

Writers Aloud

Episode 429

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.

Ann Morgan: Hello and welcome to episode 429 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, the first of a two-part interview, Juliet Gilkes Romero speaks with Ann Morgan about childhood influences, developing a love of storytelling, and how a career in journalism led to shaping narratives for the stage.

Juliet Gilkes Romero is an award-winning writer for stage and screen who was writer in residence at the UK's National Theatre for 2022/23. In this first part of our conversation for *Writers Aloud*, she reflects on her career as a BBC Foreign Affairs reporter and producer, and how her long experience in journalism shaped her sense of storytelling before her move into more creative kinds of writing.

Juliet Gilkes Romero: I think it began with family, being at home around the dining table, hearing my parents tell stories. My dad was a very good raconteur, his mother and his grandmother told him stories under the moonlight in Barbados as he was growing up. So both my parents were very invested in stories and I began writing at quite an early age.

Mum used to bring books home from the library and they would never say, 'Sit down, we want you to read', or 'We want you to practice your writing'. They would just leave these books around the house for us to

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discover and they would overhear my brother and I saying things like, 'Oh my goodness, there's another one, where did that come from?'

And I think the writing kind of came from that: listening to stories, learning to read and then just discovering this world where...you know, where...the world of imagination, which for children, you know, between one and I think one to nine, we just have that brain where we are like sponges and we absorb and we don't...we don't have that critical voice. And I remember trying to adapt *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, I must have been about seven and I know my parents still have it in their attic, I need to look at this because I don't know...

Ann Morgan: Adapting it for the stage or...?

Juliet Gilkes Romero: No, I just decided that I wanted to have a go at it in my own way. And that's as much as I remember, but I know that they still have it; it's in the attic in my mum's house. But, you know, my goodness, if someone came along and asked me to do something like that now, all of those self-critical voices and self-doubt would kick into play. But yeah, I guess...I think it definitely started in childhood and I enjoyed the connections that we made through storytelling and then it kind of morphed into an interest in journalism.

I was very interested in TV news, particularly when my parents would say things like, 'Oh, well it's bedtime now', or, you know, 'This story's not quite for children.' But I always wanted to know what was happening, what was going on in the world and fascinated by seeing images of people who didn't live where I lived; lived in different countries, names that I often couldn't pronounce.

And so I'd always be asking questions and so the idea of being a journalist and being a foreign reporter or correspondent, and being able to go and meet people and hear their stories, I think that really began to embed by the time I, kind of like, hit eleven/twelve, to be honest. And by the

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time I was fourteen I persuaded my mum to write to the BBC and get an application pack to join their news reserve.

Now obviously I was too young, but I wanted to see what would be required for such a post.

Ann Morgan: Gosh, that's incredibly focused at that age!

Juliet Gilkes Romero: Yeah. I have to say, I was very organised in pursuing the things that I wanted, not so now, I'll be really honest, I don't know what's happened with the years, but I'm quite scattered now. But when I was younger, I was really focused about the things I was interested in. I grew up listening to World Service radio, my parents were radio people. They grew up listening to World Service Radio in the Caribbean. So I think it was very much that tradition and I just kept imagining myself being abroad and interviewing people and meeting people.

So, yeah, I was very curious; well what does it take to be able to work in a field like that? And I think as a result now whenever I'm interested in a particular subject or area, I will do that research: well what does it take, what skills do I do I need? And it stood me in good stead because in the end I was successful in joining the BBC as a news trainee.

But I had been thinking about it for a while. And it's funny, when I remember all of that, it's like, wow, and it's that confidence that you have when you're younger, you think everything's possible! Maybe it was that my parents were very much like that. They never put limitations, they never said to us, 'You can't do this, you can't do that', they'd always answer our questions; if we asked why, they'd always answer, you know, and I had friends and even young cousins who didn't always have that experience, you know, and it always makes me sad when I see children shut down. If they ask a question, I think as adults we should to the best in our ability, provide an answer, no matter, you know, even if we're busy, we've got, I don't know, thirty bags of shopping and we're hurrying for the bus, if you

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can find time to just answer a child, I think that sparks their curiosity and their concept of what storytelling is. I think everything comes back to story; it's how our brains have evolved. Yeah. That's a long answer!

Ann Morgan: It's a great answer! You had a high-profile career at the BBC, busy, demanding, rewarding, all kinds of things. What happened to make a shift, how come you decided to move into writing plays, writing audio, writing more imaginatively, I suppose?

Juliet Gilkes Romero: So I spent quite a while in the BBC and when I joined it was...I started in radio, there was more *money*, I could go to Ethiopia or Haiti or right up to the border with Somalia. And with the advent of 24-hour news, it became something else, which I found quite disturbing to be honest.

There wasn't the thought, the creative thought process, that went into making programmes and meeting people, and creating documentaries and bringing back the lived experience of others into the medium of either radio or television. 24-hour news is very reactionary and it has to justify its existence. So, for example, do you remember the young girl who disappeared, was it in Portugal?

Ann Morgan: Oh, Madeleine McCann.

Juliet Gilkes Romero: That's right. And I remember being on shift in the newsroom and the parents were flying back into London and they had a reporter down at Heathrow, and every plane that came in for landing, he had to stand there and do a live, in case they were on board.

And I remember thinking – and this was just *ad infinitum*, this live shot – and I thought, *Is this news, what are we doing?* The build up to the Iraq war, I remember we used to rehearse the opening titles. We designed graphics for the war on terror and not a bullet or a bomb had been dropped or a bullet had been fired. At the time it was a big row about weapons of mass

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destruction; could Saddam Hussein hit London, where are these WMDs, do they exist?

And while this was going on we were preparing for war, and I remember feeling like a boxing promoter, and I thought, *I'm not comfortable*. And how much does a news agenda satisfy a desire for a conclusion? I remember the Orange marches in Northern Ireland and every year there'd be violence and every year we would be there with our cameras or, you know, radio stuff. And it's like, *Is this performance now?*

Ann Morgan: So it's almost like with reality TV's rise, this kind of, this self-consciousness –

Juliet Gilkes Romero: – Yes! –

Ann Morgan: with how events are performed?

Juliet Gilkes Romero: Exactly, and I just began to ask myself a lot of questions about this. But certainly 24-hour news...you know, gone for me were the days, apart from Channel Four News, which has all day to think about it, you have one programme, they'll have an editorial meeting, they'll be thinking about the content of the programme, think about the analysis, putting things into context. But with 24-hour news, it literally is a live point, you've got bombs dropping and that could be it. And we're watching an event and actually those bombs are dropping on people, people are dying, but we're not really seeing that, we're seeing this, we're seeing *fireworks*.

And yeah, that began to disturb me. And I was a producer the day of 9/11. Arrived from my afternoon shift, dropped my handbag in the gallery. 'I'll be back in a minute guys'. As I turned my back, first plane hit, cos we had all these monitors in the gallery trained on the World Trade Centres, you know, like APTN, Fox News, and we were stunned by the first hit.

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Then obviously the second hit, we went into this overdrive and I think I was at Television Centre for about fourteen hours. And all of this was going on and it's like this mad tapestry, there's all these threads and you don't see the picture. And I went home after all of this and then I watched news for several more hours with my brain quite burnt.

And then I remember thinking, *Wow, is this news now*, you know, *What happened, why did it happen, have we been able to translate that to an audience?* Because out of that, I remember a Sikh guy was murdered in America, he was wearing a turban; all of a sudden he was viewed as the enemy.

So, then again a very long answer in a sense, but an accumulation of these things and wondering what is news; do we...are we justifying our existence? Because also I'd meet people in the street who, like, weren't watching the news, but we were there beavering away, churning out 24-hour news. And then I'd meet people who'd actually find news quite stressful, don't want to see it.

I stopped wearing a watch because my life when I was on shift was on the hour every hour, you know, headlines, and you had your summary at half past the hour, at quarter past the hour you'd have some kind of reminder what was coming. It really *became* overwhelming.

I left the BBC and then I was freelancing at Sky. I was covering for Sky News International, a story about forty-three teacher-training students who were abducted and presumed murdered by a drug cartel, it seems with the collusion of police, and at the same time the RSC asked me if I'd be interested in writing a play about this.

Ann Morgan: That's quite a leap, I can't imagine many journalists get that kind of approach. How did that come about?

Juliet Gilkes Romero: So I had gone to a...what do you call it, like a

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workshop with the RSC, with other writers. And it was like a workshop of provocation and we were gathered and everything was on the table. We could talk about migrants drowning, the bodies of children landing on beaches. The morality of debt, which is where *The Whip* came out of, the idea for that play came out of that particular workshop. But I'd done this workshop with other writers who were questioning all kinds of things, and then they came back to me and said would I be interested?

I thought, *great*, because I was covering this for news. After three weeks there was no interest in it because it was no longer the sensational headline. I watched this terrible story slide down the bulletin order because news is so sensational and you very quickly move on to the next thing.

And I thought, *This can't be allowed to go away*. And then I got approached by the RSC, there was a director with a big background in Latin America, you know, civil rights stories, humanitarian stories from Latin America, Chile, Argentina, composer. So we decided to write either a musical or a play with music.

And I said to the RSC, 'I don't want to do this from the vantage of an armchair and I'm a journalist. Can we go out, a small team of us: a designer, myself, the composer and director?' And they paid for us to go to Mexico. We went for a week so we had to hit the ground running. Because I knew the story I was able to help in terms of interviews, but also, we went to a fantastic museum of anthropology of Mexico. There are over forty languages spoken in Mexico, so I was really learning a lot. But what we were able to do was then bring back that lived experience and translate it into a theatrical experience of the story of those who had disappeared.

And what was fascinating about that was the families who went into the hills of Ayotzinapa, where these students had been abducted, they kept finding mass graves, but the bones and the bodies did not belong to their children. So it's like, because there are over 30,000 disappeared in Mexico, whose bodies are these: migrants trying to cross Mexico to get to America, victims of the drug trade?

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But what we were able to do was to translate it, condense it into *story* in a way that news, in my opinion, can't. News can inform, but I don't think that news can engage empathy in the way that bare naked storytelling can do. Because the story was so full on and a violent one, we use satire, we use music, and we also use puppets and masks.

Ann Morgan: A kind of distancing?

Juliet Gilkes Romero: Oh, it was amazing. We had practitioners who would come into workshops and we had to wear masks. And as I was writing it, that was a really interesting experience and I remember how I changed, I put on a mask and I could perform because I was behind this mask. We had masks made, and the thing about masks is because they don't move, they express, unless you give them a kind of static expression, it allows the audience or the person who's observing the mask to transfer how they're feeling. Therefore, it becomes an even more powerful experience. I witnessed, and I felt myself, how masks could reduce an audience to tears actually, tears of empathy in a way that, you know, live action without the masks can.

The other thing that we did in Mexico which I very much wanted to do, was to go and see Lucha Libre, Mexican wrestling, which is working-class theatre, with *bells* on, and whole families and popcorn, and beer and soda, and people would be screaming at the bad guy in the ring and they are masked.

It had to have been one of the most liberating, fascinating experiences I've ever had. And again, storytelling *in the ring* and again it fed back to who we are, our humanity, how we understand, and how we gravitate towards that form of storytelling. So we used that in the play as well, we had Lucha Libre, we had all kinds going on. But that combined with the music, and the masks, and the storytelling, people queued up to meet the performers afterwards, and a lot of them signed up for Amnesty International afterwards.

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So it really impacted them in the way that watching a news bulletin doesn't, because you can check out of a news bulletin, you can hear the kettle and go and finish your cup of tea, wander away.

Ann Morgan: Switch off the TV.

Juliet Gilkes Romero: Exactly. You know, you don't engage. The beautiful thing about the crucible of theatre is that you will sit shoulder to shoulder with complete strangers, yet you know that you've entered a space and a grievance where you're going to share a journey. And there's a beauty about...this is why, I think it was Albert Camus says that, writers *save* civilisation, we are there to protect it and save civilization through our storytelling.

And I really feel that I've witnessed this and experienced this because in that space you've got people who don't know each other yet there's this shared journey experience. And we might not all see the story in the same way; the beautiful thing about having a space in a theatre, you know, like a bar where people can go and have a drink afterwards and argue and shout or buy each other drinks, but ruminate and chew the fat of what they've seen, is important.

There's a reason why Brecht's theatre was so successful after the Second World War for Germany's healing and transformation, after the devastation of that conflict. Because what rose was literature, theatre, film, novels, all of these writers, they, for me, are the ones who helped make that whole.

And this is why when people are working with refugees and, you know, they come from a literary background and they're able to help through storytelling, because we all have stories to tell because that's what we do. And the most important thing that we can do, the most humanitarian thing that we can do is to listen to each other and give space to each other's lived experience.

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RLF outro: And that concludes episode 429, which was recorded and produced by Ann Morgan. You can find out more about Juliet on her website, julietgilkesromero.com.uk.

Coming up in episode 430, Juliet Gilkes Romero speaks with Ann Morgan about telling history's forgotten stories.

We hope you'll join us.

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Thanks for listening.