

On the Breath S2 Ep 4 Behind the Scenes, with Indira Varma

SJ

So Indy and I were talking just a moment ago about the vulnerability of voice in general and she mentioned a yoga class that she attended.

Indira

It really connected with me and surprised me and has stayed with me. And the teacher said because obviously the breath is incredibly important in yoga. And she said the first thing you do in life when you're born is to breathe in and the last thing you do in life is to breathe out. And I just thought that was amazing because of all those breaths in between. I just sort of had this image of the journey of the breath in every stage of your life and I just think it's extraordinary.

SJ

Oh my gosh. So we were just talking about ageing parents and when you said that, I was with my dad when he was in his last nine days and I wasn't there at the final moment, but it reminded me how tough the breathing can be when you're with someone who's passing. But for me... I really wanted to start lightly. You can see that! For me, really profound to be there. And I think sometimes also parents don't go if their kids are there. So I'd just sort of gone home for a rest and I knew it was soon and I didn't mind not being there at the last moment because I'd been there before for that whole time helping to care for him. But the breathing is the thing that can be so tough. And so just to emphasise how incredibly central it is to us, to our emotion, to our state of life. So not just supporting the voice, but also supporting life at the same time.

Indira

Yeah. And seeing as you started on such a heavy note, but important, so primal, I also wanted to... Something that also came to mind for me was talking about the first breath is... actually I'm sort of jumping the gun here because this was one of my questions for you.

SJ

Okay.

Indira

I was thinking about the first time I heard my daughter's voice because you know, when you have a child and obviously they have taken their first breath and they make sounds and they cry and they yeah, they make sounds, but that's not their voice. You know what I mean? What I was thinking and I remember listening to my child crying when she was tiny, tiny, making these little sounds and snuffles and gurgles and squawks and I remember thinking, I wonder what she's going to sound like? My question to you is what was the first voice that made an emotional... had an emotional impact on you?

SJ

Okay, I'm sure it must have been my mother's, but that's kind of in the mists of time. So are you wanting a question that's conscious? I mean an answer that's conscious?

Indira

Yes, I do, actually. Yeah.

SJ

Okay, so back to death, Indira, let's go back to death. The first thing that occurs to me and I'm sure there's so many other things I could say, could say things about the sexy voices that have really kind of impacted me and things like that but when my grandpa died, we were living in the U.S. And they were in England because this was my mother's parents and it was a surprise. He had just had a fall and then he had an aneurysm. I felt so connected to my grandpa, and it was his voice down the phone at that time. I was nine, I think it was, at that point, his voice down the phone. And he had such a lovely voice. And I think it was to do with the love that was expressed. My mother was an only child. I'm an only child, so I was the precious grandchild. And he'd say, hello, lovey. And I could hear his voice in my head for years. And then now I really have a simulacrum of his voice, although I think we have him on tape, old fashioned cassette tape. So you've just reminded me of that.

SJ

But there was something about the voice over the distance down the phone. One of the things I sometimes say when I'm promoting my work is that voice is your signature in the world and it travels beyond you. So I can call upstairs and my partner will hear me and he'll know it's me. Whereas, yes, you can tell from footfalls I have a heavy footed child and a more sneaky child, so you can tell by movement if you're really attuned. But it isn't quite that same thing. So many voices, I think, have impacted all of us, but that's the one I remember. I love that you jumped in there and asked me a question first. It really changes it up.

Indira

I remember having a feeling of the first time I heard my own voice you know when you're a child and then you hear yourself, a recording of yourself and it doesn't sound like you? Do you remember that feeling?

SJ

I think I do, but I haven't even I don't know if... It's stranger connection that I want to make to that. And I did a solo show, which sort of started with this whole idea, I think, that we were staying somewhere when I was a child at one point, where there was a mirror right by the bath. So I was naked in the bath, and I stood there, I looked at myself and I thought, this is my body. Like I had for years, a strong sense of a spirit being in a body or like, this is my body. This is what I look like. And it seemed almost like an alien thing.

Indira

Yeah.

SJ

And so I'm saying that because that's my stronger memory of not hearing, but so much seeing. And now I don't even think about it, but really took me a very long time, I think, into my life to go not to have that moment of, oh, who's this? And I know my mother has

that experience with ageing, she's like, who's that? And so our physical form changes all the time and our voices eventually will change, or they do change, but we're still us in the body, we're still us inside here. So that's what I wanted to respond to that with.

Indira

It's funny because I really felt that the body I felt very I think I discovered my body quite early on because we can see parts of our body just by looking down and you explore your body physically and you feel it, whereas the voice feels more ephemeral. You hear it inside your own head but what it sounds like inside your own head is not what it sounds like when you record it.

SJ

Right? It's an auditory distortion, I think, when we hear it inside our head because we're hearing the sound from within. If this is like the cathedral for the sound and we're bouncing the sound off of this bony cathedral, we're hearing it from inside as well and that's the big shock. And most people don't get over that. Most people will not listen to themselves like many actors won't watch themselves. And it took me a little while both to watch myself and also to hear myself. But it was a good journey in self love. I actually found that I became to like I came to like it, I came to go, oh, that looks quite good. Now, there's some angles. If I'm editing, I'll go, no. Or I'll say, oh yes, that was a good emphasis. Or I'll say, oh, you're tired today, you're not really exemplifying speaking dynamically. So for me, I've had to do that. And I learned it from being in a late sort of a mid career MFA and being in a cohort with choreographers. And so those choreographers dancers always film themselves, which most actors just don't even want to think about.

SJ

And I had to do it when I was doing movement pieces and I actually found it very helpful. So having to get over the discomfort of observing yourself and I'd love to hear a bit more about that for you because you're on screen a lot.

Indira

Yes, I mean, the first time I sort of saw myself was kind of I don't enjoy watching myself but I do use it as a tool.

SJ

Good. Sometimes good.

Indira

And I think it's really helpful. I remember once, a long, long time ago, I did something and the director said, I want you to smell these gloves with sort of this is lovely, and whatever. As in sort of sort of wanting them to purchase them in a shop, whatever. And I remember doing it and he said, you look like you're having an orgasm. And I thought, of course, that was not what I was trying to convey, so it was useful to watch it so that I could temper my behaviour. Because we don't always know how we come across. Picking up on you and Tanya's chat [interview with our mutual friend Tanya Moodie], that whole thing about within relationships, I can say something and it's totally misinterpreted by someone who knows me really well. And it's infuriating. And I think it's the same when you're performing, which is why it's great having a director, a good director, because hopefully, if you trust them, they'll say, this is what we're reading. And sometimes I do say, what are you getting from what I'm doing here? Because I think I'm showing these different things. But I just need you to tell me that that's what you're reading.

Indira

Especially if you're trying to sort of play more than one layer of subtext as well, and they're potentially contradictory and you want it to be subtle enough so that it's just bleeding out very slightly. So I will watch it back to see how that's coming across. I don't like watching myself well, I'm always disappointed.

SJ

If you watch too much, you're going to become terribly self conscious. So I think it's different, probably, with what I'm now doing when I'm not acting. And I'm doing this because I can watch myself and I'm thinking, how's the communication landing? But if I

was trying to be inside a character, when I am trying to be inside a character, I don't want to be watching myself too much. So you've actually pointed to a really important balance of giving over to the outside eye. So why have a coach for public speaking like myself? Because you can start to feel within your performance and try things out. And I can support from the outside. Otherwise you'll just be very self conscious watching and editing. And the same as actors yourself. With a director.

Indira

What I don't like is something interesting. If I'm doing something and then I watch it and I hate that I look so or I'm I'm seeing it objectively, but in a negative way, because it's not because we all have egos, but actually there's a vulnerability in what I've just done and an awkwardness or something clumsy. And that's what is interesting.

SJ

Right?

Indira

It's the slick performance rather than the the watchable one.

SJ

I think it's so true. And there's this other thing, too, that when people are being revealing or authentic in their performance, I always think there's a huge attractiveness in simply the authenticity of that moment. Actually, actors are often simply attractive when they're in their work by virtue of the authenticity or the fact that they're embodying something very true and human, and yet you can meet them off stage. And it's not that actors are particularly attractive compared to anyone else. It's just being given that opportunity to express something true.

Indira

Definitely.

SJ

And it's interesting.

Indira

I'm just skipping a bit to, you know, doing ADR. ADR is automated dialogue replacement. So what you have to do is if there's been a problem when you're filming with sound, you go into the studio, into a sound studio afterwards, and you have to watch yourself, which is hell. And you have to copy what you said and lip sync, essentially. And sometimes it might be because they need to change a word, or because performance, they wanted a slightly different intonation, or because the microphone didn't catch something and there was an aeroplane overhead. And it's really interesting when I think of I love and I think that because of my theatre background, our theatre background, studying text, I really think of language and doing text as music. And that doesn't necessarily mean that I repeat exactly the same intonation, but often just by virtue of repetition, because you're line learning and then you're performing a scene over and over again, often there will be your favoured intonation, which you can imbue with a different emotion or whatever, because that's the clarity. It gives the best clarity for a line or whatever. And so I love ADR because I think I'm quite good at it, because I've got a good rhythm and I'm quite good at repetition and I can hear a rhythm and I can repeat it.

Indira

But there are times going back to your authentic when you're feeling in yourself and really authentic and not self conscious, and that's what I aspire to be in all my work. Sometimes there are moments that are so haphazard and I suppose, like jazz, it's so arrhythmic that I cannot repeat it. And that's really, really hard. And I had to do something recently. In fact, it's on one of the shows that's coming out now, the one for Netflix. It was a grieving scene, takes hours to do the scene, and I had to go to the animalistic part of my voice in order to grieve and to convey what was going on. And then they had a problem with the bloody microphone and I had to go into ADR and do it. And I said, I'm not going to be able to do this well enough. I can't replicate that level of emotional intensity because I'm now in a studio trying to copy my mouth shape. And they said, we will try and clean it up and use the original. But there was something so

guttural about what I reached on the day that was really hard to artificially replicate in the studio.

Indira

That was really tough.

SJ

And you don't know what's happened yet with that.

Indira

No.

SJ

And now I'll be really excited to.

SJ

And that's Obsession. Correct?

Indira

Yeah.

SJ

Well, you were also talking about babies and wondering what your daughter's voice would be like because your baby was making noises, but that's not really their voice yet. And the thought that came into my mind at that point was actually because it's an animal space and we do make different sounds, even as adults, when we're in an animal space, sounds we didn't even know we could make. You hear people saying, there was this sound and I realised it was me. You're almost disembodied from what's happening.

Indira

Yeah, it's really interesting. This has triggered a lot of different things that I'd love to try and remember to talk about. That is so true. And I remember once doing again, it was in rehearsals, actually. We are so privileged to be able to visit these places because they're not easy places to visit. But often in rehearsal, or when you're in a safe environment where there are parameters, it's an interesting thing to visit. I was in rehearsal for something and for some reason we were improvising. I mimicked something that I had cried out as probably quite a young child. It triggered me and I couldn't go on. And it was like a cry for help sort of thing. And I obviously had hit the same pitch, same intensity, and it was like it opened this portal. It was really frightening. The power of that is really mad.

SJ

You're also pointing to how we can trigger ourselves physically. So using the voice in a particular way or moving in a certain way, breathing in a certain way. For me, that was a huge support for me as an actor, realising I can trigger myself physically because the body is always there. Yes, exactly. Rather than and we were not taught a mono, method approach in our training, so that makes a big difference. But there is quite a bit of that in the US, which is where I've sometimes come in as a teacher to bring in movement and voice approaches. Because we have such a range of what we were being exposed to, we can start to learn that I can activate myself in all of these ways with this other person in the moment by what I'm doing to my body, and then how that impacts them and all of that. And so embodied approaches to performance, I think, are always there for you in a way that the psychological is important. You have to really understand the psychology. But if we're just focusing on trying to trigger emotion with thought, I think we can't repeat that very long.

Indira

I totally agree. And I think when you were young, as a young actor and at drama school, I remember just being so desperate to be able to squeeze out the tears.

SJ

I know.

Indira

And it was pathetic. And also, nowadays, if I see someone blubbing on stage, I hate it. It's emoting. Who cares? Where's the story? Don't show me your emotions. Tell me the story anyway. Fight it.

SJ

Usually trying to contain emotion rather than trying to work up emotion and then letting the audience have the emotion.

Indira

Totally. So at drama school, it was all about trying to psychologically, if I'm in this pain and he's left me and she's not talking to me, a bit constipated with it. Whereas now I feel like the more physically relaxed I am and the less I'm aiming for something and the more I'm present in the moment, the more likely it comes without trying. It's really interesting. In my journey as an actor, what I found really interesting is an empowered moment for me has been radio, because I came into radio because I was Indian, half Indian, and they wanted someone who could do an accent and I mean, talk about authentic self and all that stuff. I don't speak Hindi or any Indian language, so I always felt like a fraud and that I shouldn't really be there. But my first job, I was speaking with an Indian accent. And in those days, did I do any dialect coaching? Nah, nobody insisted on it. And this was with an Indian director and it was non specific about which region and all the rest. Anyway, I did a lot of work on it because I felt it was a sacred space.

Indira

This is my people, this is my father's people, I want to do justice to this. If all these producers don't care because they just think everyone sounds the same. I care on behalf of my family anyway. And then I'd never done radio before. And in those days, it was a closed shop, as it were, but because somebody was looking for someone who could do an Indian accent, suddenly I was wheeled in very young. My early 20s or whatever. And it opened a door for me because I started to get lots of voice work in

radio, because I think I have a fairly expressive voice and I'm good at sight reading. And since then I've done tonnes of audiobooks and Terry Pratchett, you know, they this is me doing a sell, but that's one of the things I've done. I've just done eleven Terry Pratchett because they're re recording his whole legacy and I absolutely love it. And it was me playing the game of someone who was there solely to tick a box and provide colour and then actually opened a door for me. And so that was a really amazing thing. And I realised that it wasn't about the way I looked, which is so limiting in TV and film, and I just didn't feel like I was being judged, it was so freeing.

Indira

And I'm very loyal to my radio heritage and I do stuff like what's it called, that radio? I sometimes judge the radio. BBC Drama Awards do things like that. And I love radio and it also means I really respect the sound recordist on TV and film, because they're always the ones who get sort of pushed to the side. It's always the visual, it's always the cameras that get the respect in the room. And sound is always like, oh, your bloody booms in shot, or whatever. And I always think they're looking after us, they're looking after the emotion, because often I think the emotion is really in your voice. If you're on your voice, that is so fabulous.

SJ

Because my first play was produced on BBC Radio. The first play that I ever wrote. And it stayed with me, the presence of sound in my writing, because that was such an important experience.

Indira

Wow, that's interesting. Have you worked with an intimacy coordinator?

SJ

I have. A few years ago, when I was in one of my plays, I did, but it was more of a choreographer, served the same purpose.

Indira

But I'm just riffing off your play. Not that I know anything about it, but just that whole idea of intimacy and touch. Because on *Obsession*, we had an intimacy coordinator, brilliant woman. And we really talked about the stories that we are telling through these sex scenes or whatever. And I'd never talked about that kind of thing when we were doing filming about with intimacy scenes like that in my life. And I just thought that was brilliant. And considering my first job and other jobs had had a lot of sex in them when I was young, I found it fascinating and so detailed. And it was the level of work that we have done on text and voice and movement that was being done on the movement and the physical story that you are telling in those moments. And I just love that. I thought that was brilliant. Yeah, I wanted to go back though, so I got into Radio and loved it so much. And I feel as an actor that for me, it's all about story. So actually, if you're telling the right story, you won't need to cry because your character just needs to communicate this thing, whatever.

Indira

It's all about listening. People still don't know how to listen. And I remember thinking we're so obsessed with playing our actions that we forget to receive. And funnily enough, I think with social media, it's all about output, output, output, and there's no time for reflection. And acting is reacting and all that. And if you are focusing on the other person, genuinely focusing on them, you don't have to worry about yourself. You stop worrying about yourself. You stop becoming self conscious, you stop having to act and you just listen. And then I think your voice will be on, your emotions will come. And that, to me, that's what it's all about, I think. Yeah.

SJ

There was a moment in *Carnival Row* when I was watching you and I thought, oh, she's really hanging on how he's reacting to her because of her desired goal. So there was this sense of tremendous I think it was with your son or your husband, there was this sense of watchfulness by being so focused on them, which is, I think, exactly what you're talking about. I appreciated it, I noticed it and I went, she's so focused on how they're reacting to her, which ties into what you referenced, which is the action, what do you want? Which is all about what you're doing to get what you want. But your focus was on them in the relationship and I appreciated that. It stood out to me, actually.

Indira

Yeah, that's nice. Thank you. Yeah, I think it's very much I remember I did a play, did a play. I did Man and Superman at The National with Ralph [Fiennes] playing Jack. It was a love story between these two characters, and he was running away. Running away because he sort of idealises this woman and he's afraid to he puts her on a pedestal, but he doesn't want to be tied down in case she's real, whatever. That's my interpretation of the play. It really is something else. And then eventually they get together. They get together in the end. But I remember saying to him in the audition, they have to be equals. And even though he, Jack is talking, he has 75% of the play. I mean, it's like three and a half hours long. He has to listen to the way she is listening in order to know whether what he said has landed because she is as important as him. And I really felt that. And I felt that even though I had so much left to say. It was dialogue. You don't need the words to have an equal part.

Indira

And that was really fun. But of course, you need your friend to play ball with you, don't you? You can't play status your own. You need to be given status. And I feel that very much the way with if someone's listening and how they're listening and all that kind of thing.

SJ

This is not where you were going with that, because I think you've really beautifully outlined well, I think you've really beautifully outlined the power on stage of listening and how much it is playing the role. It doesn't matter that you don't have lines in that moment because it's about what's happening between the characters. But what actually also struck me is how many roles I played. It was also Shaw, actually. Pygmalion.

Indira

Yeah. Wow.

SJ

Where I'm doing a lot of listening, where as a female role, my role is to listen a lot. And that is often my role in life in a very same male family that I'm in with my partner and my two boys. So it's not that I don't have a powerful voice in my household. I absolutely do. But I do feel there's more of a fight to be heard. And so I couldn't help hearing that and what you were saying, even though that wasn't remotely the point of what you were saying.

Indira

That's interesting. That's really interesting.

SJ

And so, as a writer, part of wanting to write was really part of wanting to have my own voice. Not just be saying the words that others have written, but having my own voice. And then, of course, I can write women who are saying what I want them to say. And I love writing male characters, too. My plays tend to be pretty balanced.

Indira

But, yeah, that's really interesting. I think that's why I struggled a lot with answering the question of my most empowered moment. Because I feel that I'm very good at empowering. I think I'm quite good at empowering characters, but not necessarily myself. Because I was thinking about this growing up in a family that we shouted a lot. Everybody said what they thought. It was very volatile. But now I'm not in that sort of dynamic at all. And it's much more sort of you hold things back, but I don't think one was necessarily better than the other. Because in my growing up dynamic, I think sometimes it was because there was no common first language apart from English was my first language, but my parents were communicating in a second 3rd language. And I think that means that there was a lot of frustration there of not being heard or not being understood, being misinterpreted. And also all the cultural ways of expressing yourself are missed because, for example, I speak French, my mother speaks French and I learnt that to my elders I say 'tu' instead of the formal. but in Hindi you have आप (aap), which is formal,

Indira

but in Hindi you have आप (aap), which is formal, and तूम् (tum), which is informal.

Indira

And I was trying to learn Hindi with my dad and I called him, I used the informal and he was really angry with me. So I had these two completely contradictory ways of addressing a parent and I found that really difficult. Yeah, there's so much to unpack in terms of things like expressing yourself in a second language. I know with Tanya you were talking a lot about expressing yourself in a second accent, if you like, or having an amalgamous sound. And I find it fascinating where my voice sits when I speak a different language.

SJ

Oh yes, absolutely. So there's two things I'm thinking I'm thinking of the accent thing and I'm thinking of my son's father who is Spanish speaking. And so when we're no longer together, but when we got together and we were together for a very long time, he wanted to improve his English. So he didn't teach me Spanish. In fact, he never spoke Spanish to me until shortly before the end of our marriage when I had just learned it over time without his help with it. And then if we're speaking to family, he would speak to me in Spanish in that context. But I speak in a higher voice, sometimes in Spanish because that's how women in Latin America depends. I should just say Central America. Central America, it varies hugely, tend to speak and then in terms of accent, my partner laughs at me all the time. I have said this on some of the other podcasts, but when we're having an argument, he would say it's not an argument, it's just a discussion. Yeah, I will change accents in midstream. If I'm boundary setting, I'll go okay, so now what I really need you to hear is... And my voice goes right down and it's American. And that's because my dad was American and the idea of boundaries and structure comes from him. Whereas I can be more playfully outraged in an English accent. So my kids might say, because they don't really perceive my accent my kids will say, Be really British, get cross. Because then I'll say that's outrageous. What on earth do you think you're doing? And then it'll become sort of more musical. So my accent will do that depending on what type of point I'm making in a heated situation.

Indira

Yes.

SJ

Leading to some amusement, which is always helpful when you're in a heated situation.

Indira

A long, long time ago I did a film where I have to speak German, but it was a German TV film and I loved. My mother speaks German, so it was in my ear. And I did A level German and stuff, but I did a lot of work on it. But one thing I found really difficult was learning the way they express emotion because you know how we think: I'm soooo happy to see you. I'm SO happy to see-- we stress certain words in a different way. And in German they said, oh, no, you'd never say it's about the [modifier, or the adjective] or whatever. And that took a lot for me because I was suddenly not able to express myself without thinking. But I enjoyed it very much. It was fine. And then I had to dub myself from German into French. And my French is pretty good, but I've got a slightly Swiss accent because my mom's Swiss and I had to go to Paris to do it. And I played that role. That was me up there. And this director, because they have dubbing directors, was basically criticising my interpretation of myself into another language.

Indira

And I remember one particular scene I don't remember what what was being said, but it was sort of a flirty scene or something. And he just said, Is that how you make love? I was so insulted and I was only in my and it was just awful to be it was the way I was speaking wasn't right. It wasn't okay. I didn't know what to feel. I just felt totally undermined. It was horrible.

SJ

I think that's very shaming. Ultimately, his approach to you was very shaming and personal as well. Right?

Indira

Yeah.

SJ

It's not actually about you as a person in your intimate moments.

Indira

Really bonkers.

SJ

There's so much opportunity for that. Being an actor, for having something said to you that is just challenging. So let's talk about how do you empower yourself through those moments?

Indira

Well, again, I think it's about it not being about me. What do you mean empower myself when I'm being shamed?

SJ

Well, you get through them and you have respect for yourself and you come back somehow.

Indira

Yes.

SJ

I'm just making that assumption based on your career, that you keep doing that?

Indira

Yeah, I feel like it doesn't stop. I mean, people still say bad things and I have to just think it's subjective. Not everyone can like you. And that's okay, because there'll be one person out there who thinks it's good or who'll like it or not. Not that it's good. It's

irrelevant if it's good or not. It touches them. They recognise something in it. You must know that amazing Martha Graham quote. Do you know it? I love it so much. This is what empowers me. Let me find it and then I'm going to read it to you. "There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action. And because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost, the world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is, nor how valuable, nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it yours, clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work.

Indira

You have to keep yourself open and aware to the urges that motivate you. Keep the channel open. No artist is pleased. There is no satisfaction whatever at any time. There is only a queer divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest that keeps us marching and makes us more alive than the others.

SJ

That's wonderful.

Indira

Isn't that brilliant?

SJ

Yes, that's wonderful.

Indira

For me, every time I do a play, I have to have that in the dressing room because it's not about me.

SJ

It's such a helpful reminder. It's the only way to keep sane when you're doing your work in front of people, when the work that you do is literally for consumption of an audience. But it will also keep you with your feet on the ground.

Indira

Yes, I love that so much. Last year I did the seagull with Jamie Lloyd. And the most amazing part...and I'd love to play Akadina again...And an incredible version as well. And Jamie has been experimenting with different ways of making theatre, which is fantastic. But we were all heavily mic'd. Not just a little pickup, but we were heavily mic'd.

SJ

What occurs to me, and I'm interested to hear what this was like for you is that for me, when I'm on stage and I'm thinking of I did a season at the Pop Up Globe in New Zealand, so it's a recreation of Shakespeare's Globe. It could have 900 people in it. It's quite intimate because Shakespeare's Globe, for example, was smaller than the Globe in London that exists now. And so it was actually that rather intimate size. But it was such a physical show to reach the audience personally. Also, we're able to look in their eyes. It was done in this style of Shakespeare's time where you're talking to people and even occasionally there's moments left where you can improvise so that you're playing with people. So there's this incredible experience doing it. But if I were mic'd in that setting, my breath wouldn't be flowing through my body in the same way to then inform also my physicality. Somehow they go together for me. And I wonder if you were working against the mic to make sure you were still physically sharing with the audience. Because I think that for me, the voice and the body are so much going together, and when you're communicating across a space, sure, you can do something small that's visible to everyone, but you're not intimately having a conversation in a small room.

SJ

You are for the audience. So did that impact your physical experience?

Indira

Well, he also got us sitting on chairs and not really moving around. We didn't have a set, so people who were sitting in the dress circle and the stalls really loved it. People who were sitting at the very back of the gods felt like it was radio. But personally, I didn't feel disconnected because when you're filming often you have to speak more quietly than you would normally and you have to make sure that you're physically there as well, because otherwise, I mean, it's a different physical discipline and it doesn't require so much energy. But that wasn't necessarily a problem. I still felt like I was physically embodying the breath and in some ways I felt like I was on my breath and on my voice. I just had to trust that I was going to speak really quietly. And what I found difficult was Arkadina is an actress and so her need to expand herself was slightly taken away from me.

Indira

I had one an interesting... This is slightly more physical, a disempowered moment, which was being at The National and doing Pinter's adaptation of remembrance of Things Past and I got pharyngitis and I lost my voice and it was really awkward and I had a fever. But of course, in those days in the Cottesloe and actually we then went into the Olivier. We didn't have any understudies, so the company manager said I had to come in and there was talk of, what are we going to do? I had a fever. I mean, in any normal job, you would be sent home. And they sent me to the doctor who said, if you use your voice tonight, you'll lose it for three weeks. Right, well, I can't do that then. So there was this meeting with the company and the older members of the company all felt the show must go on. And people were trying to come up with these really outlandish things where, well, you go on and somebody will have a microphone and say, your lines and you go through the physical movement.

SJ

That's what I thought you were going to tell me, because I could think of nothing else. I thought, but surely no one really suggested that. But that's actually the thought. I thought, well, what could you do except that? And that just isn't going to work.

Indira

I mean, I had to put my foot down, but I was young, that's really tough. I had to walk away. And I was punished.

SJ

Really?

Indira

I was punished. And they found a girl, they had to cancel the night, because, of course, a theatre going dark is a real big deal, right, in those pre COVID days. And then she learnt it eventually. She went on with the book and she was on for three days and then I was back. But it was really hard. And that whole experience of COVID as well, like the first time around when I actually had COVID, when our play when *The Seagull* was first shut down. And I remember... I'm sure you've got lots of COVID stories, but there was a moment, I think, because I'd just been on stage and I'd been using doing warm ups every day, using my voice. Even though we were mic'd, I was warming up properly. Because otherwise, if you're not warmed up physical articulation using a microphone, you'll still not be understood. Your intention still has to be cleared, doesn't it? And so I felt like I was all primed, my instrument was all ready and I was suddenly coughing so badly and it was like pneumonia, practically.

Indira

And I got scared. And it was the first time I ever thought, what if I lose my instrument? And it was quite a powerful feeling, that loss of something that is who I am and how I make my world, my job, my money. It was terrifying.

SJ

It sounds it. I think we've all had those moments where the body isn't working as we expect it to work.

Indira

Yeah.

SJ

And what you really point to, I'm just going to say, is a rather toxic attitude that has existed in theatre, at least in the past, and not having understudies is the problem.

Indira

Definitely.

SJ

I was in a production of Skylight here in San Francisco Bay Area when I first came back as an adult to the US. And I don't know if you know that show well, but there's real cooking on stage.

Indira

Yeah.

SJ

And early on in being here, I became sort of known for this traumatic event in which I had made pasta and there was a sink, a working sink, and instead of pouring the pasta out like that... Yeah! I poured it on my tummy. And then there were like 15 minutes to go. And again, I was 26, still young. As an actor, I had always felt the show must go on, and so I kept going, pretending nothing had happened, even though I had all the range of burns on this area of my tummy. I had a small area that was third degree in from out from there. Right. And at the end of that act, myself and the other lead actor embrace, and I was like he felt me just going like this. He went, oh, my God, you're not okay. And everyone was backstage with sprays and all sorts and took me to the hospital. But that 15 minutes of having my wet clothing and my own skin by osmosis drawing in that hot water was bad. I don't have any scars now. It was okay, but it was bad enough that I had a fever when I was recovering.

SJ

I did have an understudy and in fact, I think that it was a good thing for her career to go on. It was a week, I think. But at the Pop Up Globe, we didn't have understudies. And how many of us sprained our ankles? There were three of us, myself included. I was playing Gertrude in Hamlet, among other things, and at one point I had to go on in a wheelchair, and then I went on in a moon boot and so on and so forth. And the whole structure is built out of scaffold, and safety regulations are just very different in New Zealand. Yeah.

Indira

I remember doing the Globe, doing Titus Andronicus at the Globe and everyone, because of the thatch, it's quite common that everyone gets really bad sore throats and we all had chest problems.

SJ

Dust. You're inhaling dust.

Indira

That was horrible. That was really tricky, too.

SJ

Oh, it sounds awful.

SJ

I mean, we could be here all day if we were going to talk about the weird things that had happened. There's all kinds of things that we're not saying. We can guarantee that to you.

Indira

Yeah.

SJ

It's such an amazing life to be able to just experience rehearsing, particularly I really love rehearsals and then being on stage and being in front of the camera and working intimately with other people.

Indira

Yeah, me, too. I love it so much.

SJ

I get that it's connections for you often that you're having with the group that you're working with that feels really nourishing you. That's just my impression of you.

Indira

Yeah, very much so. For me, it's like what happens between people is what's interesting. I think the magic happens when you're not thinking about it. You're not trying to achieve something. You are listening and watching and giving to the other person and we trigger each other. And I just love that. I guess I'm very instinctual and actually, the older I get, the harder I work and the more prep I do. But it's so much about just being there and present and being there for your friends and seeing what happens next, and it can go anywhere. It's really exciting. That's what I love, which is why I always come back to theatre, because that's what gives you energy, isn't it?

SJ

I think it's a very different experience of performance up until now.

Indira

I still feel that I get better opportunities on stage than I do on camera. Like, the breadth of the emotional journeys that my characters have are far more interesting and complex on stage. I feel like I'm a cypher for the character of the role or the writing and the director, I guess. So in a funny sort of way, you're sort of a ghost. You're a ghost just handing things between people. And also then it feels really essential, doesn't it? When you're right there communicating with people and it's a bit dangerous and it could go wrong, it's really exciting, and they know that.

SJ

And we had young people who would always buy tickets in the yard and who came to almost every show. We had the engagement of all ages and a lot of young people in a way I've never seen before. And fans. Like no one in the company was particularly famous, certainly not outside of New Zealand. But there were fans who just would come and want to see each each time and then would sort of engage with us directly while performance was happening.

Indira

God, I love that. The only thing like that... I've Titus at the Globe, which, of course, like you say, you can see everybody, they can see you. It feels very alive in that respect. And I read this brilliant thing that Mark Rylance wrote about performing in that space, and how when you speak to the groundlings, they are your stomach. They're like the stomach.

SJ

Yes, that's just right.

Indira

They give energy and the body stuff and the dirty humour, it's for them. And they'll laugh and they'll give it back, the little asides, cheeky sides. And then the people who've paid quite a lot of money, they want everything. They want the love, they want the romance, they want everything. And so you can really talk your heart out to them. And then the people at the very top and then there was another one, but I can't remember what it was. And then the people at the very top, they're the academics, they couldn't afford the more expensive seats, but they want to hear the play and they want the language. And that whole idea about where you take your thoughts, I thought was so brilliantly expressed by him.

SJ

And Shakespeare wrote it that way. Shakespeare wrote it for those levels. So there's the jokes for the groundlings, there's the academic allusions, if you will. Probably academic, is not quite the right word, but the layers of philosophy here. Then there's the story and the finer points of the story for here. So there's humour and there's tidbits for every station of life at that time, as exemplified by the tiers and by the yard.

Indira

I remember there was a moment playing Tamara where at the very beginning of the play, she goes from being a prisoner to suddenly being invited to marry this emperor. And first of all, she has an address to everybody. I can't remember exactly what it was, but an aside to this new husband, then an aside to the audience, and then a direct address to the audience. And it was so... Just experiencing those different levels of communication and how many people essentially, you're addressing how many people do you want to hear this? How public is this bit of information? Was so much fun to play. It was like an onion. I don't know. It was fantastic. I love that.

SJ

What also occurs to me is it may be hard for you to think of your empowered moments, but actually you're describing a lot of empowered moments in your role and your ability to embody role and being on stage. Those are all empowered moments where we feel that we're in the flow of the work we're doing and that we're reaching people, I think.

Indira

Yes. I suppose I was looking for an empowered moment where you stand up and you use your voice.

SJ

Yes.

Indira

And as myself. And I feel like I've lacked the courage quite. I lack courage, I think. So I feel I have courage to be somebody else and to speak their truth. And I think I'm more

discreet about my own truth, but in a way, maybe that's okay because it's mine. I don't necessarily want to share everything.

SJ

I think also, the more you're in the public eye, the more fraught it can feel to be sharing intimately. Yeah, I understand why that would be the case. So people have to understand or can understand that you're actually revealing a lot through the mask of character, but they don't necessarily know what you're revealing unless they know you. This is something that I know as an actor. There was a big transition for me in being in front of camera as myself. More of the time that I'm on stage or on camera as someone else, I'm now myself. And that's actually been very empowering. But it is a leap to be yourself in front of an audience.

Indira

But I feel sometimes that I am more myself on stage or when I'm acting than I am in real life. Because there's a safety framework of a story, even if it ends in death, you know that it's going to end in death. And you can sort of live it truthfully and honestly and openly and bravely, whereas real life is frightening because there's so much unknown.

SJ

And that what you say or what you do in the moment will have a real impact as opposed to what you say and do in the moment has been written. And, you know, the end.

Indira

Yeah.

SJ

Really such deep stuff. I never know what journey I'm going to go on. I love podcasting. I love doing the show because I get to talk to people I haven't spoken to in a long time. And also, it's a journey that is new each time. Yeah.

Indira

And also, it's funny, isn't it? Because, like I said to you, I'm at my mum's and it has thrown me... I actually thought, oh, my goodness, I wonder if I'm going to be able to do this podcast, because it feels so emotive weirdly. I feel like it's touching on things that I don't know if I want to share necessarily. But, hey, that makes it interesting. And maybe if I did this podcast and I was at my own house or somewhere else, I would come up with something completely different.

SJ

I don't know, that's really interesting. My hope, particularly for performers, is that my podcast can actually be a place where you can share of yourself and you're not just continually going to be asked about your latest work, because I think that's what a lot of the interviews with you are about. And so it is different in that way. Indy, I don't think we talked about whose voice do you love and why?

Indira

Actually, the first person I thought of was my partner Colin, which I told him about earlier, and then it made me cry, which made him laugh, and then me laugh because I'd moved myself.

SJ

Yeah, that happens. It happens at our house, too. That's a very familiar story here!

Indira

I just remember him talking to me, just hearing getting to know his voice initially, when we first were sort of courting or whatever, and just he's got a beautiful voice and some people think he sounds a bit like Anthony Hopkins, even though he's not Welsh. But he's from Liverpool and he's got a gorgeous, gorgeous voice. What can I say? The other person I chose was my dad and it's not Freudian, but it's like I feel like when you know someone so intimately and you can just detect every nuance, whether they're happy, angry, sad, pissed off with you, tired, and when they use their voice with kindness and comfort and reassurance and love, you feel it. It's animal. It's back to that

animal where you feel like you're being loved and you're being stroked from a distance through a phone or don't know, through the ear. And it's an ASMR experience, practically, sort of doesn't matter. It's like they're purring in your ear or something. It's also because you know that the voice can be harsh and nasty. So when they give us the kindness and the love, it hits you in intimate places.

SJ

Yeah, you're just making me think of all the voices I love and how important it is to have that response to your loved one's voice.

Indira

Yeah.

SJ

Otherwise they may not be your loved one.

Indira

Maybe no

SJ

I've enjoyed talking to you so much. It's been so lovely to speak with you. I'll make sure that there are links of a number of things about you that people can visit in the notes below. Is there anything else you'd like to say before we finish?

Indira

Just that I really enjoyed the chat and it was unexpected. It was an unexpected portal.

SJ

Thank you. So much.

Indira

Thank you. Loved it. It was great catching us as well. Yeah.