**TRANSCRIPT: HEL & A FOREIGN LANGUAGE Q&A**

Video (with closed captions): <https://youtu.be/DNh669ehkvI>

FRANCES POET:

Hello! Hey, how was that, was that a weird experience?

ISLA VAN TRICHT:

It's weird not being with other people isn't it? It's so weird like watching it alone and wondering if everyone else is enjoying it or not.

FRANCES:

Exactly, yeah, particularly for theatre groupies, it's like where's the laughter, where's the tears?! Very tricky.

Well let's crack on because we don't have masses of time and we've got lots of lovely questions. So um we'll start with Isla since yours was the first extract, and in a way this is a combination of two questions so um rather amusingly, Sara has said who is the goddess Hel, and what is Pine up to? And I think we definitely want to know, um I think it's a piece that there's so many bits of intrigue. So I think you can also talk, that might also lead to our question about where the piece originated from Isla. So can you tell us a little bit more about it?

ISLA:

So the goddess Hel is a Norse goddess, she's a goddess from Norse mythology and she was actually the goddess of the underworld. And there's all sorts of interesting mythology around her. I guess the reason I chose her sort of comes from like Pine's ideology, which you learn a

lot more about in the whole show. I don't know if I'm gonna reveal what Pine is up to because I'm hoping that this play will go on in its full form and I wouldn't want to give any spoilers.

But where it came from essentially is I'm really interested in cults, as you do, and sort of like extreme ideologies and brainwashing and how people end up in cults, and also what kind of people end up being cult leaders. So I did a lot of research about cults and cult leaders and um found that there kind of has been every cult under the sun for all kinds of ideologies, but there hasn't really been like a feminist cult. And there haven't been that many female cult leaders, so I was interested in what would a kind of extreme cultish ideology look like if it was headed up by a woman and had kind of extreme, extremist feminist ideology at the bottom of it, and had a kind of female deity at the head of it. And that's kind of where Pine's ideology came from, and where the relationship came from.

And I felt like trying to portray a cult situation on stage, which is so much about kind of the group environment, um I didn't think would necessarily be as effective. So I wanted to look at what is a kind of very intimate um influential power dynamic, and I was interested in kind of therapists and gurus and that kind of thing. So that's where it all came from.

FRANCES:

Amazing. And she is, I mean I thought a mesmeric performance by Kirsty Stuart there in the role, just extraordinary. And can I just ask because you said you didn't want to give any spoilers about what she's up to, um my question is just to kind of follow up on that. How at this stage, in the moments that we've seen tonight, how worried are we supposed to be about her? Are we at this stage to be uncomfortable about her? And tied to that, I'm just intrigued about um the SCUM Manifesto, which wasn't something I'd encountered before and whether that is something that's important to you, you know, is that a shorthand for those in the know to go oh hang on, this seems an unusual therapeutic approach?

ISLA:

Um I think you're definitely supposed to, I mean, I find that scene uncomfortable to watch and I wrote it! I think it's like, in a good way or a bad way, you're supposed to get moments of oh, she's slightly crossing a line there, or she's bending boundaries. I think there's definitely supposed to be moments of that. So you're supposed to be wary, but not yet sort of sure of her.

And then the SCUM Manifesto, yeah there are people who will have read it um and be aware of what that might indicate about Pine's ideology, but in the play we get more of a sense of what it is. So the SCUM Manifesto is a manifesto um written by a woman called Valerie Solanas in the 60s, and it's a radical feminist manifesto which is really really brilliant in a lot of ways, really ahead of its time in a lot of ways. And yeah, very interesting and probably should be read as kind of tongue-in-cheek in the way that it basically talks about potentially killing all men. But the issue is that Valerie Solanas in real life shot Andy Warhol, and that then obviously affects how we then read it. Because it's then kind of a little bit harder to be like, oh I'm sure you meant that like ironically or tongue-in-cheek Val, it's like, mmm did you?

FRANCES:

Fantastic. So that's a pretty big warning for those in the know that is quite a big alarm for her. Amazing, thank you for that. And over to you Dipo, just this question that a lot of people have thumbed-up about the origin of the piece. Where did, uh, Another Language...?

DIPO BARUWA-ETTI:

A Foreign Language.

FRANCES:

A Foreign Language, sorry-

DIPO:

No problem.

FRANCES:

Where did that grow up, what was the origin of that?

DIPO:

Well it started um because I was like looking for things to do essentially, and so one of the things I stumbled across was this online course on child protection. And I only did it for a couple of weeks because then I got too busy, and I was like I don't have time - it was just something you do in your own time, but I learned so much in like the two weeks I was doing it, about human rights laws across the world. And it was just because I was fascinated by corporal punishment, and how it differs in varying different countries. And with all my work I always come back to um what it means to be a Black person in Britain, so I always look through that lens with my stories, and think about conversations that aren't being said across generations.

And I was like, corporal punishment is such a common thing. So I was like okay, that feels like a topic that I've never heard anyone really discuss or try and unpack. So I was like what if this tragedy has brought a family together? And so for me it's always that what-if question. Like what if it's brought a family together and they suddenly have to tackle that head-on, because they're the younger generation who are perhaps creating a narrative around this person's death in their family. And almost trying to wrap it up neatly, but the parents feel like there's no correlation between that. And what happens when all the different ideologies collide, and is there ever an objective way to view what that means and what love means, essentially.

FRANCES:

One of the things I thought was extraordinary about the extract is the way that for all you have this incredible layer of corporal punishment, but that it felt like there was a moment when each of the four... was on the fire, as it were. You know-

DIPO:

Yeah, yeah.

FRANCES:

And you know, with the mum it's the not saying I love you, with the father it's this sort of strictness of that oreo and toothbrush punishment, with Ruth it's the way she deals with the phone - she hasn't phoned, or if she does it's writing, and then you go to Moses and what I think is masterfully controlled is um this letter. And you know to begin with we think how could he be so careless, and bin a last letter? And then we have this lovely reveal. So it's interesting that your starting point feels quite different from where you've taken it, because actually there are no goodies and baddies in this.

DIPO:

No, completely yeah. And I think that's what's always important to me, it's that nothing's black and white, like you have so many different layers to it. And it was something that came out of conversation as well with the Traverse, that the team, Eleanor, we were having that conversation and she was like what happens if Moses and Ruth are also like being questioned? What if they're also on the hot seat essentially? And I was like oh yeah. And I've always thought that that would happen at a later point in the play, but then it was like why not bring that earlier? Why not bring that, so very early on they are all vulnerable and they're all feeling like they're being judged.

And as we were rehearsing there was that conversation, there was a conversation amongst the actors about everyone trying to prove in that room amongst the family that they're all human. And I found that really interesting, and that is, that's where the complexity lies I think. So it was really important to just bring the fact that no one's right and no one's wrong into the play.

FRANCES:

Brilliant. There's a couple of other questions whilst I've got you Dipo, just to see if they touch on what you're currently talking about. Sara asks about the kick-off point, the grief - oh yeah, was it the grief, the communication or Gideon's illness, which I couldn't quite work out was mental or physical, my assumption was both one after the other - so you've already answered that to one extent, but actually intellectually you approach this about hitting, you know, spare the rod. But there's a question there about Gideon's illness which it'd be interesting for you to unpick a bit more please.

DIPO:

Yeah, um so the idea is that Gideon had a mental illness, and the family had acknowledged that amongst themselves. But the moment that he dies they start to question, they start to question if his death which was a suicide um was bigger than just the mental illness, and whether there were actually elements of his past that have led to that and whether they just attributed it to the illness. But whether it's a combination of things. So that's what Moses and Ruth are now trying to um confront their parents with, because they're like it can't necessarily be this one thing, they're like because trauma starts from like, it can go years and years back. And so they are trying to say we don't think it's just the illness, and they think the parents have almost used the illness as a cloak to disguise their bad behaviour.

And so that's what Moses and Ruth are trying to unpack. So it is several different things but that's because they're trying to make a sense of it and they're trying to weave a narrative together where there's not necessarily a narrative. And so that's what I found interesting about the play.

FRANCES:

Fantastic thank you. And it feels like there's quite a few questions um that talk about the difficulties of doing all of this on zoom. One that relates to the fact that A Foreign Language has that sort of very rhythmical text that Magnus has identified there. But also, and Isla there's some questions I'm going to come back to you on as well, but um, to both of you it'd be interesting to, Liam asked to what extent did you modify the text for zoom versus specifically writing of theatre? What do you feel was lost or gained in the digital translation? And I think

someone also asked a question about whether people used their scripts or learnt their lines, so people are obviously keen to hear about the practical um fact of doing a script reading on zoom, so that'd be great if either of you want to dive in on that. Isla?

ISLA:

Um okay I'll go! [laughter] The scenes that we saw are taken from various points in the play and I sort of stitched different bits together to kind of make it a like sample platter of the play.

We'll like give you a bit of a sense of it. I mean the actors obviously in both pieces were extraordinary, phenomenal, brilliant. I think there's always the challenge of the delay um and missing the liveness and the energy that actors obviously get from being in a room with other people.

I didn't rewrite mine with the awareness that it would be on zoom, um but I stitched it together I guess with the awareness of this sharing. And I think all of my actors, um I mean we had one day sort of workshopping the script and talking it through, we had one day rehearsing and then one day recording, so they really didn't have loads of time to work on it, and so they're reading from scripts on various devices, but they're obviously really brilliant and familiar and fantastic and making it look like it's really easy.

FRANCES:

Amazing, thank you. Dipo, what about you? Just to jump in and say um that I felt there was some, there was a moment with A Foreign Language where I felt this family almost could be talking in lockdown, they almost could be having this conversation in this, and the boxes that we saw them in slightly contributed to that sense of them all in their own personal sense of grief. Did you feel there was any richness that came from the zoom context, or did it all feel like a compromise?

DIPO:

No I feel like there were some benefits to it, I feel like like you just said actually, being in separate boxes because they're all, none of them have the same opinion and all the same view, they all feel like conflicts with one another, so actually watching it on zoom now and during the rehearsal process and the development, it's almost like everyone's decided to isolate themselves, and they've become separate. So I find that interesting in terms of zoom and how the form can actually enhance something.

But the process was as Isla described really for us as well, and I didn't rewrite anything. This is like the play from the beginning, it was all in order from the beginning and I didn't rewrite

anything. I do a lot of overlaps in my dialogue and that was quite difficult, because on zoom

you can't really overlap, and so thankfully we used different software to record audio where people could overlap. And it still doesn't work perfectly, just because actors respond to one another, and if you're not able to respond to like someone's body language, which is sometimes what I'm writing like someone's responding to someone else, like hand out a card in a certain way or look at someone in a certain way, or Moses at one point is in his own world and he wanders off a bit and you can't really get that in zoom. But I think you still get an effect of it through rehearsals and through the process.

FRANCES:

I just thought he was being devil may care with his headphones, you know! It did play that.

DIPO:

Yeah exactly, yeah and they read from the script and because I did a lot of rewrites as well, even during the development day and because I actually had like a couple versions of the script, and so I was playing around with it during development, like a couple of weeks ago. And yeah so that's how we worked.

FRANCES:

Someone's asked that question actually, did the script change in rehearsals? Did yours change Isla?

ISLA:

Um yeah a little bit, and added various bits. There are a few bits in the section that you saw that were new, that I sort of wrote either on the day or in between like the rehearsal day and the recording day, based on discussions that we had. And also ways to sort of stitch different bits together. So yeah some stuff was new.

FRANCES:

I love that part of the process when the actors are bringing it to life and you suddenly know

what you don't need and what you do need, and that line could be polished... did you find that was a positive experience for you both?

ISLA & DIPO:

Yeah, yeah completely.

FRANCES:

So coming back to Isla more specific, Zoe asks how did you approach the weaving of religion throughout the play, both in terms of Tia's relationship with God/Jesus, and in a broader sense in regards to Pine and her faith in the manifesto? There's another question that ties into that which was, oh which might have gone, which was about why Hel? Why that Norse god?

ISLA:

Um that's a great question. I guess the question that I'm looking at, or the unanswerable question that I'm looking to unpick is sort of um why do people believe what they believe, and also what does it do for them? And is there such a thing as good beliefs and bad beliefs?

Is it dependent on whether or not those beliefs are good or bad for you, or are there inherently like good or bad beliefs, is something that I was just kind of interested and exploring in the play.

So I suppose throughout the play there's kind of a tension between these two women, almost in a battle over Liam's soul, and Tia kind of representing and having beliefs that are based in a religion that we're more familiar with in terms of mainstream Christianity, and then Hel with this kind of wild out there patchwork um ideology that doesn't actually exist, that is like fully fleshed out for her and fully makes sense to her, but it would be kind of foreign to everyone else. I'm not aware that anyone believes in the goddess Hel and thinks that Valerie Solanas is a prophet, like a weaved in thing, that's kind of like a rogue combo. But for Pine that makes complete sense and backs up her ideology and her world view and it all like links in together. So that's obviously an invented ideology.

So I guess it weaves through the play in terms of the character interactions and the ways in which they try and pull Liam between these two belief systems. And how pure either of them are in that I guess is a question, or how um manipulative either of them are in that. Because it probably would be easy to see Tia as kind of an angel and Pine as like a devil, but as Dipo said, I'm not really interested in that binary. And there's definitely moments throughout the play where you see that Pine's actually doing real good for Liam, and Tia is maybe not as pure or good as we thought she was in her motivations.

FRANCES:

And that's really interesting. Someone's asked about your choice of scenes for tonight, and it's really interesting in the way you show those scenes, because my question about how uncomfortable we were supposed to feel about Pine came from the fact that we do see Liam grow in that scene. You know, she does- you see a broken boy, see the potential that he could be something better than that, and in contrast what we see with his best mate is a sense of, you don't listen to me. You know, actually why do you do that, why do you call her Pie when she's Pine? So um was it important to you and your choice of scenes that you already alluded to those sort of nuances and complexities?

ISLA:

Yeah definitely, um yeah. Definitely. I don't really have anything to add, I don't know why I was going to try and elaborate!

FRANCES:

I'm a terrible interviewer! I'm asking all these questions-

ISLA:

Well you just said everything brilliantly so I'm like why am I trying to add on that!

FRANCES:

And just about that, was it frustrating because as I understand it Isla, yours is a full-length piece that's written that you've chosen a few extracts from, but Dipo you wrote this new, and so what we see is what exists as yet? So um I'll come back to Dipo on that, but Isla was it frustrating to have to pick a short extract when you want to share the whole play, or did you feel It's really brought into sharper relief the things that work, and the questions people might have?

ISLA:

I think the workshop that we did before we sort of had to pick an extract helped me see the parts of the play that were stronger, because I feel really clear now after the workshop, and working with Debbie and the actors, what I want to work on. And because it predominantly was in the second half of the play, and also because I as a writer fundamentally want to be liked and to impress people, I chose the part of the play that was good! [laughter]

So I was like these are the strong scenes that I'll show, and then I'll go away and make the other bits better.

FRANCES:

Well also we need to be able to get up in the morning and write, don't we, and actually feeling good about something is the way to do that. They were cracking scenes.

Um Dipo, how does it, how are you gonna extend it? Do you want to extend it, is it this sort of beautiful fragment that we have now or do you want to crack it open to a 80-minute play? What's your thinking?

DIPO:

That's a good question. Because I go back and forth on that. But I think what's interesting for me is that I think what we saw is actually the easy part for these characters. I think what's most difficult is actually to come. And so I'm really interested in going back and figuring out what happens for them next, because now as they describe in scene three, um the alien is now there, honesty is now there, now they have to live with the fact that they've spoken truths to one another and what does that look like? And do they try and maintain this image of perfection because they're afraid? And fear is never the way, like never the reason why you should love people, and so it's like what does that mean to the family? And how does it break them even further or unite them? And so I'm really interested in tackling that.

FRANCES:

Amazing. That's interesting, do you think a larger play would include Gideon, or do you think his absence is important?

DIPO:

I think that his absence is important yeah. I think it wouldn't include Gideon. I think it's always about thinking what would Gideon be like if he was in that scene, but not having him actually there. And always starting with the loss of Gideon.

FRANCES:

Brilliant. And we have him there in that flicker of the lights don't we?

DIPO:

Exactly.

FRANCES:

Great, we're running short on time, let me see if we can push forward with these. This is a lovely question from Kath, who says congratulations, she really enjoyed the plays. But was there anything surprising that you discovered while writing? Who wants to jump in with that?

ISLA:

Dipo, you start!

DIPO:

Sure, okay.

Well, what was interesting is, as I said earlier, I had two versions of it. And what was interesting was that I went into rehearsals thinking one version was just the version we were gonna do, and then one of the actors was like oh I like that other version, can we read that version? And Debbie was like are you happy to read it, and I was like yeah of course, let's try

and let's see, and then we read it and then we all, then I was like oh wow I love that version. It was just a raw version. And so then I went back and rewrote it after development day, which

was very hard actually but it was interesting and a nice challenge.

Because normally I would always write a full length play before showing it to anyone, but the fact that I'd allowed people to read two different versions that were almost like rough versions of the script, um that was hard but it was rewarding in the end. And it made writing it really exciting.

FRANCES:

That's amazing. So you might be able to be bolder from now on in sharing-

DIPO:

Yeah exactly yeah.

FRANCES:

-raw bits of writing. Fantastic. Do you have an answer for that Isla, anything surprising?

ISLA:

I think it's... I love and have missed a lot in the last 12 months. Collaborating with other people and the stuff that they find, actors and directors, that they find in your work. There's like seeds of it there, sometimes that you've consciously planted, sometimes that you don't even really know are there, and I love the process of workshopping with the actors, and with Debbie. And the things that they brought out that really like excited me to expand and explore more, and things that made complete sense and felt like they'd really understood um what I was trying to do, and gave me ideas that will help it kind of grow even further.  That was really nice.

And yeah, when you've sat with a play for a while, because I wrote this play a few years ago and have done quite a lot of work, and obviously worked with Eleanor on it, and it's always nice to find things that newly excite you about something that you feel like you've stared at for a very long time.

FRANCES:

Fantastic. Brilliant, thank you. I think we've actually answered Liam's question about the next steps you'd like to take with the scripts, in that you both touched on how that process has made you sort of hungry to go at it, though we haven't perhaps covered it in detail.

But we're nearly finished, because we're well past the time so we will finish with Hope's question, which is did the writers' perception of the characters fit the casted actors? So how did you feel about the casting, presumably you were involved, or if you weren't involved were you pleased? I mean I hope you were pleased with the actors you got, because they were bloody brilliant. But yeah, what was that casting process like?

ISLA:

Shall I go first?

DIPO:

Yeah you can go first this time.

ISLA:

This is the awkward thing on zoom!

So I think I chatted with Debbie about sort of what I was thinking, and then she chose three extraordinary, brilliant actors and I was completely thrilled. And I loved what each of them brought and i thought there was like lovely um like textures and surprises and layers that they brought, so like Annie's Tia is really warm, and really likable when she could actually be quite an annoying character, and I loved that's what she brought. And um Kyle's Liam was really really moving and very funny as well, and Kirsty's Pine was really like formidable but also very magnetic and enigmatic. Yeah I mean they were magical, they were totally magic.

FRANCES:

Amazing, I agree.

DIPO:

Yeah. So Debbie said do you have anyone in mind, and I was like no just go for it, I trust you. So she chose these four, and it was incredible, because I'd seen them all in plays before, and so I felt relaxed as soon as I'd entered the development day. But what's always interesting for me is, which I think all four of them brought to the piece, is that they had a lightness to them even with dramatic material. They could go between, they could make moments funny and I laughed a lot watching that, and I don't know if other people do because you can't hear anyone in their rooms.

But I loved that they did that, and they were really open to not just making it the most dramatic thing ever, because when I read it to myself, often it's like people shouting and shouting and shouting, but they really played with all the textures and really thought about what each moment meant and so it was just incredible to work with them.

FRANCES:

Fantastic, yes I agree, they all had an ability to, when they talked about memories, they were so in it weren't they? Humanity, and yeah. And yeah I thought Liam, that the actor who played Liam, I really felt with the choice of the scenes you'd chosen that he was being knocked between one place to another, and he was so vulnerable. And similarly about Tia, but she was likable, she didn't seem annoying at all, she was so sort of vital.

Well, we have no open questions and we are 15 minutes later than we said we'd be, but that's only because your answers have been so brilliant, and it has been so interesting to talk to you both. And just loads of luck with your brilliant pieces of work, I can't wait to be seeing them in a real theatre where we get to hear an audience laughing and crying, and chat to them afterwards.

And thank you everybody for coming, thank you for your super smart questions and for joining us tonight. The Traverse have so many brilliant events on at the minute, do sign up for more and thanks very much!

[Electronic music]