

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 1 July 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 **Drew Taylor** about the positive sides of using Zoom and remembering to engage with the world during lockdown.

LISA: Hi, Drew.

DREW: Hello

LISA: How are you doing?

DREW: I'm all right. I'm excited for today.

LISA: Lovely. Well, thank you so much for giving us your time today. I'm excited to chat to you. Let's just kick-off. Do you want to tell us a bit about yourself and where you work, organisations you've worked for, and maybe some of the stuff that you were doing before we went into this madness?

DREW: Entered into this global pandemic! Yes. I am a theatre director, a playwright, and I describe myself as a young artist development specialist. What that means is that I work with young artists from teenage upwards to help them develop their artistry into the theatre profession and the myriad of jobs that might entail. I work with performers, I work with directors, I work with producers, I work with designers, I work with technicians often from disadvantaged backgrounds. I work a lot in contexts where people have mental and physical health difficulties.

That work has escalated recently, and it's been brilliant. I've done that work with Scottish Youth Theatre. I've just finished doing that sort of work with the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, mentoring MA Musical Theatre students through their autobiographical cabaret unit. The majority of my work in the field is with an organisation called Performance Collective Stranraer, which is an organisation to develop the artistry of young people from Southwest

Scotland, predominantly Dumfries and Galloway. I am the artistic director of the organisation.

LISA: Amazing. I suppose today we are going to chat mostly about Performance Collective Stranraer. Do you want to tell us a bit about how has the company's work adapted in these past few months, and what challenges - I mean, so many challenges! - but what challenges did this present?

DREW: PCS is an amazing group of people. Basically, we have nearly 30 artists ranging from 18 to 30 who are spread across Southwest Scotland. We've got people right down in Stranraer, we've got people in Wigtownshire, we've got people in South Ayrshire and everywhere in between. What the lockdown has been brilliant for is actually allowing us a way that we hadn't necessarily done so before lockdown to properly connect on a regular basis.

As you can imagine, with our participants, our cohort spread across such a huge geographical region, it's really, really hard to get everybody in one place at one time. What's been amazing during lockdown is we've started doing weekly Zoom meet-ups, and those sessions have been absolutely incredible. We've done our first Town Hall, which was where all the cohort, as many as possible, could come together to chat about what projects PCS are looking to do in the future and input into all of those things, get feedback from the activity we've delivered previously.

The first time we've ever been able to do that, actually, the context for it digitally was brilliant because people didn't have to take a day off to be able to then come and do it all. We have done some loads of creative sessions. We've been developing how you deliver exercises that look at performance activities but over Zoom. We've been really honing our spoken word skills and writing, and that's been something that I think has been like an excellent tool for everybody because it provides a really immediate way of dissecting what's happening in the world at the moment.

Then yesterday, we had our special Pride version of our Zoom, where it was brilliant. We watched a 20-minute documentary about Stonewall together. We have started to develop a piece about Pride and we did some writing. It was just absolutely brilliant session.

Was definitely the most educative of the sessions we've led, but it's been so pivotal to look at it 'cause with everything that's been happening in the world at the moment with the Black Lives Matter movement, with transgender rights being massively under threat in the States, with J.K. Rowling coming out with the comments that she has, it feels like a really timely moment for loads of minority communities. It was just brilliant to have all of our cohorts present to actually just go, right, this is where the Pride movement actually came from. This is what it's about, and its inception and also like providing a bit of information that people didn't know. Like Sylvia Rivera, who was one of

the pioneers of the Gay Liberation Front in America on the first official Pride meet-up, a couple of weeks after the Stonewall riots, she was actually a transgender woman. She was actually booed off stage by the predominantly white middle-class gay audience. She was one of the people that was literally throwing bricks at the riots and was campaigning and was founders of these organisations to create liberation and change.

She was not welcomed by the queer community at the time, and certainly, those assembled. Just having everybody present learn just about that fact, this notion of queer liberation will never happen unless transgender rights are put side by side with everybody else's, that has been the problem from the get-go really. I think it was incredible for everybody to see and to learn and to digest and to really take on board for when thinking about these notions in the future.

LISA: Absolutely. I suppose that's the interesting thing that Zoom offers I suppose because it's not as if in your practice or in any of our practice, we've not said to young artists, young people that we're working with, "Oh, you should go read, you should watch this. You should watch this documentary," or, "Read this article," or dah, dah, dah, dah, dah. A lot of people will do it, but not everyone will, and then that stunts those conversations I suppose the next time you need to be able to be together on that platform and go, "Great. We'll watch this now together and then we'll talk about it." Yes, it's a great tool I suppose that way.

DREW: Yes. For me, it's been absolutely pivotal. I've been able to work in various contexts since lockdown, not just with PCS. I've been working a bit with the Hidden Route team in Dundee. I worked with an organisation. That's the offshoot of Renfrewshire arts programs, a thing called Art Boss, which is working with care experienced young people who are interested in producing their own work, and then, of course, doing things with the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. It's been amazing for me to utilise Zoom in its own medium rather than having it as an approximation of live contact.

That's been something I've been really, really bold about when I've been talking to producers and organisers of these events and going, "Okay, from my experience, I've learned that this timeframe is a sensible timeframe for people to be actively able to engage in that means that, if possible, it should be at this time of day to accommodate generally what people's activities are by this point. More than that, we'll go, "Here's an activity that you could do at your leisure afterward in order to assimilate that learning a little bit more." Then more than that, during it, why not use the digital medium for people to go away and see actual examples of what's going on?

With spoken word stuff, it's been absolutely amazing to be able to go, "Here is this beautiful poem by Anis Mojgani. Here is this beautiful spoken word short film by Ross Sutherland." That totally gives you a really easy accessible idea

of the stuff that you can create just with your voice and how we then can apply that really quickly to creating something beautiful together. I've been a big fan of the translation of my techniques digitally, but still very much missing being in a room with people.

LISA: Of course, absolutely. I think that's the thing we all are, aren't we? I suppose as you're seeing, what can offer us a Zoom rather than... I think that was a shift in my thinking at a time as well of going, "Okay, rather than continuously thinking to myself, 'Oh, I can't do this and I can't do this and I can't do this and I can't do this on Zoom,' actually, what can I do? Like what does it offer us that we could never normally do?" Then that shift in thinking can help you.

How do you think this may influence or change your work moving forward? As lockdown is starting to ease a little bit, what will you take with you I suppose?

DREW: I think with this PCS activity, we will definitely try and keep up with the Zoom meetings. I think that it's been a really, really important factor for establishing far more of a collective company since we've with-- What we have the privilege of is with pots of funding that we get, we put a lot of that effort and a lot of that money into running residential artist development labs, and we've done, I think five, and these are incredible, intense residential long weekends, where everyone comes together and develops their artistry. Everyone stays together. We eat together. We're sequestered in the country. It's just an absolute dream, and you can see the development of people happening overnight. It's just sublime.

But... that takes a lot of effort to put together. It's been really beautiful with the Zoom stuff to be able to realise that there are other ways that we can keep that momentum going and also to put the responsibility of people's professional development into their hands much more directly. Today, later on, I will be sending out to the cohort a bunch of workshop opportunities, one of which is the YTAS playwriting workshop, which is literally just, "Here's a brilliant opportunity. This is something we started to recommend that you do. This is something that you can document that says that you've done it and it will help with your professional development.'

Lockdown has given me the time to be able to look for these things. Actually, because I know now where to find all of them, I feel like I want to keep that going as well, that you just go, right, "Here's the opportunity. If it costs any money, we can help you because it's not going to be that much every time and off you go, essentially. This is a brilliant way to develop your artistry."

LISA: This is a difficult question I suppose because it's so unknown at the moment for us all. What does planning for the future look like for you now?

DREW: For me on a really personal level, there's just been a shift. I found myself hitting lockdown at a point of creative exhaustion in a sense of my

own work. I'd just directed a show that had toured around Scotland as part of the touring fund, a brilliant performance called Thick Skin, Elastic Heart. I hit a point where the development of various things had not stalled, but I was just in a process where I was just feeling like I didn't have the capacity to plough my way through my own authorship of performance work.

I had had a long chat with myself, and I was like, right, "Am I okay to be in a position where majority of my working is in advocacy roles?" A lot of that has been PCS and potentially with another project upcoming, which is going to be Scotland's new queer arts festival, so watch this space for that. I'm working on that with Annabel Cooper and Fraser MacLeod, and we are awaiting our funding from Creative Scotland, fingers crossed.

Basically I said to myself, "Am I okay to have those two as my main jobs?" My answer to that was "yes". Then in my actual spare time, I can do my garden and hang out with my cat and have a nice life. I think theatre it is an incredible space to operate in, but I think also we have to keep remembering, and I tell this to people all the time, that working in the arts is a job. Yes, it's a vocation. Yes. It's a passion. Yes. It's a beautiful, beautiful thing, but your own health has to come first above all of that stuff. I'm looking forward in the future to prioritising that a wee bit more, but really investing and really embedding in with everything that I've been building up to this point, just not necessarily advocating for my own stuff at the moment.

There will come a time when I'll come back to it, and that's fine, but right now I'm all about lifting others up and supporting people, and in the meantime, making space for my own health.

LISA: Which brings us beautifully onto the final question, which was all about you. What does self-care look like for you at this time?

DREW: I'm falling asleep on the cat parent on my chest. If you've ever had that, it is the most amazing feeling. I've got this giant cat called Samson, and he's very, very big. The motor on him when he poses is just beautiful and totally meditative. I can be out in seconds when he's like that. He's not particularly satisfied by the outcome 'cause he's like, "No, no, he came on to get stroked, so can you do that, please?" Self-care to me is definitely finding time to go outside. Actually a new thing I've really started to embrace over the last week is remembering to engage with the world a little bit. I think that everyone has had the capacity to find their way through their own bubble and that's been somewhat important to put yourself in the situation where you're creating safety, security, and sanctuary around yourself. I found that that has felt a little bit too insular at times and has become something that means that I'm becoming, I wouldn't say blissfully unaware, but the opposite of blissfully unaware, just unaware of what's happening in the world.

I found just making sure that my outside time isn't just in my garden, my outside time is definitely going for a walk in the park or even just a walk down a few streets where there's actual people. Remembering that the world outside does exist and to have your own soft launch into it again, feels like an important weight and vital thing to describe how you do it. The world is going to come crashing in, and we need to be ready for that. It's going to always be a more beneficial thing in these circumstances to gradually introduce yourself to it rather than having it all bombarding you the next time you step out of your front door.

LISA: Yes, because that's part of the difficulty in initially going in for a lot of us and initially going into work. It did feel so sudden, wasn't it? It was, okay everything's shut, you're indoors all the time. It's that shock to the system. You're right, we have the potential to have it, probably around when we can start going back out again.

Amazing. Thank you so much, Drew. It was so great to chat with you and hear everything that's going on and excited to hear how everything develops with Performance Collective Stranraer and fingers crossed for your Creative Scotland funding and everything that's coming in the future.

DREW: Keep an eye out on social media channels. We'll definitely be sure to loop YTAS in. Over the next few days, we will be putting out our second art guide, which is part of our personal development program. The first one was done by little old me and the second has been made by Sarah Rose Graber. The art guides are designed to just give anybody, our cohort, but anybody who chooses to watch them an idea about an artist currently working in Scotland. You get to look at their practice. You get some beautiful and creative tasks. You just have 20 minutes of joy sitting in someone else's headspace for a bit. They're really beautiful and our new art guide will be released next week.

LISA: Amazing. Thanks so much.

[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

NOTE: The poems that Drew refers to in the discussion about their special Pride Zoom session are: 'Shake the Dust' by Anis Mojgani
'Things To Do Before You Leave Town' by Ross Sutherland.