

WRITERS MOSAIC

Phil Okwedy

In Conversation with Sanjida O'Connell

'[Singing] None of us are free. None of us are free. None of us are free. One of us in chains. None of us are free.'

— Phil Okwedy

Sanjida O'Connell (SOC): So Phil, we're in your lovely cottage just outside Temby in Wales, not far from the coastal path. And this is about 10 miles away from Pembroke Docks, where you grew up.

Phil Okwedy (PO): Yeah.

SOC: So what was your childhood like living in the Docks?

PO: So I was actually born in Cardiff, but I was fostered. I was long-term by a lady who lived down in Pembroke Dock. And I was a couple of weeks old when I went to live with her. And she was already 58 by then, so she was a mother and a grandmother all rolled into one. Which is quite fortunate, really, because having been fostered, I had—that was my only family. She was my only family, although I always knew my mother. And my mother was born and lived in Cardiff, and she met my father in Cardiff. And my father was a student. He was working and studying in Cardiff when they met. And I was a result of that meeting. But they never lived together. And my mother then didn't want to give me up completely—lose me to fostering, to some anonymous thing or adoption. So she asked the hospital almoner, who was like a welfare officer in the hospital, to find somebody who would be willing to take me. And the nearest person they could find was the lady I called Aunty Barbara, who lived about 100 miles away from Cardiff.

SOC: So had Aunty Barbara—so she fostered you from when you were two weeks old?

PO: Yes.

SOC: So effectively she was like a mother.

PO: She was absolutely my mother, yeah.

SOC: And she had other children, didn't she? And lodgers as well? I mean, there was a lot of people coming and going, or there must have been, in your house.

PO: I lived in a house, in a large Victorian terraced house for the first seven years of my life. We lived there. And yes, we took in lodgers. All sorts of lodgers: long-term people, short-term people, all sorts of people came to the house. But also they lived there with us, my half-brother. Who, in fact—I mean, it's interesting because we're going to talk about memoir. And I get so used to telling one version of the story that actually what I just told you is not quite true. My half-brother is six years older than me. And so it was him that my mother went to the hospital almoner for to find someone who was willing to take this child of dual heritage. And six years later when I came along, that seemed to be just a natural step.

SOC: Right. So was your brother with—did he have a different father from you?

PO: Yeah, he had a different father.

SOC: So you shared your mother.

PO: Share our mother, yeah.

SOC: And you mentioned that you're dual heritage. So your mum was Welsh from Cardiff. And then can you tell me a bit more about the background for your father?

PO: Yeah, my father is an Igbo from Southeast Nigeria. And I met him when I was in my forties, but for the first time. So I only met him—met him once, really, and then very briefly in a hospital bed, just before he died. He was an Igbo chief. When I went back to Nigeria, the central part of that first and only visit, actually, was back to our ancestral village. And so I'd always wondered what a chief was like. And I think, as I was growing up—well, I know actually as I was growing up, sometimes I would meet racism and prejudice. And one of my comebacks was, 'My dad's a chief.' Now, whether I actually knew he was or not, I don't know. But it turned out he was. A chief, though, turns out to be, I guess, a little like a local councillor or—

SOC: Not quite so glamorous as it sounded.

PO: No, the head of a large extended—really large extended family, maybe 70 or 80 people. Maybe even more than that. And the village is seven villages, so there are seven chiefs, and then there is a king.

SOC: So you're quite close to the king. But just going back to your childhood, so you were saying that your dual heritage. I imagine that Pembrokeshire was quite white at the time. What time period are we talking about?

PO: So we're talking the 1960s through to the 1970s. Born in 1962. So yes, it was an incredibly white world.

SOC: And did you know or meet anyone when you were a child living with Aunty Barbara—did you meet anyone who was dual heritage or British black or anything like that? Any other diversity?

PO: No. Apart from my brother, whose father was from Ghana, I believe, nobody else. There was a family; the father was a dentist. I think they might have been from the West Indies. But it wasn't—nobody came up to greet you. Nobody introduced themselves. I wasn't introduced. It just wasn't a thing that happened.

SOC: So did you face quite a lot of bullying and racism when you were a child?

PO: Yeah. Early on, I would have thought of it more as prejudice, I guess, and ignorance. But by the time I started secondary school, that had definitely turned

into racism, into active—people actively being racist. And it was very, very confusing because I had no idea what was going on.

SOC: No, I mean, for all intents and purposes, you were a Welsh child. You'd been brought up in Wales your whole life.

PO: I was used to the questions of—because I look different. So I was used to those questions. And I was used to people touching my hair and pinching my cheek and all that kind of thing. But for people to actively dislike you.

SOC: For no reason.

PO: For no reason at all, yeah. Which was much more unusual. I think as a young child, children would be curious and sometimes they could be unkind. But within a few minutes, children will find something; they'll be playing together and it's gone. Whereas I got to secondary school and people I'd never met, didn't know, walking down the school corridor and just calling me.

SOC: That sounds horrible. I had a similar experience growing up in Yorkshire. Yeah, it's very different from a childhood where, like you say, people are a bit curious and

have some odd questions. But then, yeah, secondary school, that was, yeah, horrendous. People didn't want to touch me in case the colour rubbed off.

PO: That's awful.

SOC: Yeah.

PO: Absolutely awful. And did you have any support around that?

SOC: No. Because, like you, I didn't know anyone who wasn't white. And people would refer to me as a Paki, even though—some people would then say, 'Oh, but she's not a Paki.' And they'd say, 'Oh, well she is, but she's just not like the others.' That kind of—

PO: Yes. Yeah, that's such a good story, actually. Yes. Trying to help but not helping.

SOC: So when—at the time, what did you know of your story, your background?

PO: I think I always knew about my father. I always knew my mother. I would see my mother perhaps once a year, so by the time I'm four, I can remember my mother. And I knew about my father. And then by the time I was eight, possibly nine, I knew

that he had another family. And I knew that those—some of those children were older than me. So even I was able to work out that when he'd come to this country, he was married, already married. So he'd met my mother and so they'd had an affair. Yeah, there were no secrets in that way, or not the obvious ones anyway. So I always knew. And Auntie Barbara did her best, which was pretty good. But it was—I mean, she was born in 1904, she was basically an Edwardian woman. And she just didn't have the skills to help me face any of those things. Though I always had this deep-seated sense of pride, and so she must have instilled that in me and enabled that.

SOC: When you say understand and face those things, do you mean the racism, the prejudice, the bullying and/or also trying to come to terms with your family background?

PO: Coming to terms with my family background was never a problem. That was always a good story. It was always—it was always spun as a good story. And I—and it always has been, and that's not changed for me. What she wasn't able to do, I guess, because the world was really different—how would you give a child back then cultural opportunities; the opportunity to meet other people of a similar background? I mean, those backgrounds are very diverse. When I say similar, it's not similar. They're very diverse, but of similar experiences. And then also when it came

to the racism. By the time that was happening, she was nearly 70, and I was wild and very angry and didn't know why. So I don't think she had the strength or the skill or the knowledge to be able to help me with that. Although subsequently, it would be clear to me that she did understand what was happening, which I don't know that I'd known before because it was happening to me mostly in school, and then I was refusing to go. But I—subsequently I found some letters, and in one of them she talks about how the local authority, actually, had known that I was the subject of prejudice and not accepted by a large section of the school.

SOC: So you have quite a few letters, haven't you? Cause you've got the letters that she wrote.

PO: Yeah.

SOC: But then you also found the letters that your mum wrote to your dad.

PO: The other way round.

SOC: Oh, dad to your mum.

PO: Because I always knew my mum, when she died, I ended up clearing out her flat. As I was doing that, I found all these letters, most of them airmail letters, which were from my father to her. So a one-way correspondence.

SOC: That must have been hard to read and fascinating.

PO: I didn't read them for a long time. I think I intuitively knew I needed to—I couldn't just read them. I needed to do something with them after. I would need to do something with whatever I found after I read them. So, actually, I brought them home and I put them in a cupboard. And in the interim, I became a storyteller. And then eventually, I came to decide that I was going to do something with them around story. And so then I read them.

SOC: So when you said you became a storyteller, do you mean a performance storyteller, and what drew you to that aspect? Especially as you said you weren't doing so well at school to begin with.

PO: Yeah, I was a—I'm a traditional oral performance storyteller, which is a bit of a mouthful. It means that I stand on a stage or in a room, hopefully with people there, otherwise I'm a crazy person talking to myself, and I tell folk tales and myths and those kinds of stories. And I now weave those with personal experience and family

history and history in general. And I came to storytelling because I, in my forties, again, I became a primary school teacher. And I was working in a school, and the school identified that they wanted to erase the children's attainment, their level of writing. I'd noticed that the children didn't have any story structure in their head. So when you ask them to write something, all their energy went on what happened next. So I don't know, after an hour's session and I might have a little boy who would write: Me and Johnny run down the road; a spaceship came down; we pulled out our guns; bang, bang, bang, bang. And that would be 45 minutes or an hour. But they hadn't been sitting there doing nothing; they'd been working really hard. So we had a storyteller come in and teach us how to get a story and then share it with our pupils. We would give them then a period of several weeks to play with the story while we did other activities too, but they could play with the story until they had it in their own words, really. So they had ownership. And then you would use the story for the writing process. And I really enjoyed the storytelling, much more than the writing. And so that made me pursue more training as a storyteller. And then opportunities came my way, and here I am.

SOC: And so, what made you decide to turn the letters and the story of your—it's partly the story of your childhood but it's also the story of your parents. What made you decide to turn that into a performance and then also weave in the West African folk stories?

PO: Yeah, why? I suppose the fundamental thing is I've always thought of my life experience as story. I don't ever remember not doing that. So that's always been the way I've thought about it. Always, it's a story. And then when I came to storytelling, I'd been telling stories for a while, and I saw that people who'd been telling stories for about the same length of time as me, similar experience, were beginning to tell myth. And I thought, *I should tell some myth*. But I couldn't find anything that spoke to me, anything that I wanted to tell. I really enjoyed other people's tellings, but I couldn't find anything. And then slowly this idea of weaving together family history and experience with folktale and myth came to me. And I began doing it. And created another show, other than the one that you saw, called *Dance of the Stickfighting Warriors*, in which I weaved these things together. And really, it was to make my own myth. Having been born not quite Welsh, definitely not Igbo cause I didn't grow up there, I lacked a myth. So I started creating my own.

SOC: That sounds like a good solution. So the performance that I went to see you at was *The Gods Are All Here*, which was your background, your family story, and then the West African folk tales. And it resonated with me for lots of reasons, but one of them was because as a child, I lived in Nigeria twice. So I had been exposed to those West African tales like Brer Rabbit and the Spider. All of those kinds of tales. And I could see in the tales that you were telling similarities with the West African folk

tales that I'd heard as a child, but they were also quite different. And so I was wondering whether you'd made up those tales or elaborated on the tales in your show.

PO: The tales in the show all exist. And I've taken parts of them and edited parts of them and married things together from several stories. So I think there are five different folk tales, elements of them, within *The Gods Are All Here*. And the bits that I've made up are around the myth of the lake. So there's a lake, and into this lake flow two rivers; one is yellow and one is blue, and they turn the water green. And the people who live around the lake say that as long as the water remains green, then the fertile floodplain that surrounds the lake will provide all that they need for life. And in the lake is the spirit of the lake: Mami Wata. One day, a young woman is down by the lake. She's alone, and she sees a crocodile. And the crocodile comes out of the lake, hauls itself out, and as she's watching, it shakes off its skin, and there stands a woman. And of course, the young woman knows who this woman is; this is Mami Wata.

[Singing] None of us are free.

[PO reading from *The Gods Are All Here*]

'Every day, she made her way down across the dead floodplain to the banks of the lake to pray, to dance, to sing, to beg, to curse.'

PO: And eventually she takes the skin, Mami Wata's skin. And when Mami Wata comes back, for reasons that I'm not going to tell you now, she can't—the young woman can't tell Mami Wata that she's got the skin. And so Mami Wata is taken away by slave raiders. And when the young woman looks back at the lake that was green, now it's half yellow and it's half blue. So she's broken the lake. She's broken that central thing for the people who live around the lake. That's important. And the rest of the story unfolds through folktale—this part of the story through folktale and myth of trying to heal the lake and put it back together. But there is a lake in Nigeria called Oguta Lake into which two rivers flow, and they don't mix. I think they're green and brown rather than blue and yellow. But they don't mix, and you can see the two separate sides of them. And so when I found that I started looking for the myth behind that. And I just found a tiny sliver, which is that the local people say that the rivers are deities; they were once married and have argued, which is why there's this split.

SOC: I see. So that sounds like a metaphor for perhaps your parents as well as—when I was listening to it, I was thinking, *oh, this is a metaphor for not just broken people, broken communities, but a broken planet.* So what I was really

interested in was how you wove those—the folk stories, because when you perform, you're going between the folk stories and then your personal story, which you're picking up from the letters, and you're quoting from some of the letters from your dad.

PO: Yeah. Well, there's a—that part of the show is a conceit. So I introduced this idea of the letters, and I gave some background about my mother and father. And I tell people that I had those letters for 10 years in a cupboard and didn't do anything with them. And then I finally took them out and decided that I was going to read them. And the thing that I was going to do with them or get from them was see if I could find the parents that I'd never had in them by reading them. And obviously, that means making up half the conversation too; you're imagining half the conversation. And so that's really what the letters part is about. Of course, that weaves back to that original myth, as you've just pointed out, of these two rivers, these two man and woman deities, whatever, gods, and the split. So, I guess, that resonates through when I'm talking with the letters; see if I could find the parents I'd never had. And one of the ways that I tried to do that is somewhere I once heard that all small children see their parents as gods. They have this moment, and they recognise these—maybe it's more of a fall, actually, in reality, because maybe they don't recognise them as gods, maybe they recognise they're not gods; they're not always right. But I thought if I could find the moment, maybe just before that

happens in the letters too. So that is woven into the letters. And then the other thread is as I'm reading the letters, which start in 1960, so before I was born, finish in 1974, when I was about 12, I give vignettes of my own experience through the bits of the 1960s and 1970s.

SOC: It was harrowing to read some of it or to hear some of it, rather, when you were talking about what happened to you when you were growing up, the bullying at secondary school and so on. I was wondering about the truth of what you're writing because, obviously, this is your version of what happened and not your parents version, although you're using, like you say, half the conversation. And also—so I know myself, I'm writing a memoir at the moment, and there's my version, but there's also the version that needs to be slightly moulded to make it into a better story. Can you talk to me about the truth of your memoir?

PO: Yeah, yeah. Everything has to serve the story. Somewhere—once I started reading the letters, I came across the term biomythography, which I think comes from Audre Lorde, American writer and poet. And I don't really know much more about it, except that's my guiding principles. So this is a myth.

SOC: The whole thing is a myth.

PO: The whole thing. There's lots and lots of truth in it, but it's a myth in the sense of it's a metaphor; it's metaphorical, and it stands for other things. And in that, then everything has to serve the story. I mean, you're a writer, so everything has to serve the story. And that's what you'll—you may write lots and lots and lots, but eventually your editing process is probably, well, for me, that's where I'm really finding the story. Lots of material, and then just finding the thread that holds this particular story together. So although in the show I do say this, which I'm about to say: 'I didn't tell you quite the truth, and I don't really know why. Just because it's the quickest way to get to answer your question, I guess. It wasn't me that the hospital in Cardiff found Auntie Barbara for, it was my half brother, who's six years older than me. We have the same mother, different fathers. And actually, sometimes I even forget. And I never forget it, but in terms of the story, and how that works, sometimes I forget. So I didn't mean—it wasn't intentional not to tell you the truth, but you asked me a question, and I went the straightest route to answer that question, rather than the—'

SOC: Complicated.

PO: Yeah, the complicated detail that you have to leave out, otherwise people wouldn't be able to follow it. I'm in the process of writing *The Gods Are All Here* as the starting point of a memoir. And so that's slightly different because there's more

room. The show's two hours, well, it's an hour and 50 minutes long, so there's only so much you can share within that. But even when in writing, it's still interesting about—it's yeah—

SOC: Interesting what you leave out. I'd love to talk to you about the book in a moment, but I'm just interested in your half brother and your version of the story. And I'm thinking about this also with my own memoir because I also have siblings. And I feel like they're part of my story, but it's not their story. So there's lots of complications that could happen down the line if they don't agree with my version. And I wondered how your half brother felt because effectively, he was written out of your story.

PO: Apart from—I do mention the fact that he was—it was him who went first and I came six years after. But then, yeah, you're right, he disappears. And I don't know, is the truth, because he hasn't seen the show.

SOC: Oh. Did he choose not to or—why hasn't he seen it?

PO: Good question. We're ever so slightly distanced.

SOC: Sorry to hear that.

PO: Over the—yeah, yeah. For a long time we weren't, but that just is something that seems to have happened. So I can't really answer for why he hasn't.

SOC: But then on the other hand, this is your story. It's your story searching for the relationship between your mother, your joint mother, and your father, not his father.

PO: Yeah. But in the risk of really complicating things, I have another brother. I have another older brother, again,. The oldest brother, who my mother was married to his father. And he isn't in the story either, but he has seen the show.

SOC: And what did he think?

PO: He liked it. He enjoyed it, I think. And, I think, from my point of view, he could recognise the truth of Auntie Barbara, who comes into it, not in a massive way, but that rang true for him.

SOC: She comes in as a constant loving presence, I think. Yeah, that's so interesting, what we choose to keep and leave out. I wonder, do you—are you ever worried

when you perform your story that somebody in the audience is going to say, 'Hang on a minute, Phil, that didn't happen like that?'

PO: I'd be very surprised, but I do have four Nigerian brothers and a sister who could possibly turn up. And that would be very interesting because my mother I knew, and so there's a educated imagination going on around there. My father, I just have his words and his letters, letters that were never meant for public consumption, which I share with people. And so the picture of him is a little more worrying what they might think of that.

SOC: And do they know about the performance? I mean, it's on YouTube; they could watch extracts from it.

PO: I haven't hidden it. They're not—no one is living here at the moment anyway, so I haven't invited anybody either, but I haven't hidden it. My father's wife is still alive. That's probably the biggest thing for me because it's about her husband's affair with another woman, though she knew. So we talked about growing up and what I knew about my background, and I think I said I knew that I had—my father had another family. But it was only when I went to visit him in Nigeria that I found that that other family were living in Cardiff at the same time as my mother and him were having an

affair, and that his wife had always known about me. My sister was also born in Cardiff; she's two months older than me. My father was a busy man.

SOC: How did that make you feel when you found out?

PO: I was shocked in a way of—bearing in mind I'm well into my forties now, and I felt like a little child. I felt like—I don't know if you've had this experience when your children come and ask you where babies come from. And the first time you're answering this question and your mind explodes, and you're thinking of all these things. And they're almost—by the time you've got something to say to them, they've wandered off; it's gone. And it's like—but what that relates to is asking the right question. So I felt like I'd never asked the right question. When I—my father told me that when I was in Nigeria and I came back to see my mother and tell her about the trip, and said to her, 'They were living here, you never said anything.' And she just said, 'Oh yes, they were living here. I think I gave them some sheets or something at some point because they had nothing.'

SOC: Well, that's tough to find out like that. And also, as a child, you don't know what questions to ask. You don't know what the parameters are. All the unknown unknowns.

PO: True, that's very true. But certainly by the time I understood that, I knew that was story. I knew that that was good story. It's not something that affects me directly. It doesn't change how I look at the past. It doesn't change the truth of the story. And actually, maybe that's part of that thing with memoir and with what I'm doing as a storyteller. It's a story. I'm not claiming it changes the past. I'm not claiming I am somebody different to the person I am because of that story either. I hope what happens with the story is that it resonates with people and brings their own stories to the fore for them.

SOC: I was wondering about your process because earlier you said that you didn't really like writing and that you'd come to the storytelling process through teaching the primary school children, and that you like that oral storytelling. So when you were creating or when you are creating your shows, are they—do you write them down first or how does it work?

PO: No, I collect stories. I may have some stories, folktales, and bits of myth that I feel will fit this. And certainly I will have some experience—some historical, personal or family or broader public experience that I want to weave into this. And there's usually song as well. That's something that I didn't expect to happen, but it turned up.

SOC: Yes, you've got a very good voice. A singing voice.

PO: Thank you very much. And then it's just intuitively putting those things together. So for *The Gods of All Here*, it was very specific. The previous show I talked about was a longer period of gestation, really. There was a folktale that I knew I wanted to tell, but I had no idea how to tell. And then there was a sudden circumstance where the experience of going back to Nigeria for my father's funeral, and those two things just fused and happened. And then it took a long time. Later on, I heard a song, and that reminded me of another bit of family history. And that kind of—this whole—that made one whole show. But that was a much slower, organic process. *The Gods of All Here*, I took the letters out and decided I wanted to do something with them. And it was right at the beginning of COVID. And Welsh Arts Council were awarding something called subsidisation grants to keep people going. And so the bar was lower than normal. And somebody said that phrase to me, and I thought, *well, I'll go for that*. And I talked about the letters and I got the money. Then I really didn't know what I was going to do. So the initial part of it was I did a lot of free writing. I don't like writing, but a lot of free writing, which usually was a lot of scribble with lots of swear words and just [frustrated noise]. But just doing that, keeping the pen on the paper and doing that, and just little things began to emerge. So the theme of racism in my own experience began to emerge. And of course, I was reading the letters at the same time. And then—and I was always reading for

stories. And so I had this collection of things. And the grant allowed me to work with another storyteller. Actually, the same storyteller who'd come into the school originally. So my mentor. I don't think he wants to be called that, but his name is Michael Harvey. He's a fantastic storyteller. My mentor. You have to live with it. And we worked online. So I would bring—I would shape something, weave it together, do it, and then he would work as a dramaturg, which is an awful word; I don't really know what it means. But he would ask questions. He would provoke. He would ask why something happened or he didn't understand something, and cause me to reshape and edit the material. And slowly, slowly, we built the show that way. That's how it was built. Although it's still evolving all the time. All the time. I think you said to me earlier that, well, before we were having the interview—but your own experience, you're still coming to terms with it; it's still an ongoing experience. And one of the things that I discover all the time, actually, every time I do the show, is I'm still doing that.

SOC: So it's like ongoing therapy.

PO: Yeah, yeah. It could be, I suppose. It's just that it's not resolved, I guess. Even though I do the show—I can do the show night after night, after night, I'm never quite sure. It's always different with a different audience anyway, but my relationship to my parents, it's always open. It's always changing.

SOC: Yeah. Well, that's interesting. That's a bit of a shame for me, I thought you were going to give me all the answers. This is how you resolve it. So if you don't write it down, does it have a shape in your mind?

PO: I use—particularly for *The Gods Are All Here*, I got myself a very thick Moleskine-y notebook. And I use lots of notes of—little notes of things, but then to join everything up, story maps.

SOC: Oh, can you explain what that is?

PO: This is a tech—well, every primary school child will know that. And the secondary school ones who might admit it, that they did it in primary school. So it's a way to gather a story. One of the first ways I learned to gather a folktale to tell. So you want to forget about the words and the text. You don't want to—it's not a script and it's not an act of recall. You are breathing life back into this story. So one of the ways that you can do that is to draw the story as a story map. And it can be—it can look like a river or a road, but it can also just look like a mind map. Whatever works for you because you're the only person who has to read this map. But you—the rules are—not rules but—is to draw as much as possible and to write as little as possible. So obviously, if you've got a recurring phrase you may want that. But you

draw. So you have these images. And then when you tell, it's the images that you're using to paint pictures.

SOC: Oh, that's so interesting. I'd love to have a go at doing that because it's very different from my process. But I used to be a wildlife presenter, and I had some coaching. And one of the things that my coach said to me was it's about the emotion. So when you're looking at a script, instead of just memorising the script, you are holding a picture in your head of what it is you're talking about, and you're connecting with the emotion of that.

PO: Yeah. So it's similar. It sounds very similar. It's still a way of getting away from a text. But I guess if you're a presenter, you're working with other people, and you basically do have to say the same words.

SOC: Yes. Yes. Each time.

PO: Yes. Whereas a storyteller, that's—you're free.

SOC: Can change.

PO: You don't need to say the same words.

SOC: Yeah. So you mentioned that you were turning this into a book. That was going to be one of my questions. Other—some other people who have been performance storytellers or poets, they have often performed their work and put it out in other ways. For instance, Lemn Sissay. Beautiful poetry, but he's also told his story, performances, TEDx, yeah, his book. So I was just wondering, is the book the first of different ways of telling your story or this is what you're focusing on now?

PO: Well, not focusing on it now. I was very fortunate also back in the first year of COVID to become a participant of a Literature Wales programme called Representing Wales. All of this was—it was all online workshops, but as part of it, you could have two—or you could have a mentor. Well, I managed to have two mentors. Because I knew I wanted to take *The Gods Are All Here* as the starting point of something, which I actually wrote it down—did write it down verbatim, just hearing myself do it. And that was the starting point. And then we had a year with a storyteller and author called Daniel Morden and with a poet and author called Eric Ngalle Charles. Daniel is from Wales, from Abergavenny, and Eric is from Cameroon via Russia to here. His story is fantastic. An unbelievable story. And so, yeah, they were mentors for me. And we got so far, and I got busy with other things. And so it's still sitting there for me to complete, I guess. So that's a goal for this year, is to get it into some kind of shape.

SOC: And so with the book, do you think you'll be able to bring in more elements of the story, like your two half brothers and potentially more about meeting your father?

PO: Absolutely. I think, I mean, it would be—it's very thin, just as the show. And of course there are conceits in it. So I think I alluded to it without alluding to it, that this idea of seeing my parents as gods in a show on a stage, you're—it's okay, I think. An audience will buy into it and they'll go with it. But if you're reading a book and you can put that book down, and the premise is: were my parents gods? Daniel Morden actually, when he saw—read that bit, said to me, 'Well, the answer's no.' So what are you going to do? So, yeah. So there are lots of opportunities to bring other things in and to broaden that story and my own understanding of that story, my father, and auntie Barbara.

SOC: Oh, well, thank you so much. And I can't wait to read the book and see the latest show when it's finished.

PO: Thank you very much. Thank you. It's been absolutely wonderful.

[Singing] None of us are free. One of us in chains. None of us are free. None of us are free. No, no, no, no. No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. No, no, no, no, no, no, no.

Phil Okwedy was in conversation with Sanjida O'Connell

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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Mikey Inderikey recorded, edited and mixed the music for *The Gods Are All Here*.

Adverse Camber produced Okwedy's performance, *The Gods Are All Here*.