

Peter Sellars LiveWell Part 2: A Culture of Care

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SPEAKERS

Dr. Wendy Slusser, Peter Sellars



Peter Sellars 00:01

What is what is waiting for you on the other side of that obstacle? Those are the kinds of visions that we need right now. And that's where artists are trained. They're trained into seeing into darkness. They're trained into seeing near and far, they're trained into seeing what is on the other side of the obstacle that is awaiting us.



Dr. Wendy Slusser 00:25

Hi, everybody, we're so happy to welcome you back to the live well podcast, and specifically to today's episode, the second part of our interview with Peter Sellers, a world renowned theatre and opera director, distinguished UCLA professor, MacArthur Fellow, and artist, academic extraordinaire. Really, for those who haven't listened yet, we highly, highly recommend you go back and listen to part one. Part two will be here waiting for you. It'll make this conversation all the more enjoyable and inspiring. So today, listening to Peter stories, about seeing through obstacles and embracing controversy in one's art, we will more deeply understand the impact of an artistic life dedicated to bringing justice to the world around us. Let's pick up where we left off and enjoy. So when we talk about music, and theater and sports, there's this pronounced communal aspect to them? Can you tell us a bit more about how these spaces are shared and interconnected, both in the past and the present?



Peter Sellars 01:40

Well, you know, again, what's so beautiful about being alive at this moment in history is we are in contact with people all over the planet. And there is, you know, thank God for the CIA, that we have the internet. So that we have this incredible way in which we can be in touch with people, we can be sending things back and forth, people can be in conversations that were never possible in human history. And so what's great is everything that is now in the Polo, there's not just one kind of music, there's not one kind of dance, there's not one kind of art, there's not one kind of sports. Now we're learning about the incredible range. And of course, when you get into Pacific Island, athletics, you get into Pacific island culture, you realize that,

you know, of course, in their landscape, what did they focus on as athletes? What do they focus on as artists? What are they focused on as storytellers and you're we are connecting to this all over the world. And so, you know, people living in the far north are now part of world culture. And, and, you know, and as Inupiat, you know, are sharing their myths with the world. You know, it's like, Excuse me, Homer is happening right this minute right now. Right on the, on the tundra. And that that sense that somewhere in the world right now, these incredible breakthroughs are being made. And now we have a way of hearing about them, and even participating. Because we're in touch electronically. That's phenomenal. And then the Olympics is a chance to meet everyone in person. That's the thrill is to have people you're sharing the planet with, and now you're sharing a meal. And that's powerful. Because sharing is the actual art form of the 21st century that we have to get a lot better at. It is we're realizing we have to share the water, we have to share the air, we have to share the resources, we have to share everything. Because the planet is made for sharing. And that's the news. That was not understood it previous the last couple centuries. And now in fact, we have to get good at a completely different set of skills. For one thing, one of the lessons you've learned in sports, right is you're not going to win the pennant every year, it's okay. What you don't want to actually do is kill the other team. Because you need someone to play next year. And in fact, if you really want the sport of soccer to be amazing, you want the other team to be really strong. And what you're realizing with sports is you need the whole constellation to be strong at its best. Because soccer is not at its best if there's one good team, and everyone else is not very good. Yeah, you actually have to support your competition. You actually have to create a situation where everybody has access to the finest resources. In order to keep the sport alive, you want great players on all the teams. So, the arts are the same thing the arts are about you wish everybody well, and you get everybody what they need. And it's not about Centers of Excellence, which we're done with, the Center of Excellence is anywhere, any human being lives, has to be a center of excellence. And the arts and sports are about that excellence, that excellence that is not only the right, but is in fact, the life goal of every human being, is to be a center of excellence. And so that space of sharing that space of realizing whatever you do, it's shared. And then that gets you into when I said this was not understood the last couple of centuries, it gets you into older cultures, which is a different way of thinking. And the reality is coming to our generation, in a way you can't deny it. So it's an incredibly important and exciting time to be alive, and to create new structures that put forward our shared existence.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 06:16

That reminds me of a performance that you directed recently, for the Los Angeles masters chorals production called music to accompany a departure and the representation of empathy that you put forth in that, and how storytelling can build other people's empathy. And I'd love to understand more about how you interpreted that choral masterpiece that you put together and what it means to what you just said.

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Peter Sellars 06:47

Well, wow, well, when the you know, the piece you're talking about was written in 1635, in central Germany, during the 30 years war, and one of Europe's most terrible plagues. And so I think people then we're going through something we're going through, which is, since then you're living in a world of unbelievable amount of violence, and that people are being taken from us in daily shootings, in wars that just spring up in a level of violence, that it's just the

undercurrent of the whole society, combined with health, that people are dying in incredible record numbers, because of environmental questions, and the plague in Europe. It decimated entire societies. And this music comes from people living through that simultaneous thing of it's not safe to go out. And what are we doing together? This music is called the pieces called music to accompany a departure written in 1635, from people who, who had to be many, many. Well, let's, let's say this, we live in the western world in a way that death is hidden, it's always happening somewhere else behind a closed door in some sanitized place. But of course, in 1635, there was no such thing and there were no hospitals. So everything that was going on, you couldn't miss it. And the streets were piles of corpses. So how do you keep going in this period? How do you not just shut down? And how do you recognize, first of all, that, in order to keep yourself alive, you have to be keeping other people alive. And, again, that health is what we're here. To offer each other. We're here to protect each other. But we're also here to take care of each other. And this question of care, which is the most important thing in life, a culture of care? What does it mean to have a culture of care, where this is not something that just happens in an emergency? This is an entire culture that is based on caring for people. And right now obviously, we're living in a culture that mostly offers people damaging choice after damaging choice after damaging choice, damaging themselves damaging our environment, damaging their society, damaging their family. It is so easy to damage yourself, or someone or the planet. It's so hard to protect them. That's should not be the case. What we have to do is make the culture of care much easier. And the culture of death. language much harder.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 10:01

Your level of empathy and bringing it and weaving it into your art, also, in a sense, has opened the doors for your ability to be controversial in your arts as well. Some folks, I think, have perceived it as controversial others, you know, welcome it. And I'd love to understand how this approach energizes your work, when you do weave potentially politically different views together and, and share it with others?

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Peter Sellars 10:31

Well, you know, controversy is basically built into being human. First of all, it's because there's no one point of view about anything in the world, because the world is not made. From one point of view, the world is made from multiple everything, everything is multiple. And so depending on where you're coming from, what your life experience is, you have a set of views, you have a way of understanding things. But somebody else who had different life experiences and other set of, you know, formative, formative kind of environmental situation has a completely different understanding of the world, but it's the same world. And so this sense of multiplicity is the most important thing. And that's why the US is, you know, sorry, but it's better than any other country in the history of the world, just because the idea of democracy that there are multiple voices, not one, it's not about one voice, one voice is fascism. And democracy is how many voices can we hear, and how many voices are participating? So that what we end up with is something of incredible richness, rather than reductionism. Because the most important things in your life do not reduce, they actually complexify. And complexity is exhilarating, complexity is thrilling. Complexity is like, no two leaves on that tree are the same whole level. Yes, they have the same shape, but they're totally different leaves. It's incredible. And you know, none of us are the same. Yeah, we have some things like, you know, they're like us, but we're not the same at all. And I think that we've come up through a period where of

globalization where we're told that we're all the same, but we're not equal. And the reality is, none of us are the same, and therefore we're equal. So in that sense, controversy, for me is just about saying, insisting that whatever is the going official view, it was like, Excuse me, no, it's totally inadequate. So it's actually must be challenged. And and that sense of the challenge, of course, is why we're alive. And that's, again, why you have a soccer game. It's because challenge is what we're rising to. It's about stepping up and rising to challenge.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 13:05

Peter, by you reframing controversy so it has a positive connotation, rather than a negative one, you really do shift its meaning, especially in conversations around art, when art is inherently representative of different points of views. So how can art challenge normative accepted ideas and get to some deeper truths that represent different worldviews?

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Peter Sellars 13:28

The arts are there for challenge, but they're there for a challenge that's not destructive. It's a challenge that not only makes you stronger, makes you smarter and makes you more flexible, makes you more alive. But gets us closer to way deeper truths. Because we've decided that certain things are true. When in fact, no, it's because they're convenient. For a few people, but ever been True. And so, for me, we're looking for much better truths, much deeper truths, then the kind of accepted truths that you know, are around us, and as I said, tend to be very nice for some people and not not nice at all, for lots of other people. So we need a better truth that, again, can be shared. So we have to challenge all the stuff that is past its use by date. And for me, it's like you know, feeding yogurt to your kids that you look at the date it was three years ago. Don't feed that to your kids. It's passed its use-by day and we're still giving it to the next generation. You say absolutely not. And that's for me, it's the joy of it is in the arts. You know, anger doesn't get you very far in life. Anger doesn't get you very far. I mean, yes, outrage, okay. There are things that are outrageous and should be absolutely pretend instead. But again, you don't want to let all the energy be sucked into the anger. And that means you need to spend a lot more energy on the creative part. How do we imagine something better and sustainable. And that, in fact, has its own properties of regeneration. And, healing. Because I think the end of the day, you know, we're all healers, we're here to be healers are here to hands on, help out with everything that's not working and with all the pain, and there's a lot of it is coming from a lot of sources. And we have to treat that. And we have to treat it seriously. Well, there's a great expression of love in Buddhism of Buddha has five eyes. And each eye has a special quality. And the first eye is like the eye that we all have that you've seen. Around you went, of course, everything you're really looking at what you're noticing is miraculous, the world of color, the world of light, and it's incredible. That eye number two, is the eye that can see in darkness. Whoa, wait a minute, what? Of course, our eyes need light to be able to see. Does it mean when you can see in darkness? What does it mean, when you can see dark things in your own self that are hidden? What does it mean to see and everything that's hidden in this inner darkness is not revealed, being able to see near and far, that is to say near and far are actually the same. And, and then the other thing is to be able to see through an obstacle, what's on the other side of an obstacle? What is what is waiting for you on the other side of that obstacle? Those are the kinds of visions that we meet right now. And that's where artists are trained. They're trained into seeing into darkness, they're trained into seeing near and far, they're trained into seeing what is on the other side of the obstacle that is awaiting us.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 17:22

Well, you teach this course at UCLA called art as moral action. And that really reflects what you just said, it's not only revealing a challenge for a community or a sector of the community, but it's also giving a perspective on how to approach it or manage it.

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Peter Sellars 17:43

And develop deep listening skills. Because you know, the more interesting truths and more true or truths are quite available. It's just depends on who you're listening to. And we've tended to place microphones in certain fairly obvious in standard and not very interesting places. And of course, the mission now is to be hearing lots of other voices and hearing them with depth hearing, recognizing there many, many, many other voices we need to be hearing. And the we, whoever the Wii is, we're thinking of is not inclusive enough. Whatever that we is, we're imagining we're part of guests get ready. You're part of a much deeper way. And what is the relation that allows you to use the word weigh, in weigh? Is your presence on Earth, supporting and working to heal anyone else?

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 18:50

From your point of view, what kind of structures or approach should we take to help move that concept forward?

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Peter Sellars 19:00

We're recognizing that lots of structures have have kind of a for profit mode are very limited, and they frequently reinforce wrong choices. Because you know, what makes a profit is weapons and pornography. The biggest moneymakers in the world. And if we're basing a society on what makes a profit, that's a pretty depressing picture. And meanwhile, what changed your life is your mom and feeding you every day and taking care of you and she didn't make any money from doing that. So like even basic things of like, wait a minute, what's wrong with this? Question. It's just like, you know, everything that's beautiful world doesn't pick up. Everything that's beautiful in the world. takes commitment. You invest, you don't make a profit, you invest. You pour everything you have into it. You pour your whole heart into it you pour your life into the prophet is that you did something worth doing. And it benefits everyone. And I think that those are the kind of ways of coming to, to who we are and what we're doing with our time. You know, and it's setting up structures that are reciprocal, that are mutual, that are, you know, allow people to be, can I just say equal, and, and I think equality is the project of the United States of America at its founding. And it is an ongoing project, and we are a long way, but it is the only thing worth working on.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 20:49

That gets back to your goal of culture of caring. And we were really working towards a culture of health as well, which is part of culture of caring. And I just sat with a biologist last week who was describing his work at UCLA, and it's all around this measurement of those that have

was describing his work at UCLA, and it's all around this measurement or those that have purpose is basically Eudaimonia sense of, you know, finding your purpose and meaning in life, which could be any thing that satisfies you in that realm, right? It could be somebody who cleans the house, if that's their, you know, sense of purpose in life, and, or it could be a, you know, astrophysicist, whatever. But he has been able to show significant findings in in your physical well being based on that, it has biomarkers and all these other outcome measures. And in the past, people used to think it was your lower brain that was defining your health and well being physically but actually, it's your upper brain. And this idea of working on culture of caring that really drives culture of health is has a physiologic basis to it as well. And art certainly can accelerate that empathy, right? A building that empathy, and the building of caring,

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Peter Sellars 22:14

Every living being is an artist, you know, it's doing what you do with beauty with Love was care with feeling it with meaning, you know, because everything has meaning. And right now, you know, most people are engaged in meaningless work, which insults them every day of their lives. And what does it mean to invite people to do work that has meaning, and to invest that work with more meaning, and to actually do it very beautifully. And again, the for profit world has created a lot of, you know, basic slave culture where the work isn't done very well because people hate it. And, and you can feel that you can feel a space of love, or you can feel a space of no love. And, and that, that is healthy, because you can't be healthy in a space of no love. And a society can't be healthy in a space of no love. And so where's the love? And that's, that's our question, everything.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 23:22

What you're describing everyone's an artist is right up your alley, in terms of, you know, equality. And I'll never forget reading about how in the Japanese culture, the audience is as much the artist as those that are performing, right. And it made me feel so good, because I'm not a performer. And I always aspired. Like, it always felt like, oh, this would be so wonderful if I could sing an aria. Everyone, like put their fingers in their ears whenever I sang any thing. And so it's such a lovely concept to hear from you, because it really opens the doors for everyone to have that sense of being part of that world.

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Peter Sellars 24:10

Yeah, I mean, I can't play sports has saved my life. I had to figure out all through high school, how to get out of sports, but I love sports. Like I love going to games I love going to meet. It's fantastic.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 24:24

You're part of the audience.



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Peter Sellars 24:27

That's the beautiful thing is everyone's participating in some way. And it's not any of us are ever spectators. Because we're always imagining ourselves in there. Some part of you is in there. That's what's so beautiful. We're not spectatorship does not exist. You know, that's been the nightmare for democracy of assuming that spectatorship is all that's going on. We're just watching rather than we're participating and a real game when it with a real audience. So you're going to a soccer game in Brazil, you are not with the spectators. The participation is so intense in the stands, right? It is like so into, it's not. You people are invested so deeply in every way every part of their lives is invested in the result of that game. And so anyway, I just want to say that's the, you know, there is no such thing as spectatorship, you're always putting yourself in there. And that's exhilarating, and liberating, and healing and transformative.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 25:33

I love that. Before we end the podcast, I want to point out how many questions Peter asks all of us during the podcast, you know, one of the series of questions you asked, and one of your podcast interviews, or maybe one of your presentations was, what does it feel to be alive? Where is love? And where does anger or an injustice come from? So there is one more question we have for you. What does it mean for you to live well?

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Peter Sellars 26:01

Well, I think step one is that the people around you are living well, living well, when other people are not living well, is not satisfying. So I think step one, is to just be part of the people around you living well. And making contribution to what living well can mean in lots of different contexts. In the United States, we kind of a little bit got hung up on quality of life, not realizing that that doesn't necessarily mean living well, if it carries with it a big burden of injustice. It's not living well, yes, you had the best of everything. But in fact, it was the worst. Because the actual human cost is obscene. The environmental cost is a cost, nobody can pay. And so that idea of living well is actually recognizing that you're living in a larger ecology. And it's about living in a way making decisions that have to do with how that ecology can flourish. And that flourishing allows living well to happen. For the plants, for the animals, for the air, for the water. And for many populations. Living Well is living inside this idea that every action in your life is shared. Everything you do means so many things to the rest of the world. It just means that the way you live enhances the way other people live.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 27:59

That's just what you were saying how long culture of caring. Thank you so much.

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Peter Sellars 28:08

Oh, Wendy. It's beautiful to be with you. It's really beautiful to be be with you. So grateful. As always.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 28:14

Wow. If you're feeling like I am right now, you're just sitting back and soaking in the wisdom. That is everything Peter Sellars has to say, here's one thing I'm taking away from this conversation this past week. Art has always been about telling stories of life and bringing healing to communities. Art has a voice and it helps speak truths in impactful and beautiful ways. And empathy is maybe the most powerful tool for change making. So thanks again, everyone for joining us for this episode. And it's a very special one indeed. Check out our website give us feedback on our contact form. And keep up to date by following us at healthy UCLA on Instagram and subscribing here. Talk to you soon. Take great care. This episode was brought to you by the Semel Healthy Campus Initiative.