The GLC Story Oral History Project

Interviewee: Farrukh Dhondy

Interviewer: Zahra Dalilah

Transcribed by: Debs Grayson

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Location: London Bridge

ZD: So I am Zahra Dalilah on 8 May 2017 in London Bridge interviewing Farrukh Dhondy for the GLC story. Firstly I'm just going to ask some questions on your beginnings and how you arrived to be involved in politics. So could you tell me a little about where you came from, your family, did you grow up in London, what was that like?

FD: I was born and brought up in India in the western town of Buna it's now called Une, I went to school there, I went to college there and then I felt I had to get out, I won a scholarship to Cambridge University. I came to Britain, my first time out of India to study at university and I did my three years there. I studied natural sciences which is physics, I did quantum physics, and then I switched to English because I didn't want to make atom bombs and stuff, being of slightly socialistic mind I thought I won't do that, I would rather study English do some writing, I wanted to be a writer. So I went from Cambridge University, came to London, faced a lot of problems at the time in the late 60s it was quite difficult for people who weren't of British origin to get by. You had discrimination of all sorts in finding rooms, you went to a landlord and he said sorry we don't take people like you, or who would say the room is already gone if they wanted to be polite. Some would even say I don't mind but the rest the tenants will object to sharing a box with an Asian. So was a bit like that, they wouldn't serve you in pubs, you went to a pub and you stood there for half an hour and they just looked through you, right. So I hadn't experienced that in Cambridge because Cambridge a is sheltered society but London was quite brutally like that. And then I started writing, I started writing bits and pieces for, with a photographer friend who said let's do this and that. We did quite a lot of writing, I wrote about the Beatles first meeting the Maharishi and I interviewed Pink Floyd I did a bit article on them when they started out, right before they were famous. And I planted these stories in the national newspapers sometimes and The Listener published the story about the Maharishi and a fellow called me up and said come to a party so went to a party at The Listener and they said, talking to a fellow he said to me who are you what you do, this that and the other, and he said he was the professor of English at Leicester University and did I want to do anything like that and he said would you be interested in anything like that and I said yes I'd like to write a thesis on Rudyard Kipling. So he gave me a scholarship, he said come and do an MA there. Now getting to Leicester I found really really hard discrimination against Asians, I couldn't find room to stay, but then somebody told me go to the Indian ghetto and look at the boards so me and my then Indian girlfriend we went and we found a room easily by looking at the boards, but it was in the Indian district of… Road Leicester. And I used to be paid very little money because I was on a scholarship and had no earnings and my girlfriend worked for the gas board and and 6 pounds a week, so we paid the rent and we ate from that and that was our livelihood. And on Fridays we would treat ourselves to half a pint of beer, so we went to this pub and on Friday evenings all the Asian workers, the factory workers would turn up because they got paid, and they would spend a lot of money drinking till 2 o'clock in the morning drinking beer, and when they saw us, Indians, they said come and have a drink with us, who are you? I said I'm a student she said she works for the gas board, they bought us 6 pints of beer and then we made friends with them. And soon, they came in one Friday quite despondent, about five or six of them, and we said what's wrong, why are you in a bad mood, and they said we got thrown out of the factory. And so we said why, and they said the supervisors and the management they discriminate, and if you answer back they kick you out. We said take that what about the unions, and they said we don't know what unions are, and so he said well you got to fight back, how many Asian workers do you have, and they said 90% of the workforce in this factory are Asians. So I said get them to side with you, they said how, we said well let's go to the university students union at night and print out some leaflets and stand at the gates at 6 o'clock in the morning. So we did that and of course they all came out in support, by 11 o'clock in the morning the management had capitulated and said will take them back you know, there's no point having a stroke here. So of course we became heroes of the Indian workers Association, and I joined politics in that particular way. Then we came down to London and there was a conference at

Alexandra Palace, with several groups represented, it was Asians, West Indians, Africans, any immigrant group came to speak their to talk about demands and this and that. I was finishing at Leicester, finishing my thesis and going to come down to London, and I was very impressed by the Black Panther movement because they seemed to have discipline, they seem to have programme, they weren't talking rhetoric, they were talking straight forward, action and what they would like to do. There was just a handful of them, and when I came to London I contacted them and they said well join up, right, and to join you have to show your commitment, right, so you need to write things, hand out leaflets, stand at markets in the morning and flog the newspaper that they were handing out, knock on doors, come to demonstrations, fight the police, whatever. So we began doing that, and then they accepted me as a member, and they were a few hundred, and they said well you're a schoolteacher, because I had started earning my living of schoolteacher, succumbing to the youth group lectures. So there were hundreds of young, West Indian, who came to the oval house in South once or twice a week and we used to give them lectures on English history, on labour history, on black power in the states, Huey Newton's work, John Jackson's work, Angela…

ZD: Davis

FD: Yes, Eric Cleaver, so we would read those books and discuss them. And of course talk here about housing, education, busing, discrimination, suss laws, there was a lot of activity in the Black Panther movement, that's why I got into politics.

ZD: Okay, and in terms of you experiencing discrimination and joining the Black Panthers, do you think that your identity was a big part of your political engagement at that time?

[9.00]

FD: I don't quite understand the question

ZD: In terms of your identity is being migrant and having faced as relation the country, how do you think that influenced your decision to act and the people around you

FD: It was the central motivation, that as an immigrant Britain hadn't any plan what to do with immigrants here except put them to work in dirty jobs, right. That's what happened to all the nations, Blacks and so on is. What was happening in Britain at the time was that they had finished with the Second World War and there was a kind of meritocracy overcoming the class question, so people who were minus sons went to universities, it hadn't happened in the 30s and 40s, minus sons didn't go to university. Agricultural labourers daughters worked in which people's houses as servants, upstairs downstairs and so on. But in the 60s it was changing, all sorts of people were now pushing, going to university because after the Second World War the British working class seem to say what the hell are you monopolising the heights of social and political power, we want a say in this. And that's why they voted Churchill out and voted at least in, and we have a National Health Service, schooling and all that sort of stuff. And they wouldn't do the dirty jobs, you are driving the underground, working in dirty jobs at the hospitals, working night shifts in the mills. Who did they get? They got West Indians, Africans, and Asian population who came say from Pakistan or India specifically to work in the factories in the night shifts in jobs that the whites wouldn't do. There was that kind of movement going on in Britain and what we wanted, we were such as tiny proportion of the population as immigrants, 1% to 2%, we couldn't think of, of course we talked in revolutionary terms, but we couldn't really practically think of causing a revolution in Britain, but we certainly wanted social and political change and we fought for that. It was

immigrant identity that gave the impetus to a section of the working class in Britain. We want to join the meritocracy, that's why you're doing what you're doing now going to good schools, and going to university.

ZD: Do you remember at the time of your political awakening, may be during the Black Panther days in Leicester, what were the key political moments of that time in terms of national politics, and how what you were doing fitted into that?

FD: In terms of national politics, if you wanted to look at it historically it's, we actually fought for equality in all the aspects of life. And very firmly they fought to get the police off their backs, the young people, I had, I suffered a lot of rubbish right, assaults, people beat me up, people beat me up for no reason. Tell you about an incident, I was a schoolteacher and the kids came to be once and said look, end of term, we want a fifth form disco. So we said okay, and the headmaster said you have to have at least 15 teachers there otherwise is not going to allow it, so I gathered 14 others and we said we would give up our Friday evening and they could have their disco. Some kids came down from Brixton, boys in a big gang because they were in love with some girl and some girl had betrayed them, fallen in love with somebody else, jealousy business, and they broke up the place, the disco stopped, and we said bloody kids right, we gave up our evening, what shall we do, about eight, 9 o'clock. So we said let's go to a club, we got into cars, and all 15 of us went up to Dingwall's in Camden Town, went into the club. Now in any school the women outnumber the men, so there were about four male teachers and 11 female teachers, so dancing with three or four girls on the floor, just dancing with them. Some white guys come up to me in suits and say what the fuck you dancing with these white girls for I said fuck off right, it's none of your business. So they dragged me outside and beat the fuck out of me, brain concussion and all of this, and screaming and shouting outside the club, I don't know what they were about. I think they were off duty policeman but there was no proof of that, and I went to hospital,,, and in 1973 when I was part of the Black Panther movement I was living above the black Panther bookshop in Brixton, Railton Road, 74 Railton Rd was the exact address, and some bastard threw a firebomb into the ground floor and I woke up with the smoke completely filling the room, I thought someone was completely smothering me with a pillow, but it was smoke and I couldn't breathe. I had to jump out of the second floor window in the house but down, yeah, that was the experience. You can see photographs of that at Brixton photographic exhibition, it was quite an experience, but basically what the actions resulted in, since you're asking her historical question, it resulted in an entrance into the meritocracy of Britain. So what happened was while we were agitating for very basic things, the next generation began agitating to get into Oxford and Cambridge, to get into universities, to get jobs in the media and so on, and I think it has resulted in that, I'm not saying everything is fine, but it has certainly moved on since the 60s

[16.25]

ZD: Do you think that at that time the conversation that you were having amongst your peers reflected a national understanding of what immigrant experience was? Or was it talked about?

FD: All the time, all the time. What was happening in British society was, it was getting, because of the political discrimination and so on it was getting quite non-integrated. So in Brixton amongst your friends you'd go to [unclear] to parties at which there were absolutely no white faces just you know West Indian, reggae dance party. And of course we we're welcome because we were Asian. Later on with Islam and whatnot there was a bit of tension between who was Indian and who was not, who was Pakistani and whatnot but at the time there wasn't, it was all very pally. But only a very small layer of the middle class, including myself, mixed with white colleagues from teaching or whatever else. By and

large people stuck to themselves. Your generation is more integrated. And whites have become very conscious in your generation of not discriminating, not talking racist rubbish. Whereas in my time you know you went to a pub, a white pub and they would say hey what's your name, and you would say Farrukh, and they would say I can't say that, I'll call you John right, would you like a drink John? Today that feels like, if he said that you'd probably swipe him (laughter).

ZD: And do you think, I suppose you've mentioned the unions and black Panthers, are there any other, was there any other political activity that was kind of at that time…

FD: There was lots of, lots of black groups who are active. But probably when we, with the Black Panther movement faded away. The most significant publication to, was an active collective called Race Today, right, we used to run that. Darkus Howe was the editor, I was prominent, I used to write stuff for it. And we didn't just want to write a magazine, we wanted to be active and then report on the activities in the magazine. So we started quite a few movements, one of them being the Bengali Housing Action Group. What used to happen was in the East End there was a lot of what they called paki bashing, right, the skinheads and rough types they used to come out in cars and they caught some isolated poor Pakistani Bangladeshi man and beat the fuck out of him. Or they'd go to the council estates in which there were isolated Asian families and throw firebombs through the letterboxes and crap and all sorts of stuff, right, smash their windows, beat the children up. We said this has to stop and so we got active in it, we got active in it by getting together a lot of young Asian boys and starting vigilante groups. Which meant eight or 10 of them would get together and every evening play football or whatever in the grounds and see that no guys throw any crap through windows or smash anything. If they do, or if they turn up and they look like they're going to, you confront them and say go home, you know, have a rest, watch television. And so on the street in Brick Lane which used to be wholly Asian, now it's all fancy, but they'd sit in the café's, and if any you know vans came along with skinheads and national front types they would step out of confront them and say you're not welcome here, keep going, keep moving. So we started that, then we noticed that the GLC was keeping hundreds of houses empty, then boarded them up. They boarded them up because they were going to redevelop them and turn them into, to make some money. Break down houses in the East End, build high-rise flats, luxury flats, sell them off and so on. Bengalis, right, the Asian population of the East End, mostly working in the rag trade, stitching and this and that, they had no houses, they weren't given houses by the council. They used to live 12 to a room sometimes right, we investigated several of these and then said this has to stop. So what we did was we unboarded a whole street of houses, first one Street, Worden Street (?) Then [unclear] Street, then Montague Street, then the whole estate called Pelham buildings which was boarded up. We unboarded it. They had smashed up the basins and the toilets so people couldn't use them. So we just brought in second-hand toilets, installed them you know with a very brave guy called Terry Fitzpatrick, Irish guy, who was a volunteer. And we started a squatting movement, hundreds of families turned up, we must have squatted four, five, 600 families against the GLC. Then the GLC put its hands up and said okay, you know, you seem to control this territory, we are going to approach the squatters and make them tenants at £10 a week, 6 pounds a week. So they approached them, they called them together and said look don't listen to these agitators, will give you tenancy, we will make you legal, you pay us rent and will give you certificate saying you're tenants of the council. So we won really, we won the battle because Worden Street, [unclear] Street, Montague Street and Pelham buildings. And Pelham buildings they said look it really is old we're going to demolish it, but we will house you, all of you, in proper places. And they did. Victory against the GLC.

ZD: And what year was that sorry?

FD: That was 76.

ZD: So prior to Thatcher

FD: Yes. But the GLC was, because Thatcher abolished the GLC. It was bad that because at the time, it wasn't Ken Livingstone, it was a Tory Council, Tory Council. I remember having several meetings with them and they were quite reasonable they said yeah okay since you control that, will give you housing associations. Some of our people said oh we've lost, they're selling out. And I said for God sakes they are these families, we might want to fight the Tories or fight the state, what these guys will do with the houses we squatted, they want housing. They don't want to fight the state, they want material benefit. So forget your revolutionary overthrowing the state business, they've got their houses, we've won, that's how the matter goes.

ZD: Do you remember there being a change between that Tory Council and when Ken Livingstone came in and Thatcher was in power and what that moment was like?

FD: Yes I remember very clearly the moment. Ken Livingstone verbally openly said that he was going to support all manner of black, Asian, immigrant, new citizens, the new communities, he was going to support them in several ways. The problem with Ken was he didn't know what the fuck he was doing. And what he did was, I can give you one example, he gave money to some fellow, I won't give his name, who said he was going to start a black photographic archive right? And the fellow extracted thousands of pounds from the GLC. He just took his family's photographs and put them in a room in Brixton and said this is – it was fraud right. He got his family's photographs and said this is the black archive, and it cost £20,000 or whatever and he swiped the money. The other thing he began is he said, black theatre was beginning in Britain, and like any artistic enterprise in Britain you start small and then you become famous, you become bigger – pop group started that way in an underground club, just singing any get famous and do more songs, do recordings like that. We started something called the Black Theatre Cooperative, right, it was mostly young West Indian actors. The guy who started it was an Asian Trinidadian called Mustapha Matura, but he was in the Caribbean, and Charlie Hansen the producer who now produces [unclear] and he's become pretty big – and his black wife Miss Asante has become a producer of feature films. And me joining in. And we started writing plays and rehearsing them in old garages and so on and then we put them on in community centres, the Paddington Factory it was called. And of course people came to see it, and it moved from there to the West End, to the arts… Ken saw all this and he said let's start a theatre conglomerate – there were plenty of people doing this kind of theatre here, and he called it together and the person who was chairing it – you should speak to her – was Parminder Vir, right. She was chairing it, and about 16 groups had come together to try and get GLC money to continue the theatrical experience. And I turned up as a representative of the Black Theatre Cooperative. And what happened was they said grandiose plans, they said take up the Roundhouse in Chalk farm and turn it into a black cultural centre. And thinking about it over three, four meetings I said look we're not going to be able to fill that centre, there isn't enough national black activity, look, why don't you give the money instead, £6 million, why don't you give the money instead to groups, 20,000 there, 50,000 there, a hundred thousand there, instead of 6 million in some grand project to make a building and in two years time start a thing. Ken Livingstone's representative said no we want to start this. And I said it'll come to nothing you know, it'll come to nothing, support these groups, let them grow and when we are ready we can have a centre. They wouldn't listen, so I resigned, I said I'm leaving

the committee, I wrote a note, I wrote that note I don't know if you'll find in an archive but I gave it to Parminder Vir and said good luck I'm off. Sure enough they gave that money to some, to a character who hired three or four people and squandered the money you know, there was no evidence left of anything. The Round House was left, there wouldn't there was no black activity there, no black cultural centre, it was all a complete disaster and a complete waste of taxpayers money that went that way. Not a good episode. But can Livingstone's people were… well-intentioned but stupid.

ZD: And that was kind of your main engagement with the GLC, through theatre?

FD: Yes through that – two things, one big victory with the housing association in the East End, the Bengali Housing Action Group, one triumph there and this great disappointment with the GLC drama effort by Ken Livingstone's committee to start the Round House.

ZD: And you feel like at that time there were a lot of example similar to what happened at the Round House, did you think the funding of black arts at the time was –

FD: Yes there was quite a lot of fraud going on. They just jumped on the bandwagon and sent to Ken's people, to the councillors, give us money will straighten this out – I don't think they straightened much out you know. Things remained sort of as they were because they were hustlers a lot of people you know. Some of them actually faced – when he became a, the GLC was abolished, right, and then they restarted with the Mayor of London. When Ken became me out he did the same thing. And some of them were prosecuted in court you know, they made illegal, criminal things. [Name][1] that was his name, there was a fellow called [name] he used to work for Ken Livingstone, he was prosecuted for stealing public money. And Ken Livingstone and so on he made some money with some cash and so on. But he got taken to court and found guilty.

ZD: And what did [name] do? He was the –

FD: He took some money, defrauded the, the London council or whatever it's called, the London mayoralty, when Ken Livingstone was mayor.

ZD: And what do you think of the positive impact of the GLC at the time and Ken Livingstone?

FD: The politics – the GLC used to be, before Thatcher, it was extremely influential part of London, and you needed that local government because London is quite distinct from the rest of Britain in several ways, and it needs to be because the capital and the contact with the rest of the world and so forth. Of course centring things in London disadvantages other parts of the country but this is how London has evolved you know to become the political, social centre, economic centre also of Britain. And you needed a local authority to run it. Margaret Thatcher thought that she'd abolish it and take charge, Parliament would be, her government would be supreme and London was a rival to her government in several aspects so she abolished it. But when she, later on they realised that you needed, are a London local government so they re-established the mayoralty and Ken and Mr Johnson, our Sadiq Khan.

ZD: Did you hear much about other projects outside of the arts that got funded by the GLC that were happening at the time?

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[1] Name redacted because these allegations are untrue – the person in question was cleared of corruption charges.

FD: Yeah there were several things that they did you know, they put on exhibitions, they put on trade conferences you know which were beneficial to a lot of people. But as I said there was probably a minority, but there was a lot of hassle going on at the time which I mentioned. The [name] hustle came later but the Roundhouse was [unclear] one. Disastrous.

ZD: Do you think the GLC was, how do you think they impacted equality both in the workplace and the city in the period that it was at?

FD: I think under previous governments they didn't really have a plan, they didn't have any intention of impacting on equality before can Livingstone's time, they'd never had a policy of impacting on equality. Livingstone actually turned up with the idea that he would do something about it and there was a significant population of immigrants and that, and second generation, who were not immigrants any more rights, they were all Brits, they are multicultural, multiethnic Brits. And he saw that and actually instituted some policies, some of them as I pointed out with the Roundhouse went wrong, but otherwise they were conscious policies of inhousing and so on and they worked out. Some of them worked out. Also I think that his mayoralty, the GLC's leadership at the time, allowed councillors from the ethnic communities at the time to be elected, it encouraged it, it made atmosphere for several people like Linda Bellos and people in Lambeth to come up and become councillors in Britain, in London's boroughs. Lambeth became pretty dominated by ethnic counsellors who then would look after, after they'd looked after themselves, looked after the ethnic communities

[36.30]

ZD: And thinking kind of your work in Railton Road and talking of Linda Bellos being a councillor in Lambeth, do you think there was a big relationship or impact between these councillors in Lambeth and what was happening on the ground for activists?

FD: No there wasn't any direct relationship. But I would say, and someone like Diane Abbott will back me up, that they never got elected to Labour and public office if there had not been ground swell grassroots demonstration, vociferous publishing movement. It was the agitators at the ground level, which is what is true of Britain right, you have agitators at ground level, it gives rise to a Labour Party. The same thing happened with immigrant councillors and black MPs, if there hadn't been a groundswell of support we would not have had directed voting, and we would not have had people climbing up the ladder of the Labour Party, it wouldn't have happened. You ask Diane and she will tell you yeah, you're right, if it hadn't been for Darkus' kind of agitation I wouldn't be MP.

ZD: Were there any of the big GLC events and celebrations that took place in the Ken Livingstone years that you remember attending or witnessing?

FD: I think I went to several, I can't be specific about it, but I went to several exhibitions and stuff which they tried – in Livingstone's time certainly there were big, a trade fair I remember, they would facilitate. They'd give money for the black book fair, they began an initiative in black history in schools and that, there was quite a lot of facilitation of the ethnic population, but I don't remember a gathering as such, apart from theatre, the stuff I talked about.

ZD: Do you remember much about the founding of Black history month?

FD: I don't, I participated in different places but I don't remember who founded it or how it happened, no.

ZD: What was your participation?

FD: They got me to speak in schools, talk about this or that. I wrote a biography of the writer and philosopher CLR James, you've heard of him? Cricketer, Marxist, lived in my house for several months because his wife, Selma, much younger than him, kicked him out. He was 80, he was quite old, and he had nowhere to go so he was Darkus' great-uncle so Darkus said, Farrukh you have a spare room, can you keep CLR and I said okay. So he came to my house in [unclear] Road in Clapham and lived there for six months with me. I used to make him breakfast in the mornings, he liked a 3 ½ minute egg (laughter) a boiled egg. So I talked to him quite a lot, not with the intention, but after he died I said to his publisher, the one who lives opposite, she approached me because she was a friend, [name] and said you know your friend CLR who lives with you, who died, why don't you write his biography? I said that's a good idea, I'll do that. So I researched it a bit and I've written his biography, you can get it on Amazon.

ZD: So CLR James lived with you at the end of his life?

FD: Yes.

ZD: And that was without Selma James?

FD: Yes, he lived with me and then Race Today had a flat, when they got offices they had a flat on the corner of Shakespeare and Railton Road, top floor, second floor. It had a bathroom. And so Darkus said you know you've done your duty, he's stayed six months with you, we will transfer him to Railton Road. So he transferred to Railton Road, to Brixton, and that's where he died. That was the year before he died but before that he lived with me. And I was only saying that because some institutions for black history, they called me to talk about him because I'd written a biography. That's how I got involved otherwise.

ZD: And in terms of the abolition of the GLC, do you remember that time at all, like, what was the political atmosphere like?

FD: Absolutely, that Ken Livingstone was trying to do things that were contrary to, which were counterbalance Westminster, to Thatcher's government. And Thatcher was very, thought it interfered with what she wanted to do with London because London was her central base. And if London was extremely important to Westminster Parliament and Thatcher was in there and the Tory government's plans to do this or that or the other and Ken would pause it – she abolished the GLC out of spite to get rid of the Labour opposition. Because London voted, well it didn't, it voted for Johnson, Boris, but London by large votes Labour and she realised that and so abolished the GLC.

ZD: And following from the abolition of the GLC, in terms of the GLC's ability to impact and fund certain things, what was the kind of change, was there a big noticeable change after ended?

FD: Well it failed. Abolition, I believe the abolition, it is just an opinion, the abolition of the GLC enable Thatcher to turn London into the financial centre, and to sell off the properties that were owned by the government, right, they sold off council housing as you know, so it had quite an impact by allowing Thatcher's government, the Tories, to privatise this and that and the other, to sell off council houses, to turn Canary Wharf into the financial capital and so on, it had quite an impact on London in that way.

Then of course it was realised that London can't function without local government, so they reinstated, they gave powers, limited powers, back to the Mayor. And they re-established the mayoralty here. And otherwise London transport and whatnot had to be handled by you know the Transport Secretary, the minister, and it was much too much work if it wasn't devolved so they devolved it back to the Mayoral system, which is the substitute for the GLC. So now we have Saddiq doing what he can, garden bridge (laughter)

ZD: Do you think there's been much legacy of Ken's era?

FD: Certainly in the atmosphere, yeah. What happened since then was I think certainly the ethnic minorities of London which amount to over 30% felt empowered by, if not by actual actions, by Ken's rhetoric I thought, about equality and so on, and that rhetoric should go on, and one to feel empowered. Saddiq wouldn't have become an MP without that sort of rhetoric, Saddiq is there, growing up in the East End. Actually it did help.

ZD: There was some thought at that time that the equality and diversity, that there was a focus on getting black and minority ethnic people employed and hired within the GLC.

FD: Within where?

ZD: Within the GLC and also –

FD: Well there is – I don't see any harm in that right, if we want to be employed and this and that and there's room for them. For instance in the social services sector several people are recruited because they can deal with the culture, the traditions, the sins, the mentality, beneficial criminal, of the communities from which they come. So lots of guys for instance who've been in gangs and who are reformed become youth leaders, to try and stop kids killing each other in gangs and going that way and becoming responsible thinking citizens who do some work instead of knifing each other and all this rubbish. So you get guys who have been in that life coming out of it and things. Similarly with the Muslim community just now, people are recruited from ex-jihadis who now want to you know detect who is potentially in danger of becoming suicide bombers or all this crap. So they're active. So they are useful in so far as they can talk to their own communities. I don't think it's a hustle.

[48.20]

ZD: And at the time that the GLC was active, what were your activities at that time, after you left the theatre group?

FD: I was a schoolteacher, the Inner London Education Authority was part of the GLC and it hired me as a schoolteacher so it paid my wages. So that was my central activity obviously, my profession. The GLC, they were in charge with the squatting as I told you, they owned the houses and they had to change their mind when we [unclear] the East End. It was a huge movement. Apart from that I don't know whether I, uh, interacted with the GLC much, I've told you what I did.

ZD: But I mean personally after you left the theatre group did you carry on working in black theatre?

FD: Oh yeah, yeah, I didn't leave theatre group, I just left their committee that wanted to make the Round House. And I said, look give each of these groups which – if they have any success or any future any plans – give them some money to put on productions in their own regions wherever they are. But

they didn’t do that, they put all the money into the Roundhouse. But we kept on with the Black Theatre Cooperative, we put on plays here and there and everywhere.

ZD: And did you receive funding from the GLC to put on those plays?

FD: No, we didn’t receive funding from the GLC but Arts Council, this that and the other gave us some money here and there. Then because of the plays were asked to write television, the Black Theatre Co-Op, so I started writing television from the Black Theatre Co-Op. We did, the first thing we did was a series called, sitcom series called No Problem, and having written that, three or four series of that, it showed on Channel 4. And so I was invited to be commissioning editor at Channel 4. So for 15 years I was, I did that, I commissioned Channel 4 programmes, yeah, including Desmond’s, and the Devil’s Advocate and the [unclear] File and all that stuff.

ZD: And can you tell me a bit about what it was like to see Desmond’s come from being an idea to being on TV at that time because it was quite groundbreaking wasn’t it?

FD: It followed No Problem which we’d written, right, for Channel 4. And then I had worked, I’d written No Problem so having written that I worked with Charlie Hanson the, my Black Theatre Co-op man, and Humphrey Barclay from London weekend television. Then one day as a commissioning editor at Channel 4 I was invited to judge a drama competition at the Albany right, so I turned up to judge the competition. And I saw three or four plays and they said which one would you give the prize to and I gave the prize to a play – I can’t even remember what the play was – but the writer was Trix Worrell, and I gave him his prize and that was it, forgot about him. Some months later Humphrey Barclay and Charlie Hanson, to people who I knew from having produced series with them, turned up at my office and said look Trix Worrell, the fellow who you gave a prize too, has an idea for a sitcom, right. So I said what the idea, and they said it’s this, barbershop set in Bellenden Road, Peckham. I lived in Bellenden Road in Peckham at the time so it became attractive, I said I know the barbershop, they said well that’s the imaginary place. So we visited it, and I talked to Trix, and he started writing the series Desmond’s. And obviously as a commissioning editor I interfered with the writing and I introduced different characters. I said you have to have an older son who has a white girlfriend, right, in order to get the channel 4 mix proper. So they did, they introduced that, and Norman Beaton as well of course whom I knew from way back, and Porkpie, Ram John Holder, we got them all involved and did the auditions and we ran the series, we became phenomenally successful, everybody watched it. It had bigger viewing figures than Father Ted or Drop the Dead Donkey which were the other commissioning editors’ sitcoms, Channel 4 sitcom’s, and they were very very jealous, Desmond is doing better than the normal sitcoms on television. So, very proud of it.

ZD: And then after your time at Channel 4 where did you move onto?

FD: Just writing. I resigned from Channel 4 and I thought I’d write films and, you know, I used to write novels, Channel 4 was so exhausting in that, you know, you are up to 3 o’clock in the morning doing edits for the next day’s programmes, and then you went to the office and you’d read through stuff, there was no time to think and write. So I did do some writing in those 15 years but I had written several books before I got Channel 4, and then wrote only two or three between in those 15 years and that’s not enough, I thought I’d get back to my writing career, win some prizes or something. And do some films because people wanting me to write films. And I couldn’t write films if I was working as a commissioning editor, you can’t pay yourself. So I quit and started writing again as a freelancer, that’s

what I did. Didn't do any, didn't get employment again, didn't apply for any TV jobs, it was too exhausting. You can't write and work in a television office.

ZD: So just looking back again at the legacy of the GLC, and I guess in this situation because obviously you weren't that invested in the GLC, but I guess it's the legacy of that era of agitation, before kind of Thatcher crushed quite a lot of the unions and the GLC and a lot of the things that had happened at the time. When you look at London today, do you still see the legacies of that era and what you identify them as?

FD: I don't know if the pre-Livingstone GLC did anything more for what we're concerned about than the post-Ken Livingstone era. It was only when the immigrants began to, not because of the GLC but the GLC was there, and the agitation that began on the ground in London actually changed things. And of course the GLC structure was there in order to force things to change. But it had to be a grassroots movement against the police for instance, to straighten out the police's behaviour. It still isn't straightened out right, they still – and now the knife crime, knife crime and the gun crime has given the police a greater incentive to stop and search and so forth. And then people begin to wonder whether they *should* have powers of stop and search, at least it will stop knifing and so on. But the harassment that it results in is not right, you know, you talk to a black kid and say, I did, 16, 15 years old, said how many times have you been stopped, he said I can't count, they just get stopped and searched. They don't even ask where you're going, if you say you're going to a club they'll search you again. So it's not nice but it's the grassroots movement that worked towards the reforming of the police's behaviour, yeah. Certainly as I told you about the Bengali Housing Action Group towards housing. Schooling of course is not in the hands of the GLC, but the ILEA used to be there, they used to pay the teachers, and I'm grateful they hired me but there you go. I just turned up and said look, I've got a graduate MA from Cambridge and they said yeah, you're on.

[58.00]

ZD: And do you think that the schooling and the policing of London today has gone forwards, backwards, how are we doing?

FD: I think certainly forwards, I think absolutely certainly forwards, you know, the fact that your generation went to good schools, came out with good results, went to universities, did all sorts of things, that certainly is a great step forward. When I went to Cambridge there were no immigrant kids in the University, zero, right, the only blacks were from the Caribbean, Asia, Pakistan, there might have been 20 or 30 of us in 6000 undergraduates. But after that, you turn up today and they're all kids from London, Birmingham, Bradford, Huddersfield, Manchester. Where did you go to university?

ZD: I studied in Leeds

FD: Leeds, good – Leeds Met?

ZD: No, University of Leeds.

FD: So did my daughter.

ZD: Oh really?

FD: She did fine arts there, four years.

ZD: I did four years as well, French and International Relations.

FD: What did you do?

ZD: French and International Relations.

FD: Wow. That's what I mean, that's what I mean. It wouldn't have happened, you know it's great.

ZD: Yeah… erm, do you think in terms of the work you did in the Black Panthers, the housing groups, squatters movement, do you think that a certain level of erasure of that history, erasing that history. Do you think that kids these days, people these days are really aware of what happened and how do you think –

FD: I don't think, the younger generation is getting aware, only in very recent years, what happened and that. It used to be quite sentimental, the history, you know the Windrush years, or immigrants came over and were badly treated and they sang Calypsos and all this stuff. So it wasn't really the history of the struggle as it were, when you say the struggle it really did entail beatings up, firebombs in houses and court cases and demonstrations at which, you know, police beat people, riots and all sorts. So all that is beginning to be not only documented but appreciated nowadays, it's happened in the last three, four, five years that this is giving rise to a curiosity and the curiosity is resulting in the recording of that history. We didn't even think of it as history, we just thought it was what we were doing, right, so now it's looked on as history which is quite bewildering, it shows we're getting old *laughter*. You want to be part of life, not part of history.

ZD: And you feel like, at the time, like – the different communities in London today, like we are continuing to live through, to act and react and continue the activity in the way that was once done?

FD: I don't know that there is any necessity for the kind of movement that we had at the time. There are definitely different movements now, you know, there's a very strong feminist consciousness for instance, right, that began then but I don't know how much scope it had. Nowadays it becomes, it goes above race, I still think that there are racial questions right, I don't think it's finished, I don't thing is ended but the self-consciousness in society has really increased hundred percent or more since that time. People don't, I mean even my kids, right, if I say something which sounds discriminatory to them they say 'dad you're being racist' *laughter*I'm not, I'm telling the truth! I say there was a black guy – don't say there was a black guy, he was just a guy. I say he *was* a black guy, they say wasn't – you know, that kind of argument. So, the level of consciousness is just appalling. You know what I mean?

ZD: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So in terms of the future and the future concerns, what you think like for people my age doing a lot of the, or trying to do the kind of things that you were doing at that time, what are the lessons that we can take from your work and your era?

FD: I don't think that you can do the same things, I don't think you will get involved in fighting the police at demonstrations, which I did three, four, five times, being thrown into a police station, arrested and tried for riots and so on. I don't think your generation will do or needs to do that. I think that you've joined, I think that there are definite great indications that you've join the mainstream, right, you've join the mainstream and that you follow a democratic path or a meritocratic path, you will rise to the top of your professions wherever you are. I notice that Darcus Howe for instance was an agitator with me, right, his kids, his son is now the head of Island Records, Darcus Beese is the head of Island Records.

Tamara started as an apprentice with me on Channel 4 and ended up at the head of production at the BBC, as one of the heads of production at the BBC. Taifa, the second daughter, ended up as the producer, produces I'm a Celebrity or something, so is high up on television. So they're just making their way. And so that's the way to go. It wasn't possible in my generation you know, you took, I suppose it was through the black agitation I got to be a commissioning editor, whereas if I just applied and turned up and said have you got anything they'd have said fuck off right. Basically it was through writing and then doing the plays, right, which also came out of the agitation. The first play I wrote was called Mama Dragon, for the Black Theatre Co-op, and it was about a black soldier returning from Northern Ireland and he had a flamethrower with him and they planned in a youth group to go and use the flamethrower against a National Front group. So that was what the theme of the play was. The agitation yes, and out of those things came the stories and then I wrote those stories, published my first book, second, third book, got into black theatre, got into activation of one sort or the other. Otherwise I wouldn't have gone, I wouldn't have been invited to be the commissioning editor of Channel 4, so it's all interconnected with that. I was there at the right time, right place I suppose. Sometimes it felt like the wrong time, wrong place but there we are. Jumping over holes, burning holes, you felt not right time, not right place.

ZD: But you got there. Right, have you got any further questions or comments?

FD: No – you tell me.

ZD: Did you want to elaborate at all on the period 72-74 in that period with the Black Panthers and Race Today?

FD: It never felt, it always felt that we had the ambition to change the world, and we would talk revolution you know, because everyone was talking revolution at the time, they were saying let's change this whole society top to bottom. But didn't – we'd observed how the hippie revolution, you know, which started by saying let's abolish capitalism, they didn't abolish capitalism at all. It gave rise to, to huge capitalist enterprise. All the people at Woodstock, do you know who was there? I went to a conference once in London and Bill Gates was speaking, Bill Gates stood up in front of these ITV, Channel 4 business tables you know, it was a kind of dinner, and he said I want to project something. And he projected a picture of Woodstock, of the audience of Woodstock and he said you're all business people that, you see these fellows, hippies you know, long hair, beards, genes, no shirts, dirty clothes – he said would you employ any of these fellows in your big corporations? And people just looked like that and he said I'll tell you, he took a stick and he said that fellow is the head of General Motors today, that's so and so the head of General Electric, right, that fellow is a shipping magnate, and that's me, Bill Gates, with long hair, hippies. They wanted to change the world you know, flower power and this and that and the other, they ended up as the heads of capitalist corporations. That was the era who wanted to change the world but the world goes on and it goes on its own way. Not that Bill Gates is a bad guy, he's donated billions to charities in Africa and here and there and tries to help. So I think evolution has happened even though we wanted revolution. Okay?

ZD: Yes, thank you very much for your time Farrukh.

FD: Hope it all works out!