

## One & Other Project

*My name is Paula Testa, I'm conducting this interview on behalf of the Wellcome Trust for the One & Other project of Antony Gormley in Trafalgar Square, the date is the 13th of August 2009 and the time is 8.20 a.m. Please could you tell me your full name, your date of birth and where you are from?*

I'm Bryan Philip Owen, 20th of September 1947 and I'm from Kirk, Eastern Buckinghamshire.

*And have you travelled to London especially for this?*

I've travelled especially for this yesterday because I'm from Scotland.

*Has coming here been how you'd imagined it would be?*

Well, I'm very impressed with the reception I've received here in these boxes, yes, it's fine.

*Had you seen the fourth plinth before?*

Yes I had.

*And how does it look from here?*

It looks very tall at the moment, quite frightening because suddenly people's eyes are on you and I hope I'm not going to let myself down.

*How are you feeling about going up on the plinth?*

Very anxious, very anxious, I'm used to speaking in public but all of a sudden I'm quite ...

*How did you first hear about the project?*

I saw it in the newspapers.

*And what is it about it that appeals to you and made you want to apply?*

It's creative art, it's a unique project, a tremendous privilege I think to be on that plinth for an hour, one hour in my life, the only hour, so I'm approaching it in awe.

*And when you first heard you had as place, what was your reaction?*

I whooped and shouted for my wife, hey, I was really quite excited I had not expected to be chosen.

*Do you have an interest in the arts generally?*

I'm a poet and a writer and I used to teach English and drama so yes, most of my life I have been interested in the arts, yes.

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*And what is it that you'll be doing on the plinth today?*

I'm going to be reading my poetry.

*This is your own poetry that you write?*

My own poetry yes, I write poetry seriously. I perform it whenever I can. I do two tours a year of United States because American libraries, schools and colleges actually pay you whereas if you do the same thing in the UK you have to do it for free so if I go to America I can get a kind of a holiday. I get a great buzz from doing things in America, from driving around small towns that nobody has heard of. American people, by large, are very hospitable so you often get put up in their homes and they like a British accent so yes, I love doing it but I write my poetry seriously so a lot of it is to do with social justice social issues, quite a lot of it is very passionate.

*And how long have you been writing your own poetry?*

I think my first poem was when I was about fourteen so I've been at it a long while. I'm nearly sixty-two now.

*And why did you go into teaching, is that something that you continue to do?*

Poetry and prose I wrote a play when I was teaching which was published by Samuel French, now out of print, the play was called *The Evil Eye of Condor* so that's another thing I've got to pursue whether Samuel French will reprint it.

*And how did you find the balance of teaching and writing, how were you able to do that together?*

Most of the writing arose out of the teaching. I had a drama club and a dramatic society one was for young kids and one was for the whole school so I often had to write material to use in the school hmm so as I say much of it was driven by my professional work as a teacher.

*And do you remember what first appealed to you about poetry, what got you interested?*

I love words, I love words, words are what we've got. Words make the difference between us and the rest of the animal kingdom and we can use words for good or for ill and it seems to me that words themselves have their own beauty and anybody who enjoys poetry or good novels will understand but words convey ideas and you know if you think of Goebbels in the Nazis, the way they used words, words can be used for ills so this morning I'm going to read a poem for San Suu Kyi in Burma. A poem that arose from something she wrote out of one of her letters and given that she's just been sentenced to another eighteen months in prison I hope that someone will hear what I'm saying and will pass it on to someone who will pass it on to someone so that maybe the message will get through to San Suu Kyi to the people of Burma. Actually they are not sort of ... actually that's one of the things I want to do in my hour.

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*And what are the other poems that you will be reading?*

I've got forty page script, there's a lot of them. I'm going to start in the Pacific because I've travelled quite a bit in my life. I used to work in Papua New Guinea as a teacher and so I'm going to start in the Pacific and work my way backwards through Asia and the Middle East and the UK and America where all my friends are still in bed because it's what? Three or four in the morning there so a lot of the poems arise through the places I've been to, incidents I've witnessed, feelings that I feel passionately, there'll be some love poetry, there'll be some poetry about coffee because I'm a coffee lover, there'll be poems about social issues because I'm politically engaged with society, yes.

*And you mentioned the impact you'd like to have by reading one of your poems, what impact would you like to have in general by going up and doing this now?*

Well, selfishly, I hope people will, say, "Oh, Bryan Owen, I think I might buy the book of his CD." I've just recorded a CD of twenty-one new poems so there's a part of it in which I'd like my work to be out there in the world, I think as far as the San Suu Kyi situation is concerned. I hope a lot of people will feel moved to either write to their local Burmese embassy or to join the Burma, the free Burma UK campaign or something of that kind. Some of the poetry is about other issues, poverty and war, maybe it will spark thinking, I think that's probably what I want to do, to spark some thinking in those who listen.

*And for you personally, what would you like to take away from the experience?*

Now, that's a question isn't it, in an hour's time how do I want to feel? I hope I shall not let myself down I will pitch it correctly but I know I've got to declaim quite a bit because there's no PA system up there so there's no room for subtlety in terms of voice projection. I hope I will feel excited, I hope I will feel myself proud, I hope I energise other people to think about some of the issues I'm going to raise and maybe join some of the campaigns I feel are important.

*When you first you had your place did you would be doing poetry?*

Yes, but I wanted to confirm that by watching other people on the plinth, so I would be working at home and have had the plinth on my computer looking for what's being going on, a lot of it has been quite banal, not much happening at all but every now and again you get somebody who has been very creative, who's put a lot of preparation and work ... people with skills of various kinds and you think I want to be in that group of people who are creative and Antony Gormley had created this opportunity, 2400 people, a cross section of Britain today, some of it is quite depressing, watching some of the people who've been up and some of it has been very energising. I've been energised by other people who've gone before me so I hope in turn I'll pass on some energy to others.

*What does it mean to you to be part of the project and to be one of those 2400 people?*

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It's a tremendous privilege, I'm sixty-two now and so I suppose I can stand back and say I've had lots of opportunities in life to do things but never something quite like this, this is unique. I've been coming to this square since I was in a pram, end of the 1940s, I remember being here. I got photographs of me at home five, six, seven years of age with pigeons all over me. Like for many British people, the square is deeply part of who you are, it's the centre of Britain, it's where our political religious social rallies all happen, it's a symbol of the freedom of speech which has been eroded by the government, currently with all the terrorism threats or supposed threats. And I want to use my freedom of speech to say things on that plinth that are important and maybe people like the government don't want to hear but I'm a British citizen, I'm proud to be British, I'm proud to have the opportunity to have for one hour to have my say in Trafalgar square so all the people who've gone back generations who've spoken in the square in support of the poor, the dispossessed, you know injustices and all the rest of it, now towards the end of my life, I'm sixty-two, I got my chance, it is a privilege, it is wonderful, wonderful.

*And when you do your tours how are you received there?*

I've always been received well, people in America tend to enjoy listening to the British accent. I am a critical friend so a lot of my poetry is generated by things I do or see in America but can be critical but on the friend, the friend from the outside is casting a light on things that happen on American society that sometimes Americans themselves are not aware of, the kind of people that come to my presentations off course are people who enjoy literature and so they tend to be people who are thinking anyway hmm a lot of them are creative themselves and I do creative writing workshops as well so it's a self-selecting group but they are you now ... I meet people in coffee bars and diners and all the rest of it, I talk and sometimes they do need challenge.

*And how did you discover that you were able to do that, that you can get paid to do that? How did you discover that work?*

Well I was going to America anyway to research for a book on religious fundamentalism that I wanted to write and in going there and visiting various places I discovered that libraries have budgets for adult education and so I then wrote to libraries, now I prepare a tour, a tour is typically three or four weeks. I might write to one hundred libraries, three or four might reply but they do have budgets and they are quite pleased to have somebody from their perspective, somebody a bit more exotic than from within their state and then I built a tour around that by writing to Google and trying to find writers' groups in the area and schools and colleges and churches that might have an interest in this sort of thing, independent bookshops, I do it all myself so if there's anybody out there who's a publisher who would like to take on that work I would be very grateful, every writer says that.

*Have you always written about social issues and things that are important to you?*

Oh yes, you can only write about things that are important to you. But I do remember when I was a teenager, when I was fourteen, I kept writing about more teenage

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things like death and so on and I've still got those poems in my study. No, I write about anything that energises me and anything that creates passion.

*Would you tell us something that is important to you at the moment?*

I have a daughter who has Down's syndrome so obviously my family are important but the issues around disability and being a carer, a parent carer are important to me. The political system is important to me for two reasons, one I've travelled a lot in the former communist Eastern Europe, I was arrested twice in the Soviet Union, I was arrested in Bulgaria so I'm very aware of what life is like when we don't have basic rights, basic human rights and therefore it is important for me today to be in Trafalgar Square to exercise freedom of speech because I know in many parts of the world people can't exercise freedom of speech. I think that is what makes Britain very, very special but I've also been, in recent years, an international election observer for the UK government and the European Union so after the fall of communism in 1989 the emergent democracies needed a lot of help in creating legislation and processes and procedures whereby they could have a democratic multi party election. So I took part in that kind of process during the 1990s up to 2006 which was the last one I did which was in Fiji but I did quite a lot of election work in the Balkans and the Ukraine. I was part of the Orange revolution in the Ukraine throughout their communist governments and that's been a privilege also to see people who have been struggling against oppression, struggling against poverty. I used to work in Papua New Guinea as a VSO teacher so I've lived in a very poor area. Racism is important to me because I remember in Papua New Guinea being called a white bastard by black people who tried to kill me on one occasion so to be on the receiving end of racist abuse as a white man, you know, is quite a rarity I guess but I also had a New Guinean girlfriend at the time so that was a seminal experience and I'm very intolerant of anything that separates people. We live on one planet so we have to look after this one planet, so the political system, democracy, the economic system whereby a lot of people are starving, constant wars, all of this. I am a member of the United Nations, yes, peace making, all those issues are important to me but then there are personal ones you know, love, hate, relationships, food, coffee and good red wine.

*And how, what happened when you got arrested if you don't mind me asking about that?*

I was frightened the first time I was arrested. I was just on the Polish border, I was a school teacher, I had about thirty or so students with me and I had a copy of The Times which I had read on the train going from Britain and I declared it at the border they picked up the Times, it was forbidden publication, I was taken off the train by armed soldiers and sat in a room for one hour and my kids were on the train. I assumed, I don't know what had happened to them and they were with another colleague, I didn't know what was going to happen and, of course, you have no rights in that kind of a system, you have no rights. So I was forced to sign a document admitting that I was importing anti-soviet slander and propaganda and of course it was a lie, scribbled a signature in protest but was allowed to continue with the school tour. On a second occasion I was in Moscow and I went into one of the functioning cathedrals and in the middle of winter it's minus degree Celsius and as soon as I

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came out of this cathedral I was arrested, taken to guard house, strip searched in these freezing cold temperatures, they thought I was a Russian pretending to be a Westerner so there was no freedom of religion, no freedom of speech, no freedom to read what you wanted to read, you know, it wasn't nice.

*And you mentioned New Guinea as well being on the receiving end of racism, when you tell people over here about that you've been affected by that from a different point of you that we would normally see ...*

I don't talk about it, it happened thirty years ago. Some things from the past remain in the past but people don't want to keep hearing your stories, but it changed me. I don't think I was a racist beforehand but having a black girlfriend who I was very, very fond of, walking along this dirt road one day and a truck coming by with all these guys shouting and spitting at me I realised how vulnerable I was and then on a second occasion actually being [?] by a group of New Guineans who thought I was after one of their women. The irony was that I was a school driver and I had to take everybody into the city, the township ... you know, the New Guineans who didn't drive so I took these people to see a film and they jumped to the wrong conclusion and attacked me, we were safe at last and waiting for the police to come but I slept with a machete under my pillow for several nights after that. I was so frightened, it wasn't nice.

*Will you write about today's experiences?*

I probably will but you have to wait for something to gel. I don't know what's going to happen, I don't know what's there yet but I hope that something will come out of it and then I'll give it to you. I'll send it here.

*Before we finish how would you summarise your experience of this project since you heard of it up to this moment just before going up?*

Very excited, very excited. As I say, Trafalgar square has been part of my life since I was in a pram and now for me to be able to do something here that is going to be seen by some people on their way to work but, more importantly, by people around the world it is a privilege, a tremendous sense of privilege.

*Well, thank you.*

Thank you.