

# FUSE

## A BOMB PODCAST

PERFORMANCE ARTISTS

## Becca Blackwell & Okwui Okpokwasili

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*Becca Blackwell is a New York-based trans actor, performer, and writer. Their play, *They, Themselves and Schmeer*, has been presented across the country. They have collaborated with Young Jean Lee, Noah Baumbach, and Richard Maxwell, among others. Blackwell was the recipient of a 2015 Doris Duke Impact Award.*

*Okwui Okpokwasili is a performer, choreographer, writer and a genre breaking figure in New York's experimental dance scene. Her productions include *Bronx Gothic* (2014) and *Poor People's TV Room* (2017). She received a MacArthur Fellowship in 2018.*

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**Chantal McStay** Welcome to FUSE: A BOMB Podcast. In each episode, we bring together artists across disciplines to discuss their work and creative practice. We've been taking this approach since 1981, delivering the artist's voice. Here's how it works. We invite a distinguished voice in visual art, literature, film, music, or performance for a conversation with whomever they'd most like to speak with. No host, no moderator, no interruptions, just two artists in conversation. For this episode, we asked performance artist Becca Blackwell who they'd most like to speak with.

**Becca Blackwell** When BOMB asked me an artist to speak to, my

immediate thought was Okwui because I had seen her perform, and I had never seen anyone of my peer group and artists that I was surrounded by who was going to such a magical, deep place that spoke to humanity and not...even though she was speaking for something very specific, she spoke past that specificity into something which I hope we all can get to one day.

**CM** Okwui Okpokwasili is a performer, choreographer, writer, and a genre-breaking figure in New York's experimental dance scene. Her productions include *Bronx Gothic* and *Poor People's TV Room*. In 2018, she received a MacArthur Fellowship. Becca Blackwell is a New York-based trans actor, performer, and writer. Their play *They, Themselves, and Schmeer* has been presented across the country. They have collaborated with Young Jean Lee, Noah Baumbach, and Richard Maxwell, among others. Blackwell was the recipient of a 2015 Doris Duke Impact Award. The two performers discuss how they build relationships with their audiences, challenging gender norms, fighting fear with art-making, and the power of body language in their work.

**Okwui Okpokwasili** That's so beautiful. And that's the whole thing about decentering. It's like when I read *Crime and Punishment*, or I read *Moby Dick*, I don't need him to be a black man.

**BB** Right?

**OO** But he's speaking specifically from his place.

**BB** Yes, the *Brothers Karamazov*—another one I was like, Why is this speaking to me?

**OO** Exactly, that's right, that's right!

**BB** Yeah, I'm like, I think that authenticity is what we're always seeking.

**OO** Right, right.

**BB** My name is Becca Blackwell. The preferred pronoun I use is they and them, but I still got she and he in me. *(laughter)*

**OO** My name is Okwui Okpokwasili and my preferred pronoun is she and her, though when sometimes people look at me, they still say he.

**BB** Your energy to me is so like woman power.

**OO** Yeah. But I don't know, I think maybe we're gonna get to a place soon where we do start to completely dismantle all of those genders, that gender space. And I'm happy to do that.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** You know, I know some people say maybe we should call everybody they, you know.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** I have to contend with why it's so frustrating when people call me he. But I think that comes from a place of being a tall, black woman who doesn't necessarily fall into the standard norms of beauty or femininity, and then the connection of black women in this country being outside of also the protection and the norms of femininity, because, you know, the legacy of slavery kept black women in the space of sort of animal chattel, or, in fact, they were, you know, occupied that vestibular space where human beings were either, you know, became chattel, right?

**BB** Mhm, mhm.

**OO**

Because it was out of the wombs of black women that you were destined to be a slave, right?

**BB** I think that's interesting, because when I, before I allowed myself to transition, like, medically, I would yell at people to call me she,

too, because part of me was like, No, she is expansive, and she can encompass many different kinds of bodies. There was a part of me that felt like if I transitioned, I'd be a bad feminist.

**OO** Mmm.

**BB** So then I was always like, I can't do that, I can't do that.

**OO** Right.

**BB** Trying to hold on to like, she.

**OO** Right. Why can't that woman-she-space encompass...

**BB** Masculine bodies.

**OO** Masculine bodies, right.

**BB** Where they have vaginas or whatever. I mean...

**OO** Right, right. Because that is also this question, when we, when I look at particularly like kind of, sort of, femme, you know, people who were identified or biologically identified at birth as male...

**BB** Mhm.

**OO** ...but are definitely kind of more psychically and chemically and, you know, consciously female, sometimes I would be like, why is it that sometimes those represented, those representations of that femininity also ascribe to this very traditional femme body.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** Like the hair, the boot, you know what I mean, and so...

**BB** The walk, the sway.

**OO** Right, right. And so it's...but it's true that then there are the

folks who are saying they/them who refuse also that. You feel there's some people who have a hybridity.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** Right. And so that, but it's true that sometimes, especially when I look at maybe popular figures who I'm so excited about and I love, that they occupy that space, especially when we're talking, when I'm thinking of black femme, black, transgender, femme women, and how they are murdered and in such...I mean, that's...

**BB** No, I know.

**OO** I mean...

**BB** Everything, I mean, as a person who's a Daoist, everything's connected.

**OO** Yes.

**BB** And if you're not seeing how everything is, like I'm connected to everything that's painful as much as I am connected to all the things that's wonderful.

**OO** Right.

**BB** And I see it, if I see it on the street, I know it lives in my body.

**OO** Mm, mm. And right, and so that's why, I see that, and I want to celebrate them, and celebrate that spirit and celebrate a moment, like their freedom, and know that it comes at a cost. So I have to put aside my feelings, like why do you have to represent in this way that feels kind of regressively feminine?

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** You know.

**BB** My compassion opened up when I started to radically change my body, you know, like, I used to feel very similar in that way. And I still do; I have to catch myself. You know, it's very complicated, and where you are in the world, that is kind of your viewpoint and vantage of it.

**OO** Right.

**BB** So I'm always having to, like, remind myself that I, you know, have a white body and it's masculine...

**OO** Right.

**BB** ...and it's a rectangle. You know, and so when I'm walking down the street...

**OO** (*whispering*) It's not a rectangle, actually. You have... (*laughter*)

**BB** I have curves. To the listener, I have curves. (*laughter*) But I think, yeah, like, to me that's something that I always have to remember. And then now I look like the guy, everyone's nightmare of a white guy, like kind of 8 Chan dude.

**OO** That's right.

**BB** Right? So then I'm like looking at this...

**OO** But I know you, Becca!

**BB** Right! Everyone's like, I know...but, but it is...I was walking, I was at a queer club – lesbian night specifically, I think they still have those – and someone pushed me across the room and said, Get out of here, white boy! And it was really interesting all the thoughts I went through. My first thought was, Oh, no, my body is making them feel uncomfortable. But I was like, but that was a really aggressive move, you know.

**OO** Right, to push you across the room?

Yeah, yeah.

**BB** Right. And it felt emboldened with, I'm surrounded by queer people, so this white boy's got to get out of here. Right. So then I was like, then I got angry, and then I turned around, I remember looking at her and being like, ugh, she's not even from New York. She's gonna tell me to get out? I could tell by her clothes! *(laughter)* This is like my...What, then it's like, it's not even about radicalism...

...it's more about like...pff, what?

**OO** Yeah, exactly.

**BB** I remember this neighborhood when no one would be walking around here, you know?

**OO** You passed.Right.

**BB** Like, now it's like hipster beyond hipster beyond hipster, you know? And that was just something really like, I had to take in. And then I work out, you know, I train with dudes because I'm all jacked up on testosterone, and I'm working out with these guys, and it's a very mixed group of men. They're wonderful. But I said, I told them what happened. They said, Yo, you did it! Yo, you did it! Like, you look like... *(laughter)*

**OO** You passed! You fuckin' passed.

**BB** I just was like, Whoa, that is...that's wild, you know?

**OO** Yeah. But that's the whole thing, like I don't want to take on the position and the...I don't want to be like my liberation entails the need to take on the position of the oppressor. Like I don't want to just assume that...

**BB** I know.

**OO** You know what I mean? I don't want to just like, Okay, I've kicked you off the throne, now I get to sit on the throne. We need to dismantle that whole fucking throne, right?

**BB** But I think that's a lot of...you know.

**OO** Yeah.

**BB** This is where you realize everyone is equal. It's like, whoever is in the position of power, if you put yourself on that or think you're there, then you are putting people underneath you.

**OO** Right, right.

**BB** So what does equity deeply look like?

**OO** Right, right.

**BB**

I think it's complicated. And it's not like, and I think we as humans want things to push up against.

**OO** Mhm.

**BB** We want a 'them.'

**OO** Right, right.

**BB** I've just noticed a lot of white guys recently being like, This is so unfair, I feel like I'm being squeezed out...and I'm like, no, you're learning how to share. And that's complicated because if you come up the world a certain way...

**OO** Or you're learning you didn't possess it to begin with.

**BB** Right. No, yes, exactly.



**OO** Like, do you know what I mean, you didn't rightfully possess it, or this is what is, you know...

**BB** That entitlement, I guess.

**OO** Yeah.

**BB** Yeah. And it feels to maybe them, it feels unfair.

**OO** And that the squeezing out, it's just like, you're not being squeezed out, you're just not in the center.

**BB** Right. Well, yeah, you're right.

**OO** It's like, I mean, maybe that's the thing about equity, right, a loss of center.

Though I have to say when a white guy who looks a little bit, I mean, see, and I see you and I look at your eyes.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** And they have so much like pathos and like love in them?

**BB** But that's when people know I'm not a man.

**OO** Ooh.

**BB** Every time, every single time.

**OO** Damn.

**BB** When people look into my eyes, both men and women, look at me and go, Wait, you're not a man.

**OO** Or you weren't biologically, like...

**BB** Right, there's something about them that...

**OO** Like, you weren't biologically determined...

**BB** Raised, I didn't get...

**OO** Right.

**BB** ...socialized as a man.

**OO** Right.

**BB**

Because I look deep into people's eyes. And that's something that men have a really hard time with.

**OO** (*whispering*) Fuck.

**BB** And when I look at men in my...

**OO** That's fucking deep, y'all.

**BB** ...men, eye to eye, yo, they look at me kind of like, Okay, you can stop looking at me like that, you know, because it's hard because we've taught men to not...

**OO** To not...

**BB** ...to be afraid of vulnerability.

**OO** Yeah.

**BB** And vulnerability is actually powerful and feminine, but that's not something we encourage for, you know, men assigned male at birth, people who are socially...

**OO** Assigned, yeah, that's right, assigned a particular gender. Yeah. Male...

**BB** AFAB, AMAB. So there's all kinds of...

**OO** I love that.

**BB** ...acronyms.

**OO** Sounds like bees and stuff. AMAB. Do you know what I mean, I feel like it's like a mother bee or something.

**BB** Totally, I love that idea.

**BB** But I think in the downtown New York scene, I was technically an actor, but the world didn't know what to do with me as an actor, so I became more of a performance artist, and then my performance art became activism through Jennifer Miller Circus Amok! and also just my body, weirdly freaking people out. And then, you know, obviously I had to write my own stuff. So then you become all these titles. Like, what do you...

**OO** Right, because, Becca, I mean, I feel like I don't know that I know your performance work...

**BB** Right.

**OO** ...as much as I know the work that you've done with...

**BB** Other artists.

**OO** Young Jean Lee and Tina Satter, do you know what I mean? And like, even though you clearly are a singular presence, but I do feel like you're an actor.

**BB** Yeah.

Yeah.

**OO** Right?

**BB** Well I collaborate.

**OO** And, and the Young Jean Lee was a collaboration piece, right?

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** Because also that piece felt like, Okay, you're singular performers...

**BB** Right.

**OO** ...in occupying this world, and you feel like yeah, I see the thing about performance art... Yeah. (*laughter*) I think, I feel like there are certain labels that are useful for people...

**BB** In grant writing.

**OO** ...and grant writing. And so, sometimes I'll just allow people to use these labels.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** And...

**BB** Is this gonna get me the money?

**OO** With me, without agreeing, I don't agree or disagree, right? Because I just feel like, Well, it's true. I am trying to make in my work these kinds of, you know...I'm pulling from multiple disciplines.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** So it's all true.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** Right? You know, because I do feel like the body is essential in

my work.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** And, I am a mover.

**BB** Dancer, yeah, for sure!

**OO** A dancer, but even sometimes I get uncomfortable with dance...

**BB** Right.

**OO** ...because I feel like then that seems to mean something to a lot of people even though I think the dance world, you know, from Judson Church...to even like Min Tanaka or Urban Bush Women...But, you know, I think people who have been doing dance practices have been, it's been super broad and flexible.

**BB** Mhm. Yeah.

**OO** And they've been finding multiple vocabularies, where I feel like there are so many vocabularies that have been engaged and then challenged and then engaged. So I like to occupy that space because I feel like people keep interrogating...

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** ...what it means to dance, right?

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** But, sometimes with theatre, I feel that the language around theatre and what makes theatre can be so hard and conscripted...

**BB** Mhm. Mhm.

**OO** ...and unmoving, but then obviously we do have like, you know, the Wooster Group. We had, you know, Richard Foreman.

**BB** Totally.

**OO** And we do have Circus Amok...

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** ...which is circus theater.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** And then, you know, or was it the WOW, the women, you know?

**BB** Oh yeah, WOW Cafe, yeah.

**OO** WOW Cafe, or...

**BB** Peggy Shaw. Yeah.

**OO** Yes. Or, you know, Ntozake Shange, and...Anna Deavere Smith.

**BB** Absolutely.

**OO** So there's this whole, so you do feel like there also was...

**BB** To me that's theater.

**OO** Yes. However...

**BB** Like, that's funny, but not...it's not traditional, what we see. Like it's not off-Broadway or Broadway to me. That's not theater, that's commercial. I see theater as like...

**OO** Interesting.

**BB** Yeah. But I was never, not allowed in.

**OO** But I wonder if they can all hold... If, if, like, why can't it, you

know what I mean?

**BB** Mhm.

**OO** To me commercial is, I guess I should think about commercial theater as being about a practice because I guess I was thinking about a particular practice, right?

**BB** Mmm, mhm.

**OO** Like I'm thinking about, in commercial theater, there is a certain relationship set up between the audience and the performer.

**BB** Mhm, mhm.

**OOHm**, yes, I guess the point that I'm trying to make is that I don't want to say that commercial theatre isn't theater. I just want to think about the particular strategies and practices within how commercial theatre is made.

**BB** Mhm.

**OO** So I don't want to say no to that. But I wish that, you know, the stuff that we were doing downtown also was included in that and the legacy of all of the folks – I'm thinking Robbie McCauley, too, I mean Karen Finley...

**BB** María Irene Fornés.

**OO** María...yes! María Irene Fornés.

**BB** I mean even John Greer and like Edward Albee would talk about how she actually was probably the better playwright...

**OO** Wow.

**BB** ...than all of them.

**OO** But there was no...but they wouldn't make space for her.

**BB** But she wasn't...

**OO** Or Suzan-Lori Parks, she's actually...

**BB** Oh, well, she's now, I feel, I feel like she's kind of the Arthur Miller of like...

**OO** Huh.

**BB** But she's got a...the Signature Theatre does all of her work. Yeah!

**OO** Signature Theater was picking up some Adrian Kennedy.

**BB** Yeah. They were, I mean they were...

**OO** Like they did a whole...Did they do a whole season of *Adrian*? No, maybe not. But, but yeah, they did *Funny House of a Negro*.

**BB** Mhm.

**OO** But, yeah, the Signature Theatre is kind of picking up a lot of...

**BB** Yeah, it's exciting. I mean, it's like I always think...

**OO** Would you call that commercial theater?

**BB** Well I always think the closer you get to the sun, you get a little further away from what the truth of what, where it came from.

**OO** Well, that's interesting too because even when I think, Okay, well who's really...are there really more parts for trans women of c—

**BB** I'm thinking of like *Pose* or something right now.

**OO** Trans women of color versus, right, versus white women of...



**BB** Or any, I think of any...

**OO** Trans, of trans...

**BB** Masculine.

**OO** Masculine men, uh, women, well, women sorry. Trans...

**BB** *(laughter)* Whew.

**OO** People who were biolo– Like who were assigned the gender of woman...

**BB** Right, yeah.

**OO** ...who actually identify as male...

**BB** Mm.

**OO** ...now. That you feel like there aren't, there, there are less parts, how, you know, for trans men, for white trans men? Then there are...

**BB** Ah, well I don't even care about white trans men, I guess, because it's like, well, I mean I shouldn't say that. It's not that I don't care. I think it's just that...

**OO** What do you consider...do you even call yourself anything?

**BB** I don't.

**OO** Yeah.

**BB** This is like, I...

**OO** That's scherm.

**BB** Yeah, schmerm. I think...

**OO** Schmerm. It's Schmerm, not Scherm.

**BB** ...it ascribes to the same question before like, I have many, many disciplines that I connect to because it's like, How do I get what I'm trying to say across?

**OO** Yes.

**BB** The same way I'm like, I have a meat carcass, and how is it going to move in the world that I can get the most done without the most pain?

[CLIP] (cheering) (*laughter*) Okay, I might use men and women—I just want you to know, because I just started into comedy, and I'm not really good at rhythms yet. So, to say, like, intersex, pansexual, non-binary, gender non-conforming, it just kind of loses the joke, so... (*laughter*) Just bear with me, PC Police, I'm gonna say men and women, but we all know it means many different things. (*laughter*) Okay? Help me out. I haven't done the work, I'm a man now. So... (*laughter*) Sorry.

**OO** About your Daoist, the meat carcass part because it's like I so don't want to be a carcass because I guess we have a legacy of having been carcasses...

**BB** How about this, earth tent? Is that better? (*laughter*)

**OO** I don't know, it's still an inanimate object. And so I have these issues with that.

**BB** Sure.

**OO**

But I think that, I'm just thinking about, like, this whole issue too, for me, is I just wonder about white women. And it's like it's interesting, right? Because, like, especially in this age when I think about this, the work that I do...

**BB** Yes.

**OO** ...when I think about, kind of, why I want to hold the kind of multidisciplinary space, why I want to kind of always be slipping under and around these labels...

**BB** Yes.

**OO** ...like, at the same time as I am located in them is because I want that balance. I want that recognition of, like, you know, there's only so much talking you can do...

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** ...before it's time to sing.

**BB** Yeah!

**OO** Before your body is gonna have paroxysms and shudders...

**BB** Is that what—?

**OO** ...of anguish, right? And so, I've talked so much, but now this is what's happening, now instead of verbally talking, instead of tongue talking, now my belly has to talk. Now, you know...

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** ...that just sent something to my rib cage.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** And then now that just sent something...now that's traveling through my feet. And once that's done, you know what I mean, then there is some kind of energetic rippling in the room and in the air, there is some traveling back through my mouth, and the tongue can talk again. So I want to make the space for that. That whole...

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** ...sort of fabric, so, I do like that sense of balance or useful imbalance that brings you back. You know what I mean...

**BB** I think artists are always trying to do that, yeah.

**OO** Yeah.

**BB** I mean that's what... I mean, the reason why I wanted to talk to you is because when I saw your work, that piece, *Bronx Gothic*, it spoke to me as a human, as an artist.

**OO** *Bronx Gothic* is the solo piece that I did that did center the kind of sexual awakening of this young girl growing up in the Bronx.

[CLIP] Okwui's job is to scare people, just to scare them to kind of wake up. We have been acculturated to watching brown bodies in pain. I'm asking you to see the brown body. I'm gonna be falling, hitting a hardwood floor and, hopefully, there is a flood of feeling for a brown body in pain.

**OO** You're occupying a space where violence and a kind of desire are entangled.

[CLIP] *Bronx Gothic* feels so deeply personal. I felt like this little girl again. To love yourself as a brown girl, you really gotta do the work.

**OO** There are questions of trauma, a sense of split and fragmentation, and there's really an attempt at remembering, remembering what the body is, what love is. But *Bronx Gothic* is also trying to do this in a way that is also very physical, right?

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** Because the first half hour is just...The shake.

**BB** Well, that's what I...

**OO** Half an hour of a shake. I call it the quake. And it comes from me thinking about growing up in the Bronx and sexually precocious girls, but also thinking about how, who we called a slut and who we didn't call a slut. And also witnessing a lot of sexual abuse in public.

**BB** Oh, I know, yeah.

**OO** And not knowing that it was that.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** Like, I was talking to people— Because I just did *Bronx Gothic* six days a week, for a month at the Young Vic.

**BB** Holy shit.

**OO** Yes. And so I didn't know that I could do it. I said, or I knew I could do it but like, how would that happen?

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** And it happened, and I was really kind of...I was like that happened. It won't happen again, but wow, that happened.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** And I was thinking about how when I was in grade school, I realized, I started to realize what sexual abuse might be when, sometimes, you know, they're always these little boys that would, as boys were getting older, they would dry hump girls...

**BB** Mhm.

**OO** ...in different parts of the school or in the playground, the

backyard.

**BB** Totally.

**OO**

And there was one girl, I remember, she was, you know, they used to call her names. They called her ugly, she wasn't particularly considered attractive.

**BB** Oh, yeah.

**OO** You know, buck teeth and like...

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** And they used to really make fun of her. And I remember there was one day in the schoolyard they were dry humping her against a fence.

**BB** Mhm.

**OO** There were like about four or five of them taking turns doing this, and she was like screaming. And I remember, and we also went to, we went up to an adult, because there were adults that were around.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** They were just like, uhh, you know, we went up, he was like, Just whatever, leave me alone, in five minutes you guys have to get on line. And so completely the adult wasn't interested in what was happening to her.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** No one cared. And I thought, Oh, they're not doing this because they like her, because I know that they don't like her. And sometimes you would see them doing it to girls and think, Oh, it's 'cause they

like them.

**BB** Right, right.

**OO** You know? But I remember thinking, what does that mean that they're dry humping her against the fence, she's yelling, she's saying stop, they're not stopping, and I know they don't like her? This is a way that they're kind of showing her that they don't like her.

**BB** Right, yeah.

**OO** Do you know what I mean? It was starting to... Like this idea of abuse, you know, and I must have been, again, like ten or eleven.

**BB** Yeah, yeah.

**OO** You know what I mean? But I realized that we didn't have language for that then. And I feel like *Bronx Gothic* was also trying to disentangle this.

**BB** Yeah, and it's using the body and language to disentangle it.

**OO** To do it. Right. Can the body hold all of this and do it or— We lost Toni Morrison, you know, Sunday.

**BB** Mm, yeah.

**OO** And *The Bluest Eye* is like...

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** I hadn't even read *The Bluest Eye* then. I didn't know that, I feel like why aren't people making young girls, young black girls in schools read The fucking Bluest Eye?

**BB** I mean, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was the first time I'd ever read someone, about being, about someone being molested. And that was a huge influence for me. And I read that at fourteen, I,

like, I remember sitting in detention, and I remember just sobbing, 'cause I was like (gasp), I've never had anyone... So it's funny because, for me, feeling maybe a bit like an outlier, it's always been black artists who've spoken for me in a way, or it felt like... I'm about to cry, but... But it's that kind of thing, like people who speak truth outside of the norm. And I think, that's where artists kind of are, hopefully, reaching out to each other. Like you never know who's gonna be the person that you're speaking to.

**OO** That's right. That's right.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** Or like this idea, even, that pain – I'm not going to run away from pain, right?

**BB** No, no, no, no.

**OO** So that's the thing about also raising a child, I'm like...

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** We have to be ready for pain, but also, how does that pain become of some kind of use?

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** Towards a kind of goodness, right?

**BB** Of course, because I mean, right, that's, what's his name, Mr. Rogers always said, you can see the sadness of the tragedy, but you should also notice people running into danger to help.

**OO** I think my work is really not when I'm writing and thinking of the text language or the tongue language. You know, I'm not necessarily thinking so much about translating shit for people.

**BB** Yeah.



**OO** I'm not thinking that, Oh, I'm writing for a white audience. I'm not thinking about that. But I am...

**BB** That's one of my questions.

**OO** But, but often I want to be like, you're looking at me, but I'm looking at you too.

**BB** Totally.

**OO** Right?

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** And what is that reverberation, you know, between this, this returned gaze?

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** Right. This kind of dual specularity, You know what I mean?

**BB** Mhm.

**BB** When you make your, when you made *Bronx Gothic*, was your husband very present in the process?

**OO** He was, he was present, he was absolutely present.

**BB** With the writing and stuff, or..?

**OO** No, the writing was pretty much...just me. But the beautiful thing about Peter, the beautiful thing about my husband as a collaborator – for him, the more obscure, the better.

**BB** Mhm.

**OO** Like as long as it has a kind of psychic and emotional energy...

**BB** Mhm?

**OO** He doesn't want to know exactly where you're going. Right? So, sometimes I've been in a room and I feel like I hear people talk about legibility or just letting you know maybe the audience isn't with you here or there. And I mean, I think that's cool. And some people like I said, they need to know where the audience is, either to undermine or or undergird whatever that belief the audience is holding is. But I feel like my husband is someone who really doesn't want to know where you're going.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** So it's kind of a nice person to work with.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** Because—

**BB** So you don't feel, you don't compromise anything.

**OO** That's right.

**BB** Yeah. So as with him, he's, he's more trying to...

**OO** It's like a sense. He has a sense. It's like, I'm...I want to...what's this? He's just, yeah.

**BB** And when you tour, do you feel like you ever alter any of the work for those audiences that you're seeing?

**OO** Yeah, no.

**BB** Good. Yeah. That's good to hear.

**OO** That's a lot more work for me.

**BB** No, yeah.

**OO** Yeah. And I think, yeah. It's so interesting, Becca, I have to say that when you talked about your experience in doing this kind of almost commercial theatre piece...

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** ...eight days a week, and that it's for the producer, and it's true in a way as an actor.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** You're labor, right?

**BB** Yeah. Well there's no value to actors, because they're a dime a dozen. So no one, I mean, I think there's people on Broadway, when they're good, you know, but those guys are having to do so much labor and work? I mean, I've just really seen...did you see *A Strange Loop*, Michael Jackson musical, it's incredible.

**OO** I missed that.

**BB** Yeah, it's okay. But one of the lead performers, Larry Owens, what happened to his body... Watching him, and knowing how much he was getting paid, and knowing what kind of he put his body through and I was just like, no one values that, you know, and what you hope out of that as an actor is that you're going to get more work, right, as an actor.

**OO** Right.

**BB** And not about anyone valuing your artists or you're going to get on a TV show, and you can get rich or whatever.

**OO** Right, right. Or not even get rich, just be able to pay rent for a coup—

**BB** Pay rent, go on a vacation once.

**OO** Yeah, yeah.

**BB** Yeah. I mean that—

**OO** So in your work do you feel...When you're doing your own solo work, are you addressing also...are you also looking at like performative...like the kind of the landscape of performance and who is valued and not valued?

**BB** I mean a little bit. Well, yeah, I mean, I did my solo show out of a fact that I was having to teach audiences how to see my body, you know, so I mean, I know you understand this. So it's like, people are like, well, I don't know what to do with you, which is just what I heard from every agent up until trans became hot, and then they're like (*laughter*), it's like all my great black actors of the 90s, where they were just like, Really? I trained at the fucking Royal Shakespeare Academy, you're gonna have me play what? You know, because there was only like, you know, white writers only could see three options because they had no idea of a community at all. And so that's how I felt with a lot of writing with trans, you're just like, What? Like, I, we don't walk around and talk like that, you know? But it's just like, Oh, well, we're writing for the straight audiences to understand you, so that you can be introduced into the world. You know?

**OO** Right, right.

**BB** And you're just like, Oh my god. But, yeah, so that was kind of where *They, Themselves, and Schmerm* came from, which was just me being like, Okay, well, let me just show the world a body that they're just like scratching their head at and make fun of the fact that, you know, I've been walking around for forty-six years. Here I am! I can't believe I figured it out. Thank God you guys are...It's just like, I had one agent say to me once, Well, would you be willing to wear - this is before I took any testosterone - would you be willing to wear a wig or like a pantsuit? (*laughter*) And I was like, What the fuck are you gonna have me audition for, Hillary Clinton? This is like in 2011

or 12. And then she was just like, No, I want you to audition for like a lawyer on Law and Order. And I was like, well, she better go down and tell all the radical dykes and their like short hair that are lawyers right now, that they better put on a wig and some pantsuits to be taken seriously as a lawyer. Because this is when you just realize that the way the entertainment or that world is like, again, it's what we...it goes back to the beginning of our conversation like, this is the world we were prescribed. These are the ways that these bodies or these people are and how they exist. And you're constantly having artists be like, mm, mm, no.

**OO** No, no. And I think it's like, I think for me, I guess, part of my pieces, too, when I work, I don't want to make it any easier for you to figure out where to put me.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** I refuse to be put.

**BB** I mean that's what Young Jean-

**OO** You know what I mean?

**BB** -would do-

**OO** It's just like...

**BB** -with the talkbacks all the time. She's like, you know, you see her, right? She'll be like, So what did you think when that part happened? And, you know, a lot of people are like, Blah blah, and then I thought well, that's gonna... She's like, Great, great. We're gonna change that. That'll never happen. *(laughter)* You know? And I think that's like, it took her a long time to get that kind of clout where she could do that, where her audiences would come they're like... I mean, when we first did Untitled Feminist Show, I remember them, one of the guys was like, I thought you were gonna throw used tampons at us. And I'm like, Well that's every guy's dream of what angry women are gonna do.

**OO** Right, right. I think Ann Liv Young does that anyway, like, I mean...

**BB** Yeah, yeah, GG Allin threw shit at you, like, in the 80's, yeah, we're fine, yeah.

**OO**

Yeah, I just, I guess I am someone - and maybe this is why my husband and I are good partners - I still want the performance space. I want people, I want to be a confounding space.

**BB** I think this-

**OO** I don't want people to come in there with any sense of certainty, about my body, about their bodies, about what happened.

**BB** 43:41

Yeah.

**OO** I want them to kind of be like, Whew...

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** I think more of us need to go into spaces and come out a little bit uncertain.

**BB** I agree.

**OO** And be able to live and be okay with that uncertainty, right?

**BB** Seeing something...

**OO** And also not expect, it's like, I go in here, and now, like, it's like you go into a performance space, and a meal has been prepared for you, (*laughter*) and they have labeled what everything is, exactly what's in it, and what's going to happen to you when you eat it, and duh-duh-duh. I'm like, No!

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** I've made something. I'm gonna share it. I have no idea what's going to happen to you. And half the time I don't know what's gonna happen to me.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** And then, and afterwards, well you'll figure it out. You'll figure out how it resides in you. I'm like, I want to operate on the back of the mind.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** I want to operate somewhere in the reptilian space.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** I mean, sure, also in the intellectual space and the cerebral, in the cerebellum, but I also want to really be, I want to occupy...

**BB** Being present.

**OO** Yeah.

**BB** Yeah. And what's experiencing right now. I think a lot of helicopter parenting and stuff... I mean, we probably grew up the same time where-

**OO** They just let you run around.

**BB** Yeah, run around, we didn't use car seats, you know, like...

**OO** Well, the playgrounds were just fuckin' concrete.

**BB** Right, I know!

**OO** Now they're all padded with rubber, which, as a parent, I kind of appreciate!

**BB** Well, yeah, well, I was gonna say, I was gonna ask you about being a parent. How did that change, did that change the way you experience the world as an artist? Did that affect the kind of language and things you want to talk about?

**OO** I am that helicopter parent, by the way.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** I think. Even though I'm like, it's okay for her to get hurt.

**BB** Physically, like fall down.

**OO** Yeah, yeah, fall down, stuff like this.

**BB** Step up, baby, you're alright, that kinda...

**OO** You know... Not from high distances, though. It's true. If I see her in a... She loves to climb, she is quite experimental. And she's a frickin' you know, she's like I'm a secret spy. People don't know this about me. (*laughter*) And she's like, Now I've gotten... You know, she has this idea, too, that she has to learn to do parkour if she's gonna be a spy, because all spies know parkour (*laughter*) which I'm kind of like, No, actually, that's not what all spies do, but you've watched a lot of action movies, and that's what they do, right, in James Bond. But yeah, no, I, as an artist...It's, ugh, gosh.

**BB** Like, 'cause when we met you were, she was about two.

**OO** Yeah, I mean, I was making *Bronx Gothic*, I was writing it while I was pregnant.

**BB** Pregnant, yeah, I remember you telling me that.

**OO** So I think that there's a kind of urgency that also comes out. I'm



just like, This is, you know, it's that present. I've always understood or hoped to try to find a sense of presence in performance.

**BB** Yeah.

**OO** But I think definitely with children, there's that thing of like, are you present, or aren't you? Because they know when you're not.

**BB** Yeah, they know when you're just-

**OO** You know what I mean, so maybe it just works that muscle?

**BB** -phoning it in.

**OO** Yeah, yeah.

**BB** And you're like, Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**OO** Yeah, yeah. They know you're not listening (*laughter*) or you're not there.

**BB** Mhm.

**BB** (*laughter*) I love you!

**OO** I love you.

**CM** FUSE is made possible in part by the generous support of the Pannonia Foundation. This episode was recorded at Brooklyn Podcasting Studio. FUSE is produced by Libby Flores, Director of Audience Development and Digital Production at BOMB. It is co-produced and edited by Myra Al-Rahim and Sophie Kazis with production assistance by Ethan Primison. I'm Chantal McStay, Associate Editor at BOMB Magazine. Our theme music is "Black Origami" by Jlin. Additional music by Ray Suen. Be sure to subscribe to FUSE wherever you listen.