

Writers Aloud

Episode 399

RLF INTRODUCTION: Hello and welcome. You're listening to *Writers Aloud*, a podcast brought to you by writers for the Royal Literary Fund in London.

Hello and welcome to episode 399 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode Peter Oswald speaks with John Greening about his passion for verse drama, his work translating writers such as Schiller, his introduction to Steiner and theosophical theatre, and the struggle to find institutional support for verse drama and long form poetry.

John Greening: Peter Oswald was born in 1965 and is a poet, playwright and performer known particularly for his verse drama. He's been writer in residence at Shakespeare's Globe, where three of his plays in verse were performed. His translations of classics in this genre have been staged in some of the world's major venues from the National Theatre, and the West End, to Broadway.

And he's received many prestigious prizes for his work, such as the South Bank Award for the production of his version of Schiller's *Mary Stuart*, and the *Evening Standard* Award for *The Golden Ass*. He co-founded the Columbina Theatre Company to specialize in new commedia plays in verse, and the Liminos Project, which creates plays connected with Rudolph Steiner's Anthroposophy.

He's also written a play for prisoners, both directing and performing with them, and several substantial verse dramas for autistic students. He volunteers as a storyteller for the Hands Up Project, and has appeared in

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this role at several major festivals in the UK and USA. He's married to the poet Alice Oswald, and they have three children.

Peter, thank you for inviting me into your house. It's lovely to...

Peter Oswald: A pleasure. Good to meet you, John.

John Greening: Nice to be able to chat. You are both a poet and a play writer, which came first?

Peter Oswald: Well, poetry, I think in schoolboy times. I started writing plays when I was fourteen and then decided to combine the two, in other words to write verse drama, when I was about twenty-five, twenty-six, I think. So I tried writing plays and prose for quite a time and took some of those to the Edinburgh Fringe. And it was fine, but I just felt there was something missing, some kind of block, and just decided to rewrite the play of mine that had recently been at Edinburgh in 1990, to rewrite that in verse. We performed that at the Fulham Performing Art Centre, it was then called the Turtle Key Art Centre in, I guess, '91. So that was my first, apart from university when I did one verse play, which was a kind of precursor of the others.

John Greening: Well, going back to school days, did you act at school at all; did you appear in plays?

Peter Oswald: Yes. I was in the pantomime at prep school and I would play the foolish sailor, which was a kind of comedy, not exactly starring role, but there was a little comedy moment for him in the pantomime. And then at school, at later school, not so much, but a little bit, I was a villain in *Much Ado*; Borachio.

John Greening: Any of those early poems that you wrote still matter to you? You gathered together thirty years or thirty-two years of poetry, of sonnets, in one of the books of yours that I looked at. I don't know whether any of those sonnets go back to schooldays?

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Peter Oswald: Yeah. I think the first one of those that I wrote was when I was about eighteen, the first in my book, which is called *Sonnets of Various Sizes*. And the first narrative poem that I wrote that I still perform, I wrote when I was twenty, which is in the voice of Helen of Troy.

John Greening: Are there any writers or actors in your family or did you appear fully formed from the head of whoever?

Peter Oswald: The head of, yeah, Zeus...well, my grandpa, my mother's father, he described himself as a man of the theatre. He was actually an Anglican priest who then left or was asked to leave and joined the Church of Rome. He was the vicar of Soho during the war. And he ran a circle of Christian writers, including T. S. Eliot, and Dorothy Sayers, Charles Williams and so on. So he was part of that attempt at a verse-drama revival in the forties, at least tangentially.

There were a lot of books signed by Eliot in his library. He did encourage me very much in terms of theatre; I think there was something coming through there.

John Greening: That's fascinating actually, and leads naturally into what I want to ask you about verse drama, because there always seems that distinction between the Eliot type of verse drama and the Auden / Brecht type of verse drama, the one where you're not really supposed to notice the verse because Eliot wanted it to sound almost like natural conversation. Whereas Auden and Brecht, you know it's verse, it rhymes. Which of those do you favour in your own writing? Do you want the audience to hear it's verse or do you just want them caught up in the experience and think, *Well, this is a good play?*

Peter Oswald: Yes, I do want them to hear it, and I know a contemporary verse playwright who talks about using the ghost of the pentameter, but to me the ghost of the pentameter is prose, so the iambic pentameter is the verse form nearest to natural speech. So very well suited to my mind to

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verse drama. But of course it has connotations / resonances with the great Elizabethans and Jacobean, so it's kind of taboo. But I think it's flexible enough to be used in a current form, with all of its devices of alliteration and its strong rhythmical qualities, right there to here.

John Greening: A very recent one of yours that you've sent me, *Sif*, you seem to be varying it quite a lot, shifting from iambic pentameter to something more alliterative and Anglo-Saxon in sound?

Peter Oswald: Yeah, that's set in the Anglo-Saxon times in Britain, about the conversion of the Kentish people by Augustine. And in fact, it's a rewrite of my first play at the Globe, which was the first new play at the new Globe. And there I decided to have the Anglo-Saxon people, the English people, speak in alliterative verse and the people speaking Latin, actually in tetrameters, so four beats. There aren't really any pentameters in that play. It was just a kind of holiday from the pentameter. And it has those and prose as well, so three different forms.

John Greening: Yeah. So you referred to that first play at the Globe, that was *Augustine's Oak*, was that?

Peter Oswald: Yes.

John Greening: How do you look back on that now, and indeed, how was it received by actors because there's a resistance to verse drama I would've thought to a certain extent, or perhaps you'd found that not so?

Peter Oswald: There's a powerful and completely overt resistance to verse drama and to contemporary verse drama. At the Globe, it manifested in a kind of indifference, certainly from the press, which is almost harder to deal with than hostility would've been. But within the Globe, I guess a kind of bubble, there was just complete enthusiasm and Mark Rylance was in charge of course, and the remit of the globe was to explore original practice.

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And he said the foremost original practice was the writing of new drama. So he was very keen to have a playwright, a living playwright, on board. In terms of my development, it was essential, but painful and awkward, there wasn't anywhere else that was prepared to commission a new verse play. I know that because I tried all of them.

But of course, Shakespeare looms very large, and in the very beginning of the Globe even larger probably than he does now. There have been quite a few new living playwrights working there since then. So that was scary and a bit crushing, but it's just, as I say, essential, and I guess I just had the youth to get through it if nothing else.

John Greening: Yeah. So how closely involved are or have you been in the productions, because as the poet behind it you might long to say, well, no, that's not the way you speak it or whatever, or have you been kept out of productions generally?

Peter Oswald: I haven't developed a strong and clear methodology to express to actors about how to perform verse. I keep thinking about it and working on it. The director of my plays at the Globe was Tim Carroll and he had a strong developed methodology himself. We generally agreed, so in terms of how the verse should be spoken there wasn't a huge role for me there. Of course, in terms of the development of the play itself, it would be a close collaboration between me and the director and the actors.

John Greening: So did he work on *The Golden Ass* as well?

Peter Oswald: Yes, he did, and *The Storm*.

John Greening: Which I read, it was a play I remember seeing advertised and I didn't get to see it and I so regret it. But it sounds as though, reading it, you could see what fun it must have been. And there's a lots of traditional farce about it and energy. So how do you go about reworking...because that's not actually a play originally is it, it's a prose text I think I'm right in saying, is that right?

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Peter Oswald: That's right. Yeah.

John Greening: So you had to turn it into a play?

Peter Oswald: Yeah. It's an ancient Roman novel and kind of a collection of stories really, but with a strong thread through the middle of this guy who's been turned into an ass. Mark hired a place called Canonbury tower where apparently Francis Bacon used to...well, definitely Francis Bacon used to live at one point, and Mark being a Baconian, or he was at the time – someone who believes that Francis Bacon wrote the works of Shakespeare – he thought it would be fun and interesting for us to work in this place.

So we, meaning him, myself, Claire van Kampen his wife, and Tim Carroll sat around this big old oak table and just went through, slowly reading through the whole of the original of *The Golden Ass* discussing which bits we would want to have in our play, and which we wouldn't. So we worked very collaboratively from the very start, worked out a plan, which obviously I departed from a lot in the writing because you do, and then there were rewrites and so on, but that was the original. That was the first stage of that process.

John Greening: It's very funny, but you've written sort of darkly serious pieces as well. Do you prefer one or the other, or do you just like the variety of writing sometimes a comedy, sometimes a tragedy?

Peter Oswald: My ideal is a kind of carnivalesque verse drama that can include everything. And as you say, it's farcical and funny, this guy being turned into an ass, but also he does suffer terribly in his animal form. Mark was very good, Mark, who played Lucius the character who turns into the ass, he was very good at conveying that: the very funny side and then the real suffering.

So in my present collaboration, I'm constantly being reined in by

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my collaborator, because I always want to veer more towards the carnivalesque and humourous; it's not always appropriate.

John Greening: Right, so you've done a lot of collaboration, but generally, even if it's not a collaboration, is there someone you show draft to, or consult and ask for criticism?

Peter Oswald: That is a bit of a problem. I would sometimes show plays to Alice. She's very busy and if I'm writing draft after draft after draft, I can't really ask her. And also, as a poet, I think she sees things differently, although she has a very, very strong, dramatic sense. So it is a bit of a problem if I'm not in a commission or a collaboration, to find someone to give feedback. Yeah.

John Greening: But you have collaborated with Alice, Alice Oswald, on other things I believe; is that right, you published a pamphlet together?

Peter Oswald: Yeah. We published one or two pamphlets together, which is basically just throwing together poems of ours in a pamphlet. And then we performed together, we've performed together quite a few times.

John Greening: Must mention *Mary Stuart* and Schiller in general, Schiller is obviously very important to you. Yet probably blank looks if you mention to most people in England sadly. Tell us why Schiller is so important to you?

Peter Oswald: Well, maybe there would be blank looks, but there was an interesting moment when Schiller entered the English canon, sometime in the eighties, I think.

And I remember Michael Billington writing about it rather surprised. Why should this neoclassical German playwright from the late 1700s and early 1800s suddenly become quite good box office in Britain and America? And I think that comes down to the need for verse drama. But anyway, my first paid job was to translate *Don Carlos*, to do a version, strictly speaking, because I don't speak German.

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John Greening: That's a long play I seem to remember!

Peter Oswald: Yeah, it's the size of two Shakespeare plays; it's vast. So I translated that, well, rewrote that, I actually went through the whole thing line by line with a German dictionary so that I could get a feeling, a real feeling for the language and the lines, despite not really being able to read German.

And that went on at the Lyric Hammersmith and was directed by Tim Carroll. So that started off quite a long collaboration and probably that and my work at the Globe gave Phyllida Lloyd the idea of – well, I knew Phyllida actually, I'd known her for a long time – but gave her the idea of commissioning me to write the version of *Mary Stuart* for the Donmar Warehouse in 2005.

John Greening: Do you look at other people's translations? I was brought up on Steven Spender's version of it. There was a quote from a German producer about his version; he said, 'It's a series of poetic variations on themes of Schiller, like a modern composer on themes by Bach'. Is that your approach really, kind of poetic variations or do you try to be strict in your version?

Peter Oswald: With *Don Carlos* I tried to be very strict, and I was very overjoyed to be told by a German friend that it's very close. And by the time I got to *Mary Stuart*, several years later, I certainly wasn't in the mood anymore to plough through the German.

And I wrote it very loosely and Phyllida said, 'Let's look at the Schiller!' She just gently brought me back to the Schiller and said, we need this to be more spare, more direct.

Because being brought up in the tradition of the Elizabethans and the Jacobean and all that, it's not natural for me to be spare and sparse. That's not what I want to be, but more full and diverse, but she was right and got me to write it in a more controlled way. So we work together like that.

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John Greening: They're terrific plays, the Schiller plays, the stories are wonderful, I read your *Mary Stuart* from cover to cover, it's just gripping, really. So goodness knows what it's like on stage, I have seen it on stage, but not your version sadly.

And then there was *Cyrano* and that was much more recent wasn't it, which I noticed you call a 'free translation' as well. And I don't know that so well, so I don't know quite how much... like the opening seems to be the old *Cyrano* looking back, is that in the original or is that your version?

Peter Oswald: No, that's Tom Morris's idea, he's the director. And he wanted to have an older actor playing *Cyrano* so that he could then start with him old, and as you say, looking back. and I just went along with it. I *can* read French, so I did that from the original, but there was a sense that it could be a bit free because it rhymes, my version, mostly, I combined again, rhyming, un-rhyming and prose. So there's quite a mixture in there.

John Greening: You've got different audience expectations there too because perhaps more people will know the story or have seen the film or something. Where the Schiller people perhaps tend not to know, although know the history perhaps.

And then very recently this *Sif*, you were talking a bit about it earlier, returning to that first play, so you're perhaps moving in a new direction. I think you said to me you want to write more original, less translation and more original drama. Is that what you're hoping for?

Peter Oswald: Yeah. Well, what I'm working on now is the play that Schiller was writing when he died. He wrote the first two acts, it's called *Demetrius*, and the rest he left in note form and I managed to get the National Theatre to commission me to write a finished version back in 2011.

But they, for whatever their own secret reasons, they axed the project after three drafts. But to me, the significance of that is that the theatre world

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in general is quite reluctant to commission new verse dramas. The only exception in my experience has been Mark Rylance and the Globe and all of the different innovating energy that was there when it first opened.

But the National for example said to me, quite overtly, we think our money is better invested in you as a translator than a writer of new works in verse. Which for me is very frustrating, but I'm lucky too, that in my theatre company at Colombina, which you mentioned, John, at the beginning and which is focused on commedia, in that I can just really fly loose and there's no classical constraints.

John Greening: Right. You mentioned Rudolf Steiner. Tell us about his importance to you.

Peter Oswald: In about 2008, I parted company quite conclusively with mainstream theatre, as you can probably hear there are frustrations between us, between me and the mainstream theatre. I was taken up instead, to my amazement, by a whole world I didn't know existed, which is the world of Steiner and anthroposophical drama.

Steiner died in 1925, he was about sixty-seven, I think. So he was there towards the end of the nineteenth century and beginning the twentieth and teaching an esoteric mixture of almost all the religions of the world, really, and all the cultures of the world, focusing on a kind of Christianity that includes reincarnation and karma.

And he himself wrote four verse dramas, which follow a set of characters through various lives through the centuries. Although it focuses mostly on the present, which then was the early twentieth century.

John Greening: Right, and he's writing in German is he?

Peter Oswald: Writing in German in iambic pentameters and I guess pretty much inspired by Schiller and Goethe himself, and the others.

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And he built, or his movement built an enormous kind of theatre temple in Switzerland, which was burnt down in 1923. It had a thousand-seat theatre and all the great ballet and theatre companies in Europe wanted to perform there, but his verse dramas were performed there and they also performed Goethe's *Faust*, or at least scenes from it.

So the tradition of theatre in anthroposophy is very, very strong. And in Britain there's a collection of about twelve colleges under the umbrella of The Ruskin Mill Educational Trust, and they commissioned me in 2008 to write a large-scale verse drama based on the temple legend, the legend of Solomon and Hiram, and the Queen of Sheba; great, great story.

And this was to be performed by any number of actors. There would be students and staff, a combination, and they didn't want me to in any way to dumb down for the students, because they do Shakespeare with them anyway. It was just a whole new world that opened up as the other one closed down or shut its doors.

Since then I've written two or three more plays for them. The current one is about King Arthur and hopefully will be properly performed next year, because of lockdown it's been a bit slowed down.

John Greening: Can you imagine yourself writing a play unfiltered by myth and history, just say set in 2021, a drawing-room comedy type; myth / history seem to be very important to you?

Peter Oswald: Yeah, I had a company called Heart's Tongue Theatre Company down in Devon, which was again set up about 2003. And I started off writing large-scale verse dramas, like you say, based on myth and history with them. But it was clear that we lacked the skills: so basically mostly amateurs or professionals not being paid. And so I started writing a series of short prose plays, which are often very farcical or surreal, a bit Kafkaesque, set either overtly in the modern age or not in any particular age. So I do write those kind of plays, but they tend

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to be quite strange, not really drawing room exactly or they'll be like making fun of the drawing room.

John Greening: Yeah. We must leave time to talk about your poetry because...are you as prolific a poet as you are a dramatist, you seem to produced enormous number of plays, and the poems, I'm not quite sure, you say in a website that you are in the process of organizing them at the moment?

Peter Oswald: Yes. I did manage to organise them, I frantically organised everything in case I died of Covid, which in fact, in the end I just got a mild Covid. But they are quite well organised at the moment. I do write poetry whenever I'm not writing plays and sometimes when I am writing plays. I don't know how to say whether they're prolific or not, moving to Bristol sparked off a huge flood of poetry.

John Greening: And what do you respond to most in poetry, other people's poetry or indeed your own? Is it imagery, is it the sound or what's the first thing that draws you into a poem?

Peter Oswald: Primarily I'm only interested in boldness: Hopkins, Shakespeare, Donne; bold, brave poets: Alice Oswald, several other poets living but unknown. I'm not so won over by quiet confessional poetry, although of course I accept it has a place. So really, I guess my taste...the kind of poetry I love, it would tend to be poetry that's in some way related to drama. Not so very far away.

John Greening: Now, do you compose aloud?

Peter Oswald: No, I don't. I do write longhand, everything longhand, and then eventually type it all up.

John Greening: Longhand and long poems. A long poem of yours – *Weyland?* – that I read.

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Peter Oswald: Yes, *Weyland*.

John Greening: So what is it draws you to the long poem, that's almost as difficult to place as verse drama actually, the long poem these days, though there is a long poem magazine, which is very good.

Peter Oswald: Yeah, that's true. You're absolutely right, and when I started out, *Weyland* was my first completed work, as it were, my first book of poems, although it wasn't a book of poems, it was a long poem. And I sent it to Oxford University Press and Jackie Sims wrote back very effusively positive but saying that she couldn't publish something so epic. She said, please be in touch if you have something less epic, but that really never happened, and then OUP cancelled their poetry list...

John Greening: – yes, disastrous –

Peter Oswald: So, as you suggest, there's a kind of block to the kind of poetry I write, really.

John Greening: Well, although the *Sonnets of Various Sizes* – which is a book I thoroughly recommend, it's fascinating actually, it's fascinating because it spans thirty years and you don't tell us when each poem was written – they're so varied. Is Shakespeare a model there for the sonnets, I felt that sometimes there was almost a nod in his direction in some of the poems?

Peter Oswald: Yeah, there is a nod, and to the Elizabeth and Jacobean generally in various places, but of course the sonnet comes from everywhere and there are all kinds of sonnets. And so I think that partly the inspiration of the book is just that, just the eclecticism of the sonnet, even though it's such a clear form in one way. So yeah, it's just supposed to be every kind of sonnet you can imagine almost.

John Greening: It's a hard form because so many people write them. It's

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difficult to write without sounding jaded, but you seem to manage it somehow.

Peter Oswald: Thank you.

John Greening: And then the storytelling, which is the only part we haven't talked about, but I know you are a storyteller. So what does that involve, being a storyteller, we know what it means literally, but it's a profession in the sense isn't it, to be a storyteller?

Peter Oswald: Well, there are two things I do: one is story poems, that I write and I perform having learned them by heart, and I've done that with *Weyland*, which comes in at a hundred minutes, and something called *Three Folk Tales*, which is three folk tales, each half an hour long – did that at the Hay Festival – and various others of different lengths. The storytelling world – and we have a very good friend nearby called Ben Haggarty, who is very important in the storytelling world – doesn't really accept that as storytelling, because it's a learned text. But I have had an opportunity to do some storytelling in a traditional way.

John Greening: Which is improvised, following a route that you know?

Peter Oswald: But retelling a story basically, but not something that you've written down. All on Facebook live to children in Gaza through this project you mentioned called the Hands Up Project. So I'm having a bit of a rest from it at the moment. But over the pandemic period, every week I've been doing an hour of storytelling straight into a screen. You get a few little comments in the corner, but it's obviously very different from performing to a live audience. It's very strange indeed. But it's still storytelling.

John Greening: Yeah, there is an audience of some sort, at least.

Peter Oswald: Yeah, they are there somewhere, yeah.

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John Greening: Without Zoom what would we have done! Have you been tempted to explore other genres, the novel and children's books?

Peter Oswald: I have written a novel, I can't get anyone to read it. Not even my best friend will read this manuscript, so one day maybe I'll find someone to give some feedback on it. I've tried film scripts and so on, but I don't really seem to have the hang of it. I think if you're committed to verse drama, it takes up a lot, it doesn't really leave much room for something like film, which again will take your whole life to really perfect, I think.

John Greening: Is there any one poem of yours or play of yours that you're particularly proud of or perhaps regards as your signature piece if such a thing exists?

Peter Oswald: Yes. Well, generally speaking, most writers will probably say their most recent thing or what they're working on now, and I would say that. But if I had to look back on existing texts, the play of mine that I first felt had found its form and was no longer staggering along, trying to exist was, *The Temple*, which I mentioned before, the first one commissioned by Ruskin Mill Trust.

And I just felt that that was a complete and workable verse drama whereas the ones before, so that includes all of my plays at the Globe and the National, all of them were in some way or other still struggling to find their final form. In fact, I'm working on a lot of them still.

John Greening: **Peter Oswald**, it's been great to talk to you and so thanks for sharing all those thoughts with us.

Peter Oswald: Thank you very much, John. It's been a pleasure, thank you.

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Outro: That was Peter Oswald in conversation with John Greening. You can find out more about Peter on his website at peteroswald.net. And that concludes episode 399, which was recorded by John Greening and produced by Kona Macphee. Coming up in episode 400 in our 'Best Writing Advice' series, RLF writers share their best suggestions for those hoping to pursue the writing life. We hope you'll join us.

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