

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 **Wednesday 6 May 2020**.

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

INTRO: Welcome to Youth Theatre Arts Scotland's *Spotlight on the Sector*. In this episode YTAS's Lisa Williamson talks to Lisa Keenan from Glasgow's Tron Theatre about the lessons they've learned from lockdown.

LISA WILLIAMSON: Hi, Lisa. Thank you so much for joining us today. Thank you so much for your time.

LISA KEENAN: No problem.

LISA W: Can you tell us a wee bit about yourself and where you work and maybe a little bit more about what you were doing before the lockdown happened. [chuckles]

LISA K: I am the Creative Learning Manager at the Tron Theatre in Glasgow. I head up the department of four. Our remit covers a whole age spectrum, not just youth theatre. We've got an early year storytelling that we do, we've got youth theatre, a young company. We've got a community ensemble. We do writers' classes, set and costume design classes. We have a community choir. We also have Tron Ambassadors: that's like our year-long work experience for school pupils S4 and up. We do a big schools' engagement programme. I think that... I haven't missed anything out. That hopefully [chuckles] covers everything.

LISA W: That covers everything. [chuckles]

LISA K: Yes. I guess probably just before we stopped, our youth theatre seniors were two weeks away from doing their production. They were working with theatre artist Sarah-Rose Graber. They had devised a performance called *Remember to Forget*. It had a really great team of people working on it with the young people. Gary Cameron was doing sound, Tim Read was doing AV, Jess Brettle was designing. Our own creative learning facilitator, Catherine Ward-Stoddart, she was the assistant director. I guess like so many youth theatres, we were so close to performance.

Our Tron Ambassadors are also involved in that project. They work with our marketing department and they designed the poster and they booked the outdoor marketing campaign alongside them, and work with our designers to create the image. They also create an online social media campaign for the show, so the show was made by young people and sold by young people. I guess like so many other theatres, it came to a very sudden stop just as the lockdown started.

LISA W: Which is so difficult, isn't it? When you're pretty much ready to perform, all the work's gone into it, you're ready to go, and then something completely unexpected happens.

LISA K: It's with hindsight you think we were all reading about coronavirus happening everywhere else, and yet while schools were still running we were like, *"well, we'll continue to run youth theatre while schools are still in."* Then just all of a sudden, you know, this is not going to be happening.

LISA W: I think you're right. I think that's the way so many youth theatres were, that was the mentality that we all had, wasn't it?

LISA K: Yes.

LISA W: *"If they're still in school, yes, then we can continue on."* But once that shifted, everything really had to change, didn't it?

[Music]

LISA W: What's shifted since then? We've moved into lockdown now. What have been the main challenges that you've had in adapting?

LISA K: I think probably, like most creative learning departments, we are by nature, quite adaptable. We have shifted our classes online. Our early years work, we were already exploring the Seesaw platform because we have *Tall & Tiny Tales* that happen in the Tron but we also have them out in community groups in Govan and Bridgeton. We have closed groups for them where we're uploading material so we're still engaging with them as a community.

Our youth theatre and skill shops and our adult ensemble and choir are all on the Zoom platform. We're doing weekly sessions with them. I guess with the team, in fact in our team meeting this morning, we play a lot of games or have started to play games in it, just as we were working out what works online in our sessions for different groups. We do have a reasonably full programme, albeit not in person.

I guess that's been challenging in that although we have our programme online and we have had some great feedback and lots of people saying that's great about our routine, about our normality, but equally, although we've got all our groups online, we don't have all our participants with us. I wouldn't want to paint a false picture in that way in saying, *"Yes, it's great, great checking in with everybody and the stuff that we're doing,"* but it isn't for everybody.

Not everybody likes being part of a Zoom call or it takes a while to get used to seeing your face. Some people have been quite honest and said by engaging through this way, it's maybe made them feel a little bit more isolated because what they really love is the shared experience in the room. Obviously, we are learning with our sessions as the weeks go on about what we're trying out and different things.

I guess one of the challenges was there was no prep time for that. Usually, if you were going into a project, and particularly if it's not in the usual way that you work, you would have had that space and time as a team to try things out and to really plan the programme you were going to use, get used to the technology yourself. Where literally lockdown happened and by the next week, that was us. We were online. I guess although it's been a challenge in some ways, the groups we've been working have worked with us as we've worked through what we like, what they like, what's fun, what doesn't work. It's a process that we've all done together.

[Music]

For those that haven't joined us in that process, we're still having conversations together. One of the things that we decided is you've got to do what's right for you during lockdown. If you love, for example, our choir - The community choir's got about 70 singers in it but we don't have 70 that log on with us. We're roughly about 40 at the moment. I guess what we've been saying is, "*You have to do what's right for you.*"

Certainly, with the youth theatre and the workshops, we've been encouraging the young people, "*Come along for a few sessions. Let yourself settle into it and see how it works for you.*" Equally, if people aren't wanting to do it, we don't want to be forcing anybody to be coming online. I think probably, like everybody, it's just week to week. Things are changing. Luckily, our department is still open and operational but past summer the whole theatre community doesn't really know what lies ahead. In terms of planning what that's going to look like, it's a bit of a challenge as well.

[Music]

LISA W: We just don't know at the moment, do we, what social distancing might still be in place for how long and what impact is that going to have on our sector?

LISA K: I'm sure in terms of adaptability, I'm sure we all could write a socially distanced workshop. I'm pretty sure that we could. I guess it's the question of, "*Is that the right thing to do? Is it safe to be coming together in the room or do we just continue online and hold out?*" I guess at the heart of it the safety of all the participants and the creatives is important at this time so... lots of challenges.

I guess just the tech challenges as well. I have to give a shout out to Debbie Montgomery, our Creative Learning Officer, has been brilliant with all the tech. She's got our youth theatre and Ambassadors signed up to be part of the Coronavirus Time Capsule project. She's obviously editing all that stuff and is very good on the ol' Zoom and with the ol' tech and stuff. There's been

lots of different challenges for different people in just even accessing the tech in your house. Although I'm sure for the young people [chuckles] that's been a doddle.

LISA W: [laughs] Yes, it's just the rest of us that are struggling.

[Music]

LISA W: What surprised you or what have you learned about the nature of your work or your department's work or how things have shifted during this time? What's surprised you the most do you think?

LISA K: I guess the thing is, again probably the same as most creative learning departments, all of our jobs, we all love being at the Tron and we love being together in the office. There's the amount of conversations that happen ad hoc and ideas and discussions. It just all happened by being in that shared office and the shared space and the planning together. But that has continued even though we've all been on our own. We do have our regular Zooms and catch-ups. I do think we've adapted really well in the work is all online.

I guess I miss a bit of the natural ideas. I think you don't often go into work and go, *"I think I'm going to come up with a new idea today."* It just happens out of those kind of conversations that we just have by all sitting next to each other. We've managed to capture that online and with our work group chat that we've got now. I thought I would really miss that, but I feel like we've still got each other to bounce off. That's been quite nice. I guess maybe we've all set up our own office spaces and we've still got that space to be creative, but I miss the shared space, if that makes sense. As much as we're all here and we're getting the job done, I definitely miss all being together.

LISA W: I know exactly what you mean. I think it's that suddenly when you don't have that space anymore, you realise how much naturally comes out of that, exactly like you say, being next to each other, bouncing ideas back and forth, just things that come up unexpectedly. It's hard to capture that over Zoom or over a group chat or any of those things, yeah.

LISA K: I'm sure you even though everybody writes their workshop plans and writes the reports on them and you're reading them all but I much prefer just catching up about that stuff in person as well, like when people will tell you, *"I did this last night at the workshop."* I really miss that side of it. At the same time, you go, *"We are all in touch. We are all seeing each other. We have all our classes online."* I don't know, for me, I like the coming togetherness that you get when you're all together in the one space.

LISA W: Yes, absolutely. I suppose that's why we do what we do, isn't it? You love being in the space with your participants. You love working in a team with other people. I think that's the beauty of this job, isn't it?

LISA K: Yes.

LISA W: That's why we do it.

[Music]

LISA W: How do you think this might influence or change your work going forward, if it will at all?

LISA K: I think particularly for our early years the Seesaw platform that we've been using, we had been exploring that before the idea of lockdown had come around. With early years, we don't make work. I guess you could say that we make work every session because there's a new story, but they never worked towards any formal sharing or do rehearsals or anything.

I often felt like with those groups we sometimes miss capturing or sharing with people outwith the workshop exactly what happens. Because we're kind of uploading clips and pictures and stuff like that, it feels like there's quite a nice wee creative conversation going surrounding the activity. I think that's something that we might keep in for that.

I guess for youth theatre, again, similar to what I said earlier, we miss the shared space. I'm sure we'll all be looking forward to being back together and just the freedom that you get because one exercise might take you in different directions in terms of the Zoom and catching up with each other online. Everybody I'm sure has had sessions that have been canceled due to bad weather. Our senior youth theatre always rehearse January towards April. In the last couple of years there's been, you know, the end of February, the Beast from the East and bad snow. Sometimes at quite crucial parts of their rehearsal process sometimes weather can be an issue. If we were all set up, if things like that were to happen, that we would know it wouldn't mean... because in rehearsal process, if you're only in maybe a 10-12-week process to miss even just one session can seem like a big chunk of time. I guess we would maybe have the Zoom platform, it would mean if the weather was knocking your schedule out, maybe there's a chance for that. I guess when groups have been at the YTAS Summer Festival [National Festival of Youth Theatre] and you've met up with other youth theatres. I know that the young people all obviously add each other on Facebook and keep in touch via social media.

But again, maybe people that are a little bit further away there's maybe the chance now for youth theatres to get in touch and to share stuff, whether it's around their production or just to be in a shared workshop, or make those connections even before you go to an event, or following them up after an event, because we know now that you don't need to necessarily all be in the same room at the same time.

Maybe there's things like that that we can explore, or if you've been to see a group (we like to take our young people to see work and invite other youth theatres to come and see ours), maybe there's a way on the night of a show... It's never really the right time to hook groups up after when you've just finished a performance, but maybe post-show there might be opportunities to explore hooking up when people have seen your work and maybe post-show type stuff.

LISA W: Discussions. Yes, that's such a good point. I think it's something we see often, isn't it? Whenever we meet each other, *"Oh, we must bring our*

groups to see each other more and we have to connect more," but it always becomes that once we're all super busy it's hard to find the time to do that. I think, yes, you're right. This has opened up those possibilities of maybe a Zoom youth theatre session isn't the ideal kind of session, but it means that we know that it's there should, yes, exactly like you say, weather or anything else get in the way. We've learned how to use it now and we've seen the possibilities of it.

LISA K: It might not even be your full group. Maybe it's a little section of a group that is going to meet another small section of another group. We've never really done that and I think every time you're at events, you always talk about how, *"It's great. We should really hook up more and meet up more."* Sometimes the logistics of making that happen can be quite tricky.

I'm pretty sure as the weeks go by the Zoom sessions will grow and develop in themselves. Then obviously, once we're back in the room together it might be that we could continue to use that just to explore something new and reach out to another youth theatre that you definitely wouldn't have the chance to go and work with because geographically maybe they're too far away.

LISA W: If we wanted that potential for collaboration and connection with other youth theatres, definitely.

LISA K: Yes.

LISA W: There we go. Well, we've solved it. That's great. [laughter]

[Music]

After lockdown, what are you most looking forward to?

LISA K: I mean, probably after talking to about the being in a shared space, it will come as no surprise. I think I've realised how much I crave other human contact. I'm lucky. I'm in the house with my husband and my two kids but I missed cuddling and actual face-to-face human contact. That'll be work life and home life. I feel like after... Well, it won't actually be lockdown because potentially social-distancing measures are still going to be in place. In the long-run, it is about being in that shared space and I can't wait to play games and just be in contact with people, physical contact. I think I am looking forward to that. My work colleagues better prepare themselves to get cuddled. [laughter]

LISA W: Watch out, Tron staff. Once you are back in the office, it's hugs all around.

[Music]

LISA K: I don't know, maybe-- I guess, working at home and obviously as I've got two younger kids and we are quite in a good routine, is exploring maybe a better work-life balance. I would have never chosen to work at home before but there's definitely benefits on both sides. I think it will be good to just maybe look at all your practice and take what you've learned from this

experience of lockdown and try and combine the two, rather than just going back to doing everything exactly how we did it before.

[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