

S8 Ep5: Joel Tan talks to Susan Wokoma

Royal Court Theatre: You

Royal Court Theatre: You are listening to a podcast from the Royal Court Theatre.

Please note, the following episode may contain strong language.

Susan Wokoma: Hello and welcome to the Royal Court Theatre Playwrights Podcast with me, Susan Wokoma, and our guest for today's episode, Joel Tan. Hello. Hello, Hello. Now, I am going to embarrass you. I'm going to read an intro which is all about you. You can just.

Joel Tan: I don't know what's out there. [everyone laughs]

Susan Wokoma: I assure you it's not. You made a joke about me finding old tweets. Don't worry, it's not that. It's not that. It's all good. Very, very safe. But feel free to just look away if you don't want to watch me basically talk about how brilliant you are. Joel has been described as one of the most exciting Singaporean playwrights of his generation. There you go. You're for our listeners [and readers], Joel is.. [they burst out laughing]

Joel Tan: I'm not even going to qualify there.

Susan Wokoma: Don't qualify. I'm going to keep going. In Singapore, his plays have been produced by leading theatre companies including Checkpoint Theatre and Wild Rice. Recent work in the UK includes the Living Newspaper at the Royal Court as well as Love in the Time of the Ancients and No Particular Order. Joel's play, Scenes from a

Repatriation runs at the Royal Court in Spring 2025. Joel, welcome to the Royal Court Playwrights podcast.

Joel Tan: Thank you for having me. That was painless.

Susan Wokoma: There we go. Perfect. And okay, now I start every episode asking every playwright this question. What was your very first experience of theatre?

Joel Tan: I used to go to, an evangelical church, a Christian church in Singapore. So I grew up in a very conservative evangelical church and they used to. And they're big, mega churches, right?

Susan Wokoma: Yes.

Joel Tan: So they used to have this annual, play that was meant to kind of evangelize. So you're meant to bring non Christians to come and watch it.

Susan Wokoma: Listen, I grew up in. Yes, yeah, Pentecostal. Yes, I get you

Joel Tan: Yeah, yeah. So the objective was to bring non Christians and then the play would somehow kind of be about how Jesus saves lives and changes people, you know? And I just remember every year it would go on and I'd be so blown away because, like, they had such big budgets. I swear, like, some of these plays probably had bigger budgets than, like, professional, theaters in Singapore. And so I was like. There was some theatre magic that I saw. Yeah, I was like. One image in particular is of, like, this middle aged couple and they're having an argument in bed and the director staged them on a bed that was up Vertically. So, you know, you, the audience were

getting like this top down view. It was like puppetry. And I was like, wow, that's amazing. Theatre's amazing. And I was like, maybe, 16, I think. Yeah. And then the other one was like some character in a play who spoke French for some reason, which is kind of rare for Singapore. And everybody was just going around calling him the frog, so it was really racist as well. Yeah. Anyway, yeah, that was my, like, the first time I actually properly watched theatre was in church, which is so weird.

Susan Wokoma: No, I, love it. Honestly, the answers that we've had on this podcast, and this is why I think it's such a great question, because people's very first experience of theatre is very rarely: I went to the National Theatre and I saw so and so perform. It's very rarely that

Joel Tan: there are those people, but they do. And then you just sort of. [they giggle]

Susan Wokoma: They do exist. Talk me through. So that was your very first experience of theatre. How do you go from that to actually going, I want to write stories? How does that happen?

Joel Tan: So, because I was watching all of these plays in church, I thought I could do that. And I thought, you know, I want to do that. And so I started writing when I was 17 years old. Basically, I wanted to write plays that talked about the struggle in Christianity between being, like, a good person and, you know, shining a light in the world, but in a kind of more honest way, I guess. That wasn't about, like, shoving doctrine down people's throats

Susan Wokoma: Or trying to convert people.

Joel Tan: Exactly. And so. And I was a young gay boy struggling, with my homosexuality against, like, all of this repressive, like, church stuff. And I just really want. I knew I wanted to write a play that kind of wrestled with, Christianity and sexuality. And so when I was in junior college, I started writing this play called Chocolate Balls.

Susan Wokoma: Chocolate Balls.

Joel Tan: I know it was inspired. I know it was inspired by, like, Did you ever watch South Park?

Joel Tan: Chocolate Salty Ball. [they laugh]

Joel Tan: Are we not allowed?

Susan Wokoma: No, no, no, I don't. No, we can say it.

Joel Tan: We can say Chocolate salty ball. Oh.

Susan Wokoma: But we can't sing it - because of the rights.

Joel Tan: Oh.

Joel Tan: yeah.

Susan Wokoma: Although I really want to sing it anyway. I know I'm very familiar.

Joel Tan: No, it's. The thing is, we didn't get South Park in Singapore, and so I was like.

And I just knew that something in South Park felt very subversive and I really wanted to catch it. And all I could find was, like, this song. Yeah. Chocolate Salty Balls. So I started writing a play called Chocolate Balls.

Susan Wokoma: No!

Joel Tan: I know! About this young gay boy wrestling with his Christian family. I never finished the play. [laughter]

Susan Wokoma: Still time!

Joel Tan: No,

00:05:00

Joel Tan: no. But, like, then the first play I wrote in, like, the first sort of playwriting class I took was basically, that premise. Yeah. And then there was the play that, got me started in Singapore because, this theatre company called Wild Rice picked up that play, Family Outing, which was the first play I ever had done. And it was about a young man who, a young gay man, who's in a really kind of conservative Christian family, who's super closeted, who dies of a freak accident one day. And on the first anniversary of his death comes, his boyfriend comes to the family to go, like, hey, before he died, he really wanted y'all to know something. And then he just kind of, like, comes out for him beyond the grave. Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: So I found that fascinating because that is your very first play idea, and actually it did become your very first play, which is. I think it's important to know

that, you know, I think oftentimes you think the first instinct is not necessarily going to be the thing or the first thing, but in your case, it was.

Joel Tan: It just needs to find the right time and place, I think. I feel like all ideas for place are like seeds. And, you know, to return to a biblical parable, it's like, where does the seed fall in, like, hard ground or, like, fertile soil? I think just sometimes it's a combination of time and place.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah.

Joel Tan: Yeah. Once I found the kind of structure of a playwriting workshop and, like, a group of writers who were supporting me, I suddenly, like, that the idea could finally grow because Chocolate balls, like, the first attempt, was, like, written entirely in my bedroom and I had no idea what I was doing.

Susan Wokoma: Excellent.

Joel Tan: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: So how did you form that relationship with Wild Rice? How did you meet? How do you discover them? Like, what was that process?

Joel Tan: yeah. So maybe some context for people who don't know. Wild Rice is like one of, like, the biggest new writing theaters in Singapore. And, they recently built their own theatre. So it's an amazing company. And I work there now, ah, as an artist in residence. I met them because my playwriting tutor, Huzir Sulaiman who's a really wonderful playwright, was teaching a course in playwriting at the university I was at. At

the end of the course, the play I'd written, Family Outing, he sent along to the, company, and they loved it so much they decided to put it on. And since then I've just sort of been engaging with them, it's been about 12, 13 years now. Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: So what is your, playwrighting process? Like you said, you said that your Chocolate Balls, you wrote in your bedroom with no idea of what you were doing. So. Yeah. What would you say now, you know, having established a career, would you say your playwrighting process was now, or do you not have one?

Joel Tan: I mean, like, it's mostly just procrastination. And I'm pretty sure I'm not the first person to say this.

Susan Wokoma: No, no, no. You're not!

Susan Wokoma: It's the gestation of procrastination.

Joel Tan: I know. And I really. I really try and give some, grace to myself about the fact that these things take time. And it's usually a flash of anger or a flash of grief that starts a play for me, and I don't always know what it's about. And there's certain things that light up in my brain when I think about an issue. Like, I hate bullies, and I hate authoritarianism, and I hate, you know, anybody. And I hate, like, people who abuse their power, basically. And so these things tend to flash up for me when I'm kind of, like, going through the world, and then they sort of fall into place over time. And a play idea, sometimes can come out of, like, reading something in the news that really jumps out at me or thinking about weird combinations of things that, like, somehow feel very theatrical. But sometimes it takes years before I finally sit down to actually write the thing. Yeah. And then once I do, it takes even longer to kind of bring my ass to the table

to do it. Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: What's the longest it's taken to write a play?

Joel Tan: I think two, three years.

Susan Wokoma: That's not long.

Joel Tan: It's not long. Okay, thank you.

Susan Wokoma: That's not the longest we've had on the podcast.

Joel Tan: What's the longest?

Susan Wokoma: Well, I don't. No, no, no. In terms of, from. This was Amy, actually. I'm not really. I was about to say I'm outing Amy, but I'm not. Because you'll all listen to it. Six years. Yeah. Yeah. Which that makes, if you're picking not six years solidly writing something, you pick it up, you put it down. You pick up.

Joel Tan: Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: That's not. That's not long.

Joel Tan: It's longer. I just haven't sat down to do the maths.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, fair enough. Yeah, fair enough. Would you say that you have a mission statement as a writer? I know I use that phrase a lot. That's probably not

helpful. But would you say that there are certain issues that you feel is your duty to speak on as a writer. You've sort of touched on that a little bit, but. Yeah. Or have you seen a thread in the work that you've created and gone, oh, that's where my heart tends to kind of lie.

Joel Tan: It's a couple of things, I think, like, because I mostly work in Singapore and I started working there, I found a lot of the work I write tends to address the Singapore situation. And, like, we've got a lot that's pretty messed up there. It's run by a pretty authoritarian government. there's a lot of censorship, and there's a whole bunch of social issues that are just constantly worth talking about in Singapore. And so I find myself gravitating to writing

00:10:00

Joel Tan: about authoritarianism and writing about, political realities and ordinary people going through, living life under political duress. And I think that's just because of where I come from, where it's constantly in the air. And lately I feel like that's been sort of tracking my work as well. Like, a lot of my plays are about ordinary people who are moving through broken systems or who are, living under the yolk of, oppression. And I don't know why I feel like the theatre feels like a place where you can release this kind of stuff, I guess. Yeah. And lately, too, I've been writing a lot about ghosts and spirits, [they both mumble in ascent]

Susan Wokoma: Why do you think you've been leaning towards that?

Joel Tan: I've gotten a lot witchier in recent years. Yeah. I mean, I think it is because of my Christian upbringing, funnily enough, where it's, like, from a young age you're taught

that, like, there's a spiritual realm that's constantly trying to effect change in the world of, like, flesh and blood. And I think that kind of stuck. And I'm fascinated by ghosts and spirits. And sometimes I think, like, a lot of the political issues we deal with today, you know, like colonialism, for example. Right. Which is a huge one. Like, you can think about it really intellectually, and you can think about it, like a political scientist, but that's not going to address a lot of the reality of how people experience that today. How people experience history is primarily spiritual. Right. And it's about, like, hauntings and how the ghosts of, like, you know, people, oppressed, people past, still live on with us. Right. So I feel like there's something to it. And I feel like the theatre is also a kind of, like, ghostly space. Like you know, for two hours, you conjure, like, these flickering images on stage. Right. And there's something really ghostly about that. and I feel like there's something about the theatre that, allows us to access something quite spiritual. And I feel like this is probably true of theatre traditions all over the world. Right. Like in Indonesia, near where I live. like, there's a deep connection between theatre and, like, spiritual. Spiritual life.

Susan Wokoma: Absolutely. The idea of conjuring, that's sort of what you. What you're doing. And then you have all these people often in the dark, watching, that there's this agreement to participate in this thing. And then, as well as even just like, the spaces in which theatre takes place in, you have echoes. And that has history in terms of who has literally walked into that space and what they've put out into the world. I'm very witchy, by the way, as well. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, Big time. But again, I think because of my. My upbringing, my Christian upbringing, you know?

Joel Tan: There's something about it.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, absolutely.

Joel Tan: A Protestant, you said, right? No, Pentecostal. Pentecostal, yeah. That's super ghosty.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, ghosty. Belief in, like, real belief in, like, angels, devils, that's kind of like the fearful thing. And then we are going to get to your play because I'm trying to do two halves of the podcast and I'm slipping into your play! But the idea of, like, colonialism and, I always find it really fascinating in terms of what, I grew up believing and being taught is belief and then realizing that actually that was brought over and there's a whole kind of treasure chest of beliefs and different belief systems that have been sort of put away and seen as, like, wrong or evil. But actually that's. That's got more DNA in terms of who I am or, you know.

Joel Tan: On a cellular level.

Susan Wokoma: Yeah. I find it completely fascinating, just to pivot before we. Because I am really trying to do this in two halves. But I really want to start talking about your play. But we will, What would you say is the thing that you most enjoy as a playwright? What aspect of playwrighting do you most enjoy?

Joel Tan: Oh, God. Mess around with form, I think. Yeah. And I don't know why, but I feel like there's something, intrinsically political about form and, like, I guess, like, I'm sort of interested in what you can do when you don't accept naturalism as a starting point. Right. And how you can use form to, enhance, political ideas or even kind of translate political ideas. Right. Some things Just don't want to fit in this tidy box. And like, exploding form has always been kind of like really fun for me. Yeah. And I know that sounds so nerdy to say, but I really do enjoy sitting. I enjoy reading plays and thinking about, funny forms and. Yeah.

Susan Wokoma: okay, what is the thing that you least like about playwriting?

Joel Tan: Writing. [they laugh] Oh God.

Susan Wokoma: I had a feeling you were gonna say something like that.

Joel Tan: Oh God, yeah.

Susan Wokoma: What was it that you hate about writing?

Joel Tan: It just feels like you've got homework due all the time, [laughter] doesn't it? Deadlines, deadlines, deadlines, deadlines. Oh, even if you don't have. Like if you're not working on something for someone, it's this feeling like, ah, there's this play I've got to write and it's like you're constantly owing. I don't know which writer said it, but like being a writer, they said feels like constantly owing homework all the time. After I read that, I just sort of internalised it and it's my mantra now. Yeah, that's what I hate about it. Just the sense of like,

00:15:00

Joel Tan: obligation. Yeah, fair enough.

Susan Wokoma: okay, now we can talk about your play, Scenes from a Repatriation. Can you just give us a brief synopsis, if it's possible, of what this play is about?

Joel Tan: Okay, I'll try.

Susan Wokoma: I know I've sort of thrown you into it, but I think it should come from you.

Joel Tan: Right. I might not even do a very good job of it.

Susan Wokoma: It does. Well, they're gonna come and see it, so it's fine.

Joel Tan: Okay. Yeah, come see. Come see it. In case I do a bad job. There is a thousand year old statue of the Bodhisattva Guan Yin, who is kind of seen as a goddess of mercy, throughout various East Asian and various other Asian cultures. And this statue lives in the British Museum, and it emerges, throughout the course of the play that of course the provenance of this statue is pretty spotty and that the statue was stolen from its original home, which was in China. And then of course there's this massive claim, from China to repatriate the statue. But at the same time there is a kind of political disturbance happening in China that's casting a shadow on the conversation around whether or not the statue should be returned. So that's the broad strokes of the play. But actually the play follows different people and their kind of relationships with the statue. So, you know, you have all sorts. The play is broken into scenes, right. And each scene kind of centers in on a different person and their relationship with art or the statue or empire. And so, you know, the big repatriation story is sort of in the background, I would say. And it's really about all these kind of strange encounters people have with the statue.

Susan Wokoma: I absolutely loved reading it, but. But I feel so. Because it is done in, written, put together in scenes. And it's one of those plays that you read going I'm so fascinated in how it's going. We spoke about this briefly, how it's going to be presented visually. But I feel like a lot the conversation of, particularly the British Museum and

what's in there been in bronzes. This conversation has been happening a lot. And I personally have been waiting for the play, the piece of art, to really dissect it. And that's what you've done here. And what's so beautiful about the way that you've chosen to structure the play is that it's so reminiscent of when you do go to a museum and all the kind of different lives that pass. These really kind of important, significant, works of art which people might have a relationship to or not. It's kind of like, I don't want to give too much away, but it's kind of like you can see this statue, what it observes, what it experiences, the lives that just pass by it as it's there. It's really, really, really powerful stuff and [I] can't wait for it. So, how did this idea come to you? When did this idea come to you?

Joel Tan: When I moved to the UK for school in 2017, I went to the British Museum for the first time.

Susan Wokoma: It's always a trip, isn't it?

Joel Tan: A surprise to no one! It was a very aggravating experience for me. I had no idea what to expect. I walk in and then you see the architecture and everything in there is just so commanding and makes you feel so small. And it's like telling you something about itself. That building is telling you we, this authority, this institution and the culture that built it, have like an authority over knowledge and knowledges. Right. And so, you know, something about the architecture really started pissing me off. And then as I wandered through, like, the Grand Atrium, I think that's what it's called. Like, I saw these two, Chinese statues, which I sort of recognized from back home. And not the exact statues, but the form of the statue. And when I went to read at the plaque, they said, like, these statues typically overlook family mausoleums or temples. And they were literally overlooking the gift shop. And there was something about that display that

I found very upsetting. And then not too far away was a kind of like First Nations totem pole. And, you know, in the middle of a cafe. And then I walk into a stairwell and in the middle of this circular stairway is this massive Buddha. And I'm not sure if it's still displayed there, but it was like this massive, massive Buddha that was up maybe three floors and you encounter it by going round and that.... I think that was the kicker for me because I just thought that was something just incredibly aggravating and disrespectful about that placement. And that got me really fascinated with, I never thought about it before until I went to British museum, made me start thinking about the politics of museums and the politics of display. And that's when I started finding out even more about all this: looting and the dodgy provenance of so many objects in that building.

00:20:00

Joel Tan: And the stories just continued to evolve and, you know, like, more stuff has come up in the years since I started writing this play. And, yeah, it just seems to never end. But, yeah, that got me started thinking about it and so I sat down to write this play and, that was like maybe, what, five, six years? Oh, yeah. Actually, this play has taken a long time. Yeah,

Susan Wokoma: That's brilliant. I used to, like so many actors, I used to waitress. And I remember, I don't think. I think I'd only been to the British Museum as a kid on the school trip. Wasn't really sure what I was seeing. But then there's something about being a waitress in these big buildings where everyone's gone and it's late and it's quiet and you're just walking round. And that was my kind of experience of going, you know, I don't think any. Like, these things should not be here when you have time with it. And that's, I think, for me, what I got so viscerally from reading your play is that experience of having time with something and it affecting me rather than in kind of like a school

way, which is the going up the stairs, going round.

Joel Tan: It's when the object is not, an object of a gaze, right? Because it's like when it's filled with people and everybody's just wandering through, every object sort of recedes into the background, almost like. Almost like background dressing. And you don't actually engage with objects in the way that they ought to.

Susan Wokoma: So, the play takes form in a series of scenes involving the statue. So you have a cleaner at the museum who prays in front of it, which is attempt to partake in a traditional ceremony before being removed by museum security. Are these the kind of situations that came to you over the course of the five, six years? And is it freeing to be able to think about constructing a play without sort of going. And then this person's related to this person and then this what's happened? Is it just more of a kind of instinctive process to just think about this beginning, middle and end? Even though we do meet characters throughout.

Joel Tan: But, yeah, actually the first attempt at the play, which was called Love in the Time of the Ancients. And this was. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Was, Very, very different to the version we have now. So, like, the seed of the play took form where we would go backwards in time to kind of trace the lineage and the movements of the statue. And, Yeah, that was a lot more concerned with sort of threading through who was who to whom, because it was trying to create this historical lineage. But when I sat down to kind of really attack it again, when I started developing it at the Royal Court, something told me to go forward in time instead. And so the play now moves forward and it's kind of rooted entirely in the contemporary. And it's not. It doesn't, you know, it doesn't concern itself that much with the historical truth of the statue. And, I just found that a lot more liberating, actually, to just be able to kind of be quite associative and to go, yeah,

whose perspective haven't I considered yet? Yeah

Susan Wokoma: Yeah. That's why. that's so true. Because I feel like sometimes when you are trying to tackle, a subject as big and vast as, like, colonialism, there can be sometimes a kind of, like, reverence to what the truth is. And what this allows is actually you can kind of emotionally experience what you're trying to say without going, and this date da, da, da, da, da. And this like. Yeah, that's right.

Joel Tan: I guess I was always trying to make an argument. I think that, like, the way these objects that we collect and display should be constituted are quite multiple. Right? It's multiple gazes that are looking at these objects, and they are composed by multiple readings. And they've been in these museums for so long that this placement in the museum is also part of its history. And so I just wanted to include as many points of view, as many eyes as many gazes, as possible.

Susan Wokoma: Do you feel like having. So this is sort of not pivoting from the play, but do you feel like having statues and artifacts and pieces like that taken away from their lands? Do you think that's dangerous?

Joel Tan: Dangerous?

Susan Wokoma: yeah.

Joel Tan: For the statues?

Susan Wokoma: No. I think. I guess what I'm trying to do is say what I feel, but I'll pose the question to you. But, I feel like when you tamper with things and you try to keep

them in there, literally keep them in that place, that is dangerous. I've sort of always felt like the British Museum is a haunted place.

Joel Tan: It is! And I think in answer to your question, then, yes, I feel like there is something very spiritually disturbed about that building. And actually, most of these, ethnographic museums that collect a lot of stolen art, they mishmash traditions, materials, images from all sorts of different spiritual practices and sort of, like, jam them together as if, like, they speak to each other when maybe they don't. And I feel like the spiritual signatures,

00:25:00

Joel Tan: like, you know, I think objects carry spirits with them. Yeah,

Susan Wokoma: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Joel Tan: And I don't know. It can't be a happy place. Yeah. And the play gestures to that a little bit. Like the sense that there is a kind of spiritual disturbance at work underneath. Underneath it all. I'm very interested in that.

Susan Wokoma: Ah, yeah. I definitely, definitely got that feeling of, like, it permeates from not just the statue, it's. The entire space feels dangerous. But I feel like that is a really interesting, space to bring the audience into. Like, when you feel like you are. I guess it's that what we talked about in terms of, the, you know, theatre being ghostly and haunted, not necessarily with things that are bad, but if that. If you're trying to kind of explain or, communicate that having something that doesn't belong there is dangerous, it makes the space quite dangerous, but in a fascinating way, because

you're all going to book tickets and see the show. I just want to end our time, because we are coming to the end.

Joel Tan: Oh! That's quick.

Susan Wokoma: I know it's quick in it. So you do have a prior relationship with the Royal Court, taking part in the Living newspaper. What does it mean to you to have your play here at the Royal Court?

Joel Tan: I still haven't really processed it because some of my favourite playwrights have been staged here. And it feels like such a joy to have my work presented in that lineage. And, I mean, I love this building and I love everything they do for writers. And it feels really, really good to be seen I think, and to have my work, championed, by this theatre. So all round good vibes, I think. I'm also terrified because, you know, of the legacy of this building. And, yeah, I just, I hope it goes very well.

Susan Wokoma: Joel, I'm sure it will. Thank you so much for joining me.

Joel Tan: Thank you.

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 royalcourttheatre.com follow us at Royalcourt Theatre on Instagram and and Royal Court on X. Tune in next week for another episode in this series of the Royal Court Theatre Playwrights Podcast. See you soon.

00:27:23