

Transcript of
A Conversation with Peter Sellars

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Meese Auditorium
Southern Oregon University

Moderator: Geoffrey Riley, *Jefferson Exchange*

Peter Sellars:
Hi, everyone. It's awesome to be here! Thank you.

Geoffrey Riley:
[*Moving table*] [*To Sellars*] Sorry! Just wanted to make a little more room there. [*To audience*] And my first trick will be to put Peter on the floor.

I know everybody heard this morning's interview on the radio, so I'll just start where we left off: the swimming pool, the Lamborghini and the King of Sweden. Go. [*Sellars laughs*] How many people actually did hear this morning's interview? Okay. That's five of you. I guess we'll have to start from the beginning, then. It all started in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Peter Sellars:
You totally do your research. That is shocking. That is truly shocking.

Geoffrey Riley:
You mean the Lamborghini part is true?

Peter Sellars:
You mean Lincoln Continental, but yes.

Geoffrey Riley:
Okay, yeah.

Peter Sellars:
Now the Sweden thing: what—The King of Sweden?

Geoffrey Riley:

Yeah, well, you got this award from the King of Sweden, right?

Peter Sellars:

Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay. Got it.

Geoffrey Riley:

It's a great speech. You should watch it online. Actually, I wanted to start by talking about my business first, because it intrigued me as we were parting this morning that you were talking about radio and its great importance in your life and how it has helped propel you into what you've been doing for the past thirty, thirty-five years.

Peter Sellars:

I love radio because it's unbelievably democratic. It doesn't stop your life; it actually continues your life. You don't have to stop what you're doing while you're listening to the radio – it intensifies what you're doing. I love that. I love the idea that soundtrack and image-track are different. That really pleases me. That's why I love Jean-Luc Godard's movies, because if you treat the soundtrack as the master-slave relationship and the soundtrack always has to illustrate the picture, and the picture always has to illustrate the sound, then it's really tedious.

What's so cool is to hear a sound and see a completely different image. That's one of the things I love in radio, is I have—The radio is making the soundtrack, that does not line up with what I'm seeing and doing at any given moment. That excitement is fantastic, because it lets your life happen in all these layers. That is a real pleasure, as opposed to the Hollywood movie where the giant string orchestra comes on and screeches as if you couldn't tell something sad just happened. They're going to let you know that. We're all required to cry at this moment—go!! That kind of oppressive use of sound drives me crazy.

Instead, I love radio, which just says, "Please live your life, but also, we're going to keep going here." I think that's thrilling. Plus, the other thing is, you have your own images. That's a really powerful thing, because we all live with our own images of so many things, and that is so valuable--not just the images we're told and we're offered. Television is so reductionist--oh god, well. Let me just give you a little quick thing, because it's really—it's basically Hindu aesthetics.

There's a really powerful, beautiful thing which is the Gaze of Love. It's the most important thing in the world. The opposite of the Gaze of Love is the Evil Eye. The Evil Eye is when you look at anybody and you think you're better than they are--pretty

intense. We do it all the time, and it's actually a curse. Jesus says if you look at somebody and think, "That fool," you're actually worse-than-murdering them and you will burn in hell. It's actually any time you don't wish somebody well. That's the Evil Eye: any time you actually look at somebody and (again) think you're superior— that's the Evil Eye. Television is the ultimate Evil Eye.

We're having this weird situation where television news is supposed to be "objective." All television cameramen are trained not to show their emotion as they're filming something. So, you see footage from the Sudan of somebody starving and the cameraman goes back to the intercontinental hotel and has a steak dinner. You have this disconnect emotionally. For the last thirty years, the emotional content of the history of our lives has been edited out. We've been actually taught to disconnect emotionally from what is going on all around us. Television has implied that by the use of the "objective" cameraman. Whereas (of course), if you were with a starving person, you wouldn't just be making that nice medium shot, at all, and then walking away.

This fake objectivity, which is actually about creating impassivity and disempowerment, and creating a passive generation that says, "what can anyone do? The problem is so huge." That was organized. That was organized by bad camerawork. By your view of the world, you're telling yourself you've seen the world, and you actually haven't. That, combined with the reporter, who is--because of the vanity of our Western news organizations, we're proud of the star reporter who was in Paris last month, is in Beijing next month, and is in East Africa this month, speaking none of the languages in any of those places. We're triply alienated and cut off from the lifeblood of the very world we're so sure we know so much about and where we have no problem invading someone else's country and telling them how to live. In fact, we don't even speak the language. We're so clueless about the most basic things, and yet our arrogance has been fed by a generation of fake television footage that lets us think that we know what's going on in China.

So, just to say: anything that disrupts the sound-image connection, anything that makes us question the image, anything that makes us listen more deeply to the sound—that pleases me a lot. Anything that says, "Maybe you don't understand everything here." Maybe—I was trained as an artist. You start with what you do not understand. Politicians start with what they think they understand. That's the difference between an artist and a politician. One person claims all this stuff; the other person questions it. As an artist, our task is to ask the question more deeply. As you know, if you ask a better question, you get a better answer. In fact, our task as artists is to ask a question that is so interesting, penetrating, and challenging that the answer is going to be, truly, some kind of break-through.

Geoffrey Riley:

So, with what is (clearly) a really deep feeling for the human condition, there are so many different ways you could have gone. At what point did you decide this was going to result in art? Or was it a decision, ever? Was it: you woke up and you just always knew?

Peter Sellars:

God, this guy. Geoff, you just go right there. This is really intolerable. [*Audience laughs*] Okay, I have to just, like, do this in public? All right. I still do not know why I am on Earth.

Geoffrey Riley:

You're still looking for the cause? The purpose, I mean? Cause, I think we know, the purpose--

Peter Sellars:

I really don't know what I'm here to do. I actually don't. From day to day, I'm doing what I can do with the people around me, and we're doing our best and, hopefully, that's useful. But, frankly, there's a lot to do, as you said. What is the best way to help? That's another question. One of the great things about the arts is they just create new space. For me, most human lives need new space. Most human beings need a space to re-imagine and open themselves into some kind of larger picture, because most people's lives have been so reduced by their work and by their circumstances and so on and so on. None of us are our job. That's one of the most irritating things about this country is everybody thinks your job is who you are, and you want to say: I am so not my job.

Geoffrey Riley:

It's the American question, though, it's like, "What do you do?"

Peter Sellars:

I know, and it just drives me crazy because I'm so not my job. And I'm so—nobody is who they look like. We're way into judging everyone by what they look like, and now we know that person. You just want to say: nobody is who they look like. Everybody has so many secret lives from themselves, let alone from you. Most people are spending most of their time hiding what they're really thinking from the people around them, and (again, frequently) from themselves. What is it to unpick that and just gently go inside that—there's so much pain, so much doubt, so much other stuff that goes unexpressed. What does it mean to venture into that area, which all of us are carrying around, but which actually has no address? We've deliberately left it in an unmarked box. Even finding it is work.

For me, that kind of—I think that’s useful, so I do engage in that. The other great thing about theatre is it’s liberating in a surprising way, because—well, I’ll just describe—[*To Geoffrey Riley*] I’ll describe one production that is kind of a little bit what I’m hoping to do, and what I think theatre is about at this moment.

I did a production a few years ago called *The Children of Herakles*, which is a play written twenty-five hundred years ago by Euripides. It’s about immigration. What’s powerful about it is you see that people were bad at this twenty-five hundred years ago. We’re not the first people on Earth to really struggle and not know what to do.

The play is rather powerfully set up. If you know Hercules, the world’s strongest man, died executing these ten, twelve, labors that were imposed on him by this vicious, vicious dictator tyrant. The last one of them killed him. It’s a really powerful image that the strongest man on earth is actually, still, in our political system, a slave. This dictator said, “Okay, I finally killed Hercules. Now I’m going to go after his kids.” So, the children run, with their grandmother, and escape the country. This dictator phones up all of the adjacent countries and says, “If you allow these people into your country, we will declare war on you.” Athens is the only one that doesn’t cave. These kids, and their grandmother, are turned away at every single country. Finally, they get to Athens. Athens says, “We stand for freedom. We are a refuge for the people who are searching for freedom. Please come and kneel at our altar. You will be protected.” Then the messenger shows up and says, “We are declaring war on you.” The citizens of Athens have to decide whether protecting the rights of these foreign children is worth sacrificing the lives of their own children in a war. That’s a debate. It’s really powerful. Eventually, the Athenians do let the kids in. It’s a very powerful and very moving play. The last scene belongs to the tyrant, which is quite scary.

Just to say: I did this play in seven—no, in eight countries. In each country, the kids onstage were usually twenty-four to twenty-seven kids from local detention centers --kids without papers (unaccompanied minors, they’re called) who were being held while their cases are pending, for deportation. Before the show every night, we first had a conversation that lasted for an hour between homeland security officials and people without papers. Immigration judges, border guards—up and down the chain: people who deal with incoming undocumented people in conversation with undocumented people.

For me, that’s a very important thing, because, as you probably know, America only accepts three stories—you have to tell one of three stories to get in here. Of course, those stories aren’t most people’s lives, so they have to lie in order to get in at the first point of entry. Meanwhile, the immigration judge—as you know, the hearings last sometimes

thirty-five seconds, some of them thirty-five minutes. The immigration judge has a list of all these things that have to be checked off, so whatever he thinks of this person who is in front of him does not actually matter, because the list itself is going to make the decision. So, the result is you have thirty-five minutes between two people that are going to decide the fate of a human being and both sides are lying to each other.

My idea was to use a theatre project to create a space in which a homeland security official could sit down with an undocumented immigrant and have a real conversation. Because it's a theatre, it's an art piece, the homeland security official said, "Oh, okay, I guess we could do that." And every night, we started before the audience came, with two dinners. One dinner for the kids, because the food in the detention centers is disgusting, and we wanted them to have a really good meal, not pizza, but eat good food. And then the other dinner was for the immigration officials and two homeless people without papers living on the street.

That dinner was, every night, incredible. In Austria, it was between the Minister of the Interior who'd called for the rounding up of all these people and two Nigerians living on the street of Vienna. It turns out they both have daughters, and the Minister of the Interior has daughters, and dinner was about that. As soon as you start breaking bread with people, as soon as you start just being in a human relation to them, you find out we share a lot. I'm really happy to say that two years later, those two Nigerians got their Austrian citizenship.

But anyway, just to say, again: instead of facing each other on television, instead of facing each other in these completely alienated environments where nobody looks good and nobody's being honest, what theatre does is insist that we're all in one room together. We're seeing each other not through a screen but actually we're sharing the same space, and what we share becomes what's important. To create—using the strange medium of theatre, which is, of course, a show--to create an island of truth in the real world, because the real world is where people are faking it. So, in theatre is where we might have a chance of actually doing the real thing—that's incredible.

The first hour was that conversation, and that conversation was unscripted. It went wherever it went every night. Then we have intermission. Then the audience came back from intermission and we had the play from twenty-five hundred years ago. What was amazing was you heard everything from the first hour repeated in the second hour as poetry. Meanwhile, onstage, are the kids. The kids are--as they are right now, in a holding room at the Los Angeles airport--they're not consulted. The kids have been detained, and then adults debate their future, which is how Euripides set up the play. Every night, these twenty-seven kids were just sitting there looking at the audience,

while all of us debated their fate. They were not asked anything, and they were not allowed to speak. Euripides does something quite amazing. When the Athenians finally decide to let the kids in, the kids leave the stage, and Euripides has done this unbelievable thing.

[Sellars sets down his microphone and steps down off the front of the stage to stand before the first row of audience members.]

The kids leave the stage and say *[Sellars grasps hands with an audience member in a front row seat]* "Thank you for letting me come to your country." *[Sellars moves to a second person and grasps their hand]* "Thank you for letting me come to your country." And they go through the whole audience.

It's genuinely--it's intense. It's an emotional moment that's overwhelming. Many times, many evenings, in many countries, people would pull away and say, "Don't touch me." Whole range of responses.

At the end of the evening, we then invite the audience usually across the street from the theatre where all night, during the performance, refugees have been cooking. And then we have our third dinner of the evening, which is with the audience, and at every table is one of the kids. One of these kids who's in a detention center, who, if you were standing next to them at a bus stop you wouldn't know how to start a conversation, is now at your table. They were silent all night and they were looking at you and you were looking at them but now, finally, you can talk to them. Again, we go beyond the television relationship, where you're just looking at each other but you can't talk. You can share dinner with them, share the table with them, share your lives with them.

By the end of the evening, that's the project, and that project is only possible in theatre. What we were able to do in each country--in Paris, we had three pages in *Le Monde*, three pages in *Le Parisien*. Every one of the kids' biographies was printed in *Le Monde*. Normally, kids in these detention centers are totally anonymous, and nobody knows anything about who they are. But their stories are put forward.

In Holland, the Queen of Holland, fabulous Queen Beatrix said, "Yes, I'm there for the performances" and showed up. The first night, she came. I guess her security kind of slipped her into the theatre quietly. So, the kids were up front and, that night, two of the kids were the speakers before the show and they said: "See, the Queen is supposed to be here, she was going to be here for us, but like everything else in this country, people say they're supporting us but, in fact, they're just abandoning us, and they couldn't care less." The Queen was there and she was not amused. She was horrified. I ran to her at

intermission, where she was in her private lounge with her lawyer friends and stuff, and she said, "These people have to realize they cannot be here. They've got to know they're going to have to go home. This is no space for them in Europe." Oh dear, this is not the best way to proceed. Beatrix is a really genuinely lovely, thoughtful woman and, in particular, her commitment, while she was queen, was to the arts in a beautiful way. So I was really worried that this was not a good opening night in Holland.

Then, the second half of the evening was the performance of the play. At the end of the night, the Queen was so moved by the play she stayed in the theatre that night for another two-and-a-half hours posing with photographs with every child and their family, doing interviews, shooting little things for their phones, doing everything. She could not do enough for them, because she saw the play. That's what theatre does is you start by saying, "These people absolutely have to leave and they have to know that," and then you see a play by Euripides and you say, "Oh. Maybe they should stick around."

That's the contribution theatre can make. Theatre can make this space in our society that, right now, has no space. We're not allowed to meet each other, we're not allowed to be together, we're not allowed to share. Everything's set up to divide us. Theatre is an attempt to make this space that we actually share. That is going to be the issue of the twenty-first century because none of us are culturally good at sharing. In the twenty-first century, the project is going to be: how do we share the air, the water, the minerals, the oceans—how do we share? The actual skill that we need to develop is deepening our sharing skills. Theatre is very, very good for that.

Geoffrey Riley:

So, Peter, many wonderful and terrible things have been said about operas and plays and movies you have put together. Would the—

Peter Sellars:

Mostly terrible, I think it's fair to say.

Geoffrey Riley:

Would the most terrible thing be for somebody to answer the question "What did you think?" with "It was okay."

Peter Sellars:

I have to say, nobody should be on the fence in terms of, "yeah, what's next." I want what I'm doing to be a seed. No seed is going to grow that night, but twenty years later my seed is your tree, if you gave it any water or any sunlight. What I'm trying to do is

give you an experience you will never forget, and that you will need to think about. I have to say: even bad advertisers have figured that out. If you make something slightly confusing, that's not immediately clear, people go back to it and back to it and back to it.

But, for me, most of the main issues in our lives are absolutely not clear and don't have simple, obvious solutions. If that can be stated in a way that's powerful, that brings you back and back and back to a certain question at different points across your whole life, which--what I think a work of art is about is—a Mozart symphony you don't just listen to once. You listen to it across your whole life and, depending on what's going on in your life, you hear it really differently at different times, because it's responding to what you're feeling at different moments in your life. In fact, you can measure your life, sometimes, by a certain piece of music that you have a lifetime of responses to. Or by a poem, or by an image, a painting, that you come to differently at different times in your life.

Theatre is something that doesn't exist outside you, because as soon as it's done, it is gone forever. I have to do something that night that you are going to keep and not throw away, and that is not in a book so you can go look at the painting you wanted to look at, not on a CD so that you can listen to a piece of music. The only place that piece of theatre exists now is in you, so I have to create something that you keep, whether you want to or not.

The short-term reaction of--the following morning you call a friend--someone you love and care about -- and you say, "I saw the worst thing ever last night. They did this and then they did that and then they did that. I can't believe it." And someone else is calling a really good friend and saying, "I saw the most amazing thing last night. They did this and they did this and they did this and I can't believe it." It's the same half-hour. Both calls are equally important to me. Then the really beautiful thing is what happens when the person they called calls someone, and says, "There's this incredible thing going on. There's this and then they do this and then they do that. Can you believe it?" And the person who made that call—

Well, first of all, the person who made the first call becomes an artist. You're describing to someone something they've never seen. Then the person they called really becomes an artist, because you're describing something you've never seen. That means you're an artist. What's powerful is empowering. For me, the video is not helpful, the legend is spectacular. A lot of my best shows had really bad second acts--I don't need anyone to remember them. Most shows have three amazing moments in them. The whole thing is worth it just to get to that incredible moment. Then it's just like the Buddhists say about

a raft: once you're across a river, throw the raft away. Don't carry it around. That's what I feel about the performance. I don't need to go through all that. That performance got to these three beautiful moments, and those moments I want to live with and I want to keep with me for the rest of my life and actually treasure them. The rest, let it go away. It's fine.

Basically, what I'm doing is making something that will change after the night you saw it, and turn into something else. That's why it doesn't bother me that people hate the show or love the show--it's all the same. And then, I probably should say to you--when I lived in Paris when I was eighteen--my mother, a Pittsburgh public school teacher who didn't speak a word of French moved our family to Paris. We had no money. We ate couscous every night. But it changed our lives. I went and saw one of the director Patrice Chéreau's early productions. He died last year. He was one of the very, very greatest directors. I was young, I thought I knew everything, and I saw this thing, and it was horrible. I was sure it was the worst thing I'd ever seen. I wanted my money back, and that's not the kind of person I am. I was so angry.

Five years later, I knew that was one of the greatest things I'd ever seen. Literally, tonight, if we had the time, I could describe all three hours of the show to you--but when I first saw it, I hated it. For me, that's a lot like your family. *[Audience laughs]* When something horrible happens, it's no fun, but the family comes together. Maybe it's the first time that person stops lying about everything. When you look back on it ten years later, that experience was not pleasant, but it was important, and it was a break-through. There was some moment of truth that it actually prompted, and that moment of truth is actually what was needed.

What I'm hoping stays are these moments of truth that were breakthroughs for people, and the rest of the show *[sweeping gesture with hands]* fine. Whether people love or hate the show is not--I'm not really interested. I'm not running a popularity contest. I'm not a politician. I don't need anyone to vote for me. It doesn't matter to me what people think because that's one really important part of truth-telling. If you're always worried about what people think, then you're never really going to free yourself to say something you believe deeply. You have to put it out there, for better or worse, and let people deal with it, and not be in a panic about what they think.

Now, it's easy to say that. It's really hard to sit in a show--again, that *Merchant of Venice*, for example, when--at the Goodman Theatre we did *The Merchant of Venice*. Audience of six hundred the first night. For Act Five, there were seventeen people left in the auditorium. Now, in some of my better shows, I'm able to clear about seventy percent of the audience. What you can say is: no one will ever forget it.

Sometimes you're doing something that is challenging to everybody, and sometimes a little is already enough, so I don't hold it against anybody, but of course it hurts. Of course, when you're destroyed by review after review after review, of course it hurts. But as soon as you, for one second, think that you're hurting a little bit, think of Shostakovich, think of Mozart, think of just about anyone you admire. If we had to write the biography of Martin Luther King from what newspapers wrote about him, that would be depressing. Anyone you admire had a really hard time and got a lot of bad reviews. To me that's actually somewhat of a badge of honor because a lot of stuff that gets the great reviews everybody really has forgotten ten minutes later. It's like silly pictures of what you were wearing in 1975. You look at it now and you say, "What?"

That somebody hates something or cares enough to try and attack it, to kill it, to stop it, to stop it dead, means you know we're touching some nerve, means you know we're doing something that needed to be done in some important way. When a grown adult will sign their name in the newspaper to this outrageous venting you say, "I think we've touched off something that puts somebody in a very defensive place." As always, when human beings overreact, you know you're going in somewhere that's important. Even though, personally, it's never stopped hurting after all these years (you'd think I'd be used to it), and the new attacks still shock me because every show I keep thinking, "this is so beautiful, people will just love this." And then controversy returns, and I'm like saying "but there is no controversy!" But, weirdly, apparently, there is.

At the same time, it's an honor to be discussed and talked about. Again, that is what I think the job description is. I'm going to make something that people have to talk about and needs to be discussed. The topic I'm bringing up needs to be discussed. If it starts by them having to discuss this evening, that's great. We're doing our job.

Geoffrey Riley:

How do you decide on an approach? How did you decide to do *The Ring* cycle shortened with puppets or to put the Lincoln Continental onstage, or to stage a show in a swimming pool or any of the things you've done? How is it you choose whatever device—Or to do *Don Giovanni* as a Blaxploitation film? How long before you actually stage the show do you make the decision about the approach you'll take?

Peter Sellars:

Well, I mean, don't you need a little humidity for Egypt? I mean, come on, swimming pool is one of the only places you can get that dense, intense, hot air.

Well, more to the point, when I graduated from school, I was adopted by a bunch of singers. I did the Wagner *Ring* cycle with people and puppets because it was just too long so it had to be--I had to--[audience laughter] it's just really long.

Geoffrey Riley:

Fifty hours, isn't it? The whole cycle?

Peter Sellars:

Bizarrely--it was when I was a teenager -- I was running a children's theater in Denver and then we got thrown out of our place where we were performing, and so we ended up spending one summer performing on the streets of downtown Denver in Larimer square. We did six shows a day on the streets of downtown Denver. Now, that was my actual theater school. Your job is to take people who have the single most important American mission on their minds, which is to shop [*audience laughter*]. How can you distract them from their mission for crucial seconds, have them stop and see what you're doing for a half hour, and then (most importantly) put money in the hat, because otherwise you will not eat tonight?

That was a very basic learning curve. I learned at a young age, as a teenager, to seriously engage America and Americans. What do you have to do to just stop Americans in their tracks and make them look--for a moment stop what they were thinking and divert their thought into what you're proposing? That was a very powerful set of experiences, and that summer was my most important learning curve of not talking down to any American, but talking across, eye-to-eye, on the pavement. How are we going to recognize each other? How are we going to give each other some space, some time, and some attention?

Doing these puppet shows and magic shows and all these things I was doing six times a day is exhausting. We were one block from, in Denver, what was billed on the front of the store as "The World's Largest Woolworth's." Doesn't that call for something grand? How about the *Ring* cycle? [*Laughs, audience laughs*] Haven't we done enough little puppet circuses? We should do something that has some ambition.

In high school, I was obsessed with Stravinsky--the unbelievably short, acerbic, everything reduced to the most perfect, jewel-like, finest statement, most absolutely -- and my friend who was with me in Denver was obsessed with Wagner, which is [*makes a blowing noise through lips while creating circles in the air with his free hand*]. We would argue until late in the night about this. He would really get mad at me because I didn't respect Wagner. I would get mad at him because Stravinsky said it all in fifteen seconds and Wagner is still warming up to the prelude.

Long story, short: we just said, "let's do the *Ring* cycle." We did that production of the *Ring* cycle on the sidewalk in Denver, Colorado one summer. The rainbow bridge came

from the fourth-floor men's room of the office building over there [*points upward*] and it was just--we figured it out, to do the *Ring* cycle in the middle of an American city, and what would that be like if the gods were walking down the streets in Denver, and the Valkyries came in from the Rockies. It was really alive and amazing. We reduced each piece to an hour. I took the old Bayreuth tapes and spliced them down to forty-five minutes each, actually (is what it turned out to be).

That's when I understand actually you can't lose a note of Wagner, was when I had to shorten Wagner. And then I realized why Wagner was five hours long. My respect for Wagner came after I had to make each Wagner forty-five minutes. Now I'm a crazy Wagnerian but, at the time, it had to come the hard way. I had to go into those pieces and realize why they had that amplitude and what it means that every human being needs to have that kind of amplitude--that human beings are immense, infinite, infinite beings, not these tiny stick figures that we're all told we have to be. We're all told we're powerless. We're all told our voice means nothing. We're all told that you can't affect anything, so just shut up. It's just not true.

Wagner is about one person's voice being [*brings hand swooping forward while making a blowing sound indicating volume and intensity*] and going into eternity, yes, and that you better be prepared for that because nothing that we want to actually do we're going to live to see in our lifetime, so your voice better reach into eternity. Your voice better be there for the next seven generations. We've got to figure out a way to speak that has power two hundred years later. Mozart died thinking those operas were failures. Two hundred years later, I was allowed to use them to describe the Reagan period in America, which he was not allowed to do in his lifetime, because his democratic sentiments were upfront.

One I'm doing next month is a continuation of my work on his last opera, *La Clemenza di Tito*, which is a mess, because he was desperate, he was dying – it was two months before he died. He had to write it in three weeks while he was still composing *The Magic Flute*, which opened two weeks after *La Clemenza di Tito*. They made him write an *opera seria* for the coronation of Emperor Leopold. Of course, Mozart was part of this circle of intellectuals who were creating the revolution in Europe, because Europe had no democracy; it had only autocracy, and they admired us, the Americans. Mozart was part of the same lodge as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. The last year of his life, Mozart set two pieces for glass harmonica, the instrument invented by Benjamin Franklin. That's why *The Magic Flute* is about a European prince showing up in a foreign shore, and the first person he sees has feathers--it's their idea of America. It's their idea that the future of the world is going to be America. With *Don Giovanni* and *Figaro*, he's shown what he thinks of equalizing all the voices. The aristocracy and the

working class are all treated, musically, as equals. Nobody has rank in a Mozart opera. Mozart's specialty is to give the best music to the worst people, which is really deep.

At the end of his life, when he's dying and he desperately needs money, he is given the gig to write the big opera for the coronation, except he's totally, totally, totally, totally, totally anti-empire, anti-king, anti-royalty, dyed-in-the-wool democratically committed revolutionary. He has to write his last opera in praise of an emperor, which killed him.

What I've done is rewrite the piece and put in the music he couldn't write, and changed the story so that it actually is his last work and he leaves the world with a real legacy. I thought that would really be attacked this summer in Europe. What I've done is I've staged it as a--I've staged the bombing--the placement of the bombs in Brussels two years ago. I've made it a terrorist attack in a European city with the best music going to the terrorists because, of course, Mozart was on the side of the generation that was creating the revolution. At the same time, I've connected the emperor, as I'm sure Mozart meant to, to Nelson Mandela, and put us in this place where we're at--where people who are hoping to change the world and their lives are setting bombs in public places at a terrible human cost, at a terrible moral cost, but they're that desperate right now. We've created such a level of desperation on two-thirds of the world. People are selling their own children as slaves. The desperation in two-thirds of the world at this moment is so extreme. We can condemn it as extremism but, in fact, people are living in extreme conditions. It's not extreme, their reaction--their reaction is the reaction anyone would have in those conditions.

Mozart writes music for the person who set the bombs. He says, "I'm the worst villain who ever lived, I'm a horrible criminal, but if you could look into my heart, you would actually understand me and recognize why what I'm doing has deep integrity"--an aria by Mozart. Mozart's whole life is about music of reconciliation. Mozart's genius is to take and deepen sonata form. Sonata form is: idea A shows up and is fabulous and enjoys itself, and then idea B arrives, to the annoyance of idea A, because idea A was supreme. Then idea A has to completely break itself apart and re-imagine itself in order to include idea B. That is every single piece of music Mozart ever wrote. It's about social inclusion, it's about none of us being who we are--we are who surround us. All of our lives we're changed by everyone around us. Most of our ideas belong to other people. We're all in this together. That's the point. Mozart writes the soundtrack for that.

Every Mozart opera ends with forgiveness--every single one. That was his reason to be on earth was: how do you write the music of somebody's done something terrible, but you actually need to love that person and receive that person? Again, as we said this

morning on the radio, until the person who is the problem becomes the solution there is no solution.

Geoffrey Riley:

Because only they can stop themselves.

Peter Sellars:

Right. Only a gang member can prevent gang violence--no cop. No standing army can help Afghanistan. Afghanis have to work out Afghanistan--not the French, not the Russians, not the British, and not the Americans. The only people who can solve the problem are the people who are the problem, and they need to be supported, not condemned. Most people are at their worst because they feel desperate and unsupported. I'm not just speaking of Afghanistan, I'm speaking of your family. It's just really basic, and really human. If someone behaves really terribly, you can't just cut them off. You've got to be with them. You can't only be with people on nice days. You have to be with people at their worst days. That's when they need people with them. That's why we're here.

Culture was invented as a way you could get close to somebody you were really scared of and not risk your life. You could be in the audience, and we have this hypothetical of what is it like to be near people we really are scared of and who we really don't like – let's test that. Let's test if we can hear what's going on in them, and if we were close to them, what would they say and what would they be like? Theater was invented as a way to go into the danger zone and not be physically in danger. Nobody has to lose their home. In Shakespeare, which is particularly grotesque – Shakespeare ends the play, almost every play with these bodies all over the stage and blood and it's ghastly and then there is the curtain call. They all get up, nobody actually died, and we say, "Oh my God, thank God we didn't actually have to have the casualties of the Vietnam war to learn something." It's a way of learning something without having to sacrifice a generation. That's why I'm still doing theater.

[Applause]

Geoffrey Riley:

You've mentioned two things about the people you work with: number one, it's a very collaborative process. Yes, you're the director, but you take so much from the people who are in the company – all of them. But you also, clearly, delve so deeply into the stuff of being human that there are often disasters on shows when people come apart in the rehearsal process because they're digging so deeply and finding things in

themselves they didn't know existed. Given that, how do you get people to work with you?

Peter Sellars:

Or, I would add, in performance it falls apart because I'm trying a very complicated thing of bringing this group of people with that group of people and some nights it just doesn't work. That's what life is like: you just don't know if it's going to work every night. But you've got to try it. You've got to create the space. Again, anything important in life doesn't necessarily work the first time, or the tenth. But it doesn't mean you walk away from it. You actually have to keep going until, finally, it starts to work.

People want to work with me. It's one of those very strange things: actors truly want to work with me, singers truly want to work with me, because they know I will actually challenge them, and they will make their greatest performance of their lives that they will never forget, because none of us go to the place we can go because none of us are ever really challenged. Usually, when we see a challenge coming, we duck. What it means to--again, as I've called the rehearsal room, is what I think of as a protected zone where people can do something terrifying and risky and be surrounded by people who are going to protect them and not expose them.

At the same time, what an actor needs is maximum challenge, and you need to see somebody every night onstage facing a genuine fear that they have in their life. Every night, we get to watch somebody up against everything they're afraid of, and we'll see how far they go tonight. That's what makes a powerful performance, is when you're in the presence of somebody who's having to reach for something they don't know how to grasp. You're present when a human being exceeds anything they thought they could do before. It's like the Olympics. But it's the Olympics not of the body, but it's the Olympics of the soul. It's where you're trying to break through the limit of the last generation of people. You say, "In our generation, we're going to try and reach farther. We're going to try and solve something the last generation couldn't solve. We're going to test ourselves. We're going to give everything we know how to give. And when that's not enough, we have to find something we didn't know we had to give."

That's what theatre is. Of course, on film, thank God, you only have to do that once. In theatre, you have to find a way to do it every night for six months, and challenge yourself over again and over again and over again and over again and go farther tonight than you went last night. Film is pretty safe. If the camera captures it once, it's over. Theatre: every night it has to be just as hard as it was the night before, and maybe a little harder.

One of the great things about getting really terrible reviews is you have nothing to lose. They already hate it. It's okay. So now we can go ahead and risk everything. Go ahead and just really put it out there. One of the joys for me--well, let's put it this way: when I was young, I was scared, like most people are scared. When I was young, I got to work with spectacular artists, and one of the most amazing American actresses Colleen Dewhurst, who is just a force of nature. She's just magnificent. I thought, "Oh my God, it's Ms. Dewhurst." I was directing Chekhov's *Seagull*, and I was saying, "Well, maybe it could be like this, or, oh, if you like, maybe you could do this or maybe--" and she finally looked at me and said, "I just took this job because I thought it would be a challenge. I'm waiting for you to challenge me." [Laughing] [Audience laughs] Okay!

That's when you learn that most people are just waiting for a challenge. Most people know that their life is too sedentary. Most people know that they've ducked out of important things. Most people know that, in fact, to get themselves back in shape spiritually, mentally, and physically, they actually need a challenge. A lot of actors are willing and say "yes."

Geoffrey Riley:

Since you mentioned spirituality, it reminds me of something you said this morning about Johann Sebastian Bach: that his music is a twelve-step program.

Peter Sellars:

That really comes from--after graduation, I was adopted by these singers who saw the *Ring* cycle and said, "we've got to work with this guy." They hired me, which is the reverse from the usual procedure. They were doing--in Emmanuel Church in Boston, right on the Boston common--they were doing a Bach cantata every week, in the liturgy, for twenty-five years. They did all the Bach cantatas over and over and over again. The cantatas are about suicide, they are about self-hatred, they are about these unbearable situations. But Emmanuel Church, in those years, was really powerful. They had three AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] programs; they had two NA [Narcotics Anonymous] programs; they had a shelter for battered women; they had a Salvadoran underground railroad refugee hideout program; they had a homeless kitchen; and were rehearsing a Mozart opera in that building. You're doing a rehearsal from *Don Giovanni*, and the smoke from the AA meeting is coming up through the floor. You're saying, "gee, this guy has raped five thousand women--does this have to do with addiction?"

So, *Don Giovanni* evolved because we were rehearsing it next to NA and AA meetings. We were rehearsing it next to a shelter for battered women. Suddenly, you realize Mozart was writing that. Mozart was writing music for people who'd been hurt. Mozart was writing music for people who were addicted, compulsive, operating against their

own better judgment, desperate, crazy, but--weirdly--loving and beautiful people whose lives are in the process of being destroyed. Again, as America figured out at the end of Prohibition, alcoholism isn't a crime--it's a disease, and it needs treatment. Drugs are not a crime. These people aren't criminals. They're people who need treatment. They are diseased.

Mozart's mission is that amazing act of forgiveness. *Don Giovanni* is this amazing example of going to hell at the end, but it's not that you're going anywhere--hell is where you're already living. Hell isn't a change of address. We laid that out. We laid that out because we were working together with people who were in all those programs at Emmanuel Church. When you're rehearsing *The Marriage of Figaro*, and the Countess and the Count are in that argument of the opening of the second act, of course because we were working next to the shelter for battered women you realize that is the reason the Countess does not appear before noon--because of her black eye from the night before.

Doing those operas in those conditions made you realize that music is here to help heal people. Music is not primarily entertainment--music is primarily healing. Music is a healing space. Our task, with music, is to put it next to the wound, put it next to the hurt, put it next to the panic attack, put it next to the violent act, and let music do what music does. As long as you keep music as just in a nice concert hall for nice people, you're not actually getting that music is here to do serious work. I don't mean to say nice people don't have serious issues. It's just nice people are the last people to acknowledge that they have serious issues. [*Laughs; audience laughs*]

It's that weird thing--the three years I was in Australia, we did a lot of work with suicides of Aboriginal kids. The suicide rate for Aboriginal kids is just shocking--I mean, truly shocking. How do you begin to approach that? How do you help that? Again, you can't legislate it, you can't--a judge can't do something. This has to be addressed in some other way, which is culture. But then, once we got involved and started really working on this, it turns out the suicide rate for white teenagers is the same as for Aboriginal teenagers. It's just black people have to have all their crises in public, and white people get to have their crises in private. That's intense. But again, it just goes to the point that we all share more than, in fact, separates us, when you really look. So, of course, we have to design programs that reach into those spaces that are buried, that are hidden, that are cloaked, that are--

The way I met Gerard Mortier, the great *impresario* who ran the Salzburg Festival, who is simply one of the visionaries--the Metropolitan Opera, for its hundredth anniversary, had a big whoop-de-do gala of all the important people in opera came for a three-day conference. I was twenty-three at that point, but I had gotten this big--big things written

about me by Andrew Porter in *The New Yorker*, so the Met had to invite me to show they were interested in the future. They scheduled my talk at 8:30am on a Saturday after *Khovanshchina* the night before, which is only six hours long. Six people came to my talk. Then, as the day went on, more and more famous people showed up and gave their talks.

There was this big talk for all of the opera *impresarios*, the big directors of the big opera houses. They all said: this is my subscription season, these are my box office figures, [noise indicating continued blustering], this is the marketing department, blah blah blah. Then they got to this quiet man from Belgium, and he said, "We live our lives in a world now surrounded by so many lies. Somewhere, every night, there has to be a place where someone is willing to lift the curtain at 8 o'clock and see what is behind." Nothing about his box office. And he said, "We've forgotten how to breathe. We're all in a rush. We're all missing our own lives while we're rushing." He said, "Opera is about remembering to breathe again--not these short, quick breaths, but a long breath." I said, "my God, who is this guy?" And then he said, "This morning a very interesting young man said something," and he started quoting me. [Laughs] That was really wild.

But just to say: yes, lifting the curtain is our job. That is the work. What does it take to lift that curtain, and to do it every night at 8 o'clock?

Geoffrey Riley:

We obviously have the luxury of not having to stop for underwriting breaks like we did this morning, so Peter can go on a good long time. But I don't want to hog him! There's not that much time left, and I wonder if any of you have questions you'd like to present to Peter Sellars. Yes, right here. [Indicating an audience member]

[Audience question is inaudible]

Peter Sellars:

Wow. Did people hear that? Wow. Thrilling. First of all, I just have to emphasize: we all have different three moments. I have no idea what your three moments are in one of my shows, because I know where I'm looking, but one of the things in live theatre is no two people are looking at the same place at the same time (at least, in my shows). I love creating this all-over thing where we're all looking differently and so people are having reactions at different times. Just to get away from television and the laugh track and get away from movies and the sound track. I love theatre to just be, you're just feeling what you're feeling in your own timeline, and I'm not telling you when to feel it. That's built in.

Narrative is there to be enjoyed and to be challenged. Inevitably, just because the beauty of the life we're living right now is there are multiple viewpoints. I teach in a department called World Arts and Cultures at UCLA, which is multiple. The disciplines are multiple, the cultures are multiple, the narratives are multiple. For me, if it's an old piece, it's about: what are the multiple narratives inside the single narrative? How do we exfoliate that? How do we actually create this way in which all these different points of view have equal lifelines and equal allure and are compelling in all these different ways at the same time? As Simon Rattle describes the opening movement of the Mahler ninth symphony: your two hundred best friends are all having a crisis that's equal at the same moment, and they all call you. It's got to have all that urgency, but also all that complexity and all that dizzying multi-voice thing that--which voice do you listen to?

That's an interesting thing, to feel the tension, because everything in theatre is about tension, everything in music is about tension--it's the tension of a violin string. If it's too tense, it's horrible. If it's slack, it's horrible. It has to be just the right tension. What you're doing is you're challenging the master narrative with just the right tension. The basic thing is--just simply, as an acting choice, if you're going to act a shy person, that's probably the loudest person in the room. The basic thing is you start with a yin-yang. Every truth that's really true, it's opposite has to be true. If you start from its opposite--if you make the really angry person kind, if you make the really kind person have a lot of issues, you start to get closer to reality. If you just complicate the narrative, in fact, you're starting to taste real life.

Most composers are doing that. John Adams in one bar can give you forty-five emotions. Mozart, the same. Mozart--that gorgeous Mozart phrase you want to last forever, Mozart says, "two bars is enough, I'm doing something else now." It's that incredible thing that it's shot through with color and with change, and it's like the weather in the Rover Valley: it's just non-stop moving, non-stop shifting, non-stop dynamic. What music is about is dynamic, what literature is about is dynamic, what dance is about is dynamic, and what life is about is a dynamic. There's no one truth, there's a dynamic that's underway among multiple truths. It's how that dynamic is moving that's exciting and interesting and informative. What I'm trying to do is actually get the dynamic to work and not to just make any one position the main deal, but keep this dynamic moving all the time so all the choices are constantly multiple for the audience.

Where you are, and how you decide to join that dynamic, is always exciting and, in my shows, no two people saw the same evening, which I'm so proud of. And, a lot, in shows like *Ajax*, for example, which were really provocative, that you saw, David [Humphrey] at the Kennedy Center--we took *Ajax* to six other cities. We took it out to

San Diego, which has the largest military population in America. It was a big Sophocles play about military power. The audience in San Diego--we did it at the Kennedy Center together, with David--the audience in San Diego--a certain line someone would laugh at, and a person next to them say, "That's not funny." You've got this incredible range in the dynamic, which for me is (again) is the hope of democracy. That is why we're all here, is because we are all different, and thank God for that. Thank God no human being repeats any other human being. Every one of us is utterly unique and irreplaceable, and that's why we're here.

Which is why it drives me crazy that we've gone back to standardized testing, because the human race is not standardized and should never be standardized. Standardized testing is only useful if you want to maximize inequality. Then it's very useful, because you can say, "these people are inferior." No, these people don't have the same cultural norms you might have expected from your circle of people. Meanwhile, they know things you would never know, ever, and that you better learn. Let's face it: everybody is holding the key to finish your sentence, and you need to know everyone. To me, that is the crucial part of narrative is just to say: who has the missing key in that sentence?

[*Indicating another audience member*] Yes?

[*Audience question is inaudible*]

Peter Sellars:

Did everybody hear that? [*Paraphrasing audience member*] "What is the soundtrack in a film and how is that different from the soundtrack in an opera?" I would just say there are a bunch of operas that are just soundtracks. For me, they actually need to be done in their period because they didn't transcend their period. For me, what a classic is, is that *Hamlet* means things to us that Shakespeare never imagined. That's why you call it a classic. A classic is something that means more than the creators thought it meant. A classic is something that each generation finds their own meaning in and sees their own picture reflected back to them. That's a classic. Whereas, other pieces are just stuck in their period and will never--*The Hunt for Red October*, I think, is pretty much not going to be one of the eternal classics, and the soundtrack doesn't quit.

All I wanted to say is, for me, the less said the better. The more space you leave for the audience, the longer the piece will endure, because what art is about is about as many people as possible seeing themselves in it. The more space you occupy, the less space is available for the audience. For me, it's just, in fact, understating things creates more space for meaning. Overstating things creates less space for meaning. Erring on the side of understatement is what I prefer. What's so beautiful, in *Hamlet*, is you just literally,

still, five hundred years later, we don't know that that speech means, and so we're going to say it again. Your guess is as good as mine. That's the beauty of Shakespeare, that's the power of Shakespeare, is that every one of us has a stake in what that might mean. It's not just for experts to tell us.

To take another example: when I did *The Merchant of Venice* with this cast of primarily African-American and Asian and Latino actors, we went around the room for the first week and just, at every line, all seventeen people in the room said what that line made them think of. You realized everybody's life experiences were so different, and that line triggered a whole other set of images, reactions, and memories. The line that you're so sure you know what the meaning is, in fact, the other sixteen people heard something else when you said that line. That's very, very, very powerful.

Music by Mozart leaves a lot of space. Music by Verdi leaves a lot of space, just because Verdi is doing this yin-yang thing that we discussed a minute ago. In *La Traviata*, she's happy, but she's actually devastated. Then, finally, when she's devastated, happiness shows up for the first time. The music puts you in between the devastation and the happiness, and you have to choose where we are. Verdi gives you the whole spectrum, as opposed to, this is just sad, this is just tragic. Verdi never does that. Verdi goes, "this is tragic and-- weirdly--beautiful and happy. Verdi always puts you in this complex place. The music is so intricate and complex and, again, has this dynamic--it doesn't sit in one effect.

Just a short answer is to say, as I mentioned earlier, the films I love are Jean-Luc Godard, where the soundtrack is radically independent. If any of you want to have a crazy experience--Jean-Luc Godard's *King Lear* was my apprenticeship with Jean-Luc. I was his assistant on that film. I brought him Molly Ringwald and Burgess Meredith and who else? He fired all the actors on the second day of shooting and the rest of the film he made with me in it, which was pretty crazy. But the film has the most amazing soundtrack. You see an image, and then the soundtrack that Godard gives you puts that image in all these other wild contexts. Again, if I could just say, most of our lives, when somebody says something, you have a multiple soundtrack going on of what that comment actually provoked in you. How much of it you acknowledge, how much of it you actually hear, and how much of it is subterranean, depends on you in that moment. One of the things Jean-Luc Godard does in *King Lear* is create this soundtrack that is crazy. You actually get how many reactions you're having at every moment, because the soundtrack is opening you into that free-falling space, rather than telling you what to think.

A bunch of operas that tell you what to think I have not staged. I will only stage operas that I think nobody knows what they are, and that interests me. I only stage operas I think are underrepresented. That interests me. Or I only stage operas where people think they know what it is, and I think, "Actually, it's a really a whole other set of things. Let's look at that." A lot of mainstream opera, I don't stage, because they are pretty much what people think they are, I think.

Audience Member:

[*No microphone, inaudible*]

Peter Sellars:

Oh, well, that's easy! What would I say to someone starting out? Step one is: be you. Step two is: be you. Step three is: be you. When I was fourteen, I made a decision never to do anything that I didn't love. I kept it with one exception, and that exception was a disaster, and I learned my lesson. No matter what people say, you do what you love, with people you love. Don't worry about the money. Do it not for money, but do it for love. And because you have no money, you're going to make some amazing new way to do something that nobody ever did before, because you don't have the usual options available. Every time you have a setback, every time you have an obstacle, that means you're being called to invent a new form of theatre. Enjoy that. Enjoy every setback.

Please enjoy fundraising. Fundraising, for me, is the most important part of art in America, and it's what they're missing in Europe. In Europe, because it's all funded, nobody has to talk to anyone about what they're doing. And the results--you see the strange, if I could say, almost psychologically damaged solipsism. In America, because I have to go out and talk with Cambodians about what I'm doing, and make sure what I'm putting onstage matches something they're proud of. Every time you actually--what you're doing--you go out and talk to people who you're representing onstage and who have, therefore, some stake in what you're doing. Inevitably, they make you realize that your ideas are not deep enough. They have a whole lot of suggestions, they have a whole lot of connections you should make. They say, "but have you read this? Have you seen that? Have you talked to this person?" And that's while you're fundraising.

The more you have to explain your ideas to people, the more they give back to you things that expand your ideas. So, for me, fundraising is an absolutely crucial part because the other thing in theatre right now is who's in the audience. Not enough, or a wide enough range, of people. You have to spend as much time on who's in the audience as who's onstage. You have to make sure that people who should be there are there, and people who would be interested in what you're doing and for whom what you're doing might be really important are there, which means reaching out across your

community and beyond and getting those people into the room and having some of them support what you're doing. But, also, finding ways in which what you're doing supports what they're doing. Theatre is not just an exercise in selfish exhibitionism, but is somebody doing something that needs to be done.

For me, one of the problems of our world right now is most people are doing something that does not need to be done. Funding is available--massive funding is available for something only if it is profoundly unnecessary. Anything that is urgent and absolutely must be done--no funding is available. You can tell how important what you're doing is by the fact that no funding is available for it. Go for it from there. But just recognize that your obstacles are your art form. As the Dalai Lama says, "treat the people who try to destroy you as your dear teachers. Treat every obstacle as a gift from your guardian angel. Because it's only your enemies and your obstacles that will deepen your practice. And have fun.

Geoffrey Riley:

I have to ask here for a moment though, because the approach that you take and that Bill Rauch from the Shakespeare Festival--you're three years apart at Harvard, we figured out? You were the leader of his Freshman Seminar as a senior? The idea, though, of making it more than just "Let's go put on a show!" I mean, you really get into a community, get into humanity. Was there one teacher who really helped encourage this in both of you at Harvard? It's okay if the answer is no, or if he did it wrong!

Peter Sellars:

There was a teacher I fought tooth and claw. And, again, you have to thank them as your deepest, dearest teacher in the Dalai Lama context. This man was so offensive. I was so angry. He was so pig-headed, he was so sure of himself, he so absolutely disrespected everything I cared about, and he ran the theatre center. He was the theatre professor. As a freshman, I took the first week of his first class--I was revolted. Then, because I had lived in Paris before going to college, every vacation I kept going back to Paris. Then I saw him in Paris, way far away from school, and we got on like a house on fire and became the best of friends. While I was still an undergraduate, he had me teach his classes--which is how I met Bill Rauch, because this great professor had me teach his freshman seminar, and I met Bill.

But, again, he was my absolute enemy, and I knew who I was because I wasn't him. Then, what was amazing was, as we got to know each other, he had me make the reading lists for his courses. We would debate back and forth, and it was thrilling. I had to really dig into what I felt and believed, and had to make my arguments stronger. He

delighted in challenging them, but also could tell that--he loved it when I really got the better of him. It was on fire. He was a great, great mentor--for the first two years, negatively, and for the second two years, positively. That's why you can never just decide who somebody is, because there's always a lot more there. There's always way more there than you think. And also, again, most people are actually waiting for that challenge and are thrilled, finally, when it shows up.

Audience Member:

[Inaudible]

Peter Sellars:

Oh my god! Did you hear this, everyone, trick question? Who's the composer, I've got the funding for the next opera, who's it going to be? Well, short answer is: I actually have a very short list of people whose--I've kind of done every one of their operas. So, duh: John Adams. The next John Adams opera we figured out last Friday night. It is funded, it's done, it's a done deal, it's going to be amazing, and I'm going to announce it tonight--I'm not allowed. But you're going to hear about it very soon. We did the deal Friday night. It is spectacular if I may say. It's thrilling. I wish I could just say it this minute.

Geoffrey Riley:

Is it Trump in Pyongyang?

Peter Sellars:

That would have to sustain at least one aria, and I don't think that could happen. You know, Trump is just not that interesting, and, also, I'm kind of over Trump. That is to say, one of the things I'm doing (for example) in my class right now in "Art as Social Action" that I'm teaching at UCLA, and the last class is Monday night. The class is in student movements right now in Kashmir, Egypt, Syria, Iran, and Los Angeles. I just want to wake people up, because we're all so obsessed with Trump and if you just take one minute and recognize what's happening in Syria at this moment, take one minute and look at what's going on in Egypt, take one minute and see what the new generation is facing in Kashmir, and let's stop feeling sorry for ourselves. Let's truly recognize, the challenges are all around the world right now. Let's just step up and wake up. Mr. Trump appearing on that Wednesday morning when we--I reached for my *Goebbels Diaries* to keep them next to the bed and the lives of the worst Roman emperors--there are precedents.

But, in fact, what he's doing is not just embodied by one man. That's the usual thing. It was the same deal with Reagan. They used this howdy-dooddy puppet, but all he's

doing is the product of thirty-five years of think tanks. It's not him; he's just the mouthpiece. No, no, this has been organized. They want you to keep your eye on the little talking bird while they take your wallet, your freedom, and your children. Trump is the useful distraction, as was Reagan, as was young Mr. Bush. The people who are doing this are seriously committed ideologues. They have been working at it for thirty-five years, they get up earlier than you or I do, and they mean it, and they have designed this. It's not the random goofball show that Mr. Trump makes it look like. This is an organized take-over. It has been in the works a long time. Can I just say: most people, in most neighborhoods of color, have seen it for many decades already. It was--well, it was under Clinton that we got the omnibus crime bill and the current nightmare immigration bill. Clinton gave us the prison-industrial complex. Obama: deporter-in-chief. These nightmare deportations that are separating families, that are inhuman and unspeakable? Trump is deporting fewer people than Obama did, month-by-month, week-by-week, year-by-year. Those were our friends.

I just have to say: it's just too easy to pick Donald and, in fact, Donald is just the decoy. What we have to do is be dealing with the rest of it and let Donald go nattering into the night, and I refuse to give him any more publicity. He has enough, so he doesn't need an opera on top of it.

Meanwhile, what we do need to do is get out a lot of other stories. There are a lot of other stories that need to be told, and they need to be told powerfully and eloquently, right now. That seems, to me, the real work. The real work is creating poetry out of tragedy, as it has always been. And just say: "okay, we made very big mistakes." Now, will we allow ourselves to learn from them? Please?

In order to do that, we accompany a vision of something truly terrifying and a massive level of social and individual self-destruction with music, because music suggests that it's not over. Music suggests there's some forgiveness. Music suggests that, of course, as you know in your own life, until you've been to your lowest point, you haven't come into your real scope as a human being. Just because you made a mistake doesn't mean you're lost--it means you're found, if you use that moment to find yourself. As we know, nothing gets better until it gets really bad. All the things that Mr. Clinton and the Bushes and Mr. Trump have repealed came out of the Depression, when it got really bad. Social Security and all these things had to be invented because people saw how bad it could get.

I think in terms of the big arc of things we're on our way to, finally--when enough people are experiencing how bad it can get, yes, there will be change and, yes, people will be mobilized, and yes, people will be motivated and yes, people will be ashamed

to, in this country, remove taxes from the richest people in the history of the world and add new burdens to the poorest people among us in broad daylight. That will be the shame of centuries. But I do believe we have centuries ahead. That's why we write operas and plays for people two hundred years from now. There has to be a record of what this felt like.

John Adams and I just made that with *Girls of the Golden West*, this gold rush opera we just did, which is about a moment in America where the most important thing is gold. It's not a proud moment. It's just important to remember that. We're now in this terrified state where we think money is the most important thing in life, and it just isn't. Money is never to be confused with life, ever. Every single Euripides play has a speech which says: nobody can possibly confuse freedom with money. Money is slavery, not freedom. Euripides, of course, was exiled.

But (again) as artists, it's our job to put it out there and let time actually move together with the work of art, and let people's awareness move together with the work of art. Let's create something that just is not over with tonight, but because of its very nature, says there is a future, and we're still working on that future. A very powerful place to start from is: "I was wrong." That's where Shakespeare ends his plays, over and over and over again. He ends most of his plays in total darkness, and he says to the audience: "if you want a sunrise, please make one, and let's have a new day."

Geoffrey Riley:
Peter Sellars.

[*Applause*]

Geoffrey Riley:
I don't think I will sleep for the next three days trying to digest all the things I've heard between the hour this morning and the hour and a half this evening. David Humphrey from the Oregon Center for the Arts at Southern Oregon University, thank you so much for bringing Peter here.

Peter Sellars:
May we thank fabulous David Humphrey? Thank you! Yes! May we have a round of applause for this beautiful man, Geoff? Every day!