

Jonathan Pitches in conversation with Carmen Nasr on Zoom, 10.3.23

(This interview has been edited for readability and agreed by Nasr and Pitches on 25.8.23)

Jonathan Pitches: How did you begin to work on the Climbers? What was the research process?

Carmen Nasr: It wasn't commissioned by the Theatre by the Lake; they picked it up about 4 drafts in, and they programmed it, and then I continued to write it and develop it. I was nominated for the Channel 4 playwriting awards or bursary. It's a scheme, it's had lots of different names, and the Finborough Theatre, which is a very small new writing theatre, who were the first people to sort of champion me, they nominated me for that award based on a previous play called *Dubailand*, and then I had to pitch an idea as part of the selection process. I already had the idea for *The Climbers* in its early stages, and so started to develop it in preparation for this pitch. And then I pitched it, and I got this award, so that gave me the time and space to write it. I still worked full time, though, because it wasn't enough. When I wrote it I was working full time. It was a 4-year process, because it was really slowed down. That's how it came about.

In terms of in terms of research, the idea was initially sparked by my brother – when he took a trip to Kilimanjaro. He'd just had a breakup, and he had never climbed anything before, and a friend of his suggested: 'let's go and do this climb'. And he just said 'yes', blindly. He hadn't looked into it. He had no idea, so he went into it completely with no expectations. He's a politically aware person, and like doesn't like inequality etc. And then, when he got there, he was really shocked that they had a team of 10 local porters to support their climb. When he came back from that trip he did that thing that we all used to do before iPhones where you put the camera on the telly or on a screen, and everyone sits and looks at the photos. So, he went through this storytelling thing with all the photos, talking about his journey and showing us pictures of the porters, and talking about how uncomfortable it was, and the tensions between him and his friend, because they had different approaches. He was very much, 'it's about the journey', and his friend was, 'No. It's about getting to the top', and it ended with his friend pouring it a bottle of water on top of his head near the summit,

because it got so tense. It was a very male sort of relationship - that kind of funny friendship where it's a little bit tense. So that's how the initial spark was started: initially, I was researching climbs to Kilimanjaro finding out what motivated people and reading lots of accounts from blogs or articles. And then I saw an article in *The Evening Standard*, which featured a body on Everest - I think it was green boots. And that was when I started thinking about Everest because I saw that, and I thought, oh, my God! Whoa! And then I found out about these 200 bodies, and I had had no idea before.

It was a very slow journey in. And then, when I, when I found out about the bodies and I started to research Everest. I already *knew of it*, obviously. I knew of the over commercialization of climbing from the news. But I had never really read anything about climbing. So *that's* when I started researching Everest and *that's* when I thought, okay, this is a much more theatrical space than Kilimanjaro, there's more peril, it's more dramatic, there's obviously a lot of politics going on in Kilimanjaro, but it felt like there was way more going on thematically in relation to Everest. And so I started by just reading little bits and pieces online. The first books I read were *The Climb* by Anatoli Boukreev (an account of the infamous 1996 Everest disaster where the avalanche killed quite a few people). And then the more famous book, by Jon Krakauer: *Into Thin Air*. *The Climb* is like the other take on that story, and that was really interesting. That's when I started to become really interested in this idea that there could be two accounts. These are two published books by two very well-respected climbers who are saying different things and remembering it differently. So my research was really sparked by those two accounts. That incident in '96 just seemed so important and key to a lot of the literature and a lot of the thinking, and a lot of the sort of attitudes to safety.

Then I read *Annapurna* by Maurice Herzog, and that was very much because I wanted to look into the colonial, imperial conquests - these big trips that were carried out. There were *ghosts* in it as well. A lot of the themes and content for the play came from those texts. I don't know whether it's him or he's recounting someone else who says that he gets separated and he's alone, and then he feels that there's this third person, and he hears the footsteps in the snow. Those initial ideas and themes were there in those books. And I found them extremely fruitful.

I was really worried about being *accurate*. If you know, people who are into climbing, I mean it's like: 'that's not the right crampon'! So I knew I needed some of that detail, but it was so overwhelming that finally I decided that it didn't really matter - as long as there were some basics, all those details weren't that important. I'm not making a documentary, this is not a realistic journalistic account, it's a space of imagination. So I stopped doing the really detailed technical research, because I just didn't think it was helpful. And, I understood where the camps were. I had done research on what a journey might be like for someone on an expedition. After those books I started reading a lot of articles and blogs and accounts, because there's so much out there. And when people knew I was writing about Everest they'd send me things as well, which is really cool, and things sort of naturally come to you when you have that radar!

Then I read a story, a few years ago it must have been, about an Australian couple who went up Everest. They were a married couple, and the woman wasn't feeling well, but she said to her partner, 'go on to the summit', and he did. And when he came back she was dead, or almost dying. There were videos of him talking online; he'd been interviewed, and he was just devastated and destroyed. There was a lot of talk about the ethics of it. So, while I was writing the play, after that initial research, after those books and reading some key articles I also watched documentaries including *Sherpa*. That documentary was really, really key.

So after that phase of research I wrote the first draft and it was very different to the final product. Then through the redrafting process I was doing other bits of research as necessary - into ghost stories and Himalayan ghost stories, into karaoke bars and Kathmandu and what someone might do when they're there. I did more niche, rabbit hole-y research as the play developed, and as the characters sort of grew. It was an ongoing process.

And then you have to stop at some point. You've got to let the imaginative space exist and leave it behind at some point. So I did that. Once we were programmed I also did an interview with a Sherpa who was in Kathmandu. He'd not gone up Everest. He'd done treks, he'd led a trek to Everest base camp and now worked behind a desk doing marketing for an expedition company. He was great and really really interesting. That was the one interview I conducted. So that was the research. And it was a really long process (*laughs*).

JP: Well - that's an absolutely fascinating blend of the very personal and biographical with the available historical literature - *Annapurna* was also mentioned by playwright Matt Kambic, who wrote *The Sherpa and the Beekeeper*. I'm really interested to see in earlier theatre if there is an archetypal, colonial statement on Everest - to try and benchmark that against the dramatic work that's happening now. How are writers like you, in the second decade of the 21st century, responding to a different approach to representing Everest?

CN: What I found really interesting about those colonial accounts was that when we talk about colonial activities and imperialism there's a certain level of embarrassment; there are certain moments in history that we don't talk about with huge pride anymore. But Everest is *not* one of them. We still talk about it with this imperial terminology. I mean, things are changing but when I was looking for books, the way that people were talking about *Annapurna* and the level of praise it gets. I guess it's partly warranted - it shows you the perseverance of the human spirit, and where ambition can get you. I went into it thinking, this might be quite inspiring, and it was in a sense. But there are some passages where he talks about the "coolies", where he talks terribly. It's in a passage after Herzog's just talked about how noble the men who are with him are, and how humble he is. And so it was very jarring. I found the attitudes towards that text are very celebratory, still. I think there are not many people challenging those narratives about Everest really. So that's why I wanted to write the play I guess: it was a narrative that most people don't really question. They're like, oh, my God! Someone climbed Everest. Wow! And they just move on. There's a huge colonial history there, just as much as with India and Africa - all those imperialist bits of our history, and this is one that's *still* shrouded.

JP: The thing that fascinates me about mountains is they represent an acute intensification of some of those debates in geographical terms. Often they're on political borders, there are international teams that are put together to climb them - that whole debate about Hillary and Tensing and who summited first, and which countries were represented on the flags. They really are a fantastic space to work through some of those bigger political narratives.

CN: Definitely, but because they're also a space that feels. Everest feels so 'of its place', geographically, but also it's this blank mountain that everyone can project onto. So mountains are both stateless, and full of politics at once, which I think is really cool.

JP: Having done that research, and having found that central motif of different narratives on the same climb, how did that move into the dramaturgy? The mixed time zones, the whole notion of the altitude contributing to confusion. It's quite a complex dramaturgy. Isn't it?

CN: Yeah, yeah, it is. And it was hard! It was a long process. I think there's a tension in climbing. What I find really interesting about mountaineering is that there's this very, very scientific world of fact, technique, equipment, altitude, geography, and use of medical terms. It's all very specific, very accurate. And this comes into tension, rubs up against, the antithesis of that: the space of ambition and feelings and emotion and purpose and soul-bearing and finding yourself, of local communities and religious belief systems. And that's a completely opposite world. It's almost like both of those things exist, and people are passionate about them in equal measure, but they're the opposite of each other. I was interested in that. The play is very *specific* in moments, but then very *open*, and speaks to that antithesis. I didn't know that at the start, I discovered that afterwards. But I think the dramaturgy, that kind of messiness, of memory and multiple truths, initially started with those two differing accounts of these big climbers.

Then I started to research altitude sickness. I had no real knowledge about what it was - I just thought people threw up and got a bit ill, through oxygen deprivation. When I started looking into that I was really shocked at how serious it was, how people could hallucinate; it wasn't just physical, it was very, very, very, very much mental. People could hallucinate, people's memories were all over the place when they came back from the mountain. And in the death zone, I can't remember what the altitude is exactly, but above that your brain cells start to die and it's technically brain damage. I read about how that can change your ethics and your personality, because if your brain is not functioning in the right way, it's like being drunk or high. And in that situation, do you have diminished responsibility, as if you have some mental health issues when you commit a crime? That really interested me! There's a

space on Earth where the altitude changes your mind and that's why we shouldn't go there! And what are the rules there? What are the *moral* rules? How do we judge behaviour in such a space? So I was very, very intrigued by this space. And also by the fact that there are these bodies and people walk past them, and that's kind of fine. Immediately it felt like, in this death zone, there was a different standard of behaviour. There was a different set of morals that had been agreed upon silently, but also sometimes not, and people were very confused about it.

In the early days I used to say: 'my play is going to be time, space, and altitude and altitude is going to be the third dramaturgical point'. I had no idea how I was going to do that, but that was very much a conscious choice that I made at the start, formally. It took me a long time to understand what that looked like. For the first draft there wasn't a sherpa character because I was really nervous about representing that character. The conversations around representation at the moment are quite fraught, and they're fast moving, and so I think, as a writer, especially then as I was starting out, I was a little bit nervous. But I thought about it a bit more - either you leave that voice out, or you include that voice, and if I'm going to be driven by fear, then that's gonna silence that character and all the stories I was reading on Everest, people from the Sherpa community were there. They're there, you know, in all of the different stories. So I thought, No, there has to be a character.

Because I was really interested in the politics of it, and I had watched *Sherpa*, I thought perhaps there's a play where it's about the strike that they took - they all went on strike one year, which is incredible. But I don't think I'm the person to write *that* play. So, my take on representation is, if someone said to me write a play about Martin Luther King or Gandhi, I'd probably say, 'mmm, I don't think I'm the person for that'. But if someone said, I can have a character from a different community *within* my play, especially if it's a very global space, and it's necessary, then that's totally fine. I went on that journey as well. I was desperate to have the sherpa character in so the dramaturgy of *his* character also evolved, and what I decided in the end was this is a character who tends to have the least power in the situation. There is the reality of this character's existence - the geographical reality, the socioeconomic reality - and I wanted to speak to that and represent that. But I also wanted to give him voice and power. So the dramaturgy of him narrating and speaking actually comes from a space of

giving him the most dramaturgical power. That was the idea - he's the only character who knows it's a play. He's the only character who knows of the artifice. And he speaks to the audience. And he breaks the fourth wall. And while he's forced to take Charlie and Yasmin on their journey and he's in a sense *our* guide, because that's his role, he also is able to tell his own story through the monologues and to talk about his own life. The other characters don't necessarily have that power. The other thing was that in the scenes where he's speaking with the characters, the "realistic" scenes, he's going to be speaking English, but in the monologues he's speaking his own language, the English is not limited by that. So those were the dramaturgical choices, they are driven by questions of representation and power, and of giving a character dramaturgical agency. But then the idea of memory and truth and who said what was very much the narrative heartbeat of it, because that's the suspense of 'what happened?' And it was a gift, because there's all this possibility. But it was also really hard, because the redrafting process, all of the scenes that are as they are, have been in all different positions - because you could technically have the chronology however you want. And then eventually it turned out that the memories of the mountain are in chronological order - except one scene, the really fever dream scene in the middle. It was more jumbled before, but then it ended up being actually quite ordered, even though it doesn't feel like that.

JP: I'll have to go back and examine it in that light. I think that position of the sherpa is absolutely fascinating. I completely agree with you - there's both an empowerment and a disempowerment to that position. As you say, agency within the dramaturgy, but not necessarily within the narrative itself, an opportunity to be able to talk to the audience directly from outside, but not effect change within the narrative necessarily. When dramaturgy and the political backdrop to that are in such an interesting marriage, it gets exciting, doesn't it?

CN: I hope so. It was hard. It was challenging, and I was really nervous about it. When we got into rehearsals, there was a whole other bit of rewriting, because suddenly you're with these brilliant actors. And we had a very, very capable, intelligent, generous group who all were staying for 2 months in the Lake District, and we're all really interested in the outdoors. So, there was something really special about going into the rehearsal room with these actors

in that setting, and everyone was reflecting on the trips that they had been on. There were a lot of personal stories in there. One of the actors had gone for walks in the Himalayas with her father, who had passed on, and it was really special to her. And the actor playing the sherpa, who actually was *not* of sherpa ethnicity, which is a whole other debate, right, because we couldn't find anyone who was living in London available, and an actor - it was really difficult. He'd grown up in the foothills of the Himalayas and that felt really important. And he'd hiked up to Base Camp. So we actually found more detail in the sherpa character and his story together, which was really great. In the early drafts he was giving me more facts - rather than the story of his growing up. And we brought that more to the surface. It was a real journey, that character. I think in very *early* drafts, and it's embarrassing to admit that he was silent, because I hadn't figured out how to do it, and that's why sometimes I think that we don't give enough *time* for writing; you need *time* to let things macerate and come to the surface, and you need time to reflect and to talk to people. But I think we got there in the end, and I'm really really pleased that I did that.

Interviewing the sherpa was really useful as well because I got a different perspective. A lot of the perspective from documentaries and other representations, especially from Western journalists, are all about the conditions, and how terrible they are. But *this* person was like, 'It's great!' Because he's part of the new middle class sherpa community who are business owners who are trying to push for more power, and his perspective was one of pride. He was acknowledging certain behaviours of Western climbers, but also defending the industry in many ways and speaking up for it. That was a new perspective as well. I remember the actor, who was not from that community, pushing for him to quit climbing in the story, but from speaking to the sherpa who lives in Kathmandu, and who had all this experience, he suggested 'No, he wouldn't do that. This is his livelihood. Yes, he might go abroad and build up his technique. But I don't know if he'd quit'. So there were questions around his story and his agency that were really interesting.

JP: I'd like to focus now on the location - the way in which you constructed things in terms of the spatial dynamics, and also discuss that notion of a "shift" rather than a conventional blackout for the scene changes. How did you come about that mix from the hotel room to the summit? How in short do you put a mountain on stage?

CN: Yeah, putting a mountain on stage. I think there are two questions there. There's the question of the *writer's* response, the *writer's* vision of setting and place, and then how that's staged - which is completely up to the designer, and that's really exciting. I think for me the setting of Everest and the mountain on stage because it was sort of semi-unstageable, feels really playful and exciting. There's something about the gesture of doing something that's "unstageable" that I think feels really thrilling and exciting. When my brother told me the story of Kilimanjaro I remember thinking I was interested in the story, but maybe the most interesting thing for me, was: 'Oh, mountain on stage. No one's ever done it before!' Obviously they *have*, you know, you think you're original. So the setting was such a point of inspiration, and exciting and it felt really rewarding as a space to start with. For the designer (from having worked with Max Johns, who designed *The Climbers*, who's brilliant) I know that that he was equally creatively inspired by the challenge of it. For me in terms of design, I didn't really have a preference for it being really literal or being stylized. In my mind when I was writing, I wasn't bothered by that, because I think that when a designer comes up with a creative vision that's backed up by rigour, and speaks to the dramaturgy of the piece and themes, then it's going to be brilliant. So I wasn't so much worried, I guess, about the style.

In terms of the locations I knew there were going to be flashbacks, and I knew that it was going to be moments from the climb, and then moments of this interrogation - it was just the climb and the interrogation at the beginning. But then, at draft 2, the notes that I got back were, 'we don't know who the couple are, and we don't really get their motivations, and we don't understand what's going on between them and their choices'. So then the first scene I wrote that was *not* in Nepal was the scene where they make curry. And it was supposed to be a scene for myself to discover them. And then I thought, oh, it's really good. I like this, and it's really exciting. So the choice to have multiple locations and to go back to England came from discovering the story and the characters, and then: what would happen if the mum and Yasmin met? I was sort of experimenting with these scenes, and by draft 3 or 4 we had all these multiple locations, so how do we move between them? And the shift thing? I don't know whether it's just me being a bit pretentious (laughs) admittedly. I guess it was more like an offering to the creative team, that it doesn't have to be a blackout, it's not a scene change in that sense. It's sort of a shift in memory, a shift in Yasmin's mind, I guess,

or a shift in feeling or place. So I think that stage directions are really interesting because they're really specific, it's like a tent pole and a tent, but they're also a place of opportunity and possibility. You have to do both. You have to mark a scene change, but also give them a flavour of openness. And when you're working in theatre people tell you things like, Oh, 'I was at talk with this amazing director, and they said this, and that's the truth now', and someone had told me that blackouts kill the play. They kill the dramatic energy. And I remember thinking, oh, that's interesting. I can't control that. You know a director might choose to do blackouts. But how can I offer something else that speaks to the world of the play? And I guess the reason it swaps locations as well is because it *is* about Yasmin remembering everything essentially. And so in your mind you do kind of move from place to place but also at some point I have to tell the story, and these are the scenes that we need to see, and so wherever they might take place, they need to take place.

The fun thing about the mountain location was, because especially when they were lost and in the death zone, nothing mattered anymore. It didn't have to have any accuracy. It was really exciting to think 'Oh, *this* is said in *that* place, yay, I can do what I want' (laughs). And the space of the imagination could really open up, like with the penguin scene, and those moments where it doesn't quite add up, and things are a little bit confused; they were really exciting to write. I do remember thinking because it moves a lot it ultimately probably has to be stylistic, because it's jumping around. In the end the creative team came up with this brilliant idea. What I loved about the design was that the designer wasn't just trying to recreate the spaces. But what they did - within the design - was to create a sense of memory. The mountain was these sheets, that looked like peaks, but with each scene one of them was lifted up and revealed a very realistic mini-set of the real scenes. Because the pandemic delayed the play, he had an extra year to work on the design - you know, free labour - not great! The earlier design had a similar concept but didn't have any realistic sets in it. It was just going to be imaginative spaces, just the mountain through *light*. That might be how it's interpreted in other productions of the play. But what was beautiful about the way he did it, and because it was in a main house space that had a huge amount of height and depth that was really, really great. (If you're in a much smaller space one of the challenges of designing and staging mountains is the material challenge of the space you are in. Is it in the round? Because then you can't do these sort of landscape images). Theatre by

the Lake and the main house was a perfect space for it, because it was so big. And we did have a good budget, for me - from starting off on the fringe. This was top end! And we had these little sets that flew out, and there was a trapdoor, there were ladders all the way up so people could climb, and there was a bridge at the top. So, we were very lucky in that the architecture of the stage and of the theatre lent itself to the epic-ness of the mountain. We were able to do some tricks - all the mounted peaks flew up and they ended up being inverted at the top, for instance.

And then, in the final act, there was just this completely sparse, empty space, and you could see everything at the back. You could see the backstage almost, and it was just this pure white space, and so it peels back into this this space of confusion and emptiness and the big void of a mountain and feeling lost. The designer responded so beautifully to the dramaturgy of the text; the mountain was represented in multiple forms across play.



The Climbers, premiering at the Theatre by the Lake, Keswick, UK, 17th June 2022 ©The Other Richard

JP: What you say about the design makes perfect sense - at a twenty-first century level of nuance.

CN: That's because I also think mountains, or the space of geography and science - they've got such a history of the poetic. From the romantic poets and the sublime going all the way back, mountains exist everywhere, so there are all these local populations that have their own interpretations. Mountains exist in this realm of the poetic, I think. But now there's this new realm of tourism and consumption, and also a space of conquering and ownership. It feels like it's more layered now, right? And there's these bodies just sitting up there! This is the thing, it's become a space of death, and I think that's what fascinated me about Everest as well. And the ghost idea was because I'm reading *Annapurna* and there's this ghost mentioned and no one bats an eyelid. And then among the sherpa communities and other communities, there's this belief that if bodies are not given appropriate burial rights then their souls are trapped up there. And there are stories from the early expeditions - was it Tenzing, or someone else? I can't remember - saying that there were these ghosts asking for food. Maybe it was from the nineties. There are a lot of ghost stories out there among climbers. And there's this other layer of the ghostly and of memory and of people dying there. Suddenly it's become a place of death when it wasn't. I don't know how many years, it's not been long that it's become a graveyard..

JP: That connection you make with the ethics I think, is very interesting. One thing I've noticed is the shift of climbing protocol. Back in the '50s, '60s and '70s no one got left on the mountain. They might have been seriously injured, but they were a team of say five, and they all knew each other. I mean it's a reduction, but nevertheless, the kind of commercialization that you evoke in this play without becoming obsessed by it, when just walking straight past, even the question over the Sherpa's contribution to saving Charlie.

CN: That's true. The one thing that I guess the colonial accounts *do* have is a sense of decency for human life, strangely. So, even though they're conquering and they're being exploitative, there is a sense of, 'no man will be left behind'. And I guess the question was, can that infect a romantic relationship in a partnership? Can that feeling, if there's something wrong in a relationship, can it weasel its way in? Do you know what I mean? And

I guess sometimes you do need to just save yourself - but everyone else walked past him too, right? And that was also inspired by a really heartbreaking documentary about a Nepalese climber. She, I think was originally from Kathmandu, but had left when she was quite young, and ended up in Canada, married to a Canadian guy, and she became a Canadian as an adult. She wanted to be the first Nepalese Canadian woman to get to the top of Everest. She was in Canada and she'd never climbed before (she'd been on a few hikes), and this documentary follows her as she prepares. She holds a big gala to raise money for all her equipment, and it's sort of framed as this attempt at diversity and an attempt at being the first to climb. And so she went on the climb, but wasn't ready. She was training in Canada, in forests near her house, on these hills. She wasn't ready - the expedition company that took her on just wanted her money, and there's a lot of debate about whose responsibility this was, and essentially she died, I think, on the way back. The sherpa who was with her was interviewed, and basically she couldn't do it, she was really unwell, but she *insisted* on going to the top. The sherpa she was with, her guide, said, 'please, we can't'. But she said there was no way she was not getting to the top. And so he took her up. She was dying on the way down, and they couldn't carry any more so they left her, and people walked past her, and she was slowly dying. And that story shocked me. I was shocked. Eventually someone covered her up with a flag. It's horrible, but everyone was sort of trying to defend their position. And it made perfect logical sense why people did what they did, because the system up there and the commercialization doesn't allow for anyone to be held down or to stop. Do you know what I mean? But I found myself believing in it as well. You know, of course she's stupid to have tried it in the first place. So of course, leave her. That's her *choice*. She *chose* to go there. I guess that's also an explanation of what I think. I don't know what I think, so I think that that's the point of the play - Yasmin not being able to confront what she's done - because it's horrific. But also its also true that she had no other choice. Is it forgivable? Is it okay? I don't know.

JP: I wanted to come back to one very pragmatic question, Gwen and the climber, or Gwen and the ghost. Is that a doubling role, or is it effectively one role that confuses together through the drama?

CN: It's a doubling role because of budget constraint (*laughs*). Like a lot of writing, especially for theatre, because it's a text that's supposed to be staged - it's not a novel where you can have a 100,000 people if you want in it. So you do have to make decisions that are based on practicalities. Early on, the question was - how many characters is it? Yasmin, Gwen, Charlie, Celia, Tshering, Connie - so it will be 6. And when you when you get over 6, people start to get really nervous, so essentially it was a choice. I think in an early draft Gwen was called Scott (*laughs*) representing that side of climbing - a real *lad*. But then I thought it'd be interesting to make her a woman and I wanted it to be a climber. So it was tricky. Like the dramaturgy, I guess it gets a little bit watered down when it comes to that element. The ghostly climber? - probably the hardest thing to find was Connie and her relationship with her mum. In previous drafts there was a whole five to six page scene where Connie and her mum chat, Connie and the ghost chat, and I was really attached to it and everyone thought it was awful (*laughs*). Now I see why, but I was adamant at the time. It ended up becoming a monologue which works so much better, and the ghost doesn't speak, thank god! I feel there *had* to be a ghost, because it came up so often in people's accounts. It came up from historical accounts up until modern day accounts. There was the ghost story about the camp and the radio from K2 which was really scary. The phone call that Charlie's mother gets was also based on an account of the woman who died on K2, British climber - her friend, received a phone call, and she heard her on the other line. So really, all the ghost references are pulled from real accounts and in some way transformed slightly. And then, because of the ghost, and because of the death of Charlie, the concept of grief, of closure became a thematic part of the play as well. So, having a character who haunted the play a little bit, felt right. It felt it would bring those themes more to the surface. And also the fact that when people hallucinated they tended to see another climber on the mountain. You know that was again a common denominator in all these stories of - there was someone else there, we saw this other climber. So I felt like I wanted another climber, a ghostly presence within the fever dreams. That was something I wanted.

And then with Connie's character, it was about finding a personal link which felt really on the nose, but we were trying to figure it out, and I think we managed it. Again, her mother being basically the ghost figure, started to become a character that meant different things to each different person and they projected onto. And there was a sense from all the accounts and

the research I did that the mountain really gets under your skin, and that there's something spiritual, and that there's this other, there's this sort of otherness that no one could quite pinpoint, but meant something different to everyone. So, I felt like the ghost character needed to contain that. It wasn't actually, until the performance that people said 'so is Gwen a ghost?' and I was like, oh, no! But I guess it kind of worked - there was a blurring, and maybe Connie had imagined her - it wasn't that intentional, you know, but it was interesting. Before I'd had a production go on, I'd read a lot of big playwrights say, 'you don't know what your play is about until you're sitting there at opening night'. And I thought, 'yeah, right, whatever'. And then I found out it's true. You know you're sitting there on opening night and you're like, 'oh, God it's about the relationship, and *that's* the central thing'. So you learn so much from the interpretation. And that was something that came up with Gwen being a ghost .

JP: There's a lovely kind of electricity between Connie and Yasmin, I really like that, and also between Yasmin and Celia that just captured that sort of very sparse tension in really simple ways. That kind of writing often gets used in acting classes where you don't know what the context is, you know the so-called neutral space where you invent the given circumstances, and you try different ways. These are the sort of things I would be doing with my students, and there's some really good writing in your play for that kind of exploration.

CN: It's funny you had a question about budgets and that was really interesting. I was thinking, and it was only through this experience I think, that I really started to think about budgets, because initially what comes to mind is the production, right where you can *do*. But really I think that if money wasn't a problem, I'd ask for more money for *research and development*. Guy Jones, the director, who is also a dramaturg, and who dramaturged this play for 3 years, was unpaid in the lead up because of the pandemic delay. So we were 3 months from the final draft when the pandemic hit and it got cancelled, and we were both in tears. It was awful. And then once we picked ourselves up again we asked each other, shall we keep working on it? And we did, but it was hard. He spent a huge part of that time on the dramaturgy. But when we got in the room with these actors in week 1 scenes like the Celia and Yasmin scene didn't need to change that much, which is very rare. I think it's

because it's got very clear parameters in a way, it's got a very clear situation emotionally between the characters. And so the other stuff doesn't really matter - that she wants a funeral, the other one doesn't and you know it's like that.

We recalibrated these moments together in the room, and we, discovered more for the sherpa character. I wrote maybe five or six new scenes during the rehearsal process. We really did a huge amount of work. But there wasn't enough time. So one thing that the play didn't have was a big R&D. Because that's expensive - you're talking £10,000 to pay all the actors. So I would have loved to have had some more R&D and *then* gone into rehearsal.

JP: That's a really nice flipping of the assumption that one makes around budgets - that it all goes into set construction if you've got more money.

CN: Yeah, it's - the costumes are really expensive, actually, the climbing boots, and we knew that the audience was really going to be climbing-based. It was like, 'oh, we can't afford that, it will be too hot for them to wear the real things', so it was finding stuff in between. We got a lot of donations. We had a good budget for set - we weren't really held back. But I do think that it's the labour of the writer and the dramaturgs, and all of that work which often is not included in the budget - *Time*, time to think and explore, maybe a trip to Nepal would be really nice! (*laughs*)

JP: Can we finish just on that last scene? You might just say, 'well, it's up to you, don't ask me', and I would completely respect you for that. But looking at it again: the very last moments of the piece; we're back on the mountain; it's just Yasmin and Charlie. Where do you want to leave us? Where do you want to leave us with that conclusion as an audience?

CN: For me, in really basic practical terms, you do have to explain yourself to a room of actors because they are like, 'why' and 'what'? You're right, it *is* open to interpretation, and that was the point. But I *was* clear in *my* mind, it *was* clear what was happening. In *my* mind Yasmin is leaving him and this is what he imagines and says, 'Okay'. Or this is what you hope being in a state of altitude sickness is like - that perhaps this is what he experienced instead

of her leaving. Because no one wants to imagine that moment, and our imagination sometimes fails us, *or* it's what Yasmin imagines or hopes that his final moment was like. So it's a space of imagination, I think, for Charlie or Yasmin or us, as the audience, not to be able to see that final moment. I think it also represents the fact that beyond Everest and beyond all of those themes, it is essentially the story of a couple, and - we live in a world that's so individualistic - I guess it's her making the choice to save herself, right?

JP: She leaves him a second time...

CN: Yeah, exactly. She leaves him a second time, and so in a way it's celebrating their love, but also understanding this desire for saving ourselves sometimes. Jonathan, the other. Jonathan [Westaway], actually had a really nice interpretation. He said that the final moment for him felt like it was about the inevitability that every partnership must end, and one will always leave the other behind, no matter what. I was like, 'Oh, My God! That's so profound and beautiful!' And like Yes, that's what I meant! (Laughs). But in a way I was. That was an interpretation I think that that articulated, perhaps for the more general comment that it makes on humanity and on relationships - at the end of the day, every relationship has to end, and someone has to go first – which is just really grim. I guess for me that's what it was.

JP: 'Everything glitters' - did everything glitter?

CN: Yeah. Oh, it was so good! That was my favourite moment, actually. The way that they did the last moment of the play. So - he's on the floor, he's begging her, and then the song that they did karaoke to at the beginning comes back on, so for the audience it's really recognizable. And they get up, and they sort of transcend the play - they take all their climbing gear off, really quickly. They shove it off and then the whole stage became a different colour, and this mirror ball came down, and then they just danced. But then the song starts to warp, and then it goes back to that real moment, and then she just climbs up this ladder and leaves the stage. So it was really beautifully done. We had a choreographer, and they did this dance- it was good. They really captured what I'd imagined.

Jonathan Pitches and Carmen Nasr interview, 10.3.23

JP: I'm so grateful to you, Carmen. Thanks so much for being so open and expansive on this. I could talk for the rest of the day.

Carmen Nasr: Me too, I've got inspired now! I really appreciate it, because once a performance happens and finishes you feel a bit distant from it. It's like, 'oh, I'm done now, and I want to move on'. But it's nice to revisit and remember and reflect.