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**TRANSCRIPT: Two Laureates in conversation: Cecilia Knapp and Shaniqua Benjamin**

**Cecilia Knapp**: Hello everyone I'm Cecilia Knapp and I am the current Young People's Laureate for London and I'm here today with Shaniqua Benjamin who is the Croydon Laureate, so we're going to have a little bit of a chat about being Laureates and our love of poetry and what we want to achieve during our time as Young People's Laureate and Croydon Laureate. So yeah, Shaniqua you were kind of sworn in at the same time as me weren't you? 1st October, which was National Poetry Day. We were just talking a little bit before weren't we about how it's quite a strange time because obviously everything's online and and we're just about to go into another lockdown. So have you been busy since since the 1st October? Have you been up to anything yet?

**Shaniqua Benjamin**: Not as busy as I wanted to. I think lockdown has had an effect on that and it's impacted the first project that's going to start with the museum of Croydon which is very frustrating because I am so raring to go and just get this work started and do great stuff in Croydon.

**Cecilia**: Would you tell us a little bit more about the Croydon Museum project? That would be really great.

**Shaniqua**: So that's really exciting. It's working with young people so it's kind of a natural elevation from the work that I do working with young people and mostly from Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic backgrounds, just so they can get more voices heard because Croydon is like a hugely diverse borough, but the museum is not really reflecting that at all, so we're trying to work on that and get them responding to the collections because it kind of stops in 2011 after the riots. So we want to get some more pieces for that and it's going to be really exciting to work with them get them writing and also to learn about the museum myself because I know hardly anything about it I haven't seen the collections and so many people don't even know there's a museum in Croydon so I'm looking forward to raising a profile of that as well.

**Cecilia**: So is being Croydon Poet Laureate, is that about raising the visibility of poetry specifically within Croydon?

**Shaniqua**: Yeah, definitely it's kind of building on how spoken word and poetry has built more in Croydon and just making it even more accessible and really kind of promoting that and getting people writing and just seeing how they can actually do it because people are really afraid of poetry still and I don't want them to be

**Cecilia**: Totally. And is that what attracted you initially to being Croydon Poet Laureate? What was it about that role that you were like: "Yeah that's that's something I want to do”?

**Shaniqua**: It's another platform to kind of amplify the voices of others which I love to do. To make other voices heard, to make a difference as well. And doing it through art. I've always wanted to be a creative, so this is the way of like marrying the two things together, So I was just really excited to do more in my borough and to do more with poetry and to grow as an artist as well which is really important for me.

**Cecilia**: Yeah, that's super exciting. Are you from Croydon?

**Shaniqua**: I am. I'm a Croydon girl born and raised. Where are you from? What area are you from?

**Cecilia**: So I live in Hackney but I did live in South for a long time. But I betrayed South. I moved East for a boy! But I actually grew up in Brighton you know down by the sea on the South coast, but I've been in London for about 10 years now and London was for me where poetry started for me. I didn't really have any... My love of poetry didn't really begin until I came to London even though Brighton is like a super creative place there wasn't... I wasn't aware of any spoken word nights or poetry nights or anything down there. I'm sure there are but it was coming to London and getting into... because I got into the kind of spoken word scene before... that was sort of like my route into poetry. It felt like a really exciting place to be and I just met in the first kind of year that I was in London I just met all these amazing writers that were just like...It's making me miss live events talking about this but just going to a poetry night. Everyone being there supporting each other reading a new poem, everyone hanging out afterwards talking about poetry. It was such an amazing route into poetry because. Actually, funnily enough I've just been writing this article today about like why I'm excited to work with young people in the arena of poetry and it got me thinking about how so many young people that I work with are like: "On no I don't like poetry, I don't really care about it. It's boring. It's too difficult". Things like that, and so I was reading up online about what's on the GCSE syllabus at the moment which is actually not even compulsory to do poetry at GCSE anymore as you probably know. And I was reading the poems and I was like ugh these are... I mean I don't want to cause controversy. There are some really good poems on the syllabus, but a lot of them are so kind of like rigid in like form and rhyme and the the subjects which they're addressing are so hard to connect with. So I kind of think like like you were saying earlier, it's kind of no wonder you go to you you work with young people and they’re like: "Oh no I don't want to write a poem" You know.

**Shaniqua**: I get that all the time even young people or older people are really afraid like I do some work with Crisis and I find some people don't want to do poetry because they are not good with literacy and things like that and I'm saying we can just work on that and build on that. Poetry is not about literacy and it's just thinking how can, you know, I make this art form accessible for everyone to actually want to write it and see it's not so hard. You don't have to, you know, write this really convoluted language and have to have the hugest metaphors. It's, you know, you can express yourself. And I hear so many people say it's a form of therapy and how therapeutic it is, and kind of looking at it in that kind of easier, simple, way of breaking it down rather than to have to write this amazing piece straight away, it's gonna like - I don't know – change everyone's imagination or mindset or something.

**Cecilia**: Yeah and I think once you take that pressure off of yourself to write... to try and replicate a famous poem by a famous old dead person once you take the pressure of grammar and spelling and yeah, like you say, trying to fix everything with a poem then you can actually start to have a load of fun with it, can't you? And there's so many young people that I chat to that are like: "I don't have anything to write about" and I'm like, I have a little conversation with them, just a back and forth for 10 minutes and they've already told me so many interesting things and I go "why don't we write about" that and they're like, "that's boring", you know And I'm like, "your life is not boring! Your life is so fascinating to me and so many other people." And we need those stories out in the world because if you've only got a certain amount of poems from a certain amount of people like a tiny demographic of people, then the poetry landscape is going to be a pretty boring dry place isn't it?

**Shaniqua**: I agree. I think that's a huge thing, like when I say to people what I write about I say I love writing about American sports, they look at me really weird it's like "American sports?!" I'm like well yeah, you can write poems about that and I love writing about that, so it's trying to encourage people to write about what is important to them and what they love or things... Rather than just... People think it's all about love or really over-emotional stuff all the time and that's not always the case

**Cecilia**: Nah, sometimes I just like hearing a poem about, like, eating a sandwich [laughs] Um yeah... and also I think, like you were saying, writing being good for you as well. I definitely I'm not saying that everyone should be a poet. It's not a job for everybody but I do think that having like a creative practice in your life is so important and can really help you figure out a lot of stuff and can help you find the answers to things, and ask the questions to things and also find, like, the joy and the fun about writing as well - without it being like right or wrong or just kind of having that process you know?

**Shaniqua**: Yeah I agree, I agree. I think creativity is the most beautiful thing for so many different reasons. Are there any other art forms that you kind of do, or dabble in apart from poetry?

**Cecilia**: Well I started with poetry, like I stumbled across a poetry course in London when I was like - 10 years ago - when I was 18. And I was like: "whoa this is so cool..." but then that actually opened the door into other types of writing for me as well. Which is a really it's a really good point as well, isn't it? Because it's like  opening yourself up to poetry means opening yourself up to other things as well so I actually  started writing plays after I got into poetry because I was really interested in dialogue and the back and forth between people so I wrote a couple of plays and one of them was  one of them was just actually a one-woman show and then the other one was two characters  that are just like basically having a bit of a chat in a pub and I loved the  restriction of only working with dialogue and then I also wrote a novel. So obviously that’s like completely polar opposite to poetry because... If a poem is like a delicious small snack then a novel is like a banquet. Do you know I mean? It's like, huge. So it was really a really different experience but really exciting and expansive being able to kind of just like really go into things because I see a poem as like a moment like zoning in on a moment whereas a novel is like... can be a whole lifetime you know. So yeah I guess those two other art forms 'I’m pretty into as well and I like to read novels lots and I like to... and I like to watch plays - when you can watch plays because... and it so it makes me so sad because there was so many exciting new playwrights and great shows coming up before corona, you know?

**Shaniqua**: Yeah. Before it happened I got to see Pass Over at Kiln Theatre which was the most amazing thing. I remember going away from that being like... for ages I couldn’t believe it, like, just my heart just did something to me and I was like everybody needs to go and see this and then I had to stop and that was just so heartbreaking because this was just the most amazing piece of theatre. It just said so much and will get so many conversations going because this is what you make art for. This is this reason.

**Cecilia**: Yeah, totally. You think about all the people whose life that would have changed. Like you say, the conversations it's going to start. The empathy that people are going to have because of seeing that piece of art. That is kind of what... that’s why people write isn't it: that. To have that impact. How did you get into poetry and did you did you think you could be a poet? Were you like: "Yeah I'm going to be a poet when I'm older?"

**Shaniqua**: Never. I was going to be a writer when I was a child, I wanted to be a writer. First I wanted to write novels and stories and then I changed to fashion design and then it all kind of went full circle. I want to be a writer again, and then I found poetry where I was creating a short film to launch my youth organisation and I wrote a spoken word piece and I was like I can actually write poetry because I hated it at school. Like school really ruined it for me and then I started watching more spoken words stuff and I was like I really love this and I did workshops and started to read more and I just fell in love with it. I thought this is the form of writing for me that is... was going to help me become the writer I want to be that releases books. And it's such an amazing form of expression, like it's so healthy for me I always say I need writing because I struggle with self-harm, so this is what I need to do to like express myself in a really healthy way. And also, just the amount you can say in a small period of time to just share information or inspire others or empower others I think it's just so powerful and so special. So I was like yeah this is poetry I've just fell in love with it and I've loved it ever since really.

**Cecilia**: That is so inspiring and I just think that you are exactly the right sort of person to be getting people all over Croydon engaged with poetry because that is... Yeah that story is really... your love for it is so palpable and the and the fact that it's that it's such an important way to connect to yourself and to other people as well. And for other people to think that they have they have the space, that they deserve the space to tell their story and to say whatever they want about the the world really. Do you want to share one of your poems? I would really love to hear a poem.

**Shaniqua**: Yeah I'd love to. This poem I'm going to share means so much to me. It has a special place in my heart, very special place in my heart. This is called “Forgotten Ones”

Unwrap the clamp around your tongue

free their names,

they ain’t so hard –

Jevanie

Shakai

Manaf

Rashan

Not jumbles twisting your lips into knots

a labyrinth would get you less lost,

rather risk mauling by a minitour than try

to assemble letters

chained at the back of your mind –

Jaden

Millik

Nathaniel

Tyrone

Coughing up black out your mouth

trace discarded down drains

of what was more than signature or label,

part of identity held proud

that you would see purged,

permanent demolition of –

Jamal

Glenn

Marcus

Khalid

Jordan

Dante

Micah

Kieron

**Cecilia**: Wow Shaniqua, thank you so much for sharing that poem. I love that feeling of just hearing a poem land like that and then actually feeling a bit like ... you know, you take my breath away with it. And your delivery is so gorgeous as well. I think that is that is such a powerful poem. Can you tell us a little bit about the process of writing it? How you came to write it, why you wrote it?

**Shaniqua**: Yeah, so it's all part of a larger piece of work I've been working on that means the most to me called Ghosted which is all about young men - specifically young black men - who are often ghosted by system and society and different problems of that... and this one it started  in an amazing workshop with Debris Stevenson that she was doing during lockdown called Write Now  and we did this like one minute free write and then I built on that and she was saying  use a poem with as many names as possible based on... inspired by a poem by Jay Bernard  from Surge and so I was just like, I want to use all these different guys names  and think about how often the names are forgotten, people don't want to say them, or  can't say them, or these young men are often just put in the background. Or it's like you're not saying their names until they're suddenly being killed by the police. I think it's really important to remember these young men because most of the things people that I actually know, who I've worked with. And they are such beautiful people with... yeah sometimes troubled backgrounds or they do troubling things, but they have these beautiful hearts that haven't always been nourished and they have so much to give to the world and it's just like: say their names. Don't just forget their names or don't try and say their names or ignore these people, like, they are here and they deserve your care and your love and respect as well because they're not monsters, they're human beings. They’re someone’s son or brother or something like that.

**Cecilia**: Thank you so much for that amazing exploration of your poem, after the beautiful poem itself as well. Yeah I feel like you've carved out some really valuable space with that poem and it's breeding compassion I think, and that's why it's so powerful.

**Shaniqua**: That's really important for me that's what I hope will happen through the Laureateship is more of that and I hope to work with some amazing young men and get them sharing, and get their stories in their own words because they have so many amazing stories to tell which I always love to hear, but I would love to hear one of your poems as well, if possible?

**Cecilia**: Okay, sure thing. Okay so this is a poem called “You Know a Market Where the Tulips are Still Three Quid”

You Know a Market Where the Tulips are Still Three Quid
and you buy them to remind yourself that you can.
They begin tight-lipped and upright,
but their petals become loose, droop.
Their stems will start to lean away from their own.
You know the cat will cry at two AM,
some nights you will sleep right through,
others your body will fling you upright as though
your brother is dying again. You know what the wine does to your teeth.
You know about leaving.
You know you keep useless things
in case you need to build a shrine.
You know how to make gods of men
whose toothbrushes sit caked on the counter.
You know this, and you let them weigh your avocado,
rolling it around in their palm.

**Shaniqua**: Oh that was beautiful. I just... I can really just like fall into your words. You've got this amazing voice, like I could’ve listened to that for ages. I'd love to know more. That sounds really interesting actually.  I think that from the title I was like I really want to hear this poem because that's really interesting

**Cecilia**: Yeah, I like a long title! [laughs] Um yes, I guess it started with, uh, this idea of kind of like maybe sort of like self-care and being like I’m going to buy myself flowers because I can. Trying to feel it in charge of yourself but then it became this kind of list poem about all the things you know. You know that the flowers... you buy the flowers, but you know they're gonna die and then perhaps you know other things but perhaps you do things that aren't necessarily that good for you sometimes. So I guess it’s kind of about that but also I write a lot about kind of loss and grief and how that kind of sits with you, and um... how you live your life with that. And that always finds a way to kind of creep into my poems. And, you know, I'm not mad at that because you know everyone lives through that, and everyone was gonna have to face that in some way and so it keeps creeping into my poems I think because it needs to maybe. And for me poetry is kind of about finding a language to talk about the good things in life, the joy as well, but also the challenges and the unspeakable unsayable things. And so, a lot of the time my poem is, my poems are trying to kind of like figure out how to express those things, you know?

**Shaniqua**: I think that's really important and I think a lot of people resonate with that and they come to poetry for those things but it's what can they find that will say that will help them and realise they're not by themselves, so I think that's really amazing and you do it in a beautiful way where it's not so heavy, or like you're reading it and you’re just like... you're putting yourself in some maybe more depressive state. It's a really beautiful way of looking at it and you can resonate with that and look at that, so I think that's really really wonderful. Really wonderful

**Cecilia**: Well... Tom from Spread the Word is telling me that we’ve been chatting for over 20 minutes which has gone by so quickly. It's been so nice talking to you about all of the things that you're excited to do and your relationship with poetry and I feel like we share the same sentiment of how kind of vital it is and how we want to make it a thing that more people can enjoy so thank you so much for talking to me it's been really amazing

**Shaniqua**: Thank you so much. It's wonderful to see you and I'm looking forward to seeing all that you do, and I know you're going to do some amazing, beautiful things and I can't wait to see your projects and what comes out working with young people and hopefully it's all and soon so we can actually do stuff in person.

**Cecilia**: Yeah, hopefully before our year as Laureates finish we'll be...

**Shaniqua**: You have a year, I three!

**Cecilia**: Oh my god! Okay so you're definitely, you're definitely gonna get to do some face-to-face stuff I hope. But hopefully our paths will cross again one day because I would love that.