

DAY ONE: A chat with Tinu.

"I am an invisible man..."

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me."

THE INVISIBLE MAN is a novel written by Ralph Ellison. Published in 1952, it explores the psyche of an African American man whose colour renders him invisible. Set in Renaissance Harlem, this National Book Award-winning piece forces readers to face difficult truths about a long historical lineage of white-on-black oppression. It seems fitting, possibly now more than ever, that we breathe new life into Ellison's text by exploring its theatrical potential. In pairing the novel's charged, surreal and deeply moving narrative with live cello and percussion, we are embarking on a process of bringing *The Invisible Man* to the stage.

We begin our first day of workshops at the Arcola Theatre with a discussion; I sat down with co-director Tinuke Craig to chat about her relationship with the novel and her creative approach.

Eloquent, passionate and wonderfully cool, this is what she had to say:



NATHAN: Tinu, hello!

TINUKE: Hey!

NATHAN: Tell me: how did you first discover this novel and what was your initial response to it?

TINUKE: Well, I first discovered *The Invisible Man* when I was at University; I was studying James Baldwin – doing my dissertation on his work – and Ralph Ellison kept coming up as another writer worth reading. What struck me then was how honest it was. It was dealing with a set of emotions that I'd heard my Dad and my brother talk about but I'd never really seen represented in literature.

NATHAN: So, forgive the obvious question, but... *why now?* It's undeniable that the issues Ellison explores are still incredibly pressing. Why do we need this adaptation in 2017?

TINUKE: I think we need it partly as a reminder. It's so easy to dismiss these issues as "*no longer relevant*", when in fact they might be more relevant than ever. It's also important to consider that The Man in the novel isn't the kind of character that "typical theatre audiences" will come into contact with very often. We spend a lot of time with him, hearing him speak. There's something vital about bringing those two types of people together, especially now.



NATHAN: In his introduction of the novel, Ellison writes: *'I felt that one of the ever-present challenges facing the American novelist was that of endowing his inarticulate characters, scenes and social processes with eloquence. For it is by such attempts that he fulfills his social responsibility as an American artist.'* Is that something you consider to be true and relevant for modern theatre makers/artists?

TINUKE: I actually don't agree with Ellison there. I think there's something really important in letting people speak in their own voices and asking audiences to do the work. If someone leaves their estate in Tower Hamlets to see *The Cherry Orchard* at the National Theatre, I doubt anyone is going to make a huge effort to help them understand it. That being said, I do think there's something really exciting and refreshing about hearing a black male from the 1950's speaking in this incredibly poeticised and lyrical way; it upends the audience's expectations of that character. The mismatch between an audience's preconceived prejudices and the words coming out of the character's mouth is a really useful textural device.

NATHAN: It's safe to say that the pairing of text and live music is *instrumental* (sorry) to this particular adaptation. How are you approaching the marrying of these elements

TINUKE: Well, when I'm not directing plays I run choirs, so I spend a lot of my time around musicians, and Ellison writes very musically. He's incredibly clever in his use of pace and rhythm; he builds readers up with lists and paragraphs and extremely complex sentences before suddenly bringing us into something more staccato. There's also a lot of wonderful things about the cello specifically. Not only is the register similar to the human vocal register, but you literally have to wrap yourself around it in order to play. It's an incredibly connected and personal instrument with an inherent theatricality. It's *exciting* to watch someone play it. It's physical, too – you really break a sweat playing the cello in a way that you don't playing the flute. No shade to flautists, of course.

NATHAN: Of course.



TINUKE: It's also exciting to explore the pairing of a classical instrument like the cello and what is, in some ways – vocally and rhythmically – a jazz novel.

NATHAN: And Ellison was a musician himself?

TINUKE: Yes, a cellist! It's fascinating to think about what kind of musician he would have become, were he born in a different time or skin. There are entire generations of black musicians who trained classically but had to play jazz in order to make a living. Nina Simone could have been the greatest classical pianist of her generation, but she simply wasn't allowed into those spaces. I mean, the world got Nina Simone, so yay! – but she also wanted to play Carnegie Hall.

NATHAN: One final question, what are you most excited/nervous/interested in tackling over the course of this R&D week?

TINUKE: What I'm very keen to crack is finding a truly meaningful connection between the voice and the instruments. I want to interrogate *why* the cello and drums are being played live on stage in order to create a music-text connection that *really* means something.

NATHAN: Brill. Thanks Tinu.

TINUKE: No worries!

NATHAN: I love your jumper, can I have it?

TINUKE: Sure, here it is!

*(That last exchange didn't actually happen but I was *this* close)*

So that was Tinuke Craig! Visit the blog again tomorrow for an update on the work we've done so far and more thoughts from our wonderful cast and creatives.

– Your blogger/roving reporter/social media wizard, Nathan Foad



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DAY TWO: Meet Clarence.

Welcome back! So it's day two of our R&D at The Arcola Theatre and we are in full experimentation mode. Our fantastic musicians have been mining the text for its natural musicality, breaking apart the rhythms of Ellison's writing and deciding how best the music can service the piece.

Meanwhile, Tinu and our performer, Clarence, have been cracking the prologue wide open, playing around with the narrative voice and trying out some new stuff that has surprised them both.

To tell us more about the process so far and give us an insight into his relationship with *The Invisible Man*, here's the marvelously charming and talented Clarence Smith:



NATHAN: Clarence, I'd love to hear about how *The Invisible Man* came into your life.

CLARENCE: Well I was about 15, which is many *many* moons ago, and I found this novel on a friend's bookshelf; the picture on the cover was a distorted image of a black man's face. I thought to myself "*why do these white people have this book in their house?*" – there really wasn't a lot of other black literature there! The book was called *The Invisible Man*.

I started reading the prologue. '*I am an invisible man.*' Now, growing up as a black boy in Brixton, there were quite limited ideas of what you could be – “Are you a soul boy? Are you a reggae boy?” – but in all actuality I was a punk boy!

NATHAN: And there weren't a lot of black punks at the time?

CLARENCE: Not really, no! I definitely stuck out, and in reading this novel it helped me realise that you can ask others to look beyond your surroundings and see you for who you are. To be honest, even dressing like a punk was just a suit of armour and I was inviting people to be brave enough to see through to the other side of it. The novel is about being courageous and defining yourself despite the odds. It had a really profound impact on me – it gave me a kind of courage that I've carried throughout my life.

NATHAN: So then what was the process of you eventually deciding “hey, maybe there's a play in this”?

CLARENCE: I will hold my hands up and say that it wasn't necessarily my invention! I had a theatre company back in the 80's called *Double Edge*. Two colleagues approached the company and asked if we'd be interested in producing a stage adaptation of this book– I couldn't believe it was the same novel that I'd encountered when I was 15. At first I didn't know how it would work, but the second I stopped to really think about it I could suddenly hear the prologue being spoken aloud by an actor and it made so much sense. I thought “wow, this is perfect!”

We did an invited audience performance at The Albany in Deptford and it went down really well. From then onwards, it was a part of my DNA; I always came back to this piece. So when I was going to New York with the RSC, I wanted to seize the opportunity. I contacted the Ellison estate and put on a platform performance at The Armory on Park Avenue. It also was very well received but I still didn't feel like the true power of the novel had been fully realised.

Later I ended up working with the wonderful Anna Girvan and we got on extremely well. We knew we wanted to do something together and once the Ellison estate gave us the go-ahead and Arts Council England generously funded the R&D, we got to work.

The piece transcends race; it transcends gender; it talks to each and every person individually. That's why I feel it's a really important and seminal work that deserves a new platform.

NATHAN: And what was the decision to pair the piece with live music?

CLARENCE: Well in the novel there's a musical refrain: *What did I do to be so black and blue?* – Louis Armstrong. So already it has that echoing throughout. Then I met the fantastic musician Laura Van Der Heijden in Stratford-Upon-Avon. We saw each other perform and were both genuinely moved by what the other had done – there was a real connection and we knew we had to work together. That's when I got curious: was there a way that Laura could be inspired by Ellison's words

and find a way of expressing the piece musically? Thus began our exploration of how these two mediums could work together.

We then brought our percussionist on board, Richard Olatunde Baker. We wanted to include an African influence alongside the classical sound of the cello.

What we're always working towards is a true connection; it isn't a soundtrack. There has to be a real alchemy between Ellison's writing and the music.



NATHAN: And what challenges does that throw up for you as an actor? Performing with the music?

CLARENCE: It really is a challenge. If it was simply about having an ambient musical accompaniment, all you have to worry about is whether it's too loud or quiet. In this case, the performance I'm giving has to interact with the performance the musicians are giving. It's quite unusual because elements of it – much like jazz – have to be improvisational, but we still need a framework in which to operate. The musicians will throw something up in rehearsals that allows me to respond in the moment. It's a total conversation. I've never done anything quite like that before; we're absolutely experimenting in a new realm.

NATHAN: The prologue is a real epic mix of incredibly beautiful language infused with these feverish – almost nightmarish – trains of thought. How do you strike that balance?

CLARENCE: Just keep true! Ellison brilliantly uses the conduit of the reefer smoking and that's what pulls *The Man* into this altered state of mine; it's incredibly sophisticated. It frees him from operating in a three-dimensional world and takes him into this other realm. Then he comes out of his drugs trip and it truly feels like a waking dream.

Then, once the words are totally within you, the piece begins to lead *you*. It's like a kite.

NATHAN: So finally, what hurdle or challenge are you most excited about taking on this week?

CLARENCE: Well we experimented with something really interesting this morning. Over the weekend a dear friend of mine, Larrington Walker, sadly passed away. He was a mentor and a trailblazer and I'd actually worked on *The Invisible Man* with him during one of its earlier iterations. At the time we argued and fought about whether I should perform the piece in my own voice or with an American accent. I was always of the view that the piece was so quintessentially American and I worried my natural accent would jar.

Then, in true synchronicity, this exact topic came up in this morning's session. Tinu and I discussed the notion that the black experience is so often view through the lens of the American black experience, yet here we are on Kingsland High Road! Like I said, the piece transcends so many things – gender, sexuality, class – and now we're wondering whether accent could be another one of those things.

So we actually explored some of the text in my own voice. I'd never tried it in my own accent with Larry – I'd love to know what he'd think of it. In a lot of ways I wouldn't be in this business if it wasn't for him. A lot of people owe their careers to that little Jamaican man. He didn't so much take me under his wing as he asked me "*who are you going to be?*"



Many people have done many great things as a result of knowing Larrington Walker and in a lot of ways this entire project is in testament to him.

NATHAN: A great note to end on, I think. Thank you Clarence.

CLARENCE: Thank you!

So there you have it. Day two has been a fascinating set of discoveries. Tomorrow I'll be chatting to the music team and getting their unique perspectives on the piece.

Bye for now!

– Nathan



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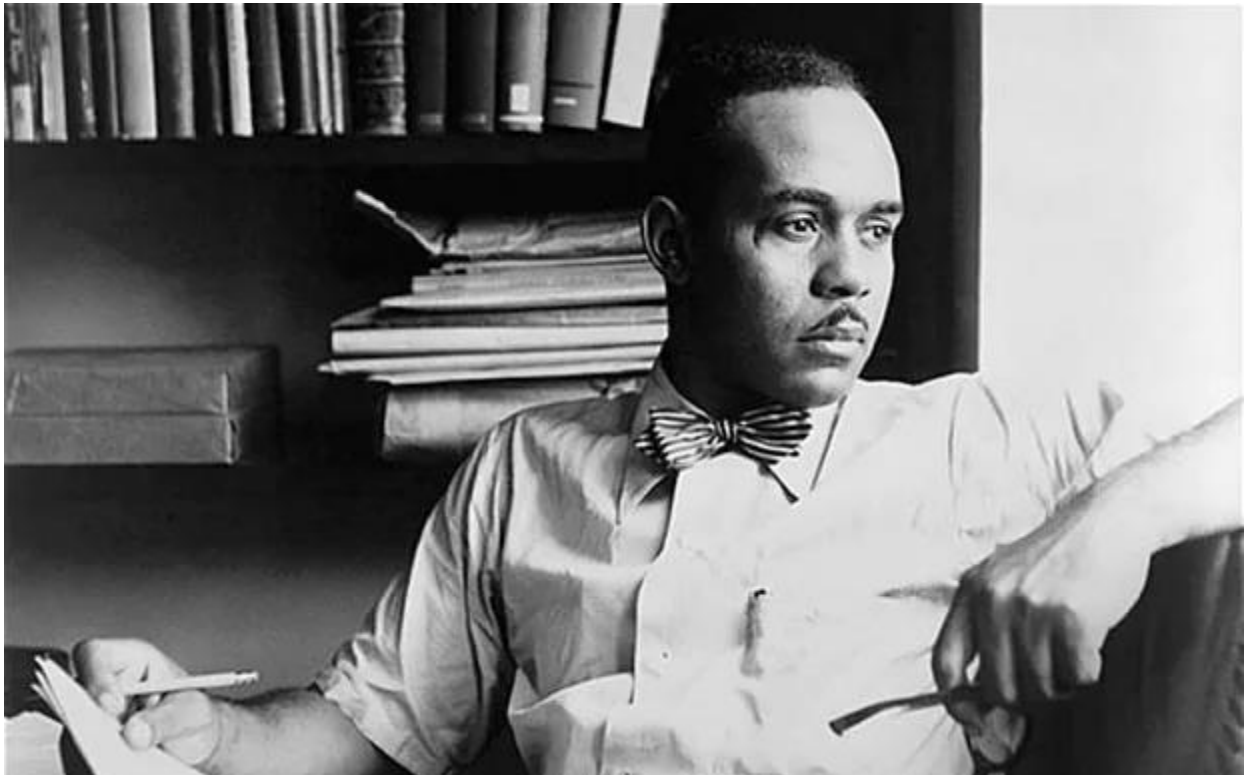
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DAY THREE: The Generosity of Ellison.

We're at the halfway point!

It seems impossible to think we're on our third day of R&D at the Arcola Theatre. In some ways it feels like we only just started and in others it seems as though we've been furiously exploring Ellison's text for an age.

I come to you from the back of the rehearsal room, watching as the cast and creatives fuse their beautiful musical compositions with Clarence's performance. As I type, our composer, Milton Mermikides, is discussing the musical interludes he has constructed in order to allow the performance proper space to breathe; moments of calm and clarity that arrive after the piece's most intense bursts. It's a wonderful privilege to be privy to such an electric and collaborative creative process, and as I observe I wanted to take a moment to tell you a little bit about Ralph Ellison.



Something that you may not know about Ellison's *The Invisible Man* is that he fully intended it to be open for interpretation; many consider it a definitive novel about the black experience, but he has stated that this is one of many potential readings.

When I was a kid, I read the English novels. I read Russian translations and so on," he said in 1983. *"And always, I was the hero. I identified with the hero. Literature is integrated. And I'm not just talking about color, race. I'm talking about the power of literature to make us recognize again and again the wholeness of the human experience."*

Reading these words reminds us of Ralph's overwhelming generosity. I'm sure he didn't *think* of this as a generous act; he was simply being a thoughtful writer – but to this reader in 2017 it feels incredibly profound.



When I spoke to our performance, Clarence Smith, in [yesterday's blog](#), he marvelled at the transcended quality of Ellison's writing:

"It transcends race, gender, sexuality. It's about bigger, broader issues...In fact, now I think about it – I don't think the protagonist's blackness is even mentioned in the prologue? He is more of an entity: an 'it' or 'them' as opposed to a 'he'"

What a wonderful gift Ellison has given his readers. In this explosive and heart breaking story of black oppression and self-discovery, he weaves in such delicate universal truths for audiences of all identities to absorb. We, of course, do not *expect* this of him. It speaks to a certain level of entitlement for a reader (particularly a white reader such as myself) to expect a reflection of their own experience in everything they consume. We could simply read his words, marvel at his resilience and enjoy his writing *without* finding a common thread. Yet he still chooses to reach out across barriers of colour, gender and class; he extends his influence despite the specificity of his experience.

It is truly remarkable.

An easy thing for me to do right now would be to list the ways in which *I* am marginalised and the specific nuances of Ellison's writing and how they apply to *me*—and believe me, I nearly did that, but I feel like I'd be hugely missing the point. I just wanted to, in my own small way, recognise and appreciate the generous spirit alive in Ellison's work.

His work is an allegory for which I (and generations of readers) am hugely grateful.

– Nathan.



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DAY FOUR: Let's talk music.

How is it Thursday already?!

We're one day away from our industry showing and we're incredibly excited to share what we've been working on during our week of R&D at the Arcola Theatre.

In reading over my previous posts, I began to feel like I'd neglected our incredible music team a little. The musical elements of our workshop process have been so unique and inspiring, I decided I had to sit down with our cellist, Laura van der Heijden (BBC Young Musician 2012) and composer Milton Mermikides to chat about their vital involvement with this project.



NATHAN: Hi guys!

MILTON: Hello!

LAURA: Sorry, I'm eating so I'll be talking with my mouth full.

NATHAN: Don't worry, I won't mention that when I type it up.

LAURA: Perfect!

NATHAN: So how did you both first come across *The Invisible Man*?

LAURA: I actually discovered it through doing this project. I just finished it a few days ago! I took the book on holiday with me and I couldn't put it down. Obviously we'd done a bit of work on the prologue earlier in the year so I was familiar with that, but I think it's really important to also read the novel because it puts the whole thing into context and deepens your understanding of the piece. Then, of course, Clarence's performance only makes it all the more gripping.

MILTON: I first encountered it as a teenager. I thought I was reading the H G Wells version – it took me a while to realise my mistake, but I loved it! I was an awkward teenager – so hard to imagine now! – and I moved homes a lot; I completely connected with the idea of being unseen and I always felt like I fell between cultures and identities. I find Ralph Ellison fascinating; not only was he a novelist and a jazz trumpeter, he also studied symphonic composition with William L Dawson, one of the most important African American composers in history. So everything is a contradiction with Ellison; he doesn't quite fit into any specific category. I really resonate with his work, so when this project came along I was thrilled; the opportunity to work with this breadth of musical styles and approaches was just perfect.

NATHAN: So how did the conversation arise to pair this story with a classical instrument like the cello?

LAURA: Well it's important to remember that we're not really playing classical music. Milton is composing a lot of it, we're improvising bits, etc.

MILTON: And one would have never expected Ralph Ellison to be a classical composer, so we're playing with those assumptions! The idea of pairing symphonic orchestral instruments with jazz and electronics is actually very Ralph Ellison, in my opinion.



NATHAN: Is this process of pairing live music with theatrical performance something that you've done before?

MILTON: The theatre work I've done previously has had a more conventional ensemble underscoring the action or performing interludes – less interactive than what we're doing for this project. I have done a lot recently with electronics and performance, which I suppose is somewhere in between sound design and composition. It's interesting because it's almost like live film scoring that allows for all sorts of unique interactions that weren't possible 10 years ago. Also, the cello is such an amazing instrument – it's so broad in its timbre and range – you can do wonderful things with it. Then pairing it with Richard Olatunde Baker's percussion is just stunning; it's that last element of Ellison – hearkening back to the African motherland.

LAURA: This is all incredibly new to me. What I've really been enjoying is the creative liberty this process affords you. In the classical music world, your creativity comes through your interpretation of a pre-written work. Of course Ellison's prologue is written, but everything we're adding to it isn't, and a lot of our own original ideas are going into the piece. It's really exciting but also challenging, which is why it's been great to have Milton on board because he has much more experience in this field than I do!

MILTON: It's been nice to have a variety of approaches in the room. Sometimes you can only get what you need through a more traditional writing and composition process, but other times you do need that spontaneity. That's why this is the perfect environment; there's flexibility and room to play but we also have the time to hone and finesse the work.

NATHAN: Great! So in summary, has there been any particular challenge you've overcome this week? What moments have really inspired you?

LAURA: The biggest challenge for me has been finding how to support the text in the most effective way. It's such a strong piece of writing on its own; you don't want the music to distract, you want it to support. You also want it to be an entity within itself but it has to interact with the text. Striking that balance has been difficult! Again – Milton has been an amazing help in that regard. The most exciting moments have been when it feels like that balance has improved; in those instances, both elements truly come alive.

MILTON: The challenge for me has been the fact that we have the text but very little else; it's quite daunting when you have so many options open. Also, the text is a prologue so making a structure out of that has been fairly demanding – I feel much better about it now than I did at the beginning of the week. Yesterday's session was brilliant; it really felt like things were clicking. We had the right amount of prepared material alongside the improvised elements and it's very moving when those moments of real interaction between the music and Clarence's performance occur.

NATHAN: Brilliant. Thank you guys!



So, that was Laura van der Heijden and Milton Mermikides. It was a fascinating opportunity to open a window on their processes. All I can say is: the result of their hard work is simply stunning.

Make sure you visit the blog tomorrow because I'll be coming at you from our industry sharing. Exciting times all around!

– Nathan



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DAY FIVE: Work in progress.

Here we are, folks!

It's our last day of research & development at The Arcola Theatre and I think it's safe to say that we've had an incredible week; full of experimentation and thrilling discoveries, it's been truly special.

As I type, the musicians are warming up and the stage is currently being set for our work-in-progress industry sharing. We are thrilled to be showcasing the work we've been doing with Clarence, Tinuke and our wonderful music team.



Once our audience has taken their seats, co-director Tinu gives a brief introduction to place the afternoon's showing in context:

We wanted to show just a snippet of what we've been working on and hopefully receive some feedback. We've been grappling with several big questions: what is the relationship between our performance and the musicians? Should they be present and visible on stage or do situate them elsewhere? We've also been experimenting with accent; playing with both American and English. We'll be showcasing both options today and we'd love to hear thoughts on this.

The sharing begins with cellist Laura van der Heijden, Richard Olatunde Baker and Milton Mermikides performing a stirring opening piece that brings Clarence on stage. It eases the audience into the performance with a quiet tension.

Clarence then launches into his performance with surprising musical interludes intertwined throughout. He shifts accents midway through, dropping his Southern American drawl for his natural East London. It divides the piece in two, shedding a new unique perspective on its second half. For me, it poses the question: just how American *is* Ellison's story? Does it hinge on a specific accent or does it – as discussed in [Wednesday's blog](#) – transcend those boundaries to become a more universal allegory?



These aren't questions for me to answer of course, and at this very moment Studio 4 of the Arcola Theatre is buzzing with our cast, creatives and industry audience as they discuss the sharing; giving feedback and presenting their interpretations of the performance.

In terms of future prospects, our team are extremely excited to absorb the comments from today's sharing and continue to explore Ellison's incredible text, developing our theatrical adaptation beyond research and development so that we can share our work with a wider audience.



If you're interested in keeping up with the piece's progression, give us a follow on Twitter! [@invisimanplay](https://twitter.com/invisimanplay).

We'd like to take a moment to thank all those who have contributed to this week's success: Nick Connoughton at the Arcola LAB and everyone at The Arcola Theatre; Felype Campos from ThreeBlokesProductions for his beautiful photography/videography; Arts Council England for their generous support and of course our phenomenal cast and creative team. Find a little more information listed below!

Well, that's all from me! Thanks for keeping up with us this week; I'm sure you've not heard the last of me!

Peace out, friends!

Nathan.



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