



SPEAKING WITH SHADOWS

Transcript of Bonus Episode: Voices of the Portchester Prisoners

Josie: Hey! You've found a little bonus episode from our series Speaking with Shadows, the podcast that listens to the stories that history forgot. I'm Josie Long, and today we're hearing more from my visit to Portchester Castle in Hampshire. In the last episode we traced the story of the black prisoners of war who were held at Portchester during the French Revolutionary wars in 1796 and 1797. About ten years later, a remarkable theatre was set up within the castle by French prisoners of the Napoleonic wars. A sound installation in the keep that runs until November 2019 now links the two stories. Drawing on two plays written by the French prisoners, the installation invites new perspectives on the story of the black Caribbean prisoners who were incarcerated here. We talked to the artist Elaine Mitchener as well as to Kate Astbury, who worked with historian Abigail Coppins on this research.

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Kate: My name is Kate Astbury, I'm Professor of French Studies at the University of Warwick.

Elaine: My name is Elaine Mitchener and I'm an artist and musician and responsible for the sound installation at Portchester Castle.

Kate: We're sitting here at the moment just outside the keep while we watch families have their picnics and school parties traipse up and down the steps.

Elaine: We've been talking about this project for well over a year.

Kate: A couple of years?

Elaine: Yeah a couple of years. I'm really interested in the fact that history is often written by the victor, and it's the ordinary people who are disregarded. Yet, it's the ordinary people who do extraordinary things that changes history as well.

Kate: I had a research grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council to look at French theatre of the Napoleonic era, and as part of that, I had a PhD student working on prisoner-of-war theatre. Obviously Portchester is the most extravagant example of prisoner-of-war theatre of the Napoleonic period.

[Clip] My principles are unwavering. The French people, through the organ of its representatives, has invested me with my authority and I am answerable to them alone.

Elaine: I want really to draw people into areas of the castle. You will hear music in the theatre space, which is drawn from a play called *Roseliska*, which was used for the overture of this play, and it was written by one of the later prisoners who was a composer and went back to France. And I just tried to



imagine the prisoners just settling to hear. And also those who were invited to come and see it, which is people of Portchester who paid tickets to come and experience these melodramas, which is rather fantastic actually.

As you move within that first space with the well inside the keep there is, what I call, a corridor. There you will hear the opening speech by the character Spartacus who is an enslaved African on the island of St-Domingue, and it's from the play *The Revolutionary Philanthropist*. And he talks about being all men are born free and equal. It's a propaganda play.

Kate: It is a propaganda play. And it's propaganda from the white colonial perspective.

Elaine: Absolutely. I'm into subverting things anyway. So you can hear that being said by two actors, a man and a woman. I felt it was very important that people understood that men and women were part of this revolution.

[Clip] Liberty, equality. I no longer recognise distinctions of colour and I declare to you that prejudice will no longer despoil this land...

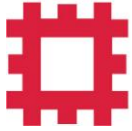
Elaine: Through to the other room, there's an ambient sound of a tropical forest and a wood fire burning, and I wanted to evoke that sense of memory of those French prisoners who arrived from the Caribbean in the winter, and what a huge shock that must have been to them. And the actual fact that there would have been a fire burning in the fireplace, so that crackles away, and then in the corner of that room you will hear the names of some of those who are in the registry, and they are just spoken.

[Clip] ... Fournier. Soldier. Thomas Laroche. Soldier. Jean François. Soldier. Dieudonner. Soldier. Jean Carere. Soldier. Carnie. Soldier. Paperé. Soldier...

[Overlapping] ... Joseph Dupuis. Sergeant Major. Jean Charle. Soldier. Pierre Cologne. Gunner. Eugine. Gunner. Jean Barthelemie. Soldier...

Elaine: The list of the names, you can hear them upstairs, and that's accompanied by a big drum sound known as 'gwo ka' from Martinique. It's part of this big drum tradition, which is across the Caribbean and originates from West Africa, and it's one of the things that has survived the history of the Caribbean, and I find that rather remarkable. And it's shared, it's a shared heritage and it was seen as being very dangerous because it was also a way of conveying messages through drumming.

Kate: The prisoners were released from Portchester and sent 'back', in inverted commas, to France. So they never set foot in France. They were from the Caribbean, but they were French, so they were sent to France. The men were sent to the Île-d'Aix and garrisoned there, and the women were held on the mainland. And they wrote to the minister of the interior in Paris to say that they were destitute and could something be done, and the ministry sends the letter back to the region and says, we do need to sort out payment for these women. But we also get some great letters complaining that



they're trying to inveigle their way onto the ferry to get back across to see their menfolk. So they're pretending they have dispatches from the General in order to wheedle their way onto a ferry.

Elaine: Why wouldn't you?!

Kate: So we have this fantastic letter that says: 'Can you just watch out! These women are trying to get back to the garrison by claiming they've got dispatches from the governor.' It just gives you an indicator, just a tiny flavour, of how incredibly resourceful these women were – how all of the prisoners were actually.

These are really amazing revolutionaries who are prepared to take things into their own hand and are not prepared to just passively sit there and be separated from their menfolk, but will go to whatever lengths it takes to stay together.

Elaine: Absolutely. It's really inspiring and it feels very contemporary as well, just the way that they are described. I think they're described as refugees at some point, and their papers are being examined and scrutinised – now are they the right papers? And you hear about all the bureaucracy around it.

I feel encouraged that it has come to the fore now and I feel very proud and privileged to have been able to work with this material, work in this space, and actually reassess what English heritage means in a wider way.

[Clip] ... Edouar. Soldier. Louis. Soldier. Augustin Camus. Soldier. Bernardin. Soldier.
Megrinier. Serjeant...

[Overlapping] ... Jean Marie. Soldier. Opera. Soldier. Joseph Postillion. Soldier. François Le
Versier. Soldier...

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Josie: Thanks for listening to this bonus episode of Speaking with Shadows. If you subscribe on your podcast app, you'll get the next one automatically. I'm Josie Long and you can find out more about this, and other amazing stories, at english-heritage.org.uk/speakingwithshadows.