Interval Drinks podcast, Series 3

Charlie Josephine and Chris Sonnex

Welcome: Welcome to the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Ibraheem Toure (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.

Maggie O'Farrell: You know, Shakespeare is a very mysterious and shadowy person. You know, on one hand, we have this enormous wealth of his work. On the other hand, there's so much about him we don't know. But I've always felt that Hamlet is a play in which he becomes most visible to us at certain times, as a human being.

Philip J Morris: It's kind of my bread and butter for theatre making, like, it's the thing that connects us as human beings. It's being able to go, You know what? I understand you or I maybe didn't understand, but now I feel like I know a bit more. Just see ourselves within different worlds that are creative.

Ibraheem Toure (Host): Have you collected your drinks? And let's begin. This week, actor, writer and director Charlie Josephine will be in conversation with Chris Sonnex, Artistic Director of Cardboard Citizens Theatre.

Charlie: Hello, everyone. Welcome to Interval Drinks, the Royal Shakespeare Company podcast in which we talk to people who inspire us. My name is Charlie Josephine. My pronouns are they/he. I'm an actor and a writer. And today I'm very blessed and happy and excited that I get the opportunity to chat with Chris Sonnex. He is obviously for people that don't know the Artistic Director of Cardboard Citizens, previously an award winning artistic director at the Bunker Theatre. He's the creator of Ticket Bank and many other things, so I'm going to get into all of that. But firstly, hello mate. Thank you for your time. How are you doing?

Chris: I'm doing all right. It's so weird to like, be the person that you're like, who does inspire you? I mean, like, what was it like, Gary Oldman, like, not available or something?

You was top of my list. As soon as as soon as I got the email through, I was just like, yeah. I'm a big fan of you as a human, but also of the work that you do. And my intention is to use this platform as an opportunity to just give that work a bit of a shout out, but also like personally, just to have a chat about theatre and about class and about like identity and about passion. Because there's some big questions that I'm having in my life at the moment as an artist and like, so yeah, selfishly, I'm just excited to get an hour of your brain, basically. Okay. So the first thing, obviously the title of this is Interval Drinks. So what are you like in a interval when you go to a show? Like what's your interval drink of choice? Do you have any rituals? Like, do you do any like sneaky Irish exits? What's going on?

Chris: Yeah, that's, a question with like two parts really, because there's two different versions of me. There's, there's Artistic Director, somebody that has like a standing, in the industry. And then there is Chris Sonnex, the boy from the council estate, which is like it's like two different pieces, like two different people. Do you know what I mean? So in some ways I can definitely, unequivocally have ducked out of a play halfway through.And do you know what? For my sins, I've ducked out of a play when there wasn't an interval. Just because I felt it was like, offensive. But anyway, that was a different matter. But as an Artistic Director, as a person that's like in the industry now and I've got power and all of that stuff, I don't tend to duck out anymore.

Charlie: Yeah, because you're a bit of a face now, so like you can't just be ducking out. Like that's a comment. As a company, it's like, do you feel that responsibility?

Chris: Yeah, like full on. It's super tight. You've invited me or like, I've come on my own accord, and then if I duck out, you'll be like, 'Yo, what did we do to Chris?' Or 'that Chris is an idiot, man.' And I'm like, I don't want to be that person. And people have put like, their energy and their time into doing this stuff and you kind of want to respect it, especially as it's my job, but like, as a paying guest, as a person that's just trying to enjoy art. I mean, I think it is on the onus on the artist to sort of like keep you staying there. So there's a little bit of that.

Charlie: Yeah, yeah, same. Definitely. I've ducked out many times and I say to people all the time, like, if you're not enjoying it, then like go. If it's painful to sit there, like, especially if you feel stupid. I say that to my mum all the time. Like if she's like made an effort to get on a train and go into London to watch a show, like she's rung me in a interval before being like, "Can I have your permission to leave?" And I'm like, "Yeah, just go, man. Like, go and have an ice cream or something."

Chris: Yeah, it's difficult. It's difficult. But one thing that's probably going to keep me there is if they don't have any wanky beers, right?

Charlie: Yeah. So as soon as you walk in, and you clock that, you're like, Oh, some pale ale stuff going on.

Chris: If I clock some beer that was made in some bro's like basement that costs £72 and some sort of white jazz is playing, I'm out. I might not even make it to the interval.

Charlie: Yeah, yeah. Fair. No, but seriously, though, all of those little moments like and obviously as a queer person, like if there's no gender neutral toilets, I'm already like, Oh, so I'm not welcome in this building because I can't even pee in peace. Like, I mean, so it's all them small little things that make me feel comfortable in your building. And like, people forget that often they're public buildings that they should be for all of us to come and be in. But most of the time it doesn't feel like that. It feels like I've been invited to somewhere that's a bit swanky.

Chris: They're full-on civic spaces. That's what they're there for, you know? I mean, that's what they originally were there for. And then for you to feel uncomfortable when you when you walk in and the little things are the most important things. Big things are fine. Everybody's obsessed with, 'Oh, maybe it's the programming, let's get the programming and we can get this demographic.' But if you ain't like you said, if you ain't messed with the toilets. If you ain't thought all those little things through, or if you don't see another person that is Black, say, in the whole of the building, like, are you going to really want to be there? And then on top of it, you kind of want a drink - it's like the evening (if you do drink) and then you either you have to pay a ridiculous amount of money for a beer that you don't really want because it tastes like socks or you have to

buy like elderflower and satin-satin because you're like because you don't drink and that costs like £20.

Charlie: Yeah, yeah, yeah. But seriously, like all of them things affect how your body feels in the space. And I think if my body's relaxed, then I'm going to be able to receive the art with more of an open mind, because I'm not somewhere in my body feeling defensive - do you know what I mean? It's just interesting. Yeah. Can you tell us a little bit more about you, please? The work that you do. Can you just give us a bit of a rundown about what Cardboard Citizens is?

Chris: Yeah, Cardboard Citizens, for those of you that don't know, which I'm sure is a lot of people, but because theatre is theatre and it doesn't always translate to everybody, but we're trying to change that balance with somewhere like Cardboard Citizens. Cardboard citizens has been around since the 90s and I've only been there for about two years. It's a theatre company that makes work with, for and about people that have lived experience of homelessness, poverty and inequity. The poverty and the inequity bit came a little bit later, since I joined. It used to be just about homelessness and people with lived experience of homelessness, but I kind of felt like there was a slight acceptance there of homelessness being a state of the status quo. And I kind of was like, Actually, we need to talk about the reasons why homelessness exists and we need to not be passive in it and go, actually, let's get the people that are the most at risk of homelessness and let's talk about those issues. Quite often you'll see, or you definitely have done in the past, a sort of slogan that says homelessness doesn't discriminate. You heard that one where you know, Oh, you're like one paycheck away from from homelessness, right? It's not true.

Charlie: I was going to say, like, good intentions, but not quite accurate.

Chris: It does that thing, though. It's narrative, isn't it? It's interesting. It's like the power of it. Because if you say to somebody, Oh, listen, you might be homeless at any given point and take away any privilege, it kind of scares you into going, Oh, maybe I need to think about that. But actually, if you look in London, it's, um, one in 23 black families are threatened with homelessness at any given point in London, right? one in 23. Any other ethnicity is one in 83, it's one in 4 Queer people are at risk of homelessness at any given point, especially when they're younger. Trans - one in four - goes a little bit higher.

Charlie: Also the definition of homelessness. People think they just instantly think street homeless, right?

Chris: That was the thing that like it kind of shocked me myself as a moment of art being sort of, being in the arts being a self discovery, because I knew that I was homeless because I knew that I got evicted when I was sort of 14, 15 from my council estate. And I knew I was homeless then because I didn't have a home, you know what I mean? I didn't have a home I couldn't go to like the 40 acres Daddy's like house, mostly because I don't know where he is. But I knew there was one time where I was homeless. But then, when you look at the legal definition of homelessness, which is: living in domestic violence; living in overcrowded housing; living in unfit housing, you know; water; mould, stuff like that; sofa surfing. All of these moments of homelessness that can exist, and the more we don't talk about it, the more hidden it is and the more dangerous it is, which means the more successive governments can get away with it. And so it's our job as artists to say, 'here is a problem in society and let's talk about it.' And that's sort of what Cardboard Citizens has been doing for 30 odd years.

Chris: And for me as a person that was already kind of drawn to the underdog, I suppose, in many ways, like because of my upbringing, for me, it's an interesting - and I'm talking very London specific now - but like in the council houses, in the estates and the big estates, you know, like 10s, 20s of like estates in one estate, you know, 120 blocks in like one estate, the diversity in those places is insane. Look at how many people live, whether whether it's Pakistani families, South Asian families, Black families, queer families. Like so much difference in those estates that luckily for me, I was drawn into into that being to be celebrated. So when I started to do any sort of work at all, I was always drawn to the stories that and the people and the artists that were underrepresented in theatre but weren't underrepresented in my life. And stories don't have to be like spoken word - it could be food, it could be the way that you play football or, you know, people just dancing.

Charlie: How you dress, how you move down the street, everything. Yeah.

Chris: Trainers.

Charlie: Yeah, yeah, definitely. That's like a big communication tool for me. I clock someone's haircut and their trainers instantly and I'm like, okay, I feel like I know a little bit more about you. Why theatre? Like, how did you get into theatre in the first place? What was it about it that just made you go, 'Oh, yeah, there's something here that's making me feel excited.'

Chris: I want to give like a really, like, highfalutin, lovely poetic answer to this. But really, I didn't know theatre particularly. I don't remember the first show that I went to necessarily - I'm sure it was a musical, like it was probably Oliver! Or something. Do you know what I mean? Like, but I don't remember it. But what I do remember is being at school and being good at it. When I was in primary school and secondary school I had drama and music lessons - secondary school, there was a Labour government that cared about arts in general. So in secondary school I did drama from Year Seven all the way to the end.

Charlie: I think the same for me - I remember doing loads of it. Yeah.

Chris: No, you don't do that anymore. So many different state schools don't, don't have that. But also in primary school I had music lessons and then you would do the assembly stuff, right? I think it was because I was good at it. But never in a month of Sundays did I ever think that I would make a career out of it, that I would be in it as a thing.

Charlie: After like ten years of doing it, my family still think that I'm lucky that I get paid to do what I do. Like that's a fluke. And I'm like, "This is actually my job." But also I think people forget or maybe it's, a problem in the industry that it's so wrapped up in itself that we're not very open about the many different possible jobs in theatre, from like sound designers to cleaners to producers. I didn't know that these jobs existed at all.

Chris: I reckon 80% of the population don't know it exists. And don't understand that there is like so many different ways of making a living. I think when I first got my job, first job, first paid job, really it was like an admin job at the Royal Court. And that was the moment where I was like, Well, first of all, I'll get more money than I would have when I was working in retail or on the on the sites or whatever, so that's a bonus. And now I'm just like - I feel so lucky to be here. It's not until later when you start understanding like

the systemic reasons why so many different people can't be in the industry, that you start going, 'Well, hang on a minute, Maybe I wasn't so lucky, you know?'

Charlie: And then you find yourself Artistic Director at the Bunker like and still fuelled by where you come from and that diversity that you grew up with and an awareness of the inequity. What was your story there like? What were you trying to do with Bunker.

Chris: The Bunker is an interesting one because, again, I took over that space and I don't think it was doing too much really. It was kind of a venue. And most of those fringe venues at that particular time or just before that particular time, what they were doing was they were a business. So in my head, in my kind of like romantic version of theatre, because I'd started at the Royal Court from my first job like and just rose up in the ranks all the way through. So I started at like the elite. I was kind of like starting at a premiership club and then being like, "Yo, how does this conference thing work?" You know what I mean? It's like it's kind of interesting because I hadn't really clocked it, but you learn quickly, right? And so in my romanticized version of it, I was like, Oh, fringe theatre should be that grassroots space. You know, the place where the like people are coming through. And it means that it's kind of like a utopia before it gets to the West End, before it gets to like different organisations that are kind of exclusive. This could be this like, lovely kind of utopia of different classes, different creeds coming together, making work, right?

Charlie: Yeah, like raw, honest, gritty, like first album stuff where you just fall in love with people and you're like, Oh yeah, like you haven't got polished yet. And you haven't, like, got heartbroken by the industry yet. And yeah, just full of that hope and making loads of mistakes and all of that.

Chris: Yeah, that's what I thought it would be. I thought it would be grime, I thought it would be punk. I was like, okay, here we are. And then... I couldn't be more wrong. Like, it was less inclusive than like places like the Royal Court in the respects that it was pay to play quite a lot of the time. So spaces were being used, so people would pay a certain amount of money and they would get to put their show on and they would have to fund it. And that's how the sort of fringe ecosystem used to work. It's changed now massively because of a lot of different people really persevering and trying to change it. But back then, it was it was kind of like the Wild West, you know what I mean? So but a

Wild West with nobody that was from any lower socioeconomic background. It was rarely not middle class, upper middle class, people that had gone to Cambridge, like all of that stuff - and people that had money to burn, really to put shows on. So that was a bit of a fall from, like 'oh'. Realising that.

Charlie: Yeah, not quite your expectations because it's like, no, no shade on them people. But that's just one flavour of work. And what you were trying to do is like open up space for all the other flavours. And also, like, my personal taste is just always going to be much more from that, like raw punk grime, messy place that's like coming from a place of lived experience I guess.

Chris: It's interesting because it was whatever the middle class, upper middle class version of grime is, I don't know what it is. But it was that, because because people were were honing their skills in a kind of non-risk situation and then they would end up going to maybe making the step to the bigger venues and being noticed. So it was grassroots for them. They were still coming through the ranks, but nobody else got a chance to play and to learn. And so those people that were getting big hits that were from working class backgrounds or from the global majority or that were queer, they would have to hope to get a big break straight away at somewhere like the Royal Court or the Bush, not go to somewhere like the Bunker or wherever, like another fringe venue, and then all of a sudden become sort of hit. So it was incredibly like, exclusive for so many different people. And that's what I think in that moment people were wanting a change. And I was just lucky to be on that precipice there at that moment to go, okay, well, we can make this space that, we can make it the utopia. We will care about who we're programming.

Chris: We're not just chasing the money so that we can continue to function as a business, but we're also going to care about who is writing the work, who is making the work, the work we have to believe in unequivocally and the work might well fail at some point. But for me, it was mostly important about who the writers were, who the directors were, who the artists were that were involved, and giving them a chance, and then trying our hardest so that we could fund it. And I had a great team that really helped the producing of all of these shows, to get their funding right. And so we had a run of like a year of Arts Council funding. It was kind of ridiculous. I think maybe one didn't, which was which is a joke because that one went on to win or to be nominated for a Stage

Debut Award. We tried to make it work in the respect that we were a business and we still needed the money income, but we also wanted to be something different. But it was my point to be like, if you are going to come, then we have to make that venue, that theatre, as inclusive as possible.

Charlie: Now because I remember stuff like, there was like tampons in the toilets. The bar was just like, calm, like a bit dripp (not going to lie) from the ceiling and stuff, but like, yeah, a bit grimy around the edges, but like, basically I felt like if I was walking down the street and I was like, I just want to pop in and sit and do a bit of writing or whatever, like, I could. It felt, um, closer to that utopia of a civic space or what basically theatres are meant to be, but I never remember there being Tweets about the fact that you had tampons or whatever, it just was there. Like it was just part of the fabric of that building, like, and sometimes I wish that people were a bit more like that, like just shut up and get on with it, rather than telling us what you're doing. Do you know what I mean?

Chris: You tend to cause less problems for yourself as well, because if you're doing the right thing, you're not putting yourself on the parapet. And also you can just stand by it because you're doing it, right? You're not doing it because you want to try and get the headlines. And that's the difficult thing because we're in that kind of like we need to stand out from the crowd kind of thing because there's so many different arts offerings. There's Netflix, there's dadadada, all of that stuff, right? How do you how do you stand out above the crowd? And so often what the right wing might call the 'woke agenda', is used as a sort of selling point. But the thing is, you're not doing it because you're trying to get a headline. You should be doing it because you're trying to make people feel inclusive so and feel like they are here and that they they exist and that we care about those people. Every single person that walked through the Bunker should have felt valid. And it's not just for the show. There's things of like having like non-wanky crisps, you know what I mean? Like we had Taytos, which - just to salute the Irish, because they're the best crisps. But, we had them because we knew that they were relatively cheap. Do you know what I mean? Yeah, okay, fine they rattle around - they're in like foil or whatever, but like, if you were hungry and you were coming from a show and you maybe spent your last like £10 on a ticket to come and see a show because you really care about it, you know, it would be nice to know that you can get something just to fill

your stomach for a second, you know what I mean? Or even like I think at the end we were doing like free tea and coffee as well.

Chris: You could just come in and take it from the side and if you wanted to put some money in that was fine. But yeah, it was everything, the tampons, the sanitary towels. I mean, the rationale right for that was also to shame people. First of all, everybody should just put sanitary products in the toilets, Right? If you've got toilet roll in there, then put the other stuff in too, because people are going to need it. You know what I mean? And we weren't a publicly funded place, we didn't have very much money, but if we could manage to put some tampons and some sanitary towels in the toilet, then everybody else in the world can do that. I'm talking Starbucks, I'm talking whatever. You know? I mean, not just theatre, like everywhere.

Charlie: From what I know of you, and I've been watching you for a few years now, like, you seem to really interrogate what your intention is and then take action that matches your integrity and just get on with it. And I wonder how challenging that is when you become the artistic director of a company. Because as a kind of freelance artist, I'm only responsible to myself, right? As a human. But when you are kind of the face of a company and the decisions that you make are affecting that year's work or that five years' work or however long you're going to be there, I guess the question to you is like, how much of a challenge do you find it to like, hang on to your integrity when faced with decisions, as the artistic director of a company.

Chris: I think it's guttural, first of all, is the answer. You're giving me like a massive compliment by saying that like I really think it through and then I go and do it. More often than not I've thought about it, but it's the gut instinct where I'm like, 'Yo, I need to I need to do something here' or there's something in my power that means that I can do something and so I shall do something. Do you know what I mean? But it's probably because I'm paying attention to the world. That's the first thing I think. So I can be guttural. There's a lot of madness going on in the world. And if you ain't if you're sleeping on that, that's a problem. Like even just as a civic human being, right? That's that's a problem.

Charlie: And probably a product of fear. Right? Because it's like sometimes it's just so overwhelming.

Chris: Fear is the most potent thing that the powers that be use to manipulate you into doing exactly what they want, really I suppose. If you look at a vast amount of working class, white working class human beings and the way that they buy into the vitriol of immigrants and council houses and them not not being council houses, all that comes out of is fear, the fear that they won't have somewhere to live, fear of the unknown, fear that somebody is going to take their jobs, all of that stuff. When in actuality everybody's in the same boat. Look at loads of people that are spouting out conspiracy theories or talking about racist vitriol or transphobic nonsense, like. All of that stuff that is is it has to come from somewhere. And I think quite a lot of the time that is coming from fear that has been fuelled by by somebody. And that's what I have to kind of believe. I can't believe that we're all just innately problematic - do you know what I mean? So the theatre is a really interesting thing, I think, because it's a microcosm of society. So all the things that are happening in governments and in society today is happening in theatre in different ways, right? So when you when you're a freelance artist, I don't know whether it's true, Charlie, or what you say when you're like, oh, I'm just sort of looking out for myself because I've seen your work and I don't think you do look out for yourself. I think you often are looking out for the people that you know that are going to be in your shows, the people that are going to work and be part of that show. You're looking out for them innately whenever you're writing anything down, when you write down somebody's ethnicity or class and in the character.

Charlie: I'm basically waking up to the choices that I'm making as an artist and how they are feeding into the utopia that I'm trying to create. Like you said, like a rehearsal room could be a version of the world like that would like to see, you know, I mean.

Chris: A 100%.

Charlie: And the big sticky questions that I'm putting on stage, I'm genuinely hoping that the collective consciousness of the audience and the actors and all the creatives, that together we can solve it, whether it's patriarchy or like white supremacy or whatever. I'm like, 'Here's a question. Let's all try and work it out' because I don't know the answers. At the minute we're casting for Cowbois, what's going to come to the RSC later this year And like it's fascinating for me to go, 'Oh, as a white writer, where have I accidentally just written white characters and not considered their race? And where are they all 30

years old because I'm in my 30s and like, where are they all able bodied because I'm able bodied?' Do you know what I mean? Just questioning those things and opening myself up. It's doing the same thing that you're saying of like, putting your money where your mouth is and like making sure that your, your walk matches your talk. But I don't know. I just see you doing it beautifully. And it inspires me because even when you're placed in a position of authority or power, you seem to still be hanging on really true to like what your core is like of why you're doing what you're doing.

Chris: It's difficult, though. It isn't as easy as when you are... I mean, with the Bunker because there wasn't any money and there wasn't any major funders and there wasn't any board, in fact, it was a CIC. So, you know, it becomes slightly different because what you can say and what you can't say is sometimes dictated by things like the Charity Commission. And sometimes boards don't want you to rock the boat. So you kind of have to walk a fine line a little bit. I think sometimes what I've got is, well, I've got like a huge amount of privilege, first of all. I know that if I was a different gender that I wouldn't get away with probably half of the things that I've done in my career, because I would have been either sort of shouted down or ignored or...

Charlie: Not even had the confidence to do it.

Chris: Not even had the confidence. Yeah, exactly. Because I kind of got to look after myself, right? Because I'm scared. Because people are going to fire me or not take me seriously or think that I'm mouthy or bossy and those things that don't apply to me because I'm a white man. I don't get called bossy, you know what I mean? I can shut up in a whole meeting, which I tend to do quite a lot of the time just to listen. And I know, I notice when women do that, or people that aren't white do that, there's often a sense in the room where people are like, 'Well, that person is well mardy.' Like, do you know what I mean? Like, 'what is their problem, man? Why didn't they speak?' Whatever. And I'm just like, 'I didn't speak.' You know?

Charlie: Yeah, it's different.

Chris: So it is difficult in institutions as well, because because you have to navigate. And sometimes I've made mistakes like all the time when it comes to how I've gone about things and what it means to like an organisation and what it means to the people

that are working there, because you kind of live and die by my word, you know, and we're we're never going to be perfect, you know. But often I find it really difficult not to say something. I mean, social media is the issue a lot of the time because you put it out there, it stays there. Do you know what I mean? So you want to say something and stick up for like different people, and be reactive and actually call call shit out when stuff is being said. Like there's so many decisions in the industry that I just want to like, I want to call out on a regs, you know what I mean? I'm just like, Are you for real? You said that? It makes you second guess it. So now I'm a little bit more selective. And you probably noticed, anybody that follows me, that I'm a little less, angry on social media, but it turns out that I'm more angry in person now. It has cost me, I think. I'm almost positive there's like jobs that I haven't got because of it, interviews that I haven't got because of because of who I am.

Chris: You know what I mean? You kind of want a safe bet, you know? You want somebody that wants to toe the line sometimes. So I know that it's definitely impacted me and maybe even even my career as a director, because often I'm seen as an artistic director and not necessarily a director, which is sometimes difficult because like, really, I want to be in the room and I want to work with people and I love that. It's just that I know that I can bring a little bit more in a different perspective, because of lived experiences. And because it pays - the P-A-Y-E, you know what I mean? I need that - I don't have mummy and daddy and all of that stuff like. If we're looking at, why be an artistic director? Or just work in a building, to be a producer or to be, I don't know, in development or whatever. To me, the massive draw on that, regardless of anything, is that you're getting paid on a regular basis. You know what I mean? Like, I'm in debt because I grew up poor, you know what I mean? And I also, like, spent all of my time working in an underfunded theatre where, you know, I needed to, like, take out a loan or take out credit cards or whatever. And so I'm only like, slowly pulling it back now.

Charlie: Yeah. It feels like class is still like this thing that's not spoken about. Like it's definitely for like five years, there's been a big cultural conversation starting to happen more vocally about gender and about race. Because for, for me, like I can't separate class and my queerness - they intersect in such a clear way to me. But it seems like most discussions about diversity in this industry, like class is just absent from that. Like, why do you think that is?

Chris: I think the problem actually with class is that whenever you say 'working class', I think often the psyche of society, I tell you, white working class people are talking about class, because that's what's in the media a lot. And I would say that I don't have the statistics to hand, but I would say in London, white working class is the minority in the working classes, I would imagine. So we're not talking about class because A, it's super intangible.

Charlie: Mercurial I want to say. Yeah, I've never said that word out loud before. Yeah, I think it's mercurial.

Chris: Look at us, on the Royal Shakespeare Company podcast saying words like 'mercurial'.

Charlie: But felt shy because I was like, I've definitely read that word, but I've not said that out loud before. Do you know what I mean? So I was like, Go on, mouth, Don't let me down, please.

Chris: You got it. That's a different thing when you're in meetings in like what is like, quintessentially, like, just people that are not from your background, right? And you're like, saying words. You're like, No, whoever said that word right or wrong, but I'm just going to go with chest and just be like, Yeah.

Charlie: Yeah, exactly. Like with Shakespeare, the first time I ever, like, read some Shakespeare out loud, I was like, I don't know what I'm saying. And I don't know if I'm saying it right. And people in the room are laughing because I'm getting it wrong, but it's like not being funny, I didn't grow up reading Othello. That wasn't my bedtime story. Do you know what I mea?

Chris: Yeah, yeah. Imagine if it was though, that would be a long, that would be a long bedtime story. I think the other thing is, is that theatre's got a problem with class because, because also, and I hate to say it, I think there's, there's quite a lot of pretenders out there as well because I think this, this oppression Olympics that has kicked in has really done a number on a lot of people, not just people that are like feeling like they're being oppressed because equality has been given. Right. Which is which is privilege. Right. All of a sudden, you if you're privileged and you see someone

getting what is deemed to be some sort of equity or equality that feels like oppression to you because you're not getting it right, which is nonsense. It's done a number on people that are working class as well, because then it's like, well, no, you're not working class enough or, or you're not benefit class or you're not criminal class or you're not, you're not traveller class. It's really unhelpful actually to the cause when you start battling against you each other. It's the same thing like the government doing when when you know the white working class are having a go at the immigrants because there's no council houses. But what the truth is, is there isn't any council houses because you sold them all off. Do you know what I mean? It's nothing to do with the immigrants, right? Yeah.

Charlie: For me, I think it's three things, right? It's one is like the actual money in the bank, like your finances, what your parents are earning. What's going on? Can you pay the bills? Yes or no? That's the first thing. The second thing is culture. Like how people around you talk. Are you going to the pub? Are you going to watch the football? Are you are you listening to opera? Are you getting your food from Asda or Waitrose? Like what's going on? Like the culture around that's affected by how much money you've got in the bank? And then the third thing is like your sense of safety in the world, your sense of worth in the world like, so like even though now I'm in my 30s, I'm paying my own bills. Like properly for the first time in my life, like I'm earning money. So like, my money in the bank has gone up significantly in the last, like, I don't know, ten years, five years whatever. So my culture has changed slightly. You know, I'm eating avocados, I'm drinking flat whites sometimes - occasionally. I'm still in Asda, but I'm like, I got one foot in each world.

Chris: Extra special innit?

Charlie: Exactly. But like my sense of worth and safety in the world, I've got some healing to do there. Do you know what I mean? And so when I walk into the National Theatre, I'm always, always thinking 'security guards going to clock me' like. Like I'm always thinking, you know, working at the RSC, I'm always thinking, 'Oh, they're going to chuck me out any minute.' Like, still, you know, even though I've worked there before and like, you know, I've been doing this job ten years, I deserve to be here, arguably, like, so when we talk about class, what bit are we talking about? Do you know what I mean? And as an artist, what kind of work are you making? How can you share stories

that are about any aspect of those three without it being poverty porn for someone else, or like kicking up old wounds and trauma for yourself? Like it's just challenging all of that, I think. So the conversation around it is just not nuanced enough, I think.

Chris: And we because we live in this like football-ification world where like we have to go by the colour of our scarves, right? We support this team and you support that team. And I'm right, you're wrong kind of vibe, right? Without looking at the nuance, social media doesn't help, right? So you can't have these these intricate conversations about what it means to be working class. Like if you would look at the way that they talk about class theory or whatever, Right? It would be like, well, you can leave being working class or you can leave being lower socioeconomic, right? You can leave that. Yeah. See, the thing about poverty is, is that it doesn't leave your bones. It's from the way that you hold yourself from the food that you eat. Do you know what I mean? Like, I'm six foot one, right? But my posture is always low, like I make myself smaller. And there's part of me being aware of the world and knowing that I'm a six foot one man, that is quite big. Do you know what I mean? I don't want to scare people. So I've like made myself smaller, but also because I was scared all the time, you know what I mean? So I've got into our boxer stance that is really messed up my posture, and everyone thinks I'm like five foot ten or something when I'm not. I'm like way taller. So even those little intrinsic things that happen, the remembering what it was like not to eat or the remembering of what it was like not to have that money or feeling like you might have to rob someone just to get by. Those feelings don't leave you, unfortunately. So to say that I can leave my class feels weird because. Because then you have to then deny all of the trauma and all of those emotional feelings that feel true. You have to leave them by the side.

Charlie: Yeah. Which is why I get frustrated when our organization will to hire someone because they're working class or because they're non-binary or because they're black or because they're a woman or whatever. Like because it, like, you know, ticks a kind of diversity box is the cynical part of me or because like, honestly, they're like, Oh, this story centres that person. So we need to cast someone, you know, which is great. But if you're not willing to look at the kind of - I want to call them like soft skills, the kind of like cultural stuff, the unspoken things in the building, the posh crisps, the toilets, like. Those things that affect your body as an artist. It's like you're not going to get the best work out of that person because they don't feel safe to be seen. So I would love it if organisations

would consider those things when hiring someone. So finding ways to be creative to like really, truly support that person practically, emotionally, spiritually, like. Those kind of conversations, we need to start having them.

Charlie: Before we run out of time. I just want to give space for the Ticket Bank. Please, can you talk to us about that?

Chris: Yeah. So the London Ticket Bank was an idea that I had, but I probably should say that a million different people probably had variations of this idea at some point, somewhere along the lines. I don't really believe that there is an original idea out there. Do you know what I mean? I think there's a lot of shout outs to be had, like the Black Ticket Project, and a lot of other other places that were doing a load of lovely, beautiful things. I'd been in a refugee camp for six months helping set up a theatre and I remember the immediate thought that I had was like, 'why am I going to set up a theatre in a refugee camp? Because surely they need like intrinsic political shifts and like housing and food and stuff like that.' And obviously I was there for about two seconds and realised why theatre was needed and why the interaction with art was needed - because it's a human right, right? People need to feel, it's not just about surviving, it's about living, man. You know what I mean? And art gives you that moment like, yeah, food. And if you just had food and a house and that was it, it would be a pretty boring life, it wouldn't be a fulfilled life, do you know what I mean?

Charlie: That's not living, that's just surviving, right?

Chris: Yeah, exactly. And that's sort of stayed with me ever since, really. And I realised with the cost of living conversation that was being had, because, because it was caused by however many years of austerity, right. And greed. But we were also talking about heat banks and, and not just food banks, but heat banks. It's just insane that people have to do that. And that's not a fair society. But you realise that there's a whole industry, there's a whole culture that you can't access if you are on the breadline that's the last thing you're going to think about. What I realised was that after the pandemic, there was a lot of tickets for loads of different cultural events that were just not being sold. So my my thought was, why can't some of those tickets just go to people that couldn't necessarily afford them? And that's not to say that I think that price is the only barrier to this, to the working classes and and people from lower socioeconomic

backgrounds and people that are struggling going to the theatre. I think there's a whole cultural shift that needs to happen. But we were lucky enough to get a lot of partner organisations together to to say that they would if they could, if they had shows that weren't sold out, they would give tickets to people that needed them for nothing.

Chris: Like people could donate if they wanted to, because I think it's important that people feel like they've got agency on it, but like ultimately that's a free ticket. And I wanted people to to go and enjoy something and have a moment of an hour/two hours of something that they might hate or they might love, but at the very least they would be warm in the colder months, you know? They could go to a warm venue and be part of it and enjoy it. People can absolutely say no and they might not want to go to these different venues. And that's completely fine because that is at least you're asking. I don't think I was ever asked when I was a kid, you know what I mean? So I think it's interesting because it's not just about the tickets, you know what I mean? I don't know. I think I think it's more and I think there's some like inherent issues that need to be fixed with within culture. It's interesting.

Charlie: Yeah, massively. It made me smile so much when I first heard about it because I was reading about pleasure activism. There's that incredible, Dr Adrienne Maree Brown started writing about it, like who gets access to pleasure? Not just erotic pleasure, but like even just standing still, like in the car park, letting some sunshine come on your face while you're picking up your kids. Like just taking a moment to, like, experience the pleasure of being alive, like you're saying. And art gives us that and helps us ask big questions and makes us like. Yeah, it's 100% vital for our mental health and a human right.

Welcome: Please take your seats. The performance is about to continue.

Charlie: So. Yeah. Thank you so much for this conversation. I'm buzzing by the work that you're doing. I think it's really important. As if we got a three-minute bell ringing before we all got to go back into the theatre from this interval conversation, who real or fictional, who's a person that you would most like to share an interval drink with and why?

Chris: So I'm going to go. I'm going to go Charlie, but also with Kathy Burke. I would like Kathy Burke to be jamming with me, having a having a little drink, calling people 'pricks' or something while we're while we're drinking, not shit wanky beer, I think, yeah, I think Kathy Burke. You know, those people, those like working class people that they were the first people that I heard my accent even though she's North London.

Charlie: Like she's just also like, consistently being herself, like through, like for all the good and the bad. She just consistently has stayed true to herself, which is a beautiful thing, I think.

Chris: And I think that if she didn't like it, she would tell you that she didn't like it. Even if you said you liked it. Do you know what I mean? I need that more, like. There's an interesting thing in the theatre world where people are like, "Oh yeah, that was lovely. Yeah, that was great." And then they go home and like, completely mug it off, right? And I'm like, No, tell me, tell me it's rubbish. Like, because that would be interesting. It's a much more interesting conversation. So I feel like me, you and Kathy Burke just jamming would be would be a vibe. Yeah. We might have to go to the theatre for that if I'm being honest.

Charlie: Yeah, I'd really enjoy that, yes, please. Okay. Thank you so much. Beautiful conversation. Thank you. For you.

Chris: Charlie. Thank you the people.

Ibraheem Toure (Host): Thanks for joining us today. Remember, you can listen again to past episodes on the Royal Shakespeare Company website. Just search 'RSC Interval Drinks'.