

MIF Originals

Episode 2: Chasing Philip Glass

Phelim McDermott [00:00:07] When people try and be original they do the same things again and again. But if they just do the obvious thing, or they say the most obvious thing in a scene, they end up doing something original because they're true to themselves.

Isaiah Hull [00:00:22] Welcome to MIF originals, with me Isaiah Hull. It's a podcast about creativity. Is it still possible to be original? In each episode a different artist who is developing new work for Manchester International Festival is offered a blank audio canvas. A chance to try something new with the podcast form.

Isaiah Hull [00:00:47] This episode is about what happens when you get to meet your hero and ask them anything you want. I remember when I was younger I met Saul Williams; American poet, musician and activist. I asked him whether or not he'd ever thought about quitting writing. His response was "No." I remember feeling very deflated as if the question just wasn't good enough.

Isaiah Hull [00:01:17] Today's story comes from the theatre director Phelim McDermott. He's launching a new work at MIF called Tao of Glass, with music by one of the most influential composers of the late 20th century: Philip Glass.

Isaiah Hull [00:01:34] Long before they worked together Phelim was a big fan of Philip Glass; so much that he once followed the composer around London's Covent Garden. Given the chance to interview Philip, what would Phelim ask?

Isaiah Hull [00:01:48] I'm hoping this episode will show me what I should have asked Saul Williams. Here's Phelim.

Phelim McDermott [00:02:01] Hello, do you know who Philip Glass is? Yes [Phelim's young son.] Who is he? Tell me [Phelim's son.] He's a composer and he composed the music for the shows that Daddy's directed that I'm about to do. You want to have boob [Phelim's son.] Oh you want the boob, [laughs] okay.

Phelim McDermott [00:02:26] Philip Glass' music is an invitation to see the world in a different way. Out your window, out your train window, as you walk along the street. The music has the ability to invite you to see a sense of a pattern, a bigger pattern, a deeper pattern in what the world is doing.

Phelim McDermott [00:02:55] So this is the Coliseum Theatre, home of the English National Opera. You see this glow on top? The letters of the Colosseum revolve. This beautiful building, it's actually the biggest theatre in London, the Colosseum. There aren't many composers who are alive who can fill this theatre. Philip Glass does.

Phelim McDermott [00:03:23] So this is kind of 1986, and I'm a student at college. And I've been very excited about Philip's music, I've been listening to Philip's music, and I see that there's gonna be this performance of 'Akhnaten', first time in the UK, and I go and buy myself a ticket. I can remember standing on these steps with the ticket that says 'Philip Glass: Akhnaten.' Over the years I've re-remember that moment and I've added a Philip Glass soundtrack. [Philip Glass music plays.]

Phelim McDermott [00:04:12] Step off out into Covent Garden, with my treasure in my hand, and as I walk up Saint Martin's Lane I put my ticket in my pocket and up ahead of me I see a figure. And it, maybe, is it him? It's his hair of course, that's the thing that I recognise from the videos that I've watched in the Middlesex Polytechnic library of Philip playing at the piano in his ensemble. It is! It's Philip Glass. I'm following him. I'm following him into Covent Garden. And my heart's beating. And I'm thinking about if I get up close to him; if I were to stop him, what will I ask him? [Philip Glass music plays.]

Phelim McDermott [00:05:38] Flash forward about 30 years and I'm now making a show with Philip Glass. It's called the Tao of Glass and I'm going to get a chance to ask him some of the questions that I haven't asked. But at the moment those questions are dark empty spaces. [Philip Glass music plays.]

Phelim McDermott [00:06:05] I'm keeping a distance of about two double decker buses as I follow him along Long Acre, and I'm looking at other people. I'm imagining his music so I am kind of in a movie of me stalking Philip Glass, to this music. Does Philip Glass have a soundtrack in his head of Philip Glass music? Does he have old tracks of Philip Glass music, or is he thinking up new Philip Glass music? Does he have the soundtrack of other minimalist composers in his head? Does he come up with new tunes? What happens in a composer's head? I have no idea because I don't know how to compose music. [Philip Glass music plays.]

Phelim McDermott [00:07:16] It's the end of the first week of rehearsals. So we're making the show now and we're having a discussion, myself, Phelim and Kirsty, the director, we're having a discussion about questions as a process and as a way of making shows, one finds oneself sitting with questions. What's the show about? What're we going to do today? Writing a question down is important.

Kirsty Housley [00:07:47] What's that brilliant question you have? It's something 'like what's the question which if you have the answer to that question it would...'

Phelim McDermott [00:07:55] What's the question, if you had the answer, would set you free? And that's basically a daily meditation, that question.

Kirsty Housley [00:08:04] I really want to ask him that.

Phelim McDermott [00:08:05] Yeah well I think I should ask him that question.

Kirsty Housley [00:08:08] It really makes you think about your life in quite a sort of fundamental way.

Phelim McDermott [00:08:13] I like the idea of the mother of all questions, which is more interesting than the mother of all answers.

Phelim McDermott [00:08:20] I think you have to be playful, you know, I think that's the key to all of it. The key to creativity, the key to working well. If you're going to go deep or you're going to go somewhere edgy, you have to be playful around that. If you're not playful, things clam up. It doesn't open possibility.

Phelim McDermott [00:08:50] I go to a floatation tank centre, and I float in the darkness in a few inches of saltwater, bobbing on the top. And I use that place both to relax my body, but I also use it as a place to dream. And it's strange being in the tank because people

think 'oh is it claustrophobic in there?' and it's actually the opposite. It's a feeling of space, that you're floating in space. The first thing you hear is your own body. You can hear the blood going around your own body, sort of thing. You go inward. So you can feel tiny creeks inside your own body. Sometimes you can go very very deep. I think brainwave wise it's kind of fetus state that you can go into. In the darkness you see images and sometimes I decide to look at those images and see if I can get closer to them and expand them.

Phelim McDermott [00:09:58] I was floating in the tank and I saw an image which was like paper moving and I realised it was an image of myself doing puppetry. And then I saw another image and it was an image of hands a keyboard moving across the piano. I realised it was Philip Glass, playing.

Phelim McDermott [00:10:30] I think the thing I need to do now is have a word with my wife Matilda about the questions that I'm mulling over in my mind. Maybe she'll have some insight into what I should do. Go home and talk to Matilda about the questions that I need to ask.

Matilda McDermott [00:10:51] So I'm Matilda McDermott. I'm sitting on our blue sofa in St Margaret's in London with Phelim. You have a chance to ask him some big questions. Do you know what you want to ask him?

Phelim McDermott [00:11:12] You know it is hard thinking about what those questions will be, being given that opportunity, you go 'ah I've got to ask the right question or I've got to ask a really important question!' Have you got any suggestions of what some good questions to ask might be?

Kirsty Housley [00:11:30] It makes me think like, what about our children? And Ridley, our son, is very interested in music. I sort of want to step into the mind of a child or his mind if I think about what to ask Philip Glass.

Ridley McDermott [00:11:46] This is why I'd say. [whispers] Daddy what did you say again?

Phelim McDermott [00:11:54] So I've got a chance to ask Philip some questions...

Ridley McDermott [00:11:59] So what I'd ask him is how do you do better composing? What's the best kind of composing? What composing is most popular?

Phelim McDermott [00:12:11] Do you think you'll be a musician.

Ridley McDermott [00:12:15] Definitely yes.

Phelim McDermott [00:12:36] He's just turned left into Neil street. He looks like he's slightly wandering and he's hunting for something. When I'm working on something I like wandering amongst people, I like wandering amongst the city. There's lots of invitations in the city to dream, this thing of like where do ideas come from, where does inspiration come from? You know you see kind of, strange characters in the city and they're actually -- if you were to see them with a shamanistic eye -- they're probably messengers and they've probably got extraordinary messages for you about something that you need to listen to, something the city needs to listen to. Seeing Philip wandering about in the city was a bit

like a dream; wasn't that unusual, it's like of course that's what's going to happen. I see him in a city and I'll follow him.

Matilda McDermott [00:13:31] So when you were younger what would you have asked Philip Glass if he'd turned around said 'ask me a question.' [laughs]

Phelim McDermott [00:13:39] The question that I would ask back then would have been like, how do I do it? How do I keep going? How do I do what I want to do which is to make theatre and to make shows? And I don't think it is that now.

Matilda McDermott [00:13:53] Maybe they're questions about questions. What does he still want to know? What question does he ask himself? Does he have anything he wants to ask you? [Philip Glass music plays.]

Kirsty Housley [00:14:13] I think the question I've heard Philip ask more than anything is 'how long was that?'

Phelim McDermott [00:14:19] Oh yes, he always asks that question at the end. How many minutes was that?

Kirsty Housley [00:14:25] And generally if it's about 10 he'll say 'good, good.'

Kirsty Housley [00:14:27] There's big pile questions isn't there?

Phelim McDermott [00:14:33] What I get an impulse for now is for me to create some little cards where I write those questions down.

Kirsty Housley [00:14:41] Great.

Phelim McDermott [00:14:42] This is the missing piece, this random element which is an important part of creativity. You can't pick the right question. So somehow you have to spin a pen, or you have to shuffle the cards and the question will reveal itself.

Phelim McDermott [00:15:18] Hello. Welcome to your dressing room. [Phelim speaking to Philip]

Phelim McDermott [00:15:24] So we're currently at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Philip Glass' dressing room and I've got a chance to ask him those questions that are at the moment dark empty spaces.

Philip Glass [00:15:36] We've got lots of privacy here, right?

Phelim McDermott [00:15:37] Exactly. The only thing that's missing is your piano.

Phelim McDermott [00:15:41] So when I was looking for like what questions should I ask Philip. One of the things that I realised was I needed a random, a random thing so rather than picking these are the best questions, I thought I'll put all these questions on cards...

Philip Glass [00:15:56] Oh you're working your way through?

Phelim McDermott [00:15:58] ...Well, but before you came in I shuffled them so they're in a random order. So I'm just picking off the next one.

Phelim McDermott [00:16:07] So I've got some questions from Ridley, from my son, Ridley wants to ask you 'how do you do better composing?'

Philip Glass [00:16:17] That's a really good question. You know, it comes down to if you're lucky enough to find an inspiring teacher. That's the best thing that can happen to you.

Phelim McDermott [00:16:37] And so you're a composer and I'm not a composer. So Ridley is asking how did you better composing. For me, it would even be, how do you compose? Do you hear it in your head and then it becomes something?

Philip Glass [00:16:49] We had that discussion when my young fellow began writing music. He said "Dad I can write music but my pieces are very short, they're only about 10 seconds long." I said "Oh yeah, that's called 'and then what happens'." And that's all I said to him. I said everybody has a problem. You play the first 10 seconds and then what happens? And that's all I said to him. And he became quite a good composer.

Phelim McDermott [00:17:19] Well that's great because for me that's like improvisation. So there's a great teacher, my teacher, Keith Johnston. He has a great exercise 'what happens next?' And you get on the stage and you stand there and you say 'what happens next?' and the audience tell you what happens next and you learn how to unfold a story.

Philip Glass [00:17:38] I mean, you have the same thing in the theatre then, it's exactly the same.

Phelim McDermott [00:17:43] You know, Ridley is totally into music and he does want to be a musician. And I asked him what I should ask you about that. How would you support that in him and not do what happened to me which is get put off. So how would he do that?

Philip Glass [00:17:58] What usually happens with people who become musicians is it that they're attracted to an instrument. For example when I was very young, only six or seven, there was a boy just a year older than me who had a beautiful silver flute and I thought it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen and I wanted to play the flute. Generally speaking when I've talked to people they're attracted to the instrument.

Phelim McDermott [00:18:28] I was remembering this story of following you and what I was thinking. I imagined I remembered, if I did remember it or not, thinking when Philip Glass is walking along the street, does he hear Philip Glass music in his head? I look back at that memory and I put Philip Glass music to it.

Philip Glass [00:18:48] I suppose it's not just myself but most musicians, if you ask them, will tell you that they hear music all the time. It's almost a continuous companion. It's very very common.

Phelim McDermott [00:19:01] And do you hear it music that you know, or do you sometimes hear music that you've never heard before?

Philip Glass [00:19:05] Erm, both.

Phelim McDermott [00:19:13] And the next one is: what are you afraid of?

Philip Glass [00:19:17] Well, one of my fears is dying in the middle of a piece and it doesn't get finished. That's something to be afraid of. There's something waiting for me to come home, but what if I don't get there and the piece isn't finished. Do you even have feelings like that, of incompletion?

Phelim McDermott [00:19:39] But there's a bit of me that hopes there's a bit of me that will go on. I mean you've got something that will go on, your music will go on.

Philip Glass [00:19:48] Everybody says that but you don't know that, and noone knows that. When I was a young man, the people who we thought were very important composers, we never hear their music.

Phelim McDermott [00:20:00] I think we'll be hearing your music.

Philip Glass [00:20:02] Yes, they thought the same thing. That's the most common thought. They say 'oh you have a big following... your place in history...' and they talk about things like this. It's nonsense because basically you have no idea what people in 20 years will be listening to. The more, let's say, reliable way to think about it -- the one that has the least conceit and the least confusion -- is to think of culture as a huge wave that we're part of. Sometimes you're in front of the wave, sometimes you're behind the wave, sometimes you're in the middle of it. Schubert was unknown and he had been forgotten. He had never been remembered actually, most of his music had never been played. He played his music for his friends. I don't think the symphonies were played very much at all. And of course now he's one of the great memories we have. But his own life did not reflect that. It's better not to personalise it too much.

Phelim McDermott [00:21:23] Have you ever had a religious experience?

Philip Glass [00:21:26] If I think 'have I ever made a really good spaghetti?' I've have plenty of those. Does that count?

Phelim McDermott [00:21:36] Yeah. That's a good answer to that question. I think.

Phelim McDermott [00:21:41] This is one of my wife Matilda's questions: what question do you ask yourself?

Philip Glass [00:21:48] The question I've always asked myself about music and from the very beginning and which led me to become a composer, actually, which of course is, it's a very simple question that we all ask is: where does it come from? And then I began looking in the libraries and looking at the music and over, oh now it'll be 70 years or close to 70 years, I've answered that question in many many different ways. And I always have a current answer which is different from the last one. And it usually comes around this way: I'm talking to some students and someone, some jackass will always say 'where does music come from?' It always comes up and I don't prepare an answer, but I wait to see what I'm going to say, if you know what I mean. And on that occasion I said to them: music is actually a place, it's as real as Chicago or Manchester. For musicians, we live in two worlds: one is the world of music, and one is the ordinary world. And that's where music comes from.

Philip Glass [00:22:54] But I have a better answer since then! Now I say, and it came about because I understood very recently that when I woke up in the morning and I could hear music that it came from a dream, I didn't realise that for a long time. I thought it was

just the first thing I thought of. That's not the first thing I thought of! It was the last thing I dreamt. So now I think that music comes from dreams.

Phelim McDermott [00:23:21] Now I would say my little fantasy of our show came from a dream, you know in my floatation tank, that's where it came from.

Philip Glass [00:23:31] I find that totally credible. For one thing, the thing about dreams is that they're not negotiable with our ordinary way of thinking. So there's no way to enter them in a logical, serious way. You have to take them. It's like meeting a really strange person who looks familiar. It's your dream, but you have no idea where that came from.

Phelim McDermott [00:24:11] What do you still want to know?

Philip Glass [00:24:12] That's a good question. There is something called the unknowable. And that's probably the thing that you want to know. But that's what makes it unknowable.

Phelim McDermott [00:24:28] The Tao that can't be said!

Philip Glass [00:24:32] It's interesting that the cage of language binds us very tightly, doesn't it? And once we break out of the cage, other things happen. That's one of the nice things about the arts, is that it becomes a much more mobile language, a language which we can invent and we can create with. I think that's why people become poets and they become musicians. Because of that.

Phelim McDermott [00:25:04] What do your children ask you?

Philip Glass [00:25:06] When they stop asking you they're no longer children. And we're just at that place now. I see that my 17 year old is on his way to becoming an adult. I left home very early on when I was 15 and I didn't talk to my parents for years after that. And I think I was probably double that age, I was probably 30 when I began speaking to them again. It's so funny isn't it.

Phelim McDermott [00:25:35] I think it's interesting. And, you know it's in the show, I didn't quite get back to that place with my dad before he went, I think.

Philip Glass [00:25:42] You know in the case of my father, it happened we did have a conversation and two weeks later he was hit by a car and died. So we never got into that very well. We had had a misunderstanding which meant we didn't speak to each other for several years and I went to see him and we had a walk together and we just began talking and then I went back to New York and never saw him again.

Phelim McDermott [00:26:21] Is important or possible to be original?

Philip Glass [00:26:30] You know I think actually it's inevitable. It's not. It's neither. This inevitable. Simply because our communications with each other are so faulty and so misguided and so misunderstood. We've had a long conversation and I have no idea what, I didn't know what we were talking about, and I still don't know what we talked about. But one of the things that we're born with is originality. I think that DNA is too complex to repeat itself. So that everyone brings to the world, let's say, one page of a dictionary, and altogether it makes a dictionary. We're inevitably original. There's no other way for us to be.

Phelim McDermott [00:27:27] I mean I kind of think that as well, what I think is, and this comes back to Keith Johnston my improvisation teacher. He says that when people try and be original they do the same things again and again but if they just do the obvious thing, or they say the most obvious thing in a scene, they end up doing something original because they're true to themselves.

Philip Glass [00:27:48] See that's why in a way I've just recently returned to dreams as a source. It's very hard for us to imagine ourselves being the authors of the dreams, they seem to be imposed on us. They seem spontaneous. But they probably come from the core experiences we have. And oddly enough we don't recognise them.

Phelim McDermott [00:28:11] I just found this quote which is a Gaudi quote and it says: 'originality consists of returning to the origin.'

Philip Glass [00:28:19] Or the oranges. More delicious don't you think? [laughs]

Phelim McDermott [00:28:43] And this is definitely the street. He knows where he's going now. And he goes into Shelton street. Here we are. These shops were not here. But I think it was either here. Or here. It was a sushi restaurant and I look inside and there is a very happy man going in there. It's made me think memory's a strange thing because it is the same place, but it doesn't feel like the same place. I have that feeling of parallel worlds. Where you go back to the same place in a city, and you go, maybe that other city that I was in then still exists in some other parallel world. Maybe there's a world where I did speak to him. And, you know, if I did speak to him then, maybe I wouldn't be doing this show now. Because the act of seeking was still there as a thing that hadn't been fulfilled.

Ridley McDermott [00:29:57] Erm, I forgot to say, sorry, I have a joke. What is a lawnmower's favourite musician? David Mowie, or it could also be Philip Grass.

Isaiah Hull [00:30:16] That Phelim McDermott's Chasing Philip Glass. I like the way Phelim speaks. I liked what he said about being playful. He said if you're not playful, things clam up and I think that's a very important thing to have in your mind. As a creative, if things are jumping up we can always get in the way of our own fun.

Isaiah Hull [00:30:42] This episode definitely made me think about why I should be asking more about life. Less about the art: your hero is a human too.

Isaiah Hull [00:30:55] For each of these episodes I'm sharing an original poem in response to what we've heard. This is about the nature of questions and answers. Running and hiding from each other. And the complexity of questioning yourself and all of that stuff.

Asking honours curiosity
the answer pays its due respect.
You cannot see just
who's a-head a-hanging
may you move again?

a knotted frame plies Jerusalem

New Jersey in a bust

He who lusts a tourney turned attorney into trust
Lose the game on purpose.

Question mark on top of birth mark
market research
Espionage beneath your remarks
the heart will resurface
the art will need purpose
so lose the game of QnA
and start the rewording.
Quicksand your question deserted
the answer is slow,
true as quink or calvin klein the colour in two.

Answering machines that
question my character feels like AI IOU A&E
bleeps and bloopers
pi-a-no play a key
me alone deus ex
maginot marionette
whey ago
whey a went
If I ask don't take offence
question cares not of respect
off with its head
I am the dust you blow the keys
why won't you kneel
I want you keel
I want you keen
I need you clean without a question
without questioning me clean.

Isaiah Hull [00:32:47] Next time in episode 3, it's day 1 at The School of Integration where migrants, asylum seekers and refugees living in Manchester will be sharing some important lessons.

Isaiah Hull [00:33:01] Thanks for listening to the second episode of MIF Originals, featuring Phelim McDermott and Philip Glass; whose show, Tao of Glass, is now on at the

Royal Exchange Theatre. You also heard the voices of Ridley McDermott, Matilda McDermott, Kirsty Housley and Philip Glass.

Isaiah Hull [00:33:23] The music was by Philip Glass and the intro music was by Vicky Clarke. It was presented by me, Isaiah Hull, and produced by Eliza Lomas. It's a Reduced Listening and MIF production.

Isaiah Hull [00:33:36] Until next time guys I will see you soon!