“Phillis Wheatley Peters On Stage” Podcast Transcript: *Episode 1*



*\*Note: This transcript has been edited from the original audio for clarity and ease of reading.\**

**Colleen:** Hello everyone! My name is Colleen Wyrick, and I'm one of the undergraduate student contributors to the *Genius of Phillis Wheatley Peters* project. Welcome to “Wheatley on Stage” a podcast that explores Phillis’ many depictions in theatre throughout time. Today, I am joined by the wonderful playwright behind *Phillis in London*, which reimagines Phillis in Europe's greatest capital city, at the height of the slave trade, on the cusp of the American Revolution. Please welcome [Ade Solanke](https://www.sporastories.com/about/), writer and academic.

**ADE:** Hi, thank you so much for having me. Nice to be with you!

**Colleen:** It's so exciting to have you here! Before we get started, I would love it if you could tell the listeners a little bit about yourself, your background, and how your passions for theater and playwriting came to be.

**ADE:** Oh, absolutely. But just first to say this is such a great project to be part of and I'm really grateful to be included. I've looked at the materials, and I'm enjoying the work that's been produced so far.

I'm a writer. I'm also an academic. And this project brings together some of my passions, namely, writing about writing. Phillis, as a writer, is of interest to me. I've also been a journalist, so I've been interested in factual writing and the history side of it is really interesting and appealing. Apart from being a journalist, I've also been involved in the arts and the cultural world for about 30-odd years, working with different projects. So, I'm interested in the general field of culture and how it connects to how we live, how we relate to each other, what kind of world we inhabit, making art, through art experiencing other stories through theater and visual art, and all sorts of other forms of expression. I actually came to theater, I would say fairly late in the last 10 or 11 years. I came first into nonfiction writing as a journalist and then into fiction as a screenwriter. I studied at USC, Screenwriting at USC film school, and that I suppose, inspired my love of Dramatic Writing. Playwrighting and stage writing, the stage and the screen, have lots in common. Although with the stage, obviously, you're, offering a live experience, rather. And I've been developing the material first as the theater’s play, but I'm also developing a TV series which will be, you know, the recorded version of the story, which gives me the scope for lots more locations, lots more characters, a wider, a bigger canvas to stage this, I think, incredible story on.

**Colleen:** That's so amazing. I did not know about the TV series that is so exciting. Moving on kind of in that direction, what about Phillis Wheatley, in particular, stood out to you and why did you decide to select her as your subject?

**ADE:** That's a really good question because as you and your listeners will know, any creative project involves so much time, so much effort. I've been working on this particular story for around eight years and it's actually probably the project I've worked on the longest. I've done other things in between, but it's been, you know, you might call it on my back in a good way, for the last eight, nine years. And I've done various versions, I've done lots of readings of the place. So that's a long-winded way of saying it has to be something really engrossing and engaging for a writer to spend that much time in that world with a particular character, with a particular set of themes and issues. And I think, more than anything else, I'm interested in the story of a writer at the point at which Phillis is living.

The 1770s, at first, when I began to research, seemed a really, really long, long time ago, very remote. But now I've really been living in that world for so long and seen so many parallels between then and now. I'm actually thinking of this less as a historical piece. So, what first attracted me was to explore what I thought was, if you like, my own personal backstory, as an African, as a woman, as a writer… She, you know, echoes my own lived experience in those ways. And I thought, “Well, it'd be interesting to see what it was like back then.” But the interesting thing is, as I really grappled with the material and understood so much more, it's really interesting how contemporary a lot of her story is. And I think I was surprised by that if I'm honest. 250 years sounded, at first, like a really long time ago. Now I think, oh, gosh, it's just a blink. Lots has changed. Of course, we can't deny the changes, but so much actually remains the same, which is why it's history which really speaks to now. It’s history which, really, is about today and the legacies of slavery that we walk through every day of our lives today.

One of my goals as an artist is to really represent untold stories and to give voice to so many of the- we call them “Hidden Figures”- and that's a polite way of saying, you know, buried stories. We’re going through a moment when there is, you know, a real war about what should be taught, what should be experienced in schools, and a similar debate applies to what should be on stage and on screen, and even on the page. So, I was also inspired to tell the story of an African woman writer, because it's still quite unusual to have a black female protagonist at the center of a story. And I think it's, you know, part of my job as a writer to address that, and redress it, actually. So, I thought, apart from those motivations, and the most important thing is, you know, a great story well told. So even if I wasn't particularly interested in telling these untold stories, I would have jumped at the chance as I have done to explore Phillis, because the level of conflict and struggle, external, interpersonal, and internal, that it encompasses… it really does make it the most perfect material for somebody who wants to dramatize a story. It's kind of got, well, so much built-in conflict, that it's kind of writing itself, which doesn't mean it's been an easy story to write because there are lots of areas of the story that have been challenging.

**Colleen:** So, going with that, what about Wheatley translated easily to the stage? What was more challenging to portray?

**ADE:** What translated easily to the stage is what's always going to be like the very first requirement for me of a viable stage project: a really interesting and complex central character, and a set of relationships that that character engages in which audiences will recognize and be engaged by. I don't expect people to come to see this play, because it's a good thing, a dutiful thing, a worthy thing to do. Come and see a really interesting character grapple with very live issues. And I think it's the challenges in writing the play that it's not paradoxical. It's actually, I suppose, often the case, what we as the artists grapple with, is where we find the juicy meaning, the real texture of the play.

One of the issues that come up working with Phillis’ story, is, you know, was she an apologist for slavery? There’re so many people who consider her you know, you could call her a sellout. And that was one of the things that attracted me. I thought, “Well, it's all very well, for us to point the finger and accuse her.” Some really interesting books… [*The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*](https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Gates_Phillis.pdf) by Henry Louis Gates was one of the books I read at the start of the research. He wrote really eloquently about the 60s or 70s, and the reaction from, you know, the nationalists to Phillis Wheatley, who had written words, which when I first started reading her work made me kind of bulk. And then I thought, well, let's dig deeper. And it's always in the digging deeper that you get to the *real* material. So, one of the things I'm exploring is, you know, where she stood on the issue of slavery. And if she didn't stand, and denounce it explicitly, does that make her a sellout? Or is it as a woman- and let's not forget, she was a teenage woman, and let's not forget, she was an enslaved woman- was it to do with the fact that those conditions made her expression different? So, I've been challenged in ways that have made it more fruitful as a writer. She's not, and this is interesting for me, somebody like [Sojourner Truth](https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/sojourner-truth) or [Harriet Tubman](https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/harriet-tubman) or [Frederick Douglass](https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/frederick-douglass). You know, the [film](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GqoEs4cG6Uw) about Harriet Tubman was amazing and at the same time, I thought, “Well, Phillis is interesting because she's not like Harriet.” She didn't go to war against slavery in the way that those other freedom fighters you could call them did. So, what was her position? It's a more complex character. But if you read between the lines in her poetry, you really get to understand where she was coming from.

It's not my job as the writer to give the audience the answer to that question, you know, where did Phillis stand? My job is to pose the question in a way that engages an audience and makes them ask the question and answer it for themselves. That's more interesting for me. So, I don't decree where I think she stood (although I've got a view of that). But I create a set of dynamics and conflicts, which leads the audience to answer the question themselves. And that, again, is a question you might ask of contemporary players in this continuing drama around social justice, and racial justice, where do people stand? It's a choice. People make decisions now, which parallel the decisions people were making 250 years ago: how much to speak out against racism in your institution, in your organization. Institutions of higher education are not exempt from this arena. People make choices all the time. So, I'm watching it, I'm living it, and then I'm replaying it through Phillis’ story.

**Colleen:** I love the idea of leaving things up to translation and kind of questioning what the audience might think and how they might interpret Phillis’ character. So, with that, when you were crafting *Phillis in London*, where did you feel that it was essential to stick to historical facts of her life versus taking creative liberties, and what were some of those elements?

**ADE:** I've taken lots of liberties and I hope she's looking down, sorry Phillis! But my job is my audience and my duty is to do as honest a rendition of her life as possible, but also to offer the audience an artistic experience. So, I do take lots of liberties. I introduce her to people she didn't really meet. I put her in locations she didn't really go to. I put words in her mouth, which I'm inventing. But I do stick to the truth of it all. I tamper with the facts, but I stick to the truth as I've interpreted her truth, the truth of her situation to be.

So, one of the things that interested me was her coming to London. I'm interested in her story, but I'm a Londoner by birth. I grew up in West London and I was born in London. I love London. And I wanted to really explore what it would be to have an African American land in the midst of [Georgian African London](https://www.haringey.gov.uk/culture/black-history/timeline/georgian), which was quite a considerable space. People like [Ignatius Sancho](https://www.bl.uk/people/ignatius-sancho), who was one of the other inspirations, wrote a really moving letter about her and expressed his contempt for the Wheatleys, who were ostensibly, obviously, nurturing her talent, supporting her talent, parading her (as he put it) around London… and yet all the while keeping her enslaved. So he questioned them. I think he called them hypocrites. So, I wanted him in the story, because his feeling, the feeling that emerged from that letter was so powerful. I wondered what it would have been like for him to have met her. It doesn't seem from his letters, or from hers, that they actually did meet. However, I staged that relationship because it's, for me, so moving. He was almost like a father figure to several enslaved young people in London. He actually was known as someone that young men in particular would go to for support. As many like Phillis, being stolen from Africa, were orphans, they had no family. That's really also become so clear to me, as I've been researching the material, the number of people who just didn't know any of their real family. That natal alienation is a deep part of the experience of enslavement that I hadn't thought about as much as I've now begun to really understand. You know, we see pictures of enslaved people having to toil in the woods and work and deal with all sorts of physical manifestations of entrapment. But the worst part, to an extent, is being severed so brutally from your roots. So, you know, Phillis, in some respects, had a family. The Wheatleys, especially Susanna Wheatley, certainly had, you know, an emotional attachment to her. There's no doubt about that. But there are so many young people who had no family. Sancho himself was famously born on a slave ship. His mother died in childbirth. Apparently, his father committed suicide we're told. So, he is a character in my mind, having found his freedom, having found love and marriage and family (he had seven children) ... he's a model of what you can be in spite of the ravages and the horrors of being kidnapped and enslaved. You can still have life, you can still make a life. I think Phillis would have been grappling with so many of those issues.

Coming to London, seeing a whole set of new realities- different types of white people. The English of that era were so different from the colonial descendants of the English she would have met in Boston. (The Wheatleys are obviously English descendants, but I think 150 years after their ancestors had arrived in the New Land, as they call it.) So, London was one of the things I wanted to explore and celebrate, as well as you know, the general, not just the African London of the day, but the general London, you know, the [Bluestockings](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bluestocking-British-literary-society). This is a period when women were beginning to assert themselves and have a stake in the literary world. The Bluestockings have always interested me. So, I have an opportunity to explore the Bluestockings, the [Hester Thrales](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hester-Lynch-Piozzi), and the [Elizabeth Montagues](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Elizabeth-Montagu), and all of those women. At the time, and it's still so weird to think, the idea of having a salon where men and women converse as equals was a big deal. That's just amazing to think about. So, as I said at the start, so much remains the same. There's a lot of unfinished business to do with female emancipation, and yet we've moved on from *that* being a thing. So, London was a character that I wanted to include. The Georgians such as Sancho… ([Equiano](https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-life-of-olaudah-equinao) was actually on an expedition I would have loved to have him. So, to answer your question, he wasn't literally in London at the time. I've resisted pulling him into the story because I know factually, he wasn't there.) But Sancho was around. [Francis Barber](https://blackpresence.co.uk/francis-barber/), who was the son, let's call him, of [Samuel Johnson](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Samuel-Johnson), a literary guru of the age. He was in town and he was still very close to Mr. Johnson, who, as you know, actually treated him as a son in his will and left his worldly goods to him. I read a book called *Black England*. I think was [*Black England*](https://gretchengerzina.com/black-england.html). That's it, and that opened up a whole world of the characters [Dido Belle](https://www.history.co.uk/articles/the-story-of-dido-elizabeth-belle-britain-s-first-black-aristocrat) was in London, but halfway across London in the mansion of Lord Mansfield, Kenwood House.

So, a really interesting array of characters, and obviously, the conflicts that were going on around slavery at the same time as the conflict around American independence. Those two things give me a really interesting social backdrop against which to position the story of a brilliant young woman contemplating the next stage in her life; whether to stay in England or return. My other enduring interest as a writer is diaspora. As I said, I was born in London, both my parents are Nigerian. So, I've always been an African abroad in the diaspora, and I thought of her in that same sense. She's an African woman writer abroad.

**Colleen:** To hear more of the conversation regarding the play *Phillis in London,* make sure to check out Episode 2 of the “Phillis Wheatley Peters on Stage” podcast. Coming soon!