

INTRO

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Jess Brough: Welcome to Before the Applause - an audio programme for hybrid arts festival Fringe of Colour Films. We are going to be hearing from the filmmakers and artists who are behind the films in this year's festival programme. Some of these films will make you laugh, many will challenge you, and others will be thoroughly dismantling in their ability to find their way straight to your heart. Please enjoy hearing from the people behind these remarkable films and this continuation of their stories. In this episode, we are going to hear from Campbell X, the writer and director of the film Still We Thrive.

DIALOGUE

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Campbell X: Well, the film starts with Langston Hughes and Negro Dreams of Rivers, voiced by the wonderful actors Martina Laird, Don Warrington, Michelle Tiwo, and Miss Kate Kim Tatum. I think to be Black and diasporic, we're in a constant state of dreaming, but also of grieving. I can't speak for the people who were left on the continent, but I can speak for the people who were taken from West Africa primarily. And there is a longing and it's existential of who we are and who we were. Many of us don't know our ancestral names unless we have European antecedents, and I do. We can trace our lineage through our European antecedents, but not through the African ones, because very often they were just first name. And weirdly enough, I asked my dad the names of his grandparents he didn't know, and I felt so sad. I thought he knew their surnames, but not their first names, because certain things were not passed out. The Africa we dreamed of doesn't exist. It's not even in memory now. We hold certain things in our bodies, like the sounds we make, the expressions in our eyes, the look. We all know that it comes from certain lineages. We know those things. So our bodies are archives, but they're things that are completely lost. I was really thinking of the predominance of Christianity as a Black thing and thinking about history, because the film Still We Thrive is really about looking back, to look forward. Some of our ancestors were not Christian. They were Muslim. I wanted to center that Islam is also us, not just a recent thing, but also an ancient thing, because we were captured and enslaved by the Moors, by the Arabs and North Africans.

[CALL TO PRAYER CLIP]

I kind of wanted to incorporate that. And that's why it starts with a call to prayer as also a unifying force to let us know diasporically. We are everything. We're not just Christian in these monotheistic religions. I know we are other forms of spirituality as well, which I tap into in the film. A lot of it is the choice of poetry using Langston Hughes and Olive Senior. It's also using Carnival, which taps into certain African spiritual traditions and bring them into a kind of modernist context. Often people think of spirituality as you have to go somewhere to worship, and that's very much based on monotheistic religions. But our historic spirituality was an everyday thing it was also a celebratory thing. It wasn't just sitting quietly and listening, it was participating. And to me, that's what carnival does. The other thing is often in our spirituality, is water. And it comes into the gospel music. People talking about death as crossing the river. So I wanted to incorporate water. An awful water is in a lot of my films, specifically for this reason, about us in relation to, uh, symbolic language that we have in the

diaspora. And we also came to the Americas via water when we were kidnapped and enslaved. And many of us, our ancestors and forebears, came to the UK over water as well. It's crossing the waters, and we are born from water. We're surrounded by amniotic fluid in the uterus. And if you're an evolutionist, which I am, we originated from the sea. The Emoja poem, I wanted to use two diasporic Black people, one from the Caribbean, one from America. So there's Langston Hughes and Olive Senior. And I just reached out to Olive Senior on socials, and she was so gracious, so generous. It was incredible. But I love that poem because it's like the origin story. The story of Black woman as origin. Again, where we are from, as human beings, is from the womb of a Black woman. Many don't want to acknowledge that, and I think her poem does. And using the symbolism of blue, which is often a symbolism in carnival as well. The Blue Devils, people grease themselves in blue. Three Canal did a song called Blue. It is a spiritual color, and it's the color of the sky, too, and the color of the sea. So these are all things. They're not invisible, but they are ties, I suppose, that bind us all in the diaspora. And I'm very much for us exploring more diasporic things rather than just locating in the UK. Because the UK is tiny compared to the rest of the global majority. And often I think we get lost in our, uh, tininess and hopelessness around the smallness of it. So I wanted to join everybody with Olive Senior, Langston Hughes, and using images from the past to current to show we were always here and we were always magic. Actually, we are magic. There's something about people of African descent, black, and it's quite magic. The film uses archive footage, some of which is mine, some of which is the cinematographers. And one thing I would say, and I say this a lot, is as Black people, we do not own our archives. We don't own images of ourselves. And it's made me think about cinema, documentary photography, about the lens and who this lens was for and how do we, as black creators, subvert that lens. Truly, I think of The Master's Tools with Audre Lorde all the time. I make films because I'm using the master's tools, and I question myself, can I really dismantle the master's house with these tools that were literally used to colonise us and demonise and pathologise us as Black people, as Black subjects. And we still have to pay for it. A lot of money. A lot of money. Intercut with the poems is also my writing around the concept of madness. Drapetomania, which was a psychiatric condition that they gave to slaves who wanted to escape. Can you imagine it was ever thus? We're still in a kind of dratomania right now. Ashte Kompha, who was a producer of the film for Smoking Dogs, was incredibly holding and understanding of me wanting to center blackness, so centering Blackness, and then putting it out into the world, and it being loved and having that impact. It's quite moving for me, to be honest, and quite humbling. Because when you're a filmmaker, you make something and you never know the impact it has on audiences. You just don't know because you think, oh, I've made something real good here. And then people are like, oh, shit. I only can say while I was making it, it was the most profoundly beautiful experience. And it was made during Lockdown as well. So to be remotely connected but interconnected is kind of maybe a metaphor for the film itself. But it was our life. And so it screened in Sydney, Australia, and that went down really well. And it's going to be screening in the USA. It's had a life beyond when it started, and it was, um, financed by art with impact who are incredible, um, body who just got what I wanted to do, understood and allowed me to create. I have to say, it's a beautiful piece of work, and I really stand by to love it very much.

OUTRO

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Jess Brough: Fringe of Colour Films 2023 takes place from the 23rd to the 29th June, but this audio programme will be available in perpetuity. If you are listening to this before the festival, we hope you can join us either online or in-person in Edinburgh, and if you are listening after the festival, you can stay up-to-date with our work at fringeofcolour.co.uk. This podcast was brought to you by Fringe of Colour Films, a hybrid arts festival for Black people and People of Colour. This series is presented by me Jess Brough, produced by Halina Rifai and Fringe of Colour, theme music by Xavier LaCroix and is supported by Creative Scotland. Thank you for listening.