

S7 Ep8: Mark Rosenblatt talks to Susan Wokoma

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Susan Wokoma: Hello and welcome to the Royal Court Playwright's Podcast with me, Susan Wokoma. And here with me today is Mark Rosenblatt.

Mark Rosenblatt: Hello.

Susan Wokoma: Hello. Thank you for joining me. You are a writer, if you didn't know, and a director for stage and screen. You have worked as a theatre director since 1998 and, in that time, you have worked as the associate director at Leeds Playhouse, the National Theatre Studio, and founded Dumbfounded Theatre to rediscover forgotten classics from the international repertoire. This year, your debut play, Giant, will premiere here at the Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Downstairs. Welcome to the Podcast, Mark.

Mark Rosenblatt: Thank you very much.

Mark Rosenblatt: Thanks for having me.

Susan Wokoma: Now, okay, we're gonna start with you telling me, because that's how podcasts work - What is your earliest memory of Theatre?

Mark Rosenblatt: Oh, I remember going to see. Do you know what's so - it's so weird this.

Susan Wokoma: Go on.

Mark Rosenblatt: My earliest memory of theatre is going to see a production when I was a really little kid of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, which is uh - handy.

Susan Wokoma: Yes.

Mark Rosenblatt: And the reason I remember it is because, all of the. It was in a big Theatre, I don't remember where. And all of the actors were miked, had head mics on, and Augustus Gloop's head mic was looping. It was going. It was glooping. So he was getting feedback on his monitor, and Willy Wonka had to say to Augustus Gloop, 'turn your head mic down, Augustus.' And that's what I remember. That is my first memory of Theatre.

Susan Wokoma: That sounds like a fever dream.

Mark Rosenblatt: So specific! [they laugh]

Susan Wokoma: Then Willy Wonka said...

Mark Rosenblatt: Yeah, no, but it was. But it's weird. I find it weird that that's my first memory, because I think, I'm always thinking theatre's always, like, on the verge of screwing up. You know, it's like a delicate, fragile thing.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Mark Rosenblatt: My first memory of it is the sort of the thing you're not working.

Susan Wokoma: You got to see its danger zone. That's the bit where the actors on stage are like, I don't want to do it. And that's your first introduction. Not anything slick.

Mark Rosenblatt: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And the illusion cracking. Yeah, yeah.

Susan Wokoma: So what was it that drew you to Theatre? Was it that experience? Or was it something? Was that. I want to do that. I want panic on stage.

Mark Rosenblatt: I would probably just like, you know, showing off acting in school plays and, Yeah, that stuff. I just like. I mean, I did acting at school and a bit at university and I started, actually was one of those weird, annoying people that started, like, I did directed at school as well. So I sort of had that interest. I just loved it. I actually loved being. I loved, like, in our drama, sort of studio space, you know, just like, love the feeling of an empty Theatre like this. I just love the. I think there was that sense that, like, you know, when you just hang out, sometimes hang out in one and just the sort of little hum of the lights and nothing. The worker lights being on and the potential of a space for something to happen was pretty cool. yeah, that's when I sort of first got into it and I went to see. And I was also quite nerdy. I went to see. I was really lucky because I lived brought up in London. I went to see plays, in London, and sort of was wowed by things, school trips. I remember going to see, Complicite. I mean, I'm quite old, so I went to see Complicite when, like, there's a show they did quite early on at Riverside Studios called the three Lives of Lucy Cabral, which was just mind blowing. Just watching a company of people pretending to be an alpine peasant community and

pretending to be cows in a cowshed and doing sort of strange sexual things and just storytelling through their bodies just felt amazing to sort of see. It felt like going to a dangerous circus. So that stuff really, like. Yeah, made me think, oh, God, Theatre is so much that it can be.

Susan Wokoma: So you've worn a lot of hats, as I've kind of listed out. and yet Giant is your debut as a playwright. So walk us through that journey. Like, were all the different roles that you've taken on- Was that something that you did alongside writing or did you take on all those roles and then writing was something that you discovered that you want to do later?

Mark Rosenblatt: I've never written a play before, so it's like, I've never tried to write a play and I've never wanted to write a play, so I never really had that in mind. It was never like part of the plan - at all.

Susan Wokoma: Right.

Mark Rosenblatt: I've directed plays 20 plus years- So it's quite hard to talk about exactly - it's little things that happened along the way and then a couple of big things. but I started, I did, simply put, as a director, I sort of always felt like playwrights were, especially in theatre, they are like, yeah, and, you know, playwrights to me growing up, you know, working in my working life, like

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Mark Rosenblatt: Jack Thorne, Lucy Kirkwood, you know, Mike Bartlett, Lucy Preble. Like, amazing people, Debbie Tucker Green that we were talking about before, just

amazing voices. And I never. I never had a sense that I had a voice or in that way. But I did. And also, I think the challenge of writing for Theatre is so big. It's like, it always felt to me like there's the idea of holding an audience for that long and being interesting enough and also all the technical stuff, the sort of heavy lifting of, like, exposition and. And setting up a... world building on stage with just language felt so out of my reach. And I never really thought I had the confidence or the desire to do it. I did. I've always been passionate about film and I always thought maybe I could write that. And so I have written a bit for screen, but, what sort of got me thinking about writing was, weirdly enough, was like. Like, this sounds so stupid, but I remember a while ago, my best friend got married and I was the best man, and I made a speech. And I got the sense of, like, I wrote a speech and people thought it was really funny and, like, I got a good reaction in the room. And also I sort of structured an idea, about love and joy and whatever, and with a few jokes. And I got a sense, a real rush of like, oh, this is a nice feeling. I've written something and people are laughing. And then, And then another little moment was, yeah. I directed this play called the Circle by Somerset Maugham. It's really old fashioned, 1920s beautiful, like classic drawing room comedy, When I started out directing. And years later, I was sat on the tube and I was being really nosy and I didn't have anything to read myself. And I was looking over people's shoulders. At what other people were reading. And there was this guy sitting next to me who had the reviews of an American production of this play, The Circle, that was not done very often. And I was like, that's weird. And I said, 'sorry, can I ask why you're reading reviews of the Circle, by Somerset Maugham?' And he said, 'Can I ask why you're asking?' And I said, 'because I directed that play three times in the theatre.' And he said, 'that's amazing. I've just optioned the movie rights.' And so, like, a couple of people on the carriage opposite were like, what? What is going on? And I basically.. Longish story short, he lived down the road, like a couple rows behind me. I had coffee with him a few days later. He gave me his number and he, as only an American would, because I had

not written anything at the time, said, 'you want to have a crack at the screenplay?'

Susan Wokoma: That's such an American thing.

Mark Rosenblatt: Yeah, [they laugh]

Susan Wokoma: Sure- why not you?

Mark Rosenblatt: Exactly.

Susan Wokoma: Why not you?

Mark Rosenblatt: Yeah, it was such. It would never have happened if... I don't think. Anyway, I started writing for this producer. I wrote two adaptations of two plays, and I started developing a language for writing, visually, for film. And then I started doing a bit of film writing, but it was always adaptation. So it's never me taking the risk on myself.

Susan Wokoma: Just to jump in. I think that this is fascinating because we have a lot of writers who sort of say it was this moment, it was this clear moment, and then this is why I wanted to do it. I went to go and see this. and to have somebody who's got all this Theatre experience, you weren't off doing something else, Theatre experience, you were like, oh, I don't know, still, I think that that is really, really important to hear and to hear this journey to your debut play. So please carry on.

Mark Rosenblatt: So, I mean, what became apparent was that I was like, oh, I quite like writing, but I still don't have the confidence to write in my own voice. And a couple of people have said, you need to write in your own voice. What's your voice? And I was

like, what's my voice? That terrifying question. And then eventually, I started to think, okay, I've just got to write and direct a short film that's an original story. And I had. My first child was on his way into the world, and I knew that time was going to start. I was like, I've got to do this now. I've got to do this now. So I made a short film that was an original piece of mine, and that was really transformative, just in a sense of like, oh, I've done something of my own. And it did well on the festival circuit, and that was very encouraging. And then when I went to, the final kind of turning point for me was that this play happened because. Not because I set out to write a play. I had an idea for a play, this play, as a director, and I happened to have a conversation with Nick Heitner, who I'd worked for at the national Theatre, but I had a coffee with him in 2018, and, this conversation opened up into, like, What have I got to pitch to Nick? And I just mentioned this idea just as, like, a director maybe looking to work with a writer, for his company. And he listened to the story, the idea, and he said, I really like this idea. You should write it. And I was like, you have no. I mean, he had no cause to say that.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, there was no kind of like, you write it for me.

Mark Rosenblatt: He's never. He's never read anything that I'd... He didn't even know I'd written.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, okay

Mark Rosenblatt: He was just like, you should write it. You know, this world, you know,

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Mark Rosenblatt: this subject matter. And I don't know. To this day, I keep asking him

why he said that. but it set me off on this path where when lockdown came and a show that I directed got cancelled on press night, on the day that Boris Johnson shut the theatres down, I was sort of left with this project and Nick at the other end of it, potentially to read it. At the very least, to read it. And I knew that he liked the idea and I know that he doesn't just say he likes ideas. So I sort of had enough to go on and I just started the process of researching and writing and went for it, like, almost. Because there was nothing. It was lock down. I had nothing else but this sense of, like, got something to say. I'm going to try but for the help, you know, I wouldn't have done it without the help of some people, you know, the people around me. But I sort of started writing this play and it took me, you know, a quick three years, sort of. And then I gave it to Nick again and he read it, about a year and a half ago and said that he would like to direct it and. And it's gone from there.

Susan Wokoma: That's incredible.

Mark Rosenblatt: Kind of mad.

Susan Wokoma: It's what I love as well. Speaking to other playwrights, I feel like this. I don't know about anyone else. This feels like the season where a lot of things were born out of lockdown.

Mark Rosenblatt: Right. Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: it really feels like this has happened and then lockdown happened. And so I was faced with this idea and I thought, better write it, which is so exciting, because we're now starting to see where people's minds were in that time and how it's still affecting us now.

Mark Rosenblatt: I think to some extent, lockdown, like, maybe forced people to go cold turkey on what they thought their lives were supposed to be and think about something maybe deeper that might have been kicked into touch at a, ah, busier, normal time

Susan Wokoma: Yeah - when you're

Susan Wokoma: sort of more distracted. These things that you're now faced with.

Mark Rosenblatt: Yeah. Pitching for work in a certain way or whatever.

Susan Wokoma: 100%. So let's talk about Giant. It's a true story - I had no idea. So it's about Roald Dahl. And before we go into the sort of ins and outs of the story, why was he going to be the subject of your very first play? What was it about this story that made you think, I want to.

Mark Rosenblatt: Well, I didn't initially, you know, so, Roald Dahl. I mean, it's just. That's why I said. When I said Charlie and the chocolate factory at the beginning.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, yeah.

Susan Wokoma: No exactly.

Susan Wokoma: No, yeah.

Mark Rosenblatt: I mean, the stimulus for writing, it didn't initially include Roald Dahl. He just became... so. I've always loved Roald Dahl. I loved, as evidenced by my first memory of Theatre, But, you know, I grew up reading his stories. I read them to my

oldest son. but I was also. What was. What happened was that I was aware that in, like 2018, when there was an investigation into antisemitism in the Labour party and it was found to be, guilty of structural antisemitism, there was like a, ah, kind of diminishing of the findings. certainly within the Labour party, it felt as if there was. Yes, there was sort of diminishing of it. And what was at the heart of that was like, a kind of. A lot of what was found was the sort of blurring of the language and the discourse around talking about what's happening in Israel and Palestine with, frankly, hate speech, antisemitic hate speech. So the two things were getting confused and conflated. So there was like meaningful, important conversations going on about the Middle east and then, certain elements of language that were not cool.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, yeah.

Mark Rosenblatt: And, I was interested in that. As a British Jewish man, I was interested in that and I was a bit frustrated and maybe I'd say a bit angry that it didn't seem to be fully taken seriously or fully understood. And so basically I was looking for a story and I remembered that Dahl, who I loved, had been... There was a story about his antisemitism. I looked it up and I realised that what he had, what had happened, which we can talk about, but what had happened and, what the play sort of focuses on is exactly that, a kind of a moment where he was speaking out about, in 1982, 1983, about, Israel's invasion of Lebanon and their siege of Beirut, and pretty virulent antisemitic language that got kind of. It's widely documented. But I looked into that at the time and I thought, oh, this would be a really interesting way of speaking to now and to the moment. Like, this is an interesting way into that sort of.

Susan Wokoma: That happened just before the publication of *The Witches*, didn't it?

Mark Rosenblatt: Yeah, so he. Yeah, exactly. So in 83, he's just written it. It's about to hit the shelves. And, he happened to write a review of a book about Israel's invasion of Lebanon. And he was furious

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Mark Rosenblatt: at what he saw. And he expressed that fury in some ways in a meaningful way, in a substantial way, and in some ways in a very hateful, way. And so there was a backlash in the press when this review he'd written went out, and the play is set in that moment in his house.

Susan Wokoma: Wow.

Mark Rosenblatt: Where his publishers are scrambling to his house to kind of get him to try and moderate or say something conciliatory in the press to just kind of, you know, dial down the anger. Now, I mean, some of this is true, and some of it I've, I've made up

Susan Wokoma: Which I'm going to ask you. So can you talk about the research that you had to do in order to write this play and then also about the value of getting it right as opposed to wanting to tell the story that you want to tell?

Mark Rosenblatt: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, it's tricky. I mean, I did a lot of. I read everything I could get my hands on. That was, you know, in terms of biographies, you know, analysis of his life and work. And I took, like, a lot of notes and I sort of distilled it all into, like, this 60 page document, which sort of timelined his life leading up to this moment. I tried to kind of, like, literally ingest everything so that I could write them and write him and the people in his life with some degree of ownership and, like a sort of

method acting, eating, ingesting everything. And then. So that took a lot of work you know, and then I also was reading a lot about, Israel and Palestine. Reading as much as I could on both sides of the arguments, both narratives of history. I mean, it's a very, very complicated situation in, terms of where truth lies, for people on different sides. and so I was doing a lot of work in that area. So a lot of reading, a lot of research to try and understand the points of view of the different characters I was going to put in that room with him. and then a lot of prevaricating and angsty over what I was actually writing. And I had written a treatment, for Nick at the very beginning of the process which, didn't quite pan out when I started writing it, I had a second half that is not the second half that people will see when they come and see it. Because about a year and a half in, I realised that I wasn't going to jump forward a few days in the second half, I was going to stay in the room. So it's a real time play, 2 hours with one interval. Well, I don't know if it's 2 hours, but like it's, you know, roughly.

Susan Wokoma: That's the plan.

Mark Rosenblatt: Yeah, that's the plan. But it's kind of. We're in one room in real time with Roald Dahl and And a member of his family and people that work in his house and his publishers. So it's drawn from reality. And I've then taken a leap to imagine what would happen if he was directly put under pressure to apologise or say something publicly. So yeah, it's a mixture. It's a blend. [Susan laughs] It's a blend of. Yeah. I mean, I guess in the way that a lot of kind of biographical drama is.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, of course. Because there is, you know, you can get so bogged down with trying to get things right. But when there is like this event where you don't know the ins and outs, should you not knowing what really or actually happened, should that stop you imagining.

Mark Rosenblatt: I'm not without, like there, there are. I'm aware I'm writing about real people, but I'm also. These are imagined versions of real people. And I know. I feel like I've done as much due diligence as I can about like sort of immersing myself in what is, what is known and what has been written about and interviewing people and being as respectful to the reality of their lives as possible.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah. So Giant is created by an entirely Jewish creative team. How important was that for you?

Mark Rosenblatt: Oh, I don't know if it's an entirely Jewish creative team. I mean, Nick's Jewish. Nick Heightner is Jewish. He's directing it. I'm Jewish. And there are, In terms of people on board so far. There are a couple of other Jewish creatives. I mean, but it's partly because experiencing any kind of racism and how it feels.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Mark Rosenblatt: It can only.. I find it be very hard to imagine it being articulated by anyone but the person that is hit with it.

Susan Wokoma: Sure.

Mark Rosenblatt: So like, the authenticity of that, like, really knowing antisemitism is a very odd thing because In this country, it can occur in a kind of casually contemptuous way. It's hard to describe. And then it can also often in relation to what's going on in the Middle East, it can then manifest in a very aggressive

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Mark Rosenblatt: and forceful way. So there's a kind of clubroom antisemitism. Jews have been in this country for a while, but they've not often being that sort of. They've been othered in a very particular kind of way. And every form of racism does this in some way or another. But like to experience that in the small ways, I have to know what members of what people I know have been through. And to the. You know, it would be odd if someone who wasn't Jewish had written that or tried to kind of get the atmosphere of that right.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah. And with Nick, I guess you have that there with him as a shorthand.

Mark Rosenblatt: Totally. I don't have to explain it to him.

Susan Wokoma: Which could be exhausting.

Mark Rosenblatt: Yeah. Or just like. Exactly. Or like. Might misfire. Yeah. Understood in the wrong way.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah. Now I just want to ask you just to wrap ah up. What does the royal Court to go mean to you as a theatre maker and what does it mean to have your play here?

Mark Rosenblatt: I didn't even drink my glass of water.

Susan Wokoma: You didn't even drink.

Mark Rosenblatt: Because I decided not to. I was like that says. That's. I mean, having

told you what I've told you about my roots at this point, it is mad to be here. I mean, it continues to be. I keep saying I feel like a sort of competition winner. Like it continues to feel incredibly unreal because it is, you know, of all the places that it could have. You know, given that I. You know, I held in such high regard these amazing, like, career playwrights who. Many of whom have had their work on these stages in a theatre that celebrates the writer primarily. To have. Yeah. This play on here is just beyond. There are so many things that, you know, like Nick. Nick directing it. You know, just the fact that it's gonna happen. Like, I know, if it happened, could have happened anywhere. It had been wonderful. But to happen here of all places is. Yeah, I keep. It's a bit pinch me. So. Yeah. And like to be sitting here talking to you on the stage with those very lovely seats behind us.

Susan Wokoma: They'll be full!

Mark Rosenblatt: I wish I could say something more interesting than that.

Susan Wokoma: No, no.

Mark Rosenblatt: You know, It's strange, but I guess also, on some level, it's very weird. And on another level, we've worked so hard on this thing, and it's taken so much to kind of make sure every stitch of it feels thought out and, investigated. That I don't know. At the same time that it's not that I feel like, oh, yeah, therefore, we should be here. It feels like we've worked really hard to get here, so it's like a double thing.

Susan Wokoma: Mark, I'm so excited to see this play. Thank you so much for sitting here and talking with me.

Mark Rosenblatt: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Susan Wokoma: Thanks for listening to the Royal Court Theatre Playwrights Podcast. If you'd like to listen to more, then make sure you subscribe. If you're interested in what you've just heard, you can book tickets for this and other plays in the Royal Court's new season at, theroyalcourtheatre.com. follow us at RoyalCourtTheatre on Instagram and at, royalcourt on X. Tune in next week for another episode in this series of the Playwright's Podcast. See you soon. Bye.

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