

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 **Tuesday 19 May 2020**.

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

INTRO: Welcome to this episode of Youth Theatre Arts Scotland's *Spotlight on the Sector*. In this episode, YTAS' Lisa Williamson talks to Jenni Mason at Paisley's PACE about the importance of keeping engagement going during lockdown, and the new possibilities that it has created.

LISA: Hi, Jenni.

JENNI: Hello, how are you?

LISA: Good, thank you. How are you doing?

JENNI: Excellent. We're doing fine under the circumstances, yes [chuckles].

LISA: Absolutely. Thank you so much for joining us today. We're really looking forward to hearing everything about everything that's been going on with you guys. Start off by telling us a wee bit about yourself and where you work and maybe a wee bit about the work you were doing before we went into lockdown.

JENNI: My name's Jenni Mason and I'm the Artistic Director at PACE Theatre Company. What we do at PACE is we primarily run a large youth theatre. Before lockdown, we were engaging with about 1000 young people every week as part of drama workshops and classes. We also run a massive holiday programme, so every time the schools are off we've got young people in. They're taking part in a theatre and performance project.

On top of that, we have additional masterclasses and we do lots of performances with our young people. We do the panto at the Paisley Arts Centre. We also do a lot of work in schools. Before lockdown we were very busy. We were just on the brink of starting a fundraising project for our brand-new children and young people's theatre exchange which is something we've been working on for the last couple of years. We were just at that fundraising stage. It was very frustrating obviously, timing-wise, that everything happened when it did.

[MUSIC]

LISA: With so much going on and so many young people that you're engaging with every week, and as you say school work as well, how has everything adapted in the past few weeks? What new projects, or has anything new developed out of this situation?

JENNI: I suppose we had to move very quickly into finding a new model that worked. I suppose one of the big things that we wanted to do was to continue engaging with as many young people as we possibly could because we know how important their classes and the work we do with PACE is to them. It was really important for us to keep that engagement up with as many young people as we possibly could, and to keep engaging with their families as well.

We very quickly decided to move our programme online to find new ways to connect with the young people that we work with. We've done that through, we recreated, I suppose, to an extent, our groups in an online environment. Every one of our groups has an online classroom which allows them to engage with the tutor that they're working with, and with other young people, with their friends that they'll know from PACE. As part of the classroom we post videos, we post creative ideas, we post creative challenges, and we get them continuing to engage with us. That goes on all through the week.

Then on top of that we run online actual classes, online sessions. We do that on Zoom. Once a week the young people get to actually come together and interact with each other and interact with their tutors. That was really important for us I think that we still provided a space where they could see their friends and they can see their tutor and they can have fun and they can do a lot of the same things that they were doing albeit in a completely different environment, but we wanted to give them that part of their week that hadn't changed, because we know so much has changed for young people. That familiarity I think was important.

We run a large workshop assistants programme, so we've got young people that help out with other groups, help out with younger groups. We've kept that going as well so that the young people are still seeing the faces that they recognise. Feedback from parents has been that that's been really important for them.

[MUSIC]

On top of all that we've been running additional masterclasses, Q&A sessions, and social nights and things that they can dip in and out of if they want to. We're also looking at how we can use this time to create work that we might potentially be able to use in the future. We've got our *Stories from Isolation* project where we state that's more aimed at our older students. We set them creative tasks to inspire them to create work that we will hopefully look at doing together when we can all come back together again.

I suppose the other thing we're trying to still do is, still get a big part of what we kind of push is, watching theatre, how important that is, and getting to the theatre as much as possible. As part of the classrooms we've tried to share as much digital theatre as possible, obviously there's lots out there which has been brilliant. Often, we will set tasks relating to that. Older members, we've got them on Digital Theatre Plus memberships so they're able to act, there's

lots of online stuff. It's been exciting and it's actually been nice to have to try to work in a different way.

One of the other things that we've taken part in is the *[Coronavirus] Time Capsule* project which is obviously run by Company Three in London. It's been really nice as well. We've pulled young people together from across groups and from across ages. Young people that were particularly interested in being part of this project, so that's been lovely as well. Lovely to work with our young people but as part of a bigger project. I think that feels really nice, and creating something that, hopefully, will be a digital legacy of how young people are coping at the moment. Yeah, we're really excited to be part of that. We've got about 400 young people I think currently engaged every week, and we're doing that on a donate-what-you-can basis depending on people's current financial situation as well.

[MUSIC]

LISA: That's incredible. An amazing amount of work to still be continuing with and to have such a robust programme to have turned around so quickly. That's such a testament to you and all the team at PACE, it's incredible. What have been the main challenges in adapting your work?

JENNI: I think for us, we'd never done anything - as I suppose like most people - we'd never run an online class before. I've never heard of Zoom I don't think until the lockdown started.

[laughter]

LISA: I don't think anyone had heard of Zoom until this happened though.

JENNI: It seems incredible now considering most days we spend some time on there. I think it's just been a big shift to try and rethink everything that you do, and that you take for granted that you do, and having to really rethink how that works on a digital platform. It's something I think we're learning more every week about what works and what doesn't work. I just think the speed that we probably had to move at was quite overwhelming at the beginning and there was such a lot to think about. It was putting into place new policies and procedures and making sure that we were keeping young people safe when they were working online. Just all those things that I think were completely new to us at the beginning I think, and still do to an extent. It just felt like everything that we did or used to do just suddenly was turned on its head, but as I say there's excitement in that as well because you're having to learn new skills and think about things in a different way which is no bad thing either.

LISA: It's interesting what you were saying before about starting to think about how can we use this time now to then feed into and potentially influence our work once we're back in a room together with our young people because I think that initially, it was a knee-jerk reaction I think from a lot of the sector was how do you just stay in touch with your young people? How do you keep them engaged? How do you make sure they're okay and keep that continuity? Now, as we're getting into a situation where it's looking like it could be quite a while before we can be back in a rehearsal room, then, how

do we use that time? And how can that influence our work further down the line? It's really great. I imagine it's something that is super engaging for young people to feel like, *"This is feeding into the bigger picture,"* I suppose.

[Music]

JENNI: I think that's what has been exciting about it I suppose, in that it's just something that we hadn't really ever considered [chuckles] was running sessions online. Obviously, we'd never had to. I think even at the first conversations I was thinking, *"How can we possibly work? How can we possibly transfer what we do into that environment?"* To see it working and to see young people engaged in that way has opened up this possibility of, *"What else could we do?"*

I think something that's really come out for us, is we did a call-out at the beginning for former PACE alumni to come forward and if they could, to share some of their skills with our young people during this time. We had an overwhelming, and still are, having an overwhelming response to that. We've had loads of different people running masterclasses and really giving young folk totally new and different experiences. I think last week we had Marcus Guy, who's one of our former members, he was running a session from New York, and it suddenly just opened up the possibility that actually the world's quite small when you think about it and why can't we do that more? Why can't we be bringing these brilliant practitioners to our young people even beyond this? Because it works really well in that way. I suppose it's just got us thinking about that in terms of when we go back to working the way we used to work, how can we combine this so that we can get people doing stuff?

We've had Mark Rowley, who's another one of our alumni. He's been incredible. He's run loads of sessions for us, but he's also connected us with all these other people in the industry that have given up their time to do Q&As, to do sessions. It's just been really inspiring I think and what the young people have got from it, at a time that they really needed something like this, has been amazing. It's been brilliant.

LISA: Absolutely, and so heartening as well, I suppose, to see the generosity of people in this situation, how much people are willing to give for others, which is great. The next question was going to be about how might this influence or change your work once we come out of the other side of this, I suppose things like your potential online masterclasses?

JENNI: I think that's definitely something we will pursue because of our alumni, we have got really lovely supportive people that are working in all areas of the industry. Often, it's difficult because of geography to get them to us. It's opened up that possibility amazingly of how we can engage our young people, we can get them working with people in all areas of the creative industry. I think that's definitely something that's really exciting and something we'll definitely take forward.

I suppose the other thing as well is it's suddenly got us thinking we can connect with young people further away, we can connect with young people that aren't necessarily within our area, or that are unable to travel to our venues. Why can't we actually potentially look at connecting with other

young people in a digital way? I think that's something that's really quite exciting as well.

I think at the moment, we've currently opened the programme up to our own members just as we were finding our feet with it, but our next stage is we're looking at how can we offer it out to other young people in Renfrewshire that are looking for engagement at this time. I suppose that's the next stage. I think it's partly about connecting with other artists, but also connecting with a wider range of young people.

[Music]

LISA: It will be interesting to see if that shifts anything. I think it's a conversation we often come back to within youth theatre, isn't it? How do we get our young people to see more work made by other young people? Often, it's travel, it's geography, it's cost of doing that, that's the challenge.

JENNI: I think it would be lovely actually to think that maybe, and it's not something we've really managed to explore yet, just with time, but I think it'd be lovely to see what collaborations or connections could be made with other youth artist organisations like you say that we're maybe not able to do very easily on a face-to-face basis, but we could be looking at connecting in other ways. There are lots I think. If anyone is interested in finding out a little bit more about *Change of PACE*, then our website is: pacetheatre.com/changeofpace

LISA: Exciting. Watch this space as we make our way through this. [chuckles] To finish off, let's bring it back to you, a lighter question, after lockdown, what are you most looking forward to?

JENNI: Gosh. Loads and loads of different things. I think all the things that you just took for granted, I suppose like everyone else. Seeing family and friends, going out for a meal, going to the pub, going to the theatre, all those little things. Taking the kids places, taking the kids to the cinema or the park or little things. I suppose I'm also really looking forward to getting back into our workshop space and being able to work with young people in that way again. I think we won't take that for granted anymore, how important that is, and how much that connection matters. Lots and lots to look forward to.

[Music]

OUTRO: Thanks for listening to this episode of *Spotlight on the Sector*. Find out more about Youth Theatre Arts Scotland's work at www.ytas.org.uk