

W.P.J.
St. J. in F.M.
8/2/56

John Oswin O'Brien

Born: 13th February, 1937 in Johannesburg, South Africa.

1943 - 1954 St. John's College, Johannesburg
(J.M.B. Matriculation 1953 followed by 1 year in Sixth Form).

Prizes: Sixth Form prizes in English
History
Biology

+ School Essay Prize

+ School Senior Carpentry

1955 - 1957 University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

B.A. Degree - major subject English

second subjects History and Philosophy

December 1957

Travelled to the U.K. with the hope of studying further either in Law or Psychology. Somewhat unrealistic as I had no money! Chose preparatory school teaching as a first option as this offered long vacations, opportunities for travel and time for thinking and planning. During these first months I came across Michael Burn's book on George Lyward - 'Mr. Lyward's Answer' - and began a correspondence with Lyward.

April 1958

Teaching post at St. John's-on-the-Hill Preparatory School, Chepstow, Monmouthshire. Taught English, History and Elementary Mathematics to pupils preparing for Common Entrance Examinations to Public School. Given a long rein I explored teaching techniques and produced two plays out of doors - abridged versions of Shakespeare's 'Julius Caesar' and 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'. Made three visits to Finchden Manor and in

August 1959

was appointed to the staff of Finchden Manor. Though much tutoring had been conducted at Finchden Manor over the years, I was the first member of staff to be officially appointed as a teacher. This was a massive concession to the changing times and more rigid conditions of entry to English universities. As well as general duties as part of Lyward's team assisting him in the psychotherapeutic re-education of 'disturbed adolescents', I taught English and History to G.C.E. Advanced Level (the normal requirement for university Entrance) and G.C.E. Ordinary level Mathematics.

I was given enormous opportunities to explore my interests in painting, pottery, stage design and drama.

It was at Finchden that I first met André Tchaikowsky, who visited often, seeking help and guidance from Lyward.

June/August
1966

I made a brief visit to South Africa. Immediately on my return to England, my father died. Lyward provided me with the funds to return to S.A. for my father's funeral. Became somewhat restless and won myself a place at a highly reputable Art School in London. Departure from Finchden Manor was planned for mid-1967. Mrs. Lyward's illness became unmistakably terminal. She died in 1967. I stayed on at Finchden Manor. The next four years saw a much closer relation developing between G.A.L. and me and out of this a much closer link between André and me. This was also a period of great activity in drama, in which I devised a small number of highly diverse theatrical productions. After a production of 'The Tempest' André asked me to consider working with him on a libretto.

July 1970/71

One-year course at Institute of Education, University of London. Diploma in Philosophy of Education.

July 1971 -
December 1972

Most of this time was spent in London. I was unemployed or 'self-employed', living from hand to mouth, making pottery, painting pictures, illustrating a children's book written several years earlier (but never published), working on the libretto for the opera with André and running an unofficial outpost for Finchden Manor, providing temporary refuge for people who had moved away from Finchden Manor before they were really able to hold their own in the world.

September -
November 1972

Visited Southern Africa. As the only son of an elderly widow, I felt obliged to move closer to her home, and so explored the possibilities in the states neighbouring South Africa. At no point since I left South Africa in 1957 have I been prepared to live in that country under its monstrous regime.

January 1973

My hopes of establishing a small institution for delinquent adolescents on remand or probation were frustrated partly because I had not the funds required by the Swazi government to establish my credibility, partly because there was no Children's Act within the law which would have enabled magistrates to send people into my care rather than going into the horrific conditions of the central prison in Mbabane.

Instead I accepted a post in a national secondary school.

January 1973 -
December 1975

Mhlatane High School, Pigg's Peak, Swaziland. I was appointed Boarding Master and Deputy Headmaster. A fascinating three years in which I

explored the undoing of conventional authoritarian discipline in one of its fastest strongholds. It proved a valuable preparation for my transfer to Botswana.

January 1976

I had first visited this school in 1972 when it was only a few months old and believed it was important, a trail-blazer for education in the Sub-Continent. Appointed to the Staff of Maru a Pula as Head of the English Department and responsible for drama and gardening, I became Boys' Housemaster in March.

In 1977 I wrote and produced the school's first major play - "Antigone '77".

In January, 1978, appointed Second Master and have held that post ever since.

Theatrical
Involvement

It is important to point that I am in no sense a professional in the theatre. All my work has been amateur - however highly praised. The number of productions is small. The point has always been to elicit from withdrawn or disturbed young people responses which would give them confidence in a larger world. This statement is more true of my work at Finchden Manor than elsewhere, but the principle that I have employed has been consistent.

At Finchden I was intimately involved in, but did not direct the following plays -

My Three Angels	
Romanoff and Juliet	Ustinov
A Penny for a Song	Whiting
A Man for All Seasons	Bolt
St. Joan	Shaw

in collaboration - Jewels of Sorrow (an adaptation of a Thurber story)
produced and
designed

My Three Angels	
One Way Pendulum	Simpson
Sweeney Todd	
The Tempest	Shakespeare
The Teacup	G.A. Lyward!

At Maru a Pula I have produced, designed, etc., etc.,

Antigone '77 - JOB + Sophocles + Anouilh	
Caucasian Chalk Circle	Brecht
A Midsummer Night's Dream	Shakespeare
Royal Hunt of the Sun	Schaffer

Page 4.

Selo and the Sengwe-le-Sengwe
Tree

JOB

In Gaborone I have produced a reduced version of the opera 'Hansel and Gretel'. By reduced I mean piano instead of orchestra and good acting instead of spectacle + angels!!

In 1985 I also produced a modern dress version of Act II of Tosca.