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### [Episode 30: Alexander Woodward](#) - (May 2016)

Transcript edited by David Turner – 13/03/2017

Host: Lizzy Palmer – **LP**

Guest: [Alexander Woodward](#) – **AW**

#### **Conversation:**

**LP:** Hello, my name is Lizzy Palmer and this is another episode of Lunar Poetry Shorts. Today I'm joined by Alexander Woodward. Hello.

**AW:** Hello.

**LP:** How are you?

**AW:** Not bad, how's you?

**LP:** I'm not too bad either, thanks.

**AW:** Hurrah.

**LP:** Excellent. So, by way of introduction, as we always do, we'll start with a poem please.

**AW:** This poem is called;

Should I Have a Daughter

Should I have a daughter –  
That's not a question, it's a pause for thought –  
Y'see,  
I wonder what I ought to tell her.

First thing, I suppose  
Is that she shouldn't back down when she's right just because somebody yells at her.  
Equally, though,  
She should know to apologise when she's wrong.  
It's not that nice,  
But it doesn't take too long.  
And then,  
When she's done  
She can go back to being friends with whomever she's just made amends.

The second thing  
Is that she can believe what she likes,  
But has to be able to justify her thoughts.  
For I will challenge her.  
No daughter of mine is going to be a knee-jerk of any sort.  
Nobody likes a bigot,  
So I shall disconnect from the plumbing  
That particular spigot  
(Which is a posh word for 'tap'.)

Third is a thing at which I myself am crap.  
It's a good lesson, though I've barely learned it:  
You only get the reward if you've sweated and toiled and bloody well earned it.  
To do well,  
To aim high  
One has to grit one's teeth and really fucking try.  
But if trying's not enough and she still fails

Then I'll be there with a consoling word and a lovely, lovely ale  
Which she can drink by the pint.  
My pale, hairy arse  
Will that be thought of as being unladylike!

Four.  
I hope I can give her the space she needs,  
But if she calls me, I'll storm on in:  
A knight in shining tweed.  
Zeus help whomever leaves her in tears for a day or a year,  
Or dares to forget her.  
For I will give them such a vicious  
Handwritten letter.  
And I'll charge the bastard for the postage.

But what I want for her most is  
That she will be interesting.  
For the interesting will inherit the world.  
And then they'll go  
"Oh.  
Thank you.  
Oh, that will come in handy.  
Oh, look."  
And then they'll go back to their book.  
My daughter will read  
And she will like it.  
That's not a threat, it's a prediction.  
In my family reading is an inbuilt predilection,  
A source of affection.  
She'll read in Latin, I hope,  
So we can talk about life in a 'dead tongue'  
And I can share the Ancients' wisdom  
On how to cope.

It's my hope that this list  
(Though parts of it were written half-pissed)  
Will be sufficient preparation.  
I want for as long as possible to save her from the realisation  
That Daddy doesn't know everything.  
He's just as scared and confused as the rest of the world.  
But he'll try.  
That's a promise to you,  
My (as yet, completely hypothetical,) little girl.

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LP: Wonderful, thank you.

**AW:** You're welcome.

**LP:** Right. So, my first question is; why poetry?

**AW:** It's a two-strand attack on this one. I've loved poetry forever because I've got an older brother and a younger sister, there's five years between them. So, when we were small, finding something for mum to read us at bedtime was hard because there's not going to be something, story-wise, that'll capture everyone's attention. And you can't get through enough of a book in any one sitting to avoid tedium so mum read us poetry. A lot of Edward Lear and the Hilda Boswell, Children's Collection of Verse and things like that.

As far as doing it? That came about accidentally because I wanted to be a comedian, I wrote a sketch in school and then when I went to university I swapped to stand up. The poetry just accidentally happened because I couldn't sleep one night and I thought, "Sod it. I'll try writing a sonnet", to see if I could and kept that up for a few years.

Just for me [really] because I enjoyed the process and then I made the mistake of, accidentally, memorising it and reciting one while hammered in someone's front room. They [kindly] said, "This is brilliant, you've got to do it", so I slowly kept doing it because it seems to be going quite well.

**LP:** Yeah. I really like that question because while it seems a bit simplistic maybe, everyone's answers so far have been totally different and it's really interesting for me to find out.

**AW:** Well, that's what we're here for, isn't it? Interesting?

**LP:** Yeah. So, since you have been writing, what have been the main influences over your development as a writer.

**AW:** Well, there's a fair amount of Latin poetry in it because my degree was in Classics, so you know, you read enough of something it sticks in your head. If you know you're looking for I'm told there's a fair amount of Horace and Ovid in... Certainly, my imagery and my structure, I'm told. Apart from that, there's a fair amount of stagecraft from the comedy and from the from acting, in trying to get an 'arc'.

Because like, with my background, I wrote specifically with speaking to an audience in mind. That's what I write so that's how it came out and so if you're doing that you need to... The ideas come like jokes, you start with a funny bit, the bit in your head, and then you have to track back until you get to a point where the audience can get on board with you and then you can follow it to a decent conclusion. So, as far as the writing itself goes it's identical in process to trying to write stand up comedy. It's just, what comes out is a little different.

**LP:** Great. I think now we'll take a second poem please.

**AW:** Lovely. I think I'll do a love poem. Love poems are great, they're like 'the little black dress' of literature. They never go out of style and everyone's always surprised that I've got a lot of them. This one is called;

### Why Can't I Sleep?

Why can't I sleep? Is it:  
Hastily scrawled emails hanging Damaoclean above my pillow, waiting for a reply and – free  
from light, stringy restraint – to plunge?  
Is it:  
Thoughts of unwon kudos cavorting in orcish glee and jabbing me with gouging pikes of self-  
doubt?  
Do mind and soul rush down untrod roads, hoping to catch glimpse of some unknown,  
unseen monument to my greatness?  
No.  
So,  
Why can't I sodding well sleep?  
Why do thoughts spin and make me nauseous?  
Why am I plagued by thoughts of one met but barely-met, known but unfamiliar?  
It's all so similar to angsty dross,  
So in need of exorcising,  
Of recognising it for what shit it is.  
Fiction.  
Fantasy.  
Guff.  
You don't love her.  
'cause you don't know her, that's why! You've hardly met!  
And yet ...  
And yet it is an intriguing thought,  
One which one ought to dismiss as idle fancy.  
But if you act she might accept or at least not laugh full-derisive in your face.  
Mark this place and seek her face to ask, to test, to see.  
Ah  
What that face does to me,  
It's a buzz, you see,  
A joy for me.  
One quick smile and this boy is floored by she who hoards my dreams and keeps them.  
Let her keep them.  
Or  
We could share them,  
Be a pair, then,  
And all content lie back and stare ten hours at stars and lights and talk of all the things we  
ought to have done, but didn't.  
We didn't because I wouldn't.  
Not if I had the time with you, I couldn't.  
I'd be ensnared, and scared to tread on this joyous bubble, and be befuddled when it takes  
my weight, and takes on shape, and becomes reality.

That would be really quite okay for me.

But for now

I dream.

But still don't sleep.

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**LP:** Thank you.

**AW:** Welcome.

**LP:** So, you touched a bit on how you structure your work can. Maybe you could tell us a bit more about your actual writing process?

**AW:** That's a very grandiose title for what goes on. Process! It involves chocolate digestives, dressing gowns and the kitchen, really. Writing is a thing that happens when I'm sober at two o'clock in the morning. Ideas occur and I let them wander in occasionally, my brain will stumble across either... It's often a single line that there'll be something pleasing about. Either, I like the concept or it's rhythmically pleasing or it's a line that sparks something and you know, I forget half of them.

And then half of them that I do remember never make it to anything and then about... I don't know, it works out to about a couple of times a week, I've got an evening or a weekend, I'll sit with my massive stack of Post-It Notes and half written memos on my phone to see if I can recreate the thought. If I can then I apply the structure of starting in the middle and working either side.

**LP:** It is a bit of a hard question, really, because the word process implies a very definite, set way of something happening and it's obviously not really like that for most people.

**AW:** No. Would that it were.

**LP:** I might change that question. How long have you been performing your poetry and what impact, if any, has this had on your writing? Have you noticed that the actual performing of it has made you want to change it, at all? I suppose that's two questions in one.

**AW:** Apart from, what, three gigs while I was at university... "There's a thing going on, I'll try some poetry because I'm bored with my material". Properly performing? October? Yeah, I hadn't been on stage for a couple of months which was weird and I didn't have any stand up that I was happy with. But I did have, at that point, about twenty minutes of my verse memorised so I just stuck 'spoken word open-mic nights' into a search engine and went to the first one that seemed like it was still active and it's been going well.

As for, has it... The act of me performing hasn't changed because, as I said, I write with speaking to an audience in mind, naturally. What has changed is seeing. Because you're at a gig, and unless you're a complete tool, you stick around and watch other people. You listen to other words and that changes you because it shows you what the well-trod ground is.

You know, if everyone and this dog is doing a 'fuck the Tories' poem, to take an example out of thin air, I'm tempted to say, "Okay, I'll leave that and write something else". So, it's made me focus a little more on the slightly stranger ideas as opposed to... The first poem I ever wrote, that sonnet I mentioned, during the insomnia was a lovely little thing. It rhymes quite well but it's just, "Ah she's got very pretty eyes", we all start there but... So, seeing how other people approach it has been the big effect, I think.

**LP:** Do you find the experience differs very much between performing your poetry and acting or doing stand-up comedy? In terms of performance.

**AW:** A standard comedy audience have every chance of being as welcoming and engaging and supportive as your standard poetry audience. Though, comedy is steeped in irony and cynicism, in this country certainly, other scenes vary. It's the ability to be earnest and the fact that a poetry audience won't shy away from 'this is how I actually feel about a subject' that is the big difference and is why I keep coming back.

Because maintaining cynicism just to write is exhausting. Whereas, thinking of myself as a spoken word type I can still do jokes between poems. I can still do things like, playing with how I present myself to the audience and the 'gaze' and talking to the front row. The thing that is wonderful is [I can] be enthusiastic and slightly vulnerable and genuine. I think this is what I like about it, you get a lot of 'genuine-ness'?... Being genuine filtered through this lovely artistic fiction and for purely selfish reasons I prefer it because it's much easier than trying to get my therapy through the comedy.

**LP:** That's great. We will have a third and final poem please.

**AW:** Okay. My poetry comes into three categories 'miscellaneous', 'depression' and 'love' so I'll round it off with this one which, I think it's called On Humanity. I don't much like the title but I can't think of a better one, so we'll call it;

### On Humanity

Sometimes I feel numb,  
Which shouldn't make sense  
'Cause numbness is an absence of feeling  
Except that the numbness has got so bad that it starts to burn.  
Does anyone else get that?  
No?  
Alright.  
Um.  
D'you ever, like, really fucking want  
To put your fist through a table?  
You don't,  
Not because you're not able,  
But in case some shocked person cries out  
"THAT'S MAHOGONY!"

The agony of your personal Odyssey isn't anything new.  
 Don't you forget, you're not the first  
 To get the hull of your trireme wet.  
 A thousand generations or more since ancient times  
 Have left their native shores  
 And set sail for distant climes.  
 A thousand generations from a myriad of nations  
 Have braved these seas before you learned how to breathe.  
 Despite the odds set against them  
 Your ancestors squared their shoulders,  
 Set their feet,  
 And met them.  
 They sailed through the crashing boulders and crossed the raucous seas.  
 They reached the Caucasus and retrieved the Golden Fleece.  
 You are the successful result of billions of years of evolution,  
 And with every revolution of the wheel of fate  
 Your ancestors grit their teeth and set a faster pace.  
 We are the only species to send one of their own into outer space.  
 We share 97% of our DNA with chimpanzees  
 And we have crosswords  
 And blackberry jam  
 And artistic jamborees,  
 While  
 (Nice as they are)  
 They're naked and live in trees.  
 The ease with which we put ourselves down  
 Has always struck me as strange since  
 The bricks of our molecular arrangements  
 Were forged in stars.  
 You are the dust of stars,  
 So you really must start trying to get some perspective.  
 Do some good,  
 Write some ringing invective.  
 Just make sure the world's a better place by the time you leave,  
 Because, Sir and Madam,  
 I do not believe we are the fallen descendants of Adam and of Eve.  
 We are risen apes.  
 If that thought ever escapes you  
 Or you begin to hate your life or regret it or rue it,  
 Forget all else  
 Save this:  
 You're human.  
 Humans are great.  
 I'm sure you'll get through it.  
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**LP:** Thank you.

**AW:** Welcome.

**LP:** Fucking crosswords!

**AW:** Yeah.

**LP:** So, final two questions.

**AW:** Okay.

**LP:** The first of which is; How would you like to see your writing progress?

**AW:** I'd like to... I think I do what I do quite well, internal rhymes, showing off my education, I'm good at that. But I don't want it to get to a stage where I do that just because that's what I do. I need to try and, I don't know, fuck about with form or subject matter or things to; 'A', see if I can do those and if I like those and 'B', just to make certain that there's genuine active artistic intent behind things and not just, "Fuck it, that'll do pap".

[INAUDIBLE] the other thing is, I think, I need a little more discipline with my stage craft. Having these memorised chunks as big anchors helps the flow between poems and the meticulously scripted, off the cuff remarks that I open and close with I need... They're as much a part of my set as anything else and I need to give them a little more time and dedication I think.

**LP:** Yeah great. So, have you got any recommendations for our listeners? This doesn't have to be specifically regarding poetry, it can be anything they can go and see, read or watch that you've recently experienced.

**AW:** Lucretius', De Rerum Natura, which I think the Penguin translation is quite good if you need notes to help you. It's called, On the Nature of the Universe, I think. It's about eight thousand lines of Latin epic hexameter trying to explain Epicurean philosophy, which is, atomist basically atheistic... I'll accept the angry calls from Greek philosophers later, basically atheistic and it's concerned not about justice or goodness, about how to be happy, how to lessen suffering. So, it's a wonderful philosophy written in very good poetry, that's number one.

Children's poetry, I think, doesn't get enough of a look in these days because... It's certainly how I started and I assume it's how most people... It's either that sort of thing or Rap, it seems to be so take. So, [I'd say] take some time re-read things you loved when you were a child. I teach a class of eight-year-olds and last half-term we were doing The Pobble Who Has No Toes, the Jabberwocky, the Jumblies, you know... "They went to sea in a sieve they did, in a sieve they went to sea".

And I forgot quite how much that is why I love poetry so much. So, just re-discover things you thought you'd forgotten. Oh, and just... I have no idea how big his reputation is but there's a wonderful Canadian called Shane Koyczan, K-O-Y-C-Z-A-N who, if I need to cry I go

listen to him. It's the most beautiful stuff going on with some wonderfully silly jokes in it, as well. So, there's three to be getting on with you.

**LP:** Thank you very much, that's it. Thank you, Alexander Woodward.

**AW:** A pleasure.

**LP:** I've been Lizzy Palmer and thank you for listening.

**End of Transcript.**