Shabina: Yo, Millie.

Millie: ‘Ey up, Shabina.

Shabina: What is the ‘Northern Voice’? Have you got a Northern voice?

Millie: What do you think? I mean, I sound pretty Northern to myself but I know to a

lot of people I’m going to sound quite – well, inverted commas – ‘posh Northern’ but that’s cause I come from Harrogate but Yorkshire born and bred.

What do you think?

Shabina: Well, do you think I sound Northern?

Millie: You sound Northern to me but I know you and as I said I’m from Harrogate.

Why? What do other people think?

Shabina: Well, I think people get confused about my accent. People have often

thought I was Welsh or Scottish. I think it’s because they’re surprised by a brown person speaking in a Yorkshire accent. And I do get asked a lot ‘where are you really from?’ And again it’s just racism and an inability to accept me as a British Asian person. But, you know, that’s what we’re doing here today, isn’t it? In this podcast: *The Northern Voice*.

Millie: Yeah, exactly. And, you know, throughout this series we hope to dig into that

and explore what that means and ‘what is the Northern voice?’

Shabina: Yeah so what kind of things have we got lined up?

Millie: We’re going to be discussing everything from Broadsides’s origin story to

class, gender, South Asian identity, queerness and politics.

Shabina: Fantastic. So my name is Shabina Aslam. I am creative engagement producer

for Northern Broadsides Theatre Company.

Millie: And I am Millie Gaston. I’m a local artist from the area.

Shabina: So, during the podcast, I’ll be hosting a panel discussion with three invited

guests. And Millie?

Millie: I’ll be hosting individual artists with the experience of the theme of the

episode.

***Musical Interlude***

Shabina: Hello. My name is Shabina Aslam: creative engagement producer with

Northern Broadsides. ‘The Northern Voice’ - of which this is our inaugural podcast - is our aim to explore what it means to be Northern right now and how this translates into theatre for today.

In this episode, we're exploring the origin story of Northern Broadsides, who built a stellar reputation on creating theatre with Northern actors and for making Shakespearean classics accessible. You were guaranteed a good night out in unusual spaces. With Barrie Rutter welcoming you in at the door, you knew you were in safe hands, felt welcome and there would be lots of music with a multi-talented cast who are like a family you wanted to be part of.

So today I've got with me Sue Andrews, who began working for Northern Broadsides in ‘93 just after their first performance of *Richard the Third*. I've got Conrad Nelson: actor composer, choreographer, and director, currently joint Artistic Director of Claybody Theatre. And Ishia Bennison: an original member of Northern Broadsides and worked with the company regularly for the first five years. Seen recently in *Happy Valley* for the BBC and several seasons with the RSC including playing the nurse in their filmed production of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Sue, how did you first meet these other people?

Sue: At the first rehearsals of *Merry Wives,* after *Richard the Third.* Because I’d

only been working Broadsides from a distance cause I was doing another job. I just gave Barry a hand and it was only at the rehearsals of *Merry Wives* that he suddenly realised that you can't do it on your own and you can't do this somebody's already doing it you know 5 minutes everyday. And so I agreed that if I could fund myself, get some funding to pay myself, I’d give up my job and go in with him so that’s what happened.

Shabina: Did you have an office?

Sue: Basically, Broadsides arrived on my dining room table in a big box. Lots of

unopened envelopes from the tax office and I just started going through it and realised that - you know - it needed somebody to actually do that sort of work, so that's what started it.

Shabina: So Conrad, how did you get into all this?

Conrad: I worked with Barry at the National Theatre - I probably got the year wrong –

but let's say 1989, 1990 - something round there - on *Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* by Tony Harrison. And that was an all-male company. And from that, Barry roughly set up - I think - the idea of Northern Broadsides and invited a lot of the lads to get involved in some readings that we did at the National Studio, after which I think the idea then came into fruition.

And I did have a letter. In fact, I've got it in a drawer somewhere. One of these draws which I don't want to open cause it’ll make a lot of noise on a podcast. But it's got the original letter from Barry saying: ‘This is on, . This is what we're doing. This is about the first *Richard the Third*. We're going to try and do it. Are you up for it’? basically. So, I've always kept that letter. Because there's not many of those letters around, and that is the beginning of the Northern Broadsides journey, really. And I went to see the first *Richard the Third* with a bloke called David Crellin, and we went to see, I think it was the last night in Middleham Castle. With Ish and we were up all night and it was a superb experience and so we were already in the team if you like. Although, not in the show, but we were infused by the whole idea.

Shabina: So, Ishia, you were in *Richard the Third*?

Ishia: I was. I was in the very first production, yeah. And I mean, I've known Barry

since the 70s when he worked with my partner and my ex-partner. And so, he just turned –

I was doing a play in Nottingham Playhouse and he turned up and said, ‘do you fancy doing this gig?’ And he explained it to me and it sounded… completely daft to be honest, because until he did this *Richard the Third*, all the kind of Kings and Queens were always posh, were always RP and the servants and lower echelons were - you could have your natural accent, so for him to be talking about.

Anyway, one knew that it would sort of work because it was a Northern piece. It got more complicated when he did things like *Anthony and Cleopatra* and you thought ‘oh come on. Can this really work?’ So it was a crazy idea, but so crazy that you had to say yes really. So yeah. So I've started in the boatshed in Hull with the first show, which was terrifying because we didn't know whether people would just laugh at us to be honest…or come. Well, all the Queens were staying in the same digs in Beverly –

Conrad: That’s a lot of people.

*Laughter*

Ishia: Yes, but I'm talking about the women actually. And so we were in the digs in

Beverly and on the morning that we were about to open, the free post came through the door and the headline on the newspaper was: ‘Northern Broadsides a Flop’. And we went: ‘This is ridiculous, we haven’t even opened yet, this is just daft’. And actually what they meant was that there were very few ticket sales. Not surprisingly, nobody ever heard of it was a completely brand new venture and there was hardly any publicity. Nobody to do it.

Sue: It was remarkable, the controversy it generated with, you know, ‘what a

waste of money it was and why would people be doing this, making a laughingstock of Hull’ and all that sort of thing. So it was, you know, against all odds really at the beginning.

Ishia: And Barrie, of course, is from Hull as am I, so talk about shooting your own.

You know it was a classic, so yeah.

Shabina: So, I would like to hear a bit more about what Shakespeare productions were like before Northern Broadsides. Conrad?

Conrad: It was always conceived that Shakespeare will be delivered with a Received

Pronunciation accent that - as it suggests - is a learned accent. You know, it's not a natural accent, it’s an accent that you learn. So, we were all universally enthusiastic about the idea of delivering Shakespeare in our own natural voices.

The expectation - and it still is now, to be honest - still students come to Shakespeare and add an accent on top of their own accent. Almost…you know, you think that would’ve changed now, but it hasn't.

Yeah. Certainly, that was the pattern it was about Received Pronunciation and, as Ish said, you know, either the Northern or the West Country for the lower class characters. That's normally a bog standard. Either you know, whippet sort of conversation or it's like West Country *(in accent)* ‘everyone speaks like that and it does’. That's about it. Ish’ll tell you a little bit more.

Shabina: Yeah, I would love to hear more about that, Ishia. Apparently, *The* *Daily*

*Telegraph* said the early performances by Northern Broadsides were ‘a tonic antidote to RSC gravitas’.

Ishia: Well, yeah, I mean it was it because everybody - I mean, as Conrad was just

saying - everybody tried initially to put on sort of posh voices when they did Shakespeare and specially as soon as you mentioned the word ‘king’ or ‘queen’. They immediately assumed this kind of whatever it was.

And it also slowed down the language so that people were terribly, terribly slow and thought that that was interesting and really elongated everything that they said.

And suddenly there were we: Northern and Yorkshire quite a few of us, most of us, and Liverpool the same, actually. But doing short sharp words very quickly and it made the language very available and very different. And that's what Barrie did and he was a fabulous teacher and he told him he took me an awful lot about how to use the language. He's so smart. About its use and how to make it vibrant and lively, and he used to call it ‘market language’, ‘market trading language’ and he's right. And that's what was so different. That's why it was so fresh. Now it's part of the lexicon of theatre I think but started by him.

Sue: To me, it made Shakespeare more real, more immediate and I think people

listening to it for the first time in voices that sounded familiar and friendly and easy to understand….A lot of our audience thought we'd rewritten the script. I was asked so many times ‘does Barrie rewrite it himself?’ Well, we’re not rewriting it. We’re just reading it in a different voice. It was as simple as that really. For Broadsides, it wasn't just the Northern voice. It wasn’t people hearing it in a different way, they were seeing it in a different way because it was no holds barred Shakespeare. It was rough theatre. It was in your face.

Well, I think, for a start, I mean, just opening it at venues like the Marina Boatshed in Hull. So the audience is sort of just there in front of you. There's no hiding, there's no proscenium arch, no barriers. And so it was the whole experience I think that eventually people cottoned onto and thought ‘actually, this is really good. We understand it. It's telling us more. We're hearing things afresh.’ They were seeing things in a different way and there were no fancy costumes. Wasn’t any money for it. And no set and that helped because you're going from one week you’re in a castle, the next minute you're in a posh theatre or a ‘velvet space’ as Barrie called it. And there was no time to put up sets and get everything trimmed up. It was the basic stuff and it really brought the text to life. I think it showed you that you didn't need all the trappings, not really. All you needed was a jolly good play and some actors that knew what they were doing.

Conrad: Yeah, it put all the emphasis on the language. Really, as Sue said, you know, and Barrie would say you know, it’s lights up lights down. One que, basically. If you're a lighting designer, you wouldn't have much to do on those early shows, cause it really was two or three ques, and it was the action of the actors that was driving it on.

Which I think was also one of the principles of starting the company in the first place so that all of the resources came down to the stage level as opposed to were locked in an office administrative level above. So, everything was poured onto the stage. Which is why maybe less so then but certainly now that the cast sizes were remarkable cause they were, you know, often getting up to twenty actors touring. That's huge. I mean, there aren't many companies that do that now, including the National. You know who tour that body of actors that come out and that was because it was very light at the top and heavy down on the stage level and that was brilliant because it created a wonderful rolling ensemble of actors who were just using their physical presences to tell the story and their vocal energy.

And what you got - the terrific thing about, of course, playing a site-specific venue like a boatshed or like the castle or, you know, the tower or something like that is you can't buy those sort of backgrounds. And people now - we find this as well - when you do a site-specific piece, the audience are already buying into the concept cause they're coming to somewhere new. So they can come into a boatshed that they've seen there for a hundred years or a castle that’s been on the landscape and not feel any barrier to coming to see theatre. And once they come in there and they hear people of their own voice speaking that back, you've got an association on two different levels. And there's a bit of magic there you just can't create.

And I think one of the difficulties is it as the company went on - early difficulties, when I say early difficulties, ‘hurdles’ I think – is when the popularity of the company grew and it started going into more traditional theatre spaces. You know, like the Hammersmith when we were there for three weeks and then those venues, the success of the company drove us into more popular, traditional theatre venues. And then you had to play… Eventually, you have to accommodate those venues because they don't quite have the cache of a boatshed or the, you know, the energy of those found spaces I think, and then you having to create a space within a theatre space.

So, you know, I think there's a bit of a bit of longing for the times when you could just open a door and go and play a space. We still stay that you know, as Barrie would always say: The first thing I do is when I go to a place I think ‘can we play it?’. And that's what Barry would always say. Can we play it? Can we do it? Can we do it here and now? And I think there’s a great energy in that. And together with those natural accents and those spaces, it really created a groundswell of energy and enthusiasm from the cast and from the public who could hear Shakespeare and classical theatre done in a new voice that spoke to them. that was, you know, priceless.

Shabina: Well, that sounds fantastic. I heard that you went to Skipton cattle market.

Ishia: We did.

Shabina: Can you tell me about that, Ishia? Do you remember? Were you there?

Ishia: Of course I was. I was one of the originals. I was there just after they took the cows out. I tell you the smell was overpowering cause they were still selling them in the ring. So, the first time we went it stank. It was shocking.

And I have to say my abiding memory - because we did *The Dream* there, didn't, we? - And my abiding memory is Peter Gunn, who is one of the funniest people I know who's now in *Coronation Street*, of course. Who'd invented a character called Keith, who was so crazy, and he used to pop up over the stalls as Keith and make us laugh so much before we went on stage. We were absolutely hysterical and he well - very funny.

But we played the most amazing places and that was that was certainly one of them. But also the thing that he desperately wanted: to take shows abroad, which we did.

Conrad: Yeah.

Ishia: Which we did a lot.

Sue: We did.

Ishia: I know, which was brilliant. So first show that we took to Copenhagen, that

was the first tour, wasn't it, which was amazing. Yeah. *Richard the Third* and then *Merry Wives* won this competition. We did it in London and Standard Chartered were looking for a play to take to India. And they chose us and our production of course because it was very available but it was also probably, well, it must have been one of the best shows.

And actually, what was brilliant for me about the India bit was that we took this play. Of course people take it for their own culture. And they loved it and got it all. Got more laughs than we did in other places cause they so understood the play, it was brilliant. But also they took it as the story of an arranged marriage. Which of course we never did because that isn't part of things that we would think were terribly important. And so the cheering when the couple got together at the end and everything was hilarious. We couldn't believe - it was the most wonderful, unexpected response to a show. It was fantastic.

Conrad: Just going back to the cattle market cause I think it's important to say that the cattle market *was* a cattle market. That's what it was. It was never a theatre and just taking that – it’s probably out of sync this – but just taking that lesson.

I'm thinking about what lessons I've taken forward after being, you know, working with people from Broadsides for such a long time. And the idea you mentioned on the intros of Barrie and then subsequently everybody else welcoming people as they come in. So when you're in a space that doesn't have a green room properly, you're getting dressed underneath a board table or whatever. You also communicate with the audience that are coming in because you have to anyway, because there's nowhere to go but it makes a delight of that connexion between art and people you know.

And when we're talking about policies of the Arts Council now it is all about that that connection that Broadsides did so well, and better, I think, than almost any other company that I knew of at the time. Because it literally pressed the flesh of the people were coming to join in. That is a piece of magic that everybody should do and I still maintain that a lot of professional theatre organisations don't do that very well. They sort of hide in a box and then come out to play and I think Broadsides never hid in a box. The box was always open. You could always peer inside and see what was there and that. That is, a touch of modern magic really.

Shabina: So I've heard so much about the way that Northern Broadsides was like a huge family. Can you tell me more about that?

Ishia: Yeah, I think it was because I think for all of us we'd never worked with a completely Northern cast before. So it was that extraordinary thing that everybody seemed jolly. Everybody wasn't - Well, yeah, I mean 99% were jolly, up for a laugh and you had a kind of connection before you started. Which I think showed in the productions. So, I think that's how I would take it as a family.

Conrad: The energy was, I guess, similar across the cast. It was very forward and very. Yeah, it was very ‘front clothy’ the energy, if you like to borrow a phrase. We were all out there. I don't mean that it wasn't detailed. I mean that's the frustration, isn't it? You suddenly speak with a slightly different voice and people think your works, not detailed, it is was detailed. It was extremely detailed when you talk about all the text work that Barrie was doing. That was the core work, but it was accessible and it was fun and so it was family in that way. And it's sort of the way the whole company, I think, sort of progressed was like a family business. It drew in people and it drew in other people and a lot of these actors were first generation actors. You know people - I'm thinking about people like Matt Booth, don't know why Matt Booth comes into my mind – but, you know, he's a farmer's son. You know, that sort of thing they were coming from a different place where they were bringing all of that real world energy into a theatre company. So, it wasn't a rarefied environment. It was practical and energetic right down to, you know, the early days of making the music in Broadsides.

When we went to record *Richard the Third* on the radio, we basically got all of the bins, the dustbins and stuff, and made the music out of detritus, even in the radio studio. But it started off very, you know, it was very poor theatre again. Like Sue was saying.

Sue: I think that was one of the really unique things that Broadsides also brought

to audiences was that the actors didn't just bring their voices, they brought songs and dance and their instruments. So we were one of the first companies, I think, that regularly did. That brought music into things that didn't have music like Shakespeare etc. But it was the fact that suddenly the actor would pick up an instrument and give you music. And it's I think that was something that was unique to us early on. I mean, I might be wrong.

Conrad: I think early doors, the idea of you know actor-muso shows, when I think how long ago that was. Now that's thirty – what is it? Thirty years ago, it's changed completely that. There's an expectation, or there was an expectation, that you would have actor-musos latterly. Well, early doors when Broadsides were touring, that wasn't the expectation, or it wasn't in my mind in that way, so it was - It did start a trend in that, and I'm not saying Northern Broadsides were the only people to play site-specific venues, but funny enough thirty years later the popularity of site-specific playing is come back full circle again. You know we do it as a company, Claybody do it. That's where we find the energy for doing some of the shows, very similar to that early Broadsides energy. It gets your artistic juices flowing so there were some, I think, whether they were designed or whether they were accidental or whether they came through because there wasn't enough money or there wasn't enough facility. Whatever drove those little inventions on. Broadsides were at the centre of those, whether they realised it or not. They were.

And, and I think that you know, acting with the Northern Voice when Barrie was driving that forward. Actually, the principle of that was given to the company by the audience who watched it, because they recognised it. They would say ‘this is what you're doing, you're creating Shakespeare or classical theatre that we can appreciate’. There were other things to drive, I think, the creation of the company, but, I think, like we talked about, the idea that it couldn't tour internationally cause it was too heavy. But when the audience saw what was happening, it was Northern Voice. They really got behind it and wanted more of it because it is something that they've never seen before. So, it was ground-breaking.

Shabina: So did you need a northern accent to be cast in a Northern Broadsides play?

*(Laughter)*

Conrad: 95% of the time.

Ishia: There were a few strays who got in, who weren't, but on the whole it was a passport job.

Conrad: And like Ish was saying, lots of Yorkshire. Obviously, a lot of Yorkshire came through and folks like me and scousers and Northwest things. That was a tricky journey and Barrie will say that. They were looking for Yorkshire. So was Tony Harrison. We sneaked into the sort of ranks of *Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* it was by the skin of your teeth. It was only probably because Lawrence Evans, a Mancunian, said, ‘get him in, he can move a bit probably’ that squeezed that one out.

But really it was interesting because obviously Yorkshire vowels are not that same as Scouse vowels. They’re not. So, you know, sometimes we’d have to fight our corner. We don’t say ‘OH’, we say ‘OWH’. You know, you were trying to stay faithful to your own voice within the context of Northern Broadsides, which was, you know, ostensibly driven by a Yorkshire fella. So, yeah it was good but it was the combination of those voices I think that enriched it all.

Shabina: Could you tell me a bit more about Barrie’s approach to the text in rehearsals?

Ishia: What he didn’t do was psychology. Cause he didn’t believe in it. So, if you wanted to find your own background or your own backstory, you did that yourself. But the text was absolutely the ultimate –

Conrad: The bible.

Ishia: Weapon that we had. Yeah. So he analysed it brilliantly and also knew how to use it. And taught an awful lot of people, including myself, how to speak it as well as one possibly could. And just on that I think he was the forerunner of so many styles. Because at the time so much of Shakespeare was done in kind of, you know, not just velvet drapes, but massive amounts of furniture and changes of scene and whatever. And he brought the simplicity back that then became fashionable again. And I do think he was the kind of the start, you know, the forerunner of all that.

But the text was - nobody could ever say that he didn't use that. That was absolutely the point of the work.

Conrad: Yeah, everything else could go apart from the text. And like Ish said, you

know, you’d have actors going in corners going ‘yeah, but what does my character want to do with you?’ Say it and it makes sense if you know what I mean. That's the key.

Shabina: What was it like adapting from venue to venue? If you were going from a

non-velvet to a velvet space, was it difficult to adapt or was it built in? How did you manage it?

Ishia: It was brilliantly quick because when you do a tech now for most places, you know, it takes forever cause of the lighting changes and you know - goes on for days. Whereas this used to be two hours. So you'd always get your Monday night off or quite often. So then you travel up on a Tuesday morning. Did your tech in the afternoon and get it on in the evening so you didn't forget it - or try not to forget it in my case, so yeah. So it was blissfully quick.

Sue: Do you think it kept actors on their toes? Didn’t it? You know, having to

adapt very quickly to a very different space. And there was always a freshness, an energy at the next venue that it just kept it alive.

Conrad: There are times when, you know, it was cue to cue, rapid, get it on, change.

And, you know, basically you didn't quite know which exit you were coming on or off. Not really. So, as you were going off, you always had to keep an eye out thinking ‘am I going off the right way?’ Cause you’d literally done a two hour, two and a half hour play in two hours so you’re not even having a chance to process it. But it made you think quickly and it made you keep the text at the forefront, I guess. It made you understand spaces a little bit more. You know, actors are not all naturally brilliant at spatial awareness on stage. That's not a criticism, it's just a fact. So, I think it helped you balance a stage when you had to keep thinking on your feet all the time because you were moving so rapidly from venue to venue.

And as you say, going from found space to a traditional theatre space, again, that's a big learning curve. But there was a growing knowledge in the ensemble, in the family, if you like. So that a lot of people who came to Broadsides wanted to come back. So that's got to be - apart from just working - there's got to be a reason for that, isn't it? That actors wanted to come back. And of course, you built up this continuing knowledge who were more adept at that touring model. Who could think quick on their feet. Who knew what to expect. I guess.

Shabina: Ishia, were you going to say something about the changes?

Ishia: No, I was just going to say I think it attracted actors because it was so exciting at the beginning because we had an unknown space that we had to decide where to come in from and how to use it and how to get off. I mean, I always remember going to Hull the second time with *Merry Wives*  playing the City Hall and I was doing Mistress Quickly as a cleaner in a shell suit. And realising it was a jolly good idea with me j-cloth to clean the whole of the steps going down the middle of the City Hall, cleaning all of the bannister which took a long time. But things like that - it was really good fun. You don't often get choices like that and so a lot of those choices were thrown open to you. So there was a lot of freedom, which was fantastic, so you weren't confined. We were all opened up, I think. And I think all of our work improved because of it. So yeah, that's what I wanted to say.

Shabina: I notice that in the later years you did attract big name stars like Lenny Henry.

You played Iago to his Othello, didn't you Conrad? What was that like?

Conrad: Great. I think, you know, Lenny was making a – I might’ve got this wrong so

Sue or Ish can correct me on this but - Lenny was making a programme, I think, for the BBC and that's where Barrie met him to talk about language and talk about Shakespeare’s language. And that association, obviously, then naturally grew because Barrie said, well, you know, ‘how about it then?’ Basically, come and play Othello. And I think Lenny probably sort of stole himself and thought ‘shall I? I'm a comedian. Shall I take this leap?’ Which was significant, but you know, if you were going to take a leap it was best in Barrie’s hands and I think he made the right choice there, did Len. That gut feeling. And of course he was completely embraced within the company when we did it at West Yorkshire Playhouse as it was then.

And what was good is Len’s got a very good work ethic. And he had to because there's sort of no prisoners in that rehearsal room. We were all very supportive but you've got to get on with it. So, I really like working with him cause you do as Iago with an Othello because he was so - yeah, he was so committed to doing the work and I'm committed to doing the work. I like doing the work I don't like not doing the work. You know, if I'm going to be in a show and do all that. And if you're writing the music as well, you've got a different mindset and learning Iago, you've got to get on with it. And you want to be in in in rehearsal room cause I don't like feeling insecure when I go out on that first night. So I wanna work it, work it, work it, work it and find out what it is and so to have somebody like Len who wants to do a similar sort of thing was a good partnership for me. Just me and Len I’m talking about, in terms of that relationship cause we'd always go through the play before we did it. Mostly every night.

And we did it in the end for about nine months. So that was a - I mean, let's face it, I’d had enough after nine months saying those lines cause it's like three hours speaking. I was glad to get, you know, you're glad when it's over. I'm glad when I hit the floor and go ‘over to you, Len, to finish this play off’. It's an absolute delight because it's a wonderful privilege and a little tiny bit of a burden. Cause you wake up, you go ‘OK’. You know, most of your day’s heading towards half seven. That's how it gets me. You know. Obviously, you have fun. But it was a great next first experience that we had as a company that a show – correct me if I’m wrong, Sue - show transferred to London to do that and it was a lovely thing to do that. To be in London, working in London cause that's the first time I've done that for a long time and get to know London. Although I used to live there, get to know it in a sort of way so I get up and have a cup of coffee or go and see the framers down the road. It felt like a village then and I always really enjoyed that. So it was a great privilege and obviously still in contact with Lenny.

Shabina: Tell me about the parties. Apparently, I was listening to Barrie on *Desert*

*Island Discs* and he said all the parties ended with Frank Sinatra's *One for my Baby* *and One for the* Road at 3:45 AM.

Ishia: Yeah. That’s about right.

*(Laughter)*

Ishia: No really. We had fabulous parties, but it was also cause it was such a jolly

lot.

I mean when we went- we went to Brazil. We did a tour of Rio, Sao Paulo and Brasilia. We did lots of kind of press. And they called us ‘the company who laughs’ cause we were always having a laugh. So of course we had loads of parties. We had a ball. We had a wonderful time, was absolutely great. I mean yeah ‘parties-R-Us’.

Shabina: The founding father of Northern Broadsides, Barrie Rutter was invited to

participate in this podcast, and Sue, you talked to him about that, didn't you? What did he say?

Sue: I think Barrie wants to move on. He’s sort of drawn a line under Broadsides.

He loved it and nurtured it. And then he left it. And he felt by coming back to it, somehow he would - he didn't want to be, I don’t know, trying to take it back somehow. I think that was his feeling. So he’s reluctant to do it. It might have had something to do with the technical side of it as well: having to put on headphones and plug himself into something, maybe. I don’t know.

Ishia: Sue, I think you're absolutely right. I mean, I spoke to Barrie about it and he

said he just believes in moving forward.

Sue: Yeah, yeah.

Ishia: And this seemed like, you know, it wasn't. So he's moving forward with lots of new lovely ideas and things, so that's why. Not any disrespect, but just because it is history for him now.

Conrad: I'm constantly referencing ‘not going back’. I I feel like Barrie, exactly the

same way about going on. What's useful is when we refer it, starting a new company and stuff like that is cherry picking the real pluses. So, although we're moving on, not to leave that, not to dwell on it, but to go ‘there's a few gems there to take forward’, so by moving on you take the really good bits with you. And that's about memory. But it's also about practicality and how you deal with people and how you make a theatre company relevant I guess. And they’re really important lessons to take forward and so I'm happy having been on this journey to then take that forward from here on. And I think there’s some real gems, I think, there that we still use as reference points.

Shabina: Well, let's wrap up by talking about things that we can take forward. What

theatre can take forward from what was learned through Northern Broadsides’s adventure. Maybe Sue? What would you like to see the theatre ecology take forward from Northern Broadsides’s past?

Sue: I don't know, just never lose the joy of it. Theatre is such a joyful thing and I

look back on Broadsides, like today, thinking about doing this interview and looking back on the great times we had. But I think the overriding thing is it was hard work, but it was joyful. And I think sometimes we do get too embroiled on wondering what Hamlet had for his tea on occasions, and I think just get out there and do it. Never be afraid to try something different. Cause if Barrie hadn't tried something different, my life would have been different, a lot of actors’ lives that we were involved in would have been different. And I think the theatre world will be poorer for it.

Shabina: That’s really beautiful, thank you. Ishia?

Ishia: No, that was well said, Sue. No, I agree. I think to go back to the text as being the most important thing, to not be too top heavy. I mean, I've done a lot of work at the RSC, which I've absolutely loved. But there's so many staff and such a juggernaut to keep on the road. I think the simplicity of really knowing who you need is fantastic. And also the fun. I absolutely agree about that. And I think a lot of that's been lost sadly because of the circumstances and certainly now.

I mean what a time. What an extraordinary time we've all had. I mean, I got closed down on a press tonight in Leeds having just been to Japan. And with the Japanese cast, who were devastated because we’d had the fun being in Japan, their fun was coming to England to play and of course they couldn't. So it was just heart breaking.

We must get it back and it must be less about buildings and more about plays, I think.

Sue: And people.

Ishia: And people.

Shabina: Conrad?,

Conrad: Yeah, just what Ish and Sue said: less about buildings, more about people. I

think is the key cause that's what it always was and that was always the joy. You can fund a building as much as you want, but without the people in it, there is nothing. There is nothing. So we forget that at our peril. Put it into folks, creative folks or people who have got ideas, who want to take these energies and want to join people together, particularly now when we've been separated for such a long time. And I know a lot of performers, experienced performers, now who feel really, really isolated and very uncertain of themselves because they have not practised anything, they've not been with people. All of those things that we would do all the time. They've not been able to do. They’ve not even next be able to sort of live on the promise of an audition or something in the future. It's been very, very, very unsettling for a lot of people. So get people together, spend the money on folks with energy and put those creatives together with the people that we're supposed to entertain, to serve, to inform. All of those things. That's the joy. That is the joy.

Shabina: Thank you so much. We’ll make sure that Northern Broadsides continues to

do all of those amazing things. Thank you. Thank you, Sue, Ishia, Conrad.

Conrad: Thank you all.

Sue: Thank you.

Ishia: Thank you. It's lovely to see you. Great to see you.

***Musical Interlude***

Millie: Hello, I am Millie Gaston. An actor and writer from Harrogate now based in

Leeds. I first worked with Northern Broadsides during Lockdown 1.0 as part of their Digital Squad. Since then, Team Northern Voice had been busy squirrelling away to create a theatre podcast with the North at its heart.

In this segment, I will be chatting to artists across an array of disciplines, from writers to performers, backstage, and anything in between, by asking a series of questions about their experience of working in theatre.

To continue the Broadsides story, I would love to welcome Laurie Sansom: Artistic Director of Northern Broadsides, previously artistic director of National Theatre Scotland and Royal and Derngate, Southampton. Laurie took over the company in 2019 and has since produced *Christmas Broadsides*, *The Aftermath*, toured J.M. Barrie's *Quality Street*, created an abundance of work digitally throughout the pandemic and most recently helped to set up the Young Writers’ Forge, a writing group for anybody aged between 16 to 25.

Laurie, welcome. It's so great to talk to you and have you on the podcast.

Laurie: Thank you for having me, Millie.

Millie: I think it's best if we just jump straight in with the first question.

Laurie: Go on.

Millie: You have had an incredibly successful career to date. Can you share

something you're most proud of and a challenge you've overcome?

Laurie: Ok, well nice of you to say so, thank you. I guess one of the biggest challenges is also one of the things that most proud of, which was making the *James Plays*, which was a trilogy of new plays by Rona Munro that we produced in Scotland 2014.

The challenge really was this was three full length plays about James the First, James the Second and James the of Scotland. A piece of history that not a lot of people know about. And you could see them all in one day with one company with twenty-one actors. Which was kind of like an eleven hour marathon, which is something that I love. I think theatre should always be like twenty minutes or eleven hours and this was the eleven hour version.

And we were making it to open at the festival and we didn't really have enough time. And so it was. It was so tough. I mean, it was, you know, three months of wondering whether we were going to make it. It definitely felt like running a marathon and we weren’t sure whether we're going to get over the finishing line. But it was really satisfying as well and I think it was challenging because the writing was so good. So that you felt real pressure about doing it justice. Cause I knew these could be brilliant, brilliant plays, but I also knew it was going to take a lot to get them onto the stage and do them justice. So it did kind of scar us all for life in some ways, but it was worth it. So much so that on the final weekend - and we toured them internationally for a bit a couple of years later when we were in Toronto - I actually got the technical drawings tattooed on my forearm.

Millie: Wow, ok.

Laurie: Never had a tattoo before in my life, never had one since. But it felt like I

somehow had to mark that on my body. To kind of just honour what that experience had been like that I’d shared with so many people.

Millie: Yeah, definitely. I think, especially after lockdown, we're really going to want

to emulate some of what you did with the *James Plays* in terms of cost, size, and being in the theatre as long as possible.

Laurie: Well, it's interesting, really. It's like there’s also going to be the things that

gonna be really tough moving forward cause of the economic situation and trying to pick the cultural sector back up again so it can play a really important part in the country's recovery is going to be so important. But one of the things that broadsides has always done brilliantly is tall with really large casts with big plays and we're determined to still do that, even if it's going to be tough. And we're going to find do our damnedest to find ways to do it and to share that with audiences around the country. But it isn't going to be easy.

Millie: Yeah, that's amazing, and so you're talking about Scotland. And that's actually a long way from where you actually grew up, which was actually in Kent

Laurie: Yeah.

Millie: From a very early stage in your career. You were brought up North. What

brought you to Northern Broadsides and what does it mean to you?

Laurie: Well, as you say, I spent a lot of my formative years in Scarborough. I was

working as Alan Ayckbourn’s associate director for years. And at that point that, I was just doing new writing and that was such to an amazing experience for me as a young director. Partly because Alan is such a generous artist himself and his support and his hands off approach - just dropping in the killer note when you most needed it - but otherwise just letting you get on with it was just what I needed. So I was doing six or seven new plays every year for four years. A bit of a conveyer belt at times but actually you get into certain zone with that that you just get in there and do the work with the actors in front of you. And that has a certain power to it. You know, you can't overthink anything. You've got a couple of weeks to get a lunchtime show on and then you're doing a main house show in-the-round. Then you’re doing one in the second space. It was a brilliant time and I loved living in Scarborough. So yeah, it feels a bit like coming home.

Millie: Do you think that's something that you've really brought into your own

practice in terms of creating many shows or are you sort of different in that in that respect from Alan's approach of putting on seven new plays a year?

Laurie: Well, I've never done that again. Interesting about that is that Alan and I are

quite different directors, but there's something we really share which is a huge respect for actors. Alan has that in spades and I have that, I started out acting. I was a very bad actor. But I always think that if I if I hadn't tried acting, I'm not sure I would have known quite how to best support and facilitate actors in the rehearsal room of when to say something, when not to say something. When to get out of their way is just as important as when to give them some support, some inspirational or when to guide in a particular way.

So yeah, I think we shared a lot, but in other ways were really, really different and have very different approaches. It’s a bit like talk about me and how Barrie worked, because in some ways you couldn’t think of two more different people. But what we both share is a love for telling bold, accessible stories in shared spaces with audiences. A lack of pretension about how we do that. And there might be lots of other ways that we are probably quite different, - in lots of ways we’re different - but actually there's something about wanting to share stories in really playful theatrical ways with audiences that we do share. And actually, that's why Broadsides felt like a really good fit for me.

I was coming home back up North and able to take on big Chunky plays with Big Casts, which is something I've always loved. Yeah, so it's a real privilege actually, to be leading the company through its next phase.

Millie: Because you were actually the person who came up with the title for the

podcast, which was: The Northern Voice. I wondered if you could unpack that and say what your understanding is of the Northern Voice?

Laurie: Well, yeah, it was pretty obvious though. Wasn't it, really? Because actually

Broadsides’ve banged on about the Northern Voice since its inception because - as we all know – it was started by Barrie and the actors he brought along with him to do classic work in their own voice, and that remains right at the heart of we're going to continue doing at Broadsides. It's also exciting I think to explore what the Northern vice or Northern voices are now cause the region's changed massively over the last thirty years. And actually how we reflect the multiplicity of voices and identities s across the North is also something that I'm really keen to put right in the heart of our mission.

Millie: And do you think that will be reflected in the disciplines you choose? Will it

purely be the sort of classical theatre that we know of Broadsides cause I've already seen that you have done *The Aftermath*, which was an incredible piece that you did with Northern Rascals. And that's already kind of breaking down those boundaries.

Laurie: Yeah, well what's really important to me is that we don't put up fake barriers

between different types of work, different types of audience, different ages because I think these are sometimes instilled in us by the Arts Council rather than actually being real things. It's like, I know that, as a teenager, I loved going to Shakespeare. It really opened my eyes up to the theatre and made me want to work in the theatre. And also older audiences love watching contemporary work where young people are expressing - like in *The Aftermath* - how they felt in the middle of lockdown and about the changing world around them. So, I think the barriers we put are often perceived ones, or you erect them when they don't really exist. So I think what’s exciting going forward is breaking down barriers between the classical repertoire and new work, between age groups and going ‘well, actually, how can we take people on a journey? To things they maybe haven't been offered before, but with the reassurance that they are still going to get a really powerful, emotional, playful, theatrical experience?’

Millie: Which leads me brilliantly on it to my final point, which is: what does the

future of the company look like?

Laurie: Well, one of the things we’ve be doing is start to make all of our productions

with a group of people called a Creation Squad. It's a way of us making sure that all of our work is really resonant. So with *Quality Street*, which we were touring this time last year, just when lockdown happened. We managed to get to three or four venues before the tour was cancelled sadly. So, we lost four months of touring. But that production, which is a play by J.M. Barrie from 1901, and, you know, it's got some creaky gender politics in there so what we decided was to work with a creation squads of women who'd recently retired from the Quality Street factory in Halifax, who between them had like hundreds of years of experience working on the factory floor. And they shared their stories with us of working there but also they commented on the play as we went along. So, we would perform scenes and ask them for their commentary and it was like having a live Gogglebox. And what they were coming up with was so perceptive and so witty that we ended up recording their words and using them through the production. So, we had this live Gogglebox commentary around the play, and the actors ended up doubling the characters in the J.M. Barrie play and the Quality Street workers. So, that, for me was an experiment to do that.

But we're going to continue with thinking about who we make each production with cause it changes how we see the show, how we see the period, how we see the politics of the piece, how we see the story. And it makes sure that it’s resonant for any audience. So that's what we're going to continue doing.

The digital work, which of course you were brilliantly so part of during lockdown, we want to make sure that we're continuing to explore that because it makes the work accessible more people, doesn't it?

And I think that's something that we're all learning in the theatre industry of how we blend the alive and the digital because the live event is always going to be the thing that we're most excited about and we're championing, that we want to share with audiences around the country. But sometimes people can't get in to see you and it also opens up other creative possibilities. We definitely going to develop that as well.

Millie: Yeah, because I think a lot of the conversation that happened throughout

lockdown was about the space of which we perform. So, what a traditional theatre might be and where we can now breakdown those barriers like you were saying. Something similar like what you did with *The Aftermath* at The Piece Hall.

Laurie: Yeah, Broadsides have always done it. You know, Broadsides have always

performed in the non-velvet spaces. They started off doing that but maybe over recent years has settled into a much more conventional tour. So it is a really exciting prospect to start looking again at performing in really unconventional spaces cause you reach different people. So yeah, that's definitely on the cards.

Millie: I want to end with a quote of yours.

Laurie: Oh dear. What’ve I said?

Millie: ‘For me it's more the sharing of life experience in the rehearsal room than it

is in the theatre. It's a space where we safely explore how we all view the world, how it's knocked us all about, and what our hopes are for the future.’ This quote brilliantly explains your love of the rehearsal room but also helps to define the space we want to create on our podcast. Laurie, thank you so much for taking the time to chat today. I know everyone listening, the team and myself are so excited for you to return to the rehearsal room and stage, which we have all so greatly missed. So Laurie, thank you for being here.

Laurie: Thanks, Millie. And we can't wait to go out and see everyone again because

we've missed you all so much. You know, that's why we do this is to see all over the country, so I can't wait to be on the road again.

Millie: Thanks Laurie.

Laurie: Thanks.