

Susan Wokoma—the fifth interviewee in my [chain interview experiment](#)



Susan was introduced by my fourth interviewee, [Holly Race Roughan](#) who said: ‘I suggest Susie Wokoma who is an actress and lives in London. She’s currently filming for a big television series. I’ve worked with her three times, twice at the Royal Exchange in Manchester and once at the National Theatre and she never ceases to inspire me as a person and as a craftsman.’

I met up with Susan in Bristol where she’s filming. Now in her late-twenties, she’s had a broad-ranging career so far, taking in theatre, TV and film. She told me what her work means to her and shared some of the tips of her trade.

How did you get into acting, Susan?

Well, I suppose it all dates back to when I was about ten and first went to the theatre. It was for a friend’s birthday and we went to see *Bugsy Malone* in the West End. There were children in it and I now know from researching what I saw, that it was a National Youth Theatre show, but I didn’t know anything about that at the time. I remember leaving and feeling really weird. For days after, my Mum kept asking me how I was because I was so quiet. I didn’t understand why, but now I know it was because I was thinking, ‘God, I want to do that’ and being sad that I wasn’t able to. I sort of ignored the feeling and then when I was at secondary school I had an English teacher who gave me a leaflet about the National Youth Theatre and suggested I apply. It was only ten pounds in those days, so I saved up my pocket money and got in. I still didn’t really understand what it was and we didn’t have the internet at home so I couldn’t research it. Some time later I realised that all these famous actors like Helen Mirren and Tom Courtenay had come through it.

What do you think your English teacher spotted in you?

I have no idea because we didn’t do any drama at school. My first taste of it was with the National Youth Theatre on a two week summer course, and that’s when I got bitten by it. After that I wanted to do more so I joined a Saturday drama group. It was run by English National Opera and it was about ten pounds a term; stuff that doesn’t exist these days. We did an hour of singing, an hour of dance and an hour of drama. My singing teacher was Gareth Malone. It was before he got into the Royal Academy of Music and he was very young. I found singing really traumatic but he was very big on everyone finding their voice. He pushed me and was really inspiring. It was him and my drama teacher, Maria Leaf, who were the first to tell me I should apply for drama school. I didn’t even really know what it was, so they explained. I remember Gareth saying, ‘You should go to RADA... of course you should go to RADA... why not?’ and being really stern with me. And I did go to RADA.



What did drama school do for you?

I got my first agent when I was about seventeen and I worked on a big TV drama then. It was a show called 'That Summer Day' about the London bombings. It was from the perspective of six children and I was one of them. It was great to be in it but I was working on gut instinct. Some takes felt really good and others were just dreadful but at that stage I didn't really know why. Drama school helped with that.

Drama school also taught me to trust my instinct and skills. That means that I don't have to hassle the director and ask, 'How was that? Was I good?' It made me self-sufficient. That's especially important in TV. You don't really have rehearsals and the director doesn't have much time to give you, so you need to turn up on Day One, ready to go. Drama school's a good preparation because you work on so many texts and with so many different people. And they teach you all these skills that at the time you think you're never going to use. But they're like a tool box and you suddenly find you're in a job where you need them. So for instance, we did animal work at drama school. We had to be pandas and other animals and I enjoyed it but I thought, 'I'm never going to use that.' And then I played a character in a show called 'Hotel'. She was pretending to be a maid but actually she



was planning to hold a family hostage. I didn't know how to become physically robust when I was dressed in a little maid's outfit. Then I thought, 'I'll try something with animals.' I picked a panther because the character was very slow and measured at the beginning of the play but then she pounced. I didn't tell my director or anyone else what I was doing—it was just in my head. If I hadn't gone to drama school then I wouldn't have known anything like that.

Another challenge is when you have to act and aren't feeling great. Often things happen before you go on set—a friend of mine saw someone jump in front of a train. And when I was making the film 'Half of a Yellow Sun' in Nigeria, my dad passed away. The next day I had to be on set and it was really horrible but I was able to put my feelings on one side. I just had to think in a technical way, 'What is it that I'm trying to do to this person? Am I trying to humiliate them?' You pick a word and it just sees you through. I couldn't bring myself to watch the film for ages. But when I did, I don't think you'd have been able to tell that anything had been going on. That was the moment when I thought, 'That's why I went to drama school—so I can do my job even when I'm under stress.'

Where do you find your confidence?

A lot of becoming an actor was to do with other people spotting something in me and being encouraging. But there came a point after I left drama school when I had to get my confidence from myself. And what took over was my enjoyment—I really love acting. I enjoy the stories and the opportunity to play different people. As an actor you're not in a position to pick and choose parts, certainly when you're starting out. But I think I've been really lucky to play a variety of characters and I've done a lot of theatre that's had a social conscience to it.

So for me, the goal was finding something I enjoy. My parents came over from Nigeria to make a better life for my sister and me, and I saw how hard things were for them. My mum worked nights and my dad always did two or three jobs and really suffered. My confidence comes from feeling lucky that I've found something that I love, and I don't think that happens for everyone.

What's difficult about being an actor?

The thing about acting and other arts jobs is that talent isn't tangible—it's so objective. For every hundred people that think you're great, there'll be five who think you're not very good. And you can win awards and there'll still be people that say, 'Actually I don't think you're very good.' So it's hard to get to a point where you can feel, 'I'm really good at this'. If you want to be a lawyer then you pass the Bar exams and you can say, 'I'm a lawyer.' That's it—you're a lawyer. But being an actor is different. There's nothing that makes you feel that you're in the right place. Even when you're on really big jobs there's that feeling that you're a fraud. I remember Kate Winslet doing an interview where she read an extract from her diary that said, 'I feel horrible—everyone hates me—I can't act.' And she'd been acting since she was a child.



Also actors are really vulnerable because there's so much rejection. Being turned down for parts is something that you have to make friends with but it's very difficult to do. One of my friends auditioned recently and got really close to getting the part she wanted. When she didn't get it, she said, 'Next time I'm not going to put so much effort in.' And I said, 'Next time you should put all the effort in and you still might not get it. But you need to make friends with that heartbreak.' Some people are very fragile and find the rejection very hard. There are all kinds of reasons why you don't get parts. It doesn't mean you can't act, but it might be that you're too short, too big, too small, you've got dark hair, you're not famous enough... That sort of thing can drive you mad but you just have to say, 'OK that's fine.'

The visibility is an issue, too. I realised a while ago, that if someone wanted to know about me then it's easy to find out that I'll be on stage at a particular theatre at 7.30. When I had that thought it made me feel really weird. And another is that when things don't go well then the actors are the most vulnerable. No-one's going to say, 'That film flopped because of the second assistant director—I'll never work with them again.' They'll be employed regardless. But when things go wrong then people are critical of us first. I get people saying things like, 'You look so ugly on TV', especially since I worked on Chewing Gum. People feel they can say anything and behave in certain ways to you. And I'm not famous so I can't imagine what it's like if you are. Psychologically you want the recognition and then you have it, and it's scary.

You just mentioned Chewing Gum—that's been very big hasn't it?

Yes, we're doing a second series. Michaela Coel the writer and actor, won a couple of BAFTAs for it. I got involved because I'd done a play with Michaela and she invited me to audition. It's always flattering when friends ask you to be in things but I take it with a pinch of salt. And then I got the part after one audition. That almost never happens especially when it's a regular part in a series. At the time I'd accepted a part in a play with Maxine Peake at the Royal Exchange in Manchester. It looked like it was going to work out but then the filming for Chewing Gum got moved back twice and the start date for both projects was the same day. So I had to make a very difficult decision. I chose the TV show but I felt like I was letting people down. Then I got an email from Maxine Peake. She said, 'I would be really upset if you'd taken this play instead of the TV show. We need more women like you on TV so hopefully we'll get to play together at some other time.' Most of us have been in this situation and she really understood.

When we got to the first day of filming I was so nervous and I thought, 'It had better be really good after all this hassle.' And it was great. I did about two weeks on it. Michaela and the crew really trusted me with the character so I could do a lot of what I wanted. It's gone down really well.

I had a tiny role in the Inbetweeners 2 movie and having that on my CV, opened doors. It's been the same with Chewing Gum.

What are you doing at the moment?

It's been announced now, so I can talk about it – before it was secret. It's a new E4/Netflix series called Crazy Face and it's written by Howard Overman who created Misfits, Atlantis and Merlin. I play Raquel, one of the leads and it's about two self-made demon hunters. It's billed as a comedy horror series and will be out on E4 in October and then globally on Netflix. It's the biggest thing that I've ever done on screen so it's a lot of responsibility and a lot of words. I'm really enjoying it. We're right at the beginning of creating that world, and we hope it runs and runs.

What else are you doing?

I'm developing my own TV series as a writer and performer. It was inspired by my time filming in Nigeria. I'd never met my family there before, but during a gap in the schedule I went off to Port Harcourt and met my grandparents, cousins, aunts, uncles and my half-sister for the first time. It was really overwhelming but also incredibly funny and moving. I suddenly found I'd got all this family and so my TV series is about a Nigerian-British character who discovers a sister in Nigeria and brings her back to England. It's about identity and where you're from.

Your family must be very proud of you...

I realised early on that it was very important to me that my family were proud of me. But to be honest I think my parents weren't overjoyed when I became an actor. Whenever they didn't turn up to see plays, it really hurt. So I learned quite quickly that it's my job and there's no point doing it to show off to people or to impress them. Now I just get on with it. I think, though, that my mum's very impressed that I said I would do it and now I can live off it. That was her worry—that I'd be as poor as they were.

Is there a piece of work that you are proudest of?

The part I played in 'Hotel' was very physical. And I'm proud of it because I looked after myself and got through it in good nick. Towards the end of the run I went to see the nurse at the National Theatre. When I said I'd hurt my ribs she said that she'd expected to see me a lot sooner. She goes to see every show when it opens and calculates which actors are likely to get hurt. It was my first out and out lead and she said I'd done really well. My acting teacher used to say that actors aren't just actors, they're athletes. It's not about going for runs or lifting weights, but managing your time is really important. I was able to give my all to the performance and still see my friends afterwards. I felt like I'd really gained control.

But the thing I'm proudest of is that I said I wanted to be an actor and now I *am* an actor.



Thank you so much. And who are you going to pass me onto for my next interview?

I'd like to suggest my dear friend Maria Leaf who is a secondary school drama teacher but on the cusp of making some big changes in her career. She's amazing and she's the reason I'm an actor today.