

## GIRLS Education Resource Pack

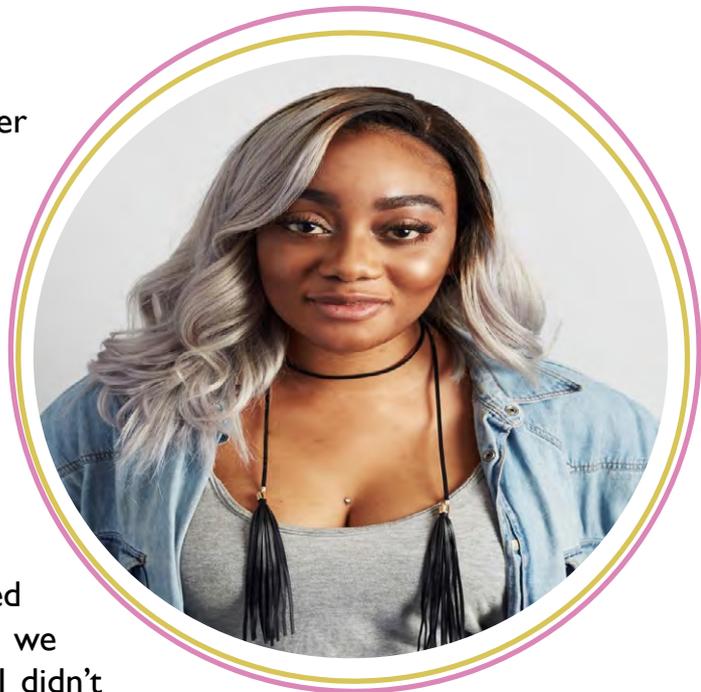
### Interview with Theresa Ikoko, writer of GIRLS

Theresa Ikoko was born and raised in Hackney, London. Theresa wrote her first ever play in 2013. Following this, Theresa's first full length play, GIRLS received a number of prestigious awards before being staged for the first time in September 2016.

We spoke to Theresa about how she got in to writing, her inspiration for GIRLS and her tips for budding writers.

#### **How did you get into writing?**

It was accidental. I wrote this thing that I'd read over the phone to my friend, called *Normal*, about a boy growing up in a Nigerian family and saw his brother die before he was six. Then it's twelve years later and he's had a crisis. But it was fun to write because it was characters that reminded me about people that I know. When I finished it, a good friend of mine told me it was really good and it was embarrassing but I trusted him. He suggested that I find a way to put it in front of people so that they could tell me what they thought about it. So, we did some Googling and came across Talawa, a Black led touring theatre company. I recognised the name, so we sent it off and didn't hear from them at all - and I didn't think anything of it. And then nine months later I got a call from Michael Buffong, Artistic Director of Talawa, saying that they wanted to put the play in a festival! I hadn't even read the whole thing through, so it was a bit of a whirlwind. There was a 3 day workshop, and a small audience in a studio space and that was 3 years ago now.



#### **What inspired you to write from a young age?**

I've always said "I don't know". But someone reminded me that when I was little, about 7 years old - in year 4 - I wrote this poem called Mr Turquoise. I just remember Mr Turquoise coming to life in my head and being really interested in all of the details about him. I've always loved reading, but writing was never part of my life in any other way.

## Is that when you fell in love with reading and writing?

Yes, I was struck when I was quite little, in a way that I thought everybody was.

I had one of the most amazing English teachers, and I was really lucky that she demanded excellence. I went to a school in Hackney that people thought wasn't a good school and we weren't allowed outside at lunch time in case of fights with other schools - that sort of thing.

My teacher in year 9 was like something out of a corny American film - like a Coach Carter sort of figure. She made us write *Romeo and Juliet* line by line into modern English. People would find Shakespeare so hard, and she made it so accessible. She really inspired such a fascination for theatre, storytelling and reading.



My favourite book I read was "The Coldest Winter Ever" by Sister Souljah. I must have been 13 or 14 when I read it, and I remember thinking; "I love Midnight" (a character). Genuine, true love. I didn't know you could fall in love with a character, and I cried when it ended and I laughed out loud at times too. I would rush to my bed when I would get home because I was so desperate to get to the end but also desperate for it not to finish. That's an amazing experience to have.

## What made you want to try writing a play?

I don't think I was aware that I was writing a play.

I've always been the kind of person that likes to understand people, I'm really nosy! I like to imagine what people are doing and I'll sometimes get overwhelmed with thoughts about their life. It was almost like whenever someone would pass me, they would possess me. For a moment, I would imagine that I had felt everything that they felt. And I thought that was normal. So I would try and transport myself into everything that was happening in that moment.

With *Normal*, I was driving home from work one day, and I had this image in my head of this boy in the kitchen... I've always also imagined random people. So I had this image in my head and he said: "I want to kill myself". When I got home I wrote; "There's a boy in the kitchen and he says "I want to kill myself"! Then I wrote down everything he said after that. And I guess I didn't think - "oh, this is a play!" I remember just writing what he does next and it became a play organically.

## **Was that how it happened for *Girls*? Was there a particular girl you first started imagining?**

It was Haleema. Me and my friend were on the phone and we were talking about women and what it means to be a woman, and how challenging the world can be for women. Especially for those women who are in war torn countries or are oppressed. I remember there was thing about great women who were being referred to by their relationship to a man, as in she was a Mum or a Girlfriend as opposed to using their own name. And when someone has done something great, when someone is an accomplished woman... that's not right. We were just talking about that and I was having all these thoughts about women and where we stand in the world and how we can be overlooked.

I would go home and just spend time with her after work. Writing down her conversations and her thoughts and her mistakes. Then meeting her in company of her friends and falling in love with their friendship and it reminding me of my friendships and my niece's friends - some of whom I'm not too fond of, but she loves them anyway. Their familiarity and their joy kept me with them.



## **And did the other two characters follow quickly after?**

It was sort of the idea of spending time with Haleema, and getting to know two other characters through Haleema. If Haleema had friends, who would they be and what would they be like?

## **Was there a particular person that inspired any of the girls?**

Not totally, but one of my friends came to see it in Soho and she was like "Oh, how about you write about my life?!" She's deaf in one ear, and whenever we go to the cinema she always tells me off for sitting on the wrong side of her because she would say "I can't hear you on that side of me!" It was just funny that it sort of made it into *Girls*, because it's not something that I consciously did or thought about at all so I was like "Oh no! That must have come from you!". It came from my subconscious.

## **Do you exclusively write plays now or do you experiment with other forms?**

I write whatever I like really. But I have found in my very short time doing this that I really love the magic of plays. I feel like you can do anything and completely go with it and blur the lines between reality and imagination, magic and surrealism. I love that about theatre and likewise I'm finding I can write with huge scope.

## Why do you think theatre is such a powerful medium?

People who don't read or who don't think the arts world is for them can go to the theatre and have a life changing experience. I went to one of the nights in Soho and sat in back - people were raucous and answering back to the characters. Every time someone in the audience was like "um hmm, yeah!" - it felt like panto. So I feel like people aren't stifled by theatre.

For a lot of my family and friends it was their first time in the theatre. It's not like reading where you have to proactively pick up the book and continue reading. You're held captive for an hour and half. And that either makes you love theatre or feel that you never want to come back to theatre again.

## When you were writing *Girls* did you have a vision for how it would look on-stage?



I was definitely less visual about staging. I didn't imagine it on a stage at first at all, because I wasn't writing a commission. It's not a language that I think in. I found that quite good because I get to work with incredible people who do think in that language, and they think bigger and better than I ever could have!

## What was the process between you and the director, Elayce Ismail?

It felt so perfect because between Elayce (the Director), Tanith, Mica (the Stage Managers), and the actors, it was just 7 women in a room who were just always, always, always on the same page - always! I did feel like it was a real collaboration. I was so surprised and so touched and so humbled by the experience; especially that it meant just as much to them as it meant to me. I remember the Stage Manager - who you're thinking has done a million shows, and whose job is quite technical and demanding - was always in and out of the rehearsals checking things. At one point I wanted to cut a line and she was just like "No, no, no, not that line...". I thought "Oh! She really cares! Why does it matter to her!" But it did, and that really touched me. Rehearsals were so fun.

## What was it like auditioning for the play?

I think if I'm to be honest that I was really nervous. I heard 30 talented women read the lines and it was the first time I'd heard them read out loud. Even after hearing the first few women deliver some lines, there were many different ways that they were coming out. Some of the interpretations were not what I had intended, so that made me go back to the writing and look at if the writing was clear and doing what I needed it to do.

## **When you saw the three chosen actresses playing the girls for the first time, how did it make you feel?**

Once we got those three girls, it just felt like they were born to be those characters - and even when they made different decisions it totally made sense.

It was honestly such a wonderful feeling. At the end of scene 1, the girls sing and dance. Early on in the process I was at work and when I got to the rehearsal they had made up a dance and a routine for the song and they had played with some of the lyrics - using lyrics from an popular afrobeats song, and it had their names in it. They were performing and I was laughing so hard because it was the funniest thing! It was like - I'd seen this moment in my head for so long, and having it shown back to you was so incredible. I'd only ever seen it in black and white and I felt like I was then seeing it in colour. I had butterflies, and it was funny, it was emotional, and I felt like they almost knew the text better than me. I couldn't tell them anything!

## **Do you have any writing tips that you've picked up that you can share?**

I really like the tip of coming in late and leaving early. Almost like 'end the scene a beat before it should', which I really enjoy. I also think that sometimes we forget the way that we actually talk. We don't always finish our sentences, and we don't always talk in complete thoughts. Especially if you're writing characters who know each other really well - I feel like friends talk and it's almost a different language. So allow your characters to talk to each other in this way. They don't need to explain themselves or finish their thoughts. I also think that one of the most important things is to show what happens outside what the audience sees - the action happens in between the scenes that are on stage. I personally quite like that, other people might not but I really enjoy it.

## **Why do you think *Girls* is an important story for young people?**

I'm going to break that down!

I think it's important for young women because I personally think that it's nice for them to see that just being young women or just being a woman is enough. That's enough validation to tell a story. In *Girls* because there isn't any reference to anything other than their friendships, and I think that it's good to see women outside of the shadows of anything else. They are just as big as the things that are happening outside the doors.

Young women are valid. Sometimes we're made to justify the place that we take up and I think that actually the three girls just take up an hour and half without any justification.

More specifically, I think it's important for black women as well - to have that same experience! To not feel like they need to justify the space that they take.

And I just feel that young people in general should just know that... despite sometimes feeling like something is the end of the world, we are strong, and it's good to play. We have an instinct to survive and more than that an instinct to thrive. The girls are trying to make their lives better. They're falling in love, dreaming and aspiring. And I think that it's important to see female friendship as this powerful thing, and I hope that *Girls* celebrates that a little bit.