

HIP HOP

DANCE ALMANAC VOL.2

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FEATURING:

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ISAAC OURO-GNAO

IA: First question is around Hip Hop as an alternate kinship and family. A family that you choose, be it in a company, a battle or a social context. What are your thoughts on Hip Hop as alternate family and kinship?

IOG: I've always been a bit of a social butterfly. So belonging to one group has never been...a norm for me. It's quite an interesting question. I was thinking about this yesterday, kind of anticipating the question almost. Because I've been in Spoken Movement with Kwame Asafo-Adjei, I've been in Body Politic, and people have come and left throughout those years, I think since 2015 from Body Politic, and 20...I wanna say 17 or 18 for Spoken Movement. I also left that company for a while cause of personal issues and mental health, and I only returned this year. Well, last month. No, this month, yes...a lot has happened. The idea of...an alternate family and choosing a family is an interesting thing that I've always questioned and whether a place can be a home...I recognise it can, and I have felt in certain instances that it was, for example for Body Politic when we started out, it was pretty much...and I hope she doesn't, by 'she' I mean Emma-Jane, I hope she doesn't mind me saying this... it's following the Boy Blue style

of dance company, of creating street dance on stage, in a sense. From Boy Blue's earlier works, it was less theatrical tools, more dance...street dance styles and let's just get a concept out and put it on stage. And it worked. At that time we had, a large number of people and, yeah we were a family, we get along, make jokes, and when it's time to work you work. Then personal things come up and people have gone out the door and, from them leaving, I started questioning the idea of family and what it means if it's just work, you know? I'm like, 'I'm here to work so...I don't need to work here anymore or something else is calling me so, I'm just gonna step aside.' That balance has always been something I've questioned and I'm not sure I have an answer. The same thing happened in Spoken Movement where I was so embedded I felt 'This is comfortable, this is home.' Even to a cultural level... the topics Kwame explored was quite rooted in my own journey as a person as well. Then again, things happen, people leave, and then you question whether that's just work, or it's family or where do I differentiate or should I? It's a growing...well, I should say, continuous question that I'm trying to find an answer for, and I'm not sure if I'll find an answer for it. I recognise that it can be for others, and sometimes

I feel envious for that, seeing others and how long they've been in a company, how long they've thrived you know. Social medial comes into play, you know they're touring and you see all smiles and laughter and you're like 'Oh, I don't have that...' I mean, I kind of do but... yeah. That awareness comes in...but I'm still questioning it and tryna figure out what it means for me.

IA: You've mentioned two companies there, you're not just a dancer and a writer in other people's you are an author of your own work.

IOG: Yep.

IA: How is that as an author and creator? How do you put your family around you, or a support system around you?

IOG: That's a very good question. [laughs] I think working alone has made me realise the importance of a support network, and not necessarily only creative people. I'm still working towards trying to build a creative family around me and a support network moving forward with my work, but I'm aware that takes time and I'm aware that it takes a lot of hard work as well so I'm not in a rush to figure that out. In terms of a support system...I think having others that aren't involved in the industry, being a shoulder to

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lean on, helps a lot. I'm gonna say [laughs] every time I think about these things, I always end up thinking 'I don't know yet, so I'll just figure it out.' And, it's not necessarily kicking the can down the road but knowing I don't have answers, and there is worth in trying to figure out those answers but...I really don't know and I'm tryna figure it out and tryna work out the best way to have a system around me that supports what I do, outside and inside of the work I'm trying to make. I think I'm really struggling to answer that question. [laughs]

IA: Is it that you've identified the system but haven't put it in place or...?

I OG: I've identified the system yes, I would say so. I've identified what ideally needs to be there, from looking at other people I look up to or...I've seen that a process works for them. Akeim is one, Akeim Toussaint Buck...Seeta Patel, she's another who, I'm working with her, being in that space and like 'OK that works, that works, that not so much, but that works.' Again, identifying what works, ideally as a soloist and tryna put that in place, but again I know it takes a lot of time for that to happen. I think the topic of mental health is so intrinsically embedded in what I'm tryna do, that's another layer of awareness and attention that needs time as well. So a support system, yes, but also a support system that is aware of mental health generally, and my mental health and what might work for others might not work for me. I think that's one reason why I'm so...oh what's the word? I wanna say isolated. I've isolated myself in that sense of 'OK, I need a producer, let me just find a producer.'

IA: Purposeful isolation?

I OG: Yeah. Through choice. Like 'I need an assistant, let me find an assistant.' It's more - I don't need an assistant just to do the work, I need someone who understands what I'm trying to do, who can be on the same wavelength in terms of things I wanna work on as a soloist and on mental health, my mental health and mental health in general. Again, I know it takes time to meet those people and build that rapport, and through that I've isolated myself to try and build what I can for myself before trying to find others to implement that network or support system.

IA: Let's talk a little bit about The Ore Complex. I want to ask how you finished your performance in Leicester asking 'Am I black enough?' Can you talk about that?

I OG: [laughs] Yeah. Am I Black enough? I think it's something I've always been asking for a long time and, it's quite interesting how that question is prevalent in people's works whether it's about identity or about ethnicity or whatever. I was looking at your review for Artists4Artists' double bill of Chris and Kloé, looking at the idea of 'enough.' That questioning, and I'm very aware of that in my own work. The idea of 'Black enough' for me comes from how much of something must you do to be included in the culture, or how much of something must you do to belong. The idea of belonging again, has been something I've questioned for a while. The conversation, specifically about The Ore Complex, I think...and I'm not so sure, cause it's always been in my head, but I think it came out of a conversation with Seeta Patel. We were talking

about identity, and I looked at my own life and the idea of belonging and assimilation specifically and what it takes to assimilate. Do we sacrifice? What do we sacrifice in order to assimilate? And, knowing I'm quite unique in the sense where I'm young enough to be embedded in Black British culture, but also old enough to be a first generation, or technically one and a half generation migrant. So I still have a very deep sense of Togolese and West African identity from the language I speak, to how I sound, to how I was educated there and here and living and operating in different spaces. I tend to occupy a hybrid identity, which comes into question with the idea of code-switching. I might be a specific way in this environment, and another in that environment, so it's something I've always carried across the past few years with me and having that awareness, I haven't known how to express it til that conversation with Seeta. I was into the poetic filmmaking, like tryna put poems and films and movement together to try and create.

IA: Like The Trees?

I OG: Yeah, yeah that was the first thing I did. I really see myself still going down that route of filmmaking with poems and movement. So from there I made Palatable which was a five or six minute short film. Less dance-based, but it uses dance and movement, and it's more text-focused and I'm looking at the idea of assimilation, the idea of labelling from 'coconut' to 'Bounty' to 'Oreo' and looking at who labels one to not be 'Black enough' or to be a sell-out or sacrificing a part of yourself to be able to

operate in a Western context. And who labels whether it's non-Black or Black or other ethnicities and the relationships between those cultures. Specifically Black British and Black African and how those two communicate as well. I remember my mum holding a lot of prejudices towards Caribbean people when we first came here, and that seemed to be the norm in those ages. It was 2004 when we first came here. Growing up with those disconnected communities, and questioning the idea of what is Blackness? Blackness in Togo is different to Blackness here, and also in the Caribbean, and having to exist in the melting pot of different types of Black identity makes that even more of a crisis. I was speaking to Tyrone Isaac-Stuart on the way back from Norwich yesterday about that and he recently went to Ghana; he was just talking about how there is such a crisis of Black identity because we exist in so many different pockets, but we're still trying to create a blanket identity.

IA: You can't be the whole of any part of it?

I OG: Absolutely, no, you really can't and I don't know why there seems to be an idea of needing to have one blanket of a Black identity you know. 'Black British means this.' Whether that's to do with government consensus or whatever in terms of trying to populate, or count the population I mean, I'm not sure, but I've been reading a book by Kwame Appiah on identity, I think it's called Rethinking Identity. He identifies race, creed, religion and nationality as ways we compartmentalise identity and how all of these can cross over or also exist

in their own pockets. That has also informed my work. with Pawlet at Serendipity was...and it's something I've

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Essentially The Oreo Complex is pretty much just me trying to find answers for myself through the questioning. It's very much still a work-in-progress...I have a vision for it to be about an hour and forty-five long, because I've identified...the coconut would be the historical context, the Bounty would be the transition of West-African to Britain and migration and assimilation, and Oreo would be the result of that assimilation. The storytelling elements of that pretty much pertains to each section, so what you saw on Thursday was very much the early starts of the first section, which is gonna be a bit longer. What I wanna do with that work is pretty much question what it takes to be Black? Do I have to research my history? Do I have to be embedded in my native culture? Do I have to speak and sound a certain way? Do I have to abide by my indigenous gods and laws? But doing that in a very authentic and respectful manner. A conversation I had

always held for a very long time, is that you don't have to embody your stereotype to show it on stage and question it. What I really wanna do is, you can observe the piece and see all of these sections and go 'Actually that's very authentic.' Underlying that is, is this what it takes to be a Black artist? Is this what it takes to be Black in Britain? Is this what it takes to be Black in a Western society or Black generally? That question is very much the underlying layer of the work, but I wanna do it authentically cause sometimes you do have to be embedded in that culture to be Black in that context, sometimes you have to be a lover of jazz and play jazz to have a certain culture and Black connection, whether that's in the US and there's cultural things that I wanna unearth through this work that pay homage and are authentic and respectful but still point out the absurdity of having to do these things to obtain a Black pass or a Black card.

IA: Before we started this interview you had a kind of an imposter-y syndrome thing, like the 'Am I Black enough?' Am I Hip Hop enough to be in this?

IOG: That's another thing. I remember a conversation we had here briefly. It was before Seeta's The Rite of Spring at The Place and it was about... can someone operate in Hip Hop theatre and appropriate Hip Hop culture? I believe absolutely you can and... again, I had this conversation with Tyrone yesterday and I pretty much don't think I'm a Hip Hop theatre artist...only. I don't think The Oreo Complex is a Hip Hop theatre work...I'm very aware, possibly from my love of words and from my journalistic background, I'm very aware of semantics, and saying something is Hip Hop theatre vs rooted in Hip Hop culture, I feel makes a lot of difference. I'm informed by Hip Hop culture, whether that's music or dance, or its history. But The Oreo Complex isn't a Hip Hop theatre work because I'm again, very, very, very aware of the history of Hip Hop theatre itself, what it looks like, it's foundations and those pushing those boundaries who are still operating in that format. Whereas me, I'm very much operating from a Hip Hop culture point and perspective but not trying to create Hip Hop theatre. I'm aware, again, of the idea of identity operating in different environments and contexts and pockets, the same way I feel very connected to a lot of different styles of movement, different cultures of movement, and I think that's one reason why I've started operating in a multi-disciplinary format, because I feel like I can express myself in all of these formats. Putting it

together helps me to question the absurdity of having to operate in many different places to obtain a pass to exist in those spaces, but still doing it authentically. I am aware of the Hip Hop theatre label, I'm aware of it pretty much evolving these past few years...the thing is, it's always evolved. I don't think there's ever been a period where Hip Hop theatre was one thing and you see it and you go 'That's Hip Hop theatre.' I think Hip Hop culture itself has always been an evolving thing. I'm aware that I can argue myself to exist as a Hip Hop theatre artist, but I'd rather not because I'm also aware of those who operate solely in it and, again, the imposter syndrome thing kicks in where I'd rather distance myself from it than operate in it. I want to operate elsewhere rather than be called out or questioned and like 'Hey, you do that other thing.'

IA: 'Are you guesting in my culture?'

IOG: Essentially yeah, the idea of appropriation very much links again with the format of The Oreo Complex.

IA: In your personal constellation, who are the three people that are your go-tos? Who are your crutches, your supporters, your three people and what do they do for you?

IOG: Creative support? Or just three people?

IA: Three people.

IOG: Phew. Three people. [long pause] I've been listening to Wretch 32's album, the recent one Upon Reflection. There's a single on there's called Mummy's Boy. [laughs] I'm very

much that. My mum has been a pillar...from me embarking on this artistic journey to graduating as a journalist and deciding to take the supposed plan B as a dancer into a plan A. She's been a pillar and she doesn't fully understand the dance industry or the creative industry but she's always there to offer advice and be of help in my moments of crisis. So absolutely she's one of a few people I go to. Actually, I think she's the only one I go to with a general openness. As I mentioned earlier, that isolation through choice, I think it's a personality trait which I'm aware of and I'm happy to undertake. It's not that I don't trust people, it's more that I'm very selective about who I open up myself to...again being aware of my mental health and how that could impact certain relationships. Through trial and error as well, opening up to people in a creative sense and having that affect it really negatively. Through no fault of their own, it's just the manner of that conversation. So it's always been just my mum and myself [laughs]. I'm very good at talking to and getting better at the self-care thing and calling myself out and holding myself accountable; I've always been good at operating in my own lane, by myself through these years and knowing what I need to do to elevate from seeing others and how they operate, creatively or just personally or mental health, etc. More recently I've been learning from Nathan Lafayette. We've got a good bond...talking creatively and again, the idea of peer support and holding each other accountable on the mental health issue. I feel like every soloist tends to come across mental health hurdles at one point in their life, and it's something I've

realised from talking to people like Orley Quick is another one. I've also been leaning on Tyrone as an artist. Ffion Campbell-Davies as an artist and having the support of Saskia Horton as well. Having a support network of artists who I can go to just about creative issues and hearing their processes, how they operate, again I'm very aware that I'm early career...maybe the imposter thing comes in to it, but I humble myself a lot. I know someone who has more experience than me will know more about what I'm tryna do as well, so even though I have my own ideas, I will always, always listen. Even though Saskia is younger than me, she has more experience, so again I lean on her for certain support...who else?

IA: That's more than three.

IOG: That's more than three. They're very isolated in the creative sense, but generally I'd say just myself and my mum.

IA: What are some of the things that are troubling you at the minute?

IOG: At the moment. [long pause] Troubling me? I think imposter syndrome and ownership.

IA: Ownership of...?

IOG: Ownership of my work...or how I creatively input in certain spaces. Again, I'm hyper-aware of my experience. I've only been doing this for three years professionally so it comes into question where... what I'm doing and what I'm inputting might be good I've only been doing this for three years. Is it good enough? Is it alright? Then on a flip side, feeling really emboldened in other spaces to go 'Actually

no, that's very important.' What I'm inputting is highly valuable to this, so I need ownership of that, and I need...I guess accreditation of that as well. Personally, within myself I find that because I'm operating in these different spaces

huge issue of coverage and... oh what's the word? [long pause]

IA: Multiplicity of voices?

IOG: Yeah and just showing the existence of this work in

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and half spaces, I'm at times feeling like 'No, it's okay, that was alright, yes...and actually no, this is very important what I'm offering.' It's quite polarising and quite difficult to consolidate the 'Actually no, this is who I am, this is what I am.' I find that hard when I'm trying to completely believe in myself as a stronger, creative artist and still doubting myself in other spaces. That's one thing that's troubling me at the moment. Another thing in Hip Hop...I think one thing that's always troubled me is the lack of journalistic coverage. It's one reason why I started the Gender in Dance investigative blog, which at that time I thought 'Let me broaden my horizon first to see what the dance industry is.' I was operating in contemporary circles as well as certain Hip Hop circles. From then realising that actually there's a

its vast nature, rather than just a niche pocket of the dance industry. I do realise it is niche, but representation absolutely matters and I'm always shocked when I'm the one having to do research to discover such a breadth of history. Outside of me choosing to make that choice, and research, I would not know anything. It was the same thing when I first started working in the Hip Hop theatre world, I was like 'Oh my gosh there's a lot here that hasn't been archived or covered in the media.' I've come across that when it comes to contemporary Afro-Caribbean based work as well, from my link to Serendipity in Leicester. Again, being shocked at...I'm the one having to do the work to realise there's so, so, so, so much out there and I think that's always gonna be an

element of it. You do need to look to find, but it shouldn't be that hard to look and find something, it shouldn't be that hard to find when you start looking. I think access and coverage and representation for Hip Hop theatre artists and Hip Hop theatre work is very important and it's something that's troubling me cause I'm still wondering how I can input, looking at the blog thinking 'OK, if I do change it this way, how much can I input into the world of Hip Hop theatre and how much can I impact it and affect it for the better?' But knowing how Gender in Dance petered out cause it was self-funded and on my own back, has made that step difficult. So something like this I really appreciate cause it's something I've thought about needing to happen from archiving, to coverage, to reporting, to reviewing...seeing more reviews and more coverage always empowers me and emboldens me but I still see it as a very important thing to tackle, that's still a prevalent issue.

IA: Why do you think it doesn't have coverage or profile?

IOG: I think it's as simple as language. A lot of people who review dance and Hip Hop theatre aren't well-versed in the language of Hip Hop theatre and they tend to undermine or generalise it. When something is generalised it becomes beige in a sea of other works that are out there 'Oh, it's just another thing that's happening.' Rather than it's a very unique and important thing that's happening. I think having reviewers or writers who understand that language and speak that language is important. That's another reason why I feel that pressure

of, I work in this world and I understand it. I don't think I'm the only one but I know I can contribute to the wider coverage and representation in terms of writing and because I'm not doing it, I'm feeling that pressure as well that. A simple review saying something like 'popping and locking' when they're looking at Blak Whyte Gray is just...it's like, there's more to it, that you see that and go 'OK well that's just another generic term that's been used for the past ten years, so there's nothing really new happening. Or nothing interesting happening in Hip Hop theatre when there's so much more to say. I'd say it's down to language.

IA: It'd be like saying 'Here's some contemporary dance.'

IOG: Exactly, yeah! Exactly that and it's so infuriating. That is so infuriating. [laughs]

IA: Can you talk about your relationship to words? As a poet, an author, a scriptwriter, and its relationship to theatre and Hip Hop.

IOG: Yes. On the way here I was thinking about those very same things and I've always had a tricky relationship with titles.

IA: Titles?

IOG: Yeah, so being a poet. Anthony Anaxagorou is a poet, Sabrina Mahfouz is a poet. I'm not a poet.

IA: It's a title you use on your website...

IOG: Yes, that's the thing, it is. [laughs] Again, it's something to do with ownership. I'm really, really trying like...let me [laughs] let me work with it to get to a certain point where I can find an ownership of

that title. So even though it is there, it's more to represent the thing that I do, rather than what I am. I don't think I'm a poet in the grand scheme of things. I can write poetry to a certain level. Again, working across disciplines, I write for a certain purpose. Mainly that's to be in a theatrical or artistic performance context. So I don't write poetry to exist as a poem, or to be published, which I think doesn't mean... you don't have to be published and write to be a poet, but I understand that there's a history of that existing in that form. To call myself a poet when I'm just using words to express in a performance context...it's quite tricky. The same thing with the author and scriptwriter terms...again I've wrote things to be expressed in a theatrical context, and yes that is a script, it is a play, but I wouldn't call myself a playwright. I think I would call myself a scriptwriter because...again, I think it's an awareness of the history of that label, that title or that context. How much you apply yourself to those skills, and how much you understand those skills and how much you can prove those skills...I am aware of wanting to be a playwright and a scriptwriter and wanting to improve those skills to be that in its own thing. As a poet, I don't think I wanna write just for the sake of writing. Maybe in the future, I don't know, but I have that complicated relationship with those titles. The same with 'journalist.' I haven't been a journalist for two years. But, I still operate with those skills, so it's quite hard to have that ownership and I think that's to do with practice as well. I don't practice as a playwright or practice as a poet, I practice as a lot of different things and understanding that and

humbling myself as someone who uses those skills but isn't just those titles.

IA: What is it that you do practice?

IOG: [laughs] Good question. My practice is...looking at words. I'd say creative writing, I'd absolutely own that. Creative writing is definitely rooted in my practice, and I'm not embedded to a form of creative writing, I think that's another reason why I'm uncomfortable to just exist under a title. But creative writing allows you to express a theme or an idea in different ways. So with The Oreo Complex, that's my more West-African and griot storytelling style of writing, where I haven't developed an Isaac style of creative writing, I've just developed a creative writing style that allows me to embody these different expressions. I think that very much sits well with who and what I'm trying to be as an artist. Movement-wise... that's tricky. Hip Hop is...Hip Hop dance styles, urban... not urban. Street styles, funk styles inform my practice. There's contemporary styles that inform my practice as well and there's holistic movement styles that inform my practice as well. So it is very much, less looking at the culmination of those skills, no, the outcome of those skills, but instead looking at those skills themselves and seeing how they operate together. I'm not just a Hip Hop theatre dancer, I'm not just a house dancer, I'm not just a contemporary dancer; I use those skills to express the things I want to express creatively. To be...complicated. [laughs]

IA: Continuing with the words,

what was your work on and relationship to Father Figurine?

IOG: That's a big question. It began as a poem that I wrote for myself, with the same title Father Figurine, about my relationship with my dad. It wasn't quite as severe, but more an observation of the male silences and the uncommunicated emotions, thoughts, words and lack of kinship. It was more of a 'you fulfil roles', so father as provider, son as diligent son. [laughs] Coincidentally, Em-Jay was working in a pupil referral unit and was looking at how young men struggle to express themselves. So there was that connection, that perspective. It was at the time she was moving from more of a workshop and event-providing organisation into a theatre-making one. So she took the risk with, going with my idea, cause I was also training in the events that she did; then when she wanted to make a company, I was one of the first to audition and from then on...I was like 'I'm also a creative writer.' [laughs] 'I write poetry...and I have this piece.' From then on, we decided to develop it into a script, which led me into researching scriptwriting and seeing how to best put it across...whilst still remaining authentic to the theme of the work. It was developed in early 2016 - then we had the two choreographers, Derek Mok and Stephen Brown, who created choreography with music they chose - and I created the script. Then we came together to see how it would work and it was very much trial and error from the get-go, of how to operate as a theatre-making company. In hindsight it would have been great to work together,

so I'm writing as well as they're creating and see how that correlates, but it was very much, they created movement, I created text and we came together to see how they worked together. From then on, that piece was developed to be twenty minutes, and I was also a spoken word performer in the first iterations of Father Figurine, because the style that we created before was also creative writing, spoken word and dance-based. It was a piece called "Reflections" where there was three smaller works in the night with a spoken word poet moving into movement, and then things like that...so we had that style developed. Father Figurine was then developed into an hour-long work when we had time and funding...but over the years I've had to, essentially upskill myself to better fulfil the roles that was required. So not just a spoken word artist, not just a creative writer but a scriptwriter as well and moving into movement, movement direction, having an idea and ownership of the script and going 'This movement works well with this text, so let's see how we can twist a few things around to better suit each other.' So there's been an evolution of roles in that company and it's because of that that I have realised how chameleonic I am. Embodying roles to fill a purpose, rather than embodying the role to be that also informs why I'm complicated with titles and roles. It's been a very long, almost Frankenstein-like journey of chopping and screwing things together and seeing what comes out. I think that's pretty much why the beast that is this work exists in so many different ways... whether it's just through spoken word or through a

movement context, I think we've found a way for it to work for what it is.

IA: Why do you write about Hip Hop theatre?

“Hip Hop has been influenced by a lot of things around it musically, and I think Hip Hop theatre has been influenced by a lot of things movement-wise, context-wise and thematically. It's only right that it continues to evolve. Hip Hop music now isn't what it was before. You can definitely trace an evolution behind it.”

IOG: Representation and coverage is really important; I don't have a saviour complex 'It has to be me!' But I know I have the skills to help the conversation around representation and coverage. So writing about Hip Hop theatre, allows someone who understands the language to inform it for a wider public and I think that's why I don't necessarily have a style, but I like to be very analytical and dissecting the work. It allows people who might not know those languages or techniques to better see how they operate and what they lead to in the works. When I can I like, I do like writing about it for that reason, to offer a more in-depth view of what's going on in Hip Hop theatre, rather than 'It's just another style of theatre.' Which it is,

but there's so much more to it...and because I have the skills to do it, why not?

IA: There are two camps. There are the Hip Hop purists and the evolutionaries.

IOG: Yes. [laughs]

IA: I'm interested in your thoughts on these camps and where you think you belong.

IOG: I'm an evolutionary. I don't think I can be anything else, probably because of the way I am in my own personality and how I operate, or have operated this past three years in the Hip Hop theatre context. I absolutely value and respect and understand the history and the arguments behind the purist philosophy, for lack of a better word. But again, as I said before, Hip Hop has always been an evolution. Much like the sample, sampling in music, there's a lot of sampling in dance too. Looking at, someone like Botis, if you were to use music terms, he's been

sampling a lot of different styles and influences.

IA: Biting? Are you saying biting?

IOG: Absolutely not! Don't put words in my mouth! [laughs] Next thing you know a headline! I think we talk about influences in that sense, and Hip Hop has been influenced by a lot of things around it musically, and I think Hip Hop theatre has been influenced by a lot of things thematically, movement-wise and context-wise. It's only right that it continues to evolve. Hip Hop music now isn't what it was before. You can definitely trace an evolution behind it whilst you're also tracing the purist philosophy still maintaining itself for all those years, and I think it's the same for Hip Hop theatre. Going back to the Botis point, there's still a respect and an understanding and an embodiment of Hip Hop culture and history and roots, stylistically, movement-wise, musically...but there's also that avant garde nature of his work that pushes...I think it's the same thing for Kwame, again understanding and embodying...and there's a deep culture of training and mastering styles, in order to break their boundaries. I think that's where I exist. You have to understand how something operates before trying to operate outside of its boundaries. That's where I stand personally. I'm definitely an evolutionary where I respect what exists, but I can also express myself in different ways. Not from trying to be different, it's just that's how I creatively think and how I want to creatively express myself. I'm definitely an evolutionary.

IA: You had a role in BLKDOG.

IOG: Yeah, yeah, I did.

IA: Can you talk a little bit about that?

IOG: That was [laughs] really interesting. I wouldn't say it's as a voice artist, but I guess I used my voice as the...I wanna say therapist or counsellor. My voice was heavily distorted so you wouldn't recognise it but...that was an interesting role. Botis reached out to me because of the way I sound, which linked into the...

IA: The tone of your voice?

IOG: Yeah, the tonality, the...I guess RP speak, if you wanna call it that. To try and embody the very formal counsellor kind of character and be a therapist for whoever I was a therapist for. They gave me a few lines to do and I remember sitting in a corner of a dressing room in Sadler's Wells and just barking into a microphone. [laughs] Trying different sounds and... that was interesting. It was a good process.

IA: There's been a shift between Hip Hop as entertainment, to Hip Hop as commentary in the past couple of years in terms of the theatrical presentation. I'm interested in your thoughts on that shift.

IOG: That's a very large question. I don't think I'm well-informed enough to completely formulate an opinion worth voicing, but I'll try. I think I've always existed at the fringes of cultures, again purely from my personality, where I'm embedded enough to partake and belong to that culture, but also on the fringes to be able to observe it. I think it's safe to say ZooNation operates in a very more entertainment style of Hip

Hop theatre and I might as well use the other titan - Boy Blue, as existing in that theatrical commentary. I think there's space for both. They're all valid, and I think they exist for very important reasons. There's been a very big political fatigue across the nation from the past few years on Brexit and I feel like it can also be the same for social commentary in theatre. There's only so much you can take from seeing and hearing about heartbreak and stories and realities and it's not to say Hip Hop theatre as entertainment only exists as a purge of that or as a counter to that, but Hip Hop has always existed in a social context, an uplifting context, and going against the status quo for the joy of self and empowering of the self. Sometimes you just wanna sit and enjoy something that you really like. I think works that are entertainment-based are very valid, and I also think works that are more commentary, socio-political, are also valid. What is bad is when one's put over the other. Although there has been a shift in the mainstream coverage of Hip Hop as a theatrical thing, the entertainment side has always presided or been given more of a priority than the social commentary, and I'm not sure why. Again I don't think I'm well-versed enough to formulate an opinion, but I'm learning as the years come. I think what we need is more of a balance, to understand that both of these exist in their own environments and contexts and both are valid; you know seeing a back flip and going 'Hey, great! Another back flip onstage! Great, he's doing windmills and all of that's awesome.' It can lead to almost a catharsis theatrically. It's also valid to see things in a more social, political context.

So that's what I'd say on that topic.

IA: What's it like to be you, right now?

IOG: [laughs] That's almost... oh my gosh! That's almost an existentialist question! To be me right now is polarising. It's difficult. It's great. It's freeing as well. But definitely there's a hybrid of spaces I embody. I don't know how best to answer that question because I could look at it in a multiplicity of ways.

IA: Unpack a couple of those words...

IOG: Unpack a couple of those words...so 'polarising' in the sense of how much of myself do I give to a company vs to my own work? Polarising in the sense of exactly where do I belong in the artistic landscape and cultures? I'm not quite contemporary, but some of my work is. I'm not quite Hip Hop theatre, but some of my work is, so polarising in that sense, and hybrid in that sense as well. Hard because I understand where I am in my career - very early on, hard because I understand that I'm trying to be multi-disciplinary, and that's always a hard thing to try and harmonise especially when you're just...well, not new at working on it, but new at trying to communicate why you're using all of these skills to programmers, or spaces you might be interested in performing in. Hard because of the idea of trying to belong, again to the whole Hip Hop and contemporary and other spaces thing. But also great because I believe in the work I'm trying to do...and I very much feel emboldened by what I'm trying to say, and my voice. Still being humbled by

my influences and...I wanna say creative mentors. There's a quote I seen the other day...I can't find it anymore but it said something along the lines of 'Every artists subsumes from their predecessors until they can completely articulate themselves.' I'm very aware of how much of others I am still communicating in my work. I'm very aware of how much of an influence Lee Griffiths and Botis Seva and Kwame and even Seeta Patel has on how I think theatrically. I've only been doing this for three years. I've been researching and watching a lot of things to try and pull together, tools, or works that impact me deeply are from those artists. I'm very aware of how their voices might almost leak out in what I'm trying to do...but I'm emboldened by needing that process, to be able to get to what I wanna say. It's not to say my voice isn't among those, but the thing is, it is among those and I don't want it to be among, I want it to be the only thing I communicate through. I'm also looking forward to how the multi-discipline pocket of artists grow. I don't think my generation, people I relate to like Ffion, Tyrone and Saskia... even Kloé to a certain degree. To see how that pocket exists in a Hip Hop theatre context and outside of the Hip Hop theatre context, and how I can operate in that pocket as well, so I'm very excited by the evolutionary side of things. That's what it feels like to be me at the moment! [laughs] A lot of things.

IA: What is your strongest memory of dance?

IOG: My strongest memory of dance is being in Togo on...it would be like my fifth or sixth, no...probably sixth or seventh birthday, and having

a song come on the TV. We had a veranda and had a huge table with a lot of food on it; the immediate family was there - I lived with my grandma at that time - my parents were abroad, they were here already, so it was my grandma, my brother and my sister and just a couple of friends. I remember we put the TV outside on the veranda, and a music video came on, this Ivory Coast artist. I still have the song with me to this day, but there's this very, just like joyous fist pumping, but also a lot of like shoulder movements and a lot of hip, hip rotations and hip movements, not quite undulations but it was just fun. I remember beginning to eat my salad, seeing the music video come on TV and just dropping everything and just started doing the dance. That's the earliest memory I have of dance.

IA: Is that the strongest memory?

IOG: It is the strongest memory. It's the earliest and the strongest memory. I think since then, I've had a strong imprint of how to move in the joyous sense; I think I could probably give other examples, more recent in terms of impact, but that's definitely the earliest and strongest. It's something I remembered a couple of years ago and something that's been strengthened by my discovery of Afro-Caribbean contemporary dance and its history across the globe. Doing Thomas Prestø's workshop a couple of times in Leicester, when he was down, also made me realise how much my body is codified in the West African style of movement. It just clicked. It made a few things click into place and I was like 'Wow, actually that's always been there.'

IA: Did you start dancing and practicing in Togo?

IOG: The thing is, dance was part of the culture...there was dance professionally too, but as a social thing, a cultural thing, it's always been embedded in it. I wouldn't say 'practiced' professionally in that sense, but just moving and being aware of how I'm moving, from that point.

IA: When did you meet Hip Hop?

IOG: I met Hip Hop as a way out of being socially awkward, and not speaking English. French is our national language and I've got my native tongue of Ewé as well. I only moved here in 2004. That was quite tricky to adjust and assimilate...I think it was in 2006 that my brother...there was an audition at Wembley and he wanted to go, and realised I'd be bored at home, so he brought me along. It was a street-dance style audition based on tutting and waving and funk styles. I fell in love with it at that point and I've been dancing since. That's when I met Hip Hop...not in the sense of the dance style itself but in terms of the culture.

IA: I've got more questions, but I want to offer a space for you to speak about things that we've not spoken about so far. Are there things you want recording or putting down? Are there other memories, points, positions that you wanna talk about?

IOG: Interesting. [long pause] I can't think of anything now, but if I do I will...

IA: OK. let's talk about mental health and self-care. There's been multiple works this year that are directly addressing and looking at

it, from male and female perspectives. I'm interested in how you practice self-care and your thoughts on Hip Hop and mental health.

IOG: Self-care is always a tricky thing for me...especially from having the culturally ingrained philosophy of always working hard, pushing beyond limits and being resilient and strong-willed. That was one of the reasons why I had...well, it was, a mental breakdown in 2018, because I was still so strongly holding on to that when it was becoming detrimental. Pushing even though I was physically ill or pushing even though I was mentally exhausted and at my tether; so since having that mental breakdown, even though I had one before in 2015, but still not learning my lesson...from 2018 realising, again because of my personality, because of my history, I need to figure out a way to work with what I have, rather than against it. So accepting that I am now more mentally ill, more prone to mental disorder...there's an acceptance there. Whereas, I think before I was still in denial of 'No, that's just a thing that happens sometimes, you know, I'm still my mother and father's son, I'm still African, I'm still Togolese, I'm strong-willed, just keep going, work hard. Twice as hard as the text says in Father Figurine. So since 2018, I've been very aware of creating boundaries for myself and for others. It starts at home, I can't expect someone to understand my issues, if I don't understand them myself, you know? I can't expect others to respect my boundaries if I don't respect them myself. So, getting to a point where you realise that you've got nothing more to give, or you completely break down, and establishing that

boundary, making others aware of it, is something I've tried to put in practice. Specifically going back to Spoken Movement now, after leaving because of my mental health, and making them aware like 'I don't expect you to be my therapist, I just need you to be aware that sometimes I might be stuck in my head a little.' It takes me a while to come out of that and I don't need you to do anything, just be aware of that and give me the time and space I need to process what

"Self-care is always a tricky thing for me...especially from having the culturally ingrained philosophy of always working hard, pushing beyond limits and being resilient and strong-willed. That was one of the reasons why I had...well, it was, a mental breakdown in 2018."

I need to process. Whereas before, it would have just looked like I'm stuck, and all I need to do is push through, and push through, and push through. Feeling like actually no, I should push through and that becoming an issue in itself, so setting boundaries for myself and others, respecting them, and having a process once I get home to detach from certain things. I'm very prone to maintaining a certain thought process and carrying a thought process form creative works or otherwise. So I'll still be in the idea of 'OK, I need to do that' or 'I need to do that.' Not giving my mind a rest. I get sleepless

nights because of that, always thinking 'I need to do that, OK cool, I need to do that de-de-de-derr.' Kind of having to get up and write it down, rather than me going 'This isn't work time.' Detach, stop.

IA: Just stop.

IOG: Exactly. I don't know how to stop. I've tried meditating, from it being advised and suggested but it hasn't worked for me. I very much prefer writing. Writing has

been a catharsis for me, in the self-care sense of things...not necessarily writing creatively for something, just writing for the sake of writing.

IA: Free writing?

IOG: Essentially, yeah, free writing. So the words don't exist just in thought, but they exist on the page as well, and that helps to alleviate the stress on the mind. Also, now being more aware of mental health, not completely forgetting about the physical, cause that's another thing, it's like 'Mental health, mental health, mental health!' It's like, well it is linked to physical health as

well so let's not forget that too. It's not lopsided to prioritize physical health in the push for a mental awareness, maybe that gets ignored as well, to try and create an unequal balance. But, being aware of my physical health as well, being better at saying 'No' has been something I've learnt this past year. Especially from someone who likes saying 'Yes' a lot. I don't see it as a bad thing. I like learning. I like working in different spaces. So when something new and interesting comes up, I'm more likely to say 'yes' but being aware that you can say 'yes' and later on say 'no' if things come across. It's things that seem so simple [laughs] but are quite hard to put in practice is what I'm trying to place in practice in terms of self-care.

IA: What are your thoughts on the more visible presence of it in theatrical work?

IOG: That's quite interesting. I'm gonna come back to the word of 'ownership' and 'acceptance.' I think because there's more awareness and more conversation, a lot of artists have felt confident and comfortable in that acceptance of their own ailments or issues, or their own personal struggles with it, and feeling emboldened to express that theatrically. It's not like mental health is suddenly a new thing, it's always existed and I think there's something to say about awareness actually working from these past campaigns about mental health, by organisations and charities to create an acceptance, to create responsibility for the self, and then from that realising 'If I'm like this, I'm sure others are.' The best way to express that is through

art and theatre, because that's always been a creative outlet. A lot of individuals... we need a development and acceptance for artists themselves to go 'Actually, I need to talk about that cause if I don't, it will stay an issue.' And then feeling emboldened to share that story with others, and help them to have those conversations, and have those personal developments for themselves. That's what I believe anyway, because that's what's happened for me in order to create the work of Father Figurine and other short films I've done on mental health.

IA: What role does class play in your work?

IOG: Oof...oof.

IA: How do you spell 'Oof'?

IOG: [laughs] Double 'O' 'F'? Is that my own work or works I've created or had a creative input in?

IA: Both.

IOG: OK. For my own work, absolutely it is a very big part. I'm aware of the middle-class, working-class, upper-class divide where you can operate culturally in a middle-class context, but socially... no economically you're in a working-class context, and vice versa, and the issues that poses, and hurdles to overcome because of that. I'm having that experience myself, you know...being brought up middle-class in Togo, coming here and creating, pretty much, from a working-class context, whilst still maintaining the mentality of middle-class... it's so hard and tricky and polarising and...I think because it's existed in my personal life, it very much influences the

work I'm trying to create. I think challenging the socio-political issues around class is very important for me as well because more often than not, we focus on the differences and the clashes, rather than...I mean this is gonna sound very bohemian... looking at the similarities and the communities we operate in, and how we can uphold each other, that's beyond class. I think it naturally has an influence on my work, and I'm still trying to develop ways where I can use that to my benefit to make more poignant statements, but I'm not there yet. I think it has a passive influence on what I'm doing. A bit active, but not so active. It's something I'm working towards in my hopefully very long career as an artist. [laughs]

IA: What is your relationship to music?

IOG: [long pause] Is that in terms of movement or just, generally?

IA: Wide and then narrow.

IOG: OK. Music has always been cathartic. There are songs you listen to, to just listen to. Jazz and soul has always been that for me, I can just sit down and...leaving off the question of class, I was gonna say a glass of wine when listening to jazz! [laughs] But yeah, I'm alright with that. It's something I do sometimes, not all the time, but that is quite relaxing. A lot of Afro-based music that I grew up with, whether that's Afro-jazz or the music my parents used to listen to, in that sense and more socially uplifting songs like the Congolese songs of the seventies, eighties and nineties. It's always been a home for me, music, to return

to. Hip Hop, later on, as I grew up and came to this country, I connected to that more in this country. It also definitely helps in the movement aspect of self-expression. There are sometimes different songs that you wanna move to from Native American to Aboriginal to Hip Hop and jazz; there's different things it connects to. Just looking at my relationship to music...it's quite varied. I don't always lean on it, as a creative outlet or as a creative influencer, but it's always there. Like a home to return to, essentially.

IA: I pulled something from your website. I'm gonna read it back to you.

IOG: Sure.

IA: I'm interested in the commodification of trauma. You talk about 'unravelling traumatic socio-political issues relating to identity and mental health by creating relatable, thought-provoking, empowering and educational work.' That's one of your values as an artist?

IOG: As an artist, absolutely.

IA: In relation to unravelling issues, this commodification of trauma is actually quite prevalent. It relates to class and other things as well...the middle-classes are looking work which says 'Here is my authentic experience, come and be a tourist for an hour in my trauma.' What are your thoughts around some of those things?

IOG: It's something I've always been aware of and I'm trying to be sensitive to. I have been in works and I have nearly created works that just express trauma, and I think that's - and this is my opinion

- problematic...when all you show is the trauma. So like you just said, you come along and you experience someone's trauma, then you leave - might carry that with you if you're an empath or more empathetic; or you might think 'That was a very interesting piece of theatre.' And you reduce it to a piece of work, rather than an exploration of trauma. It's something I've been aware of for Father Figurine especially with it's ending. I've always looked at the idea of hope, and I think someone who does this well is Akeim in his work Windows of Displacement. You can be authentic and honest about trauma, and you might not necessarily need 'This is what you do next' or 'This is what I'd do next', an outlet or a piece of hope, or some educational information on how you deal with that trauma. You might be dealing with that trauma and for others to understand if they have relatable traumas they too can use that process, or might realise 'I need to do something about that.' A really empowering thing that happened last night in Norwich was one person came up to me after the post-show talk for Father Figurine and I was

"Male silence is a big problem. But actually talking about the trauma helps and makes you realise how to deal with it or creates an awareness around issues of still holding on to that trauma."

sitting down in a chair, he knelt next to me and said 'Thank you so much for showing

that, because it just made me realise the importance of actually talking about the trauma, rather than tip-toeing around it.' What he said was he lost his mother, and I think he was in his thirties, but he lost his mother and his father and him never really talked about the trauma...they were just 'Hey, are you alright? Yeah, how's it going? Yeah, hope you're good' kind of thing so, still having that support system, they talk to each other, they have a really strong relationship. But the trauma is left intact. What he said Father Figurine made him realise is that, even after all these years, he's never asked how his dad has felt about the mother passing away, or how he has never asked him how he feels about his mother passing away and how actually talking about it is so much important than just talking. Talking is important as well, you know, male silence is a big problem. But actually talking about the trauma helps and makes you realise how to deal with it or creates an awareness around issues of still holding on to that trauma. That's what I mean by creating works that create an awareness of the trauma, it's not necessarily

by exhibiting it or showing trauma that I can do that, I can reference it, but having

a way of communicating an outcome or a need of an outcome, because we all have trauma in our lives, we've all experienced a level of trauma. Knowing that there is a way to deal with it, or knowing that there is a possibility to deal with it, or move forward somehow, is so, so, so important, rather than just exhibiting trauma and going 'Wow, that was so, so heartfelt and heart breaking.' Yes, it's heart breaking, but what are you doing with that? You're gonna perform it again and again and again. Another thing I've realised from performing traumatic work is how much it sticks with you, even if that trauma isn't related to you. You're still performing trauma.

IA: Like a groove in a record...

IOG: Exactly, exactly, and it does build up in its own way, and I only realised that when I was in therapy after my mental breakdown, and pointing out all of these things that were so unrelated to my own history of trauma, but impacted my trauma. That's why I'm very, very, very empowered and emboldened and what's the word? [long pause] Essentially I'm very passionate about trauma and dealing with trauma. Not necessarily like, we can heal the trauma in a theatrical space, that's impossible. But showing that there is a first step that needs to be taken, whether that's talking about the trauma, whether that's showing that there's a way moving forward, or just having a conversation around it. I think it's important because seeing other works that just exhibit trauma, as an empath, I always leave carrying something with me, and I hate that feeling, cause I can read reviews and go 'yeah, that was brilliant' and yes it was

brilliant, but at the root of it was you exhibiting your personal trauma and that's it. Like you said, it's a commodification of trauma and making money off of it, which sounds horrid, but at the heart of why I'm making that work is the pure thought of just wanting to heal and have a catharsis; I feel like there is a process needed for that, that we might not be aware of. Whether that's a support system during the work, and creating the process of the work, or before and after it. I feel like because we isolate it as a creative piece, we still treat it as other works that might not need that process, but when it comes to mental health I very much think and believe in conversation and conversation with a professional that might know how to inform your creative process to allow for that; that next step or that movement away from 'I'm just showing trauma on stage, and I'm showing trauma onstage because of...' etc.

IA: I imagine when you've been doing the post-show chats there have been people who come up to you and share things, what is that like for you as both writer and a performer? What is that direct contact like?

IOG: It's really eye-opening. Sometimes, again, it feels quite isolating for anyone who opens up to their trauma or who feels isolated by it and feels they're the only one experiencing it. It's always an afterthought, almost but a good realisation that after these post-show talks and after the performance itself, you get reminded that this is an important piece and this is the effect it's having. You might think 'oh, it'll be great or we want this to have that effect'

but to actually see the effect in motion is so eye-opening and empowering. Especially when it's come from a very personal trauma; I always struggle with the...I wanna say passive but also automated response of 'Thank you so much, I really appreciate that.' I'm trying so much not to do that because it lacks authenticity from exactly what the piece is trying to be which is to be honest and open. Sometimes you are lost for words when you hear those stories reflected onto your own work. For lack of better words, it's empowering to go 'Thank you for sharing that because I'm sure it must have been hard to, to say that.' Seeing the process I've gone through on stage has allowed people to open up about that and create a line of conversation outside of this context. That's all I would want for any work. For The Oreo Complex when I performed it at Rich Mix, I really believe in the power of conversation, that Q&As aren't just about 'How was the process? How long did it take to make?' But actually continuing the conversation about the themes, about the work and opening up a conversation, not just for that room but later on, that you might go and speak to someone else that you know. That happened for The Oreo Complex as well, and someone said 'I didn't realise I was doing that, but absolutely I was sweeping the issue under the carpet of, you know, being called an Oreo and oh no, it's just a joke but, over time I just keep thinking about it like, do I actually sound like that? I mean, am I a sell-out?' All of these pseudo...I don't want to say pseudo, but all of these micro schizophrenic thought processes of self-questioning and self-doubt over and over...it just keeps

happening over and over, these small conversations you have with yourself. It's exhausting and it builds to a trauma. Actually realising what it is helps in talking about it and helps in alleviating and dealing with and healing that trauma. I very much believe in the power of conversation outside of the theatre context, as well as in the work itself. I feel that's what's lacking in a lot of works that are just exhibiting trauma, it's the lack of conversation afterwards. It's more than a video from the audience saying how they loved it, it's more than a few tweets, it's more than a social media campaign talking about the importance of the work. It's actually having these open and honest maybe not always face-to-face but open and honest conversations about the themes outside of the context of the work itself.

IA: I'm gonna ask the question again is there anything that you've thought about that you want recording...

IOG: I'm tryna think, because I feel like I've expressed a lot on the mental health side. There are things that I wanted to say that I've said already before coming here. [long pause] It would be annoying if I walk away from here and go 'Ah! That thing!' But, I honestly can't think of anything.

IA: Talk to me about Hip Hop as craft.

IOG: [long pause] Hip Hop as craft...

IA: I think there is a perception that people don't see Hip Hop as a craft, as a skill, as a practice. It's, as you say, exists in the trick and the physical hypermobility.

IOG: [pause] That's a very hard question, because honestly I'm still trying to discover that. Especially from teaching workshops rooted in Hip Hop, about the philosophy, about the culture, about the movement, the mobility necessary to practice the craft and the techniques. I feel like someone more experienced and established in teaching would be...

IA: It's not a get-out Isaac.

IOG: No, it's not a get-out, but I'm... [laughs] I'm only saying this because I'm, again, I'm hyper-aware of my experience with Hip Hop as a craft.

IA: You've been dancing ten years.

IOG: I have been dancing for ten years.

IA: If you have that faux science BS, where if you practise something for ten years you're a master.

IOG: [laughs] Oh yeah...I mean it says a lot about my personality, doesn't it? Hip Hop as a craft... [long pause] How technical should I get?

IA: As technical as you want.

IOG: One thing which is weird, and I think I've struggled with having to use other practices in order to unlock Hip Hop as a craft for others when I'm teaching them this is the holistic practice of Tomislav English, Ferus Animi Terra Nova, influenced by things like...fighting monkey, all of those contemporary-based practices, and holistic practices have a very deep understanding of the body, that lends itself to people who practice in a Western context of movement and

dance, for example. Which Hip Hop does exist in, but I'm also very aware of the cultural history of Hip Hop itself, as a craft, being influenced by Afro, African styles and African movement, and being developed and linked throughout jazz and modern jazz and contemporary jazz and contemporary...mainly in the states. I digress. I'm having to, whenever I teach a workshop, lean on those holistic approaches because it's a common language they would understand; because if I just approached it with a Hip Hop language, it would be very difficult for them to access. One thing I always ask when I teach is 'Have you been in a class when someone just says 'You know just feel it, feel the move, feel the groove, sit in the pocket of the music' and you're just there thinking 'I don't really know what that means but I'm gonna try.' When you do that and you visually imitate and internally, in your body, practice that technique. There are absolutely teachers of Hip Hop and funk styles that know how to achieve that within their own language, but for me, I'm having to speak a common language before accessing the language of Hip Hop. So that's a contraction of muscles and the timing of the contraction of the muscles, the flexibility and the movement of the spine...when you're trying to do a basic Hip Hop groove and jack, how so many people do it when they just observe it visually. Then having to provide a context of actually 'This is what's happening in your body, so find how your body does it, and then you'll be able to access that groove.' I very much feel like there's still a disparity in and a detachment of languages; for me, I'm having to create that bridge

from the commonality of a...I guess, more contemporary style of movement and holistic practice, to access and unlock Hip Hop techniques in the body. I feel like you can teach anyone a choreo and a 5,6,7,8 and they'll be able to execute that. But for them to take it away as a very important technique, is to show them how they can access it within their own bodies. That's how I've approached Hip Hop as a craft, and I'm not sure if that answers your question, but that's just been my process of trying to show others the technique and holistic understanding of what the body does when it's doing Hip Hop and funk styles; cause from then on they go 'Oh, so that's what's happening. It's not just me, you know, shaking that elbow when I'm trying to do a pop or like...yeah, nearly tryna break my knee when I'm tryna do a leg pop or...' So trying to speak a common language when accessing Hip Hop. Personally, for Hip Hop as a craft...again this is my own history...linked to the idea of titles and roles, as I've mentioned before, I've never felt a need...this is gonna sound controversial to master a style. But a need to be proficient at it to achieve a certain creative output, and I'm very much thinking in a theatrical sense. If I was battling, I would absolutely need to train, train, train, train, and master that style to be as efficient at it as possible. But from a theatrical sense, I want to understand what it takes for all of these styles to exist to the level they do in order to let it influence my own work theatrically. So I think there is, again, a lack of archiving of Hip Hop as a craft, a lack of understanding of Hip Hop as a craft and techniques, rather than just fun things you do. So

many people have different opinions on how to access Hip Hop as a craft, I feel that also creates a difficulty; you might have an experienced Hip Hop teacher or funk style teacher teaching one thing a certain way, and you might have another teacher teaching the same thing another way, and they're both valid. They might contradict each other, but they both have the same outcome in a sense where they get you to a certain level. Because there's no consensus as, let's say ballet or other classical styles, no formal, written down consensus of 'This is the right way.' I feel like that also influences how Hip Hop as a craft is viewed outside of that context. This is just a very long, convoluted way of trying to give an answer [laughs] to that. I feel like that it also leans into itself in understanding how Hip Hop is a craft because it has many different pioneers and many different pioneers with many different voices, and many current influencers with different voices as well. Because there's so many threads and paths in it, it makes it even harder for others outside of Hip Hop to access it as a craft, but I definitely believe that there are many, many, many people finding ways to communicate that as a craft and making audiences and reviewers or whoever understand it as a craft. But I recognise personally, it's still a journey I'm undertaking for myself and trying to unpack and uncover. A very hard question to answer.

IA: You're a stick of rock and I break you in half. What is running through you? What are your values? What does it say inside Isaac?

IOG: Interesting. Oh gosh. [long pause] [laughs] I'm

aware of not tryna sound like a political manifesto. 'Isaac is this, Isaac is that.' I like the word 'rooted' in cultures, and that plural 'cultures' is very important. Rooted in cultures... damn. This is hard! [laughs] [long pause] I'm a strong believer in ownership of identity and questioning your identity to understand who you are...rather than who you are being dictated by external influences or environments. I mean, that's always gonna be the case, but not to be passive in environments. I'm a strong believer in the questioning of identity. I'm passionate about music and some themes I hold close to heart, are mental health, identity and masculinity. Again the questioning and ownership of those things. I love theatre, I love writing about theatre. That's a big thing. I'm empathetic. I feel like that's a big thing I've learnt about myself over the past year how empathetic I am and how that influences how I operate in different environments. I don't know why I'm thinking I'm a hopeless romantic! [laughs] Yep, that came out, there we go. I value support, but the right kind of support...and what the right kind of support looks like I'm still tryna figure out, but I value support. Support systems and support networks. I'm trying to unpack what being a Black artist vs just being an artist looks like. I very much feel like that theme and topic...is rooted in who I am and what I am pretty much again like questioning and unpacking ownership. If you were to define Isaac it would be 'questioning, unpacking and ownership.' [laughs]

IA: On this arm there'd be 'questioning', on this arm it would be 'ownership.'

IQG: Yeah. Yeah, I don't know why I struggle with that question, but yeah, I'd say...

IA: Anything else?

IQG: Now that I mentioned it, the idea of 'Black'.

IA: You said 'Black artist' first, not 'an artist who is Black.'

IQG: No. Black artist. Artist who is Black...it's something I'm becoming more and more aware of, especially trying to occupy spaces that aren't typically Hip Hop theatre or Hip Hop linked...is the certain labels to put on myself in order to exist in a certain space. 'Black work' or 'Black artist' is a thing that has plagued many people, will plague many people, and is plaguing a lot of people, myself included at the moment. It's a question I was asked by...oh my gosh I've forgotten her name. I know her twitter handle. It's @swizzbeats who interviewed myself and Em-Jay for Father Figurine and asked if Father Figurine was a Black work.

IA: Shirley?

IQG: Shirley Ahura. That's her. It's something I've always had a thought about, whether you can create work from a Black perspective and it not be 'Black work' or you can create work that is a 'Black work.' The creative team doesn't have to be all Black for it to be a 'Black work' and vice versa. The work doesn't have to be Black if you have a creative team that's all Black. It's more to say, again, and I'm questioning and unpacking that label as a 'Black artist', because I am a Black artist, some works I make are about that experience but again it's to do with that common language and understanding of some

people might not have access to ways to describe that work, and ways to describe work by an artist who happens to be Black. I'm aware I'm slowly

semantic differences for The Oreo Complex. Because it is partly a Black work, but also not and again, it being cross-disciplinary it exists in so

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fitting into those spaces and embodying a hybrid of spaces and the difficulties that brings about. Especially when you input things like class and religion and social and economic situations... how all of those influence the labels in so many different ways. That's just to say that having that question placed on me, I answered it as Father Figurine is a work about mental health, about men, masculine mental health, from a Black perspective. Again, looking at it semantically means that the work isn't about Blackness and Black mental health, but it accesses mental health, male mental health from a Black experience, and I'm hoping that differentiation communicates what I think it does to others... but I'm finding it exhausting to try and operate in those same

many different pockets, and I'm not sure there is answer of 'What makes a work Black?' vs 'What is a Black artist?' etc. I'm aware of coming up against that wall and figuring out how to overcome it or walk through it or just smash through it. Yeah. I think that's all I have. I haven't been on this side of an interview in a long time. I haven't been on that side of an interview in a long time either! [laughs] It was interesting to realise certain questions I knew I would answer, and me thinking of answers and pretty much going on a tangent [laughs] from them anyway! The whole imposter syndrome thing comes up...again, it is what it is and I'm interested to read back what I said and [laughs] scrutinise myself!

