

Interview with Lisah Adeaga, cast-member of 'No Yogurt for the dead' in Different Class, published online on 25/01/2025

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I believe our lack of rituals is causing a public health crisis

Lisah Adeaga is an actor, theatremaker, singer, and cast member of the new NTGent production *No Yogurt for the Dead*, which will premiere in January. For the piece, director Tiago Rodrigues uses the book his father wrote on his sickbed as an entry point, only: the book is empty. Focusing on the absence of words and narratives in the context of grief and loss and what stories remain untold, Rodrigues takes care of the sixth instalment in the NTGent Theatre series *Histoire(s) du Théâtre*. With performer Lisah Adeaga we mulled over the play, what grief stories mean in our society, and why we need to return to the ritualistic character of theatre.

You're a cast member in the new NTGent production *No Yogurt for the Dead*, tell me about it!

The play is based on the book his father was writing from his sickbed. When Tiago discovered the book after his father's passing, he found that it wasn't a coherent manuscript but rather a collection of scribbles, fragmented thoughts, and child-like drawings. So, in a way, the play imagines what his father, Rogério Rodrigues, a well-respected Portuguese journalist, might have wanted to write—an article about his experience in the hospital, the turbulence of Lisbon, about a woman named Teresa Torga, and about the complex nature of storytelling or journalism itself.

But as I am speaking, the play hasn't been made yet. So I'm talking about a play that doesn't yet exist about a book that doesn't exist. Weird. It's a reflection on the act of creation, kind of.

What draws me in first is the rather playful, yet heavy title. *No Yogurt for the Dead*.

I think the title is awfully comical. When Tiago first asked me if it was a good working title, I immediately said yes—because it just felt right. It's funny, and a little absurd, but also carries a weight of truth about life, death, and everything in between. It sums up the atmosphere of a hospital, that tasteless cup of yoghurt they give you. It's like a staple of the hospital diet, even when everything else feels wrong or out of place, a tension between banal and profound. Despite everything you get that yoghurt, even when you're dying. It's like a symbol of life: as long you're alive, here is your yoghurt.

It's the director's personal story about a close one passing. How do you approach that vulnerability as a performer?

I was very honoured to be trusted with this raw material and to be part of this story. And as a theatremaker myself, I appreciate that Tiago set out with something very personal. That doesn't always have to mean the play itself is very personal, but the starting point, the need is. Nowadays we so often see the great creators tell stories that are so very removed from themselves. We're all questioning who can tell what story, I think the answer is in the question itself: *who can?* Who has the skills, the knowledge and who did the research? As a performer, I certainly do want to have a degree of distance from the story or character. The personal nature of this story doesn't mean I, as an actor, have to fully embody Tiago's experience or take ownership of the story. I want to be able to share it with the audience without completely claiming it. Telling a personal story might be fragile, but I think theatre as a medium is a natural serving-hatch for intimate narratives, because of the ritualistic character. It's not about presenting the personal story as a finished, conclusive narrative. Instead, it's about creating a space where vulnerability is acknowledged, and where the audience is invited to bring their own experiences and vulnerability into the room.

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Can you expand on that: would you say theatre could be a ritual for grieving?

I think, in our secular West, we have too few rituals anyway. Pitifully little, actually. We hardly have rituals to deal with the deep ripples and glens of life. And I believe that is what is making us sick: it's causing a public health crisis. The lack of rituals makes it harder for us to deal with the challenges of life and death, both individually and on a collective level. We don't get time to digest, because we have to constantly keep going: work, work, work. That capitalist mindset forces us to keep moving, with no room for reflection or mourning. And that mindset is contrary to what rituals should offer, really. Theatre is one of the few places in our society where a ritualistic character still exists. That makes it so important, especially since it is subsidised and therefore should be accessible to everyone. But unfortunately, even within the industry itself, we sometimes forget that ritual aspect.

So more than the content of the theatre, it's showing up itself, sitting in the theatre, watching something together that is a ritual.

Exactly! It is not only about the content of performances but also about the role of theatre as an institution. Theatre should be closer to people and evoke an every day, almost instinctive feeling. It is not an elevated form of culture, but a place where we come together to share our human experiences. That's the ritual character: the collective, communal processing of what it means to be human. Unfortunately, you see

theatre increasingly influenced by a capitalist mindset. That clashes with ritual, because capitalism is about production and efficiency, while rituals need time, attention and stillness. And without those rituals, we are left with unprocessed emotions and experiences about life and death.

Fear of death seems to be a recurring theme this theatre season, what are your thoughts on that?

I believe that I only fear death when I am not okay with my life at that moment. Because if I am okay with my life, then there is absolutely nothing in me that shies away from death. I think people often think in reverse. If things are going well, they have the fear of losing it. I think in the core that's the same fear. Fear of dying is also a fear of living. Because if you are really in the here and now in your life, you don't have that fear that that will be taken away from you. I think the fact that I have a spiritual taste helps with that, too. I'm not necessarily just sitting around relishing this material world.

You're a performer, theatremaker, singer but also a teacher at the Conservatory. I'm excited to hear about your experience with teaching.

First, a disclaimer: I very much enjoy my job! Although I can say that teaching is full of paradoxes. For example: to create freely, you have to let go of the critical voice, within yourself or outside yourself. But in an art school, you unite the two: freedom and assessment. Judging art is still tricky. How do you judge someone's receptiveness to creative flow? That conflicts with the school system, where you have to justify everything to the government. There is also a contradiction in the word 'conservatory' itself. It's about conserving ideas about what art is. But to create something new, you have to overturn those very existing frameworks. And that is difficult if you are judged within those same frameworks. Learning is such a big part of being an artist, yet institutions often leave a strange aftertaste. Therefore as a teacher, I don't focus too much on giving grades.

Lastly: as a multi-disciplinary artist, it's often easy to lose yourself in abundance, how do you deal with that?

The power of working in multiple disciplines is that it allows you to not always take everything that seriously. In true creativity, there are no boundaries like disciplines, so for me, they overlap and influence each other. I remember as a child, I used to fill up my afternoon first by colouring a bit, then put on a CD and dancing around, then maybe I would continue writing my book. An 8-year-old writing a book! Going to art school made me choose certain paths, made a kristalise my art practice in a way I'm trying to unlearn again: I want to turn off the rational brain and just play, play play! Or in the spiritual sense: follow my intuition, my gut, guide me again. The floaty isn't all that serious, being spiritual is also playing around.





