

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 **Friday 1 May 2020**.

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

INTRO: Welcome to Youth Theatre Arts Scotland's Spotlight on the Sector. In this episode, YTAS' Lisa Williamson talks to Deborah McArthur about what changes COVID-19 has made to her work, and some of the challenges she's faced keeping in contact with the youth theatre participants in North Lanarkshire.

LISA: Hello Deborah, how are you?

DEBORAH: Yeah, I'm okay, how are you?

LISA: Yeah, I'm good! Thanks for giving us your time today, can you tell us a wee bit about yourself and who you work for?

DEBORAH: I am Deborah McArthur, I'm a drama facilitator, community artist and project manager based in Glasgow, and I've been working in the youth theatre sector for... oh goodness, 14 years... 14 years, what?! Currently I'm Arts Development Officer for CultureNL over in North Lanarkshire, and I've got the remit of drama and music. As a department, we deliver over 80 classes a week for children, young people and adults across a range of art forms: drama, dance, music, film, animation, visual arts, pottery... but I work with the youth theatres as part of my remit for drama. I've got the 13 to 18 year olds. So, as an organisation we were actually just starting our devising process for our summer show so all of our young people had been set their brief, and they were all excitedly starting to generate ideas and characters. Each year all of our drama classes come together to perform in Motherwell Concert Hall, and this year's show was going to be called Explore, and weirdly enough the premise of the show (we thought it was going to be set in like a hive with this character called Q) was going to be some sort of like warning bell... like some sort of alarm, where something was happening and they had to find like human kindness or to support the world. It's so bizarre now, we've had lots of young people been getting in touch going "oh my goodness, we predicted it!"

LISA: This is the show we all need to see now!

DEBORAH: I know! But we think that we can definitely come back to it next year, and I'm sure our young people will have lots to offer for the devising process after we're able to get back into a room.

[Music]

LISA: What would you say... what's been the main challenges in adapting your work during lockdown, yeah "in this unprecedented time" (laugh)

DEBORAH: I know, you hear that so often, don't you? "That unprecedented time" but it is! I think for us, the first thing we realised is that what we do is about creating a safe space for young people to come and explore and respond in the room. We discussed at length about, you know, digital sessions and would that work for us, and then technology probably has been one of the biggest challenges for us. Being linked with North Lanarkshire Council we have really strict IT in terms of like software that we can use and things like that, because of our firewall, so that that's been a big challenge, and trying to navigate around that. I think another one is our participants see us as a venue, and a time in the week, and I don't think we realised that until now, so when we've been talking about getting online and getting digital and things like that, it's actually not worked for our young people because they say that the safe space that they come to is sacred and actually to do, you know, some form of activity in the bedroom, or in their house, just doesn't feel right.

Another big challenge is probably the over-saturation on a digital platform. I think everyone's on it and I think that, you know, we're saying, you know, "come and work with us, come and be creative with us" but actually they have school and they've got exercise and then parents and guardians have still got work, and then there's many of them in a household with one device, so, you know, it's quite a lot, and I don't think we realised, I don't think we realise maybe, how important that time in the week for them to come to us is, and I think that we all will cherish that.

We've also realised that a lot of our young people, they don't necessarily keep in touch outwith class time, but they're really great friends when they do come to class. So, you know, I think a lot of people have been missing that link to like-minded people and a type of person that they might not find anywhere else in their life but they do in their drama class.

[Music]

LISA: So, if the digital platform hasn't felt like the right thing for you and has presented its challenges, what approaches have you taken to continue to engage your participants?

DEBORAH: We have been emailing directly with them, so when all of this kicked off we sent every participant in an individual email and just to check in,

ask them how they were doing, and at that point we just put a few ideas down, you know, “we're thinking of doing x, y and z” to get a little bit of feedback from them and actually for some of the participants we've continued the direct emails, right up until I was even sending some last night.

We've been sending out text updates, just as a way of getting a quick blast out to a number of people. We've got a text system that we're able to do that via, which is really handy especially when we were going into lockdown and we weren't sure about how the landscape was going to look, that seemed a really instant way.

Then we decided actually because technology was a barrier for us, getting onto a video platform to do online classes wasn't going to work for us or our participants, so we created a Stay Connected newsletter. It's a two-page newsletter and it's been going out weekly, been out for five weeks now. [On] the first page my colleague and I give them an update on what we're doing, the things that, you know, recipes, things that we've been learning, things that we've not been liking, you know, just hints and tips and just staying connected... and then the second page is tasks, and one of the tasks is, say, from the character Q from our show Explore, and the other task on the newsletter is just a general one that they can do either outside, or in their home, or with someone at home, and actually we found that the uptake of them at the beginning seemed pretty positive, and then it fell away, but in the last week we've started to have work sent in which has been really lovely, and some feedback we've got is that they're not doing them every week, but they do enjoy reading them just to check in with us.

So that's been good, and we have also (can't believe this!) ...we've been doing TikTok, and we've been doing our Friday fun challenge each week. I mean, it's ridiculous (laugh), but a lot of our young people use TikTok and we just thought it would be a really fun thing for our social media platform, so each Friday I put up a video, or my colleague puts up a video, and we challenge other people, and they go away and make their video and post it... so just finding fun and creative ways to stay engaging, and it's mainly been via email and social media that's been working for us.

LISA: And I suppose it's that thing as well, like you say, if your participants are sort of like “okay, we can't do the tasks every week”, but I'm sure even that newsletter coming in to them, it's that they know that they're still being thought of and they're still being...

DEBORAH: Of course!

LISA: ...you know, that you're still there, you're still, you know, thinking of them, and encouraging them to stay creative in this time.

DEBORAH: Yeah, definitely, I think when you're pulling it together, you know, you can see your participants, you know who's going to like what tasks, you're already thinking about that. And I think that one of the interesting things is, we got an email from one of the parents to say, “I haven't given them to [my] daughter yet because she's got so much going on, I'm just waiting for either a dip, or summer holidays, where I can say ‘look at all of this’”. She said because

there's so much coming out, some parents and guardians, (because for some of our participants we're emailing via the adult) they're giving them out weekly, or they gave them out over the Easter break, or they're going to wait and give them out over summer, to give them something to do over the summer months. But however anyone wants to engage with it, it was just our way of staying connected. As well as putting them out via our participants, we've also uploaded them onto our main social media platform so that anyone can access the tasks, because we've found that over this time our social media following's going up, as everyone's moving online and looking for things. So even if we can, you know, make someone else smile as well, it's a job well done I think.

[Music]

LISA: How do you think this may influence or change your work once we come out the other side of this?

DEBORAH: I think, we've been talking about this quite a lot, and I think that, you know, one of the things he said is that, you know, it won't change that physical space we've realised, that it's like gold dust, you know, and the feeling and the space that we create is sacred, so that definitely won't change, but I think that what we've realised is that for some of our participants, this newsletter, this way of staying connected in between classes, is really important and it's something that we think that we might carry on, probably not weekly, but it might be monthly, or, you know, once a term, and definitely over the longer breaks like summer when we don't run our weekly programme. So, we're definitely going to do that, and we think that our challenges are probably going to be something that's going to stay.

And we're not sure about what the landscape's going to look like for coming back, so even though we felt that during lockdown digital sessions haven't been right for us just now, it's not to say in the future that we won't have to look into something like that, especially given the social distancing information that's been put out, so I think it's ever-changing just now and I don't know if we'll really know how we will fully adapt our programme until we get back to folk, I guess, starting again, so I guess there's a lot of unknown. And also 90% of the face of our classes are our amazing tutors, and during this time they've not been able to deliver for us, so it's just be my colleague and I, and for a lot of our drama classes that's okay, because we also facilitate and work with them as well as project manage, but for some of our other artforms, like music, they know my name and they know my face because I pop in and out of the classes, but they don't have that connection, and I think we've realised how important that bond is between the tutor and the participants, and how much they're missing that. So yeah, I think it'll be ever-changing, I'm sure a lot of organisations will be the same about how we'll adapt our work. We're working on a day-to-day, week-to-week basis at the moment, and I think it'll be interesting to look back and pinpoint the changes, or how we adapted it.

LISA: We'll finish with a lighter question... what does self-care look like for you at this time?

DEBORAH: I think because working from home and you've got everything set up, like my office is in my dining room, and we've got a kitchen, like our tables in our kitchen, so I feel like there's a tendency to always be 'on', so the first thing I've been trying to do at the end of each day is to fully pack away all work stuff... because I wasn't doing that at the beginning, and so the makeshift office was always there, I would sit next to it while I was eating my dinner, and that meant then, if a thought came in I'd jump back on my laptop, so packing everything away at night so that it's completely gone.

I'm a foodie, so making something really good to eat, but mindfully eating it, like sitting down and enjoying it...

LISA: Yeah giving yourself the time...

DEBORAH: Yeah, and I think that, you've got time just now, so I've been like trying to cook more because I find that quite therapeutic. I think just listening to my body, like last week in the start of this week, I exercised every day, but the last three days all I've wanted to do is sleep, and that's okay! (laugh) Yeah, it's okay to lay on the couch or sleep or do nothing. I think there's been a thing about being really productive during this time, but I'm just trying to go with the flow really...

LISA: Listen to yourself, absolutely! I think it's like sometimes you feel exhausted and you think 'why is this?', well because your brain is having to deal with all this new information, everything that's happening externally... chill out, it's fine you don't need to do Joe Wicks' PE every morning!

DEBORAH: Yeah exactly, exactly! And I think though I've only come to that like... the first few weeks of lockdown I was like still up at half six in the morning, walking the dog, working out, sitting on my laptop by half eight... And then I was on as a call with a with a friend, and she was like "yeah I'm getting up now about nine". I was like, "you got up at nine?!" and she's like "yeah... but why would you get up at half six? You're not going anywhere". I was just like "of course, why am I still getting up like I have to travel to North Lanarkshire?!" You know that way, still up at the crack of dawn, showered, ready, like I was going to leave the house, and then I just had to sit in my dining room... So yeah, just taking that that time and slowing the pace and taking care of ourselves.

[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