

Speaker 1:

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Arlene Fleming:

Hello. Welcome to Only Artists from BBC Radio 4, the podcast where two artists talk shop. I'm Arlene Fleming, here to introduce the artists, and then leave them to it. This week, trying to get a serious point across, "Is comedy the best vehicle?"

Helen Cammock:

Hello, I'm artist Helen Cammock. I'm at the National Theatre Rehearsal Studios, and I'm here to meet the playwright, Suhayla El-Bushra. Why am I meeting her? Well, I'm meeting her today, because we worked in a social work setting about 20 years ago, and we haven't really seen each other since. And I've just become more and more aware of the plays that she's been writing, and thinking about some of the interconnects, I guess, and maybe motivations that we both have for making work. So I want to talk to her about that today.

Arlene Fleming:

The artist Helen Cammock meets the dramatist Suhayla El-Bushra.

Helen Cammock:

There she is.

Suhayla El-Bushra:

Hello.

Helen Cammock:

Hello, you?

Arlene Fleming:

Helen Cammock's work explores social history through film, photography, and performance. She won the Max Mara Prize last year, and is nominated for this year's Turner Prize for her film *The Long Note*, which focuses on the rule of women in the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland.

Suhayla El-Bushra has written extensively for TV, including epic episodes of *Hollyoaks* and *Ackley Bridge*. Her plays include *The Arabian Nights* for the Royal Lyceum in Edinburgh. And she's also written for the National Theatre. She's currently adapting the novel *The Long Song*, by Andrea Levy.

Helen Cammock:

We worked together about, I guess, 20 years ago, probably now?

Suhayla El-Bushra:

Yeah. About 20.

Helen Cammock:

Yeah. Both in a social work setting.

Suhayla El-Bushra:

On play schemes. I came to do some play schemes. And then I trained as a teacher and then I stopped teaching. And that was when I decided that I had to do something more creative with my life. I did two years of teaching in a comprehensive school, teaching drama. And I felt very frustrated, so I gave it up, but I taught part-time. I did supply teaching and I started writing, but I wasn't quite sure what I was going to write. I just started writing bits and bobs at home. Then I ended up working for a Pupil Referral Unit part-time, still writing all the way through. And I think I came back to work with you.

Helen Cammock:

Yeah.

Suhayla El-Bushra:

At that point and we ran some youth groups together in the Family Centre, didn't we? And you were always quite creative, from what I remember. You'd always done your music, and you were into photography, I think.

Helen Cammock:

I think maybe even then I hadn't even picked up a camera at that point. I always did kind of much more statutory services work. Working with individual families but then I also had the opportunity to run the great group work programmes that they had at the Family Centre at the time. We used to use disposable cameras and I used those in kind of one-to-one sessions with young people who were trying to process difficult situations that they found themselves in. And then, I stopped singing in bands and playing in bands, the more I took on more responsibility at work. And I had this huge gap, huge gap, in my life. And so, I went back and did an evening class, and then that was it. I was-

Suhayla El-Bushra:

Hooked.

Helen Cammock:

... like, "Right. This is what I need. I need to have a voice. I need to do something in a different way in my life." And went back and did a photography BA. So that was the beginnings for me. So I don't know whether you feel like the work that you did before has some relation to your motivations for writing, but also, whether it impacts on the kinds of work that you make.

Suhayla El-Bushra:

Yes. Yeah, it does. I was completely influenced by the job I had had before, because I had done so much work with young people that I was really keen that I wanted to write for and about young people, especially the sort of young people who don't get a voice, because those were the kind of kids that I was working with. And it was a very hostile time, I feel. It was the early 2000's, and they were getting a lot of bad press, and it was when they had all those ASBOs were kind of out. All the kids that I was working with were being sort of vilified by the media, and sort of being seen as out of control.

So that was a really burning thing, was not just that I wanted to write and tell stories, but I had something quite specific that I felt I had to talk about. And I wanted to show these kids in a different light. And then the first two plays that I wrote were obviously really influenced by the work that I had done with kids in the Pupil Referral Unit, and the kids that I met there. Has it influenced your work?

Helen Cammock:

Yeah. It's funny. I always get asked that question, and I sometimes want to deny it.

Suhayla El-Bushra:

Yeah.

Helen Cammock:

Not in the, I'm denying it, because actually I'm not an artist to be a social worker, if that makes sense.

Suhayla El-Bushra:

Yeah.

Helen Cammock:

But I am an artist who wants to somehow affect some kind of social change and I guess that's who I was before I became a social worker as well, is that I was a person who wanted to affect some kind of social change. So I guess it's just me, that's who I am. But absolutely, in terms of having worked with people who have very little space to speak for themselves in a world that is marginalising them for much of their experience, that is a big motivation for me. When I think about your script writing and my script writing, there's this huge chasm, in terms of the approach and the form of it.

Suhayla El-Bushra:

The form is very different, but I think in terms of what we're saying, it's very similar, isn't it?

Helen Cammock:

Yeah. Exactly. We're having conversations about the fragility of human relationships. We're having conversations about interconnectedness, structural power dynamics that people have to negotiate in different ways. I guess I wanted to then ask you a little bit about comedy, and how humour is kind of the foundation, I suppose, of the dialogues that you are having. And why? Why have you chosen comedy?

Suhayla El-Bushra:

It's funny, because I didn't originally choose comedy at all and I would never have thought of myself as a funny writer. And in fact, my first projects were very serious. Very serious. The first screenplay that I wrote was about two Nigerian girls who'd been trafficked into the UK. And I thought, "I'm going to make very serious points about this." And I wrote this, and it was good, actually, it was fine. And then I wrote a historical screenplay about a political situation in Sudan in the 1880s, and that was also very serious. But I kind of felt like by the time I finished them, they weren't quite me, and they weren't really the sort of things that I would enjoy watching.

And the comedy-ness... I think because I was also writing stuff for young people, and I think it's really hard, you kind of have to make that funny. I think young people are very funny, naturally, and I think they really see the humour in situations. The way the tragedy and the comedy work together. They're really aware of that in the way they present themselves, and the way they behave.

So I guess, when I was writing for young people, I always had quite a light touch, even when you're talking about serious things. Just because that's how they are, and that's how they feel to me, is that they're funny but also they're kind of preoccupied with very weighty, serious things. And then, I

think probably I got more funny, I got more into to using humour as I went on, because when I saw my work on stage in front of an audience it was the funny bits that I saw that those were the moments in which I felt the audience shift, following me wherever I was taking them. And once I'd got them on side with humour, it was much easier to get my point across.

Helen Cammock:

So it's a strategy.

Suhayla El-Bushra:

Yeah. So as a strategy, I kind of felt like, actually this is really good, almost in a quite manipulative sense. It's like, this is a good way of getting people on side.

Helen Cammock:

But also there's pain in humour, isn't there?

Suhayla El-Bushra:

Yeah. That's life.

Helen Cammock:

I didn't see... But yeah, it's life. I didn't see Pigeons, but I read the script the other day and it is funny, but it's also really tragic.

Suhayla El-Bushra:

Yeah.

Helen Cammock:

It's really sad. And there's a lot of, kind of pain, that's happening in and around and between different characters in the play.

Suhayla El-Bushra:

So, Pigeons is about two teenage boys; one is white, and one is from a Muslim background. And it starts with the white one has chased the Muslim boy into the toilets, and he's waiting for him to come out. And there's antagonism between them. But you realise throughout their conversation that they used to be friends, and they have a shared history. You kind of flash back, but you also flash forward so it plays with time, and you see how the white boy was in foster care, and this little boy's family were kind of like a sort of surrogate family to him. So you see how much that family meant to him and you also witness him kind of getting drawn into a far right group. It was about the kind of symbiotic relationship between far right nationalism and Islamic extremism, and how the two feed into each other and make each other grow.

So even though it was a serious subject, and quite a dark one, because he does end up stabbing his friend at the end. It felt like you had to see the places of hope and the places humour within their friendship. So you could really feel for them, I think. But also, there was one scene in it, where they're mucking about in the playground with this girl, and then it ends up going quite dark, and something really awful happens. And that's the thing that ruins their friendship. What I learned from that, watching it on stage, is because it was quite funny, and it was rude was seeing at which point people stopped

laughing as it grew more serious, and how the laughter tailed off. Because some people stopped, and were like, "Oh, this is getting a bit dark." And then there'd always be like one person who just carried on laughing, really inappropriately and I was like, "It's really interesting to see-

Helen Cammock:

There always is, though right?

Suhayla El-Bushra:

... how that kind of just took whole old of them, and changed them." But, you spend so long working on a play or a screenplay, and you do so many draughts. And actually, if you are looking at serious things, you'd end up destroying yourself. I wouldn't be able to cope if I just kept on and on at the same really serious story all the time, and there was nothing playful in it, and no joy to be found in it for me then I would find that very difficult and very intense, to work with-

Helen Cammock:

So it's a strategy for you, as a writer, but also for your audiences.

Suhayla El-Bushra:

Because I think if it's too relentless, then people switch off.

Helen Cammock:

I was thinking that that's probably why I use song.

Suhayla El-Bushra:

Yes.

Helen Cammock:

Not exactly in the same way, but for me song is about... It's a different register of the voice, and that means that somebody who's listening to something that's very difficult maybe that's being said, it's a different way to receive it. I think you receive it on, I would say, a much more emotional level.

Suhayla El-Bushra:

Yes.

Helen Cammock:

And sometimes, we are easier to open. It can move you in a different way, and therefore enable you to think about it and listen to it in a different way.

Suhayla El-Bushra:

And there's a beauty to it, I think. And I think in a way to be able to appreciate the beauty of something that's painful means that it's much easier to kind of accept it, and come to terms with it in a way, isn't it? So I think like in your shorts, the way that when music comes in, it kind of encapsulates everything that you are saying. And it's really, really powerful. Singing activates. I think it can be political, I think it can be social, I think it can be emotional, I think it can be nurturing. And sometimes, I'm singing poems, or

sometimes I'm actually singing a song. So it moves from, for example, one of the performances begins with an old Black American spiritual, and then it moves into a musical rendition of a Christina Rossetti poem. And it's the kind of juxtaposition of different sounds that we identify. So immediately, we are identifying different geographies, and we are identifying different periods of time and then we're identifying different experiences, as well.

(singing)

I went to Italy on a kind of six-month residency for the Max Mara Prize last year and I had some classical singing lessons. I've never had singing lessons before in my life. And I went in, and the singing teacher sat behind the piano as classical singing teachers do, and said, "Right, sing me something." So I did. And she was like, "Right. Okay. You've got a beautiful tone. You've got musicality." But she said, "You're singing all wrong. We're going to have to start from the beginning." And it was like my heart sank. But actually, what it's meant, is that I have found a slightly different voice inside of me, and my body became a conduit for a completely different sound. And I felt like I was touching this voice that came from the 17th century.

(singing).

I sat with a music teacher, and we were messing about and she sped up the cords underneath this aria. And we could sing Hit the Road, Jack over the top of it, because basically it was like a 12 bar blues. So it's this kind of unveiling of something that I felt that I heard, but I didn't understand. And so, then I did a duet with a jazz trumpeter, which was for me, as an experience was incredible. But actually I think also, for a listener, it was interesting to see me for the performance in Italy, in a green boiler suit. We all wore work wear boiler suits, singing this 17th-century aria. So I want to push the form of what the song and the sound can do.

(singing)

Helen Cammock:

What about your mixed heritage? Because that's something that we both share.

Suhayla El-Bushra:

Yeah.

Helen Cammock:

Do you feel it has impacted on how you develop characters for example, or how you think about storytelling?

Suhayla El-Bushra:

Yeah. I mean, it's massive. It's a huge part of who I am as a writer. Firstly, my experience as somebody who is mixed heritage, but also somebody who came to England when I was 10. Felt very English growing up Sudan, but then came to London and then suddenly didn't feel English and felt Sudanese. And that at the awareness of those two different cultures was very intense at that age and trying to kind of navigate and find a place in that. I mean, it was a great thing to have, but it's also quite a traumatic thing to have. And I think I probably quite often come back to that theme of either two different cultures trying to live together or somebody trying to kind of get two very different sides of themselves to kind of come to terms with that.

So I think like psychologically, I probably am drawn to that in itself, but also I think when I was growing up, I didn't have... There was nothing on television. There was nothing that reflected my life

back at me and there were depictions of Muslims on TV now and again, you know in EastEnders or Grange Hill where somebody would have an arranged marriage and I was like, these are none of the people that I know, none of the people that I've grown up with. And I can just remember whenever something did along that felt like it was remotely or any relation to my experience, it was so important and I really latched onto it hugely. So like I think Hanif Kureishi wrote The Buddha of Suburbia and I read that when I was a teenager and I was just like, "Oh my, God. There's someone out there who I can relate to."

And that was just so important to me. And I think that's kind of what has been a really big driving force. I have to... I want to tell these stories because I want people who were like me growing up in this country to see themselves reflected back and I want them to have what I didn't have actually.

Helen Cammock:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). And that's also the same for me. I think the invisibility of ourselves on screen has been a massive motivator for me as well. And that the stories that we hear they're not full or complex or complicated stories or nuanced stories, they are often very two dimensional stories and they are riddled with prejudice and realising that really quite a young age, same as you, that I wanted that to be different and I wanted to read about myself and I wanted to see myself and it just wasn't going to happen unless-

Suhayla El-Bushra:

Unless you did it, unless you made it yourself. Yeah.

Helen Cammock:

Yeah. There are some stories as well that I'm really aware of that are very particular to living in and being born into families where different cultures come together and what happens when they collide. I mean, my dad was so he was born in Cuba, but his family were Jamaican. They were forced to leave Cuba at a certain moment and then he left Jamaica when he was 18 and came to this country and he struggled a lot. He became a teacher and then he was a magistrate and he was really passionate about fighting for people's rights. He was a very difficult man as well. And my mom was a kind of white British, but her heritage is all Irish. So she kind of brought another history that she didn't really explore until she kind of got older. And so her heritage kind of became quite silenced in our family, interestingly.

And I think as we kind of navigated the world, like my dad I'd loved and my mom loved kind of walking in the country and mountain climbing and those kinds of things. And we were always the only black family doing it but then we became... So as people externally receive you as black that became my identity. So I became black British in my mind. That was and who is who I am. And I think increasingly I would like to start thinking a little bit more about my mom's heritage and my Irish heritage and in a way that's on my terms rather than it being about how I'm perceived.

Suhayla El-Bushra:

Do you find it's ever a hindrance, the heritage in the way that you are seen as an artist? Do people make assumptions about you or...

Helen Cammock:

Oh, all the time. All the time. I mean, people make assumptions in life, don't they? But there's this idea that if you are making work about life or your life, you are just making work about race or you are just

making work about gender if you are kind of writing things of about what you know which is what many people do. But whenever we do it, the race is seen whenever somebody who's white does it the race is not seen. So this idea that race is only race if you're non-white.

So that's been a challenge I think, but I also, you know, I want to be who I am and who I am is a black woman. And so when I make work, I make work with that as my experience and so I'm very happy to make the work that I make. And if I'm not making work about my own experience, then I'm still a black woman. And so those kinds of conversations and thoughts and ideas and intersections will always come into the work that I make.

Suhayla El-Bushra:

I guess it's what, for me, when it becomes a problem is when people take it and that's all that they see.

Helen Cammock:

Yes.

Suhayla El-Bushra:

It's the same as coming from a social worker or a teaching background, you know, we're not just here to do because we've got something worthy to say, it's like, we are now artists who've been doing this for a long time. And it's about the quality of the work and being treated as an artist and not as somebody who's just a representative and therefore, oh, well done, forgetting your little story across, you know, it's that you need. And I think when you are seen as a mouthpiece or you are seen as a representative from that particular diverse group, sometimes people impose that on me, or there's an expectation that I'll want to write a certain thing because it's about a certain thing.

Helen Cammock:

Yes. I often struggle to get people to talk about the form of my work. So they want to talk about the content. Whether it's kind of looking at historical colonial stories or histories, or whether it's looking at something more contemporary and often I have to really fight or push to talk about what I'm doing as a kind of artist practise. So to look at the idea of collaging, to think about voice, to look at how I try to fold and unfold the frame, all of those things.

Suhayla El-Bushra:

Do you feel like you need to find a new language, I guess? Because you've got different voices that we don't normally hear from. Do you feel like it important for you to formally challenge yourself? I guess is what I'm... If that makes sense.

Helen Cammock:

Yes, it does. We create new meaning when we play around with authorship. So in one of the films I'm speaking Enoch Powell's Rivers of Blood speech, and the fact that as a black woman I'm reading it, shift the meaning of that speech completely for me. And it's about this relationship, the impact on my family. I don't speak about that but the shot is of my dad's bed in his house where he lives. So this idea of the domestic and the impact that a speech like that has, if I just had the recording of Enoch Powell speaking it, that would be a very, very different. The meaning would be different and everyone would be, "Okay, I recognise that voice, or I recognise that speech."



But when I read it, you hear a woman reading it and you know from the rest of the film that I'm talking about this relationship with my father and what he did, and when he found things very difficult in 1968, and the Rivers of Blood speech happened, he was teaching in Wolverhampton. And so you find these things, they kind of unravel, and that's the new language that I hope I'm finding is a kind of unravelling. Me trying to say what I want to say, but I'm working with this chorus of other voices.

Suhayla El-Bushra:

It's like a sort of collage.

Helen Cammock:

Yeah, exactly.

Suhayla El-Bushra:

And then in The Long Note, I thought it was really interesting how you had kind of talking heads, interviews with people, but then you also had, were they transcripts?

Helen Cammock:

Yeah.

Suhayla El-Bushra:

That you were reading yourself in your voice. And I wanted to ask you about that. What you thinking was behind the way that you chose to show those different voices?

Helen Cammock:

I guess this time it was a commission to make a film about the experience of women in Northern Ireland in the civil rights movement. And that wasn't my story and I had already been thinking about, "Am I the right person to make the film?" And I had lots of conversations with the curator and she was absolutely adamant that she wanted somebody from the outside of the story to come and work with people, ask questions, do some research. And so those voices had to be the lead voices for the film, but there were some women, particularly two older women who'd worked in the shirt factories who thought their lives were so boring and uninteresting and pointless in many ways. And then the more we talked, they realised that their lives were not pointless. And that there was some worth in what they had to say, but they were too shy and too kind of reticent, I suppose, to share their stories. They didn't want their voices to be heard.

So then I thought, okay, well this is a strategy that I can use to bring myself in. And they was something about my English voice telling their story that placed me as the artist in it, but also cited England in that conflict and in the relationships that were happening between people in that moment.

We heard the shooting and thought it was fireworks. And then I found myself running and I was never so terrified. I stepped over my cousin, dead. I'd never seen anything like this before.

Suhayla El-Bushra:

It was so powerful, I thought. I think you're right. I think in a way to try and remove yourself completely is dishonest. Isn't it? You're kind of saying, "Well, I didn't have anything to do with this and it just happened and that's a lie." And I think there's some documentary makers who make themselves so invisible or, you know even like verbatim theatre makers who take people's conversations and put them

into a piece. And it's like, but you are still the architect of this thing and you are still shaping it. So it feels dishonest to say, I'm not here, you know ignore me.

Helen Cammock:

And I mean, it's more interesting I think if you can cite yourself somehow.

Suhayla El-Bushra:

Yeah. You have to know, and people should know.

Helen Cammock:

And there's another little section in the film where it's raining because it rains a lot in Dublin and I'm cleaning the lens of the camera. And I left that in because I wanted the viewer to see the black body who was cleaning the screen. And so they would hear the English accent and they would see the black body and they would start to make sense of who the maker was. So in terms of voices, how is it to adapt a work rather than to write it?

Suhayla El-Bushra:

To write your own?

Helen Cammock:

So there's something about if you're writing your own, it really is your voice. And then if you are asked to adapt something, do you feel compromised?

Suhayla El-Bushra:

I don't feel compromised. And up until the last thing that I adapted, I ended up feeling that they were mine actually. So when I adapted *The Suicide*, which was a Russian play from the 1920s, I kept the framework of that but I definitely put that in a very modern London context. I've just adapted a novel by Andrea Levy called *The Long Song*, which is set against the last days of slavery in Jamaica. I mean, I've loved it for a long time it's been one of my favourite books. But for me, the connection that I have with it is that it's about the relationship between the oppressors and the oppressed, the slave owners and the people who worked on the plantation. But it's very human, it's very personal. All of the characters are flawed. The black characters are not victims, they are normal human beings. And it's about those moments where people who are thrown together in these awful systems find relationships and the relationships they make.

And they're all tied up with power obviously, but coming from a background, I guess, where my dad was educated by the British in Sudan and then came over here and met my mom. I'm really interested in where normal people actually connect and collide. I think other times that I've adapted stuff it's almost been like I'm sort of just rifling through a suitcase and seeing what I want to take. This is more looking after something, but it's also about where I intersect with that story. Because I think like somebody who's half Sudanese, half English, I'm kind of born out of that relationship.

Helen Cammock:

So one of the other things I wanted to ask you was about how you develop characters and maybe when you develop characters as well, whether the characters come before the idea or the concept or even the

story that you might have in mind or whether they come when the story or the concept or the idea is already there?

Suhayla El-Bushra:

Oh, that's interesting. They come very early. They're the first thing that I work on definitely. I might just have an idea of something that I want to look at or have a very quick beginning, middle and end of a story that I want to tell, but then I will go in with the characters and that's where most of the initial work happens is me with the characters. And I'll probably do a lot of writing that's just almost like stream of consciousness actually. I might write as that person and then I'll probably put them into scenes and into moments perhaps, or I might write somebody else's point of view talking about them, but I'll do a lot of work around them before I properly flesh out the story, because I find that actually, when I really dig into who they are, the story comes out of that.

Helen Cammock:

Yes. And how do the characters come? Where do they come from?

Suhayla El-Bushra:

Where do they come from? Where do they come? It's a good question. I think it kind of borrow little snippets here and there from people that you've met or people that you've seen. They're never based on one person, but definitely there's details, aren't there? I think the little details that make people human you kind of borrow from all over the place really. And I think probably they're more me than I would initially think. They're always yourself, I think. And it's really funny because people often come and watch your work and they look for themselves. Sometimes your friends will go, was that? Bet that was me. Was that based on me? And actually most of the time I think they probably are me just you know a part of myself. I think they have to be don't they?

Helen Cammock:

Yes.

Arlene Fleming:

Only Artists. Go on, grab another slice there's plenty more on BBC Sounds.