Interval Drinks podcast, Series 3

Anyebe Godwin and Cleo Syvestre - transcript

Announcer: Welcome to the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Host: You're listening to Interval Drinks, the podcast where current RSC artists talk to those who inspire them. Each week, a different creative from the RSC speaks to another artist about their secret interval rituals, fascinating personal stories, and the big questions facing artists today.

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Anyebe: Yeah. I think representation is very important. I think that's how a lot of people get started. They see someone that looks sounds from the same place, same heritage, background, accent.

Anyebe: Welcome to Interval Drinks. My name is Anyebe Godwin and I am an actor currently in The Empress, which was part of the Swan summer season at the RSC, which is now at the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre up until October the 28th. And I'm joined by actor performer artist extraordinaire Cleo Sylvestre.

Cleo: Thank you so much. That lovely intro.

Anyebe: Just to get started, I just wanted to ask, what's your interval drink of choice?

Cleo: Well, if I'm allowed to smuggle in something, I could bring some homemade gin, sloe gin which I have in my kitchen, which has been there for about four years. So it would be really sort of strong and top it up with some fizzy water and some lemon juice. So I would have that nice. Otherwise I would have a large glass of Rioja.

Anyebe: Nice, nice. Do you have any interval rituals that you do?

Cleo: Well, mostly as a woman I go to the loo because yeah, they're usually very, very busy. So you can spend the whole of the interval just queuing up. I don't really have a ritual as such.

Anyebe: Can you tell us about your journey into acting and how those experiences have shaped you as a person and a professional?

Cleo: Well, I was brought up in Euston in two rooms, mainly with my mother, and she was amazing because she was from Yorkshire and she was very bookish. She'd been brought up in a children's home, and she was always reading and so I learnt to read at quite an early age. And I remember we had a big table, in the one of the two rooms, which was a dining table, and I used to sort of play under there and make her do little plays with me. And so, so that was from about the age of 4 or 5. So that developed when I was at school. I used to, you know, just do do plays and things at my grammar school. And also I went along to Conti's because I had a very, very strong Cockney accent. And my mother was, I think, worried that, you know, people wouldn't understand me. I mean, I talked like that, I think I thought and anyway, so, um, she sent me off to Italia Conti's, where I did drama there, and I really enjoyed it. I always used to do plays at school and loved Shakespeare and the language of Shakespeare. And then I decided, my headteacher said to me, oh, you know, there's no parts for coloured actresses, which was the word that we used at the time. And so I was even more determined when I left school to, to be an actor.

Anyebe: You're also a singer. So do you think working with music has had an influence on your work as an actor?

Cleo: Well, initially when I started out, I always used to do my the lines like a score, so if you looked at it, my script was as a score. Score. Yes. So I suppose because I do hear the music.

Anyebe: Was that particularly helpful with Shakespeare?

Cleo: I think so, I hope so.

Anyebe: We were in Stratford-upon-Avon at the same time. Yes, and basically neighbours. So I just wanted to go back to hearing about you bunking school to record with the Rolling Stones.

Cleo: That's right.

Anyebe: Yes. Music. Can you tell us how that came about?

Cleo: Well, I used to when I was about 16, 17, I used to go down to a club called The Marquee, and they had an evening of blues, which was very new at the time. Somebody called Alexis Korner used to organise it, and all these people used to go down there, Eric Clapton, Long John Baldry and Rod Stewart, and they would just get up and sing and. I met Mick there, down there, and he came up to me one day and said, oh, we're. I'm starting a group. Would you like to be the singer? Not knowing if I could sing or not. So I went along to a few rehearsals in Chelsea, which was where near where they lived. And it was, it was fine. And then he phoned me up one day and said, oh, we're recording. By then they'd started to get more gigs and everything, and the band was doing well. And so I went along to the Regent Sound Recording studio, and Phil Spector was there and recorded a number which came out not long after and did actually quite well in London, but to date never got any money from it. Yeah.

Anyebe: That must have been a very exciting time. All the names that you've mentioned, I'm guessing this is just before or quite a while before their meteoric rise. Yes.

Cleo: Yes it was. Yes. They were all sort of spotty youths really.

Anyebe: Sounds amazing. It really does.

Cleo: It was a very exciting time actually, because this burst of, I mean, with the fashion and everything with miniskirts and people wearing bright colours, which, you know, because being brought up post-war, it was very, very dull and very grey everywhere. I mean, for example, we'd play on bomb sites. Those were our adventure playgrounds. So suddenly the 60s, you know, was a new sort of entirely sort of new life, really.

Anyebe: Can you tell us about Crossroads and what it was like when you got that role?

Cleo: Well, that was amazing because at the time it was one of the most popular programmes on television. And I'd actually taken part in a TV programme which was BBC refused to put out because they said it was too realistic. It was called Some Five Women, and it was based on a novel by somebody called Tony Parker, who interviewed people. And then. The told the story of five women who had been in prison and for different reasons. And I was playing a 17-year-old who ended up in Holloway through no fault of her own, but because she kept on absconding from the care home that she was in and there was no other place for her to go to. There was nowhere to place her. So eventually. They made this programme, this television show, which BBC refused to put out because they said it was too realistic and people wouldn't know whether we were actors or not. There was a critic called Ken Tynan and also George Melly, and they wrote in one of the paper's - Sunday papers, they wrote, you know, that it should really go out. And eventually it was shown very late at night on BBC Two when everybody would be asleep. And the following day my agent got a call from Reg Watson, who was the producer of Crossroads, asking if I'd like to go down and meet them all.

Cleo: And I went up to Birmingham and saw people like Susan Hansen and met everybody and decided to go. And at the time I was also working at the National. So eventually they decided that they would write me in when I had a break from the National, which was great. It was not long after Enoch Powell had made that Rivers of Blood speech. And then to have a character like myself in the show, I think, you know, people used to come up to me in Birmingham and they used to say, oh, you know, I loved your character Melanie. And they'd be really enthusiastic. So I think it did a lot of good. But course, everybody on the council estate, you know, loved the fact that I was in crossroads. And I remember one guy coming up to my mum one day and saying, "oh, we haven't seen Cleo on telly recently." And my mum said very proudly, "oh no, she's at the National Theatre." And he said, "oh, never mind."

Anyebe: What you've just spoken about is groundbreaking in terms of doing a show and BBC not wanting to put it out there because they thought people would think it's real. What show were you doing at the National and what what what was the experience like?

Cleo: I was doing a show called The National Health written by Peter Nicholls, which was all about the National Health. Would you believe? And what happened was I was doing another show called Wise Child at Wyndhams with Alec Guinness. And one day after a matinee there was a knock on my door, and I was, because I was a Juv and sort of really way up in the building. My dressing room was really way up, and there was a knock on the door, and I opened it and there was Olivier. And he said to me, "Oh, Miss Sylvester, I'd just like to congratulate you on the most wonderful performance." And I sort of stood there mouthing like a goldfish because, you know, a few weeks prior to that, I'd been watching him at the Old Vic. So then I went to to do National Health, and it got lovely reviews, and I wrote to all the rep companies saying, 'oh, I'm currently in this blah de blah de blah. And, you know, perhaps you could bear me in mind.' And I think only one of them replied and said, 'oh, if we're doing The Crucible, we'll bear you in mind.' Yeah.

Anyebe: You were the first black woman to play a leading role at the National Theatre. How was that? How did how did it feel at the time?

Cleo: Well, it's it's a job, really. You don't don't really think of that in that context. I didn't think of it in that context. I just was doing a job I enjoyed and loved. It was only when people afterwards came up to me and said, oh, you know, watching you really gave me inspiration because I thought, if you know, you could do it, I can do it. Yeah. That I realised the significance, really. In fact, there's a podcast with Bernardine Evaristo and she talks about seeing me when I was with the Bubble. Yes. And she thought, oh, you know, there is somebody there.

Anyebe: Yeah. I think representation is very important. Yeah, I think that's how a lot of people get started. They see someone that looks sounds from the same place, same heritage, background, accent. How do you see the industry moving forward now with global representation across stage?

Cleo: Well, big changes have happened recently for the better. I worry about things like AI.

Anyebe: Especially with the strikes at the moment.

Cleo: That's right. Yes, yes.

Anyebe: I've seen a lot of more representation over the last ten years. I finished drama school in 2015, and just the kind of roles that I was going up for then and now, what's kind of opened up for me now as a young black British African man has really kind of widened. Yes. And I find a lot of roles I got for now. I know there's a term colourblind, but I would say more like. The the colour doesn't matter. It's not integral to the character, which has been really great for me. Yes yes.

Cleo: Yes yes.

Anyebe: What fuels you creatively? Because I know that you're a multifaceted artist, so what fuels you to create?

Cleo: Well, just the fact that when you're doing a play, hopefully you're entertaining, enlightening and informing people. I think theatre has a big function and it should be accessible to everybody. As a young black working class woman, I didn't feel theatre was accessible and it should be accessible to everybody.

Anyebe: I agree with you on that. I started acting. I just remember I was fortunate enough to. I was in a school that was based in Southwark Blackfriars area. So we did workshops and this was the time where there was money in the arts. We're talking late 90s, early 2000s, about 2000-01, and they would do inter-school workshops at the NFT, which is now BFI, the National Theatre, and ended up doing a children's version of The Tempest at Southwark Playhouse. And at the time I loved like rapping and emceeing. I used to love So Solid Crew and they were like, why don't you rap as Ariel? And I think that probably stuck with me 'til adulthood. That was one of the experiences that made me become an actor, I think.

Cleo: Fantastic. Yeah.

Anyebe: That was because there was funding in the arts, and they were pushing children who really loved music, drama, art into places and spaces that offered that. So

yeah, I do really agree with you with that. I have a question I wanted to go back to. How was it working with Sir Laurence Olivier?

Cleo: I didn't actually work with him. No, I worked with Alec Guinness. Yes. And that was wonderful. It was a real education.

Anyebe: At the time was the National Theatre a rep company?

Cleo: Yes.

Anyebe: How long did you spend with them? At the time.

Cleo: Probably about three years, I think. Yeah, on and off.

Anyebe: I think that's training that a lot of people would love nowadays as well. Yes. Obviously the RSC are known for.

Cleo: Well, I was lucky actually, because I went to the Young Vic and that's I always say is my training ground really because it was run by a wonderful person called Frank Dunlop, who's now 96, and I'm in frequent contact with him. He lives in New York and he just cast everybody. He was like Joan Littlewood. He just reflected life as it was on stage. For example, in those days, you probably wouldn't see people who are big on stage or small. Everybody had to be uniform. But Frank had real life there up on stage.

Anyebe: It's interesting you mentioned Joan Littlewood because she was known for that, and I actually came through Stratford East Youth Theatre/Young Artist Lab, which just yeah, so just really pinged out to me. And they were known for that as well. You also then became the Artistic Director of the Rosemary Branch Theatre. How did that come about?

Cleo: Well, that was the year after my husband died. And I had a friend who's a neighbour as well, very dynamic, who had just taken over. She and her husband had just bought a pub called the Rosemary Branch, and she was teaching dance at the Central School of Ballet. And she said to me one day, oh, she said, I'm fed up with teaching dance. I'm fed up with the way the theatre's been run, because there was a

theatre up there. And why don't you and I try and run it? And it was ideal because it was very near to where I lived. It was about three streets away from where I live. So I could use of rush there, you know, and to do the box office and everything. And so it was great. It was wonderful.

Anyebe: How long were you the AD for?

Cleo: 20 years we did it. Yes. Then we decided it was time for some fresh blood. And so we gave it up in 2016. And it's great because it's an entirely different audience now. Lots of young people going, which is the future generation.

Anyebe: Can you tell us a bit about Marvelous Adventures of Mary Seacole?

Cleo: Well, that's actually happened... I read the book years ago when I was working at Oxford Playhouse, and we used to have a bookshop near me in Hackney, Centerprise much lamented. And I went there one day and I saw this book with this very imperious woman on the cover and thought, oh, I must get that. She was obviously in Victorian dress. And so I read it and I thought, oh my God, this is amazing. This, this woman, I've never heard of her called Mary Seacole. So I thought I must, you know, do something about it. It'd be great to have a one-woman play, but I'm terrible at procrastinating, so I didn't sort of do anything about it. Then one day we were doing the box office duties and I was saying, "oh, this would make a wonderful play." And somebody came up to me and said, "excuse me, I couldn't help overhearing your conversation. I think these people might be interested." And she gave me a card, and the card was the Florence Nightingale Museum. So I rang them up and I went along to see them. And I came out of that meeting being asked to do six performances of a children's version in June.

Cleo: And this was in sort of January or February. So, as I said, I'm terrible, I'm a good procrastinator. So March came and went. April came and went. May came and went. And I suddenly thought, oh my God, you know, it's nearly June. I haven't done anything, you know, fortunately, I sort of managed to get a costume together. I sat down and it took me just a couple of days because it had been festering in my mind for so long. So I sat down and wrote it in about two days, just the 20-minute version. And then so we did it. And that went really well. And then somebody called Dame Elizabeth Anionwu came to see it, and she was on the committee to get the statue for Mary Seacole. So she

suggested I did it at the National Portrait Gallery, as a portrait had just been found of Mary Seacole. So I did it in, in front of the portrait. And then from that I went to the House of Commons and it just progressed. And by then I'd turned it into a full length monologue.

Anyebe: How did you find performing one-person show? One-woman show?

Cleo: Oh, God! I love the camaraderie of a company. It's great. And you don't have any. You're sitting in the dressing room by yourself. Oh you know, and so and it's like a marathon because once you start. You think, oh my God, that's it. You know, you just have to keep going. Yeah.

Anyebe: I also know that you were a part of and you had involvement with interact stroke support. Yeah. How did that come about at the time?

Cleo: That was because a friend of mine who used to work for them suggested. That I should read for them, so I started reading for them. And the irony is that I had my stroke last year and. I ended up after two weeks in the neurological hospital, I ended up in the same ward that I used to go and read in. It was deja vu. It was? Yeah.

Anyebe: I have a medical condition called sickle cell. So I understand in certain ways about how to manage your health and career side by side. How have you found, how has it been for you since having the stroke and since kind of recovering?

Cleo: Well, it's been quite a journey, really. It's frightening at times because you think, oh God, am I going to go on stage and then not, you know, remember anything? But I've had lots of support. Apropos of sickle cell, Dame Elizabeth actually started the first sickle cell unit in England.

Anyebe: She's not part of the Sickle Cell Society, is she?

Cleo: Yeah, she started it. Yes.

Anyebe: Okay. Yeah. I follow her on socials and I try and. Yeah.

Cleo: She's wonderful.

Anyebe: Yeah. I usually read for them. They have a getaway like a weekend for children with sickle cell, teenagers with sickle cell. And I've been doing it for the last three years. I read for them. It started during I started doing it during zoom, and I either read something from a play that I've written, which is about sickle cell, or sometimes I would just get them to do activities and perform. I couldn't do it this year because Rep!

Cleo: You were busy.

Anyebe: Yeah. Doing two plays at once was manic. I just there was no time. But yeah, very fond of society and the work that Dame Elizabeth has done. What was your first encounter with Shakespeare like?

Cleo: It was actually a book called Tales of Shakespeare by Charles and Mary Lamb, which was given to me at my primary school as a prize. And so I used to read the stories and fascinated by them. But actually seeing a performance, that would have been when I was at grammar school. And one of the other pupils, who's a well known actor called Sara Kestelman, was a fairy in Regent's Park. So we all went along to see her being a fairy. Yes, at Regent's Park Open Air Theatre. So that was probably the very first live time I'd seen Shakespeare.

Anyebe: I can't remember having seen Shakespeare before I performed in The Tempest, but I remember having read certain things in primary school. What about Shakespeare? Do you think we should hold on to as performers and in society now?

Cleo: His currency. I mean, he's universal. The emotions that, you know, in all of his plays. Unbelievable that somebody could have such resonances so late, you know, after he died.

Anyebe: Yeah. When I look at the themes.

Cleo: Yeah. Yes.

Anyebe: Very human, very unfiltered and so flawed. Wasn't scared of showing the actual flaws of certain characters. Is there something that you've watched or read recently that gives you hope for the future in the arts?

Cleo: Apart from seeing you being brilliant in The Empress?

Anyebe: Thank you.

Cleo: I support a company called Company Three, and the first time I ever saw them, I immediately thought, My God and I went to see Black is.

Anyebe: Black is Safe. Yes.

Cleo: Yes, yes. And and Diorama that was very good. And then also For Black Boys who have. Yes. That was very moving. Yeah. Yes. Yeah.

Anyebe: That's it's very interesting you say that I've worked for a Company Three since 2021 consistently. And I was like, I would come and cover some sessions with them. Since 2019, Company Three is a youth theatre that makes work with teenagers between the ages of 11/12. The teenagers usually stay till about age 18, and in that time they've made work. They've made plays called like brainstorm, and then what they've done is they've created a blueprint to make work with young people, by young people, for young people, and then push that out all over the world. So other youth theatres in other countries and other communities can make their own play with those themes. They do great work in and around Islington, going into schools, going into drama classes and primary schools as well. And that's where they get their members and they support them with so many things in school, being a teenager growing up. I really believe in their work, love the work they're doing. Um, I'm a facilitator for them. And I was assistant director on Black Is for a point and then acting job came up. Yes. And that's the nature of the industry. But I really love their work.

Cleo: They're brilliant. They really are. Yeah. And it's so wonderful to see so many young people and so talented.

Anyebe: So talented, so understanding of the world around them, and using stories to understand and to learn and to teach. Yeah, I think that's one of the best things, because I work with young people and facilitate and direct youth theatre and stuff, but with Company Three, just seeing just how much they grow.

Cleo: Yeah, yeah.

Anyebe: What do you hope live performance will do in the future or will be doing in the future? What does utopia of theatre look like for you?

Cleo: Well, I hope it will be accessible to everybody price-wise. Because it excludes a lot of people.

Anyebe: Making accessible to lots of people, young people, and also people that are because I think there are a lot of schemes for people under 25. Yes. And that assumes that anyone 26 and over has made it or is stable enough to be able to go and see as much theatre as they like. So yeah, I definitely do agree with you with that.

Cleo: I'd like re-instigation of rep theatres, because that's the really sort of training ground for young actors. Be nice to have each city and town have a proper rep theatre.

Anyebe: Yes, that would be ideal. That would be great, actually. Yeah. I think you just get better by doing having just come in there to the end of the the Swan summer rep season and going across both plays, which was Falkland Sound and The Empress, two very different plays where I played very different characters. Learned so much on this job.

Cleo: Yeah, yeah.

Anyebe: Just so much. And being able to do rep, which I feel very fortunate for. So I can agree with that. As someone who's just experienced that now.

Cleo: That's that's a joy. I mean, you're constantly learning.

Host: <Bell rings> Ladies and gentlemen.

Host: Please take your seats. The performance is about to resume.

Anyebe: Closing question. Who real or fictional would you most like to share an interval drink with and why?

Cleo: I think it would be Josephine Baker because she was a phenomenal woman. She was an entertainer, but she also had a conscience. She was involved in civil rights, and also she was a spy. So I think it would be wonderful. I actually went to see her. I think it was a year before she died. She had a show at the London Palladium, and it was quite sad actually, because she came out with all her ostrich feathers and everything and there was hardly anybody in the audience. It was very, very sad. And I thought, 'oh my God, you know, this is the end of her career. And she's been so amazing. And then she ends up to play to just a handful of people.' But she was she was an amazing woman.

Anyebe: Amazing woman.

Cleo: Yes, yes.

Anyebe: Thank you so much. For this opportunity to speak to you on Interval Drinks.

Cleo: Thank you so much and I look forward to watching your career in future.

Anyebe: Thank you.

Host: Join us for the next episode, when Amber Sylvia Edwards will be chatting to fellow actor Greg Hicks.