a lot in the interview, I mean, also one of the other reasons that I wanted to come to Berlin is like, because to, like explore the queer scene as well you know? And maybe this is bringing back to the question, what I'm really enjoying about understanding what 'queer' means, you know (and queer is not like white gay male firstly, if I can just remind everybody, all the time) but is to understand that like, it's okay to not know, you know? It's okay to not define yourself as 'a master of something'. You know? Because I was like, I'm

a dancer, you know, when I came out of university and then tried to fit into the dance world. And I was like, Oh, but I don't really fit in here. So I started, you know, making theatre that was more stylized and more absurd. So I think it's about, ja, it's okay to not define yourself all the time. You know? It's okay to be a little bit in between, it's okay to work project to project and be like, on this project, what is my role? I'm going to make music. On this project, I'm going to be a dramaturge. On this project, I'm reading a script. On this project, you know? So that it's okay to be to keep transforming and to keep, kind of, ja, just following your instinct a little bit more and to not have to define yourself all the time or to put so much pressure on yourself to have you know, a kind of...

N: A clear identifier...

K: A clear identifier or like, a clear three sentences for your biography like - this is what I am. And ja, to be more brave, I think, this is what I would tell myself. It's like, it's okay to not know. It's okay to not know and it's okay to be adaptable. It's good to be adaptable, if that make sense?

N: Ja. Totally. Great. Thank you!

J: Pleasure! Cool.