

## Oliver Emanuel – Playwright

Born April 4<sup>th</sup> 1980; died December 19th 2023

Oliver Emanuel, who has died aged 43, was a playwright whose every work was an adventure. This wasn't just the way Emanuel sometimes filled his plays with fantastical creatures. It was how he brought his writing to dramatic life, driven by a sense of wonder and compassion. Whether it was writing a play without actors, as with *Flight* (2017-2020), or penning a piece without words with *Dragon* (2013-2015), Emanuel relished the challenge of finding new forms in expansive and playful ways.

He did this both on stage and on radio, where his imagination flew, using the medium as a creative tool. This was used to maximum effect in *When the Pips Stop* (2019), written for the centenary of the BBC. Emanuel took the idea of the state broadcaster going off air in the event of a nuclear attack and ran with it, to the extent of the play not only interrupting *The Archers*, but not being listed, advertised or trailed in any way. Emanuel loved surprising both himself and audiences in this way.

A major stage work came in *The 306* (2016-2018), a trilogy for the National Theatre of Scotland to commemorate the centenary of the First World War. Written in collaboration with composer Gareth Williams, the three plays took as their starting point the 306 British soldiers executed for cowardice. The result was a moving and tender evocation of lives lost, as Emanuel's plays honoured the dead and those left in their wake. Later works included *The Monstrous Heart* (2019), a play about two sisters for the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh.

Themes of loss and grieving pulsed much of Emanuel's work. While this came from the death of his mother when in his early twenties, he channelled it in a way that sparkled with empathy and wit. There was nothing esoteric or obscure in Emanuel's work. For him, it was all about the story.

Oliver Robert Michael Emanuel was born in Kent, the eldest of two children with his sister Alice to Mary (nee Dunsmore), a secondary school teacher, and Peter Emanuel, a solicitor. With Mary teaching drama, and Peter an amateur drama enthusiast, Emanuel was exposed to theatre from an early age. He went to St Gregory's Catholic Comprehensive School in Tunbridge Wells, then on to the University of Leeds, where he took English Literature and Theatre Studies.

At Leeds, Emanuel met Dan Bye, and the pair took part in student drama. Emanuel planned to be a novelist, and did an MA in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. Then Bye received a phone call from Emanuel one day to tell him that he had written a play, and wanted Bye to direct it. That play was *IZ* (2004), a piece about three men grieving the same woman. Even before his own loss, it seemed, Emanuel was sensitive to the experience.

The production's Edinburgh Festival Fringe run marked the beginning of Emanuel and Bye's collaboration as Silver Tongue Theatre. Other shows included *Bella & the Beautiful Knight*

(2005), and *Man Across the Way* (2007). Emanuel moved to Glasgow in 2006, and quickly became part of Scotland's playwriting and theatre communities by way of plays at The Arches and Oran Mor.

Emanuel's sensibilities were perfect for children's work. For the Macrobert, Stirling and Imagine festival, Emanuel wrote *Titus* (2012), an English language version of Jan Sobrie's novel about a ten-year-old boy dealing with grief. For the National Theatre of Scotland, there was *The Day I Swapped My Dad for Two Goldfish* (2013), an adaptation of the book by Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean. Again for the Macrobert, Emanuel penned *The Little Boy that Santa Claus Forgot* (2014-2015). For Visible Fictions, he wrote a version of *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (2014).

*Dragon* (2013-2015) was created with the Vox Motus company as a puppetry and sound-led spectacle that told the story of a little boy grieving for his lost mum who finds a dragon outside his window. Co-produced with the National Theatre of Scotland and the Tianjiin Children's Arts Theatre, China, the play saw Emanuel take a leap into his imagination to tell a story that went beyond words.

*Flight* (2017-2020) saw Emanuel work again with Vox Motus on an adaptation of Caroline Brothers' novel, *Hinterland*, about two orphaned Afghan boys who flee from Kabul and make a two-year journey to London. The production told the story through a revolving diorama of models in light box installations, with Emanuel's dialogue recorded by actors and heard by the audience on headphones. Opening at Edinburgh International Festival, the show won a Herald Angel, and toured the world.

For Horsecross Arts in Perth, Emanuel wrote *I Am Tiger* (2022), about a little girl who is given a pet tiger after losing her brother to suicide. It won a Critics Award for Theatre in Scotland for Best Production for Children and Young People.

Emanuel's sense of empathy applied similarly to his work as a mentor and teacher. He became Reader of Playwriting at the University of St Andrews, where, with fellow writer Zinnie Harris, he set up the MLitt in Playwriting and Screenwriting. Other posts included a stint as Associate Playwright at Playwrights Studio Scotland, and Writer-in-Residence at Gladstone's Library, the residential library in Hawarden, North Wales.

Radio was a perfect medium for Emanuel's wide-eyed visions. His play *Daniel & Mary* (2010) received a Bronze Sony Radio Academy Award for Best Drama. *When the Pips Stop* won the Tinniswood radio drama award. *The Truth About Hawaii* (2018), won a BBC Audio Drama Award for Best Original Series or Serial. Closer to home was *The Tenderness of Boys* (2020), about a writer who visits a supermarket and sees his mother, who has been dead for fifteen years.

Emanuel worked alongside Dan Rebellato, Michael Jameson and Lavinia Murray on *Emile Zola: Blood, Sex and Money* (2015-2016), an adaptation of the nineteenth century French novelist's twenty-volume Rougon-Macquart books. Spread across three series', Emanuel's contributions included *Fate*, a brand new work that filled in the gaps of Zola's epic in a fictionalisation of the diplomatic scandal that led to the Franco-Prussian War. The series

won Best Drama at the 2016 BBC Radio and Music Awards, and Best Adaptation at the 2017 BBC Audio Drama Awards.

Rebellato wrote how “there is no radio writer I admire more than Olly Emanuel. Every one of his plays is formally inventive, conceptually daring and – the difficult bit – emotionally rich and resonant.” As Bye put it, “every play Olly wrote was an attempt to reimagine what a play could be.”

Emanuel is survived by Vickie Beesley, and their two children, Matilda and Isaac. Emanuel and Beesley married a few weeks before his death. Emanuel is also survived by his father, Peter, and his sister, Alice.