

Peter Sellars LiveWell Interview (1)

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SPEAKERS

Dr. Wendy Slusser, Peter Sellars



Peter Sellars 00:02

And you know, we're so busy judging everything and everyone way too soon. We're here for the long game. Our lives are adding up in very deep ways that you can't see. Until that go you score 20 years from now.



Dr. Wendy Slusser 00:21

Hi everybody. Welcome back to The Live Well podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Wendy Slusser. Today we get some questions answered such as why were snakes at the original Olympics? How are the arts and sports connected? And how did the Greek tragedy come to be? We cover these questions and additionally explore how art is a way of maintaining joy in part one of this special two part series with Peter Sellers. Peter Sellers is the perfect person to talk with about maintaining joy as he brings joy with him wherever, whenever he steps into a room or a Zoom Room. For that matter, MacArthur Fellow Peter Sellars is a world renowned theatre director and artist, regarded as one of the most influential opera directors the past four decades, Peter explores challenging moral issues through his work abstracting traditional performances into a social political spectacle. His work spans disciplines and cultures across both academia and art. He also happens to be a distinguished professor in the UCLA department of world Arts and Cultures dance, where he has taught since 1988. Today, we talk about art in relation to believe it or not the 2028 Olympics, which at the surface may seem the complete opposite of the theatrical artistic world that Peter knows so well. But Peter helps us explore this intersection to discover there or maybe not so separate, enjoy, and stay tuned for part two, you really really don't want to miss out on Peters wisdom. Peters absolute honor to have you on this podcast.



Peter Sellars 02:08

Wendy, the honor is mine to be in your aura on Zoom.



Dr. Wendy Slusser 02:12

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 02:13

I mean, you're a revolutionary, really in the interpretations of classics and modern performances, in a renowned director, theatre, film, opera, and so many other parts of your life are so meaningful, and impactful, I found this quote of yours, which I thought was really so telling of who and what you are in regards to music. And you said, what I get to do is put music on a stage to describe people's lives to describe people's hopes to describe everything people longed to have in this world. That was from one of your awards. Yeah, you said that.

P Peter Sellars 02:59

It's actually true. I mean, what we're all looking for, what is it we're looking for? Let's talk about that. I always tell my students, you know, how to make art in three steps. You know, step number one is imagine the world he wants to live in. Step number two, create that world. Step number three, live in it. I mean, that's what we're here on earth to do. We're here to actually say, what is missing from this picture? What are we hoping for? What are we looking for? What have we not seen yet? That we want to see? And what have we seen way too much of that we don't need to see anymore. Let's refocus our vision. Let's refocus, you know, where we're looking and what we're concentrating on. And let's spend our time really productively and not negatively. But actually, you know, what we're against is pretty obvious. What are we for? That's the real question. And can we not only articulate that, but can we realize it? And one of the great things about art is it's a way to realize new ideas, and make them really palpable, you can hear them touch them, they're singing to you, they're speaking to you. And it's something you only dreamed of, and there it's real, right in front of. And just particularly in difficult times when we're all waiting for change. And look, you think, oh my God, how is it ever going to come? What's great about art is Okay, let's try this out. Let's spend our time experimenting and say, What could this look like? What might this look like? How might this work? Let's try it instead of just get depressed while we're waiting. Let's just let's actually the opposite. Let's say actually keep our joy. And one of the great things about, you know, a work of art and making the work of art and sharing a work of art is it's not something you do alone. It's gathering people. And of course, the joy is this gathering the sense that, okay, we're not alone. None of us are ever alone.

D Dr. Wendy Slusser 05:22

That's so lovely. And it's such a expression of your ability to inspire people who might not consider themselves as artists to be artists. And that was something that really struck me in a conversation you had with previous Provost from UCLA about why you were drawn to be a professor at UCLA versus a conservatory, like Juilliard.

P Peter Sellars 05:51

Again, one of the reasons you you love a university is the word universe, that's a very good word. It's like just saying, Excuse me. First of all, every one of us brings a universe with us. And every human being is a universe. And so, actually, to be in a space where we're talking about universities, and we're talking about things that are, are bigger than our little world, we're talking about a universe, which is how many worlds not only coexist, but energize and activate each other, we really are talking to students who are in history, who are in the humanities, who

are in the sciences, who are going into government, we need all hands on deck. This is not just for one part of the society to address, a culture of care has to move through every part of the society, which is why it has to be created and cultivated in a university, where there's a new generation of people moving into all of these fields. And we have to together find a way in which it's a larger culture. And every one of these fields has their place and their role. And so the sense that you're just studying art, because you're interested in art, is not that interesting for me, because art is not about art. Art is about everything else. Art is this arrow pointing you away from art towards something in life, something in life that needs to be attended to that needs to be looked at, that needs to be understood more deeply. The great thing about an art project is it's only positive, nobody has to be targeted. Nobody has to, you know, it's just an experiment. And it's fun, and it's exciting. And most every human being has been trapped in an identity that is way smaller than who they really are. Art is this beautiful space that lets people have the 360 of who they are. And let's just say, okay, these very rigid rules and structures aren't working very well. In fact, they're holding everyone back. So can we create some structures that are more fluid that are more open that are more reciprocity? And what's beautiful art project is it's constant reciprocity. Somebody proposes something, something proposes something else and those two things move. And that starts to shift and not to get too technical when they but you know, Mozart, you know, and Haydn and Beethoven all those, those guys in Vienna, invented something called sonata form, which is the basis for almost every one of their pieces of music. And it's not a form basically, idea a shows up at the beginning and you hear this nice tune, he said, Okay, that's very nice. And then the shock is, idea B shows up. An idea A is very annoyed, because the world was idea a only, and now it's suddenly you have to include idea B. And so idea a has to completely reimagine itself. Until it can include idea B. And idea B, enters a conversation and ends up transforming everything around them. That's the sound of social inclusion. That's the sound of how to receive immigrants. That's the sound of Hello. Something new is entering your world and change your world to include it.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 09:37

It's beautiful. You know, you came to our steering committee and shared the origins of how art is part of the Olympics, which is another kind of dissonance, that or inclusion maybe of art in a world that you wouldn't necessarily consider Have you to share a little bit about how that really parallels what you just described about music in a way? Where did the arts and sports fine likeness?

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Peter Sellars 10:12

Well, you know, art and sports are about. Basically the same thing is how you get really good at something. It's about across a lifetime, arriving at the moment when you can make the crucial move, when the crucial move has to be made. And that's what it is to play the guitar or violin, or, or dance or paint is that you're, you're working on something, that's your life work. And you know, we're so busy judging everything and everyone way too soon. We're here for the long game, our lives are adding up in very deep ways that you can't see. Until that go, you score 20 years from now, suddenly, absolutely up into the world. And so for me, that sense of patience, that sense of go back in there, keep working on this, keep working on this commitment, love, doing something that needs your whole heart put into it, that is just the most important thing in the world. It's not a job, it's a commitment of who you are. I always tell people, you know, if you

want to know who you are, look at all the things you're not paid to do. And then you do, because that's who you are. Because you love those things, you care about those things, you care about those people, you care about those issues. That's who you are. And what you want to do is put who you are upfront, rather than all the way in the back. And so the arts are that space, where you're involved in healing a society that at any given moment, has plenty of wounds, and is taking plenty of blows. And a society whole society needs. Space to heal, time to heal. The Greeks knew that to put a society back together to hold a society together with some kind of love and goodwill meant that you had to create sports and the arts, that is to say, we all have issues. So let's get out on the field and go for it. And get all that anger and all that intense stuff, get it out on that soccer ball. Just just put it out there and stand and be in the seats and scream your lungs out. Let's go for it. That's the first step of healing. And with the arts, it's you know, the same thing but with music with singing, with with dancing with making something so beautiful that you actually can, right there go forward. What I love when he has the Olympics, the early Olympics in Greece is you know, when you went to the Olympics in the town of Epidaurus. As you walk in the Olympic grounds, the first building is the incredible Asclepieion which is the temple of healing, where Asclepius, the god of healing, presides with his snakes, his healing snakes that he's brought from Africa, and you go into the temple, you say I'm going to the Olympics. But first you stop. And you tell the attendants about your medical issues, what's happening in your body, what's happening in your mind. And then your first night at the Olympics, you sleep in that temple, and the snakes, the healing serpents come to you in your dreams. And they tell you about the next stages of your treatment. Then you wake up on the next morning of a new day in your life. And the next building on the Olympic grounds is called the Odeon. And it is a giant space of beautiful healing food, food prepared with love and wisdom and music, sacred music and you find your physical, mental spiritual equilibrium at that morning meal. And you start a new day in your life with the right food. And with this atmosphere created by the music that puts your whole system in some kind of harmony.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 14:47

I find it so fascinating Peter, how health was taken so seriously at these ancient Olympics. As we increase cultural conversations around health I'm curious if there's a way to read integrate these sort of community health standards, or maybe we call them rituals, even at modern day cultural events. Were there other ways in which ancient culture used community gathering like the Olympics or other art forms to navigate societal issues,

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Peter Sellars 15:17

Of course, the Greeks used art. Because after the games, you know, they made these incredible statues of these athletes. And you get these, you know, the beauty of the human body, you know, at this moment, in the life of a human being you, the body is so gorgeous. And you look at the faces of the statues there. So the faces are open the expression with no fear, you can see the courage, you can see the vision in the faces of these beautiful Greek sculptures. And then, after the games, you go up the hill, and the Greeks have prepared something for every visitor to the Olympic Games, and that's called tragedy. Wait a minute, what? Where's the feel good entertainment. And the Greeks said, no, no, we're already feeling great. The Olympic games make you feel great. And once you feel great, let's all together, look

at the things we're not doing well, as a society, let's look at youth suicide, because it doesn't, that's not going to be changed by passing laws. That's actually going to be changed. Because we, as a community, come together to say, let's address this and talk about this.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 16:40

You just outlined a roadmap for what we could do, potentially, in 2028, when the Olympics comes to Los Angeles, and I wanted to understand how you could reconcile or how you integrate your passion for social justice, in a.

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Peter Sellars 17:22

Exactly, you know, again, the so many of the stories that were put forward in the Greek theater, were also about disability. Because, you know, again, what a healthy body can do is an amazing story, and how you train your body to overcome obstacle after obstacle. But of course, the same thing is true. When we're when we're talking about disability. And we're talking about again, people facing an obstacle, and rising to it, and figuring out day after day after day, how to achieve this with incredible virtuosity, incredible grace, incredible deep commitment and looking into themselves. Because of course, you're not just an athlete, because you do exercises. You know, you're you're an athlete, because you're looking deep into who you are. And victory is, as always, you know, that jihad, it's about victory over yourself. It's overcoming your own limitations, is the first step to being human. And saying, yes, the world is putting up plenty of obstacles, but guess where most of the obstacles are actually in you? So could you start with working with your own obstacles? And that's, of course, what what great athletes are doing is they're conquering themselves before they step out on that field. And, and that's, of course, what artists are about. That's about wrestling with, you know, the hardest issues in our lives, but not hiding that but doing it in public, and just saying, Okay, if one person can step forward, it does change how everybody votes because when you see somebody who self liberated or liberated with the help of a community of people who supported them, then you say, okay, it is possible. And that just to break the law, have to say no, no, it is possible. We're going to demonstrate it. That is incredible. And of course, that's why the Paralympics have turned into such an important part of the Olympics. And I think in LA in 2028, they're going to be on equal footing with the the official Olympics because we're beginning to recognize that the human story starts from the top end starts from from them hardest, hardest places. Life itself is a challenge. Hello. So good. We get better at responding to the challenges that life is handling us, because the reason we're here on Earth is to be challenged. And, and it's out of the struggle that the breakthrough is gonna come. And, and so, art and sports are a way to make the struggle powerful, thrilling, and share that. So it's not just your struggle you're going through alone. But it's a struggle that brings light to the world.

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Dr. Wendy Slusser 20:31

That's beautiful. I hate to leave you want a cliffhanger with this conversation, but it's just so wonderful that we had to split it into two. A big takeaway for me this episode is how arts and sports are both lifelong commitments to navigating struggle in thrilling and uniting ways. You have a lot to look forward to in the next episode as we dive even deeper into a culture of caring and using art as our greatest tool. In the meantime, check out our website to explore recent

episodes with guests like Dr. Dre aletta Mende and Evan Kleiman or to provide feedback with our contact form. Keep up to date by following us at healthy UCLA on Instagram. Talk to you soon and take great care. This episode was brought to you by the Semel Healthy Campus Initiative.