

Spotlight on the Sector:

Season Two • Episode Three



Corin Beattie

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 6 July 2020.

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

INTRO: Welcome to the second season of Youth Theatre Arts Scotland's *Spotlight on the Sector*. In this episode, YTAS' Lisa Williamson talks to Corin Beattie from the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland about how their organisation adapted to lockdown and the resilience of young people.

LISA: Hi, Corin.

CORIN: Hello.

LISA: Hi, thanks so much for your time today.

CORIN: No, thanks for having me. I'm really pleased to be here.

LISA: Oh, well, let's just get started. Tell us a wee bit about yourself and where you work and maybe a little bit about what you were doing before we entered this strange time.

CORIN: My name's Corin, I'm the Junior Conservatoire Coordinator for Dance, Drama, Production and Film at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. I suppose I am the first point of contact for all staff and students. I oversee all weekly activity and I coordinate and organise all internal and external events for juniors DDPF.

We offer activity to approximately 300 students across six different art forms. It's first and foremost a skills development program for young people between the ages of 11 to 18, who want to pursue a career in the arts, and so it's got more of a skills development focus. However, we also have our young theatre company, which is for 16 to 21-year-olds, and that has more of a

performance and creative focus. This year, we are launching a company for 13 to 15-year-olds, which is really exciting.

In terms of what we were doing before lockdown. We were going into our busiest time of the year, so April for us is the busiest month of the year. That's when we do all our recruitment. All our auditions happen in April. That's when we get to see hundreds of young people that walk through the door and that would be a number of staff sitting on panels and watching all these wonderful young performers and interviewing these young people who want to pursue that specific art form. Unfortunately, we couldn't see them face to face. Everything had to get moved online. I spent the majority of April, watching self-tapes and watching performers and interviewing young people. It was really a delight actually getting to meet all these young people and find out why they wanted to join us and speak about their passion and their love for that specific art form, so that was great.

We were also planning for our Bridge Week. Bridge Week was, or it is, it's an interdisciplinary learning week and it was adopted by the senior school four years ago. It's essentially an opportunity and the only opportunity really for all our young people to come together and share practice skills, their experience, and work with other students from other art forms and work with professionals from different art forms. It's the highlight of certainly our year and a lot of our students' years because they get to see the arts as a bigger picture. Because they're only getting to work with their peers for 30 weeks of the year and they don't see anything else or work with anybody else. For them to experience another art form and say, "Oh, that's what a filmmaker does," or, "That's what a designer does." It just gives them a bigger appreciation of the arts as a whole. We think that's really important for them to access that and experience that.

Also planning for Term Three. Term Three, is, again, a really big, important time of year for us, it's the one opportunity where our students get to perform. Like I said before, our program's more of a skills development program, so they don't necessarily get a chance to perform on a bigger scale throughout the year, so Term Three is geared towards that.

We worked with the Youth Arts Festival, and we basically commandeer the whole of the RCS for one day for all the art forms. Again, we had to quickly gear shift that one and think, "How are we going to do this?" That had to be all moved online. Before lockdown that was what was happening.

LISA: I suppose you kind of touched upon it there. You're working towards these events as you say are the highlight of the year and then all of this happens and we're all suddenly in lockdown. You adapted by moving stuff online. Could you tell us a wee bit more about how did it work and what challenges did that present and how was that? Everyone's dealing with it in

different ways I think and have faced different things whilst they've worked for.

CORIN: I suppose we all had to learn really quickly what on earth Zoom and MS Teams was. If you'd asked me what Zoom was at the beginning of March, I would have been like, "What? I don't know what that is." All our staff had to become very familiar with what it was to teach and how to teach online, which for some staff is brand new, a total challenge. Not everybody is tech-savvy. They had to completely change their content, their curriculum for that term. With that, we had to work really quickly and adapt really quickly.

What was quite advanced just and fortuitous for us was we had already created an online platform for our students at the end of 2019 as a way for students and staff to engage with one another, to view online video content, upload work, and we were already engaging with that before lockdown happened. When lockdown eventually did happen, our students were already engaging with online activities. For them to move over to completely online wasn't a huge shift for them.

We were using a platform called Slack, which was and we're still using it now actually, it is a really useful platform to use, especially for young people. Anyway, so we had to shift everything on to MS Teams and Zoom, but due to safeguarding reasons, we weren't permitted because we sit under an institution obviously, we weren't permitted to use Zoom for online teaching apart from dance.

All of our teaching had to be done over MS Teams. The thing with MS Teams is that you can only see up to six people at a time, they may have changed it now. When we first started using it, it was only six people at a time. To actually engage with the young person online, when you can't see them is really challenging. You're having to really make sure that you're checking in with our young people, making sure that they are happy, they're engaged, they understand. For me, each and every art form has its own challenges whether that be lack of resource, lack of equipment, space.

We've got six different art forms to look after. We had to look at them by case by case basis. For me, the main challenge was just making sure that all our young people were safe and were engaged in the activity because our students come from all ranges of backgrounds, have all different ranges of resources at their disposal. We need to make sure that each and every one of them could engage in the same way that everyone else could. You have to just make sure that we are accommodating that. I'm sure that's the same for any company or groups that are only working with young people online. We had to make sure that we were on top of that.

The main thing was just making sure that our young people were happy and checking in with them. I know one of our staff he was using a really great way

of check-ins and I'm going to do name drop here, Nick Barton-Wines, who I believe is doing something with you guys about talking about check-ins with young people. He did a great thing about at the beginning and end of each lesson he was checking them. It was a great way to monitor how our students were feeling and engaging with the work throughout the seven weeks we were working with them. That was really helpful. Lots of challenges, but for me, it was mostly about making sure our young people were happy and safe and were comfortable with the change in working.

LISA: Since moving online, what have you noticed of anyone who's working with the young people at the Conservatoire? It's about young people's engagement during this time. Obviously, there's probably been some barriers, but then perhaps opportunities as well that have-

CORIN: Absolutely.

LISA: -arisen from this time. What would you say you've noticed most about young peoples' engagement?

CORIN: What I would say is, well, given the circumstances, I think the young people have been absolutely incredible. What has really proved the resilience of young people and not to digress too much but somebody asked me a few weeks ago which generation I think has been hit the hardest through this whole thing. At the time I didn't really know who, I thought, "Gosh, everyone's been hit badly."

Actually, now that I think about it. I would say, young people, those teenagers young people coming here. The cost of their lives. They're going into-- it's a new step, those that are maybe leaving school that have missed out on all these big moments in their lives maybe from school to higher education, further education. Or those younger teenagers who are sitting exams. I think they have really been hit hardest. The thing that has really kept them going throughout this whole thing has been the arts and that has brought, certainly, our young people. We're asking them to be creative and resourceful in their own homes at a time of uncertainty and worry. They've managed to do that incredibly well. They've done really well to do that considering with everything that's been happening over these past few weeks. Like you say, I think it's really highlighted what can be achieved when you think there's a restriction there, but if you look at it another way, what could be also be seen as a restriction is also seen as an opportunity. Lots of our young people have become really good film editors because that's essentially what we asked them to do. Our Youth Arts Festival, as I was saying before, we moved that all online.

We asked all our art forms to create something, to have some sort of online content, so all our young people created work within their own homes. Whether that was kind of a talking heads thing or we had young people learn a

piece of choreography in their living room. We had documentaries from our film students, our production students created a theme of a Treasure Island and they took on all elements of production, and each student focused on one area and they created this online, just this 30-minute film. It was just incredible what they've managed to achieve.

Our Acting Level Three students, they had been working with writer/director Andy McGregor since January and they had a piece that was basically good to go. It was supposed to be performed at SYT. They basically had to scrap that and start from scratch and they created a part-animation, part-live film which was brilliant, and they'd never done anything like that before. Andy had never done anything like that before. They said, "Well, let's just give it a bash and see what happens," and it was brilliant.

You just ask them, all these young people, "Okay, this is the situation we're in. Let's just give it a bash and see what happens." That's all we were asking our students and staff to do. What they managed to create in those seven weeks, in that short time was just-- It was brilliant. It just proves the resilience of some people, that what you take-- You try and create a good thing out of a bad situation.

It was a really interesting few weeks and it's given me a perspective as to what can actually be achieved in the future, and you would normally think, "Oh, we won't touch that with a barge pole." You think, "Actually, no, we could probably do that now, yes, because we've proved that we can do this." Definitely, it's given me scope to look at things differently.

LISA: I think there must be something quite-- In terms of the young people that you're working with, there must be something quite freeing about that opportunity in a way, especially, if you're saying about the groups that were working with Andy and had the performance ready to go and then it's all just taken away from you. In a sense, it's like, "Well, what have you've got to lose?" What have you got to lose by trying something different? Like, the worse thing that you could have imagined happen.

As we all know from the experience, if you're working towards something you're so dedicated to it, you're so passionate about it, and then for it to just be gone, there's probably a sense of like, "Well, let's just throw caution to the wind and try something different." Nothing can be as bad as us having to go into lockdown, I suppose.

CORIN: Absolutely. You're saying to these young people, "You're not getting to do the thing that you were planning to do, but here's another really great opportunity to explore," and, "Nope, we've never done anything like this before, so let's learn and fail together." We didn't really know what it was going to be, if it was going to work and that's not just for that particular craft, but they didn't know if it was going to work. They didn't know if it was going to

come together, luckily it did, and they could see at the end of it, "Actually, we can do this and we can create something that doesn't need to be a live performance."

Yes, it was really encouraging to see, I think it just proves, as I say, the resilience of young people and how they've really-- Their art form and their passion for it has really-- I think that's what got them through. It was a joy to see.

LISA: For a lot of organisations come to the end of term now and some people are doing a summer activity, that's time with us. What does planning for the future look like, for you, at the moment, Conservatoire-wise?

CORIN: It's quite challenging at the moment because as I say, we sit under a larger institution. We need to follow policy and government guidelines and all that stuff. Hopefully, it's looking to be a mixture, a blended learning approach. A mixture of online and face-to-face teaching. We hope to be able to get our students back into the building as soon as, and at a full-time basis as soon as possible. At the end of the day, that's what our students want, that's what the staff want.

I suppose what that last term has just proved though is that our students can cope, and our staff can also cope with teaching online. There is creative opportunities there and there is scope there to create something that isn't necessarily what you wouldn't normally associate with that art form. It's a little bit out of the box, but you're still creating, you're still engaging with that art form and it's still really interesting.

No matter what our students end up doing in Term One - which I anticipate when there could be challenges - no matter what they're doing, we know that they're still going to be creating and working hard and doing something that they love. That is the main thing. It's a bit unknown at the moment, but we're remaining positive.

[laughter]

LISA: That's all you can do, isn't it? Waiting with bated breath for the next bit of government guidance, or the next phase.

CORIN: Absolutely. I know. It's just we're in limbo, right? We're waiting to hear what happens. We're all remaining positive. On the whole thing, that it's going to be a great first term back.

LISA: I'm sure it will be. With things starting to ease, what are you most looking forward to? For yourself, personally, what are you looking forward to?

CORIN: For me, I can't wait just to see my pals properly, and hangout. Whether that be in someone's house-- Can you remember when we could go into people's houses?

Just to hang out with friends in their house, or-- I'm not even that bothered about going to the pub or a restaurant, I just want to see my mates and just hang out with them, and actually get back into the office and be around my peers. We work in the creative industry and I think you need creative people around you. As much as I have enjoyed working from home, I'm ready to be back in the building I think. Yes, people. I want people, Lisa!

LISA: I think we can definitely all relate really to you there. Thank you so much. It was great to chat with you, Corin-

CORIN: Thank you.

LISA: -and hear everything that was going on

CORIN: Thanks very much. Thanks for having me.

OUTRO: Thanks for listening to this episode of *Spotlight on the Sector*. To get the latest episodes or catch up on Season 1, don't forget to subscribe on iTunes or Soundcloud. You can get more information on Youth Theatre Arts Scotland's work and get full transcriptions of every episode on our website at www.ytas.org.uk.