**JOSETTE BUSHELL-MINGO**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION**

**Podcast with Josette Bushell-Mingo and Ryan Skinner**

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Ryan Skinner (0:00)

So, I'll start off by introducing myself. My name is Ryan Skinner. I'm an Associate Professor in the School of Music and the Department of African American and African Studies here at Ohio State University. And we are here today with a guest from Stockholm. Sweden, Josette Bushell-Mingo. She is Head of the Department of Acting at the Stockholm University of the Arts. Hello, Josette.

Josette Bushell-Mingo (0:21)

Hello.

Ryan Skinner (0:21)

Welcome.

Josette Bushell-Mingo (0:21)

Thank you.

Ryan Skinner (0:22)

Thank you. Thank you for being with us. The visit today, your visit is sponsored by the Migration, Mobility, and Immobility Discovery Theme Project, which is hosting, this week on campus, a Moving Subjects Week, from the 14th to the 19th of October. Tomorrow, you're going to be performing and presenting your work as an artist, as an activist, as an advocate at Hale Hall from four to 6pm. Today, in this conversation, I would like to talk about the African and Black diaspora in Sweden. And the way this community has merged and claimed a space for itself in Sweden. In Swedish you use the phrase "ta plats," the way the black and African community have claimed a space for itself in the public sphere via the performing and visual arts. And I want to say that evidence of what I have called a an "Afro-Swedish Renaissance" is everywhere these days. In the dramatic arts we can talk about the Swedish adaptation of Lorraine Hansberry's classic African American Broadway show A Raisin in the Sun, which featured a largely Afro-Swedish cast and production team. You directed that.

Josette Bushell-Mingo (1:26)

Yes, I did.

Ryan Skinner (1:28)

In music, we could point to Seinabo Sey who has had a tremendous success both at home and abroad; but I want to point out in 2016, the way she brought out 130 black women on stage on national TV at the Swedish Grammy Awards, which was an unprecedented kind of intervention. We could point to Medan Vi Lever (While We Live), the first feature full-length film to tell the story of the black and African Diaspora in Sweden, and you had a leading role in that film.

And we can point to literature where we've had so many different texts, fiction and nonfiction, about the black experience of late including Jason Diakité, his recent memoir, En Droppe Midnatt, A Drop of Midnight, which recounts his story as an African American and Swedish man in the world. At the center of this Renaissance, as I've indicated, is Josette Bushell-Mingo, directing A Raisin in the Sun in Sweden starring in While We Live, but also performing a solo stage play about the life and work of Nina Simone. Josette Bushell-Mingo, welcome.

Josette Bushell-Mingo (2:00)

Yes.

Thank you very much.

Ryan Skinner (2:35)

So you were born in the United Kingdom, to Guyanese parents. And in Britain, you have established yourself with a distinguished career as a performing artist. I want to note that in 2007, you were awarded the Order of the British Empire.

Josette Bushell-Mingo (2:48)

Yes.

Ryan Skinner (2:49)

Right? By Queen Elizabeth the Second herself, for services to the arts, but you have been living in Sweden and working there for quite some time now. So I wanted to start off by having you tell us a little bit about your relationship to Sweden and the Afro-Swedish community more specifically.

Josette Bushell-Mingo (3:06)

Yes. Well, first of all, thank you for having me. It's a great privilege to spend time to share thoughts and reflections.

My relationship to the Afro-Swedish community, I think has been an evolving one. I've been in Sweden now working both as artistic director and now as you say, the head of the university acting department. But I will definitely say it's one that's been evolving. I think I started off trying to fit in as a young black British woman, both linguistically and culturally. It was easy enough then to find other Afro-Swedes, but very much individually. I was fortunate enough to come in contact with some of those who were there before me like Astrid Assefa, for example, phenomenal and very important actress for us in Sweden, Richard Sseruwagi, Graham Tainton, in fact. Now these names are firstly important to say because while we say them, they are here with us. But what was important was understanding very early that there was a generation arriving in Sweden of African descent, who, for different reasons, went to Sweden. And then things change. And I think that's how my relationship changed as I saw Sweden grow from these isolated but individual stories of existence and artistry and struggle, there came a larger movement where a younger generation started to pop up. And I found myself being gently woven in, I guess.

I see myself very differently, because I'm British. I'm a black British woman, which is very different to being an Afro-Swedish woman and any other gender definition. But I mean, I certainly found myself becoming more and more provoked and inspired by living in Sweden and meeting the Afro-Swedish community that have been very generous. And over the years I have established with their help a clearer role for myself. So it's been evolving. It's rich. It's today. It feels like home. It feels like family. And I'm still learning so much, really. I'm really part of, as you said, a renaissance or growth taking a place. I am not prepared to take this shit anymore. This is something quite unique for me. I've never experienced anything like that ever, not even in the United Kingdom. Really. It's unique and privileged and slightly scary often.

Ryan Skinner (5:37)

I would imagine so. You mentioned several names. And again, I want to reinforce the idea of "naming names" that is so important here. But the names you mentioned also tell a very interesting story about this diaspora. So Graham Tainton, originally from South Africa,

Josette Bushell-Mingo (5:51)

Yes.

Ryan Skinner (5:52)

Richard Sseruwagi was originally from Uganda. Astrid Assefa with roots in Ethiopia. Yourself as a woman with roots in...

Josette Bushell-Mingo (5:58)

Guyana.

Ryan Skinner (5:59)

...Britain and Guyana. So, already, just to note, you know, this is a diaspora that is defined by its diversity.

Josette Bushell-Mingo (6:05)

Absolutely.

Ryan Skinner (6:05)

And by the different places within the African world that populate it.

Josette Bushell-Mingo (6:09)

Yes.

Ryan Skinner (6:09)

And I think that's important to note as well. I want to push a little bit deeper about the British-Sweden connections by beginning with your work with the group Push...

Josette Bushell-Mingo (6:17)

Yes.

Ryan Skinner (6:18)

...in Britain, which becomes translated into another movement in Sweden called "Tryck," which means Push in Swedish. Can you talk about Push and Tryck?

Josette Bushell-Mingo (6:27)

Yeah, they're sister organizations. Push, the organization was established just before 2005 before I came to Sweden, and it was a reaction. When I was in the Lion King, I played the role of Rafiki. I was interviewed by a well-known magazine that asked me the question, there were hundreds of interviews happening at that time, and what this particular newspaper asked me was, "Is the Lion King the answer to black theater?" Because, for those who may not know, it is a 98% African descent cast, and I was so shocked by that question. I won't repeat on the podcast what I wanted to say. But what I did eventually say was, "No, I don't think so." But it triggered in me a reaction where I started to speak to other colleagues. Have you heard a statement like this before?

So, these kinds of questions on boundaries, I had a huge struggle with them. I'd asked friends what they thought and after a period of time. Things were starting to emerge among other colleagues from the theater. I branched out and started speaking to doctors and teachers, writers and students, and asked, "How do you respond to that question?" That presumed that the Lion King is the answer to black theater! And then other questions came up from that, but also frustrations, which was I'd really rather just get on with my job. I'm tired of carrying the whole African continent on my shoulders when I walk on the stage. Why aren't we allowed to write anything that we like? Why must we be contained? I am more than my blackness. These are the phrases that cameout of this. When people began meeting around my house, it became too big, so I asked a smaller theater if we could move into their studio. Those people who attended invited more people. And eventually, an idea emerged, "Why don't we create a platform where we can show each other how great we are?" But also show the society around us that we have an extraordinary creative capacity that doesn't need their affirmation or confirmation. The phrase was always, "You fund the idea because it's good. You don't fund it because it's black." And this was a very interesting twist.

Eventually, Push became an extraordinary two project event. The first event brought together artists from the HBTQI community that did workshops and seminars. We invited Scottish blacks. We invited people from Denmark to come over. We had a huge turnout of actors, performers, writers, technicians, and all of them were of Black British background. It eventually culminated in a huge event, which took place at the Young Vic. And then we had a Second event which happened at the Royal Ballet. These two events were really about changing the landscape for us, changing the landscape for us as artists, sharing and showing the nominally white British establishment that we have more than enough to offer. We are extraordinary, and we will be claiming a space. We do not need the stages. You're lucky to get us and so on. And this was across the board. We worked with the Paralympic team. We worked with choirs. I mean, it was an extraordinary event. But the last event, I think it was like 1500 people who turned up on the street. We had sign language and, again, everybody was Afro-British. And people's reaction, which is very different than the one in Sweden, was "Yeah, about time!" Of course, we had racist remarks and we had people saying, "Why is this happening?" But not on that scale. Not in the way that it was received in Sweden. That was very different. So Push really was a manifestation of a solid platform. Where we as Black Britains said, "We are here. Look what we have done for each other." It was healing. An affirmation of strength and resistance.

In Sweden, I'm delighted to say that people had heard of Push and wanted me to organize something similar. At first, I resisted it. I just felt that Sweden must generate its own. And then we were at a conference. And there I met Astrid Assefa, a fellow Afro-Swedish artist. We were at a completely white conference with women in the Swedish performing arts community, and we sort of looked at each other across the hall and went, "Oh, it's just you and me here." Then, we met, and we talked. We contacted other artists and met around the house. It got too small. And then we said, "Let's try and formulate an association." And here we are. Push really stands for the celebration of Black artists; for the political support the artistic support of each other across the board. So, in Sweden, it's actors, singers, dancers, but also philosophers and researchers. And it's really there to support Afro-Swedish artists across the country, anything from seminars, or going in and supporting an Afro-Swedish artist if they find themselves in conflict, all the way through to play readings and seminars. And I think also there's a huge psychological impact, that Tryck exists. I think it has changed the landscape. So, I'm very proud to even be a small part of that. So that's Push and Tryck, sister organizations.

Ryan Skinner (11:34)

In the Swedish context, you talked about the psychological impact. Can you talk more about the reception of Tryck in Sweden?

Josette Bushell-Mingo (11:50)

Yeah, I mean, I can say quite clearly that there was resistance to the idea that an organization should only focus, think, support, uplift, Afro-Swedes, because of Sweden's complicated idea of democracy. Any group that says we focus on ourselves--not to exclude others, but to focus and strengthen ourselves--is seen as exclusion. And, certainly, we received racist emails very quickly once it was established. I think Sweden just wasn't ready. I think what was ironic and in parallel was the rise of the Swedish Democrats, which is the right-wing racist party, which I'll say quite clearly were growing. There were shadows of that in the distance, but already we marked an artistic resistance. I think that's interesting. An artistic resistance. I think the difference in the United Kingdom was there hadn't been this gathering of force before, artistically. In Sweden, we were establishing something in a society that deemed itself democratic, that deemed that everybody was equal, where everybody had a chance and everybody had a voice, but it has to be our voice. It has to be the collective voice. People would ask, "Why aren't white people involved?" And we gave a clear, concrete answer, "Because we need to understand ourselves, we need to affirm ourselves. We need to discuss and deal with issues without a white gaze, so that we can enter into the world strong and whole, and participate, as well as come up with good strategies to help our white allies and colleagues." And this is the irony of it. It's not just about us. The irony is, I think, that it's always been about wanting to have a better world and a better place, and that means thinking alone sometimes, not always watching. So that was the big difference, which I wasn't prepared for.

I was being very cheeky as an English person and going, "Well, who cares, just tell them this is a group for us and get on with it." But then I realized actually this is completely different. This is what's been happening to me over the years in Sweden, realizing that this isn't just democracy, this isn't about trying to make everyone equal. There is a fundamental lack of education about the African continent, which is really dangerous for the educational system that is continuing to turn out people who do not know about themselves. And, so, for other minorities and African Swedes, they have to fight to get that knowledge, and that's where organizations like Tryck can come in and support. But also finding myself now in the university which has produced generations of students and teachers that have no idea. They have no idea, and this is having a devastating effect psychologically, because you never see yourself. And when you are spoken about it's either in racist or ignorant terms. Of course, there are those doing extraordinary work like yourself, Ryan, but I mean you're isolated.

You know, in one sense you become isolated or ostracized because there are two different versions of it, I think, because of the passion and the desire to see this equality; to understand that the African continent and its diaspora are the cradle of the earth in terms of its impact, in terms of the arts, in terms of our existence as human beings, and so on and so forth. And that power is dangerous, I think. So certainly, Sweden highlighted for me, from Tryck and onwards that this was something embedded deep in the Swedish society that I hadn't come across before. It was different from the United Kingdom. We've got a terrible colonial past. We've had, for a much longer period of time, fights for equal opportunities, petitions to the commission for racial equality. We had Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech. We had Margaret Thatcher. We had huge cycles of resistance over the years. But in Sweden, this was almost speeded up. I mean, we're talking about since you and I have known each other, less than 10 years. I mean, 10 years ago, the word Afro-Swede technically didn't exist. It's happening so fast. And it's thrilling. It's exciting. It's a little dangerous sometimes, because you're gathering so much information about yourself. So those are the some of the crucial differences that will make everything good in the end, but it's tough.

Ryan Skinner (16:21)

Tough, yeah. And one of the good and tough efforts you've made in a, as you say, clear and concrete manner--to move from the interventions that Tryck and Push have been making in civil society, and to concretize that work in the public sphere--is in the arts and through the arts. And I want to talk about your your work with Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun," which was pathbreaking in ways that are somewhat surprising, certainly joyous but also tragic. Tragic in so far as it was not until 2016 that the arts community saw this play staged in Sweden, and in Swedish. Can you talk about "A Raisin in the Sun" and its impact on Sweden and the Afro-Swedish community in particular?

Josette Bushell-Mingo (17:04)

Yeah, there is a saying that goes, "Before A Raisin in the Sun and after A Raisin in the Sun." It was a watershed. It was an intersection. It was a meeting point for the first time in Swedish history. A classic play. And the impact was--I use this word a lot--"affirmation" for the Afro-Swedish community and those of our allies who knew about Lorraine and the capacity of African descended black writers, who sat back in a theater and went, "Yes, at last." For those who had never experienced anything like it, I think they were fundamentally changed on several levels. First of all, which is going to sound really crass, "Oh my god, there are black writers." This was one. The quality of the writing is the second part. The specificness of the situation, which became hugely resonant in Sweden, moving Sweden's history about moving from the country into the city, of coming from poverty quite recently, in the last 150 years. But also, the fundamental brilliance of Lorraine, to put voice to people. So much so that even though the family in the story is specifically black, specifically African American, their characters resonated across Sweden.

I remember when we played the show in Finland, a place that, I must admit, scared us. Everybody was nervous about playing in Finland, hearing the clichés of how far the right wing had moved there. And we were being invited by all of the national stages at that time. So, we turn up there for a press conference. I did a press conference, and it was actually the Holocaust Remembrance Day. And I remember walking into the room where the all the different theatre directors were, and we're going to have a press conference. Because it was the first time that they'd come together to see the show. And I noticed that the guy who was hosting me, he looked rather strange. And I said, "What's happening?" And to cut a long story short, he said, "Well, we've just heard on the radio now that there are demonstrations at the border, and the right wingers are shouting phrases like, 'Close the borders, open the ovens.'" I mean, we looked at each other, and it was silence. I mean, when I say it now, I can't believe it. And I said, "What do you want to do?" And he just looked at me said," I think we do the press conference." The short version of that story was A Raisin in the Sun played to sell-out crowds for every single production in Finland. They lined up around the block with standing ovations every night to a totally white audience. And an elder audience who would have known about World War II. They would have known about sacrifice. Although the story is completely different for the people that the story is based on, who bring with them a history of slavery, a history of emancipation, a history of the human right to full existence, a history of racist infrastructures, which include murder and torture. And everyone understood and saw it. They saw what this story meant. They could see themselves in it.

Throughout the run, there were very emotional moments of people crying and saying very clearly, "Why had I not heard about this before? I'd never heard it. Why didn't anyone tell me about this?" And the room would be still while this person would cry or weep. It changed the ecology of Swedish theatre forever. And it's still talked about to this day. And as I understand it was a highest grossing production in the Swedish National Theatre that year.

Ryan Skinner (21:12)

Remarkable.

Josette Bushell-Mingo (21:13)

Extraordinary.

Ryan Skinner (21:14)

Extraordinary.

Josette Bushell-Mingo (21:15)

People, say, "I was there! I was there!"

Ryan Skinner (21:16)

Can we talk about some of the topical substantive points of connection, points of contact between the play and contemporary Swedish society? I'm thinking of segregation.

Josette Bushell-Mingo (21:25)

Yeah.

Ryan Skinner (21:26)

I'm thinking of a story of migration. So, "A Raisin in the Sun" takes place in a time when generations of African Americans had moved from the rural south to American industrialized cities in the north. Cities like Chicago, like New York City. I'm thinking of a Swedish society that is also incredibly segregated, but much more diverse than most people would realize. You have upwards of a quarter of the population that has some kind of non-European, non-white background.

Josette Bushell-Mingo (21:57)

Yes.

Ryan Skinner (21:58)

We're talking about about 300-400,000 people of African descent who have settled in Sweden, but who have found themselves in a society that is highly segregated and fragmented, along ethnic and racial lines in particular. Could you talk about some of those points of contact and how "A Raisin in the Sun" translates in contemporary Sweden?

Josette Bushell-Mingo (22:18)

Well, I think it was a very stark mirror to exactly that picture that you portrayed, really; that there are parts of Sweden that are segregated, particularly for those who are arriving because of migration, because of war, because of unemployment. There are isolated pockets within Sweden where there are only persons of African descent and other minorities. So that's reflected in the play. Then there is the question of housing. You know, one of the most important moments in the play is when Lena decides to move into a white area. Black families react by saying, "What the hell?" In Sweden, this same kind of movement from the outskirts of Stockholm into the center is met by continued resistance. "The prices of properties would go down," people say, "if they move into the Stockholm city center." Another poignant part, which could be a cultural thing as well, was the representation of women striving to maintain a sense of dignity and family. And I think that resonates, because families arriving here find themselves in huge tensions with the culture, a culture that professes democracy and yet isolates; that says it respects religious difference and yet emphasizes a completely secular society. I mean, the women in "A Raisin in the Sun," they mirror that too. There are a lot of women, mothers and daughters, now coming into the Swedish culture, who are demanding the same rights. It's quite clear in "A Raisin in the Sun." Ruth says, "Let's just be happy where we are." And Beneatha says, "No, I'm here. I want an education. I want to be someone." And Lena is saying, "God will look after us," even though God may have abandoned them. So these kinds of tensions are present in the play, and that's what makes it universal. That's what made it universal.

I think the racism, just the racism, I mean, some people may know that Lorraine Hansberry wrote two endings. She wrote the one ending--which, of course, is most well-known--where Lena at the end, after the house has been bought, looks at the last flower that she's been maintaining, looking through the window, looking at this flower surviving as a symbol. She takes the flower when they move out. Then, there was the second ending that Lorraine wrote, which is when the family moves into the new property. And the final images are of them sitting on the sofa in their new house with a baseball bat, listening to racist chants outside the door. And that ending resonates in Sweden today.

We are, as you say, very close to a right-wing government. The rhetoric that's being used in Sweden at the moment is quite terrifying. Everything from, "Oh my goodness, we've been speaking about this for the last 15 years! Do we really need to talk about it?" All the way to, "Well, actually, I think I have a right to say what I want to say. And I think that you, whatever what they choose to do, shouldn't be here!" This blatant. We've had people attacked on trains! I mean, there's enough evidence at the moment to know that people are no longer hiding in the shadows with their racist or xenophobic thoughts; whether it be a right-wing march on a street in the south of Sweden, knowing that the synagogue is less than 10 minutes away. You're asking for trouble. Well, "they have a democratic right to march there." Yes, but that is not the point. And how did that democracy suddenly erase another community of people? Lorraine Hansberry's "A Rasin in the Sun" mirrored so many things, but maybe the most important of all was--the part that stuck with me--was Lena, you know, "everything that we have given up to be here." Your father, me, we all act as if the new generation has forgotten what happened. And I think this is a huge tension for us, as an African descent community. We haven't forgotten. And how do we show that we haven't forgotten? Our parents say, "You have forgotten that we fled from war!" Or, "I've given up a lot for us for you to get that education!" Etc., etc. I think that was hugely resonant in Sweden, and how our younger generation fall back. So, yeah, there are so many resonances. And I think, ironically, maybe the biggest one was to see a black family live their life; just to see that, I think, changed everything. Watching actors not worry about the color of their tights or their makeup color. They just had to be themselves. They just had to speak and be and exist and I mean ironically, maybe that's the biggest symbol of all. That's what we all knew. That's what we want. We just wanted to live. We just wanted to be, you know, without the continued gaze or brutality.

Ryan Skinner (27:09)

An intimate and honest encounter with black life, such as it is.

Josette Bushell-Mingo (27:12)

Yeah, there you go.

Ryan Skinner (27:13)

There's a tendency in Swedish cultural policy and the Swedish art world, as I've encountered it, to say, "We staged A Raisin in the Sun, and it was great. But now that we've done that, we're going to move on to the next issue." You know, we've done our black show, let's tackle something else. And that's not in your character, to say "we've done this" and move on. And so A Raisin in the Sun was followed up swiftly in its wake by a solo stage production that you developed and produced, called "Nina: A story about me and Nina Simone;" a deeply personal engagement with Nina Simone's life and work, and what she means to you; performed, at least initially, in Sweden. Can you talk about that production and its resonances and particular impact in Sweden?

Josette Bushell-Mingo (28:07)

I use Nina Simone as a Northern Star, as a GPS to guide me through situations that I feel unable to deal with as an artist. It's deeply personal because, for the first time, I accepted and now live with my rage, which is different than being angry. Not getting milk in my coffee makes me angry. But rage is something else. It's not something I can turn off. It doesn't mean I can't sit here and discuss with you. But if I release it, it is at its full capacity all the time. My rage is active, and Nina Simone was a piece where I had had enough; I'd actually had enough. I couldn't watch another killing of an African descent person--man, woman or child. I was sick to death of watching police get away with it. I was tired of seeing my African diasporic family weeping. I was tired of forgiveness. I was tired of justification. I was tired.

The story that set me off was actually Sandra Bland. I remember watching that film of that woman and hearing her voice in the car. I first thought, "God, that could have been me!" You know, if you are just being yourself and saying, "Well, no, I'm not going to step out of the car," and then very, very quickly escalated. I followed the Sandra Bland story, not only the part of her being found dead in the cells, about three days later, but there was a whole--I find it difficult to talk about, actually--but there was a whole series of social media posts where African descent people would take pictures of themselves with friends and colleagues, because they were so terrified after the Sandra Bland case, and there were thousands before that, and will be unfortunately more, but after Sandra Bland, there were a lot of African Americans and other diasporans taking pictures of themselves with friends to say here I am, looking fine and normal and this person sitting next to me is my wife and these are my children. And they were taking these pictures because there was every possibility that they could be picked up and shot, picked up and taken into a prison. But what was the most disturbing, horrifying was that people were taking these pictures. People were writing wills, social media wills to say this is who I am before the story of who I am is distorted. Some kind of dam broke in me where I stopped trying to be Swedish, and I stopped trying to be good, and I stopped trying to say, "This is going to forward my education, my career." I didn't care. I needed to say this, and I had the power and the place to do it.

And so the audience follows me through a series of thoughts. And I expected people to walk out in droves. I mean, because everyone thinks, "Oh, Nina Simone, how lovely! We can listen to little bit of you know, Nina Simone!" And they'd walk in and after four minutes, they found themselves in another room and they couldn't get out. I made sure they couldn't get out. Psychologically, they couldn't leave. And after that, I took them down the rabbit hole, the rabbit hole lands in a place where I say, "Okay, just imagine," and this is a very important word for those listening. "Just imagine in this theater, after everything you've seen for an hour and a half, after all the pain I have described, I'm now going to ask all the black people to leave and keep all the white people here, and then I'm going to kill you. I'm going to kill you in revenge." So this is just an idea. By then I thought, well, they'll just get up and walk out. I mean, forget this. Nobody moved. And I would stand there, and I'd ask them, okay now you know about the history you know about the pain. There's a very long monologue in the piece where I named people, as you said very rightly, Ryan, naming. Every time you name somebody, they are alive, and they are in the room, and we named everyone from Emmett Till all the way to Steve Biko, all the way to Sandra Bland. I mean, we named the names, and by the time the show had finished, I could have had three pages of those names. But I basically asked the audience, "What should I do? I have a gun." I have no gun in my hand, of course, it's theater. "I've got a gun. You know what's happened, you know, the pain. And this is very important. You know, I have nothing to lose. I know the police will come in and blow my brains out. But before they do, I'll take you all with me. But before I do, I want you to tell me why I shouldn't do it."

And this is very interesting. Remember, the audience sees our three band members on stage looking completely terrified. They were acting, of course. And so was I, to a point. I ask the audience, "So what should I say? Say something to stop me from using this gun!" Often there would be huge silence. But often somebody will be brave enough to say, "You shouldn't use the gun because we love you!" Or, you shouldn't use the gun because you'd just be the same as everybody else." "You shouldn't use the gun, because it would just cause pain." I said, "Exactly. That's why I'm using the gun. Because you've done that to me, you've done that two generations of me. And this is the time to say it's enough. And nothing will change but everything will change." Now a lot of the things I was saying was based on truth, research I had done from African American people who had been to several of these shootings. And I tell them, "It doesn't matter if they kill me. But the pain is so great. What you have done to me so horrific." and I know it's happened to other minorities. I'm not talking about that. I'm just talking about this. "Can you say something to stop me from using the gun? And I'm so at the end of days, that I kill my own husband who is white. That's how far we are. What would you say now? To stop me." And by then people are weeping and crying and all sorts of things. I said, "Can you say anything?" And they couldn't. And that's the room. That's the room I wanted everyone to be in with me. Because I can't answer that question. I can't. And you'll just have to wait and see what happens at the end of that. But that's what Nina was. Nina allowed me, night after night, to go through that, to be bound by that crucible every single night. Because I couldn't deal with it. I can now. I can now. And it's so funny as well, because people were like, "Oh, my God it was an amazing show. How do you feel after today?" I feel great. It's the audience who carries something. "Witness" is a very important word for me. You cannot change what I share with you, but you can witness it. You can carry it with me. My husband always says, "This part of your journey, Josette, you must do alone, but we will be here waiting for you when you come back." And this to me is very important. How far will I go? As far as is necessary, in order to make sure that the art that I use makes a difference for myself, for the African world. As Toni Morrison says, "I can't be the doctor and the healer." I can only be one. And I decided I can't be the doctor and the patient. Sorry. That's what she says. And I decided that I will be the doctor and heal my own for a while. And that's okay. That's really okay. And if it's done well, then others will be healed by it too.

Ryan Skinner (35:21)

Right? There is this red thread that's coming into my head as you talk about these intimate and honest encounters. I'm thinking of the Push movement and the intimate and honest encounter it created within the community.

Josette Bushell-Mingo (35:34)

Yeah.

Ryan Skinner (35:34)

I'm thinking of A Raisin in the Sun as an intimate and honest encounter with black life in Sweden. Sayig, "We exist. This is who we are. These are our challenges, struggles, joys, fears." And then an intimate and honest encounter with black pain and rage that you're staging for audiences in Nina. That seems to be a through-going red thread, and I just wanted to note that.

Josette Bushell-Mingo (36:01)

Yeah. Thank you. That is important. And I think, just to add to that, by experiencing that, acknowledging it, you release all the greatness that you are, you are released, you are freed from it. And that's what I feel. That's what I feel. Now, I never feel that I'm alone. The society has made us think we're alone by coming into this place. And with Nina, she actually says, you know, she'd go out and use a gun. She actually says that, and she keeps asking me, "What are you going to do, Josette? What are you going to do?" But I think what's very important is that in the midst of all that comes joy. Believe it or not, in the midst of that is greatness; in the midst of that is triumph, and not a kind of, "Wow, we survived." But more than that, that we are part of a continuum, and that is never going away. It's watching many white lives struggle with their legacy, rather than us struggling with who we are. We know who we are. It's a majority white community that are lost, really, and that's so sad to see.

Ryan Skinner (37:10)

So, these works are also functioning as a kind of guidepost; an opening of a door.

Josette Bushell-Mingo (37:14)

Yeah.

Ryan Skinner (37:14)

"Come in, and even if we can't help you find your way, we're going to at least point you in a direction where that way might be found." I also want to note the way these different project--from Tryck to A Raisin in the Sun to Nin--are also highlighting different facets of you and your work; so we have the coalitional advocate, with Tryck; we have the director, with A Raisin in the Sun; we have the actor, the singer, with Nina. Now, I want you to talk about another hat you wear, as the founder of the National Black Theatre in Sweden, which is just now, as we speak, beginning to launch its productions, coming to life as an institutional presence in Sweden, the first of its kind...

Josette Bushell-Mingo (37:55)

Yeah.

Ryan Skinner (37:56)

...in Sweden. Can you talk about the National Black Theatre of Sweden?

Josette Bushell-Mingo (37:59)

Yeah. There's a part of me, the cheeky English part, that says, "Yeah, and why not? Why not? What's the problem with it?" The National Black Theatre of Sweden (NBTS) is set up as part of a continuum. As we mentioned, there are extraordinary organizations like Tryck or Push, or the Afro-Swedish National Association; there are hundreds of brilliant African Diaspora organizations. And so, this is just part of the mix. The National Black Theatre of Sweden was set up to primarily do great plays from the African continent and African diaspora. We have four goals. One is that we commit to one play from every country on the continent, which means I'll be dead before it's over, but somebody else will take it. The second part of our work is to generate new Afro-Swedish plays, which we're doing now. We have four in commission. The third thing that we do is NBTS International, which is inviting our friends and colleagues and artists from around the world. We're talking to Ghana, Norway and France at the moment, with a little bit of Denmark thrown in. And then there's NBTS plus, which is where we work together with important organizations from the Royal National Theatre, to ABF, which is a bit like Open University, a huge organization that conducts workshops around Sweden. So those are the four areas, and I consider myself an artistic architect.

I'm building for someone else and building to be able to step back away from it and watch it, and building so I can attend and building it for consistency. I'm building it because of the joy, for the amount of productions that are waiting, hundreds and hundreds of productions from around the world, so that the Lorraine Hansberry moment will not be a single moment anymore. They'll be plays where people will go, "Yeah, yeah, I saw that. God. I saw that five times." At the moment, there are 10,000 plays of African descent in Europe alone. I mean, I won't live long enough just to do those. Forget from the continents. Forget from the United States, from Asia. And then we've got a whole community of Afro-Asians, from Japan and China that have their own stories. And our community from Australia. I mean, we can't do everything, but just knowing that that's all out there; the National Black Theatre of Sweden, it just is. And I'm delighted to say that our first production will be "Woza Albert" from South Africa, which, of course, is unique; again, because of Sweden's relationship to South Africa after so many years. One of the world's most famous plays about apartheid, done with huge satire and huge love. And I think one of the reasons it was chosen was also the use of the Gods. That they will come back to us, will come back to fight for us, whether it's Steve Biko, Nelson Mandela or Martin Luther King Jr., or whoever they are; and the women, Miss Parks, Rosa Parks will come back and fight for us. You know, Stuart Hall will get up and go okay, Josette, what do you need us to do? And that's really for me one of the huge moments of the work is that our ancestors will come and be with us in moments of struggle. They will remind us who we are.

Ryan Skinner (41:11)

That South African connection is so fascinating.

Josette Bushell-Mingo (41:14)

Yeah.

Ryan Skinner (41:14)

I mean, you mentioned Graham Tainton. He came to Sweden in the 1950s, in the context of a performing tour with the Golden City Dixies--a musician, a dancer--and found refuge in a Sweden that was actively contesting white supremacy in South Africa at the time. And of course, under Olof Palme's leadership, Sweden took a leading role in navigating the Cold War politics of the anti-apartheid struggle, through the Social Democratic Party, funneling money and resources to the resistance movements in places like Namibia, but also South Africa. So that's another Afro-Swedish story, I think. And so it's appropriate to begin with a South African piece to really root the modern history that connects the African continent and Sweden.

Josette Bushell-Mingo (42:03)

I think it's one of the most accessible plays. It's deeply funny. It's deeply African, South African. It also brings black clowning black satire. All of the languages of course, our version will be in English, Swedish, and Sotho, which is one of the first languages of the play. We're starting a dialogue with PEN, which is an assocation for poets, essayists and novelists, a global association that defends artists in exile, particularly those from those areas. Because, of course, what happened in South Africa, so many went into exile, so many great artists went into exile. And we've also been given permission to turn one of their male characters into a woman, to highlight women's voices in the struggle, which I don't think anybody would deny. So it sounds good. We start rehearsals next week, and Father Richard (Sseruwagi) is in it, and a fantastic new actress Aurelia Dey. They bring Uganda and Ghana to the play. So just, yeah.

Ryan Skinner (43:04)

Yeah, and Aurelia Dey and Richard Sseruwagi are also musicians. The idea of this Renaissance notion, it's also about how the arts are so fundamentally interconnected. And we see that so profoundly in your work. And also many of the artists with whom you work in the African community in Sweden; that they are engaging on so many multiple fronts, hip hop artists who are writing memoirs, musical artists who are staging plays. And I think that's important to think about as we move forward. I want to talk about one more hat you wear. Because not only have you been engaged as an activist, or as a stage performer, or as a director, or as the founder of a new theater, of an institution in civil society, but you also now are head of the Department of Acting at the Stockholm University of the Arts, and I want to conclude there because here we are at The Ohio State University. And we are building opportunities for collaboration and exchange.

Josette Bushell-Mingo (43:55)

Yeah.

Ryan Skinner (43:56)

And I think we are very interested in knowing more about your vision for theatre, as the head of this department.

Josette Bushell-Mingo (44:03)

Right, well, surprise, surprise. I'm the first woman ever to have had the post and, of course, the first person of African descent ever to have the post. And, on top of that, I think the first person possibly to take the bull by the horns, we could say. The vision for a great actor today is an actor who is ready and proud of their own identity, but able to stride out--and I use these words quite deliberately--into the world with grace and political awareness, intersectional perspective, a climate perspective, and work. It doesn't mean you can't do a comedy on Netflix or children's theater. But, for me, I'm looking for good people becoming great artists. They will transform the world when they leave. You come to a theater school to train. Talent, you must have it before you get here otherwise forget it. You come here to train in some of the broadest classical traditional works ever; from horse riding, to 3D screen rooms, digital animation, voice dubbing, all the way through writing your own play. These are the tools I think that will sustain an actor. My vision is also to give credit back to the work of training to be an actor. It is a life work. It's not a three-year thing that you do and then you're going to make it. It is forever. And the work that you do to train as an actor continues to help you grow as a human being. It means you can have an empowered dialogue with directors, you can demand more. So the vision is a classic traditional training, and the classic for me is actually the things that bind us together no matter what community we're from; connection, eye contact, contact is very important, and body awareness. Tradition is something you do at the same time every year. So that's the vision, great classical traditional theater acting for the next generation. I call them Marvel comic actors, Marvel superheroes. They can be whatever you need them to be. They come with superpowers. That's the vision.

Ryan Skinner (46:11)

And it's a vision that's born I think of these conversations about diaspora. I'm reminded of the scholar Michelle Wright, who says that diaspora fundamentally is a story about diversity and inclusion. And here you are.

Josette Bushell-Mingo (46:22)

We've got PhDs who are sign language based. For example, we're introducing Global Perspectives into our curriculum, so that students for the first time are reading plays from around the world, from China to Russia to Congo. I mean, it's really for the first time. We're digitizing our first auditions, so that people from across Sweden can participate. After that, all of the auditions are live. But for those who are using sign language, for those who may have another functional variation, for those who have Swedish but get nervous in an audition, for the first time, you can control it. So, there are lots of ways to expand this education, and I've got great teachers and a really brilliant set of students and artists coming through. So yeah, diversity and inclusion.

Ryan Skinner (47:09)

Fantastic. Well Josette Bushell-Mingo, we are so honored to have you here at The Ohio State University this week. Thank you so much for sitting down and talking with me. And we look forward to your performance and presentation tomorrow evening. Thank you.

Josette Bushell-Mingo (47:21)

I'm very excited to be here. Thank you very much, Ryan. Thank you.