

Transcript of Actions not Words

An audio interview with Jacqueline Stewart and Amardeep Kainth

Jacqueline Stewart: Welcome, before we begin, I would like to start with a moment of solidarity for people who have lost their lives to racist state violence. I'll now read the statement Clean Break recently shared.

We are angered and devastated that Chris Kaba has been killed at the hands of the Met Police. Chris is the second Black man to have died following Met Police contact in three months, as Oladeji Omishore died in June following police use of Taser. We send our deepest sympathies to Chris and Oladeji's loved ones, and solidarity to everyone campaigning for truth and justice.

My name is Jacqueline Stewart. I'm the Head of Participation at Clean Break and the Interim Deputy Chief Executive Officer.

Clean Break is a women only theatre company founded in 1979 by two women in prison who believed in the transformative power of theatre. We as a company tell women stories, about their experiences of the criminal justice system, to change hearts and minds through our work in the theatre industry, in prisons and in community settings.

In March 2020, we engaged the services of darvaja to lead us through a root and branch organisational anti-racism journey. The result has been that we are working to a live bespoke developmental anti-racism working plan.

And on that note, I would like to introduce an esteemed guest of honour who is here with me, please welcome Amardeep Kainth, Amardeep is the director of darvaja.

Amardeep Kainth: Hi Jacqueline, thanks so much for having me. That was very kind introduction, thank you.

JS: You're very welcome, It's always a pleasure to speak with you Amardeep. Would like to tell us about darvaja and the amazing work you do.

AK: You're very kind Jacqueline, thank you. So we're a collective of practitioners that work together to address systemic and structural inequality in the places that we work. It's a slightly unusual collective practice, our practitioners work in a whole host of sectors. We have people that work in theatre, that are writers, we have team members that work in construction and do work in neighbourhoods that are gentrifying, thinking about how social value might show up in that space. We have

members of our team that are experts in gender-based violence in the international sector.

We have a collective of practitioners that are really varied in what they do, and the one unifying thing for our practice is to really try to address structural and systemic inequalities where they show up. The goal of that is really about making sure that we are leaving better places and practices for vulnerable, minoritised and marginalised communities. That is really at the core of what we do.

I know it can sometimes sound like our team has really disparate work, but there is so much connectivity in what we do.

We came together as a collective in quite an unusual way. I think it was about this understanding that we were working quite often in silos, in organisations seeking to make change, and that's a really isolating experience. It can be a really, really isolating practice, and so for us it was about solidifying and consolidating what we were doing, creating community with other people that are seeking to move the needle in similar ways. And also taking some power back as well, right? So thinking about what one singular voice in an organisation might do and how that might be listened to, versus a collective of experienced and expert practitioners coming together and offering something. So there was an understanding that there's collective value in our practices being joined up.

We have two key streams of work. As I just shared, we have a community of practitioners, so both formal and informal at different times, we come together and provide support to those same isolated practitioners, and then we also offer consultancy and strategic advice to organisations, particularly from lived experienced leaders.

And so that's a little bit about how we came to be and work with Clean Break for a really extended period of time, generating your plan and your way forward.

JS: Thank you. I'm just thinking in this time that we're in, particularly now, 'collective action' is exactly what's required. I think that's what everyone is seeing, that trying to work on your own is a lonely and isolating path.

The other thing I wanted to pick up on was just how much work you did with us, and the models that you used which were amazing. So, how can organisations and individuals move beyond just words? Move into action from inaction.

AK: That is such a good question and I think Clean Break has really been through it. I think for me one of the biggest things within our practice is we're quite selective about who we work with, and have grown more selective about when we will work with an organisation and when we might not. Our practice is somewhat disruptive

for an organisational space, and that requires people to be quite ready. You'll recognise I'm using both 'people' and 'organisations' at different points interchangeably, and that is not without intention. Organisations can be more than the sum of the individuals, and this practice of really thinking about systems change requires an organisational lens as well as that interpersonal lens.

But coming back to thinking about what organisations can do to move beyond words and into action, I think it's about really thinking about where you can commit, where are commitments made and how might you be honouring those commitments.

Not saying words you don't mean is a really good place to start. I think what we saw in 2020 particularly, was a moment where people were very quick to make commitments to things that they hadn't really thought through. That they felt like they should be saying something, so they were speaking. I think we have to think about why we might be saying what we're saying, before we say it sometimes. I would also really encourage organisations to consider how much they're actually willing to look at what might be going on.

One of the experiences we have had, particularly over the last few years, where organisations are really seeking to understand. There is a desire to understand what things might look like at the organisation, without an understanding that moving beyond that reality will require time, it will require resource, it will require longer term interest as well. This isn't something that we can come in, slap a plaster on and keep moving. Staying in action is very much about remembering that we can't just speak once and then we're done.

I think two years on from 'black square summer', we're really seeing that those moments emerge where the words have been potentially hollow in some organisations, the work hasn't been done underneath. This is why we always say don't over commit. If you're really about it, then be about it. I'm going to quote one of my fellow practitioners, something that he says that very often is "if you're really into it, then do it. But if you're not, then don't." Because I think that can also lead to perpetuating much more harm. When your organisation has set a path that they are not prepared to walk, that can be very, very difficult, particularly for the practitioners and people in the room.

I'm particularly thinking, we work quite extensively with charities, so what does it mean when you have made commitments that you are not prepared to honour for the people that are feeling the sharpest end of the stick of racialised violence, when we're thinking about your anti-racist commitments.

JS: Thank you Amardeep. It just brought to mind, when you used the word disruption, how Clean Break as an organisation has been really clear about tipping

the tables, particularly around women in the criminal justice system and that work. But this is the first time that there's been a serious effort to embark on disruption across our landscape, of anti-racism and all the intersectionality that brings.

AK: Coming back to what you were just saying about actions and not words, we have to be ready to disrupt our practice. That's what I think organisations really have to be ready for when we're thinking about moving beyond words, is really thinking about how much we might be willing or wanting to change, or ready to change. Because when we commit to anti-racism, have we actually really thought about what anti-racism means? Anti-racism is about challenging systemic oppression, and if we understand that anti-racism is about challenging systemic oppression in the multitude of ways in which it shows up, what we have to acknowledge is that it's going to require us to change the status quo. And for many of us, particularly in the theatre industry and in the creative space, the status quo is comfortable. The status quo makes sure we get paid, it makes sure I have a nice job. The status quo might serve me, the status quo might make sure that actually I progress in my career, and that I have space. But actually, what we have to understand is it will require the desire and need to challenge systemic oppression. An anti-racist practice will require us to really sit with what the status quo has actually meant.

And I think staying in action and moving beyond words requires us to both have a robust understanding of where we have been, where we are now, and then move into thinking about where we want to build into, and where do we want to be. Quite often if we skip any of those steps, we are not going to land in a place that reduces harm for racialised to people. We're not going to land in a place where people are safe, and we are going to keep reproducing the reality that we already know exists.

JS: Thank you, because clearly what we do have here at Clean Break is a platform to do that. To do that work and share that messaging. So I wanted to also ask, on that basis, what did you learn from Clean Break in terms of our working across all three sectors, the theatre industry, our work in prisons, criminal justice and in community settings?

AK: Working with Clean Break was a really delicious experience for our team. It wasn't linear, and one of the things I think that was quite unique about working with Clean Break is that the organisation already has an understanding of itself as progressive, as radical and and as an organisation that is very vested in being disruptive, right? Your identity, when we think about your origin story that you shared at the beginning of this podcast, that is a really powerful mandate in the origin of what Clean Break actually does and is. What we found was that actually coming back to that mandate was really constructive in looking at each area, in

each sector that Clean Break works in. So, thinking what does the women's sector need? How might racism show up in the women's sector? What might we need to think about when we're considering intersectionality when we are working in the women sector? It's an incredibly complex context to think about.

You layer into that we're a women only context, thinking about the criminal justice system, thinking about anti-racism, for racialised women is extremely attached to the origin story of Clean Break. And what I found that we were able to do, is that going back to that origin mission and that origin statement we were able to take everybody on the journey. Because as we know, hopefully this is alright for me to say, it's not like everybody is going to walk away from working at Clean Break a millionaire. We don't come to the arts to walk away being really, really wealthy. We come to the arts because it's a head and a heart practice, right? It is a heart practice, and if you are coming to work at Clean Break, you have a collection of really passionate women that care about other women. That want other women to live great, full and expansive lives in the world. And when that is already at the heart of what you do, it is possible to make sure that people are doing the learning to expand what that practice might mean, to have a more expansive understanding of what does it mean to really talk about justice for women in the UK in today's context, where we are thinking about really extensive state violence.

JS: Yes. I just really wanted to share something with you Amardeep, so this is in direct relation to the work that you've done with us. We for the first time a few weeks ago were able to sit down as a company and discuss the killing of Chris Kaba, and what that meant for the company. What our thoughts and feelings were, and what actions we would take, including sending out social media messaging.

And that absolutely could not have happened without the input of darvaja in Clean Break, to bring us to that space. It was ground-breaking, it was challenging, but we were all there together. And we managed to be able for the first time to talk about the deepest and most raw things that are happening in our society, in our workspace, because of the enablement we felt through the process that you brought to us. So I just wanted to share and say thank you for that Amardeep.

AK: Thank you, Jacqueline. What you just shared is why we do what we do. That is really important for us, that feels contrite to say that it's important to us, but it is core to our practice. For us, it's not just about doing a really good piece of work while we're in the room. It's actually about leaving something valuable. I'm not here to keep coming back into Clean Break and keep coming in and doing consultancies, I haven't done my job, actually. If you need me to keep coming back into the room I haven't done my job right. And actually the the progress that Clean Break has made independent of our practice, since we wrapped up our work together, that for me is really motivating and extremely exciting. In the sense that really thinking about the

fact that you can come together and talk about something being extremely traumatic, extremely loaded, extremely connected to the professional work that you do with care, with compassion in a trauma informed way, and people were able to walk away feeling held, supported and seen. That for me is the undeniable value of doing work to really understand anti-racism.

I think quite often when we're thinking about organisational anti-racism work, it's hard to get the balance right between thinking about it as a strategic practice, so getting into the vision of your organisation, really thinking about what does this mean for the nuts and bolts of what we do operationally. While also balancing that with the heart practice, that there are people in the room that have direct experience of this violence and what does it mean for them, for us to be exploring this organisationally in this way. There has to be a real critical balance of both care for the individual and then understanding that this is deeply systemic and structural. And I think holding that tension, particularly in the sectors that you straddle, the criminal justice system, thinking about the women's sector and then thinking about the arts, that's a really complex thing to hold and just seeing that you can put one foot in front of the other. Clean Break is an exceptional example of that, and that is really powerful and moving.

JS: Yeah, we took steps that we hadn't done before, and I just want to reiterate that by doing that, that was empowering. That to me was an action that, we as a company, was tangible. We took that action, we sat together, and the allyship presence was there, you know, we needed to respond. And I see that as the beginning of the new pathway for Clean Break in the way that we respond to state violence against Black people in the criminal justice system, and others.

AK: Absolutely. Can I ask you something, can I ask a question? How was that relationally for you? As a team, I won't invite a personal reflection, but just thinking relationally.

JS: I mean, well, it was held by us, so there was a kind of offer... So when I say 'us' I mean myself Erin and Anna [Clean Break's senior leadership team] held the session, and for me it was without a doubt that I wanted to do it.

So there was a question put out - we've never done this before, are we going to do this? If we're going to do this, how are we going to hold it? How we going to put the care in? How are we going to make everyone feel safe, all voices heard in the room. That we have outcomes, solid outcomes. So for me it was so close to home as a Black woman, it just made sense. To me it made more sense to bring it in the space. To me it becomes nonsensical when you're ignoring something as awful and tragic as that, as recent and raw as that, and then coming into the space to say that we're doing anti-racism work. It's implausible.

AK: And I think you've just hit the nail on the head, right? Is thinking about actions, not words, is that understanding that anti-racism is core to your practice. What I'm hearing in that reflection from you is really the embedding of this understanding that this is intrinsic to what we do. This is actually as much connected to our practice as our operational meetings. This is as important as the finance conversations, that this is as critical to our programmatic work as anything else. It's massively motivating to know that this space exists within your practice at Clean Break.

JS: Thank you Amardeep.

OK, so we know it's Black History Month. Well, it's Black history all the time, isn't it! The beginning of history.

In this moment I just want to ask you a couple of questions. I know it's a massive pool to fish from, but if you could name maybe one woman who has inspired you from the past, just one. And maybe one woman who's inspired you presently, and that can be worldwide.

AK: There are so many, it's a really difficult ask Jacqueline! I mean obviously, I know you and I have spoken about this fantastic woman's practice before, but I can't not talk about Mariame Kaba.

So Mariame Kaba is a prison abolitionist, transformational justice practitioner, and she is just incredible. And I find that actually everybody that I'm going to talk about now, because I'm not just going to talk about one let's be honest, is that actually her practice has such a tenderness to it. But this one does really hard work, she's fantastic, she does real work, she's really in the grit of doing abolition work in the US. But she takes people on a journey, and I learned massively from her. I would really encourage anybody to listen to one of her podcasts, read her work and really lean into her practice.

One of the things that I hold every day from her and her practice, is that hope is a discipline. Quite often we think about anti-racism and anti-racist practice and challenging systemic oppression, we think about how hard it is, think about how heavy it can be. And practitioners like Mariame Kaba are able to come to this work with such a grace and tenderness, and care for the human is at the centre of what they do.

And I think, coming back to hope as a discipline, that is grounded in that. What she talks about is that hope is not an emotion, it's not a feeling, it's something that we do. Hope is something that we do with intention, with care, and again with action. If we are hopeful that this won't be our reality, we have to be party to creating the alternative. And this is again another thing that, I think particularly for organisations

within the theatre space, is to lean into that creativity. Once you've done the work to understand the reality of what this sector does to people and how it harms people's practice day-to-day, once we've done that work, getting to move through to the alternate reality of the future that we want to build, that's exciting. And that builds on the creativity that already exists in the space. Because it's necessary, right? We can't only, and I'm going to say we can't only because it's absolutely necessary that we do, we can't only look at how horrific the reality is now. We also need to move into thinking about where do we want to go and how are we and I, how are we moving in a way that we are actually creating it, curating it, building it. And I think practitioners like Mariame Kaba always bring me back to that. Right when I'm feeling the despair of working in this space sometimes, I find her practice to be extremely uplifting.

In terms of somebody from the past, and I wouldn't like to talk about her practice as something that's in the past, but I'm going to talk about Patricia Hill Collins, and I know that Clean Break is really familiar with Patricia Hill Collins. Patricia Hill Collins is sociologist, and we learn lots from her practice of understanding some systems of oppression, thinking about how they appear, what they do. And again, I know that Clean Break's action plan has been really grounded in Patricia Hill Collins's practice.

And actually, Patricia Hill Collins's practice is understood to be some of the foregrounding work for Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on intersectionality. And if we understand that actually, Black women have been doing this work, Black people, Black women specifically have been doing this work for aeons. They've been in the room, and actually we're not here to reinvent the wheel, right? Our practice at darvaja is about leaning into understanding what already exists, building on it, seeing how we can apply it, thinking about what new understandings we can use for that.

Thinking about Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw's work, is really grounded in this understanding of self-determination. And on Black History Month as we're thinking about actions and not words, grounding our anti-racist understanding in the importance of self-determination for people is really critical and core to thinking both about the interpersonal change and culture shifts that we need to see within our organisations, but also about the broader systemic and structural changes that we need to see. Both within our organisations and socially within our sectors.

JS: Absolutely.

I really think about what the women speak to us about at Clean Break, and sometimes when these events are so enormous you can feel so small, and wonder what it is you can do to make a change. So, my past woman I'm going to choose is

Rosa Parks. I've chosen her because it seemed like one small thing, but in the face of the situation she was in it was such a brave small thing, done on her own, on a bus, in the face of all of that. She would have been a part of the reason that Patricia and Mariame come to do the work that they'd come to do.

It's the dignity with which she did it, and that kind of silent courage. She knew she was disrupting everything, she'd just had enough, but still held her dignity in that moment. Because she could see a different future. So, I'm sharing that for our women. You know she probably, in her time, would have been very, very unlikely to have been an 'ologist' of anything, sociologist or anything, because she wasn't able to do that, the doors were shut. But in her own way she was able to make her mark, and make it known, and and so she did.

The person I'm going to pick from the future, I'm coming back over to London now, and that's got to be Doreen Lawrence. Because her reaction to an action, a desperately terrible murder of her child, her innocent child, has been groundbreaking, truly, truly. She is on a different level, she's unassailable, she won't be touched. Her determination to seek out justice for her child was second to none. They absolutely underestimated her and her family, and the fact that she's in the Lords doing that work and has never let go, is amazing. It's just a beacon of hope and light for everyone, that in that adversity she turned it round and showed just what kind of powerful woman she is.

AK: Endless, endless respect for Doreen Lawrence. I think there's something about, coming back to the grace with which she responded, we know that Black women are subjected to hyper scrutiny, hyper sexualisation, inhumane and dehumanising treatment consistently, particularly when they speak out against the injustices that they have experienced. I have a two-fold feeling about the grace and dignity with which Black women respond in the UK, because actually they shouldn't have to be graceful. They shouldn't have to be calm. They shouldn't have to be composed when they are saying 'enough is enough, my teenage son was subjected to something that nobody should have ever been subjected to, and then my family following that incident was subjected to something hugely violent, disruptive, life altering.' The violence for them was not the one-off incident, it's been the continual practice that they have been subjected to.

And so I have a really mixed feeling sometimes. Endless, endless respect for Doreen Lawrence, but I really hope to see a world where actually people don't have to be composed in order to speak out and challenge the injustices they face. It shouldn't be the case that speaking out against injustice subjects you to more injustice, and I really hope that in my lifetime I see that reality to be true here in the UK as well.

JS: Thank you Amardeep, that was a really, really eye-opening conversation. I hope that the listeners who are with us have learned a lot more about darvaja, about the

ground-breaking work you've done with Clean Break, and I hope that we are an organisation who are being very much like we're foot forward, and not looking backwards and not making empty sentiments or statements about what we're going to do, but actually we're going to get on with the action and and do the work, Amardeep.

AK: That's it Jacqueline, one foot in front of the other right, one foot in front of the other.

JS: Your favourite phrase as well, 'non-negotiable'.

AK: Yeah you know that! Enough is enough, you've got to know when to say enough is enough.

Yeah, we've learned massively from working with Clean Break and one of the things that is almost one of our criteria for when we're deciding whether we're going to be working collectively with an organisation, we see this work as a collective endeavour very much so, that if we're going to walk alongside each other that there is a readiness and a willingness to do the work. You know, it wasn't a walk in the park with Clean Break. At points there were challenges, there was discomfort, there were setbacks, there was changing of a timeline. There were lots of different moving parts, but the one thing I will always credit Clean Break with is the unwavering commitment to learning and doing better. That the commitment to doing this right is non-negotiable for Clean Break and that for us, whether you come to us getting it or not, or whether you come to us part way on your journey, at the start of your journey. For us, the willingness is a really core part of that, because we could see how much at Clean Break that moved the needle, and it enabled us to move the needle. That collective journey, that understanding of it is both strategic and heart driven. And also the understanding of it as being core to who you are and what you do, is something that was a really unique opportunity for us to work with an organisation and have the confluence of all of those things at one point in time.

So yeah, really grateful to have done that journey collectively with you and walked alongside with you for the start of it, and and looking forward to seeing where that journey takes Clean Break as you move forward as well.

JS: Well, I can honestly say on behalf Clean Break, thank you. And the fact is going forward we have forged a friendship that is not going anywhere for a long time, Amardeep. We see a future together.

So, thank you very much Amardeep Kainth.



AK: Thank you so much Jacqueline, such a pleasure to speak with you and connect with Clean Break as ever.