

S7 Ep11: Oli Forsyth

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Susan Wokoma: Hello and welcome to the Royal Court Theatre Playwrights podcast with me, Susan Wokoma, And I'm here with Oli Forsyth. Hello. Thank you for joining me.

Oli Forsyth: Pleasure.

Susan Wokoma: And, just to begin, I'm going to let the audiences know exactly who you are, just in case they don't know. So, Oli you are a tv and theatre writer. You've had your plays performed at the New Siorama, Hampstead, Vault festival, and Edinburgh Fringe. This year, your play will debut here at the Royal Court, BRACE BRACE. Thank you for joining

Oli Forsyth: Thank you very much for having me.

Susan Wokoma: Nice to meet you. Okay, to kick off, I want to know what is your earliest memory of theatre?

Oli Forsyth: well, sorry, I've got work. I think I've got two that I sort of don't know where

they go.

Susan Wokoma: Ok, let's hear them.

Oli Forsyth: I think the first one is, my grandparents lived in Sheffield, so I think, like, occasionally we go and see them on a weekend. And I remember, like, getting, packed into, like, a car with my sister and going up to Sheffield and usually would fall asleep, but having to stay awake. And it was because we were going to the theatre that night. And I think I didn't know at the time. I think it was quite a fraught relationship. So I think making it a big evening was an important thing.

Susan Wokoma: Right?

Oli Forsyth: So I got to this theatre and I remember it being very dark and very sleep inducing and sitting in the back and wanting to fall asleep. And it was the sound of music. And I think my ma put me on her lap. And I remember, doing a bit of, like, 'my favourite things' she was doing, like 'when the dog bites, when the bee stings' and, like, pinching me in a in a loving way, but in a, like, trying to keep me awake and bouncing me. So I remember. I remember how dark it was and how, like, on your own, you felt in that space, I think. But I think the first one that I'd be like, 'oh, I remember that' as, like, a theatre thing.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Oli Forsyth: I think I went. I got taken to the Hampstead theatre. Like, I must have been really young, like six or seven or something. And, it was in the old building.

Susan Wokoma: Where was that again?

Oli Forsyth: I have no idea. I just know. Walking into it.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah. Ah.

Oli Forsyth: Like, it always got described to me as a bomb shelter, but I don't think it was. I don't think that's true. But, I remember going down, like, these rickety stairs and then sitting in my seat and the stage was just fake grass. And, at the beginning, I think it was like, cold and wet outside, so it was quite nice to be like, 'oh, this looks like summer.' And then the play happened and I have no memory of what happened in the play.

Susan Wokoma: Excellent.

Oli Forsyth: But I do remember - always a good sign - and I do remember just at the end of it being like, having a really striking, moment of feeling like 'the room I'm in now is not the same one it was when I came in here.' Because with what I've seen, the stuff that's happened here has changed that room. And that being quite a quiet, for my little brain at that point, quite a profound realisation of like, oh, they changed it by this thing. I'm fully aware it's made up. Not true. But as I leave, it's not the same.

Susan Wokoma: How old were you when you had that?

Oli Forsyth: I honestly think maybe like six or seven. but what I found interesting, when I first started ever writing plays, it took me ages to get out. Like, every idea I ever had was like, so we're in one room and we'll be there for the whole play because I'm just

trying to recreate that feeling of like. And I get it now a little bit when. When. When the curtain comes up and the set is big enough, you're like, we're probably gonna be staying here.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah. Yeah.

Oli Forsyth: What am I gonna leave? What?

Oli Forsyth: What is this space gonna what? Like, what's gonna be left here at the end of it? Yeah, yeah. I think that's my first, like, oh, that's theatre.

Susan Wokoma: Ah, that's incredible. Having an awareness of how the same room can be changed by those people over there.

Oli Forsyth: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's much better than my mum pinching me, probably.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yes. I mean, both valid have their place, theatres are cosy and,

Oli Forsyth: It's good to keep kids awake.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah. Good, good, good. Look. Okay, so, at what point did you decide that you wanted to be a theatre maker? Was there one clear point or was it kind of slow realisation that you wanted to make theatre?

Oli Forsyth: well, I suppose, like, I don't know, you've done more of these, but I imagine with lots of people, right, there's like a slow drip into, like, what you end up doing. I

always find it quite interesting occasionally you meet those people, who are like, I knew from the age of seven I wanted to be this. And I was writing to this theatre at this age and I always found that bit like, how did you know?

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Oli Forsyth: but no, I think. I think, think I had little brushes with theatre growing up and remember it being fun and exciting, but was interested in other things. I don't think it was until I was at university that I was. There was, a really. I went to Leeds and there was.

Susan Wokoma: Yes, Leeds.

Oli Forsyth: Amazing. It's so good. And it was full of so many exciting people who are still making, like, amazing work. And I think that was really. That made it very exciting and real. And there was a company that, like, everybody was doing plays, so we were doing Othello and cloud nine and hay fever and that. And then I think there was a group there in, like, one of our final years made up a show and it did really well.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Oli Forsyth: And I think that opened a door of just being like, you can just make it up

Susan Wokoma: rather than having to, you know, work in a classical way.

Oli Forsyth: It doesn't all live in the library. You can go and get it, you can go make it. And, And that was. That was sort of a, real moment of, 'oh, if they can make it, I could

make it.' Anyone could make it. And then it was just about finding which bit I wanted to do. And I tried all the bits and writing was the bit I sort of naturally fell into, I think.

Susan Wokoma: So then you founded your own theatre company, Smoke and Oakum, which was in order to produce your first few plays. Like, that is a big undertaking to go, okay, I want to, essentially learn how to produce. So when was that sort of inspired by your time in Leeds and being active in you creating and putting on your own shows rather than just submitting your script to theatres and hoping that gets picked up?

Oli Forsyth: Yeah, yeah. I think that second one just wasn't a viable.

Susan Wokoma: Right.

Oli Forsyth: Like, no one I knew was like, yeah, I sent that in and then.

Susan Wokoma: They just picked it up.

Oli Forsyth: So you're like, well, what is getting done then? Where do I find that? And that was always, by making it yourself and putting it on. So, yeah, I think I was chasing a lot of people who I just really admired who were making their own work. And I think, eventually you start doing all the jobs, don't you? Cause, it's cheap to do it yourself. It's the honest truth of it. And also a lot of naivety, like massive. I think the first show we ever did was, a production called The Cow Play by Ed Harris. Not the Ed Harris book, But he was brilliant and he gave us this script and was like, if you think you're clever, produce it. And I remember being like, how hard can that be? And it turns out really difficult.

Oli Forsyth: But I love it. I love being, like, having your hands on it all the time is really exciting. and it meant that once we finished that, like, no money, very bruised, very tired, but just been like, I want to go again. Let's do the next thing. And realising it would be easier for me to write it, rather than finding someone else to do it, that was the streamlining of that.

Susan Wokoma: So. Okay, Oli when I read this, I had, to read it three times and, Sit down. You write your first draft by hand?

Oli Forsyth: Yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I didn't know where that was going.

Susan Wokoma: I've got some news on you. No, Oli What? Why? Why? Amazing. Okay, hang on. Let's work this out, because I'm still. I'm getting that moment when I sit down having a cup of tea. So, firstly, why? Why?

Oli Forsyth: yeah, yeah. No, I cannot think of an answer that isn't as pretentious.

Susan Wokoma: No, this is called the Royal Court Theatre.

Oli Forsyth: it was just my process. Like, I think I. I remember the first time I was ever like, I need to write a show because we need to put it on soon. I got myself a whiteboard and I had this vision that I was going to be, you know, like those american writers rooms. There would be, like, 20 loose scenes and I'd be like, 'enter Jack.' And that would be all I needed to do. And I was like, writing. And then the more you write, you're like, oh. And then that happens. And then this line is probably what they say, and before I know it, it's bunched because it's tiny writing in landscape. And it just. So every time I start with these lofty ideals of, it's going to be big, broad stroke, it'll be two days

just to get it down and then I can write it. But every time, it's like months of just little tiny writing and tiny little scribbles. and I never photocopy it and I'll never save it and one day they will go missing. but that hasn't happened yet, so that's a good indication that it's fine.

Susan Wokoma: Oh, my God.

Oli Forsyth: I think it's really helpful to be able to, like, look at it, to have, like, a tangible thing. I think. I can't remember, who said someone. Someone pointed out, like, when you write it on a computer.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Oli Forsyth: In order to read the text like you are, you are having to look at it in a fairly close frame.

Susan Wokoma: Yes, that's true.

Oli Forsyth: And you can get lost and you can just have these.. This scrolling thing of just like... But when it's on a page, you can see, like, that's where I was pushing hard. That's where there's lots of breaks, that's where there's lots of crosses out. That's when there's lots of arrows. And that helps me look at it. Like, I can see the shape of that play. And then the typing it up is like the getting off the rougher edges.

Susan Wokoma: Right.

Oli Forsyth: And it means that the first thing you have down is actually a second draft

you've gone through it, you sat with it, and I think, right, I think it's the writing slowly. So you've got, like, a piece of paper next to you feel like... And then they go away sort of thing, or. And then they fall over. They're like the big ideas. But then this is like, what do you say? How are you trying to affect the person who's with them in the scene? And that's all just the dialogue.

Susan Wokoma: That is incredible, I have to say. Actually, as you were talking, I was reminded that I have. I haven't done it in a little while, but when I was sort of doing a run of theatre, my way of remembering my lines was writing them out.

Oli Forsyth: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: And I would write. But not just my lines, it would have to be because I'm like, oh, it's a conversation. So then I would end up writing-

Oli Forsyth: everybody else.

Susan Wokoma: I'd end up writing the play. So as you're talking about [they're both laughing]

Oli Forsyth: stealing ideas left and centre!

Susan Wokoma: I think that that is kind of why I was so affronted, because it triggered something that I used to do.

Oli Forsyth: And were you doing it, like, did it feel like a choice? You're like, now I'll write it down. And you were like, this is the only way this is going in.

Susan Wokoma: I just feel. I felt like it was kind of. It made it real. I don't know. There's just something about printed word that I can feel detached from. If you're going through the process of writing it, I think there's something that channels you in with the decisions. I think that sounds. I mean, pretentious. but it sort of channels you in with the decisions of it. I don't know. And there's just something about the physical act of it. A bit like when you are performing and you have to do physical act, it just makes everything kind of embed.

Oli Forsyth: Yeah, yeah, of course,

Susan Wokoma: in some way. But, I. Before we go on to brace. Brace your play, I just want to talk about the Mike Bartlett writers group that you were in at the Hampstead Theatre. Because, this was after your play Cash Cow was produced downstairs at the Hampstead Theatre. So between that and running your own theatre company at the time, what made you think that you needed to know more? Because you already had your play on and you think, 'okay, cool, brilliant, that's on downstairs.' What made you go, 'no, I want to.' Was it to do with Mike and wanting to be with him and learning from him? Like what at that point made you go, 'I need to know more?'

Oli Forsyth: That is a really good question I haven't thought about. [they're laughing] I know I have, a profound answer coming. I don't know, I think you get, you must have had this experience working in this industry. It's hard and you apply for loads of stuff and you never get anywhere, but occasionally you do and I think you just get into the habit of like if I see an opportunity that fits me applying for it, I will do that. And there's always something else to learn, there's always something else to do. and so I apply and I apply for those things. I'm on one at the minute. Like a writers course. It helps to be and to meet people. Like writing is like an inherently solo profession and I am not an

inherently solo person. So having a community of people, that can stimulate your ideas. Having an ecosystem of artists that you are part of is such a helpful way to grow. And I think the most productive times of my career have been when I am in an ecosystem of artists who are making great work and you are just like picking up the bits they're dropping or like jumping a floor with them or something. Like there's just little bits that agitate together. And so I think that's why I did it. And also Mike's brilliant. And the Hampstead are great. And you know, it was the middle of lockdown and I didn't have much on.

Susan Wokoma: The thing is, I asked that question, but like why would you turn it down? Yeah, yeah, no thanks. No, you would do it.

Oli Forsyth: He's the nicest man. it's really nice.

Susan Wokoma: I did a play of his like years ago.

Oli Forsyth: What was the play?

Susan Wokoma: It's called game. It was at the Almeida theatre and they like changed the whole, auditorium into like a house. It was incredible. It was incredible. But a lovely, lovely, lovely man. That's amazing. But enough about me. So more on you, BRACE BRACE your play that will be here at the royal court. Very exciting. So, Brace, Brace is the story of a hijacked plane told through the eyes of a couple, Sylvia and Ray, who are on the flight, on their honeymoon when the plane is hijacked. Now this, this is based on a true story that you experienced. You were on a hijacked plane. Do you want to talk about your decision to write about this? Because there is particularly, ah, with women and female playwrights, there does tend to be A kind of tradition of like, oh, you

write your trauma, you write what's happened to you. But like, was there a clear decision of you going, I want to approach this as a play with some kind of distance or with some kind of, imagination outside what actually happened?

Oli Forsyth: Yeah. No, I mean, that's brilliantly put. Like, I didn't write about it for years because. Exactly that I don't really want to contribute to a culture that demands, Thinly veiled autobiography and trauma as a currency in art. And so I didn't want to write about it and I wrote about everything else.

Oli Forsyth: And I always think the plays that I like, and that's just a personal thing have at their centre a really, really exciting vehicle to deliver the thing they want to talk about. And so I think even plays that have gone on here, The Children, it's not really about, a nuclear disaster. And The Cane is not really about cany. Like there's. Yeah, so like that is. That is, in my opinion, like the very essence of the hard work of writing, of writing a show is making. Sticking that idea in something else. And so this experience that I heard serves only really that, which is that it gave me the inspiration to talk about the other things I want to talk about, which is what the characters are talking about and what the story talks about. I don't really feel much about that event. It's not something that's particularly difficult or dramatic at all. but it did provide a really exciting vehicle to talk about the other stuff - is how I think about it in my head.

Susan Wokoma: That's amazing. So let's talk about that process of fictionalising something that's true at the heart of obviously, people. We don't want to give away what happens in the play. But, What were the themes that was encased in the kind of outer circumstance? What was the thing that you wanted to focus on? Did you know that going in? Or was that something that you discovered as you were writing?

Oli Forsyth: Oh, it absolutely was something I knew going in, which, Basically I had become quite interested in what happens to people when the thing they believe they are seeing absolutely true with their own eyes, they are confronted with a culture or a group of people who are like, that's not true.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Oli Forsyth: And that is, in my opinion, a recipe for madness. I noticed, like, over the few years, I've had maybe like, three or four people I know who, to, like to both sides of the extreme, have, I would say, slightly gone off the deep end. And, it often starts from this moment where they're like, but it's surely this thing, right? And we're like, no, no, no, you've got that wrong. It's this. And they're like, no, but I know it's this thing. I know because I can feel it. And there's a line in the play where Sylvia is trying to convince Ray of what she feels about what's happened. She's like, I don't choose to feel this way. Same way an animal just knows it's being watched. I know this to be true, and you are telling me it's not. And that is a, problem. And so I think confronting people, people being confronted with a very different version of what has happened to them is... that is conflict. And that is a story worth, picking apart, because I think we're all engaging with that on an almost daily basis right now.

Susan Wokoma: I was just about to say that, like, what is the truth? And different opinions and how people experience the same thing, experience the same world is more than ever, I think, because we're so at the... I was gonna say at the mercy, but we know so much of what people think . So, constantly we're hearing how people are experiencing this same life, world, space in completely different way. And in a way, you think having that knowledge should bring us together, but actually, all it does is make people rant and scream because we're not agreeing. And have we ever, I guess, have

we ever agreed about, like, what anything is?

Oli Forsyth: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: I don't know. Sometimes I feel like I hark back to a time that didn't...
Wasn't real.

Oli Forsyth: Why isn't that the thing, right? Living in the past where you think it was an easier time. I completely, completely agree with that. I sometimes wonder if, like, the. The emphasis on being an individual means that, like, ultimately, if we follow that through, you are an individual, it's only you. So if you think things, if you go deep enough into what you think, you will end up only being you who thinks that. If you keep going, really, what do you think about that thing? Why do you think that? What does that mean? Eventually, it will just be you. I personally think. Not a great place to be.

Susan Wokoma: No, it's a lonely place.

Oli Forsyth: It's a lonely old world.

Susan Wokoma: Okay, so your play, Cash Cow, was about the breakdown of a child's relationship with her parents as they pushed her to become a number one tennis champion. A great setup. You know, I can sense the kind of the bigness and the smallness in the middle of that. And then similarly, the breakdown of, the relationship between Sylvia and Ray in. BRACE BRACE Are you particularly interested in relationships and the moment in which they fail?

Oli Forsyth: Oh, that's a good point. I mean, I think so as well. The play in between, was

about two porn addicts trying to make a relationship and that failing, too.

Susan Wokoma: Excellent - what's that play called?

Oli Forsyth: do we have to bleep this This is such Filthy Fucks

Susan Wokoma: No, no, no. This is the royal court.

Oli Forsyth: Let's just call it filthy. That was. Yeah, that was. That was the same thing. It was two people who are trying to have a relationship they desperately want in the same way Ray and Sylvia want it, and, in Cash Cow they want it, but, Yeah, it falls apart. I don't know. It's a really good point. I'd never thought about it. If I am interested in the point relationships break. I got told once, and I thought they were bang on, that the theme I keep coming back to, and I'm really interested in, is people who lose. And, that doesn't necessarily mean in a sort of single outcome, or it could be over time, but just. Yeah, something about striving and not getting it is fertile. It's juicy.

Susan Wokoma: It's so juicy. It's sad as fuck. but it's wonderful drama.

Oli Forsyth: And Cash Cow's full of that. Like, the kid loses, the parents lose, everyone loses. and in this, you'll have to come and see the show.

Susan Wokoma: I know. You have to come and see the show. I know. As you were about to say something, [they laugh about spoilers] and just to end, this has been so lovely. what does it mean to you to have your play on at the royal court?

Oli Forsyth: It's massive. I mean, it's a building that I feel I have been in artistic

conversation with my whole career. Like, some of the most, like, huge theatrical moments I've had have been here. My first ever show at the royal court, I was just starting to buy theatre tickets, and, someone was like, just go and see one at the royal court. You should. And I bought a matinee ticket to, Nick Payne's constellations. And I went upstairs and I remember leaving and be like, that was good. And just be like, that was very good, actually. That was very good.

Susan Wokoma: That was all right.

Oli Forsyth: I was like, they must all be like that. And quite a high it's all knockout stuff.

Susan Wokoma: That's just theatre

Oli Forsyth: Really high concept, really well delivered. Yeah. and I think since then, the moments where you come out and you're like, ah, that writer has, has played that note that I would love to be playing and I'm going to try to get to that register is all. So much of it takes place here and on the stage and upstairs. And I think, to, like, contribute, to that is huge. I think Zadie Smith talked really well about, it can be quite daunting if you think about it as like, what's the point of being a writer when you've already got Carol Churchill and you've already had like Ts Eliot and all of that sort of stuff? And she's like, well, the way to think about it (and the same with Zadie Smith, for that matter.) And so the way to think about it is that literature is this huge lake that exists and sustains society and culture and that you as a writer are a tributary that contributes to that. And you don't have to be the lake and you don't have to be the biggest river, but you are contributing to that. Ah, and so I think to contribute to a building that has given so much to me and I think so much to so many people in this art form is really wonderful.

Susan Wokoma: Oli thank you so much.

Oli Forsyth: Thank you.

Susan Wokoma: And I can't wait to see the show.

Oli Forsyth: Thanks very much, mate. That was great.

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