

“Phillis Wheatley Peters On Stage” Podcast Transcript: *Episode 2*



*\*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](#), writer and academic.

This is a continuation of our discussion from [Episode 1](#), so if you feel lost, make sure you give that episode a listen first and then come back here and join us in *Episode 2*.

What do you think (now) is the balance between art and artistic representation and accurate historical representation in modern theatre and productions like yours?

**ADE:** Yeah, there's so many and it's become quite an obsession, in a way. I was just reading a report about a new play coming up in New York, which is looking at the [Salem Witch Trials](#). I'm interested in seeing that because the writer is exploring more from the female point of view, not [John Proctor](#). [Arthur Miller](#) had a certain set of protagonists and we can look at the story in a different way. [Tituba](#), you know, the first woman to be accused in that as obviously an enslaved African woman. So, there isn't any obvious way that you need to, as a writer, balance the different competing demands of history and, if you like, the art, but I always think of what [Hilary Mantel](#) once said; I think she said history stories are about real people who happen to be dead, and the important thing is that they're real and could be sitting next to us living with us, except that they're dead (250 years dead or 300 years dead).

I did a play about [Henry the Eighth and Cromwell](#) a few years ago. I realized as I was writing that piece that in order to bring them to life on stage, I had to put my life into their lives if that makes any sense. So, it's a bit of a tightrope and the only way I find to make the art from history palatable of interest to audiences is to find the ways in which those situations and characters speak about my life and my times. In other words, to blur the distance between art and history. The history is now. If I think about it as the past, then it's almost like a fossilized version. I don't have to have absolute fidelity to what it was really like because my audiences today aren't back there, they are here. The job is to be as faithful to the truth of the story as possible, but then

reconfigure it all to speak to the audience here and now. I'm interested in the way in which a lot of modern theater is really interested in that project. Obviously, it's not an interest in the past, it's an interest in ourselves. We're always most interested in ourselves, I think.

I bring in characters whom I know she [Phillis] didn't actually meet. I put her in places she didn't go to, but most of the characters in the story are real people who were there in London: Americans whom I read about who actually came to London and were involved in different aspects of the revolutionary moment. [Ben Franklin](#) is on the record, [she met with him](#). I have her meet [Granville Sharp](#), who she actually did meet, as you know, in person in truth. So, it's taking what's factually accurate and then working it into a story so that all those encounters contribute to the drama I'm building for her. And the drama is, you know, the choice between staying in [post-Somerset, London](#), which, as we know, gave any enslaved person brought from the colonies to the UK, the option to stay; they could not be legally forcibly removed, and taken back to where they'd been enslaved. That happened in 1772. Everyone in New England was aware of it. So, it gave her a conflict to explore- stay or go- which I think is always a dramatic one.

**Colleen:** You mentioned your audiences of today and how you have to tailor a little bit to make the play a little bit about them, but what do you hope that audiences learn and take away from *Phillis in London* as or after they view it?

**ADE:** Yeah, it's really interesting. There are so many people who are interested. I was in Boston for five or six months, as you know, and that was absolutely a revelation. I'd been exploring and developing the story in London. Then coming to Boston, which was really important because I realized I had to know about the backstory; she's only in London for six weeks of her life. She spent 12 years before London in Boston, and obviously, her story starts in Africa. (We haven't got much information about that.) There was information about Boston. There are still buildings standing. [Old South Meeting House](#), which was actually just down the road from where I ended up living, is the space she actually worshiped in. I think she was baptized there. So going into that space and just sitting there was really moving. Along with Old South, I went to Old North: very interesting in terms of the lore about the revolution and the lanterns and [Paul Revere](#). So, I wanted to get a taste and be in those spaces to really revisit and reimagine what it was like in the years leading up to her trip to London. [The Boston Massacre](#) had happened three years earlier on her actual street (on what was then called King Street). I actually ended up living on what is the same street, now called State Street, for obvious reasons.

**Colleen:** Wow.

**ADE:** But I was living on the same street for the last two or three months of my stay, walking past Kirby Street and King Street where the Wheatley's mansion had been. It was a very, you could call it, immersive experience, a kind of upsetting experience in lots of ways. Ugh, it was hard, because I then discovered that five minutes up the road at the top of State Street (then called King Street) is the place called [Long Wharf](#), which is apparently where the slave ship, [The Phillis](#), which brought her from Africa to America was docked. There's actually a marker there talking about the many years it was used as a disembarkation point for captive Africans. That's just up the road from where I was staying, within kind of view of where I was. Opposite where I stayed was [Faneuil Hall](#) which was, as you know, a slave market for many, many years, along

with being one of the meeting places where people gathered to protest and resist the British occupation and to organize for the [Revolutionary War](#). It was a slave market, and it's now a popular shopping mall. I moved there just before Christmas. There were the Christmas trees and all the trappings of Christmas. It took me a little while and then I realized, "Oh, my goodness, this history is kind of underneath all of this. It's not very far underneath, but it's right there." (There is an [interpretation](#) on some parts of the building.) So, I was walking the streets she'd walked and going through spaces that had a direct connection to her, and this is true of lots of different parts of Boston. [Boston Common](#), founded in (what was it?) 1634 was a popular market. She would have definitely been walking in those spaces. It was a sobering couple of months when I lived on State Street. I mean, I had a really interesting experience being there. But it also brought home to me that this is real, actually. That's what made me realize. Of course, I knew it was real, but it made it even more so.

**Colleen:** I apologize. I'll throw you a question that I didn't prepare you for. How do you think that stay in Boston altered your perception of Wheatley or influenced your writing?

**ADE:** Well, it has influenced it because one of the things about Phillis' story that's always, I would say, made me a little nervous is she had a very unusual experience because of the way Susanna Wheatley responded to her, treated her, apparently projected lots of feelings to do with Susanna's lost daughter. Susanna Wheatley lost a daughter who would have been the same age as Phillis and that affected her relationship with Phillis. Phillis called Susanna, her mother, her sister, her best friend; there was obviously a very strong bond there. But my worry has been sometimes, I don't want people to think slavery wasn't that bad. You know, this one example, can almost cancel out what most people experience which was utter subjugation and violence and all that we know slavery entailed. So being there, and walking in her shoes, made me, helped me, see that for all of the, let's say "good fortune" that Phillis had enjoyed because of her "sponsorship", you might call it and because of the feeling that Susanna had for her, none of that really made any difference in terms of the fact she was, if not experiencing, she was seeing people being brought. Captives were just being brought still to Long Wharf while she was living there. She was probably around seven when she was brought to America. So as a child, she would have seen the other forlorn and bedraggled people who were being brought to the market. The slave market was just opposite her house, literally. So, she would have seen, not many children, as you know, but often adults who came on those ships. And we cannot ever forget that she survived the [Middle Passage](#). Only, I think, a third of the people who made, that journey survived it. I can't remember the exact figures. But she was a child who was a little girl standing on Long Wharf naked at a certain point in her life, and she would have been reminded on a daily basis of that trauma because it was all around her. She would have seen the people who were in the notices, as runaways. "This person has run away. This is what they were wearing." You've read them. I've read them. She could read! She could read those notices. She could read the newspapers where those kidnapped people were being advertised for sale. It changed my sense of her, if you like, privilege. There was a certain level on which she had escaped some of the hardships, the physical probation, the mental and physical torture that many enslaved people endured, but she witnessed it. She was steeped in it. She sat in a church that was segregated.

One of the differences living on State Street made was, although most of the characters, in fact, ALL of the other characters in the play are real people, the one character whom I've invented and

introduced as complete fiction is an enslaved woman who's having the opposite experience of Phillis, who's being abused, who's being physically, well let's call it what it is, tortured, by her enslavers. And I've introduced her as an antidote to people having the possible impression that slavery wasn't that bad.

So, being in Boston I also have been to the Medford House of Isaac Royall. It's now called the [Isaac Royall House and Slave Quarters](#) in Medford, which was a house owned by the largest enslaver in the whole of New England. Isaac Royall had been a British heritage Antiguan slave trader and had come to Boston because of the number of insurrections and they couldn't cope with all the resistance. He'd recreated, unusually for New England, a Caribbean-style plantation up in Medford, just five minutes from [Tufts University](#). I went to visit that space and that was a really eye-opening experience because the image that I remember most is seeing, outside the bedroom, these kinds of mats and being told that this is where people were left to sleep so that at any time of day or night- like having a pet sleep outside your room- they were there to tend to whatever was needed. At any time, day or night. And that really brought some of the lived experience of enslaved people home to me. Phillis had a room. Phillis had a bed. Phillis had a desk and chair and papers and pens and lamps (not lamps obviously, candlelight) at whatever time. So, seeing those mats outside the bedrooms of the members of the family at that house, again really brought home to me "Okay, Phillis is in a mansion a few steps from where I'm staying. She's lived in one kind of reality, an unusual kind of comfortable-ish enslavement." Not that she's happy. She's unfree. She's still in captivity, but not the material deprivations that registered so clearly when I went to the house and slave quarters in Medford. So, I invented another character called Dina, who's having the more ordinary enslaved experience. And she's a completely fictional character, although she's based on some of the stories I read when I visited that house.

**Colleen:** To hear the final installment of our conversation regarding the play *Phillis in London*, make sure to check out Episode 3 of the "Phillis Wheatley Peters On Stage" podcast. Coming soon!