

# Spotlight on the Sector



A series of podcast interviews, recorded in response to the COVID-19 lockdown, to capture how the youth theatre sector in Scotland is adapting to the changes brought by the pandemic.

This episode was recorded on 5 May 2020.

## AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

**INTRO:** Welcome to Youth Theatre Arts Scotland's *Spotlight on the Sector*. In this episode, YTAS' Lisa Williamson talks to Mahri Reilly from Scottish Youth Theatre about the risks and rewards of sudden organisational change, and the importance of little acts of kindness.

**LISA:** Hi, Mahri, how are you doing?

**MAHRI:** Hi, I'm good, thank you. How are you?

**LISA:** I'm good. Thank you so much for giving us your time today. It's really appreciated. Do you want to tell us a bit about yourself and where you work?

**MAHRI:** Thank you. It's super exciting to do this. My name is Mahri Reilly and I'm the Creative Producer at Scottish Youth Theatre.

**LISA:** Tell us a little bit about Scottish Youth Theatre before, pre-lockdown pre any of this stuff happening.

**MAHRI:** We were moving through a period of unprecedented change anyway with Scottish Youth Theatre over the past couple of years and I took up this post in August 2018, with the view to ensure that we continue our work as Scotland's national youth theatre, and to create programmes and opportunities for young people aged 14 to 25 across Scotland and across intersections to get involved in the work that we do, and also to help Scottish Youth Theatre connect more closely with local communities, partnerships, venues, arts organisations and anywhere really that works with young people who might want to engage in artistic programmes, so quite a wide range of work including kind of site-specific things in different places but obviously our National Ensemble, which has moved into a sort of large-scale touring programme. We have *Making Space*, which is an artist residency programme with venues and festivals across Scotland. So quite a large body of work that we were gearing up for this year, in terms of really getting our teeth into the

artistic programme as it stood with last year being a bit of a test year to see how things would run and then this year, preparing to really advance and accelerate those programmes and opportunities.

**LISA:** Gearing up for really exciting things and then suddenly we're hit with this...

**[Music]**

**LISA:** How has the company's work adapted in the past few weeks?

**MAHRI:** Well, obviously, this unprecedented international crisis has completely made us U-turn on the work that we were doing at Scottish Youth Theatre. We feel overwhelmingly the urgency and the responsibility to adapt to this and thinking more radically about the work that we're doing and new participation and engagement models that we could deliver digitally with obviously limited human resources in regards to our venue and base in Glasgow was closed and a lot staff have been furloughed from the organisation.

So, really limited human resources and obviously lots of funding at standstill right now. We just really looked internally about what could we do to offer opportunities and respond to the crisis in a responsible way. So, on the 30th of March, we launched a newly designed National Digital Artistic Programme so that we could continue to deliver work and also offer this space of safety, of nourishment, and creativity in these uncertain and frightening times. [laughs]

I guess we pulled together some new programmes that we could deliver online. One of them is *2020 Stories*, which is an engagement project for young writers across the country, 14 to 25, to create a new piece of writing and response to 'the view from here', so wherever it is that they are in the country and how do they see the world at the moment or how do they see it to be in the future? Or what do they see out of their bedroom window or whatever it might be. We engaged twenty young writers from across Scotland to work on this new project, which is pretty exciting, and they are currently getting mentorship from myself as the Creative Producer and from our project assistant who also has a background in dramaturgy.

So we've really been using our own skills in terms of helping to support these young writers and obviously it's about their autonomy, it's about their authorship and it's just us posing questions and provocations about what do they really want to say with this piece of work? That's happening right now at the moment with the view that in June, those pieces will be given to professional actors who will then perform those pieces of work, which we'll then create together to share responses from Scotland's young people in terms of what they're seeing right now.

Another big change for us was our National Ensemble. It hasn't been announced yet, but we were due to do an eight-venue tour across Scotland, in-

cluding lots of the large theatre venues in Scotland and I think it was our most ambitious National Ensemble to date [with] the wonderful Melanie Jordan as Director. We've had to completely re-evaluate that and we didn't want to abandon that project and abandon those young people who'd already been on a journey with us since December. It's obviously important for their creative practice to continue and so they have something still to engage with. What we decided to do was try to re-imagine this project as a digital output and now we find ourselves in this really strange and exciting, exhilarating, unprecedented time where we're... I say 'we' but they are the ones who are doing it. They're creating this live performance that will be in isolation but obviously, to the public on Zoom in July, and we starting to look at that in language of site-specific theatre and what can working digitally be a form of site-specific theatre to keep it in obviously, the theatre language and the theatre world.

I think that's very, very exciting and we felt it was really important as well to keep true to the climate change and the climate justice theme and conversation and crisis and deeds that are still so important right now, even though we are under lockdown. We can see the impact of that obviously across the world in different ways. We do have another project as well that we're looking to extend at the moment called *Quaranteen*, which is for the younger age group, 14 to 18. The aim of that is to look at small acts of kindness.

### [Music]

**LISA:** Just going back to the Ensemble, I think that's really interesting because your theme that you were exploring was already going to be about climate change, wasn't it? Now, we have this situation which is obviously, really difficult and really challenging but there are things coming out of it in terms of the climate that are strangely positive, that are happening because we're not driving as much, we're not, you know... Yeah, it'll be interesting to see how that feeds into the work. It was amazing how quickly Scottish Youth Theatre turned around the digital programme. The launch of that, like you said, 30th of March. That's so fast, which is incredible. What do you think have been the main challenges in adapting your work?

**MAHRI:** I think the main challenges are obviously everyone's working at home. There's complex Wi-Fi challenges, cable, technical issues, all of that stuff. I think because we were already, the organisation was already going through a period of accelerated change, we're used to working in this kind of responsive way where we've all got to be really resilient and we've got to be on it and that's part of the makeup of the team as well. Obviously, everyone's super-committed to the work and super-committed to the programme. I think in those early days of lockdown, I say it like it was a long time ago, but it feels like a long time ago...

**LISA:** It does feel like a long time ago!

**MAHRI:** At that time, we were just like, as I said now, is this the end, so to speak, of our work? I think initially the creative challenges are always around *'is this the right thing to do? Are we peaking too soon? Has this really been thought about and has the interrogation that we'd normally put into our artistic programme, has the work been done on that?'* A lot of those answers were like... no! [laughs] We were like, well, we just need to take the risk. In theatre, it is about taking risks and I think artistic practices and any sort of collaboration is always some form of risk-taking. So we didn't really know when we launched it, what the reaction would be from participants, young people, families, the sector, our partners, but we were like, we just have to do something. It's also that way of trailblazing a little bit where it's like, somebody's got to put a stake in the ground and say this is it just now or wave the flag in the air or whatever analogy we want to use. We just felt that was really important that we [did] that because I think there's a massive risk for Scottish Youth Theatre and indeed the youth art sector and obviously, organisations across the country, and indeed the UK and the world, who might not recover from this. I think if we can help to support as many young people going through that emotional crisis that they're going through as well, then I think we're doing a really good thing.

Challenges, there's so many challenges, honestly, but sometimes the challenges are small as well, where we're at home and we can't connect to each other, we've got a really great idea and we're thinking about sitting in a room and getting all the pens and the flipchart paper out and having a big old debate about it... and you can't really do that online, so trying to find other places, like different apps or different digital spaces, I guess, that we can still collaborate, I think that's quite innovative and it certainly changed the way that we work now.

### [Music]

**LISA:** How do you think this might influence or change your work or Scottish Youth Theatre's work, or the sector moving forward?

**MAHRI:** I think immediately it's definitely changed my own practice. I've always been super-interested in digital work and how that sits within the theatre context. This has been a great experiment in terms of, well, can this work? How does it work? Now is the time to do it, and obviously, with so many digital natives in terms of young people who have a risk of not engaging with theatre work. Now, even more so, but even before lockdown, there was a whole generation and there are a whole generation of people who are not engaging with theatre. I think on a personal level, it was already something that I was really aware of and interested in. And at Scottish Youth Theatre, this has given us an opportunity to challenge how we work and change how we work.

As we look, we've put this programme together now just until June, July... and we don't know how long, obviously social distancing and lockdown is going to

go on for, but we have now started our planning for the rest of the year and looking at possibilities of returning into a rehearsal room, but also continuing a digital rehearsal room and what does that mean and what programmes do we already have that are on hold that could then become an online programme with the view that when we get back in the room, we can get back in the room type thing. I think it's, again, it's radically changed the way that we work as an organisation and I think that that is, again, very exciting, but I also think that the sector, the youth art sector, it's a massive challenge and I think there's dangers that there are still young people and organisations who will be marginalised, who don't have access to the internet, who don't have a space at home that they can work from or don't have the technology that they need.

I think we really see this now, it is a political issue and (back to the climate justice conversation), in regards to this crisis, the most marginalised are the ones who are hit first, in the same way that poverty hits those most marginalised while everything in terms of justice and social justice and mobility, everything is all still here, nothing has really changed in terms of that. I think there's a larger conversation to be had with the sector and the government, et cetera, and people, and funders, around how we can support young people who are not engaging in work and that's obviously not just Scottish Youth Theatre's responsibility. That's responsibility for the whole sector and of the whole country indeed.

I think that as we move forward through this digital realm that we're all in at the moment when we do come out of the other side of that, I think there's still larger conversations to be had based upon the evidence that different organisations are now gathering around participation, community engagement, mobilisation, all of that... and what changes do we really want to see? And what changes actually have already happened that we know if it can happen now, it could have happened ten years ago. It can still happen in ten years. I think we're at sort of the beginning of this peak of change, I think.

### **[Music]**

**LISA:** To finish off with something a bit lighter, Mahri. What does self-care look like for you at this time?

**MAHRI:** Yes, a good question and again, such a funny one, isn't it? We always talk about self-care and certainly, with Scottish Youth Theatre's work or my own work in a sense, I'm always thinking about self-care for other people and how do we care for other people and what wellbeing and support can we put in place for people, but I don't often consider my own wellbeing and I think that that's something that I've definitely had to refocus on recently. I think this past week, I've been feeling a little bit down and feeling the weight and the challenges of everything. So I've had some nice baths and bubbles and chilled out and went on long walks. I know that's all a bit cliché, but what I

really enjoyed doing the other day was getting some small gifts and just delivering them to some friends and family and just dropping them off at the door and then sent them a message saying something's at your door, ensuring that I'm social distancing. I think that spreading those small acts of kindness are important and I was super grateful to unknowingly also receive a lovely gift through the post the other day as well. I think of those small things of care and love and I think that's really what self-care for me is, and just ensuring that we're trying to care for people around us and care for ourselves at the same time and recognise how lucky and privileged... Well, I am, that I have that in my life. I think it's a lot of reflection at the moment. I think, again, we see that in communities and different parts of the world or the sector or whatever, that people are coming together to care for each other, and I think that that's one of the biggest, the most beautiful thing to have come out of this in that sense of community and engagement and love.

### **[Music]**

**OUTRO:** Thanks for listening to this episode of *Spotlight on the Sector*. Find out more about Youth Theatre Arts Scotland's work on our website at [www.ytas.org.uk](http://www.ytas.org.uk)