

David Bezmozgis: I'm sitting in the studio here with Gabriel Munro, who produced the first season of Love and Defiance, and I thought we'd have a conversation about Gabriel and how he ended up involved with the project. So, Gabriel you're a student here at Humber in radio.

Gabriel Munro: That's right. I'm taking radio broadcasting at the north campus

DB: And so, we end up working together because I had recorded, with the help of our recordists, those first four episodes, and there was a lot of material. I tried to take a stab at it. I mean, I have a background in sound editing from my film experience, but it became pretty clear pretty fast that I could use some help. And so, through our wonderful Humber radio program, it was suggested that I can probably find one of our students who could do it, so we met, we spoke, and I thought you could do it. And I think you did a great job.

GM: Thank you! It's really good to hear.

DB: So, yeah, I'd love to talk about working on this project. But in the spirit of love and Defiance, maybe we can talk a little bit about you.

GM: Right, it's traditional at this point.

DB: It is traditional. Is what we do. So maybe you can just talk about your background; where you're from, where you were born and raised, and what your interests were.

GM: I was born in a very remote mountainous town called Bella Coola in BC. And where I was raised was really all over the place I had a pretty nomadic family, my parents were involved in First Nations education so they were jumping around from northern Community to Northern community. We stayed in Saskatoon for about 7 years. And that to me was a long enough period of time that I could sort of be a prairie boy. I was like, ah, I'm from Saskatoon. But I've jumped around a lot, spent a lot of time in the West, have been in Toronto for a couple of years

now, I lived in Bangladesh for a couple of years as well, and have just been living a nomadic sort of impermanent life.

DB: And did you have an interest in radio all this time?

GM: I have loved radio for a long time. It was really comforting to me. My dad would play CBC Radio 2 and there was a host there, his name is Tom Allen, he still on, and the way he talks about music is so personal and so enthusiastic he almost becomes a voice in your head. And it's that kind of intimacy between strangers that appeals to me a lot. But, anyway, I was working this McJob in Vancouver a number of years ago and there was a posting. There was an online Station in New York that was looking for people to pitch shows to them. I started thinking okay, I'll pitch a show to them, and I was trying to think of what they'd like. And I got to this point where I was thinking actually, to hell with that. I'm not going to pitch the show they want because I don't want to make the show they want. I'm just going to pitch something that seems cool to me. So I pitched them basically the nerdiest show in the world. It was called Lyric Victory, it was exploring history and philosophical themes and poetry through music. So I discuss music lyrics everyday and music trivia and basically just tell stories and make stupid jokes. And they went for it, and I did that for a couple of years. I produced a hundred episodes of it.

DB: And then, after that?

GM: I was living in Victoria for a number of years and I was working but feeling essentially stagnant. I was working from home so I had a fairly socially isolated life. I'd always wanted to go to school but the problem is that nothing that excites me is guaranteed to pay back a huge student loan. Anything that does is something that I don't actually want to devote my life to. So I was sort of frozen out of post-secondary Education because of not having enough resources to pursue it without going into a great deal of debt. Anyway I heard about Ontario and OSAP being really good. So it's saying it's sweet siren song of "Hey, you can go to school without going into

tremendous debt if you're poor enough", and, hey! I qualify as that. So the opportunity arose I basically packed up my life, I moved over to Toronto.

DB: So what kind of work have you done in your time at Humber?

GM: My time at Humber I focussed a lot on writing and production. So a big chunk of that of course is writing and producing commercials which I like because that's really good practice as a writer. Can you tell a story and sell a product in 30 seconds? So just as a challenge that something I really appreciate. And some people just turn up their nose at commercial writing, but you'll see, if it's done well, every bit as much creativity, every bit as much cleverness and concision, and those are skills you can transfer to any kind of writing. But I've also been working on longer form things. I've worked on documentaries which I've just been fantastic. I've been off more than I can chew, or at least more than what was required of me. I'm always working on a couple of things that aren't even in the program, really, and trying to push myself out of my comfort zones. I'm doing a series on Canadian Justice, because it's something I really know nothing about, and it turns out to be this really fascinating thing.

DB: Canadian Justice from what perspective?

GM: Sort of the justice system and how it works. To me it seems like one of the marginalized groups that people don't tend to talk about are the incarcerated. People who have a criminal record. And that, to me, is a glaring problem. There's a great deal of prejudice against them. I think that they very often come from difficult situations and are placed in worse ones. I feel like prison is counterproductive. And I also think that it's hard for them to ever advocate for themselves, because it's so easy in our current climate to be dismissive of someone who's committed a crime as being somehow inhuman, or their voice doesn't count as much, or, "you should've thought about that before you did X", you know?

DB: Yeah.

GM: So just exploring that has been really interesting to me. It's something I always feel a little bit of my depth, but at the same time I like that. It allows me to explore it without coming in with too many preconceived notions. And also, just being trusted with people stories is such a privilege.

DB: Yeah. What's interesting about it and what I found is a writer, even just doing this podcast, on the one hand people really want to talk about themselves often.

GM: (laughs)

DB: So there's that part. You feel like you're giving people the opportunity to do that. But on the other part is once you have a story, even though people are giving it to you enthusiastically, can you have this responsibility of how are you going to portray them? To try to do it honestly and faithfully. It's a very interesting line to tread. Because I think often if somebody doesn't want to tell you their story they're just not going to tell you.

GM: Right.

DB: And there's no amount of persuading or browbeating that you can do to get it and probably you don't even want it under those circumstances.

GM: Yeah, and this is something you would know a lot about as a writer. The first documentary I was working on was about the opioid crisis and the woman was good enough to talk to me about her experiences, which were that she had known that her husband was an alcoholic, but she didn't know he used opioids. He overdosed in the night, and she didn't know. She got the kids ready for school, she took them, he wasn't getting out of bed. She got home and he had passed away in the night. Why was she telling me that? She was in tears on the phone with me, this was a hard experience for her. It's because the story meant something to her and it

meant something to her that it be told. That someone bear witness to it and that someone pass it on. And there's a great deal of responsibility, not only to portray it accurately and faithfully, which of course you have to do, but also to make the project good. She entrusted a lot with me and if I produce some piece of garbage and I've basically betrayed her. I'm so glad that that's one of my first experiences because it was an emphatic one and it's a lesson that I brought with me since. And they're not always so emphatic but there's always the implicit understanding tell if someone is making themselves vulnerable to you and trusting you with their story that is something they are giving to you. They're not just talking about themselves. They've lived in experience that has weight and for whatever reason it is important to them that it be seen.

DB: That's part of the concept behind this on this podcast.

GM: Right.

DB: To some extent, because the people we've spoken to over the course of this first season are writers and some of them have written about their experiences but it's also in talking to them, because I think they have had interesting life experiences, there's this element of, I understand you're writers, I understand you kind of put this out in the world in some form, but here we're putting it out into the world in another form. And it should be as good, that it's up to the standard of what it is that you're talking about, that you're sharing with us. So yeah, I understand completely. When you saw the posting, for instance, for this podcast oh, what was it that interested you?

GM: Writing matters a lot to me. I'm trying to grow as a producer as well, but the fact that it was writing really caught my attention. And you had mentioned something on the posting. You were looking for a person who had a variety of experiences from which to draw. And that appealed to me because that told me something about your attitude in approaching this, that this should be a deep and informed interaction with the listener. And that's something I've noticed when you are interviewing. Not all of it gets into the final product because I do a lot of

cutting based on certain things, but every time you speak with one of these writers your depth of knowledge comes across. You're able to talk to them about the world that they are describing in a way that's really impressive to me actually. That really resonated with me, I really like that idea of being able to draw from different experiences to find the essential meaning in a thing.

DB: The advantage I have is that they've often written. I'll read what they've written, I'll read it closely, I'll probably read it more than once. I'll come into the conversation having a really good grasp on what they've written. But yeah fundamentally the reason I really want to speak to them because I'm really interested both in the lives they've led, and also the kind of writing they've done. They're good writers.

GM: And also you're the one choosing them, of course. It's interesting because each episode has been in its way its own project. There's a thing you mentioned in one of them that every time you write a novel it's like doing a PhD, which is a line I just love. For me each episode is like doing not a Ph.D, but a good introductory course on a thing. I get to learn stuff from Tendisai, from David, and from Colin through their experiences, and reading their book is one way to learn these things but it's really interesting and independently valuable experience to just hear about their lives. You have the final product, but what brought you here? Tell me about the Deep South, tell me about your time in South Africa and your father's time in South Africa. That stuff is really interesting to me.

DB: Yeah. And it informs the work. And in some cases there is no final book. These are students who are either in manuscript stage or work in progress stage, and so the idea behind it is you don't need to finish the book. Whatever you written over your time here is really strong and the life that you bring to it is really interesting. And so that's all that's required. So what is your background with writing?

GM: I think I wrote my first book when I was seven, and it has been fortunately lost to time. I've been writing poetry and short stories for about as long as I can remember. It's been a saying that's in my family; my father is a writer, and my sister is also a writer. It's just kind of been the atmosphere I grew up in and the air I breathed, to an extent.

DB: So, your father, you were saying, is a novelist? And he was also I guess what we would call a columnist or a newspaper man, in Colin's words.

GM: (laughs), yes, exactly, for Colin, let's say newspaperman. He was a columnist. He had this column, it was very successful. I'm convinced it was what was keeping this paper afloat. If his column left the whole thing would shrivel up and blow away.

DB: In Saskatoon?

GM: In Saskatoon. That's where we were living. He's been a novelist certainly for my entire life.

DB: What was it like growing up in a house where, you didn't say what your mother does, but your father was a writer?

GM: Sort of a double-edged sword, in that, as a writer, he had to devote himself to his writing, and also being a writer in Canada it's a frustrating - as he once told me, it's a tough road to hoe. And that is just the reality of it. And part of that frustration is something that I grew up with has an expectation as what it meant to be a writer. Which is fine, it is a thing I've made my peace with. But at the same time, we were talking about this a little bit before, but there is a loneliness inherent to being an artist, in the sense that you in that you are not wholly an actor in this world, but you also need to be the observer. You need to be the one witnessing and processing and finding the meaning in things. People use art in a lot of ways. For some people, art is catharsis. For some, it's joy. The way that I understood it growing up, because the way that my father uses it is that you are finding and distilling the meaning from that which is in

front of you. You look into this world and your extreme experiences and you find the germs of truth there, and you clutch them back from the jaws of anguish and beauty and life and death. And to do that, it's a thing that separates you from those around you to an extent. You never fully get to be here; you have to be somewhat stepping back and channeling and processing. And if you are that way, if you're inclined to that, I cannot speak enough to the value of having somebody in your family or who you're close to who is the same way. Because then at least you know you're not a freak. You've got them as an example of, hey, we both do this, we both understand. And whatever the chill of loneliness there's this person who can see that and can really do it and can meet you in that expanse there. It's like coming across another hunter in the night or something. And I feel really lucky - really, really, really, really just unspeakably lucky but I had my father being like me in that way when I was growing up, and the same with my sister. And I live with her now so I got a pretty regular dose of that, which is nice.

DB: So when working on this project and listening to our writers, I called them writers - they're students but they're also writers, so -

GM: They're writers!

DB: They're writers. They're writers in the fullest sense. Did you learn anything that you can apply to your own thinking about writing?

GM: For me, the one that - they all have really interesting stories, Colin was just a delight as an interview. The one that for me as a writer it seems the most interesting was David Albertyn. And that's for a couple of reasons. When was this whole idea of the publishing world thinking he didn't have authority to speak about things. Which is a place I will dig my feet into the ground, because I think that's a living breathing human you have a right to express the stories that come to you. Whether or not people buy them is fine. Whether or not people believe them is fine. But the idea that human expression is some sort of a membership program that you buy into is, to me, ridiculous. So, his thing about how he'd written a thing that was set

in the Congo, but he was from South Africa, so could he really write about it? I would say well yeah of course you can write about it. And then he swung his career the other way, he really started writing about sports what was cool to me is how he kind of married to that two things in his third and what he claims to be his best project, and I believe that it's his best project, to hear him talk about it. And the way he found this beautiful marriage of stuff that he is not personally experiencing, but he understands people, along with it being informed by his experience in sports. And to hear him talk about it, too, you can just tell the authenticity in his voice. This guy, he knows. So that was cool to me oh, it was really great to see him finding success and being recognized. I think that was a really nice thing to witness.

DB: Yeah. And when you were talking about the challenge to the writer, or any artist, really, so you have to pay attention to the world and find the truth. I sat at a fundraiser for the Toronto Public Library a couple years ago with some people, wealthy donors. One man asked me, what is it you're trying to do? What drives you? I'm like, the truth. Try to figure out what the truth is and communicate it. I'm not sure if he fully understood. I think he was looking for something more tangible.

GM: Right.

DB: But I think that's right. And the other part of it is, if you're seeking the truth, the truth can often be very painful. I think about how First Responders are often described by people, especially people on the political right, not that I disagree with it, talk about why you should have respect for the police. Or when the police talked about their work, where it's like, when something happens and everybody's instinct is to run in the opposite direction they're supposed to run towards that thing. And I think in terms of art I'd make a similar analogy. George Orwell talks about facing unpleasant facts. It's unpleasant to face unpleasant facts. And so to put yourself in a position where you have to look as clearly and directly as you can at the world and instead of averting your eyes, look into the white-hot centre of what it is, that's the

job. That's a big part of the job. So I think that's the difficulty of it, which is why a lot of people don't do it.

GM: (laughs) That's fair, though.

DB: Even people who start out wanting to do it, because it's really hard and there's a lot of failure. As a way to lead a life I think that's about as valid a way as you can find.

GM: That's really beautifully put.

DB: That's the sum of my wisdom.

GM: (laughs)

DB: So, Gabriel, I'm really glad we got the chance to talk, and I really enjoyed working with you and having you make this thing your own. I'm grateful and I'm sure that once it's out in the world the people who were our participants, who spoke, will also be grateful, because you really respected their stories and understood them, and found the truth lying in the heart of it all.

GM: Thank you.

DB: Alright. Now you have to cut it.

GM: (laughs), Make myself look good.