

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.

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AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

INTRO: Welcome to Youth Theatre Arts Scotland's *Spotlight on the Sector*. In this episode YTAS' Lisa Williamson talks to Matthew Swan on how he's moved the Regal Youth Company into the digital space.

LISA: Hi Matthew, thanks so much for joining us today.

MATTHEW: Hello, it's wonderful to join you, it's a really good thing.

LISA: Can you just tell us a wee bit about yourself and your company, maybe a little bit about the work that you were doing before we went into lockdown?

MATTHEW: Yes, of course. So, I'm a drama and creative learning facilitator working through West Lothian. I work with various companies, STAR Harmoneez and the Performance Academy, but I also run my own company, the Regal Youth Company, and we facilitate weekly drama activities for children and young people. Our ethos is to create opportunities for the children and young people to participate in creative activities and in a social, non-judgmental space.

Just before the lockdown, we added a brand new P1 to P3 group, so that we could engage with younger age ranges, because we were always engaged with S1 to S6 prior to that, and in December last year we started engaging with P4s to P7s. We decided that we wanted to start at the start from P1 to S6. We started that, and that was going really well and it still is going really well.

We were also looking to open up an 18 to 25 acting collective in which would welcome anyone interested in acting or studying acting or drama and really anyone who just wanted to find a new hobby. We've had to postpone that though, until probably early 2021, but we're looking to find new ways of doing it digitally, so whether that's through Zoom meetups for anyone who's interested in joining the group, or in Facebook groups and things like that, just really using the digital resources we have.

We were also doing quite a lot of development work on our outreach programme just before the lockdown, and it's quite gutting that we're not able to do those projects. We've had quite a lot of projects lined up to go out

to schools, so we were going to do Take the Lead workshops which would provide and enable the young people participating in them to become young leaders.

We did a project with YTAS New Territories a while ago, and it was taken from that, a bit of inspiration from that, and getting the young people to find out what it's like to be a leader within the arts and obviously this was their fifth year of running, so we had a huge, huge show planned for November. However, we've put that back until April 2021 just to give it the time and celebration it deserves.

LISA: Absolutely, I imagine that is a difficult decision to make but a positive one as well I suppose, to be able to set that date for the future and know that you're working towards that.

MATTHEW: Yes, I think so. I think if we were to do it in November, it would maybe take away from the celebration of it all. If we were to come back in August, we're really, really hoping we're back to face-to-face workshops, it would maybe be a bit of a rush. Since a lot of our participants are new to us, we want to take the time to get to know them in face-to-face workshops again. Even though we are doing the digital workshops and we're doing Zoom classes, we really want to get to know them within the physical space as well.

[Music]

LISA: While we're on the topic of Zoom sessions and things, can you tell us a wee bit about, yeah, how have you adapted your work for this time and what have been the main challenges in doing so in adapting for lockdown?

MATTHEW: I definitely think one of the initial challenges was finding the best method to produce weekly workshops for our participants. We tried to do recorded, online workshops via YouTube, and sending them out to the parents and guardians. However, we were really missing the interaction between the participants and ourselves, so we decided we'd give Zoom a try.

I had been doing Zoom sessions with other companies prior to that, and they were really, really going well. I was a bit wary of Zoom at the beginning, because I didn't understand the ins and outs of it, but doing it with more companies led me to feel like it was the right route to go down because I didn't realise - like we had done Facebook Live sessions before where we were speaking into it, doing drama activities that way but you couldn't see the participants. Whereas with Zoom, it's fantastic that you can actually see them and you can speak to them. We've moved all our workshops to doing Zoom, and they're really, really working incredibly well and engaging the participants.

I suppose another challenge has been that online and digital workshops is a totally different space for the young people to participate in. We've had to learn how to facilitate in a different way, but as well, the participants have had to learn how to participate in a different way, because they're normally participating within a group environment where everyone's in the same room. However, now, they're either participating with a sibling or they're participating on their own in their own room, even though they can see the

rest of the group, it's a really different way for them to participate and we really want to build the confidence still and we want to build their social skills and their creativity. It's just about finding a new way to do it. We find it quite fun as well. Obviously, it's a really bad situation to be in and we would rather be doing face-to-face workshops. However, I think it's about finding the fun in it for the participants and trying drama games that you wouldn't think would be possible. For example, in our last Zoom class, we played the *Grandmother's Footsteps*. Whereas at the start of all this, I would never have imagined you could play that game through Zoom.

LISA: [chuckles] Yes. I'm now imagining how are you playing it through Zoom, but I love that rising to the challenge of, *"How can we translate our usual games in the space to this digital space?"*

[Music]

LISA: How do you think that this might influence or change your work, going forward?

MATTHEW: I think it will really be a key factor in our work going forward. I think it'll be, I think, probably a key moment in our history as well. It's given me a lot of time for reflection and understanding where we are as a company. I think, however long this will go on for, it's going to give us more time to think about where we're heading next, which is really, really important.

I spoke a bit about the outreach programmes. We're doing a lot of work on that at the moment, so we can get that prepared for the future. We're kind of all ready to go on that front. I think also it will also really influence the work we create, because we take a lot of our work from the participants and what they're responding to, to the world around them. Obviously, this lockdown has been their world for coming up to two months now or so. I think when we do get back to workshops, I think it'll be really interesting to see all the different responses of all the different participants.

For example, some participants might really, really hate being stuck in the house all the time, but some participants I've been seeing, they've not enjoyed it, but it's been quite relaxing towards their mental health. It has really suited that, it's given them a pause, almost. I think it would probably be quite hard for groups not to respond to it creatively. Definitely, where we do quite a lot of, I suppose, autobiographical stuff based on our participants' likes, and what topics they're interested in. We do a lot of that stuff.

We took a show to NFYT [the National Festival of Youth Theatre] a couple of years ago called 404. That focused on LGBT issues and it focused on quite a lot of different topics that our young people were interested in. I definitely feel, during our Zoom classes as well, they've been speaking a lot about the lockdown and about how they're creatively responding to it. Some of them are doing painting. Some of them are doing work in the garden. It's been really, really interesting seeing all their creative responses to it. I would really love for us to bring that back into the room, and maybe do a show about it, or create a piece of work based on their responses.

[Music]

LISA: What do you think this experience has told you about the role and the needs for youth theatre, and theatre by young people, in their local community?

MATTHEW: I think probably the whole experience has shown everyone how vital interaction with your community is, and how important it can be for your wellbeing and mental health. I think what we do as youth theatres is obviously really, really creative. There's so much creativity and amazing ideas going on just now, but for me, it has really highlighted the importance of the social aspect. Our face-to-face workshops always end with a question or a mini evaluation, and we've continued that on to our digital workshops. On our first Zoom session, I asked everyone to say what they enjoyed about this session or what they didn't enjoy. Everyone said they enjoyed seeing each other again and interacting with the other participants.

I think the role of youth theatre during this time is really, really important because it enables children and young people to still socialise and still participate in the weekly activity. I think as well, the regularity and the certainty that the Regal Youth Company or any drama club and youth theatre that's still running, this structure in a young person's life, obviously has been affected by this where they're doing lots of homeschooling and not being able to go out and see their pals and things like that. The fact that the Regal Youth Company is still there every single Monday night, gives them a wee bit of structure, and it gives them a bit of certainty as well, where there's guaranteed weekly activity, where they're not feeling they're losing every aspect of their social wellbeing.

LISA: Yeah. Absolutely. I couldn't agree more. Yeah, I think it's exactly as you said, that regularity. That everything, so much, has changed for all of our lives, but for young people's lives so much has changed, so yes, to know that they still have your company there, they still have their... A lot of times as well within youth theatre, sometimes the friends that you make or the friends that are participants have with a youth theatre session, that's the only time of the week they might see each other.

MATTHEW: That's the thing, because I remember when I went to Firefly Arts for a lot of years and I remember that's probably the only time you seen those pals, you're seeing them on a Monday and Wednesday night and that's the only times you got to see them. It's really taken it for this to happen I suppose. We all probably knew it but it's solidified the fact that this regularity and this certainty of youth theatre is so, so vital in a young person's life.

LISA: What a great note to end that portion of our conversation on I think.

[Music]

LISA: I would like to know what does self-care look like for you at this time?

MATTHEW: I think it's writing, I used to write a lot when I was younger, at high school, and just going into college and uni I used to write a lot. Since then, and since I suppose getting a full-time job and running the youth theatre and doing freelance work, not really had a lot of time to just sit down and write. I've been doing quite a lot of writing, trying to think of getting an ideas journal

going, so I can maybe write a play about the lockdown. I think writing's a great form of escapism. I'm really into shows like *Doctor Who* and things like that, so I take a lot of my ideas from that. From the stuff I like and the stuff I do in my spare time and put it into my writing as a bit of escapism.

I normally work in a library as my other job, so it's been quite nice just having a bit of relaxed time to just sit and self-reflect. I think it makes you appreciate everything more really. I love my job in the library and I wouldn't change it for the world, but it's really made me think, "*Wow I really do love my job in the library and I really love the youth theatre and I really love freelance work.*" It's been so nice just to have time at night or time during the day to just sit and write and just to brainstorm different ideas and to collect my own creativity. Maybe no one's going to read the plays I write or read the stories that I write, but they're there for me, if you know what I mean.

LISA: Yes, absolutely, I think as well especially as practitioners, as youth theatre practitioners, sometimes you don't get the chance to really explore your own creativity. You're there to facilitate and to give space to your participants' creativity, so it's great to have that time for yourself, it's unusual really, isn't it?

MATTHEW: Yes. Normally you spend your days thinking about, "*What can I plan for this session? Can I get props for this show?*" Whereas now there's a bit of a break from that, there's maybe a bit of time for you to think about yourself for a bit. I'm really, really bad for just like working all the time so I would find myself working maybe until like eleven o'clock at night and then getting up really early at the start of lockdown. Then I thought to myself, you need to shut off at one point. You need to have a finishing time, I feel.

I promise myself, I say to myself, "*I'm not going to do youth theatre work beyond six o'clock now unless we have sessions on.*" Just to take your mind off the lockdown situation and sit and write has been nice. It feels horrible saying in this bad situation, but it's sometimes nice to have a bit of escapism.

I know a lot of our kids who come to the youth theatre have been saying that as well, it's nice to have time to yourself, alongside doing all the schoolwork and the drama sessions, but it's been lovely. [laughs]

[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