

In Conversation: Desiree Burch and Selina Thompson

British theatremaker Selina Thompson and American comic and theatremaker Desiree Burch both address racism and their experiences as women of colour in their work. We brought them together to talk about *salt.*, Thompson's account of her journey retracing the Transatlantic slave trade; *Unf*ckable*, Burch's standup show about, among other things, her past as a professional dominatrix, and the thorny issue of race at the Fringe.



Left: Selina Thompson. Right: Desiree Burch

Desiree Burch: What should I know about your show?

Selina Thompson: Last year I travelled to Antwerp in Belgium where I got on a cargo ship which took me to Ghana. Then I flew to Kingston in Jamaica, then headed across to Wilmington in North Carolina and boarded a second freighter across the Atlantic to Antwerp. I was retracing one of the routes of the transatlantic slave triangle and the show is the story of that journey. I describe it as a show that is looking at the afterlife of slavery and colonialism but also it's like this deeply personal coming of age, me dealing with a lot of grief and anger, and trying to place Europe back into the transatlantic slave triangle.

DB: Because they love trying to take themselves out of that shit.

ST: They really do. And I was really angry about that. Tell me about your show and how you got to it – because I think the one before was *Tar Baby*?

DB: That was two years ago and that was very much in line with what you're doing with *salt*. It was about slavery and racism in America. And capitalism ultimately. A lot of that show was about the anger and the shame that was implicit in things and my tracing things back to capitalism and depersonalising that shame. I was curious about what compelled you to take this particular journey – what sort of life events or what the idea was. Only because I found working

on *Tar Baby* very healing in a way that I hadn't anticipated when I started out doing the show.

ST: *salt.* for me, even though it was painful and it was difficult, it came from a really deep place inside myself. There was a real need to grieve, to be like, 'I'm not carrying this on my own any more'.

DB: And when is there time to mourn this thing?

ST: The last time I was up here for three weeks was 2014 and there was the headfuck for me of looking at my phone and seeing Ferguson and then I would look around and, you know what the Fringe is like, it's this massive bubble. And I felt like I was stood in the middle of these rooms screaming and that no one could hear me. And I was like, fuck it, you're going to hear me. What can I do that is big enough? How I can take up the space that I feel these issues need to take up? And how can I stop you guys from going, 'It's over there, it's anywhere but here'?

DB: We need to do these shows in rep together. Everything you're saying – it's so nice to hear that resonated with another human being. Even though you do the show and you get the validation of audience members speaking to you about those things, to hear another black woman in a different part of the world being like, 'I feel like I'm screaming and nobody can hear me', that's even a phrase that I've uttered in that show. It feels like being heard



Credit: Kai Collock

... on diaspora

ST: A lot of *salt*. is to do with notions of home and diaspora. This idea of tracing back ancestry—looking back to where you belong and where it places you in the world—is really loaded for me in lots of different ways. But I think it's like that for everybody. Once anybody sits down and starts pulling that thread, it's fucked up. And I think it's a specific brand of fucked up if you're descended from people who were enslaved and people who lived in colonised countries and on occupied land. But I think as climate change exacerbates and moving around the world becomes simultaneously easier and harder, I think we're going to see more and more of that notion of home fragmenting and breaking and making less and less sense.

DB: I've always been curious how black British people feel about their lineage. That thing of, 'My parents are from Nigeria, first generation, I know about my family, I go there and visit'. That doesn't exist for most black Americans for sure, because, obviously... Personally my family don't like to talk about stuff. The records dissipate so you just feel like this sort of sui generis being that's got some roots but not really. Going back into that does have a profound effect on your sense of place or self. Context is important to understanding a word or a human, so not having that does facilitate a lot of anger, shame.

... on humour

ST: I'm going to keep it really real: I'm looking for work from women of colour: that's what I'm here to see and I'm especially looking for standup because my show is quite heavy and I really need to laugh.

DB: Going through that every single day is a larger task than anybody realises.

ST: I wanted to ask you about standup as a form and why standup is the medium for this show?

DB: Humour is a way that people will accept the unacceptable; even in *Tar Baby* there was a lot of humour. That's why humour is such a huge thing in marginalised communities, because at a certain point things get so dark that you just laugh at the absurdity of it. There's guilt and other feelings that they would never otherwise approach without being guided or coaxed, and this is a way to get them there quickly. So that's why I tend to like it as a form, outside of the fact that humour's always been a coping mechanism for me, so it's something that I've become pretty good at.

... on criticism

ST: I wanted to ask about Edinburgh as a woman of colour – about how you find criticism here.

DB: Obviously it's a very white environment. The people who are bringing stuff and the people critiquing it. There's some good critique that happens here, in terms of intelligent people who are interested in what's being made and are trying to pay special focus to things outside what they would normally pay attention to. And there's: 'How very dare you allow some 18-year-old student to come in here and be like, "I don't like that show" after somebody spent thousands of pounds creating it, workshopping it, bringing it to this space and promoting it?' I get that there are 4,000 shows on so it's going to be difficult to review them all but better one review from someone who's good than four of them from where some child who doesn't actually know how to look at something and see if it achieved what it set out to achieve.

ST: What I found really interesting doing a show about race, which is being reviewed almost exclusively by white reviewers, is that there are times where I'm like, 'I feel like you're not really sure how to engage with the ideas of this work'. Fair enough, because if this isn't your lived experience and you're not doing some degree in race, then it makes sense to me that maybe me standing up and talking about Afropessimism is mildly alienating to you. Wouldn't it be interesting, especially in a place like Edinburgh, where we can experiment, if the context of what it was to be a reviewer was broadened out? What would it be like if I had other people of colour come and review the show?

I guess it's a question of what you want criticism to be because so much of theatre critique up here is in service of capitalism. Not that it's a bad thing, but especially with solo shows that aim to ignite conversation or change the terms of a conversation, I'm always interested to think about the role that reviewers could play in that.

DB: You're right about that, it is in service of capitalism and the only positive benefit of that is then, if everyone's like, 'go see this, this is important', then you can take that show somewhere else, where it can be engaged with.

SHOW: **Desiree Burch: Unf*ckable**
 VENUE: **Heroes @ Bob's BlundaBus**
 TIME: **10:00pm – 11:00pm, 3–27 Aug, not 15, 22**
 TICKETS: **£5**

... on desire

DB: For this show, because I talk about having worked as a professional dominatrix, not that that's necessarily the full thrust of it, but it's sort of about having come from a born again Christian background, deciding to leap into sex work at some point for my own reasons, and also, just as a form of figuring out who the hell you are. Sexuality is a huge part of one's identity and I've always felt, especially being a black woman who's big, it's easy to just turn me into a mailbox or a lamppost, it's easy to be desexualised, it's easy to be maternalised.

ST: Phewwwwwww, you are preaching to the converted! Absolutely. Where's my desire?

DB: Exactly. Where's my vulnerability? Where's my ability to be fallible and not constantly strong and bulletproof and not needing anything from anyone because I'll survive, like Mother Africa?

"I was like, fuck it, you're going to hear me"

- Selina Thompson

ST: Absolutely. It's also about value. When I first started out a lot of my work was about beauty politics. I remember sitting down and thinking, why am I so obsessed with beauty politics, because the fact of the matter is, as a woman, being beautiful is what makes you valuable, being valued is what makes you worthy of love. We're human beings and of course we want to be loved because we want that connection.

DB: And also just societal power. There's power in that, that some people have and other people don't. If it was some kind of meritocracy like we like to pretend it is, it wouldn't matter. But we all know that's garbage. ➡ Jo Caird

SHOW: **salt.**
 VENUE: **Northern Stage at Summerhall**
 TIME: **2:30pm – 3:45pm, 5–26 Aug, not 9, 16, 23**
 TICKETS: **£12**
