

## **Conversations Over a Brew**

Season 2, Episode 7 - Amina & Fox

Transcript

Recorded 19 November 2021 over Squadcast

N - Natalie

A - Amina

F - Fox

**31:42**

## [INTRO MUSIC]

**Natalie** - Hello and welcome to Conversations over a Brew. I'm Natalie Hughes from Heart of Glass and we are an Arts Organisation based in St Helens, Merseyside, and broadly speaking we support artists and communities to go on creative journeys together and make art. Conversations over a Brew is a series of intimate recorded conversations exploring the stories of the people we make art with. This podcast is about the power of listening and conversation, and how making art can bring us together and create change. In this episode, we hear from Amina Atiq and Fox Irving. Amina is a Yemini-Scouse poet and performance artist whose work explores the identity and experience of the Yemini diaspora living in Liverpool. Amina is also an award-winning community activist and a current Humboldt Residency Fellow. Fox is a Queer, Working-Class artist, and through their work they investigate how art can be used as a tool of empowerment by their own marginalised communities. Amina and Fox met during Women Working Class North West - a working group led by Fox for Women artists and producers from Working Class or Benefit Class backgrounds. Amina was one of the artists who took part. So sit back, relax and enjoy the conversation.

**[THE SOUND OF A KETTLE BOILING FADES IN, THE CLICK OF THE SWITCH INDICATING IT IS BOILED, WATER BEING POURED AND THE CLINK OF A TEASPOON STIRRING TEA IN A CUP]**

**A** - Hello Fox.

**F** - Hi, Amina. How you doing?

**A** - I'm OK. Well it's lovely to see you and hear you. What is it like twice a week now?

**F** - Yeah, we see each other quite a lot, don't we? And you get a lot of emails recently. So, yeah, it's nice to see you again. As always.

**A** - Been an interesting journey hasn't it, Fox. Like, how did we meet? Where did it all begin?

**F** - Do you know what I was thinking about this the other day. It has been a journey for me, and not quite a journey that I expected. So how we met. OK. So I put an open call out with Heart of Glass for a group to be started in the North West called Women Working Class. Which is actually from a project I started before the pandemic even hit. I can't remember time frame wise, but it was just before the pandemic hit. So that was 2020, Jan 2020. I set up with the Live Art Development Agency, a women, a women working class group in which a group of women artists came together and discussed issues around class, being working class slash benefit class to discuss issues that impacted them entering the arts. I started that, that was really successful. It felt like it was much needed. And then the pandemic hit, we moved to online, but throughout that and throughout all of my practice, it's, there's a need for me to come back up North. I'm originally from Liverpool. It's very much about kind of the agency I had in me to join, to become an artist, but the struggles I've had, so it was natural for me to come up and start a group in the North West. So I put a open call out in March this year was it, this year? Yeah. And you applied.

**A** - Yeah. Well, luckily I applied through Twitter, and I don't really apply through Twitter. You know, I, I go to like Art Jobs on, but I saw, I saw that a few times come up and the word women connected with me. I'm really passionate about being a woman, but also being in conversation with women. But when I saw 'working class' that's where I took a moment to think about, you know "Does this relate to me?" Even though I know I'm working class in terms of, you know, how my environment or the system, would, would associate me to a particular class, but, and I saw that a few times and then I missed the deadline and then I think it was extended.

**F** - Yeah, that's right.

**A** - So, it came up again and I was like "Let me see what the application looks like." Because applications do overwhelm me a little bit. And I saw that it was just an expression of interest, and I really like that because it just sounds really, like, welcoming. So I applied, and I kind of like, just like, for the first time, understood 'class' when I described why I wanted to be in this group. And yeah, and then I remember the first workshop I, I saw a lot of women that I knew and some women I've never met before. And, you know, the first week was I, I was quite reserved, didn't speak much, but then the second week I saw that there was a lot of similar, similarities and, and, but also a lot of differences. And what I loved about the first week is you know we got to tell a bit of stories about ourselves. And I was like "Oh my god, I see myself in this memory, like this is so similar to mine. I'm just all excited."

**F** - Yeah.

**A** - And yeah, you know the extension, I applied on the extension didn't I?

**F** - Yeah, yeah, and I extended it because I wanted to go to a kind of wider reach and I wanted to make sure it reached all audience. It's really important for me, and I'm glad I got you on the extension, actually. It's interesting for me, because it's the first, these are the first times I've put out a call out. I've always been an artist that responds to open, open calls. So I'm glad I actually found you found it, the process not that, you know, daunting. No? OK, great. [LAUGHS]

**A** - It's great. It was really great. You know, it's, I think there was like, there was a limit on just word count and there wasn't any particular questions like, you know "What are your past experiences?" Especially those who were freelancing and are working class, you know, sometimes you know, might not have ever had allocated jobs in the arts.

**F** - Mm hmm.

**A** - But we freelance. So how do you put that into, like, words?

**F** - Yeah.

**A** - You know that I did a twelve week project and I did the six week project, because we do a lot, but we just don't know how to put, put it all together in an application sometimes, and I find that personally difficult. But we spoke a lot about the project didn't we and we spoke about what it meant to each other. But I want to know what it means to you as someone who's hosted it, but also facilitated it.

**F** - You know, you know, when I think about the groups, so when I had in mind, so when I worked with the South West group, I got them to make a number of resources for the Women Working Class website. And I thought I could just come into this group in the North West and replicate that model. And I was going to come in and be like, "Hey, everyone, you're going to do X Y Z" and we'll get these and it'll be the end of the fourth session. But I just got a sense from the first meeting, which is not what I expected, it was just a lovely sharing. There was no pressure and it just instead of those I had, I had, I had originally when I was going to start a plan that the first four sessions would make resources and it would be for the website but what I realised actually from our four meetings that we had, I think it was four, that the magic happens after the fourth meeting, right? You need when you're doing group work the four, the four, those first four meetings are really like when you start to get trust with the group. You get comfortable with the group. You, you can be it, slightly vulnerable with the group and it takes, yeah. So now, I like from our fourth meeting, I'm starting, like, that's the model I work with now is, I'm not going to do, make anyone do any work for the first four sessions, you know, and then come to a point when asking, you know, for any outputs of that. But what do I, what do? I think it was particularly emotional for me the first, working with the North West group. I'd worked with the group in London it was, you know, really special, but there was a lot of, as you said, things mirrored that I'd experienced up North. You know, it is a lot different up North. And I think it was Maria actually, like the first group I was like "I need to keep this together." But she talks about, like, having to put cardboard in her shoes because she had holes in her shoes. And that was the thing we did, and that was like "Oh gosh, OK, yeah, this is, this is really special for me, this group. It's going to be really, like, emotional. It's going to be really, like, affirming for me, and it was the right thing for me to do to come up North." I think for real. Yeah.

**A** - And I think, like, meaning within the group was quite interesting because as a participant, I saw how, you know, and I think that that is a credit to you, Fox and your facilitation and your vision for the project because it was a, it was a gradual thing. And I think, I think for me, it was what I got out of it is that we learned to trust each other within the four weeks. And I think because there wasn't, there wasn't any particular expectations to deliver, it was all about; this is your space to get to know each other and talk about a particular theme. It was just refreshing because, you know, being a freelancer since the age of 16, everything's about delivery, delivery, delivery and never getting a chance to actually breathe within the process so that when after the four weeks ended and we got to produce something it was it was like, "Oh, now I've took the time to breathe. I took the time to actually have a conversation. To discuss. To take notes. To be inspired. To challenge myself. I can now express myself in a way that is clear, and it's not rushed and there's no pressure and I personally saw, I think, us as a group change within, and when I say change, I don't mean anything physical. It's more, like, emotional. There was a lot of, like, strength in how we express ourselves because when we shared the first week, it was a little, it was quite emotional, but by the fourth week there was a bit of humour in our stories.

**F** - Yeah [LAUGHS]

**A** - And I think it's because we learnt to accept them.

**F** - Yeah.

**A** - And I can only speak for myself here, but this is an observation as well. We learnt to accept that these are memories that come from certain trauma, as well, childhood trauma and also, there may be some things that people said for the first time. But I think by the

end of it, we really realised that, and I think this is something that I read in one of the researchers that, from Beverly Skeggs?

**F** - Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

**A** - And something that it really highlighted for me was we feel each other and we feel them.

**F** - Yeah.

**A** - And that for me is something that after the four weeks we really felt each other.

**F** - Yeah.

**A** - Yeah.

**F** - You've really put that beautifully because there's a few things in, I was bringing academic texts into that space, the **Beverly Skeggs called Feeling Class**, which, you know for many of us can be really daunting to like, try and pull apart. But even if you just get a sense of what that's about, like, through the work, through the group, you get that sense of feeling. And you know, I keep going on about this, this group, what also for me is, I know I held the space but I, I'm always honest, I'm just like the host of the party. I am not an expert in any way. And I always say to, say to the group, you know, the group or the groups I work with is "You can stand up and stand down, there's no pressure. You can show up if you want to and, you know, just be in the space." And I can remember, there was a thing that happened with the North West group. I was like, "Okay, for this week. It'd be great if you could bring something next week, but no pressure, you don't have to do it." But you all brought something. And I was like, "Oh, OK." It's like this, like, if there's no pressure on it, you're allowed to do the work, which I thought was, something I really enjoyed at the North West group and it was really beautiful. Yeah, yeah.

**A** - No. And I think this is something for the for the listeners to hear, but you know, one of the commissions was to record our sections of the research that we'd read and I remember sending you an email Fox, just a few days ago saying "Look Fox, I've recorded this but there's a lot of words that I can't pronounce. There's some words that I don't even understand. Is that OK? Like, do you want me to re-record?" I was panicking and, and, you know, I got your email back saying "This is what I want." You know, if this is how we read, then we should be able to read it in a way that is, where we might mispronounce or we might stutter on a word and yeah I did find it difficult, but I think in the end, just that like, it's raw and it's real.

**[MUSIC BREAK]**

**A** - So what are your hopes for the project, Fox?

**F** - Oh, my hopes.

**A** - What's next?

**F** - I just want to come and share something with you, re: that making you all read. I feel like a few, if you were like "Why are you making me read out loud a really difficult academic text?" And I think a few of the women on the same day were like "I'm finding it..." And I was like "No, this is what I want because I had exactly the same problem. I stumble

my words." I think I even started laughing because some of the words were just, but there's an artist called **Gary Anderson** from up North in Liverpool, and he said to me, we had a conversation somewhere. And he said, I said "You know, some of these texts I just can't, they're not for me. Like these academic texts that are talking to me about class, how to break down the system are just not accessible for the people they're talking about." And he told me that he used to read a paper out loud himself and listen to it, his voice over and over again till it sunk in, 'til he could hear as somebody like him, who was him, or somebody with that accent talking and saying "Actually, this is for me." So that's why I made you do it. So I wasn't like torturing you, because I used to hate reading out loud in school. But it's, for me, if there's any other working class artists, listening to that, hearing those text and their, their voices and accents is really important. But going back to your question, what is my hopes and dreams? So there are some hopes and dreams is, and they're starting to happen, and I've got this beautiful website, like stunning website, with resources and work on that, you know, have been both funded, supported by **Arts Council, Heart of Glass, Live Art Development Agency** that has, I've got this resource now for other working class artists because when I first started the group in the South West I had so many applications and I asked the women, what do they want from this group? And the first thing in the first group was like "I don't want this just to stay in this room. I want something to happen that is shared, that everyone can hear these conversations." So that was going to be actually a little 'zine when we were pre-COVID. "Oh we'll just make a 'zine and put it out." But then COVID happened and we had to move online. Which was actually, means I've got this whole new web resource, which I can keep adding, so I'll add the North West commissions so we've got more and more resources. As you know as well, this week we've been doing podcasts. So I'm starting a little podcast series to get even more of our voices out in conversations. Big hopes and dreams. Blue Sky thinking, as I always, with me, I'd love us to have a little conference at some point. Got some discussions about that happening, potentially. Where we can bring as, you know, that's not just closed off to us, we should have lots of people join in for that conference. Another hope for the group is that I want to start a mentoring. Well, I think you talked about this in our, it was brought up in, by Adianne actually in the group, like a big sister. Like a kind of working class artist, women working class mentoring young women that want to come into the arts. And that would be my dream, is actually starting that, a pilot of that in the North West. Another one like, blue sky, so that's where those things are really important and they seem really like key and, you know, taking it to arts organisations and saying "This is what we need from you as arts organisations to get these young women and women who understand what barriers they have and what support they need." But also, I think pre-COVID we had one idea where we'd get a caravan and we do it up and we'd go around the whole of the UK just like sharing our experiences and stories. So they, I've got loads of hopes and dreams.

**A** - No, I, I think it's like, you know, you can dream as big as you want. But I, I do think you know the, I, I, for me as a creative practitioner and a writer I think something that I learnt over the years of my early career is that process is the most important thing. And I think process, especially when it comes to conversations around working class, there's no linear form of understanding there. Because I know people dip in and out of it. Is it because I've gone to university now, I'm middle class? No. You know, working class is something I understood that I learned through the group, it's an identity. And it's something that, even being Arab, there's a lot of similarities because like we were speaking, I was speaking to Kelly yesterday on the podcast, from the South East group, and we were talking about food, and our relationship with food in a working class environment. And I was saying "You know, that's quite similar in, when I go back home to Yemen." You know, the relationship

with food is very togetherness and there's a lot of sharing. And, and there's a lot of things to celebrate with that and I think by the end of it, it's about, what are the obstacles, but what else can we also celebrate? What things can we put in place to actually make changes? So that, Fox like yourself when you went into the arts, you faced certain barriers. I went into the arts, I faced certain barriers so that those who come after us, the barriers are either not there or they're just less, less difficult.

**F** - Yeah.

**A** - To hop through them.

**F** - Yeah.

**A** - And yeah, so throughout the whole project, if there's anything, anything at all that it really inspired you or changed your thinking or...

**F** - That's really, I mean you're all like super, every, every woman that I've worked with in this group are, just blown me away. They're like, so inspiring. And I remember, especially from our groups, by the end of it we'd feel all quite elated, like and then empowered. I mean, I think our group, I suppose it might be, in some moments it was a bit silly, but you know, we all felt quite like what's energised after the meeting. You know, it just felt, "Oh, I was really glad you came to the meeting." And that's what's special for me. That's what the, like, key moments for me is leaving those groups, you know, not coming in, "Oh, this is something I've got to do for art." It's actually that coming together. And I think as well, we did that really well because I was a bit worried about moving to online because in the in-person groups, how you talk about food, is I would make sure we have a break and I would make soup and we would eat bread. Oh yeah, I forgot I sent you little care packages. Did you ever get one?

**A** - Yeah, I did. I got packs of teas, I got a notepad. Yeah, you know what Fox? That, that was absolutely lovely because it's like something physical, especially under lockdown or COVID, was just really nice to get something.

**F** - Yeah.

**A** - So it was a lovely little touch to the project.

**F** - Yeah, because I was a bit, I was like "How can I replicate that like, breaking of the bread, coming together?" Because sometimes over those conversations over food you would have, you know, some of the, like, magic would happen, x y z. So I was like "How can I like, send that in the group?" So yeah, I made you little care packages, I put a little bit of chocolate or some people said "Don't send me chocolate." Or tea bags and things like that. So I'm glad I think and yeah, it was my way to connect with you, and I forgot I did that. So those moments bringing together have been really inspiring for me and just hearing the stories and seeing the work. I think for sense of my practice. Yeah, it's about kind of understanding that, you know, with the, when you engaging or working in group work, you need at least four sessions for people to be really, come together and trust each other before work and not put in that kind of pressure on or deadlines. You know, just being like "Show up if you can, like, and we'll make the work and the work will happen." I think those are being key for me. Like light bulb moments, but also inspirational. Yeah.

**A** - And I'm just going to, like, cut off in the middle because after the four weeks, it was kind of like, it was kind of like an invitation to deliver.

**A** - And something that I really liked because we had the four weeks to try it out to talk. Is it for you? Is this the space for you? And I think, you know what was lovely, you then asked us "I would like to invite you now for the second part of it but that this is also optional." So where there's a lot of projects, their models are very like, "OK, this is how we're going to get to A to Z." And there's no, there's no breaks in between where you can opt out.

**F** - Yeah.

**A** - You know, so I think, I think the model does work, especially when it comes to, like, conversations that need time and need kind of like a place where trust needs to be made before we deliver. So I do agree. I think the model does work, and I think it's something that probably can inspire other people to use the same model. I mean, why we, I mean COVID, one thing that the pandemic has taught us is that we do not need to rush. The world slowed down for 18 months. I'm sure we can slow down when we're working with people.

**F** - Yeah.

**A** - And places.

**F** - And one thing I forgot as well, we had **Bridging the Gap Fund**, do you remember? While I was waiting to hear back from funding. And I know this is a Heart of Glass podcast, and I'm not just saying this, but they allowed, gave, they gave me money for each member of the group to bridge the gap while I tried to get funding to continue the group. And I came to, I can remember coming to that last meeting, I'm like "You can have this X amount of money, but you don't need to do. You can do whatever you want with it. There's no outcome." And I think you were a little bit like "Uhh?!" [LAUGHS]

**A** - "Are you sure?" "Are you sure we can just have this money and just like?" And you know what, Fox? I'm not even saying this because we're recording, that bridging the gap, you know, money that I got personally as a member, I created the most meaningful ideas that I did, I had did in a very long time. Because there was no pressure, expectation. I had fun actually thinking about "Oh" and also because we were so inspired after the fourth week, we were like " Oh, I can't believe this is ending, like, I want to write, I want to create now." [LAUGHS] So, you know, and I, and I do think this is great. And we were very, very grateful to Heart of Glass for understanding that but also for yourself to actually, you know, say "This is part of the model like I need to keep, I know people are inspired, they might want to write stuff or make something, but there's no expectation."

**F** - Yeah, I was very aware after that fourth week, I just you know I didn't want to just leave you, and I was like. So it's very lucky, you know, with that funding and you know I think one of the women just took themselves on a trip to London to like, look at art galleries and just charge up because they'd just been constantly doing work. Which was amazing. But it is really important to me and I always, you know, I'm constantly thinking about this. I don't want to just parachute in, be like, "Here's a project. I need this outcome from you. And then I'm going to just disengage and you won't hear from me again." I've been very lucky in that I've got now, got the, this is the third phase we're going into, and I'm continuing to apply for funding and keep it going. But it is a constant thing. As somebody running this project I'm constantly like thinking about it in a beautiful world I'd just have a big, you know,

for a much longer period. But I, yeah, I was very grateful for that Bridging the Gap and the fact that I could just say to you "You don't have to." It was a really big thing for me as a group leader to be like "Yeah, I don't need anything from you. Just just do this while I try and get my funding." Which is a relief for me right because I wasn't holding everyone trying to keep them. But yeah, but yeah,

**A** - But, like, I think the listeners may find this really interesting. But we actually got the chance to meet women from South East. So, you know, like so, you know, yesterday I was doing a podcast with Kelly, so you had like a really, you know, London cockney accent, with a scouse accent talking about class. And I think that is just really powerful because I've never seen this before. I've really not seen it before. And I think when people listen to these podcasts they're going to be really interested in just the accents and the dialects that have come together to talk about something that will bring us a little bit closer to each other. And yeah, so I mean, what was the intention behind bringing the North West group with the South East?

**F** - Part of it was because I just love both groups and I just needed you to, like, meet. But the main thing was I was somebody from the North West living in the South, so it was natural for me to start a group here and it was me, the North West group was me going back to where I'm from. So it felt natural and there is a divide. I know it's old fashioned to say that, but in the South East you've got a lot more opportunities. There's a lot more money, funding it seems, especially in London rather than, than the North West. So bringing together was important. And like and this is for me, I think when I'm thinking about when we, if you do a conference we'll be all doing it together. So it was a little test. I've not listened to the podcasts. I give you a very like, like one line brief for it. So I have no clue what's, what I'm going to listen. I'm editing this. I'm so excited just to see where these conversations have gone. [BOTH LAUGH] But yeah, yeah, it's yeah. So that was the intention. It was, I've worked with both of you. I know there's a divide between the North and South within arts. I think it's important that we get all voices heard, so yeah, that was the intention of that. Yeah.

**A** - Amazing. Well, thank you so much. So just to end our conversation, which has been so lovely to chat with you Fox and just get to know a little bit more about the project and your intentions behind it. And also your hopes. If you were to describe in three words, what it is to be a woman, but also working class.

**F** - Oh gosh, three words. Imposter Syndrome Sucks, am I allowed to say that? [LAUGHS] That's like my three words.

**A** - [LAUGHS]

**F** - Like we all suffer. Every, every woman I've brought into that space suffers from imposter syndrome.

**A** - Yeah.

**F** - And we all realise that that is what's happened, and we're all wanting to change that and get rid of impostor syndrome. So maybe my three words is Overcoming Imposter Syndrome.

**A** - Brilliant, and I think that is, that's active, and that's a reminder to a lot of us. That it's a weakness, but it's also I think it's understanding why we do it and where that comes from.

Well, thank you so much, Fox. It's been amazing and I'm really excited to see where the project goes and I'm, I'm honoured to be part of it as well [LAUGHS]

F - Honoured to have, no problem. It's been really lovely catching up. Thank you.

**31:42**

**END**