**Interview Transcript**

**David Shearing and Khadija Raza**

**Regional Curators for East London**

Transcribed and first edit by Dana Pinto

SHEARING My name is David. I am a Lecturer and Artist electorate in performance at the Central School of Speech and Drama. I am with Khadija Raza, and we are co-curators of the East London hub of hello stranger, a UK Design for Performance National Exhibition run by The Society of British Theatre Designers. This happens every four years with the idea of celebrating the work of creatives in different forms, particularly design.

This year, The Society of British Theatre Designers decided to do regional hubs for the exhibition, creating one prominent presentation spread throughout the country in different areas of accomplishing other specialities and celebrating the work designers do rather than placed in the foreground, because often it is backstage, it is the speciality that you do not get to see. Around the foyer, you will see the submissions from East London Designers at work or based here. The work in the foyer, where we did a future of design event on Thursday and talked about the current critical things in design.

Sustainability, how do we make our practices more inclusive? How do we think about better well-being processes? We forget that these, you know, all look magical, but actually, they are challenging processes. And we had a workshop with young people yesterday.

Today, we decided to do a talk, mainly as we have been working together on this, but you are the Designer of The Flood, so it made sense to celebrate your work and hear more about your process. So, Khadija is a Set and Costume Designer. You studied design for the stage at Central School of Speech and Drama and were a Linbury Prize Winner in 2017. This is one of our celebrated design awards in the UK, and you also won The Stage Debut Award in 2018 for Best Designer.

We will talk more broadly about design and then go into The Flood as a case study. What inspired you to go into design, and what part excites you the most?

RAZA In a way, I completely fell into it. I grew up in Ilford in a non-theatre environment based on only a little art around. My school was a Sports College with a minimal focus on art or design. I always wanted to be interested in doing creative things with my hands, and I enjoyed all of that, along with English and reading. So I finished school and did a Foundation Course in Art and Design in a little college in Camden, one of the best things I could have ever done for myself. That year, one of my tutors taught at Wimbledon part-time on the Performance Course, and she found my work geared towards storytelling engaging and said, *"Have you ever thought about Theatre Design?*". At that point, I had only ever been to the theatre there once, with a school trip to The Globe, where we saw a touring production, paid a fiver, and stood in the yard. It was magical because I had no idea that anything like this existed. I stood there, and I wondered whether someone dealing with the creative side of it. So this stayed with me when I completed the Foundation Course. I wanted to look into it, but even then, I started applying to go to University and applied for animation and design courses because I felt those two things focused on visual storytelling. I went to Central, did the interview, and I was like, *"This seems cool"*. I was naive; I did not realise what I was doing, but it was exciting, and I just went with my gut into this accidental design.

It is fascinating to meet people in drama school who are confident with their practice already, *"I did this since I was five years old"*, and *"It is in my blood"* when I felt that I did not have the same level of passion. For me, it is exciting, and I am interested in the visual art side of it because there are many different angles, and I come from a strong background, such as coming from a theatre school or having been to the theatre many times when I was younger.

SHEARING And so you mention visual storytelling, which is at the heart of what we describe as visual dramaturgy. How does storytelling become part of what interests you and what you do?

RAZA Visual dramaturgy and storytelling are among the most essential elements in considering whether a project is something I would like to take on and design. And so if I do not feel connected to the story or the subject matter, not that I would be attached to a script, but if I do not feel the core and the heart of the story, then it is something that would not appeal to me, and I would find it difficult to design it.

SHEARING This makes sense, and it is so interesting. My other question, a broader one, was about what things influenced you. It is fascinating to hear your story; in that theatre, it was not your driver. In fact, you mention animation and drawing being part of your journey, but what would you say is your driver or influence?

***Shearing’s question above will need to be rephrased to match Raza’s answer below. This is disjointed. They are both equally a great question and a great answer, but we will need to marry these two parts together.***

RAZA The magic of what we do is creating these little worlds and atmospheres, knowing that design is one part of the overall picture we make. Lighting, sound, humans and movement are all part of it. Especially in The Flood, the movement was critical. Being part of a group or a team creating these different pictures is so exciting, so the design and how it works with lighting and other parts of the creative team are essential. I would run away from modelmaking, but I would welcome help whenever I could.

SHEARING With lighting, sound, movement and direction, design intersects with all of these to create a synthesis, and so in terms of design, productions you have seen or artists that have inspired you, what motivates you generally as an Artist? Would it be other Artists, types of literature or within the stories? What inspires you as a Designer?

RAZA All forms of visuals tell a story, from paintings to installations, all striving to communicate some ideas, which is at the heart of what we do as Designers. It is communication. Other Artists, installations and site-specific work are interesting because it intersects with what we do. Regarding other Designers, people doing exciting or experimental work are doing this and looking at the design differently. I love the work of Stuart Lang, who is a Designer and Director because his work is fascinating.

SHEARING Let's move to some of your practice and work where there was a project with your work on the screen. Are there any projects you have done where we started to talk about the synthesis of objects and people space coming together into a project? It is not a set formula; you cannot always predict when someone will have a magical moment when it all comes together. Is there a project of yours that has captured that magic?

RAZA There was a project with the same Director for The Flood. We first worked together at the Royal Court and on a show called Old History of Water in the Middle East. It was a fascinating project because we started with a script with about fifty drafts right up until previews, and it took a few different forms. It was part autobiographical, part play, part lecture about the history of Britain and the Middle East, and part not a musical, although there are many songs, poetry and music in it, which was fascinating. We did a week of research and development with everybody on the team, including the Composer, Sound Designer, Lighting Designer, Movement Director, Director and four performers we would work with. We took the script in as a draft of the version that it was, and we just played with it and tried to imagine different ways of how we might tell the story. It was amazing because it was the one time I felt that everyone was working equally, collaborating towards the vision of what the show would be. I could contribute to the lighting design, the Sound Designer could say something to help me visualise the space, and the actors could use their bodies in the rehearsal room, giving me ideas of how they might build the physicality of it might be on stage. We ended up with a design that referred to the water in the Middle East, where the rivers are very political, and the maps were drawn out around these waterways. We talked about each of the rivers and the history around them throughout time. So, we had this neon map of rivers above us, the audience and the performers in the Royal Court. The Writer was also a performer in the show, and the way they talked about the maps and geography was fascinating because the performers felt like they were pulling it out of the air and gesturing all around them. And so, we made these neon rivers which were really fun to make.

SHEARING Unlike other processes, this sounds more like a devised process, where different approaches, such as the text, is the primary driver. The method here, where you talk about the research and development with a mixture of texts and you are in the room during those devising processes, is an exciting way to approach design. It is interesting because it says how design can be incorporated more into the production process as a whole.

RAZA This is the process I enjoy most, but sometimes a bit more stressful because you have fewer concrete pieces of information; however, it is also a lot more playful. If you can experiment, play and see what works instead of creating the design on your own in a studio, which is also acceptable, it becomes another exciting different way of working. Working in a collaborative environment and being more cohesive as an Artist is more satisfying.

SHEARING Let's talk about The Flood and how the process of that with, perhaps in a more traditional journey, as a new piece of text with quite an epic story. Let's start from the beginning of the process, talking through the steps you went on, having already worked with Steph (surname) with a previous working relationship that is tried and tested. Steph approached you and asked whether you would be interested. Were you given the text? Did they talk you through it? Did Steph come already with a vision? And what was the set-up?

RAZA Each Director is really different. They each have a different approach, and Steph was always open and trusting and showed me things we would go from. In our initial conversation, she did not give me the script, but Vicki (surname) has already started writing, and I was given a brief of what it was about. It was centred on Canvey Island and its history, with a genuine interest in echoing themes of climate change and how it will be completely underwater by 2053. I received a draft of the text from Vicki, and we then took a trip to Canvey Island many times, wandered around the island and went to the hall, and it was intriguing to listen to what led her to write this because she was not from Canvey Island, but Vicki heard this story through somebody else and dug into the history of it and found it fascinating. Incredibly, there are parts of the UK where places like Canvey Island are well-populated, and it is common knowledge and scientifically proven that this land will be uninhabitable, completely underwater in our lifetime, unless we take concrete steps to change that.

SHEARING It is powerful to tell local stories like those at the Queen's Theatre Hornchurch and East London. The narratives affect us, both in the past and particularly in the future. Tell me more about the trip to Canvey Island.

RAZA It was incredible. I read the play and sat in the same hall across three periods of time. We walked into Bingo Day, which was terrific, as it felt like walking into a scene of a play. The way it looks and how it always has been there with no change since it was built in 1983, just like how many community halls are. I have not designed a show that was so naturalistic, and this one had to be true to the place because of how it exists now, as it was so clearly rooted in a place in time.

SHEARING With your other work here, your use of colour is powerful, non-real, non-realistic and more expressive as the landscapes and what happens within, and so this was quite a different process.

RAZA It was quite a departure from my usual approach because it is a real story of a place, and it had to be where it was set to have that impact. For it to be a space that we can clearly recognise. The halls like this exist in many cities around the country, and it was essential to be just like Canvey Island as I did not want anyone from there to come to the show and feel it was nothing like the hall they had.

SHEARING I find that fascinating, especially as a designer; how do you create a sense of identity across your work? And whether or not that's important to you, or whether or not you know, you really submit to what the text says and demands.

RAZA So I think I've ever consciously tried to have a thread, I guess inevitably, when you look back at your work, you think, Oh, these are common themes or things that I tend to be drawn towards, or I don't think it's ever a conscious decision for me. But this felt like something different for me as well.

SHEARING Let's talk about that design and how it operates. What was your thought process behind it?

RAZA One of the most daunting things about this show is that it is set for over a hundred years. Starting in 1953 and going all the way to 2053 while stopping in 2013. Having one cast doing 1953 and 2053 with the inevitable quick changes that come with that. There were lots of logistical and practical things to consider. Being able to see the same hall and the journey of the play, which is something so special about Vicki's writing, is that we are it is giving us a visual of what we are doing to our own country and our spaces unless we make a change. So, seeing the same space deteriorate across these hundred years was really important. The original idea was to have a massive revolve to see all three periods.

There are lots of technical aspects, costs, technology and installation that go with a revolve, that as a Designer, I would not understand, but part of our work is not just to come up with the creative design but also to work within the technical demands that come with it even the restrictions or limitations. But we knew we wanted to set this in a hall, and we knew we wanted to be able to show the deterioration of this space. So we decided we had a revolve at Queen's Theatre Hornchurch, which was handy but much smaller. So, we were going to be in this hall with the centre of it on the revolve; the sidewalls were fundamentally the same space as the focal point within the hall itself. One side of the hall is 1953, and the other is 2053; with some quick-set dressing, the Stage Managers could turn the space into 2013. On one side, it is entirely water-damaged, deteriorated and graffitied for 2053; the forestage, where we do most of our playing in 2053, is full of detritus, damage, branches and all the things that you can imagine that may end up on Canvey Island. In the amazing images of the original flood in 1953, where people's belongings, the contents of their homes like kettles and items they tried to escape with, such as baby items, all ended up in the streets. There was a difficult challenge with characters ending up on a roof for the final scene, which was quite tricky for this intimate, beautiful, emotional scene. So, we had this idea of having a catwalk that would come out into the audience with the characters climbing up from underneath the stage and out, and this became the extension of the 2053 area.

SHEARING It is fascinating when you talk about emotion and where something is placed is where the power, the line of power, is for the audience to feel that emotion. And so what you are doing as a designer is blocking it and advising in terms of that power and transformation. The fact that you can shift perspective and suddenly be on the roof may seem obvious, but, for me, it is magic to have the ability to move perspectives without completely transforming the set.

RAZA Sometimes there are also things we discover quite late into the technical rehearsal, such as we initially had a trapdoor in the platform that they were supposed to come out from as if climbing through the roof. However, it felt like a different language. And so with Movement Director, when they came out from underneath, which appeared to be more like they were climbing out, making the physicality of it seem better and decided not to use the trapdoor, which is still in the platform and covered in some set dressing. It is incredible to have my model of the set and have my fingers in their thinking of the spacing of it, but until you have real people in the scene in the rehearsal room, you are always going to be finding new ways how you can predict how they will use it.

SHEARING There was a real sense of different levels of height for me, like the way they climb into the space that gives that sense that it's under or it's been submerged, or there's something it's been lost underground. And that is so simple. Yeah, coming in. So, how long do you go away? How long would it take to make a design in terms of the process?

RAZA It varies, and in this production, we had six weeks between our first design meeting to the first white card stage, which was proposing the initial design. It became budgeted, and we had another four to five weeks for a final design. So after the white card, they will return to see what was possible and not possible. This is where changes may occur to make the design come in on budget and be technically safe and fit before having a fire-resistant meeting.

SHEARING To what extent are you involved in the technical? You are busy in your studio making the model and then working with the production teams, to then you would be around on the tech.

RAZA During the rehearsal period, we have our costume fittings, prop and costume sourcing, which is a big task for this production because we have a younger cast, an older core cast and then our older community chorus and younger community chorus. So, there are many bodies on stage to be costumed. Once you are in rehearsals, making any changes, adding things or taking things away, you then find yourself there full-time, 12 hours a day.

SHEARING So you are watching what is happening on the stage and making the changes in between.

RAZA Problem-solving as you go along, with super quick changes and being able to do all those things in a transition.

SHEARING This is the part where people might join us. Welcome. We were discussing The Flood and your process and looking through the model. You were just talking about costumes, and this production has quite a lot. Do you prefer costume design or set design? Or do they always go hand in hand with you?

RAZA I do not have a preference, and I usually design both. Over the past two years, I have created shows where it has been set or just costume, but I would prefer designing costumes if I had to pick. With a set, there is the anxiety of whether it is safe, whether it will fit the space, or are my measurement correct. Costumes can be more playful, and it is great to work with an actor in a fitting to try things on and see what works.

SHEARING Let's open the discussion to questions from the audience. Does anyone have any questions about The Flood? As a design or as a process?

AUDIENCE 1 I saw the production about three weeks ago and am interested to hear about the process and how a space tells a story. When you initially read the script, I would like to hear whether you know what you are looking for within the process or if it is a process you allow to consume you? It is an epic story, and it felt like you used every inch of the space, and I absolutely loved what you did.

RAZA There is never a formula that I am looking for. Considering a project or deciding to take something on is always about finding something in the story that appeals to me; something in the core concept is fascinating and exciting and speaks to me. This allows me to work better if it excites me as an artist. I then consume as much as I can around the subject. As a real place, there is somewhere concrete to go and experience what it feels like and what people are like to then capture that in this process. Staying true to something that was once there and how to capture the essence of that and ensuring the people who came to see the show from Canvey Island can see their people and their history. You can find the hook in different places and different projects. Once you find your starting point, you can pull the rest of the world out of it, especially like this one, when it was definitely the hall, considering it is three different periods. This was the starting point for the rest of the world to emerge.

AUDIENCE 2 The set was designed perfectly for this type of theatre. Do you prefer this type of theatre to work in the round? I like to look at a lovely set than look across at another member of the audience. How do you feel about this as a stage design?

RAZA Honestly, I probably have done end on the least, and it depends on the story. It is quite exciting when you are in a position to be in a flexible space. You can work with a director and decide how you want the space configured. Maybe the show you saw in-the-round actually wanted to feel uncomfortable, and perhaps this was part of the story they were telling. Every configuration has its own challenges, and that becomes a route. It is one of the first limitations of a designer's thinking about how your audience will view the set and one of the more forgiving ones. You can hide things like climbing in and out of a window.

AUDIENCE 3 What kind of approach do you enjoy to have your hands on? And, I wonder what type of stage is the most creative? Finally, where do you do your thinking? In a model or more with drawings?

RAZA Research and drawing are where I feel most creative. Developing ideas, pulling references, and looking at different artists and periods is exciting. When you first share your research and your thoughts with the director, it is interesting to see how they would respond to it, and then you can start to start to pull away the things that feel less useful and begin to imagine what is going to look like. The other part of the process I find creative is when conducting the costume fittings because you work with the actor and see how they respond to the costume with how they embody their character.

SHEARING There is something fascinating about being tactile and handling the materials that you are working with. I suspect many of the costumes came from the store after looking through our archives and designing slightly differently. Richard Sennett writes about the craft of using the pen as an essential thinking tool and as an extension of the mind. Would you always choose that type of tool over AutoCAD?

RAZA Surprisingly I love AutoCAD. It helps me think the same as people who find the model useful for understanding spacing. When creating a model, I get really bogged down with whether it looks pretty, and then I stress more about the quality of the chair rather than thinking about where it is placed in a space. A production I am designing at the moment, which has many ideas, and I have somebody helping me make the model, it felt like it was not landing, so I started doing the technical drawing, and it all made more sense to me being able to imagine where what and how the space would work and where the audience would be in what is figuring out sightlines and yet I still really love that part of the process.

SHEARING Different tools reveal different parts and different insights. Do we have any further questions, comments, thoughts or reflections? Our thinking for the hello stranger exhibition is around the future of design, and last Thursday, we talked about sustainability, well-being and making our work more inclusive. Where were there any hot points? Where are the things that are that we should be addressing as designers, and what came out of that conversation for you?

RAZA Sustainability is really important, and we need to have more conversations happening with other designers. There is a void at the moment where the responsibility lies in terms of making our productions more sustainable. Is it the designer? Is it with the production manager? Is it the building that should be putting these limitations on your money coming in? It feels daunting to feel like I might be responsible for ensuring this project is green or trying to be as helpful and friendly to the environment as possible. Everything we do in theatre should be a group effort, a collective decision and a mindset. In The Flood; that was our approach, especially with the costumes. We did not go for new or fast fashion but used things from the store and were very conscious about the few things we bought and being true to the silhouette, period or fabric. We did a lot of pulling from our store, visiting charity shops and second-hand vintage shopping. So, when you start to break down what we were doing collectively, we were making those choices together about where to spend our money. I think the least green thing from costume was Ethel's shoes. In the first scene, she talks about her brand new shoes, and we really wanted a beautiful suede pair of shoes that came from Holland by plane.

SHEARING It is interesting to see where the pressures lie for the designers, who often lead the whole process regarding the vision, creating the thematic and visual dramaturgy. We also consider whether it will be safe, the materials we are using, buildings and budgets, and the environment. It is quite a lot of jobs back there for designers.

For those who do not know, there is a Theatre Green Book that we are signing up here to think about more sustainable practices. We are looking at the set, and we do quite well with the costume in terms of reusability.

RAZA We try to manage and create a lifecycle of things so that materials are reused, yet it is about how you store materials for two or three shows that are accessible. So, when you want to recycle sets yet you may try to look for second-hand floors, but to find something that is the exact size you want, the same dimensions, the same colour and wondering whether it will fit, that is when it becomes tricky.

SHEARING Regarding the other themes, design processes, you talked about how long a production takes; what would you like to explore more in a process?

RAZA Research and development are good. The shows I enjoy designing the most or feel the most collaborative are ones where you feel like you have time before you get to all the deadlines, where you can just play, and nobody worries about what it will look like. It is trying to select all the elements in the show that you find exciting, space, costume, props or just movement. This is valuable time. The production at the Royal Court had an excellent research and development process, and another production I did before the pandemic had several two weeks of research and development processes across two years before we started to create it. The more time you have to experiment, makes more exciting work. If you have less time, you make safer choices that would work or something you may have tried before. Traditional choices. If you have more time, you have more time to grow as an artist.

SHEARING It is an important observation around time and risk, especially when you put these two together. Are there any further questions regarding the process or the work?

AUDIENCE 4 What does it feel like to experiment? For me, it is physical. But what does that feel like for you?

RAZA It would involve having the actors and the creative people in the room trying to play with some of the scenes. Experimenting for me is a little bit of watching, observing, and seeing how people naturally feel like they want to use the space and their bodies within a space. It feels important to slowly introduce materials, like toys, to a child to see how they respond. You see how they would approach a scene with movement, text or even introduce sound "I think I can put a speaker in there". It becomes an organic and collaborative process that feels more exciting.

AUDIENCE 5 Is there anything else you love directors doing in terms of being super collaborative? In that space? Are there any things that you have noticed?

RAZA Being kind and open is really important. I have worked with directors that work in different ways, some come in with a clear vision, and some want the designer to execute it for them. It is more exciting when directors are more open to seeing your vision and having more creative responsibility. It does feel like a pressured environment when you are working on your own or to a deadline, or in tech sitting in the dark for hours, but to have someone kind, patient and open to working with other people is very important.

SHEARING And so, what is next?

RAZA I am currently designing a show for Regent's Park Open Air Theatre. It is a children's show, and it will be on their lawn. It is an adaptation of a book called Every Leaf a Hallelujah with climate change and deforestation themes. It is about a little girl who goes on a journey to save the forest around her house, sees the effects of deforestation, and goes on this journey to save the many incredible species of trees around her. We have many talking trees and shoots sprouting from the ground during the play, and we are trying to sequence the effect of deforestation and the different trees around the world. It is encouraging that the seven-year-old girl starts to protest against deforestation.

SHEARING Thank you. Thanks for coming today and hearing more about what we do as designers on the other side. It has been great to put it right in front of the theatre. Thank you for your time and for showing us your model. Thank you.