Writers Aloud

Episode 430

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 430 of *Writers Aloud*. In this episode, the second instalment of a two-part interview, Juliet Gilkes Romero speaks with Ann Morgan about telling History's forgotten stories, writing about intersectionality, chasing down inconvenient truths and the experience of taking up a writing residency at one of the UK's most revered theatres. You can hear the first part of this conversation in the preceding episode, number 429. We re-join Juliet and Ann as they begin to discuss how Juliet applied the research skills she'd honed as a journalist to presenting historical events on the stage.

Ann Morgan: Juliet Gilkes Romero is an award-winning writer for stage and screen who was writer in residence of the UK's National Theatre for 2022–23. In this second part of our conversation for *Writers Aloud*, she explores some of the deeper themes in her work and considers what it means to hold a residency at one of the UK's most prestigious performance institutions.

One of the things that I really love about your writing and it's so skilful, is you do build a lot of research in, there's a lot of material, your play *The Whip*, for example, set in 1833 around the time when the abolition of slavery was on the table. Lots of angry debates about that in parliament, people putting all sorts of sides and all kinds of controversial proposals being put forward about how to manage this, whether it should or shouldn't happen.

There's a *lot* of really quite dense historical material attached to that play, and yet you manage to weave that in, in a way that is engaging, that is satisfying, that is powerful, that speaks to people. And put not just the side of the argument that I know you're on, but the other side of the argument and show how powerfully persuasive that logic can be, even if it's something that you vehemently disagree with. How do you go about getting that balance, how do you do that?

Juliet Gilkes Romero: I think the most important thing about stories is characters, and the humanity of the characters. And I know that as a writer, every character I create, I have to understand them. I have to be their own defence lawyer. I enjoy putting my strongest arguments in the mouths of those I disagree with. It's so important because if you don't or if you can't conceive of that, the work becomes agitprop and it becomes manipulation. To me, the theme was too important to lose an audience because I was only prepared to go down my perception and path.

Let's face it, I'm a descendant of the transatlantic slave trade, my forefathers were taken to the Caribbean and were forced to work until death. So obviously none of that is lost on me. I think being a journalist taught me a certain amount of objectivity as well, but I like to think of it as my calling card, it's *really* important to me.

Ann Morgan: There's that balance actually that I was thinking, that BBC balance or the idea of putting both sides of the story, and you do it beautifully without it feeling contrived.

Juliet Gilkes Romero: Yeah; because you've got to be able to occupy a space with people that you disagree with. And I think of Hyde Villiers in *The Whip*, *everything* he says makes sense, he's quite right, but I really have to get behind his eyes: why is abandoning this institution a bad thing for the country and for Empire, I had to understand that.

What I also did, because the House of Commons had this amazing library,

and I read *Hansard* from 1833 to 1834, read the debates, heard the voices and the arguments, pro and con, and they were fascinating arguments.

I saw a committee report about...comparing the African slave to Scottish peasants: who could handle money best, what will slaves do with candlesticks and bedsteads and silk, you know, does the Scottish peasant drink more alcohol than the negro?

Apparently he does! I was blown away by this and one of the scenes is very much based on the committee report that I read. I'm a big fan of Hilary Mantel. I think *Wolf Hall* is amazing, and there's this scene there where the King is having this nightmare about his brother, because he's married his brother's wife, Catherine of Aragon.

And Cromwell is sent for, now this is...you know, Hilary has just created this scene, we don't know whether he entered the man's bedchamber and soothed him because of a nightmare, but because of our understanding of character, she was able to bring all of their proclivities, you know, what we know from history, and then imagined that space where he came and he told the King that this was not a nightmare, this was prophecy, and he puts his hand on his shoulder and you're not supposed to touch him. And these attendants in the room, they withdraw into the shadows because they're like, *We don't want to be involved, he just touched the King!*

But I believe the scene because of the truth of the scene. So for *The Whip* it's about finding the truth, you've got to find the kernel of truth. So you can interpret history, provided the kernel of truth exists, and that's where the research comes in. Because obviously the whole play, you've got to throw the research over the shoulder, but you've got to keep the essence of it.

Ann Morgan: Yeah, because also what I think one of the tools that you use really well to achieve this is the way you write about intersectionality in that play. So many writers, if they were taking on this subject matter, would focus on...the issue itself is big enough.

And yet you managed to bring in and as a result, demonstrate the shared humanity and the shared suffering, but also the boundaries between people, the mill workers, for example. While there is some comparison to be drawn between them and, you know, some of the things that some of the slaves are going through, and so there's some commonality that's found between certain characters because of that. Gender: women are able to band together against the patriarchy in certain ways. So bringing people together in that web of some of the injustices that bind them across other barriers feels like quite a powerful tool.

Juliet Gilkes Romero: You know, it was something that I kind of recognise; once I've come up with my cast, and I think some of it was intuition, some by design, because what was *fascinating* by – about – 1833, because we think of people in the past as separate to us, what I *read* was, *They're just like us*.

1833 was an extraordinary year in British history and British politics: so you had the Reform Act to get middle-class, working-class men into the House of Commons as MPs. You had the Factory Act to reduce the hours that children, not remove them completely, but reduce the *abusive* hours that these children were working.

When I read cases of children, some being kicked to death, punished in terrible ways, falling asleep at the loom, and I'm like, *Wow, this...how is this different to slavery?* There was the Catholic Emancipation Act — the play was getting on a bit, I had to cut my cloth, I had to lose thirty pages, so a lot of that got cut down.

And we had abolition. This inflection point, this collision was astonishing. So British history did a lot of the work for me. I just had to step into that space. What else also helped was that HMRC had put out this amazing tweet, congratulating the British public on helping to end slavery because taxpayer's money was used to pay off –

Ann Morgan: Isn't it extraordinary, who signed that off? –

Juliet Gilkes Romero: Who *knew*, which history book have you ever seen this in? Everybody who was working up until 2015, their tax money went into paying off the compensation loan, which was the equivalent of just over 40% of the country's GDP. This is what the British government borrowed to pay off the slave owners who then received the free labour for four years of the slaves because they were forced into unpaid apprenticeships.

So not only were they making the equivalent of *millions*, they were then getting free labour, but they weren't expected to feed or clothe the apprentices. So their lives were even *worse*. In which history book...so when I did history as a child, the only history that I saw on the transatlantic slave trade was that traditional textbook: you've got this like a lithogram of the bodies in the bottom of the hull of a boat, and that was it.

And I was the only black girl in class. So I'm looking at this thinking, *There's got to be more to this story*. And everyone's kind of moving on and I'm like, *Wait a minute!*, you know, and not really knowing what to ask because we'd moved on. So I'd confess: there *was* an anger.

Ann Morgan: Yeah!

Juliet Gilkes Romero: And I thought, *I've got to do something, why don't people know about this?* And I just assumed that there'd be *hundreds* of people trying to write about this; I was the only one! That blew me out of the water, it was like, I thought *I've got to get my skates on, I've got to get to the House of Commons library.*

I applied for the Freedom of Information Act, I saw the actual documentation about this loan and when it was paid off, and I still couldn't believe it, that I, a descendant of the...of this trade, my tax money was even paying off this loan. Adrian Chiles interviewed me on Radio 5 Live about this, and he couldn't get over it, and he just kept repeating it.

He *couldn't* understand how he didn't know about this. So I then ended up doing a lot of radio and television just around that fact, even Canadian radio I was on, and everyone was asking. The thing about it though, and again it's that ability to pull back and be objective...for good or bad, and for good, the British government – and it wasn't out of compassion as such – but they realised that the institution wasn't fit for purpose.

There were uprisings, they watched what happened in Haiti, they thought, *Let's get out of this, let's end this*. You know, the petitions that were raised, particularly by English women in this country, it was very much driven by, I would say, a real feminine impetus, Wilberforce got a lot of the credit but it was the women. So when we took the cast to the House of Commons and we had the actor who played Boyd stand at the dispatch box. In fact, everyone got a turn.

The Speaker's chair, on the back of the petition sack, and this is where these petitions from around the country…we had Mary Prince who was received by a women's group in Birmingham. And she was allowed to speak around the country. People when they met Mary and heard the stories – we're back to stories now – they were able to relate, it was about the storytelling, put themselves in Mary's shoes or in the shoes of a slave, and they came to think, *This is not fit for purpose, we can't continue this*.

So the British government eventually responded. Now, slaves are property, you know, you want to sell a car, you want to be compensated. This is how they saw it. They had to compensate the slave owners. The same idea was floated at Congress in America, but they couldn't agree. And that led to the Civil War. Thousands died.

So while I was writing, I was also weighing that up. So that allowed me to take that bird's eye view as well. So as angry as I felt about certain issues and what I wanted to show was the unseemly wrangling over how to achieve this. And my character Boyd, who's Chief Whip, he is eventually railroaded into a compromise that is not natural to him and certainly not to those who feel that he's an ally.

But I still marvel at the fact that it got done and that in America they couldn't do this. And we see the repercussions of that Civil War today, because what then came as a result of that was Lincoln pronounced an edict for the slaves to be free in the south. Then we had the Jim Crow laws, then a lot of the Confederate soldiers became Klu Klux Klan and would hunt freed blacks in the South, and that lasted a long time; the history of lynchings: a *direct* link to the American Civil War. We saw none of that.

What we saw in the Caribbean, because obviously slavery was ended on British soil, I forget the date now, and that was because of a legal case, a young runaway called Somerset, and it was then decided that slavery should be illegal on *English* soil. So then what you'd get was a lot of runaway slaves from the Americas coming here. That's a whole history that people don't know about, and I just think it's a real shame, you know, there's a lot of people who talk about woke, history as woke, *We're teaching our children to feel guilt about what happened in the past.* No, these are extraordinary stories. What do these stories tell us about who we are?

Ann Morgan: And they're stories that haven't been told?

Juliet Gilkes Romero: They haven't been told. Yeah, but they point to our humanity. They point to our compassion. They point to the ability of peoples to come together. I mean I'm now writing a seq...a...what comes after, in a sense, about the cotton workers who preferred to starve rather than handle cotton picked by Negro slaves. What a history! People don't know about this, but I'm doing it theatrically, so they will know about it.

Ann Morgan: They will know, absolutely.

Juliet Gilkes Romero: And how revolutionary that was, the idea that this country was divided into north and south in a sense, because the British government at first weren't sure whether to back Lincoln or the Confederates, because cotton was *king*. This was a *huge* industry and because of the cotton mills, it brought a huge amount of revenue into this

country, but in the end, the humanity of what was happening became more important.

And unless we tell these stories, and this is why I do enjoy going back into history, looking for these inconvenient truths, excavating all of that. It's not about being woke, it's about sharing and allowing people to celebrate the formation of what we know as modern Britain. People have forgotten about those cotton workers. That should never be forgotten.

Ann Morgan: Now, not all your writing is focused on historical events.

Juliet Gilkes Romero: True.

Ann Morgan: You have also taken on the story of *Medea*, and on a modern day or a re-working of that story. How did you go about it? That's such a massive story, it's such a story that has been told in so many ways through so many centuries. I would find that really terrifying as a writer to take on. How did you approach it?

Juliet Gilkes Romero: So the wonderful Tom Littler, because I think he is amazing, artistic director of Jermyn Street, and he showed incredible leadership during lockdown, it was his idea to gather fifteen female playwrights to respond to the letters that Ovid wrote about the fifteen heroines of Greek mythology.

And Tom approached me as one of the writers, and I confess I was quite overwhelmed by it. And he sent a list of the women, and, I mean, I'll be honest, my knowledge of Greek mythology…I mean, I've heard of Icarus, Hercules, Aphrodite, but Medea stood out because most people know Medea's story. *If I do this, I'll do Medea*.

Ann Morgan: You chose Medea?

Juliet Gilkes Romero: I chose Medea and I thought when I read about her, *Why on* earth *did I choose Medea?* Number one, there've been quite a few stage productions about Medea. Everyone has done this, and done her quite well, and then her story was so difficult, challenging, unpalatable: this woman who murders her sons because she's been jilted by her lover, and I'm still trying to process why on earth I chose her. And I know that I chose her because I felt that of all of the women I read about, she had the most agency, and I couldn't understand her story; I couldn't understand it.

So I began to dig around researching her, why would she do this? Then I found a history about the Corinthians, so when Euripides wrote his version of *Medea*, it was the Corinthians who murdered her sons. Medea was seen as the barbarian other, and you know, she was not welcome. But when I saw that it was men who had murdered her sons, and it wasn't the mother, but there was pressure put on Euripides to change it from the Corinthians to the mother, I thought, *Wow, she was well and truly gaslit, burnt to a toast!* I thought, *That's not right!*

You know, when you think of Cleopatra, who apparently was a really intelligent woman, very political, also gaslit through history. So I began to look at her story and look at Medea and I thought, *Wow, this needs serious reflection* and *re-telling*. So in my version, it's not clear at the end how the sons died. So, you know, I've made her a modern-day refugee who, you know, is no longer welcome and Jason has met a younger woman who he wants to marry, and she's truly thrown onto the trash heap, if you like. And she's making trouble and she's not going quietly.

And where she's living is raided and we hear gunshots, so we don't see the deed, but she is armed, so in a sense it's like, does she take the lives of the children to protect them from a mob or do people enter and take out her sons? But I had to leave that question mark because I really wanted the audience to think about it.

And I also really wanted them to think about, was she capable of this? All of the productions that I read about were set on the premise that she killed her own children because she'd been jilted, and that wasn't the original case. I find that outrageous! So even though I had decided to do the story before I actually found this material, I then felt...I breathed sigh of relief. I thought, *Now I have a premise, now I have something to work with.*

Ann Morgan: It's another inconvenient truth, even though within fiction, as far as we know. Your...it's these inconvenient truths that really get you through it, as far as storytelling goes.

Juliet Gilkes Romero: Yeah, and how truth can be gaslit. You know and how we live by the past, how it shapes our future and often in wrong ways, you know, the things that we take at face value from history can really... when you think of sectarian conflict, often rooted in the interpretation of stories from the past.

Ann Morgan: Yeah. Now, we're sitting in quite a special place. Can you tell us where we are and how you came to be here?

Juliet Gilkes Romero: So we are sitting in my office at the National Theatre Studio, and this building, I think it started off as the original working place for the National Theatre before it was properly built on the South Bank. Because...so these were all prefabs and it was housed at the Old Vic and then, as you say, so the Old Vic is right next door to the studio.

So this is really steeped in history. And on the top floor you've got writers's rooms. I have a very nice one, which looks onto a roof garden with grass. And I can see the stage door for the Old Vic, and I'm fascinated by the comings and goings, but what a journey for me.

Ann Morgan: And we should say you are here as the writer in residence of the National Theatre.

Juliet Gilkes Romero: Yes, yes, and again, being asked, offered this, was really, on many levels, profoundly important. I'm going to say the word *moving* because it is, because this industry, this life we choose as writers, you know, it is tough.

Now, when they reopened the...when they built the National on the South Bank...so by that time I was born in East London, we moved to Suffolk. My parents were very much into the arts and culture, had a subscription to this new theatre and brought my brother and I down as children to see *Galileo* when it opened there.

And we loved it, it was a fantastic production. Michael Gambon played Galileo and that's how I was introduced to Brecht actually. I must have been about...I was quite young, ten or...nine or ten, but the fact that they drove us down to London to see this, and now here I am. I just...yeah, I find that feeling quite difficult to articulate.

I'm very grateful to my parents because what they were very good at doing, you know, my brother and I are first generation, we were born here, but they were very determined that we were comfortable in cultural and artistic spaces. A lot of kids don't get taken to the theatre or museums; my parents took us everywhere.

There was a Commonwealth Institute at the time, it no longer exists, but we would visit there, be taken on tours to see the different countries and how people lived. And as a child, again, that sparks the imagination. We were taken to the theatre, they took us to the National.

And I guess as a child sitting in those stalls watching *Galileo*, I would never have imagined that one day I would be here. I mean, you know, my sadness is that my dad isn't here because he was such a supporter. In some ways I feel as if he knows because this kind of thing was important to him. This is very important.

And it feels like a legacy thing because of my heritage. And I'll be really honest, you know, when I think of whoever, some forefather who was thrust into the hull of a slave ship and taken to the Caribbean, and now here I am, you know, in this national institution of storytelling, that, for me, is amazing.

But that journey doesn't stop, because as you know, as a writer, it never stops, it's on-going. Because I do feel that we are on a mission. It is important to be able to add to how we see each other and our lived experience and to tell these stories because these are the things that truly bring us together.

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RLF outro: That was Juliet Gilkes Romero in conversation with Ann Morgan. You can find out more about Juliet on her website, julietgilkesromero.co.uk. And that concludes episode 430, which was recorded and produced by Ann Morgan.

Coming up in episode 431, Sonia Faleiro tells Julia Copus about three little things that have been significant in her writing career.

We hope you'll join us.

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