

APT Conversation #1 With Tsholo Khalema & Jan Jennings

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SPEAKERS

Jan, Tsholo

Tsholo 00:06

Hello, Good day everybody. My name is Tsholo Khalema, and I am an actor, director and visual artist currently in Tkaronto, Treaty 13. And I make life and art here and so very happy to do so. I'm going to be having conversations with one artists on several different topics. This has been commissioned by Generator, APT Conversation Project, as we like to say. And I'm so honored to engage in a few conversation - eye opening conversation with this amazing artist that you're about to meet. All right, let's get to it. Hello.

Jan 01:02

Hi.

Tsholo 01:03

How you doing?

Jan 01:05

I'm good.

Tsholo 01:07

Introduce yourself. Who are you?

Jan 01:10

Who am I not? I'm kidding. My name is Jan. And I am a poet. I am a singer. I am a songwriter. I rap. I create really dope jewelry for my small business Mango Lily, and more recently, which is how we are here together right now, I am a playwright. And so it's been years and years of other arts. And I've decided to dip my my Doc Marten boot into the pool of theatre. And so here I am.

Tsholo 01:48

Wonderful. I have my coffee. Ready. Do you have a beverage?

Jan 01:53

I do. Currently I have some hot chocolate with some marshmallows.

Tsholo 01:56

Wow. Wow.

Jan 01:57

Keep it warm.

Tsholo 01:59

Yes, of course.

Jan 02:01

You know, weather keeps changing.

Tsholo 02:02

Of course. Right? Today is October 3. And you know, it's getting a little bit chilly. You know, October -

Jan 02:13

- and hot sometimes. It's really strange right now.

Tsholo 02:15

It is very strange actually. You're absolutely right. It can't make up its mind.

Jan 02:21

Can we though?

Tsholo 02:23

That's so true, yo. So I wanted today to talk about digital creation and production.

Jan 02:30

Okay.

Tsholo 02:30

And like, what that is and what that looks like. And, you know, we just chat freely. Like we don't, you know, we don't really have - we just gotta like, chat about about what that means, especially when it comes to theatre. So for you, have you had any experiences with digital productions, digital creation and production?

Jan 02:56

Well, this is my first year as a playwright in theatre. And so I was a part of a program, Hot House Crossing with Cahoots Theatre. And so, like, just July, actually, I had my first reading and you know,

we're in the panini press. And so that was online. And we had to do our reading over Zoom, and recorded lots of stops and starts. And it was, sometimes it was a bit difficult because you couldn't see somebody's action because some of the scripts had like gestures, and you couldn't see it because of the time lag. And so you had to like, do it again. And then it's like, okay, we're running out of time. Let's move on to the next one. And I was like, oh, so it was a very unique experience. We had our pre-recorded reading on YouTube. And then we had our talkback session on Zoom again. And so my first experience ever was a digital production and digital creation. And I was like, Okay,

Tsholo 04:05

This is really cool. Like, we live in a digital world already, especially since the - you call it the panini press, which I love.

Jan 04:13

Yeah. Trying to make it sound cute.

Tsholo 04:15

You know, panini press, it is cute. Um, so like, coming from the panini press, and being here in 2020. We had to sort of find ways to connect, you know, and so the digital world was a way for us, you know, with the Zoom, and all of that, like just video-calling, period. And even Google updated their, their, you know, Google video thing, like it made it easier to do that. And I found it really cool. You know, there was more options, but people got tired of the screen. You know, and so like, there's like, good, good things about digital creation. And then there's some people that look at it as like, no like it's definitely not the same, of course, it's never going to be the same as live theatre. But I don't know, I really liked digital productions and digital creations myself.

Jan 05:11

Well, I know for me my whole playwriting unit was online, right. And I live with ADHD. And so sometimes, it was a bit hard to focus, right? Just because you're staring at a screen the whole time, I'd have to get up and walk around, but I did express my accessibility needs. I do believe, um, before I even considered doing the program. Because it's a lot to stare at the screen. You know, but I don't know, like, how many opportunities I would have gotten, if some of them weren't digital. Because I am a parent and in the pandemic it's very unpredictable to know what's happening, in terms of the school system, and things like that. So having things online kind of did help, you know, because you could get childcare or something and be in front of your computer. And I think that's one thing about the digital creation, even though it was online, the playwriting was so helpful in the fact that they did offer childcare costs. So that kind of took care of my child while I was doing this. And so it made me able to, like, unwind and have something - one less thing to worry about, while trying to be in this whole new world! But digitally, like I have, you know, it's just now that the world is opening up, and I've gone to see my first play in person, but like, yeah, digital is kind of like, all I know,

Tsholo 06:56

Right, of theatre right now. Yeah. Yeah, that's cool. Like, I think I've sort of, I've taught digitally, like, I've done workshops digitally, as well. And I found that really difficult. I did a workshop once with six participants from India, and six participants from Canada, all over Canada. And I love that because, you

know, there was a time difference. Obviously, in India and Canada, the time difference is like, holy smoly, like literally night and day, right. And then you had, I had some folks in BC, that was three hours away from, you know, the area that I was in, and so like, thankfully, people were really up to getting up whatever hours to come together to create. So that was really interesting. And then we ended up having like a cabaret style, like cabaret where people had to, we had a theme. And then people performed individual acts that they created themselves. And I thought that was like, such a cool, cool thing to do. And we never would have been able to do it as cheaply in person, you know, can you imagine flying everybody in one place? And making sure - like that's - and making sure you house everybody, and feed everybody. You know, the hardest thing that we had to like, you know, work with is the internet glitches, right, that you experience, like, Did you experience any type of internet glitches while you were doing your reading? And like, was that frustrating? Or not? How did that work?

Jan 08:35

I think mainly, it was the time lag. Because you think you're seeing something and they did it, maybe a second or a minute before - Or it's just like really delay. Like I was saying, like, sometimes it's like, Okay, we have to take what we have right now, because we have to do the next one. And, but I will say that just like how you were talking about like, the different geographical locations. Digital creation was powerful for that to connect people from so many other places. Like, I had a poetry performance online, which was interesting. And like, I'm like, am I nervous about this? I'm home. I don't know, am I nervous? Um, who do I know in this Zoom Room? I'm just gonna put the chat screen over everybody else and watch that person while they perform, because I guess I have nerves being in my house before me in a grid. So it was a lot to adapt to as a performer and even as an art - arts facilitator because I was doing that as well. Finding ways to progress the conversation along - in person, you can kind of - People can kind of read body language and know that it's time to kind of wrap it up. But online, it's just like, how do you do that without it being awkward and stopping and starting? And things like that. So it's like, Okay, one last question. And we're gonna move on. And so it's just like, wow, it was, it was wild. It still is wild, because there's still many things that are still being done online. Like I'm, I'm in a playwriting unit - another one right now. And it's online, too. You know. And I think it's cool. Because sometimes, you may not get to have certain opportunities because of location. But the best location is home. And so you get to meet all these people. Like some people, I think even one person is like, I can't remember where they are. If it is Vancouver somewhere, but like, basically, they tell us, they're going back to bed when they're done. I can't remember where they are. So I don't really know all my Canadian geography. I'm not like a Canadian person. But like, it was interesting. It's like, Okay, have a good nap. And then it's like, I'm gonna go off and go do something for my day. And you know, so it's just, it's just pretty cool that it can connect people who wouldn't have had a chance to connect because of location. And you did mention the cabaret, which is pretty exciting to have so many different people from different places, all coming together to create art. And I think that's the beauty of the digital thing. And but then sometimes, there can also be lack of connection, because you can't actually be in person with people. But I feel like every artist has been doing the best that they can. And honestly, I can say that I'm proud of all of us, because it's been a lot to adapt to.

Tsholo 12:07

Right. Yeah. It has, like in terms of, of like, the digital world. Yeah. Um, yeah, for sure. Like, digitally. It's, I feel like digital creation is pretty cool. Because it also creates relaxed performance, because you're at

home, right? And so that is so cool. Because, you know, you get to be in your pajamas and enjoy theatre sometimes. Like I know, during the pandemic, there were some Soulpepper shows or some other theatres, a lot of lot of smaller companies that were creating online content. And I was like, This is so cool. I can still access - especially as a shy person, you know what I'm saying?

Jan 12:53

You're shy?

Tsholo 12:53

Like, sometimes, Yeah, I have, you know, I have to warm up to situations and places. And also, like, money wise, it's cheaper. It's cheaper to, to go to digital to do digital productions. You know, I can't always, as an artist, I can't always afford to go to shows. Yeah, and also the Fringe. I, you know, like, I did a Fringe show, just recently in January, you know, and so it's like, yeah, like, there's so much access to that, you know, and the comfortability of the space is really, really interesting. Of course, nothing can replace live theatre and being around people. But right now, it's even, it's difficult still, because when you do go to theatre, you still have to be, you know, sitting apart and like, also masks, you know, people find it really difficult to be breathing behind masks, and also to keep yourself safe and your family safe. Like, I really am a homebody. So like being at home and still being able to access shows that I normally would not afford, first of all, and you know, and also like to get up and leave my house. Like when I could be in my pajamas. Like, to me that is the ultimate like, that is the high fashion ultimate way of what like, accessibility - like not accessibility. What do you call it? Like? When you're comfortable, like what do you call it? I - now I forgot.

Jan 12:55

I don't know. I would say coziness, maybe. But like, Yeah, high fashion is not even having to get dressed.

Tsholo 14:31

Yeah. Relaxed performance is what I'm trying to get at. Yeah, yeah, that's the word.

Jan 14:36

Even Bad Hats Theatre had a lot of programming during March Break and like my daughter got to watch Alice In Wonderland in the comfort of her living room, you know, and I just, and that was relaxed for her and she was on the couch. We got all the snacks and there's like, we're gonna eat popcorn for dinner, and all this stuff, and she just - she was just mesmerized, you know. And maybe if it was in person, it would have been like, Oh, I got to use the washroom we might miss something. But like, I could pause it! I got to pause it! Excuse me, you have something to do? Okay, do that quickly and come back and watch the show. So there was that awesomeness, and even, they had this thing for like the senses. And so they were teaching the kids about sight and smell by like, like, almost like little plays, that were, some were animated and so we're like, you know, actual productions. And it was just so cool all the digital content that was created for the children, during this time. You know, and I know, you talked about the Fringe, and everything, and I got to watch your show. And I got to have my own little avatar.

Tsholo 15:49

That was cool!

Jan 15:50

Like, it was amazing.

Tsholo 15:51

Yo that Fringe show was so amazing!

Jan 15:54

Honestly, I've never been part of an immersive experience where I get to be interactive with a cast in real time. And I just want to say you did a real good job, by the way -

Tsholo 16:05

Thank you so much.

Jan 16:06

But like, you know, I gotta have, changed my hair color. It was either like, blue or silver, and I was present, and I was in the chat. And I was like, rooting for people. And it was like, it was just really awesome. And we wouldn't have gotten to experience that kind of Fringe experience had

Tsholo 16:28

had not The Complex -

Jan 16:30

Oh, yeah, The Complex, that's what it was called -

Tsholo 16:32

The show was called The Complex. And it was really amazingly put together by the team. And I was just so like, so impressed with how everything was and how, like, how interactive everything was, you know what I'm saying? And that was like the closest I've ever been to a, what an audience would be being in a, you know, what I'm saying?

Jan 16:56

A digital world!

Tsholo 16:56

A digital world, because you got to interact with the audience and things. So I feel like that is - that that's totally another way of doing it. You know?

Jan 17:06

I feel like the most interesting part about that show that you were in is that you all had to make your own like sets and you had to, like, design your own costumes, you you all were the set designers. You were, you know, costume designers, everything - lighting. Oh my goodness, I was just like, and it all

flowed, and I'm like, like I'm in how many people's houses right now? Honestly, looking into these things, but you, you didn't even feel that it just felt like they were on their little sets.

Tsholo 17:44

Yeah, it was a coolest.

Jan 17:46

Oh, I wish I could see it again.

Tsholo 17:48

See that was like, the possibilities are so endless with digital productions, with digital creations. They're so endless, like, there's so much you could do. And once a show has been recorded, let's say, that show can be commissioned by another theatre company. Right? And it's cheaper to do it that way. Because they can also have a digital production. If your theatre is not accessible, let's say, right, in terms of like having elevators and things like that. If you offer a digital version for certain things, that is so awesome, because I feel like it would really help other people to at least have an opportunity to still experience theatre while your theatre company figures out a way to be more accessible and finds funding, right? But in the meantime, people are not missing out on certain things right? And also like with with digital when it comes to like, like ASL interpretation and things like that, it's easier as well to put it on screen put it on the side and things like that. There's just so much. I learned so much when I was directing 11:11 produced by Theatre Passe Muraille, I was so thrilled because they showed me so many different possibilities of how we can make even digital work accessible to the public, to everyone, you know, and I feel like that's important you know besides you know the fact that there's comfortability and being at home and things like that there's the also the comfortability of knowing that it can reach many different people, that - you've said it earlier - that otherwise would never have had an opportunity to you know, to be in digital - And also, I got to like, do like a bird - I've always wanted to like do I love film, you know, so I want to include all of that. And it was like a merge of like film and theatre to me because I was like, from the beginning, I was like, I want a bird eyes view. I want people to see it from the top. And to me, that piece of theatre is classic. You know, it was a classic piece of theatre, and we have to start recognizing certain types of genres. And I feel like there is an amazing genre within digital creation, in digital productions, where people can just - there should be an award category for digital productions. I feel like there's just so much we could do when we're creating theatre, and we're still putting it on a digital platform, because it can reach many different people, you know, and those people have a right to vote whether a show is awesome or not, you know, like, or whether it touched them or not, I should say, right? Um, yeah, there's just so many possibilities.

Jan 20:42

And also, even with like panel discussions, within theatre, I went to like a festival at Canadian Stage. And some of the speakers were really, really far away. But like they, they were a part of the panel. And it was cool. They had a screen with all of them on it. And we got to ask them questions. And had there had not been that, that access to the digital, who knows if you'd ever have gone to speak to these people? Maybe a webinar or something. But we were still in person, and they were a part of it. You know, and that was pretty cool as well. And so also, a whole bunch of speakers who may not connect otherwise got to interact with each other, through digital space, as well. And so it's just like, I find that

there's a lot of hybrid models happening with things, and I don't know if things will ever go back to how they used to be, I feel like digital is going to be a very big part of how things are done in the arts now. You know, and I think it's important, because when art is created, like, it inspires and motivates it, it troubles even. But we need art to keep the conversations going. And so whatever way we have to do that to keep it happening, it has to happen, because art is so powerful, you know, especially performance art, like theatre. Definitely something that no matter what happens, no matter if there's a crisis or anything, it's important that stories keep getting told. And so I really feel like digital creation and production really helped us in a time where we didn't know what was going on in the world, but we still had our art.

Tsholo 22:36

Precisely. And, you know, like, I know, we're talking about just digital productions in a certain way. But I just had a preview yesterday with The First Stone -

Jan 22:50

Okay! Wow, congrats -

Tsholo 22:50

- and and I feel like it was really important of what they did they used, they also use some digital things, right. And I know we're talking about a different way of, of digital productions and things, but I thought it was really smart. And what they're doing is like, you know, making sure that there are words on the screen on the set, making sure that one of the characters is also - does ASL, ASL. It's tough for other people to understand so it's always there. So it's like, I know that there are theatres, like New Harlem Production, like, yeah, that are really doing work, like that are really also finding ways to to be accessible. And still, like, I feel like you can still use digital tricks in order for, for other people to be - to reach other people in that sense, right? So yeah, it's not a digital production, per se. But it's a production where it's, I feel like it's, it's really the tools that they're using right now, are really vital to reaching audiences as well, that can still come to the theatre and still be able to experience the production as well. You know?

Jan 24:11

I have a question for you as somebody who's been in theatre a very long time. And I'm like, very new. I had mentioned that I did a digital reading. And I know that I actually watched some other readings online too. But before the pandemic, how are readings staged? Were they, in person, people would come and watch them? Or was it also online?

Tsholo 24:37

Yeah, you would have nights of like, people would come and do readings. I think readings became even a little bit more public because of the whole digital aspect to them, I think, because I started seeing more readings, but readings were, people just go go have a night of reading. I remember, one of my first experiences here in Toronto, with a reading was going to Obsidian Theatre. They had the playwright unit, it would have - they would hire actors. One time, I was one of the actors that they hired to, to participate in the reading, and they would have all of these plays. That was such a special time, you know, where you would have a gathering of mostly Black audience. Back then we didn't have

anything like Blackout Nights. Like for 11:11, we had a Blackout Night digitally. But I know there are other -

Jan 25:33

Oh cool!

Tsholo 25:33

Yeah, I know, there are other places that have had the opportunities of having Blackout Nights live. But yeah, it was kind of cool. Because you would have these nights where once a year, you would hear Black writers with Black people characters mostly. And you would have a mostly Black audience come in. And it would be a night of hearing about Blackness. And I thought that was such a cool concept that was happening then. And you would have readings, not just Black readings, but you would have readings all over, of new works, you know, things like that. Or even old work, sometimes people would just have readings. There's a, there's a community event that I'm still really - it frightened me in many different ways. And maybe we could talk about that at a later time. But it was a cold reading series. The idea of cold reads scare the hell out of me, right. But that idea of also doing cold reads where you would have people come in and sign up and then they would like be placed in a character, and then you would all have an audience there. And everybody would be reading whatever part they were assigned, is also a really cool, cool idea. I just don't like the idea of cold reads. Because, you know, not everybody can pick up the words right off the page. People have different - differently - they're diverse in the way they learn. People are neurodiverse. And I feel like those kinds of things really do block other people from participating. You know what I'm saying? Like, you know, people would send you like Shakespeare script, like, a half an hour before a thing and you're like, No, I don't want to get like a big ass character with speeches where I'm like, making mistakes, and feeling kind of like vulnerable, you know? And so, yeah, I mean, to answer your question, yes. Yeah, yeah. Thank you so much. I think we'll just keep it there. This has been a really cool conversation.

Jan 27:44

Yeah, I enjoyed it.

Tsholo 27:45

Yeah, um, just for the heck of it, where can people find you?

Jan 27:50

If you're looking for me you can go on Instagram and find me at I am J River - and it's not j-a-y, it's just j and it's just - I don't know if there's an alternate way to spell river but yeah, it's just river, you know, I am J River at Instagram. That's where I do all my shenanigans.

Tsholo 28:07

Amazing. Thank you so much for joining me on this conversation.

Jan 28:11

My pleasure. Thank you for having me. This was really fun.

Tsholo 28:14

It's been my pleasure. And we will talk next time.

Jan 28:16

Yeah, for sure!

Tsholo 28:17

We gotta plan for the next conversation. Awesome.

Jan 28:21

Take care.

Tsholo 28:22

Bye bye.