

Spotlight on the Sector:

Season Two • Episode One



Jonathan Lloyd

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 Jonathan Lloyd of Solar Bear and Deaf Youth Theatre about how they moved their summer project online, the value of family involvement and the importance of play.

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

JONATHAN: Oh, hi, Lisa, thanks for having me.

LISA: No worries, no worries. Looking forward to chatting, and hearing more about everything you've been up to but I suppose for everyone listening, you should introduce yourself. Tell us a wee bit about yourself, where you work, what you do, maybe what you were doing before lockdown, before the madness.

JONATHAN: Oh gosh, yes, that seems [laughs]-

LISA: A while ago now.

JONATHAN: -a distant dream away, yes, definitely. Hello, I'm Jonathan, Jonathan Lloyd and I'm the Creative Director of a theatre company called Solar Bear, we're based in Glasgow. We do a lot of work with the deaf community up here in Scotland. We work really closely with the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and work with students on their course there who do-- there's a course called the BA Performance in BSL and English, we work a lot with those students. We also create professional opportunities for deaf artists and performers, but a big part, and an important part of Solar Bear is their youth theatre which is called Deaf Youth Theatre (DYT). I'm the co-dir-

ector of that along with a professional actor called Brooklyn Melvin who runs that with me. That's who we are.

Before lockdown, DYT used to meet on a weekly basis, on Wednesday evenings. Their office actually is based at the Scottish Youth Theatre. We also have a space there that we rent out and the young people would come along every Wednesday evening, two hours a week, and we'd have workshops and classes. Sometimes that would be just skills-based kind of stuff. We'd invite in guest artists and guest workshop leaders to work with us. Sometimes we'd work towards a performance or a digital project and create work.

Then every summer, we would usually all get together for two weeks and create a performance or a film and then share that with an audience. For example, last year, obviously we loved being part of NFYT and we brought a show to NFYT and to the young people there. That was DYT in the life before lockdown.

LISA: The life before lockdown, I love that. How has it become adapted for you over the last couple of months and many challenges I imagine, but what challenges has that presented for you guys?

JONATHAN: Yes, I think at first it was, I mean I'm sure for everybody, it was really hard making that transition because the weekly workshops obviously stopped. We weren't able to meet together and we started to then to experiment with what online sessions might look like and what they might involve. We've done, I think, four of those weekly sessions over the last few months. They weren't happening on the same regular basis that they were before. We also found, there were issues, obviously not all of our young people had the same access to WiFi or support at home to access Zoom meetings. For the majority of our young people, that was okay. It was possible but not for everybody.

We just did a few fun things for them to start with. We did a quiz that one of the young people ran and came up with the questions for. One of their favorite games, normally, is a game called Mafia which everyone always begs me to play [laughs]. Then, normally, the game would take hours, so we can't do it every week. We tried to find a way of thinking of how that would work online and we did an online version of Mafia, it was quite good

LISA: Brilliant. I feel like Mafia is one of those where you-- Once you've done it once with your youth theatre, you're like, "This is us now. The request will be there every single week."

JONATHAN: It really is. Yes, it really is. Honestly, I get requests all the time, badgered all the time, "When are we doing Mafia again?" I'm like, "We've got to make a show." They're like, "No, we want to play Mafia."

[laughter]

LISA: Oh goodness.

JONATHAN: The bigger transition, the thing we've been thinking most about, is their summer project and how we would build-up towards that and make that as a digital online project but how we could also then prepare the grounds. We'd had a couple of sessions then, just sowing the seeds for that project. Then last week, in fact, our summer project this year, we did as an online offer. We've done a lot of work preparing the ground and setting that up. and last week was the week. We're in the second week now where we're editing the material, but the week last week was where we did all the sessions and we've generated a lot of stuff that the young people themselves have filmed at home.

LISA: Yes, tell us about the summer project. What format did you choose to-- Yes, what did you do? How did you do it?

JONATHAN: "What is it?"

LISA: How [crosstalk] is it? What is it, what is it?

JONATHAN: It's a zombie comedy called 'Zoombies' that we've devised with the young people. Myself and one of the young participants, a young man called Andrew, we scripted a really simple outline. A very simple five-day structure, but then within that, there's been a lot of space for the young people taking part to improvise and devise their own content. We've had sessions where we've got everyone together but not all at once. One of things we learnt from the weekly sessions is having-- At the moment there's about 11 or 12 young people in the group. Trying to get them all together into one big group online was quite challenging in terms of keeping everyone's focus, working out what was going on.

One of the things for Zoom, it follows someone who's speaking, someone's voice, it highlights, obviously, if someone's actually speaking out loud, but if someone's signing, it doesn't highlight that. It's quite hard to follow what's going on and who's speaking in a big group. We decided to break the group up into smaller subgroups if you like. Everyone would meet in groups of three or four people in the morning.

We basically put the piece together in these smaller groups. We were able to have much more interaction, much more of a conversation by having smaller groups online like that. That's what we did. We would meet every day in these smaller groups and we'd set them a little task or an activity. We'd think of and assign characters and give them a challenge, basically. They have to go off and film at home later that day and then upload it to us by five o'clock, six o'clock on the same day. The next day we'd come back, do the same thing again. Set them a new challenge, new piece of filming, upload that to us by the end of the day.

By the end of the week, after five days of that, we've generated quite a lot of material now that we've got to try and edit together into a 10-minute short film that we are going to then do a watch party with next week, so everyone could come online and watch it at the same time.

It's been brilliant actually. One of the things we've found and was really exciting. We'd sort of go, "Maybe there's not going to be enough for them to get their teeth into here. Maybe we need into more detail, create more of a script," and actually keeping a really open structure worked really well. Just those simple little challenges, everyone ran with, they just let loose with their creativity. People's, not just their acting skills, their costume-making, prop-making, the way they shot and filmed it, you could see day by day people getting bolder and bolder with the things that they were doing at home and the possibilities. You could see, as the week went on, people got more and more creative. It was really exciting to see actually, how well the young people responded to it.

LISA: That's amazing. Do you think that something that's maybe surprised you? Because I suppose we were going to talk next about what have you learned? What's surprised you about your work during this time and would you say that's maybe something in terms of that adaptability of the young people that you work with in the--?

JONATHAN: Yes, definitely. Brooklyn and I, she said she was worried at the start of the week. "Would we get enough material? How would it work?" At the end of the week, when we were doing a bit of a debrief, she and I were both just, again, we just said how impressed we were, we shouldn't be because we know how creative they are usually. We just thought in this format, it might be more restrictive. The same, I think, openness and imagination that we see with the young people when we're in the room together was on show, so we were really delighted about that, about the amount of freedom and how the young people really took that and ran with it.

There was another thing that, actually, I hadn't expected this, maybe I should have. One of the real delights for me of last week and the thing that's really stayed with me is how involved families and other people at home were with the project. Imagine, youth theatre is a place where you get away from your family, isn't it? [chuckles] You get your face away from all of that and I thought, "Oh God. They must be all sick of-- They've been at home for months." Actually, we saw mums working the camera, sisters getting involved as actors, dads, grandma, grandparents, getting involved as playing zombies.

People were getting involved making props, costumes. There was a real sense of collaboration happening across a lot of the young people with whoever they had at home. They would say, "Right, you're going to get involved now and you're going to do this." "You're going to shoot this," or, "You're going to set this up for me." Again, over the week, we saw more and more that it be-

came a real collaboration with their families actually which was really lovely to see.

LISA: That's amazing. I wonder if that, and I imagine, that will have gone a long way of helping parents understand maybe what youth theatre is. I don't know if you're the same but I certainly had conversations with parents in the past who are like, "I mean, I know they love coming here but I have no idea what they do. I try to ask them what they've done in a session and I don't get much. I don't hear much details about it." It must be so interesting for families to have that insight into your work and the work you're doing with their young people I guess.

JONATHAN: Definitely. I think that's true. Actually, that insight I think that it provides. Also, I think a chance for the families themselves also to play and be creative as well. Often sometimes the best projects, it's a good reminder, actually. I've seen that work with younger children where actually you're getting the families involved in a creative project has a legacy because then it encourages a sense of play then and it happens at home that might have been tricky beforehand. You get over some of those initial barriers.

Actually, with teenagers, I never really thought about it, but actually, we really saw that the families got involved and were creative in their own right as well. I really hope that there has been an insight, but also that it's been a fun shared activity for everybody. It's given me something to think about, how can we do that again. I know that young people won't want that all the time. I reckon that they will still want to have this separate space. They'll still be getting picked up and asked, "What did you do?" and they'll say "Nothing," and stuff.

That's stuff as it should be, you want to keep that. I think if there's still scope in some future projects for some family involvement, that's something for us to think about I think. It's been a real surprise and a real good surprise from last week's project I think.

LISA: Amazing. I guess that comfort as well to play at home. That's the joy of the youth theatre space, I suppose, isn't it? The ideal one is that it's free and it's safe and it's inclusive. How do you have that same feeling at home if your mum's next door cooking dinner then you're crossing over off of those boundaries has probably been a challenge for a lot of facilitators and a lot of young people. That's amazing for the families.

JONATHAN: There was one of our young people who, it was like the fourth day of the project, on Thursday, I think it was. Her grandparents who were coming for their first visit in four months or so and literally within about a half-hour from arriving, the grandparents were involved as extras on the film. Now I think will feature in the finished film as two zoombied out elderly customers of a cafe. They probably didn't expect that that would be part of their visit when they set off that day.

[laughter]

LISA: An added bonus to their visit, let's say. That sounds incredible. That sounds like it's been a great success of a project. Moving forward, I suppose what are your concerns or what are your hopes for the youth theatre sector that we are further into the unknown, I guess, but as we're moving forward?

JONATHAN: I think it's the autumn, I suppose, or the next six months and stuff where there's the most kind of uncertainty. I guess my biggest hope which must be the same I'm sure of lots of companies, it that we can get back in a room together and even if it's not quite the same as before, to start with, if there are still elements of physical distancing that we have to bear in mind, are we able to get back in a room together to some extent? The digital work has been-- like I say, it has been good and I can see how inventive lots of companies have been with that over the last few months.

We recognise that it doesn't work for everybody, that there's some their youth theatre that haven't been able to join in the project for various reasons. Some struggle just with following and watching things on Zoom, some don't have necessarily support at home or don't have internet. We're all aware that it's not a solution that works for everybody. The thing that worries me I think in the longer term is just what the lockdown has done to all of us but particularly to the younger people that we're working with. I think it's been an incredibly challenging time of worrying at a time.

One of the biggest things I think we always recognise and I'm sure it's true of many youth theatres, is the social aspect, the getting together with pals, and the social interaction that happens. Obviously, the drama is a key part of it, but it's often all those other bits of social interaction that go with a good youth theatre, a healthy youth theatre I think. We sometimes, don't perhaps realise it is a big thing. For some of our young people, obviously, some of them might be at school where there's a small number of other deaf students there.

When they come to Deaf Youth Theatre, it's a chance to just blether and just chat with pals in BSL or in a way where they're kind of not shut out of conversations in a way that often they are at school. We often find that they arrive an hour early before the session is due to start. Break, it's really hard to get them in after the break as well because they want to have that connection with each other. I think as adults, we recognise those interactions, those connections with other people are part of what makes what we value about being human. When that's restricted, that's hard, it's really hard.

We would obviously love to see if there are ways in which we can get back in a room together. One of the things I'm thinking about is if we are able to get in a room, but the numbers are restricted, we maybe split people into smaller groups. Actually, what opportunities does that open up? I'm sure anyone

running a youth theatre where there's quite a lot of young people running around a room and you think of the activities and things that will work for that setting.

If you've got a smaller number, does that open up more space for conversations, space to really have a more in-depth interaction with the young people in that smaller group? What things could we do over those in the next few months? Do we need to create space to talk about the things that they've been worried about, that they've been challenged by? Or do they just want to come and have a distraction from that? I don't know the answer to that. I feel like if we can create space to at least start those conversations and see what they would most value, I think that would be important.

Obviously, if we're not able to do that, we're going to think about how some of the digital work could continue. I think my fear is that the longer we can't get in a room together, that's not a good thing for any of us, particularly for that younger generation. Obviously, it's good that schools are going to start to go back in August, but I think it's that other side of interaction as young people that happens outside of a school, it's a crucial part of your well-being.

Obviously it's a recognition of that great work that youth theatres do developing young people's identity confidence, but also their ability to connect with each other and learn from each other. I think the longer that we're not able to do that and be in a room with each other, I think that's going to be a worry.

LISA: I couldn't agree more. I think you're so right. Youth theatre is for so many young people it's that safe haven, isn't it?

JONATHAN: Yes, definitely.

LISA: It's a place where they are so connected to their peers and a lot of participants, those friends that they have in their youth theatre session, they probably sometimes only see them within that session. They're not at the same school, and they're not in the same circle of friends, and that's what you're missing. What we're all missing is, I don't know, it's those moments when everyone comes in and puts their coat in the corner of the room, and they're all standing there blethering for ages and you can't get them to get in and get [crosstalk]

JONATHAN: You're like, "Come on, focused. Come round the circle." Yes.

LISA: Annoying, but it's so amazing that you're saying about your participants arriving an hour early to have those chats with each other, that's incredible. I feel like I've been trying to say that for years, "You could have been here, you've had 15 minutes out in the foyer to be talking."

Youth theatre, of course, is about making theatres, it's about performance, it's about being creative, but it's so much more than that now, isn't it? It really brings it home, that it's that connection, it's that community. It's those conversations to how do we--

JONATHAN: How do we, yes, keep that? I'll get back to that in some way. I think you're right, we've got to be realistic as well. Obviously we're going to plan for different scenarios like everyone's doing but I think everyone's craving a bit more of that connection now.

LISA: We're all missing out, we're being in the space, a good old game.

JONATHAN: Exactly. It is, again, a key part of that, isn't it? Again, it's silly, I recognise it working with teenagers. We did a project last year as a company going into various secondary schools across Scotland. Actually, you don't get much of a chance to play at a secondary school now. It all gets a bit serious when you turn 12 and the chance to run around and play a game, actually, as a teenager. You might think, "Oh, teenagers are too cool for that," but actually, they miss that and they love that chance to actually just mess around and play.

Obviously, there's lots of great things that come from playing as well but that chance to still be playful and adult as well, but we don't often get to do it enough. I would love to do it. Again, they can get back to the game.

LISA: That playfulness carries forward into the work that you're making as well, I suppose. If you have that space where your participants feel comfortable and free to be silly and to be a bit ridiculous at times, then actually that that translates as a bravery I suppose when you're making work and when you're performing.

JONATHAN: Taking a risk is all part, isn't it? Definitely.

LISA: Fingers crossed we're all back in the space soon. Let's keep hoping. Well, Jon, we finish on every one of these podcasts but more of a question about you. I'm going to ask you what are your recommendations for lockdown viewing, listening, reading? Everyone's craving some new things to watch?

JONATHAN: I splashed out and I subscribed to the Disney Channel for two reasons. I wanted to watch *Hamilton* and I wanted to watch *The Mandalorian*, the Star Wars series. Those have been two of my treats. *Hamilton* particularly was astonishing. I hadn't seen it in the theatre, this was my first chance to get to see it and on the Disney Channel you can see it with the original cast. It's extraordinary, everything about it, the writing, the storytelling, the verve of it, the musicianship, the performances, and just a big old political story that resonates still today, was just amazing.

I know that's a fairly obvious one, but I loved it and one of my treats of lockdown.

I love reading. One of the things I love doing is I like reading books for-- Before I came to Solar Bear, I used to run a theatre down in England for children and young people. I've always been interested in children's literature and young peoples' literature. One of my favourite writers is Patrick Ness, the novelist, Patrick Ness. His new novel *Burn* came out a couple of months ago. I sort of treated myself to that.

It's an amazing story set in the '50s in America. It's about a dragon and it's about someone who's been sent to try and assassinate a dragon, and somebody who's trying to stop that happening. It's about the Cold War. It's about coming of age kind of story. It's about faith and it's about fanaticism and all sorts of things. It's a great big bold thriller of a story for young readers and stuff. That's been a real treat as well over the lockdown.

If people haven't read any Patrick Ness before, there's other great books of his. He wrote *A Monster Calls*, that was turned into a movie a few years back which is a great story, and the *Chaos Walking Trilogy* as well. Well worth a read if you haven't read that.

LISA: Thank you so much. On that brilliant note, we'll let you go. Thank you so much for your time. It was so great to hear about everything that's happened at Solar Bear. I've got my fingers crossed for you and everyone else that we can get back in a space with our young people soon.

JONATHAN: Likewise. All of us at DYT, we'd love to send that message out to everyone else working in youth theatre up here in Scotland. We hope the same for all of you. We hope to see you again in the not too distant future.

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.