

Spotlight on the Sector:

Season Two • Episode Four



Gudren Soley Sigurdardottir

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 the second season of Youth Theatre Arts, Scotland's spotlight on the sector. In this episode, YTAS' Lisa Williamson talks to Icelandic performance maker and director, Gudrun Soley Sigurdardottir, about her work with Polmont Youth Theatre.

LISA: Hi, Gudren.

GUDREN: Hello.

LISA: Thank you so much for joining us today. Do you want to tell us a bit about yourself and maybe specifically about the work that you do with Polmont Youth Theatre? We'll be glad to hear a bit about maybe what you were doing with them before we went into this madness?

GUDREN: My name is Gudrun Soley Sigurdardottir and I'm an Icelandic performance maker and director based in Glasgow. I make my own solo work but the biggest focus of my practice is my directing work where my main focus is working with young people. I direct Polmont Youth Theatre where I work alongside Ricky Williamson. Polmont Youth Theatre was set up by a company called Glass Performance who I worked for on multiple other projects with young people over the last few years. Polmont Youth Theatre is based at Polmont Young Offenders Institution and it's the only Youth Theatre in a prison in Scotland at the moment.

We make performances from scratch where the young men that we work with devise and come up with all of the ideas and the work that we then present to an audience at the end. That audience is made up from people within Polmont, their friends and families and also an invited public audience.

That's what we do in Polmont and we usually produce about two shows a year. Before lockdown, we were working towards a new production, and that obviously came to a pause like everything else in the world.

Glass Performance and Barnardo's, who are our partners in Polmont and have been absolutely amazing before and during the lockdown, we were all really clear on that it felt like the engagement really needed to continue despite us not being able to be in the space together. Basically we've had to really quickly reimagine what it is that we do and how to continue that engagement despite us not being able to do what we normally do.

[music]

LISA: Absolutely. Before lockdown happened, does Polmont Youth Theatre usually run as a weekly class? Is that how it would normally--

GUDREN: Yes, we usually meet every week and at the start of a process, we work on building the group dynamic and getting to know the young men that we work with. Then we start coming up with ideas with them and moving towards making our contemporary performance. Usually, our process is about 10 weeks long for a production. Sometimes it's a bit longer and we've also done projects where we engage them for a longer period of time. We do scratch performances where we invite audience in and have conversations with them so that the young men can unpick and talk about where the ideas come from and what they mean to an audience.

In lots of ways, it's very similar to how normal youth theatre would maybe run, but obviously, we are in Polmont, so it's also very different but I guess that's why it felt important to continue despite the lockdown.

LISA: I think it's something we've all had to-- I think especially there must be additional challenges with that specific type of work. Tell us a bit more about what it is that you moved to do and how has the Youth Theatre's work adapted and changed in the last couple of months?

GUDREN: At the beginning of lockdown, it all happened very quickly. We just delivered normal weekly session and we didn't really know what was going to happen. Our sessions run usually on a Thursday, so it was the Thursday before lockdown where we delivered our last session. After some initial conversations between Glass Performance, Barnardo's and Polmont, we really quickly came up with a new project that we called *A Way Of Passing Time* where we wrote to members of Polmont Youth Theatre on a weekly basis through their email.

It's called email@prisoner and it's their in-house service, usually used for families and friends to keep contact with the young people in Polmont. We were able to use that service to write to them on a weekly basis. We took what we do in the space, which is giving lots of creative tasks and having

conversations about things that we care about in the world and we transfer that to letter writing. We've been doing that since the very beginning of lockdown. We're still doing that project and we keep writing.

We're coming up with a lot of different tasks for them, sharing other creative writing, poetry, big ideas in the world. It's not focused on an outcome like maybe our previous processes where we would be working towards a performance. This one has been much more about continuing that engagement at a time when we obviously can't be in a space together.

[music]

GUDREN: Then, around five weeks ago, obviously we started to realise, okay, this lockdown is not going to be just for a few weeks. It feels like it's a long-term situation that we're finding ourselves in. We came up with a new project, which is called *In Tune* and it's an interactive radio program that we produce every week. Each Monday we air a new episode for the young people in Polmont. We made this program specifically for them and it focuses really heavily on the young people so there's lots of ways for them to be involved and for them to choose who we speak to, what we play and what we talk about.

That project, alongside the letter writing project, has kinda allowed us to do something that before, when we were in the performing arts space in Polmont, we were unable to do because of restrictions because of the size of the space and the time we had and all of the other things that you're dealing with as you're running a youth theatre anywhere, I guess. This time because it's a radio program, it has the potential to reach all the young people in Polmont.

Actually, in lots of ways, it's allowed us to do what we've always been hoping to do with Polmont Youth Theatre but on a much, much bigger scale. The feedback and the responses from the young people have been mind-blowing and amazing. We're continuing that project, *In Tune*, still running every week, and we will be continuing that for the foreseeable future. The aim is to hopefully be able to then bring that into this space and to continue that engagement with the young people, but obviously, nobody knows really what's going to happen.

LISA: We're all still a little bit in limbo at the moment but that's amazing. I suppose that's so interesting because it feels like a lot of the conversations around youth theatre at the moment are how do we continue to engage our young people? How do we keep as many of our young people as possible? Because the thing that came to my head before you said that, was how many young people were still engaging?

It feels like a lot of people have moved to digital space, Zoom or things like that. It's like maybe 50% of your young people, if you're lucky, are still

engaging with your work. It sounds like you guys have gone the opposite way and your numbers have increased in terms of engagement, which is amazing.

[music]

GUDREN: It's been totally unexpected in lots of ways. The letter writing project obviously had its ups and downs like everything at this moment in time and the engagement varying week to week, but in lots of ways that is also similar to Polmont Youth Theatre in general. We have sessions when we have 15 young men in the space, then next week, we might have five and that is just what you can expect when you're working in that environment and I guess the process continues and the engagement continues despite how many people are in the room each week.

I think that there's definitely evidence of that throughout this new project. In terms of the engagement and the kind of engagement that we're able to do with these two projects, I would also argue that in lots of ways, they actually allow us to reach to those young people that normally we can't reach because not everyone can come to the performing arts space. The young people have different relationships with each other. They've got other creative programs that they are a part of or work parties that they do so it doesn't fit into everyone's schedule.

Obviously, because it's a youth theatre and we have a session a week, there is a capacity limit, I guess, in terms of who we can engage with. With the radio project and with the letter-writing project, simply anyone can engage with it and we can have meaningful conversations and share creative tasks and creativity with much more people than we were able to do before. I totally hear what you're saying in terms of lots of people at the moment are trying to figure out how do we do this? I think we've found some magic with this radio program.

Also, I guess, because it has lots of variety of content, we've got an interview each week where we interview a famous person that the young people have highlighted to us that they want to hear on the program. We have got a quiz, where they send us their answers to the quiz each week and we reveal them the next week. We've got a creative task that they can engage with and send to us and we speak about these in the program. There's lots of different ways to be involved and also for them to be able to ask for songs to be played and to dedicate songs to people in their life or to give the reasoning for why they want to hear those tunes, is massively important.

We probably all know that, is that music for young people is just such a key part of their identity and what they talk about. It's been a great conversation point and a great way of moving forward at a moment when we didn't really know how it was going to go when we started it, obviously.

LISA: Of course, amazing. What an incredible project to come out of such a challenging time.

INTRO: Here's a short excerpt from the radio show, *In Tune*.

[music]

GUDREN: Hello everyone. I'm Gudrun.

RICKY: I'm Ricky. Welcome to the sixth episode of our radio show, *In Tune*.

GUDREN: We want to start today's show by thanking all of you who have tuned in over the last few weeks. We've been totally blown away by the response to the show and your letters and your engagement have been really, really amazing. If you're listening for the first time, welcome, thank you for tuning in and we hope you like what you hear.

RICKY: We started *In Tune* so that we can continue to connect with you all, at a time when we couldn't be in the performing arts space together where we normally work with Polmont Youth Theatre. This started as a bit of an experiment, but the show has continued to grow each week, where your contributions and suggestions make up such a huge part of the show.

GUDREN: We want to acknowledge your engagement with *In Tune* and this week, we are starting a very exciting competition that we'll tell you all about later in the show. Make sure you listen in and get your ideas to us, you might be in for a very special prize.

RICKY: If you're interested in taking part in the competition and being part of the show, you can get in touch with Youth Work or get your name down on a referral sheet in the hall. We would love to hear from you and for you to tell us what to play, who to speak to and what to talk about.

GUDREN: Now, let's get on with this week's show. You are listening to *In Tune*, episode six, *Belonging*.

[music]

RICKY: In this week's episode, we'll be hearing inspirational stories and reflections.

GUDREN: Our quiz will be asking you to think about songs, ships and social media.

RICKY: As always, we will be looking back in time of what happened this week at different points in history.

GUDREN: We will be asking ourselves what it means to feel a sense of belonging.

RICKY: Asking you to respond to our creative task this week.

GUDREN: As always, we'll be playing the songs you have requested throughout the week. We've had some really brilliant suggestions and if you want your tune to be played on the show, you can send them to us through speaking to Youth Work or getting your name down on a referral sheet in the hall.

[music]

GUDREN: Each week, we will be offering a creative task for you to respond to. The following week, we will share any responses that we have received from you on the program. Make sure you get in touch with Youth Work or ask for the referral form in the hall, if you would like your response to be part of the next episode. On today's episode, we have focused on a theme of belonging. We have heard politician Humza Yousaf, talk about his heart belonging to multiple places in Scotland and we have heard some songs that speak of connections to people and places. The creative task this week focuses on this idea of finding a sense of belonging.

To belong is to feel part of something. That could either be a place or a group of people, somewhere where you feel a sense of comfort and acceptance, where you feel like you're a part of something outside of yourself. We all belong to multiple groups of people and to multiple places and our identities are shaped by this, some of those we are born into and others we choose. When we think about where we belong, we might say that we are a group of young people or Scottish nationals, that we are men or support this particular football team. We might say that we are part of a family or a group of friends and we grew up in the same town.

You can belong to multiple groups and multiple places, all at the same time. Just like when Humza Yousaf spoke about his heart belonging in two places in Scotland, in Dundee and then Glasgow. Think about the people and the places in your life, where you feel a sense of belonging, where you can be yourself and where you feel a strong sense of connection. You might be thinking of a friend, of your hometown, of a group of people or a particular place in your community. You could also be thinking of a specific moment in time or even a place where you think you would feel a sense of belonging in the future.

Pick up a piece of paper and a pen, draw what makes you feel a sense of connection. This could be the outlines of a person who is close to you or a map of a particular place. It could be multiple small drawings of all of the things important to you, all of the things that make you - you - that you're a part of. You can think about it as a map of you, if you like, of what brings you comfort and joy. This could either be a reflection or a future prediction, whatever feels right to you.

Where do you feel a sense of connection? What does belonging mean to you? What are the groups you are part of? The places you have connections with? The people you care about? If you could go anywhere in the world or be part of any group, where do you think you would feel a sense of connection? Your drawing can be as big or as small as you would like, there's no right or wrong way of doing this. If you want to share your drawing with us, you can get a referral form in the hall or get in touch with the Youth Work team, who will explain how you get a response sheet. We would love to see your responses and we will write you back with our thoughts and reflections on what you send us.

[music]

LISA: How do you feel this project and the letter writing project is going to influence or change your work with Polmont Youth Theatre going forward as we're starting to - who knows where we're going now - as we're moving forward in some direction, how do you think that may influence your work?

GUDREN: We've started having some conversations about the possibility of bringing the radio program into Polmont and for us to involve the young people directly in the making of the show, for them to be the voices of the program and for them to select the content directly with us and learn how to edit it and put it together and everything. That is the dream. Obviously, nobody really knows what's going to happen and we're still in early conversations about how that would happen.

In general, what it's made us realise is that actually, when things need to change, and I think this goes for a lot of other companies and projects in the sector at the moment who have had to respond really quickly to COVID-19, is that when things need to change, actually, they can change really quickly. When you have got brilliant partnership like Glass Performance has with Barnardo's in Polmont at the moment, we can together come up with creative solutions very quickly that actually enable both us as the artists delivering the project to really add to our skillset and to really think about how do we reimagine what it is that we do and how do we still continue that community that we build with Polmont Youth Theatre but also deal with an issue that we have come across before, which is, how do we engage with more young people? How do we engage with those who for whatever reason don't come into the space? How do we go to them?

The barriers we've manage to break down is probably what we will be focusing on going forward but also just going back into the space and being able to continue our commitment with Polmont Youth Theatre and continue making shows. Alongside that, perhaps continuing that radio program and continuing to think about how do we reach even more young people and still continue doing what we do.

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LISA: I suppose the next question could be specifically about Polmont or it could be about your other work in general, but it's probably a challenging question for a lot of us but what does planning for the future look like for you now?

GUDREN: I think maybe this comes back to what I was just talking about, in terms of having to really quickly come up with solutions and reimagine what it is that you do. I think I have, as a practitioner, and I've done this with other projects during lockdown, where I've had to reimagine my engagement with Platform Young Company, which is another group that I work with and also my solo work, where I re-imagined one of my performances live from my living room for Gateshead International Festival Theatre.

I invited an international audience into my living room and did lots of audience interaction across screens. It has made me go, "Okay, either I can freeze," and I think in lots of ways, I did feel like I wanted to do that at the beginning, because it felt really overwhelming and really uncertain how things were going to evolve and where I would be within that, whether I would have any projects going forward or whether everything would come to a pause, which I think has definitely done for a lot of people. I've been in a fortunate position where I've been able to be part of the conversation of how do we respond to this, what is possible and how do I shift what it is that I do in order to enable me to continue? I guess it comes down to that, going forward is continuing that, continuing to think about, we're in this situation this week, if I can go into Polmont and we can deliver a session in the space, but we need to keep social distance, what does that look like? What is it possible to do?

Does it mean that we need to work choreographically? Does it mean that we need to work in smaller groups? Does it mean that we need to think-- Does that become part of the work? All of these questions and for those questions not to feel overwhelming, but for them to feel like possibilities or things opening up. I would love to continue doing what I was doing before lockdown, because that is what I do and I love it. Also it's been really exciting to suddenly be a radio presenter or to be suddenly making work for multiple cameras in my living room.

It's really allowed me to think about opening up my practice further and to think about how do you reach more people, how do you open up your ideas and make them more accessible and make them more available to people in the world.

LISA: It's an incredible shift in perspective isn't it thinking about the possibilities as opposed to the restrictions of the situation that we're in and I think we've seen so much incredible work that's come out of this time. It just shows exactly what we can do when we put our minds to it and continue to

be creative in spite of feeling, like you said, overwhelmed and a bit scared about the future. It's so good to hear about everything that you're doing.

[music]

LISA: So let's think about, things are starting to ease a little bit now in lockdown, what are you most looking forward to, maybe in your work but maybe in your life outside of work? What are you looking forward to now that lockdown is easing off a little bit?

GUDREN: I think, first and foremost, I'm really looking forward to being able to go to Iceland where my family lives. This is the longest I've been away from Iceland. I've not been there since the end of December. Obviously, I've got lots of ways of contacting them and video calls and other ways of keeping in touch, but I think that's definitely number one. I feel a bit hesitant about doing it until I can do it in a way where it doesn't feel like I'm having to wear a mask and stay inside and feel concerned and worried about my choices. I think I'll have to wait a little bit longer to do that.

In terms of my work, I am really looking forward to being able to be in spaces with people again. Before lockdown, I was in multiple spaces with multiple groups of people every week. It's a huge part of what I do and the social aspect of it and just during lockdown, I've really realised how much these communities matter. As much as you can continue that engagement and continue building that community remotely, whether that's through letter writing or online sessions or the radio show or other things that I've been doing, I think there's just nothing. You just can't replace being able to sit in a circle with people in a space and have a catch up and how people are doing.

I really can't wait. Also just for things to relax again. Even though lockdown is obviously easing, I still feel very much on edge. I feel like I don't really want to be out the house unless I have to be. I just really can't wait for things to-- Who knows when that will be, but for things to actually go back to normal. Also maybe for it not to be that normal that we're used to. I think I just wanted to say in terms of the sector, I've been part of lots of really brilliant conversations where I have felt really valued as an artist. Even though I'm not emerging, I'm still much closer to emerging than being established, I would argue.

I think there has been a shift in the sector during lockdown, where I feel like artists like myself have been part of the conversations that before lockdown we just weren't part of. I really hope that that continues moving forward. There's a few things that I hope continue, then there's other things I just can't wait to be able to just connect with people and meet my family and friends and do things again. [chuckles]

LISA: Amazing. Well, what a great note to end on. I think certainly, imagine I think every youth theatre practitioner listening to this will be joining you in

that hope for sitting in our classic circle with our young people again in a room. That is the dream. Thank you so much, Gudrun. It was so great to chat with you.

GUDREN: Thank you so much 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.