

Alison Jean Baker - Interview

Season Butler

So I'm very, very pleased today to be speaking to Alison Jean Baker, for Radical Structures, which is a project in which we are thinking about what artists need to survive and thrive as workers, as people, and as folks who are expressing themselves to others in various ways. And I'm so grateful to be joined by several artists who have had either unconventional or, in some ways interrupted journeys through their careers.

So Alison Jean Baker is here with me today to talk a bit about how things have been, and what the art of this process has been for her. So Alison, can you describe your creative practice briefly?

Alison Jean Baker 03:11

So okay, it's been chequered. So I started out in art, went to art school, and always wanted to perform as well, but that seems to be the easiest avenue in was through art, and certainly at school that was the thing that was most promoted. And then I realised, actually, I really wanted to pursue my writing, but also acting. So I went into acting first, but I always wrote, and wrote and performed my own work. And I dropped out of my art school place to go into a performing arts school place, and then I dropped out of that, because I realised that actually, I'm better off making my own toolkit, better off finding my own way of making things happen, which suited my approach to work, but also, with that comes obstacles of access, if anything.

Yes, so, and then I stopped acting in 2009. And that's when the big hiatus happened. And now I'm writing, trying to write in the climate we're in. So to me, it feels like one artistic journey that has just had different outlets, but I don't feel I always consider myself an artist, who chose to either do visual art, performing arts or the written word, as opposed to - I don't like putting myself in any kind of label in that sense, but I also don't like using the word creative because I don't think that it's specific enough. I always say artist.

Season Butler 05:00

Yeah, absolutely. And so many people are creative in what they do. I think that the label 'creative' isn't ours exclusively in any way.

I'm interested in the way that you've took an unconventional route through education, and this is something that I can really relate to. I think I earned my first academic qualification when I was like 27. And I kind of leapfrogged the BA stage. And it really does strike me that I think a lot of us would be both like smarter and more fulfilled, if we felt that kind of flexibility and a sense of ownership around our route through education.

And so I was wondering if you could like, expound on your views about what education both inside and outside institutions can do for us as we're building a practice, and how it was for you taking that step to say, "I want to make my own toolkit."

Alison Jean Baker 06:13

I think, well, it's something that I was aware of when I lived in Berlin, was the way in Germany and certainly Berlin, you can defer or take your time to complete your course, they seem to really understand that you have to sometimes go at your own pace. And I think we feel such a pressure to make a decision at a certain age to go through an institution, which sometimes, certainly when I went to art school, it was going through a lot of changes. They were increasing the student intake, they were starting to introduce fees. And so the anxiety that came with learning seemed to be the thing you were navigating most other than your ideas, how you tackle your ideas, building your community around you. And certainly when it came to me deciding to go into acting, and I thought, okay, I should probably get proper training because there's a pressure again on, you need to have a certain route in and I was told at 25, I was too old to go to drama school. So we have a lot of impressions as to what we expect people to do by a certain time and I think what that then leads into is a lack of trust that you might actually know your needs best.

And with that, I think we really benefit from mentors, we benefit from people who can guide us through our artistic practice. And certainly for me, I had that in my Art Foundation course, my very first year of studying art, I had a fantastic experience, and you think I'm gonna have three more years of this. It didn't happen. That was a shocker. That was a real shock, because I thought I had the lottery ticket by going to art school and having this amazing experience extended, and also being the first in my family to go into further education. There was also no expectations, but also not much in the way of support as in what to expect. So I think that was my impression of the shell shock of realising that certainly a creative environment is not this wonderful, facilitated, exciting, all encompassing environment. And I was already feeling quite alone in art school.

And certainly with drama. I mean that there's an obstacle with cost, I think the cost of drama schools, how much they cost. I mean, now everyone is understanding that burden of needing nine grand a year, but drama schools were always expensive. There was an elitism based on cost. And for me, if I think specifically about acting, you're playing people that are around you. And I think at 19, when you go to drama school, you're still you haven't had enough life experience. And so I think the fact that these institutions seem to favour the young because it suits a way of what to do with you when you graduate. "Now we can do this with you" - and that's something that I was told, when I finally got an agent was "You didn't do the path. That means it's really hard to market you and that's where the branding comes in." And that's something that I think it's easier now because people can promote themselves online and with social media. I think that has been a really wonderful tool and the fact that people can just get stuff out there and remove these gatekeepers, but for me, it always felt - I liked the fact I found my own way of piecing together how to do something and it also meant that I paid more attention to it because I had invested in that. I follow through my curiosity, I'm going to find out this, this is what I need, and I'm going to work twice as hard because I don't have the confidence of thinking, "Well, I had this taught to me by an institution." So in some ways I feel it. I benefited from having that attitude. Until you get into

the industry, that's when you suddenly become aware that actually, they want to see you, you've gone through a certain drama school or whatever it is, and even then it's a hierarchy of drama schools so you think well, is it ever good enough? Are you ever going to be good enough in the eyes of the people that employ you? Which is another question.

Season Butler 10:43

Yeah, I I loved it when I learned the word autodidact, and you know, being an autodidact is a way of life. And for those of you without a dictionary in front of you, an autodidact is somebody who's self taught, somebody who did it the way Alison did it and followed your nose, built your toolkit, built your pool of knowledge and kind of self authored your own development and I find being an autodidact so great for the, like the building and becoming of myself. And so annoying, with any kind of encounter with the normative wider world and institutions, and just the pressures of like, having a stack of applications in front of you and knowing that if you can weed out the people who didn't tick this or that box, then you have 50% fewer to read. And so it's difficult to present yourself without your education being packaged as like, you know, sort of a Bachelor's with honours in this. But I think that this is also now a path that more and more people are going to be choosing as it becomes clearer and clearer how so many of our systems are about grooming us as exploitable workers rather than spaces where we're allowed to, like, lean into our evolution in the way that you described your foundation course. So I'm just having a bit of autodidact pride.

Alison Jean Baker 12:39

Yeah, yeah. I mean, it is hard though when you do have those roadblocks presented to you though, because certainly. I mean, if I just focus on acting again, when I was told I was too old to go to drama school at age 25, I didn't let it put me off. It made me more determined to go. It gave me a bit of a "well, I'll show you." And then three years later - I know one of your questions is about moments of pride in my career - three years later, I won the Best Actress Award at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival from The Stage. And to me, that was the biggest 'fuck you' to that person. But on the same day that I won that award, I had to go and sign on. So there was a picture somewhere of me holding up my award and holding up my signing on card, back in the day when it was still a paper card.

So that was my reality. I knew I could work really hard. I knew that I could put the hours in and have that self belief, but the monetary rewards never came. The industry believing in me and taking a risk on me, it was so hard getting that industry approval beyond a critic approval or an audience approval. And so that was the moment where you think "I've done this, I've got myself forward. And it's still not enough." And that was the big wake up call.

Narrowing it down again, I think it's also to do with the way that we do things in the UK. Sometimes I think we are very tied to our institutions and the pride we have in them. And that's not to be dismissive of further education or universities but I think we're still very reluctant to be curious beyond those parameters. I think that's why when I used to go over to America, I used to go over to New York a lot, and the attitude was very different. How they cast is very different. Their attitude is "Let's throw the net as wide as possible and see what's on the edges. Let's see what's on the peripheries." And if you're there you have a sense that sooner or later someone's going to find you. And it gives you a sense of

"Well if it can happen for me, it can happen for you," so there's a positivity around your career whereas it's the opposite in the UK. They go to the top ten agents and then they fan out to be on the edges. It's a long wait until someone finds you so you don't feel you can have any autonomy over your career. And you can be seen as too much of a maverick. And again, I think that's where social media might be helping to break through some of those barriers, certainly with writing or putting things out there on YouTube or Instagram and then people start to catch up and go "Okay, right yeah, we missed you the first time round."

Season Butler 15:46

I mean, that's such an interesting distinction and I'm really pleased that you laid it out so clearly in this way. Did you have another thought bubbling just now?

Alison Jean Baker 15:58

Many! I mean, I'll let you guide me because I'm equally slightly foggy-headed this morning and not sleeping and because it's been raining here - finally the weather broke - and I opened all the windows and there was a big ass spider like a massive spider trying to get in it's like no way to close the windows to sleep with my windows closed. But it's been hot and I'm thinking where is it? So I'm equally a little bit tired today.

Season Butler 16:31

Cool. Well, well -

Alison Jean Baker 16:32

We can edit this out.

Season Butler 16:35

No way. So I want to think about... maybe I'll steer us back a little bit linear. Yeah, I want to get a picture of I mean, I loved hearing about your foundation course. And maybe it would be cool to hear about like any mentors or like mentor figures or role models or other like helpful philosophies or principles from the from the early days, and then we'll kind of steer into hearing about the break

Alison Jean Baker 17:21

Yeah, my foundation there was a guy called Nicos and he - so this is me showing my age. This is the days before we had the internet and before we had Google so he taught me how to use a library. Certainly the art I was doing there was graphic design and illustration, so you're dealing with text also, and copywriting, so that's suited my writing head. And he just said "This is how you think laterally," so he taught me how to think laterally and how I'm which suits my dyslexic brain, because a dyslexic will go on tangents and do a loop de loop because we're trying to figure out the pattern and getting me to think laterally has served me in all my creative practices. It helped me with acting, it helps me with writing to find a way into a subject or working through to get to a more authentic place and so I'm really indebted to him because he made me feel I had a brain that I could use and use well and apply some way even though - and this is when I went to university - I realised that I didn't want to do that subject any more it became much narrower when I got to university. But he's definitely someone I can think of

who gave me a tool that I've applied continually across any practice. And I'm also really aware that they're very very rare to have someone that changes the chemistry in your brain like that other than just giving you like a "Yeah, go for it." Because it is hard in the arts, as much as we want to be each other's buddies, there's a lot of rivalry and envy and there are times it can feel like you're in a piranha pool.

Season Butler 19:20

Yeah

Alison Jean Baker 19:21

So having those people that genuinely pull out of you what they can see and guide it is yeah. So Nicos, wherever he is.

Season Butler 19:30

I love hearing that. And what were some of the sort of early high points. You mentioned your big win in Edinburgh. Are there any other like breakthrough moment, big or small, from your early career?

Alison Jean Baker 19:53

I think whenever you get into a production and the other cast members are great allies with you on stage and there's a real sense of camaraderie and doing good work, especially so often, so often it's unpaid. So that makes those moments and why you do something special. Certainly I mean, again, having someone believe in you, I mean it took me 10 years to get an agent. That's how long it took to get someone to say to me, "Yeah, I'm invested," and having someone who you feel can see your strengths, and also understand why you have your weaknesses. That's always a great moment. But even that's bittersweet.

But yeah, so I guess anytime you get a job, and again, I'm focusing specifically on acting here, because that's what led up to when I stopped, but certainly whenever you get work, and it's paid work. But again, if every single time, I've had a moment where I've had a moment of success, it's always had an equal and opposite negative. So it's either finance or it's like, when I used to go over to New York all the time, and I was there two and a half weeks and I auditioned for a Broadway show, and I was offered it. You think, "God, I've not had an audition in the UK for two years." But I wasn't legal and then you have people in your life who are scared you're going to leave them and so you have an emotional challenge to deal with. And so it's always felt, any big moment, has always come along going, "Yeah, but we're going to pull the rug from you. Right at that moment." So I wouldn't say I'm cynical, at all. I try and always remain positive and open, but there is a side of me that is - it dampens down your enthusiasm. You're always looking for the catch. Like, "Okay, but why? Because you want to test me, don't you?"

Season Butler 22:31

I mean, I was interested in you mentioning how much unpaid work actors do in their career, and especially on the road to becoming in some way established. And it just strikes me that so many people value what actors do, and like, how do we get away with it? Like, how do we get away with this? And how - and maybe this is a really big question, but I'm interested in your thoughts about like - how we internalise this kind of like self exploitation?

Alison Jean Baker 23:10

Yeah, exactly. And we don't see it as exploitation, we see it as opportunity, we see it as an opportunity to be seen, an opportunity to show your work. And from that it might build on to something else. So whenever I've done a really great show, like I touched on earlier, when you're in a really amazing cast,

and you're doing a fantastic production on a shoestring. And everyone's saying it's the best thing they've seen, better than the West End, better than this, better than the RSC, better than the Globe, and yet, you still can't get that funding, you still can't take it on the journey where you think artistically it deserves to go so.

So yeah, we don't view it as self-exploitation. I mean, I've really been aware that lately, whenever I've seen anything posted, sometimes it'll pop up - I mean, I'm not in the acting world anymore, but I still see things that will come through - where they'll say looking to cast such and such character but no pay. And I know it's really, really hard to get stuff off the ground and to get funding. But when it comes to theatre, in particular, it's such a commitment for rehearsals and then you're performing of an evening if you're having to rehearse in the daytime, so to be out of work means you can take the job and then you're doing a job that is unpaid. And there could be arguments for that saying that how things are funded, whether it's our Equity union is powerful enough or not. I have questions on whether they are; I don't think in the UK it's strong enough. But also it's people that say "Okay, I want to put on a show," but they'll find the money for the theatre, they'll find the money for the costumes, they'll find the money for the press agent, but they won't pay the actors. And because actors are so open and curious and wanting to just work, you don't feel you are an actor, unless you're acting, you don't feel you're writer unless you're writing, so it's an opportunity to actually exercise that muscle.

So if it means doing it for free, then you'll do it for free because it reminds you why you're doing it. And so it is a profession that profoundly relies on good faith of actors, because there will be a moment when yeah, something will happen, somebody will be spotted. But again, I do feel that happens much more, certainly I really felt that in America more than in the UK, because of I guess, the industry in this country is spoilt with great theatre and great dramas schools and so to go to the fringes is more of an efforts and do I really need to be looking and searching and figuring out whether there's any talent there? Unless it's something specific they're looking for. So that feeds into an atmosphere of frustration. I hear a lot of actors are always frustrated, fed up, annoyed, the same mantra of just give me a shot, if I just had that moment, if I just had - that was that comment of I just have my break, breaking through something. And that's great if you feel you'll be met halfway.

And yeah, I mean, certainly, personally, the amount of work I did for free, I don't regret. Maybe there's a few productions I could have done without, but I don't regret any of the stuff I've done, but it caused me to be in a huge amount of debt. Which is what led me to when I stopped, which - I mean I know you'll come to that with the questions - but with regards to that tied in with the economic crash, and that's when I realised that this profession cannot put a roof over my head. And I was homeless on and off for about four years. And that's the legacy of doing something that you love is that you love it so you don't expect pay but it but when it actually becomes something that stops you functioning, you've sacrificed so much, you've sacrificed your financial security. And because of the kind of work you have to do to support that career, you can't take full time work, you can't take anything that's going to be in conflict of your time, which means you are forever living on peanuts, and there comes a point where, okay, you can do it, but when - certainly for me - when it affected my ability to just live day to day, that's when I had to make a decision that I can't do this anymore. I didn't want to be bitter. I didn't want to be

someone who was bitter about my profession. And I never thought I'd ever give up. But there came a point that was like, I have to stop now, and rethink this.

Season Butler 28:06

When you mentioned the word exposure, it's been kind of ringing through my head as you've been talking and yes, you need to be there to be seen, to be able to be seen more. And then I always also think of exposure as something that can kill you, exposure as something that can make you sick, and exposure as being unprotected. And when you said you know, this career can't keep a roof over my head, I thought exposure. So I'd love to hear anything you want to tell us about that period, entering into a period of homelessness, and the relationship between that and your practice. And you know, maybe where it all went next.

Alison Jean Baker 29:03

Yeah, when the economic crash happened, certainly being in London trying to rent -

Season Butler 29:17

So this is 2007/2008

Alison Jean Baker 29:20

Yeah, so about 2008. So 2008/2009. So I had finally got an agent, and I remember having a chat with her saying, "What's going on with...because the industry was really, really hit and what was happening, anybody who was quite further along in their career than me were getting the kind of jobs I would have been going up for, which was pushing me further down and so there was a push down, because there just was no money. And so she said, you know, there's nothing we can do, we've just got to ride this out, and that's what I was prepared to do. And she paid me a lovely compliment, she said, "You're the best actress on my books." And that's nice to hear that because you think, okay, she could be saying that to any actor, but she said that as a way of saying, it's not you, it's the times we're in. But this is where the bittersweet moment comes, because a year later, she dropped me. So you have someone say something to you and then because of the economic environment you are in, it's like, how much of a risk am I prepared to take with getting you into work? Is it too much pressure? So you're in a situation where you don't have anyone speaking for you.

And I remember there was a moment where, because we have a directory called The Spotlights, and when I came out of that, because that's also another expense, you've got to try to find the monies. And it's only been recently that have allowed you to pay monthly, you used to have to pay a big lump sum or maybe split into two and it's like, when I came out of that subscription, that's when I felt like no one knows I'm here, no one knows I'm an actor, no one knows that I'm available. So I felt completely isolated. And that's one of the moments when I went to Berlin because I'm just gonna go and have a good time somewhere else. But certainly with then not having anywhere to live, couchsurfing...

What was happening was people putting their security into accommodation. So they would want things like three months' deposits and a guarantor and your rent upfront and because a lot of people were losing their apartments, or being priced out, it became more and more competitive, so I ended up living

in a hostel. So I had a bedsit so wasn't sharing, wasn't in dormitories but it would allow me to pay weekly. My deposit was only £90, I was paying £119 a week including heating and hot water and you become really aware of the three things in that time, as it goes on and on, of what's important: heat, access to heat, access to water and to be able to close the door. So I was never on the streets, I was never doorway homeless, but I remember I had to register to vote as a homeless person. And that's when it really hit home that I don't have an address. And this is the product of having a career that just, I could never get my head above the parapet, I can never get savings. As someone who had put together their own toolkit and always found their own way and the autodidact attitude. I now could not help myself. I was in a situation of begging for help and that does something to you, and even now even though I'm in secure housing, I will still clock a hostel if I see it, just in case I need it.

So yeah, so there's various factors there, we're dealing with an economic environment, but also having profession that can be very brutal. And I think one of the things that we are gonna focus in more on that, on the performance element of the creative arts, because there is a cutthroat element. Then you realise that even though there is this 'lovey' nature, it also is quite backstabbing, as well and so you do start to figure out okay, where are your allies? Where are the people theatre really going to look after you and, if it isn't coming from your industry, people that represent, you then where's it going to come from? If you're in an industry where you're penalised for being poor, because you can't afford your headshots, you can't afford your subscriptions to Spotlight and Equity, and you're made to feel guilty for that. And that's when I realised that this profession wasn't my friend anymore, even though I loved it so much, wanted to do it for so long since I was so young. So it was a real moment of grieving, I really felt I was grieving. And I became this - I had no direction. I didn't know what I was going to do. And as someone who was always really good at setting themselves a goal and going for it and getting, I felt very rudderless. And yeah, and then suddenly the years go by, and it's like well, where did the amount of time go and it just went on surviving. It literally went on just being sure that I was secure and safe and able to function, which I think we're in another episode of that now, but now this is everyone. But what people are going through now, it felt like I was doing back then, was just I have to get through each day. Be sure I'm safe, be sure, I'm watered, fed, and can sleep in private. And I never saw that coming. I always associated being an artist meant never having a lot of money, but I never thought I would actually be like literally living on £20 a week for extensive amounts of time. And that's when I was like, "Okay, how do I get myself out of this? Can art get me out of this game? Can my creative brain get me out of this because I'm completely flummoxed as to what I do next."

Season Butler 35:32

And there is a profound effect on a person's sense of their value when you have to live that way. And I'm reminded of something that a friend of mine, the actor Gemma Brockis, said to me which is that the first promise of performance in the kind of performer-audience contract is the permission to look at me, I'm performing and you can look at me. I'm not at all suggesting that actors actually possess the confidence that they have to exude or that they're not insecure people, but during times when, you know, when I've been homeless, or just been kind of destitute in this way, that sense of self worth, that's lost in those moments really precludes me being able to extend that invitation and saying, "It's okay to look at me." It's so much more of a "Do not look at me" existence for me at those times. And so it's

almost something like existential, ontological, that you would really need to rebuild, or in your case, I think, really evolve in order to find what's next and what's the next form of liveable life for you.

Alison Jean Baker 37:14

Yeah, I think a lot of that comes from shame. I mean, I had a lot of shame about being in my situation. I couldn't even tell my family. My family knew to a certain degree but also my family come from a working class background so both my parents grew up in the East End and they came from the eastern slums. My dad was the youngest of ten so anything that touches on poverty, homelessness, not having a career, invites shame and so to have that within your own life when you've always - especially being a young outspoken teenager of like "I'm gonna have a better life and you did," all those kinds of conversations that we all have with our parents and then it's like no I'm actually really struggling. And that sense of being seen or how you're being perceived. Being perceived as a homeless person or someone who's in a temporary accommodation.

I mean at one point I was working for a one of the biggest letting agencies in the UK, the Freshwater Group, and I had no permanent accommodation because I couldn't afford the kind of rents that they were charging so there was these moments every day - and this is where my writers head to come in - it's like I can't make this up. I'm living in a hostel and I'm working for the biggest letting agency in the UK and I don't have anywhere to live and I'm processing all these documents and deeds and maintenance contracts and that's when I became very aware of - certainly in this country and you know this from being in Berlin - is how rent is one of our biggest enemies. How we pay our way, how we put a roof over our head, how owning your own home seems to be the only way to secure your future and so you have to kind of put a face in every day and just function, as we do when we have depression, we function when we act as everything's fine we put on clothes and we put on makeup and go out into the world and yet inside it's a complete opposite story. A wry smile will come through whenever I think of these situations again, 'cause it just makes me think this is where the writing head comes in and goes, "Okay, I have to use this. These are gifts. These are gifts of irony or gifts of a situation which surely I can use somewhere else. For sweet revenge." I don't know.

Season Butler 40:02

So how did the writing practice develop out of this period in your life?

Alison Jean Baker 40:09

Well, I've always written. I've always written stories when I was at school. But because I'm dyslexic, writing is a struggle, not as in to create stuff make up stuff, but reading is a little bit slower. And again, we're only really now understanding neurodiversity, so with being dyslexic everybody thinks it's a spelling issue, they don't realise it's how our brain is wired slightly differently. So our brains have to work five times as hard as a non-dyslexic when it comes to reading text, so we get tired. So we just have to go a bit of a slower pace, although I always say to people, whenever they view us a certain way, half of NASA, 50% of those that work at NASA are dyslexic. So we're really good at problem solving, we're not good at navigation so I can get you to the moon but don't ask me for directions because I will get my left or right muddled up. But I love the fact that that's how we seen, and I see

myself as a problem solver. I like problem solving. I like finding ways into things and when that's a combination of Nicos, whether it's a combination of my own toolkit or the way my brain works.

So stories, I'm fascinated by stories and again, all the episodes in my life, there's a part of me that will break off and be watching it as an author, watching it as a storyteller. Thinking okay, the human behaviour and part of that is born of acting, because we study human behaviour and I think that has been a very good position as a playwright, so I'm much more going down a playwright, script writing route, as opposed to writing novels or poetry, or an essay. Yes, it's for theatre, because that is what I know inside out. But it's been, again, it's been a long journey. Last year, on the fourth attempt I got into the Royal Courts writing group, the Intro writing group for 2021. And I applied for years beforehand, I got shortlisted. And then rather than just go with it, they sent me a really lovely email, really supportive and said, you know, write the full length play and send it in and I didn't and then instead, the following year, I tried to write a play and didn't get anywhere. And then the year after that, I tried to write a play and in anywhere, so last year, it's like, I'm just going to write what I want to write, how I want to write it, and not care anymore. And just through like, first draft, bashed out over four days, ten pages, and I've got in, but I had to take a pause on it. I've asked to defer till the end of this year, because my mental health was really struggling. And I think that is a product of the times we're in but also I realised there is a pattern where I'll do this, where I'll set my goals, I'll set my sights, and I'll get there and once I'm through... what do I do now? I have the energy and the commitment to achieve a goal but once I'm through that, or over that threshold, I'm rabbit in headlights. It's that lack of faith, it's that lack of confidence, but also having people around you and that's when I became very aware that I didn't have enough of a team around me, that cheerleading team that can really go, "Keep going, keep going keep going, you know, you're here." Which again, is where mentors, I think, are really important. I think having someone and I've now got a mentor who she reached out to me, has offered to help me through this year up until the course so that at least when I am on it again, I'll feel like I've got a stronger foundation other than just raw talent, whatever you want to call it. I've got a bit of a "Okay, I'm here on the basis of hard work and some kind of solidity," which you don't ever feel in the art world. I never feel anything solid. It's always because again, I've had experiences where it's just fallen away so quickly. But I realised it was a bit of creative self-care and I think the understanding about what we need which is hard when you feel the pressure is on, when you feel time pressure, pressure born of your age, I'm very aware being the oldest in the group. Again, those obstacles, how your work is going to be perceived, not as your age, but the age in the work. Will my age show through in the work? Have I still got fresh outlook, fresh take on things, that somebody else wants to invest in?

Season Butler 45:11

Yeah, absolutely. That's just the thing, because of course, you know, the question could very well be do I have a mature outlook on things? Do I have a knowledgeable outlook on things? Do I have an outlook that expresses a degree of, you know, sort of actual experience in the world and emotional literacy? But it's not that, because of what's valued.

I want to ask you, thinking about the periods in your life when you weren't performing and didn't have the kind of writing practice that you have now, and that you're developing now, what do you think you would have needed in order to avoid these gaps? What should have been there that wasn't there?

Alison Jean Baker 46:18

I'll say initially support and that support can come from your family, it can come from your friends genuinely wanting you to do well, or if not, don't make me think that you don't want me to do well. So support from your family, support from your peers, or from the people that are representing you. So that's emotional support, so the people that believe in you, because that's why athletes have coaches, they have talent, but they need someone who can convince them of that talent, or that ability, and that strength is enough. So it's having those people around you that can just be there for you when things go wrong, help you pick yourself back up again. I think certainly with how things are financed, getting help, financial help. I mean, yes, we have the Arts Council, but I'm aware, for example, if I compare the whole budget for the UK, compared to the arts budget alone for Berlin, they're the same. So the arts budget for Berlin alone is equivalent to the whole of the arts budget from UK, and that might have changed because the pandemic but that's why so many artists go to Berlin, because you feel you're in a city where they are actively investing in you. So that kind of financial support. Or even if it's in the form of, "I'm having a hard time, can you help pay the rent?" You know, those kinds of grants, which I've seen are in existence, but again, they tend to be for those who are a little bit more established. So again, it's at what level is that introduced? What qualifies you for help? Because help is help, so what qualifies you, or what stage are you allowed to then ask for help, to be seen as worthy. Yeah, you're not gonna waste that money.

Season Butler 48:19

I'm not successful enough to ask for help yet.

Alison Jean Baker 48:22

It's exactly that. I've seen that a lot. I mean, there's one award where you can be given money to buy yourself a laptop, but you have to have already had some kind of credit. So navigating that is bad enough. So that kind of financial support, but I do think the the educational system, the obstacles we have there. I think, what we expect from our creative environment, again, just comparing it to what I experienced in the States, which felt much more open, I think we still are very cautious. Which doesn't help if you are, again, if you're not cut from the same class, it can be quite difficult. I mean that's deep, that's constitutional, that is the DNA of the country or the city that you're in. So that's harder to shift, because I certainly feel - I mean, we have so many -isms in this industry that we're battling with and I do think classism will be the last for getting that sense that you are worthy. You may not have come through a certain institution. I think if I might have had a mentor or someone who I could have gone to that would have really been able to say, "These are your strengths, these are your weaknesses. Let's work on those," and just be there, just be someone to tap in with. And I think that's happening much more now anyway, and again, I think that's born of the pandemic, it's made people aware that actually everyone needs to have someone they can talk to, talk through the issues that are happening.

And also, because so much is happening anyway. What happened with George Floyd, that moment, finally, conversations are being had, some things are starting to move and progress, we hope. But it seems to take these big moments for people to latch on to what you as individuals are feeling are necessary conversations to have or societal conversations to have. And also cheaper rents, you know,

if there rents were cheaper, if you weren't trying to find money you don't have to put down deposits and try and find that money on top of everything else. I mean, it is just your location affects your ability to function and also to be a sensitive artist, you're going to crumble. It's a tough one.

I think what I'm getting to, I'll just go back to when I used to go over to New York a lot, what I felt was really great there was I felt like there was always a way, there was always a way of solving the problem. Because you could talk your way into a situation, you could talk your way into an opportunity, you could talk your way into being seen and that attitude was always really applauded. It was always like, "Well done, you've got the will and the tenacity to get yourself here of your own back and we're curious because you're curious." And I think we could do with a bit more of that over here in the UK, we could do a little bit more of "So tell me what you've got. What can you offer me? You might be what we're looking for." And when you have that you have a sense of you can - again the problem solving - you can help yourself. Yeah.

Season Butler 52:19

Yeah. And you know, I agree that the US is a society that admires a bit of moxie, you know, definitely fortune favours the brave kind of spirit. Although, if we were gonna, like, go to the mat and debate then I would have some counter arguments but -

Alison Jean Baker 52:43

I'm sure yeah

Season Butler 52:44

Whatever. I take any opportunity to give the country of my birth a nice strong critique, but I'll save that. Because I do take your points completely.

Alison Jean Baker 52:56

Yeah, and by that I just mean within that creative small little swimming pool of the privilege of being an actor. So that was where I felt that. Obviously beyond that I'm clueless but certainly within that environment, I was very shocked by how welcoming everyone was and how open and that was lovely moment of "Oh, my gosh, you're staying here."

Season Butler 53:22

I mean, I agree with your read on both New York and the kind of mindset in general. Do you consider yourself political?

Alison Jean Baker 53:35

Yes, I could be more political in the form of being perhaps more of an activist, but there are some people who have much more on that spectrum. They're activists, they're very out there, facilitating, curating, organising, and the energy of that, whenever I see that, I always admire it. But certainly in any of the work I did, as performer was always very political. My writing always focused on the political and the politics, the social community politics. I get angry and upset about things which I hope to act on in the choices I make, whether it's how I vote or how I spend my money, the food I eat, the way I travel. I

try and keep my political choices very much in how I go through life. Yeah, more than just signing a petition. I try have it in my day to day.

Season Butler 55:04

And you seem to have an awareness of class and a real grounding in working class values.

Alison Jean Baker 55:14

Yeah and I think we're at a funny moment as well at the moment in the UK because of what's happening with the white working classes who are very much voting against their own best self interest but of course we saw that in the States as well. We saw how people were voting the way they did and I think certainly one of the problems I really am aware of within - not just in the working classes but within white working classes - is a lack of aspiration that isn't about property. So certainly a conversation I remember having with my mother when I wanted to go to art school was "What do you want to go to university for, you should be leaving home and getting a job like I did when I was 15," so again, it comes down to shame which is something I'm writing about, it's very much something that is on my radar. It's something I want to explore because I have it personally but also because what I'm seeing happening now, is that sense of if you've got HRH in front of your name, you'll do your hat but if you've got an OBE behind your name it's like, "How did you get that?" It's this dynamic of this nation. And certainly with my family, my father died when I was very young and he was the youngest of ten, so there wasn't a lot of relatives around but I was very aware of how they suffered with the prejudice of having so many in his family. Like the question was "Why did your mother have so many kids?" and her answer would always be "Well, I didn't think they'd all live." Simple as that. Wasn't Catholic, wasn't a religious thing, it's that sense of having to rely on each other and I think a lot of that has kind of disappeared. I think that's disappeared because we've lost a lot of our heavy industries, so those environments which are unionised and gave you a collective voice and made you aware that you had a collective power, and a collective bargaining power has been very much stripped away. And that's something I'm very aware of, because of my age, because I remember a pre-Thatcher and a post-Thatcher. So I remember how the country really shifted and however much it needed to be pulled into the future, the casualties were vast and so I think we've got a lot of broken communities who... Yeah, they've lost the understanding of where their power is, there's more of us than there is of them and it's something that I hope gets remedied at some point, but it frustrates me. I get frustrated when I see it within my own community of like, the attitudes, the lack of aspiration which means also you don't see those voices represented in politics, in arts, in any taste making. I think the last time that was really evident in the UK was perhaps in the 60s and 70s when you had working class voices were seen as the tastemakers, the influencers the people that made people who weren't working class jealous that "Oh, I want to be a bit more like David Bailey or or Michael Caine," and I'm speaking really obviously here now but it's those iconic figures that were born at a certain time in place, in a certain aspirational attitude, like we can do more than just function.

Season Butler 58:45

Yeah.

Alison Jean Baker 58:47

And I'm really aware of it in my family, how I have to still fight that attitude day in day out. I mean, I know a lot of creators will always have a conversation with their parent where their parent go, "We don't understand what it is you do, why you do what you do, why you put yourself in such vulnerable positions because of the financial backdrop," and I think it's going to get worse now that it's more expensive to go to university, I think we're going to get another underclass, which then becomes bitter, and then all these problems are just going to be magnified, that we're still dealing with. So I wouldn't say having a working class... I would say I have a working class resilience, but a pride at the moment, it's really I'm frustrated. I'm frustrated. And yeah, that's just the product of having a Tory government for many years as well as austerity. I mean, we can get a whole other conversation, we could go on about that. But certainly, it feeds into a convenient mindset of "Stay in your place. Don't step out line. And if you really want to rock the boat, tick this box. That's how to rock the boat. Rely on your community to make change." Yeah.

Season Butler 1:00:17

Alison, can I ask you to tell us a little bit about what you're working on now? I mean, you mentioned that your work is looking at shame. But also, if you if you wanted to tell us a bit about just your passions or your preoccupations, you know, sort of maybe the, most important activity to you now is like appreciating the parakeets but I'm just interested in where you are with stuff what you're doing now?

Alison Jean Baker 1:01:00

I mean, writing wise, I never like to - again, this is my way my brain works - I never like to say I'm interested in one particular type of topic, like some people say I specialise in talking about a particular topic for my writing. I'm always interested in human behaviour and what people do and why they do what they do to each other and the reasons behind that. Having a life surrounded by so much behaviour, that's how I can process it. So I'm certainly looking at things like the environments I've worked in, and my family life, working class shame, there are things I'm looking at at the moment. And dealing with material that is sensitive as well because at the moment I'm very aware of, being a white writer, not taking up space, not telling someone else's story, which is hard you're so curious and you've been involved in the world and, I mean again that's another conversation to have about who tells a story and who has ownership. So I'm always looking for a stimulant, something that will commit me to the page. That will mean I'll get to the end of the story. Whether I do that every day, that's another question which I don't beat myself up with, thinking I should write every day. I think it's useful and I think there's certainly something that we should - Rachel De-Lahay, she said this - it's useful to write every single day because every day you're a different person. And today you have your thoughts today and tomorrow you'll have different thoughts. So that works for me like writing things down now because it's of its moment. But that's just on a practical level.

On a day to day level of things that are motivating me is a garden. When we went into lockdown, where I live, I'm in a big old Victorian house and there's a massive - it's 20 yards out the back and it was completely abandoned. And when we went to lockdown I thought, "We've got an outside space, we can actually use this." But it was covered in brambles and weeds and nettles and I found a pair of really sharp loppers and I just cut through everything like hot knife through butter, just went through this field. And underneath all this jungle was a garden that had been abandoned, so we found the old paths, we

found the old patio, we found old rose trees. And I mean it was certainly how I processed lock down. I'd be out there for 12 hours, I lost the sense of time. And it was really interesting how your relationship to time changes when you're in nature. And I mean also we had this incredible spring. So the parakeets were outnumbered, so we didn't hear the parakeets quite so much. We'd actually hear the other birds. But getting your hands in soil and having something really tactile and whenever people talk about mindfulness, which I always think for a lot of people is a term or practice that doesn't work, but actually focusing on a task of gardening, planting seeds, watching them grow, watering them, nurturing, clearing things away, seeing it develop, seeing how a garden dictates the time and it's a marathon. It's not a sprint, gardening is a marathon and so I'd be posting pictures up on Facebook and everybody just suddenly got on board of like oh, "My God, your garden, what's happening next?" and so it became its own story.

Certainly it's been harder this year because I think the lockdown's been harder this year, because it's been like, "Stop and start, when are we in? When we when we out?" It's been harder to pay attention to it. But that reconnection with nature, it's a relationship I don't have when I'm in London. I have it when I'm in Berlin, because I cycle everywhere and I go to the lakes and I go wild swimming, but in the UK, it feels such an urban environment. So to be outside, all day long, hearing the surroundings and just hearing how quiet it was when everything stopped. Which I think it's also feeding in perhaps to some of the anxiety we're all having, 'cause it's like "Oh no. That was the normal. That was actually the normal." So yeah, I've become a reluctant gardener who's full of enthusiasm. It wasn't something I thought I'd do and I've now got like 15 tomato plants and strawberry plants out there and I'm growing kale and carrots and green beans, and I'm one of those people that could very easily go down to the shops and their Wellington boots, I have to stop myself. Like, I'm not a farmer. I've got to have some boundaries here.

Season Butler 1:06:16

Oh my god, I love this so much.

Alison Jean Baker 1:06:18

But it's something that I would say to anyone. And what's been interesting as well, the people in this building don't go out into the garden, they won't go out there and sit out there. So I think it's something that we've unlearned, we've unlearned how to be outside, be invested in our environment. And I feel very blessed. I've feel very lucky. I've had that opportunity because I don't know how I would have - without that - I don't know what. My brain is already frazzled. Without that I would have just been a jellyfish talking to you right now.

Season Butler 1:07:01

I can relate I can so relate. Thank you for telling me about that. I really enjoyed hearing about your garden.

Alison Jean Baker 1:07:07

I'll send you pictures!

Season Butler 1:07:09

Please, please, please please! And I'll send you a Facebook friend request. So can I ask one last question. And you know, you can think big and small, let your imagination run wild or be super pragmatic, but what to you what a world in which artists are truly empowered look like?

Alison Jean Baker 1:07:38

That's a good question. I have to really think. Well, I think there's been times where they have and it tends to be in environments - we know this from places like Berlin after the wall came down, or places like New York, in the 70s - where artists were able to take over spaces and make large spaces that are central to a city with art as their focus, as opposed to institutionalise that the DIY culture of artists. To me, if they're put more centre stage, not just for entertainers, but for tastemakers and for what is seen as important in your day to day interaction. So when you go down a high street, high road - and I'm not talking about having gallery spaces, but just having a reminder that we're creative beings as opposed to just being consumers. So taking some of the mystery of it - but then again, selfishly, do I want the mystery to be taken away from artists? Because I think sometimes that's our superpower, is to be a bit mysterious, because then we can be a little bit left alone. But yeah, properly funded, being in cities where art spaces aren't just about institutions, or someone curating a space, but yeah, that DIY culture. And I think that only happens when you remove the capitalism around real estate, when you have spaces that aren't seen as spaces that have to be commercial, they have to make money, that they are there as incubation hubs for artists. Outside of being in an institution, outside of having to be in a university, you can actually take over a space. And again, I'm just thinking of Berlin because that's where I saw it in my adult life done so well. And of course, it's under a huge threat at the moment, but what I love about being in a place like Berlin is that I'll walk down a street and I don't see all the normal icons of a high street. You don't see a Starbucks, you don't see Nero's you don't see a McDonald's, it's all local businesses and okay, there is a hierarchy in that as well but I've become very aware that you aren't bombarded by advertising, you aren't bombarded by "Consume this." You have some power as a citizen, you can stop things happening like when Google wanted to move into the centre of Berlin and people sit outside their office just with pots and pans and just make noise, protests of noise and so that sense of society and community meaning that you don't have to be successful to be an artist.

Season Butler 1:10:42

Oh yes, thank you for saying that!

Alison Jean Baker 1:10:45

Because that's again this pressure, and it shouldn't either be seen as just being a hobbyist, it's part of who we are and if someone was to you know, be in a garden - I mean I see the gardening as a creative exercise and only I really pay attention to it but that sense of not having it to have to make money, not have for it to be looked down its nose - like you get this with theatre, amateur theatre. Can we just remove these hierarchies and again how that gets done? And I think it only gets done when there is access to more space and it only seems to come out when a city goes through a trauma. When it goes through some kind of... people's understanding of basic needs shifts and for me there's anything I would want best to come out of the situation we're in with this pandemic is people get that, that message of like what is actually really helpful to my day and what is important and what value we put

on things. I mean it there's an art shop, isn't there, in London called Fill The World With Artists and it's just like yes. Just fill it with artists and yeah, that's my... if I'm gonna have a placard.

Season Butler 1:12:16

I find that great

Alison Jean Baker 1:12:17

Everyone an artist.

Season Butler 1:12:21

Well I'm with you, I'll sign that petition and thank you so, so much for laying out your vision I've really enjoyed talking with you I really appreciate you letting me into your story and I will be following your work with interest.

Alison Jean Baker 1:12:45

Thank you. Well if I can put any of this stuff into... I mean I always think it's the thing of turning lemons into lemonade isn't it? If you can turn whatever happens to you into something positive that is a creative thing. Yeah, that's my task is to not let any experience good or bad be wasted. That's my one fear wasting opportunities or wasting experience, not learning from it, using it somehow. So yeah, hopefully I can give you something to enjoy.

Season Butler 1:13:34

Alison Jean Baker, I believe you're going to slay. So thank you again so much.

Alison Jean Baker 1:13:41

You're welcome. You're welcome.

Season Butler 1:14:00

I just wanted to ask, while I've still got you, was there because you know, was there anything that you feel like you want to mention or just anything that you want to sort of have on tape that we might be able to deal with in editing?

Alison Jean Baker 1:14:51

Oh, this question about do you feel you're involved in subcultures or counter cultures. Not so much now, I think when I was in, I mean, I'm very lucky in that I was in my early 20s in the 90s. So rave culture, club culture, and also the drugs culture at that time, it leveled everything out. And that's one of the things I really remember was this sense of - because also what happened when Berlin Wall fell, it was the end of communism, Mandela got released, these kind of big things that people were fighting for, that were very public, in the public consciousness. We had these moments of like, okay, we're the generation that can actually change things. In that sense, I'm very much a generation X in that feel very lucky, but also an attitude of like, sitting back, kicking back, eating snacks, kind of attitude. So, which I think perhaps, I'm very aware of now when I see younger people who seem to be very, very active and motivated, I think was I as much of an activist and motivated and I was, I think it was less public, we didn't have an online life. We didn't have an online way of documenting things.

Season Butler 1:16:13

Yeah.

Alison Jean Baker 1:16:14

But I think that period of time certainly was when I felt, as an artist and as a young person, real hope things were going to change. Something had happened, history, it's shifted, culturally it had shifted. You saw people who would normally be on the football terraces beating each other up, because they discovered MDMA, it completely changed their behaviour, it took away that aggression. There's a lot to be said, for those kinds of cultural stimulants that can really change things when I think of counterculture.

Season Butler 1:16:55

Yeah, I think that the 90s drug culture did really foster goodwill within the social.

Alison Jean Baker 1:17:04

Yeah. And it did, then mutate, and monetize, and then it mutated. And I mean, I had a lot of friends in the 90s, who ended up taking heroin. Not intravenously, but they were smoking it. So you ended up having a very positive youthful energy that became very sedate, and very disengaged.

Season Butler 1:17:28

Yeah, of course, and it's important not to ignore the shadow element of that as well, completely. Disclaimer.

Alison Jean Baker 1:17:37

The reason why I'm picking up on it, because it's definitely something I'm thinking about with my writing at the moment, is those moments, when it's an absolute shift. I just remember when I heard 'Fool's Gold' by The Stone Roses, and it was a moment of like, stopping, like there's certain tracks like Goldie's 'Inner City Life' just go, my brain has... it's shifted, because I've heard something in a completely different way. And it's part of a culture that I don't know, I'm now entering into that culture through this song. And I really hope we have a bit of that return because I really know that that - I mean, people are talking about this, that there might be an urgency for people wanting to collectively be together again, in open spaces or in clubs, whatever. And certainly again, in Berlin, where club culture seems really important. It's a culture that is now protected as of cultural significance. Because that's where your ideas come. That's where your ideas, come that cross fertilisation of meeting people, and I think that kind of community, those kinds of subcultures, which then influence culture, I really hope come out again and whether it has to come from music, again spaces, the narcotics even, because they influence and that's not to promote recognise what a -

Season Butler 1:18:57

Kids, consult your doctor before you do drugs.

Alison Jean Baker 1:19:03

But so part of me is really interested in what's going to happen next. And part of me is also a bit wistful for that time before and I'm really aware that when I'm in Berlin, I'll still go clubbing. I'll still go to Zug der Liebe or whatever, when that was going on and I really hope that there's a big cultural shift where it kind of throws away a lot of the - that people don't have their phones so much or whatever it is, I don't know. That's where wonder whether I'm being old fashioned like, "Oh, I remember a time before we had phones, we still able to meet up in a club." That's what I hope to see. I hope to see really inclusive culture shifts, because I think we still even though we'll talk about trying to come together, I still feel we're very in our corners, and we're being told to stick over here and stick over here and I've been waiting for that real cross fertilisation to return and it happens on the dance floor.

Season Butler 1:20:23

I'm really glad that that we got that in, I think that that is a beautiful addition to the conversation so good we didn't miss that out. I kind of had my eye on that question as I skipped it and I was glad you came back round to it.

Alison Jean Baker 1:20:42

But I think certainly that's where the arts live but I think subculture is still viewed as a dangerous word. It's certainly a danger to politics, the idea of an unruly happy mob. How're you going to control them? Because if they're already creating their own world that functions without you and lots of communities do that, whether different stratus of life we have communities that rely on each other and help each other and support each other regardless of the institutions and that's what I would love to see. I'd love to see the return of the threat, the real threat of subculture and it to then also really influence because that's how we start to have change. With no more diseases because this happened in the in the early 90s when AIDS came along. I mean I've lost friends to AIDS because you realise that they would have been influencers and tastemakers and the fact that we're in a time where this has been biased towards the old, it's not taking the youth where the AIDS did. I'm also terrified so I want to be part of that conversation that happens next. That's where I get worried about age. Am I going to be excluded? I want to be in the middle of it. I want to - still, hands up, say I'm Generation X so I'm going to have certain resistance to things - but yeah, that's what I want to still be part of that conversation, to contribute. I think that's that's what any artist wants isn't it really, they want to contribute and to me to not be able to contribute any more would be... that for me is the final death knell is if you can't contribute anymore, when there's too many barriers to you doing that. I think that's why an artist soul collapses. Yeah, I hope that's that's useful I hope that kind of helps.

Season Butler 1:22:59

I think it's super useful and I find your insights so poignant and I've just so enjoyed this conversation.