



INTERVIEW TO MICHELLE HINKSON-COX

Theater is in her veins. She is one of the most important figures in the artistic and cultural scene of the proclaimed Republic of Barbados on November 2021.

Michelle A. Hinkson-Cox is an educator, playwright, producer, director and artist-researcher, specializing in Barbadian and

heritage-based work. She is founder of the arts-based consultancy Rhema A.C.T.S. and lead many theater productions such as *Windrush*, *De Tempest*, *Tales in the forest*, among others. Her professional training began in 1997 at the Barbados Community College (BCC). Michelle's work has been recognized

internationally and she has been selected as a Fellow of the London-based Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce. Michelle is an advisor and meta-panelist at Open Channels.

The questions and interview were made by Lowell Fiet, Mat Schwarzman and Mahatma Caituiro Monge. The artist's history, popular theater in times of pandemic, Caribbean political borders, future artistic projects, and other topics are documented in video and text formats. Visit the website of Open Channels.

Open Channels (OC): Congratulations on his extensive artistic career and for being a Meta-panelist. To begin with and with great curiosity about your history and work of more than 30 years of experience in different facets contributing and participating in the performing arts of Barbados, tell us in the first place: how do you define yourself as a Caribbean popular theater performer —or theater practitioner. Also, it would be great if you could tell us about your history of creativity within popular theater, as well as your first steps in theater and theater training. Finally, because the previous steps and ancestors must be honored, tell us about the theatrical experiences, transcendental events, plays that marked your artistic development; and, what teachers, important figures and special people inspired or inspire your artistic and educator work.

Michelle Hinkson (MH): You know, popular theater really informs my process of theater making. A lot of the work that I do is built on principles of active participation and aims to provide that kind of immersive experience for the audience, so that, you know, you kind of get a better understanding of whatever topics are being explored. In more recent years, my work has focused on issues of historical significance, but I've also presented work that deals with issues around health, education, social issues, and things like intergenerational work. When I think about all the play that I do, even the more mainstream types of plays, all of them still kind of have that process that is very informed by popular theater, both in terms of the actual process itself and the kind of issues that we're representing.

You know, my exposure to theater started from, I guess, before birth <laugh>. It's genetic. My father is Barbados' most prolific playwright and he's been active in theater since the 1970s. So I was born into it in a sense. I grew up listening to him on typewriter. But my formal training would've started at Barbados Community College, and that was under primarily the tutorage of Dr. Yvonne Weekes. And from there, I then went on to study at University of the West Indies. And that's where I think my current of philosophy of theater really was shaped because I was under the guidance of people like Rawle Gibbons, Louis McWilliams, Dr. Dani Lindersay, Ed De Shae, who is amazing in technical theater. So a lot of my philosophy of theater and my

understanding of using theater as a teaching tool, particularly to understand self and our history, and explore our histories, that really came from the four years that I spent at the university under those wonderful people who I call my mentors. I did go on to study again after that at Goldsmiths College in London with Dr Caoimhe McAviney and Sue Mayo, but the foundation was built through what I was doing at UWI at that time.

So they're, they're critical moments literally at every step of my journey. If I think about Trinidad, you know, working with people like Rawle, Louis and Dani in terms of the performance side of it, just kind of understanding that theatre is so much more than what we put on a proscenium stage. We were encouraged to investigate the other possibilities for space, using unconventional spaces or perhaps even taking a conventional space and using it in an unconventional way. So they were very critical in reshaping my idea of what theater is to begin with, but I have to say that the things that really impacted my journey really strongly, again, would've been working with them, working also with Arts-in-Action in Trinidad, which is one of the Caribbean's leading Applied Theater companies. And then I would've worked also as a volunteer within the National Trust London while I was doing my Master's there.

And that opened my eyes again to the, the possibilities of theater in a heritage and historical context. I knew my father was

involved in theater, but I didn't grow up with him in theater. The very first play that I wrote in 2014 was actually a play that I co-wrote with my father. It was based on one of his poetry anthologies, and it was very special for me to kind of enter of this realm of writing through him. So we wrote that play together. It was stress <laugh>. I think one of the most stressful things for me, even now, is sending my work to my father for him to read it because he is my harshest critic.

<Affirmative> but you know, it really has been a fantastic journey being able to work with him while he's still alive, you know, and being able to have that kind of interaction professionally with him which I wouldn't have had as a child. But to be honest, every single one of the plays that I've written is special to me. They all hold significance for different reasons from 2014 to now. But the one little thing that I'll say that is kind of a common thread through all of them, which a lot of people don't know, is that every single one of those plays actually incorporates a little nugget or two about my family, whether it's family members, the family history, the stories of the family, the practices of the family. Every play that I write is actually my way of archiving my own heritage.

(OC): What do you think might be important or special about particularly important or special about improvisation within the popular theater frame?

(MH): Several things, first of all, here in the Caribbean, we are built on oral traditions. And because of that, we're avid storytellers, storytelling in itself is improv. So in terms of our own cultural identification, it's a part of who we are to be able to include improvisation. You know, my students always laugh at me when I write plays because I tell them, okay; I've put the full stop. I said "the end". I don't remember anything in the script. So I don't know if you skipped a line. And this is really bad teaching <laugh>, but I always say it to them. "If you skip a line, I don't care. Improv make it look like that's what I wrote"... because that's a part of who we are as a people. We hear a story once. And if you hear that story three more times, it's gonna be a different story each time.

And I love that kind of freshness in the work. So it becomes again a part of my process. In more traditional forms of popular theater, improv helps those participants. And I'm saying participants, not speaking about the actors, but everyone who is participating, even if you're coming in as a researcher, whether you're coming in thinking that your audience, you know, that, and kind of incorporation of the improv helps you to unpick the issues. Depending on the kind of issues that you're with, it also helps you to problem solve, find potential solutions, test the solutions. And I think that's really critical for us. Even in heritage work, a lot of the plays that I've written, I write them and then I, I give it to younger people and I say, "okay, work with it."

And then they do something that completely blows my mind through their improv work, because they have a different experience of the culture that we're writing about. So it really is a dynamic learning process. And I think that it's really important that we allow the voices and the experiences and the ideas of our participants to come through, even if it's through the improv itself. Mm-Hmm <affirmative>

(OC): Great. Is there a thread in your mind that weaves through all of these elements of you, all of pieces of the puzzle, is there a, a commonality?

(MH): There kind of is you know. Whether I try to do it or not, what always ends up happening is this pull towards heritage and culture and who are we? I don't present stories about heritage from one narrative or perspective. Because I think that we've been in a situation for too long where somebody else has always been telling our stories. So for me, it's always been about that. And again, the process is very important to me. So I'm writing, I don't write from my head, I write from the voices of people that I speak to. It's very much an oral history project as well. So a lot of the stories that you see in my plays tend to be based on actual stories that I've heard from my elders, because for me, that oral history is just as important as the written history that was in some cases written by others, and they don't necessarily tell the truth about who we are, you know. I've done some plays that are not particularly

historical or heritage based upfront, but even if that's the case, whatever I present in that play is still going to be questioning: who is this person?

How do we represent this person's story and do justice to it? You know, so that's, that's a common thread for me, this idea of representation this idea of really doing justice to identities of peoples and, you know, especially when it comes to marginalized peoples or forgotten cultures. I'm very, very specific about that, even in terms of my students and any actors that I work with. I tell them, you can't act in my play unless you have done your research. Don't come and tell me, this is a character you've made up in your dream. Go home. Do your research, whether that research is online, from books, from talking to your elders: do your research. Cause I had to do mine as the writer. You may find something that challenges what I've shown – that's okay. The point is we are doing justice to these people's stories.

(OC): Awesome. Thank you. Well, I have a question that's mainly about generations because the my real first introduction, to west Indian, to Anglophone Caribbean theater came through a remarkable Jamaican woman named Honor Ford Smith. Then, I met her and I don't know whether it was 1978 or 1979 when we first had a chance to speak and share some ideas. And this is almost a decade before I would the run to, to, to, to RA, to, to Kendall, to E two

decades before I would meet Danny. And <laugh> before, before I'd, before I met Walcott and all, all kinds of things. But the so I knew particularly about, I knew things that were happening, particularly the work, the work of honor, and, and sister and things and things that were happening. And, but, but that particular generation people who are the, my, my age or, or older, these many, many of whom now have, have passed, but the, it was an ex wonder wonderful, wonderful, wonderful time in, in, in, in Caribbean theater. The and I just wanna know the, your assessment of the, is there a generation like that now? Is there a generation you can call your generation and yet your generation is now very established and your generation, and then perhaps a younger generation. And what can you tell us about them?

(MH): So I'm gonna answer your question Lowell specifically in context to Barbados, right. Because I think Barbadian theatrical history is one element of Caribbean theater that's rarely discussed. There is that generation that you're talking of. That's my father's generation as well. That was a generation where we would've seen the likes of Earl Warner coming up. My father was actually Earl Warner's teacher. And we saw a number of greats coming up here in Barbados out of that generation, out of the Barbados Writer's Workshop which my dad started and a lot of people also would have gone off to School of Drama in Jamaica, and then they came back.

And what I have a problem with is the fact that some of the elders in that generation in Barbados have not mentored younger ones and passed on their knowledge. And I think the reason I have a problem with it, is because I came up with people like Rawle and Louis and Dani who were always so willing to share and embrace and learn from the youth as much as they were giving.

I found in my interactions that a number of people in that older generation are cut off from the rest of us. I am one of the fortunate ones, I suppose, because I have my father, but there are others who don't necessarily have that immediate contact with an elder in theater, in Barbados. And there's some kind of a disconnect that happened, I think after the eighties. So we had this major upheaval of theater in the seventies, and then CARIFESTA happened in Barbados in 1981. And then there was very little support and theater died. I shouldn't say it died. It, it kind of just went down. It was still happening, but it was not as regular as it was before. We have one particular company here that has actually been doing theater every single year, since I believe the eighties they've been doing, every year, a production up until the pandemic.

And I remember saying to the, the director of that company, you know, clearly you have a model that works. Would you be willing to mentor a younger person, share your model, say what's working, you know, so that we can continue because you are of an older generation. Who is going to take over when you

go, that was about 10 years ago, the model has not yet been shared. And so they're kind of holding onto this idea of the glory days of Earl Warner. They're holding onto the glory days of Writer's Workshop or whatever, and they're not sharing with younger people, or at least they *were* not sharing with younger people. What I think has happened now, because through the work we're doing at the college, we do have a course called Caribbean theater. And one of the things that I've been trying to do is to bring those elders into the school setting, let them talk to the students, let them explain to the students and allow the students to question them about what worked and what didn't work, so that you have that sharing of the generations.

There is now in Barbados, a generation of us. You know I don't know if I wanna say in my age group, because it's pretty wide. The age is <laugh>, you know, it's not necessarily within a 10 year age range, but there is a generation now that has been working that has been developing. And I think that a large part of why that has happened is because we have institutions like Barbados Community College. We now have a theater program at UWI Cave Hill here in Barbados. And then those who would've gone to Trinidad or Jamaica or wherever else, internationally to study and have come back, you've got this generation of people who all have degrees in theater. And so what happens is people are no longer seeing it as just a hobby.

It's not just something that you do, you know, outside of your regular job. Although most of us do because we can't afford to live in theater, but I think that the respect for theater has grown because you have people who are actually studying it academically and saying, let's not look only at the theater that's happening on the stage. Let's look at how we can use theater for developmental purposes, how we can use theater for training purposes for rehabilitation purposes. And so you have people now who are doing that. And so the respect is there and you're hearing people now talking more about theater. There's also, you know, the generation that's coming up and they are not as passive as some of us might have been in our younger years, they are fighters. And they're the ones who are getting up and saying, if you don't take me on here, I am going to leave and go somewhere.

that is gonna take me on. So one of my students is now playing Simba in West End in Lion King because he can't get opportunities in Barbados. So he's like, okay, see ya, <laugh>, he's gone. A number of them are in the US, you know, and across Europe as well, they're gonna look for opportunities. And then there are those who are also willing to stay here and fight for the development of the art form. I do think that, and I keep saying this to my colleagues, we have a responsibility now as my generation to not make the mistakes, that those who went before us made in terms of not sharing, not documenting, because I can go back and find information on theater in Jamaica and Trinidad

in a heartbeat. I can't easily find that information on theater in Barbados. They didn't document it. You know, my father's now trying to digitize his plays because of course, all of them were done on typewriter <laugh>. So in some cases he's lost pages of work that he's trying to recreate so that he can digitize the work. So we are now in a position where we are trying not to have that break between the generations. Because I think that: that was something that really impacted our art form quite significantly here. I don't know if that answers your question though.

(OC): No, no, it, it does. I think it's a remarkable answer. I'm very, very pleased because the other thing, but this is just a comment and maybe you wanna comment on the comment is that the, the perhaps, you know, using open channels can, can get more information out there because the, the, I really only know you and Yvonne, if I'm gonna talk about contemporary writer: writers, practitioners, producers in Barbados right now, I know, I know you and Ivon, but I don't, I don't, I don't, I don't know other people. And I think that, I think it's really, really essential that the that the, that, that, that stuff, that, that, that, that names get out the productions, get out, that

(MH)And you know, that's also a funding issue here. You know, I work at a college, but we don't really get significant funding for our productions. And so we don't have, for instance, a strong marketing plan. <Laugh>,

you know, we kind of do our own marketing, by word of mouth, we do what we can on social media, but we don't have someone dedicated to marketing. The college isn't set up in that way. The university has a bit more leverage, I think, than we do, but a major part of why you don't see or hear about a lot of the other practitioners is because we don't have the support. And we keep saying, we want people to recognize that a lot of artists are not necessarily business people. We wanna create the art. We don't think about how do we market this?

How do we document an archive? It, how do we fund it? We don't think about those things, right. I'm saying we as a collective, we cuz there's some of us who do, but a lot of artists here really don't necessarily have the skillset to be able to do the business side of it. And so they're not getting their work out. I have the skillset for the business side, but then I don't have the skillset for the social media side <laugh>. So I kind of fall on the social media page because my generation is that sort of you know, bridge between no social media and then wow, Social media! And I'm caught in the middle. So I'm not very strong on social media at all, but you know, we do need to look more at how do we get ourselves out there. Yvonne, as you've mentioned her, actually has just done this fantastic text. You know, and it is actually a collection of monologues and stories from around the region because of that, a couple of us here in Barbados are gonna get our work published or have got our work published in an

anthology that is going regional. I don't think anyone, I mean, Lowell, you're different, you know, because we've had contact before, but I am not that well known either. You happen to know me because we're in the same circle.

(OC): But, but in that circle, in, in just a sentence or two, can you tell us what care of net was number and number two, because the original purposes of Carib that was to do all of this, the, the, the background stuff, the, the, the two what to support production and move production around the regions. And is there, is there any sense in which Carib net could be revived or could in fact open channels, the perhaps began to take over some of the functions that carnet once had the let's say a, a decade or so ago when we were, when we were

(MH): I think CARIBNET really was about connecting artists regionally and providing that kind of support, not just for productions, but also for thought to, you know, be exchanged. So it was a chance for us to sit down and reason together. It was a chance for us to see what was happening in different cultures and to explore and express. The difficulty with CARIBNET, and I say this with a heavy heart, CARIBNET would've been spearheaded in its original form by Rawle. And I believe that a lot of people who came onto CARIBNET came on because of loyalty to Rawle and did not necessarily buy into the full vision of the institution. And so when Rawle retired and I became president of CARIBNET, even though Rawle endorsed me as

president, the number of people who still had that loyalty dwindled significantly

(OC): A miserable vice president, you had a miserable vice president.

(MH): <Laugh> no, not vice president was wonderful, but the thing is, you know, people knew the name, Rawle Gibbons. So when you got an email from CARIBNET signed by Rawle, people paid attention, nobody knows Michelle Hinkson or Michelle Cox. However you choose to put my name. Nobody knows that name regionally, except for a couple of people in Trinidad. Some people in Trinidad in Barbados maybe, well, a few in St. Lucia Lowell in Puerto Rico, but people don't know my name. And I think that that was a large part of why CARIBNET kind of dwindle the loyalty was to the person and not to the institution.

(OC): That could be okay. Well, thank you. This that's wonder this is wonderful for me. This is a wonderful, wonderful conversation. You guys have to get back into this <laugh>

(MH) Just to say that I do think that in terms of reviving CARIBNET, I don't think it can be revived in the form that it had previously. And I do think that Open Channels is an opportunity for us to merge, number one, but aside from merging, I think it's an opportunity for us to look at that collaboration, cause open channels works. It actually works, you know, but to see how we can work together now, bringing that English speaking side of the Caribbean, into the

fold. So I do think that there's definitely opportunity there not necessarily for reviving it as it was, but for moving it forward into a new dispensation.

(OC): The development of popular arts is very diverse in the Caribbean, due to its colonial past, languages, and its cultural and social vindications, which is very particular in each one of them. Recently, Barbados has been in the news worldwide, for cutting its ties with the British monarchy. Does politics influence the practice of the Popular Theater of the Caribbean and the Diaspora? The artists and collaborators of Canales Abiertos proposed the development of a study plan for the Popular Theater Artists of the Caribbean and the Diaspora to collaborate and dispel borders, is it possible? What structure should that curriculum follow? How can so many diverse cultural and artistic manifestations of Caribbean Popular Theater converge with Caribbean cultural and artistic integration?

Absolutely. It does. You know, whether deliberately or not we are impacted by it in one way or another. Arts and politics, they could go hand in hand and at the same time, they shouldn't go hand in hand, you know, because it gets so messy, right. You have a situation where when, when you have a government who supports artistic development the arts will flourish. You know, you find that money's getting pumped into the arts and that kind of thing. But then when that government is no longer in power and the next government

might not have the same interests, what happens at that point is that you find your support dwindles, you're financing, dwindles. And so in as much as we are connected to politics, and certainly there are gonna be political themes in theatre because I mean, art reflects life.

And if you've seen the memes, we're having elections here next week, you know, the memes that are coming out, they are also artistic representations of what people are experiencing and the way that people are interpreting what they're experiencing, right? So art is gonna reflect life and certainly theater is no different. We are going to be able to, at some point reflect and put some of the things that are happening, even with breaking away from the monarchy. And I'll tell you that whole process of becoming a Republic, because there was a grand celebration, the number of artists who got money, myself included, it was insane in a good way. Like, we got paid <laugh> everybody was just going like, yes, we're getting paid. Cause we've not been paid for so long. Because of COVID a number of our artists had not worked for two years. And so when you have a political party that says, we see the value of artists, you know, yes we are, we are gonna be influenced by that at the same time.

Politicians, I think need to have a, a bit of a stronger back because yes, you support us, but we also need to be free as artists to critique you. Because a part of what we do as artists is to critique what's happening in society. And it's

unfortunate that in some cases you have artists who are afraid to say certain things for fear of victimization. And I'm not saying that that is the case in the context to the current government in Barbados, I'm saying this is the case generally. People don't wanna upset the apple cart, you know, because if after you've just been paid money by a particular institution, you don't wanna go out and speak badly against them and then you never get work again. And so there's a very delicate balance, which can become very messy when you merge the art with the politics and it can be good, but it can be bad. I think one of the things that I've admired about our current prime minister is that she is able to laugh at herself.

So she's seen some of the means, which have, I suppose in some ways made a joke at her, but she's able to laugh at it. She's able to say, okay, yeah. It's funny. She's able to do that. A lot of people are way too sensitive and take things way, way too seriously. And while they are to be taken seriously to a point we need to be able to laugh at our ourselves. And I think some politicians have lost that ability. So it's a balance Nilo, it really is a balance. And I don't think it's an easy task to find that balance. But so far I've been able to. I'll be honest, I stay clear of political topics. I don't even comment on what's happening politically in the country because that's not my thing, but at some point it's gonna come up and we have to find a balance.

(OC) Finally, what artistic projects are in your plans?

(MH): Yes, I do have some new projects on the horizon. I don't know how much I can say cuz none of it is really finalized as yet, but I am looking at a potential international collaboration in Scotland. Again, historical based collaboration and looking at how we can use immersive theater to explore historical topics that affect <affirmative> marginalized or previously and perhaps even currently oppressed groups. So that's still being discussed. It actually was just pitched, I think in November. So we're going into discussions now about how to make that work. But that is one of the major things that I'm gonna be working on. In addition to that, I'll be continuing the heritage theater work and expanding that work with the Barbados Museum and Historical Society.

We have some things in the works that I hope they can happen this year. You know, again, COVID, so our work there has been more or less put on hold for the last two years, but we've been using that two years to plan moving forward. So we have some ideas for work coming up with them. We're looking to expand the topics because a lot of what we've done at the museum has been, like I said, historical focused. So it might be folk songs and looking at the origins of folk songs, or it could be based on a particular personality or a period in our history, but we also want to expand it to recognize that today's experience is

tomorrow's history. So we don't necessarily only want to go far back in time. You want to look at our more recent history as well, archiving those stories.

And of course, hopefully Lowell and Matt, hopefully finishing this darn PhD, you know and it's, it's a journey because I'm trying to use the work that I'm doing in heritage based theater in the PhD. So it's all kind of interconnected in that sense, but definitely hoping that I can, I mean, my dream really to be able to travel and to share the ideas, share the work, my work is very much Barbados and Caribbean focused, but certainly I would love the opportunity to be able to expand that not only into the diaspora, but understanding that we have other marginalized and oppressed groups, even outside of the Caribbean and African Diasporas. And I really wanna look at that. The Scotland one has a special part in my heart and is really close to me because it's also my heritage. So you see it still kind of fits back in. Because my family is of Scottish heritage, so it's still for me kind of going back to archiving my family's history. Everything ties right back into that. So that's where I'm hoping to go.

(OC): ;Thanks Michelle!