

Spotlight on the Sector:

Season Two • Episode Five



Julie Brown, Toonspeak

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 Julie Brown from Glasgow's Toonspeak about the challenges they've faced going digital, fearlessness and some early thoughts about Christmas.

LISA: Hi, Julie. Thanks so much for joining us today.

JULIE: Good morning, Lisa, it's lovely to speak to you.

LISA: Yes, we're really chuffed to have you as part of our series, and yes, to hear about yourself and about Toonspeak, yes. I'll let you introduce yourself so yes, if you could tell us a wee bit about yourself. Where you work and maybe a wee bit about what you were doing before all of this.

JULIE: Yes. It's that funny thing, isn't it? Although we work in the arts, we're never the most confident when we're talking about ourselves, are we? [laughs] I'm delighted to speak to you. The podcast is such a great idea, Lisa, and it's probably something we'll talk about on the course of this conversation but just how these digital changes are going to affect what we're doing moving forward.

Anyway, you asked me a question. Look at me, I'm off on a tangent already! My name's Julie Brown. I am the program manager at Toonspeak. My official start date with Toonspeak was the 17th of December in 2019. I really only started to meet our participants in January of this year and starting to get to understand the program, all the different work that Toonspeak achieve and

then, of course, COVID-19 interrupted my very carefully thought out plans, so we hadn't got to the end of a term. I've been enrolled as Program Manager but haven't actually seen through a term with all of our young people and our staff, haven't seen through any projects from beginning to end as yet, when this started. It's been a very interesting process for me.

Before I came to Toonspeak, I suppose, for about 18 years, I had been freelance, with the occasional kind of longer-term post in there. I graduated from what was the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama with an honours degree in contemporary theatre practice. When I first graduated, I worked as an actor. I always had facilitation in education as part of my kind of work in process, it was something that was embedded really strongly within our course, but when I graduated, myself and my fellow classmate, Johnny McKnight, we formed Random Accomplice.

I don't know whether to say 'was' or 'is' a Scottish theatre touring company. We've been on a bit of a hiatus for a few years but really my work over all the years as a freelancer has been through acting, then directing, always producing and education. Throughout my working career, I've worked for various organisations. In 2020, I found myself at Toonspeak in this new role which was created. The organisation went through a bit of a restructure last year, we have a new CEO, Hazel Wotherspoon, and so this role was new. I had just come into post and then lockdown knocked on the door and put paid to plans, Lisa, so that's kind of [laughs] how I got to where I am at the minute, yes.

LISA: Wow, what a baptism of fire.

JULIE: I know [laughs] That's it. You do find yourself-- when I'm trying to contact some of our participants or the families in any circumstance, you have to earn trust but in COVID circumstances when you've not even met somebody face to face before, it's proven even more challenging and understandably so. It's been, I suppose, when you look back on your CV, this will certainly be one that'll have a big red circle around it, Lisa, that's for sure.

LISA: I suppose that you're kind of touching upon it there. Lockdown hits us all, and we're all left a bit kind of, "What should we do now?" How did the Toonspeak adapt? We're still in it really. It's easing slightly, but we're still part of it, so how did you approach that? What challenges did that present? What did you do?

JULIE: Of course, it's so funny. I can absolutely replay in my head the moment that I was in the office and I realised that this was going to happen. We were two weeks away from our end of term and we had planned evaluation nights, we had planned family and friends nights. We had a performance scheduled with our word of mouth group and the many studios, a spoken word event with Sonnet Youth. We were just about to do all

of this and we were also just about to-- we were going into our Easter holiday program, so we had a very intensive week-long event ready for many of our participants and a holiday club for many of the families in the area. We were really powering up to several things. I remember the moment in the office, there was only three of us in and it was making the decision.

It was on the Monday night and we were getting kind of mixed messages through government announcements and it was, "Should we put these classes on or not?" On the Monday night, we had a really small group in. I remember speaking to them all and to the tutors and making a decision that, because it was such a small group in a large space, we would go ahead tonight, there's been no guidance not to. On the Tuesday I started phoning around other organisations just to get a sense of where people were at. Then that was the moment that as an organisation we decided, although we haven't been officially told to we're going to pause everything this week until we get a sense of it. I remember just phoning everybody, phoning staff, trying to get the message out to participants, phoning other members of staff who weren't in that week.

Then, officially, I suppose, by the Monday of the following week was when we were told that's us, we're in lockdown. It all happened in some ways very quickly but in other ways, really slowly. On that last day that we were in our office, we're based in Barmulloch in the building lovingly known as the Barmulloch Residents Centre. It was myself and the two other members of staff and we were kind of clearing out. We were looking for, in the kitchen area, any food that we had as part of our holiday food program, we were going to distribute it to families and toilet rolls, that was the thing when we think back. Everybody was obsessed with toilet rolls so we were gathering all our toilet rolls, as many as we could find. Again, that was so we could deliver these to families in the area rather than locking a building and having that resource.

We also very positively decided, let's also park a big box full of arts and crafts materials because surely we'll be able to come back and gather all of this and start distributing it. We piled everything in a big box and we left it near the front door so that we could come in at a later date to collect this. We left and we put the alarm on and locked the building and we went home. Then, all of a sudden you realise, "Oh, we're not going back. We're not coming back anytime soon." I think at that point, my feeling was we were so close to this Easter week we have to do something. People were geared up for it, we have to keep that energy going.

I had contacted all the artists that were going to work on it and we were speaking about how we could adapt the program. There was a week of that just crazy manic planning and then all of a sudden we realised this is not going to work at all. Toonspeak are not an organisation that function digitally, we don't connect with any of our participants on a digital platform. Yes, we

have social media but that's not how we communicate with participants. This was so huge and all of a sudden you go, "Well, what platform are we going to use?" At that point we were looking at things like Houseparty, we were looking at a Google Meet, they were the ones that we knew about. Then all these other things-- and I suddenly realised, "We're actually going back to the drawing board here." We kind of stopped more or less.

Then I found myself probably for about three weeks solidly going to every seminar or Q&A I could find about digital safety because all of a sudden you're going-- in the room, we understand what that is when we're physically in this space with our young people, we've been trained for that, we understand what signs to look out for, any red warning lights, we know what they are. We also get a sense of one another as human beings and a space. Moving to digital, all of that was going to be different, it was going to change completely. I felt really strongly that we had to treat everybody as well as we could on a digital platform as we would in the room. It had to be, you had to feel as safe and secure and as creative as you would in a room, so we wanted to get that right. All of a sudden the importance of doing the delivery was secondary to getting the platform for the delivery right and that took a while.

I think what's probably still taking time is to encourage our participants this digital platform is going to work just now because it's a big deal. It's a really big deal. Also, you've got young people who were all of a sudden thrust into their schooling via identical platform as well. Where's the difference between doing your schoolwork, doing your Toonspeak sessions, whatever that may be. Then, to throw into the mix, Toonspeak, we're based in the North East of Glasgow and there is that element of digital poverty.

At the very start, everybody was throwing everything into these digital platforms, but there's assumptions that everybody can get online or has wifi or has a device and they don't. Although I was aware of some of this, I knew that Glasgow City Council had made a commitment to get iPads out to Primary 7s up to S6s. All of a sudden, you go, "Well, did they? Does everybody have one?" All of a sudden, questions that we never had to consider before really came to the forefront before we could even start planning what that digital program was going to be.

LISA: That's interesting you should say that because it's things we see all the time about that, "Oh yes, Glasgow City Council are giving everyone an iPad," but then do you hear anymore about, did that happen? Did that go on? I suppose we're kind of touching upon it there. That was a barrier your young people were facing. I suppose what I was going to ask next was what have you noticed about young people's engagement with your work during this time and what barriers have they faced?

JULIE: Without the digital poverty, just about being online, there is still an element, and it doesn't matter what postcode you stay in, I don't think, that

barrier to coming online, it takes a certain confidence. If you're having to do it on your own rather than in a group... I guess it's like that moment where the first time you walk into a workshop as a new person and you come through the doors and you don't know the venue, you're scanning the room, looking for that member of staff to welcome you, you're looking for a friendly face to invite you in, to explain what's going to happen. It's about replicating that on a digital basis as well.

It's much harder I think because if you're at home, you can say, "Och, I'm not doing it." Whereas if you're physically being transported to a venue, you're there. Coming through the doors, they're just there in front of you. Yes, there is the barrier, the digital poverty barrier is huge and it's noticeable, but again, I think just across the city, across the nation, we're still dealing with that lack of confidence in terms of what this new platform is. That will be a different journey for everyone.

We have to allow everyone to do it in different ways and at different times. For some people, it will take one-to-one support, others will want to do it in groups. That's difficult to manage because like many organisations, we're probably limited in terms of staff. We're limited in how many platforms we can offer at any one time. It's been quite eye-opening.

The other thing I suppose to consider is why were these young people coming to Toonspeak in the first place or whatever organisation? What were they coming for? What was the art form that they were taking part in? The majority of our work was about your traditional drama in the space, in the room, physically creating something. Whether it was working with text or devising on something or storytelling. You're physically in the room with other people, bouncing ideas off of one another trying things. There's always, always that physical contact. You're always dealing with that. All of a sudden, when you start doing a digital program, you can't replicate that sense of what you get in a room.

We decided to offer anything. "Would you like to do? What have you never done before? and we'll try and help you do that." Interestingly, Lisa, the response was so low. I think it's because there is an element of not knowing that it's okay to ask for something you've never been given before. Just to backtrack a little on that, Toonspeak, we were awarded emergency funding through the Supporting Communities Fund which is a Scottish Government fund. I think my understanding is that it was going out to about 250 community groups. Toonspeak are an anchor organisation within that, which meant that we were bringing together other charities or groups within our area who also received funding through the Supporting Communities Fund. We, very quickly, developed this emergency program. It was to combat two things.

One was about the mental health of our young people. Not just Toonspeak young people, but young people across the area, across Glasgow. Now we're looking at further afield than that. The second thing was about combatting that digital poverty. Can you get online? Do you have data? Do you have the equipment? Do you have wifi? If you don't, speak to us. Let us try and help you resolve that. Once you're set up, you're good to go. What would you like to do? We've got a bank of artists here who are sitting waiting to help you with your creative project. That, Lisa, was the bit that just wasn't successful. I think potentially was so wide and that a lot of young people would never, ever think to rock up, knock on the door and say, "Any chance you can get me a MiFi? I would love to learn how to animate for a film."

They probably have all this potential within them, but they've never been afforded the opportunity. There's something really difficult about asking for something that you've never had before. How do you know you're going to like it? How do you know you want it? Do I need it? Just that asking for help, it's really hard. It's really hard to do.

Again, many of us have done over these last 16, 17 weeks, we've totally reversed it and rather than say, "You come and ask us", we're trying to have a conversation with every one of our participants first and foremost and then we're setting them challenges. We're offering them the tasters to the artforms to see if it sparks interest. Again, like many things, as I say, there's been a reversal. We were trying it one way and how you have to adapt in these COVID times, as I'm now calling them, has been-- it's been so fierce. We're seeing it across the sector.

One of the things that has I think been really important is the YTAS Managers Forums and to be able to have conversations with other managers across the sector, across Glasgow, the central belt across Scotland. Then, further afield, you're obviously organising talks with our Irish counterparts to hear we are actually all in this together. Much of it sounds like a cliché, but we're hearing the same things about the reversal of the sessions hour by hour, day to day.

LISA: These are multiple sort of contingency plans that people have had to put in place?

JULIE: Yes.

LISA: It's that sense of, "We're not the only ones who have a Plan A and had to chuck it out the window, then went to Plan B and had to chuck that out of the window." I think that says a lot about Toonspeak as well though, to have been brave enough to try something, but then also being brave enough to go, "Okay, that's not working. Let's shelf it, because for whatever reason, that's not working for us, so we need to find another way." To continue to try and find that way to engage with your young people.

I suppose there's it's the acknowledgement as well that young people, my goodness, like you say, there's so much to be contending with at the moment. Even if they have the capability to get on Zoom, I think sometimes, it gets to a point where they just maybe don't want to anymore. Much like we kind of are all feeling at the moment. A bit of fatigued with it.

JULIE: 100%, absolutely. It's also that thing. Recently, there's been new work being created, that's on Zoom and I struggled, Lisa, to watch it because, for me, Zoom is just work now. To finish work on a Friday and then to watch a show on the same platform you've been working on, I found that quite a strain. It's an interesting one where we are at the moment, it really is.

LISA: It feels like we've been at a new experience every single week, everything's been changing so much.

JULIE: Picking up on one of the things you said there, when we make our decisions and we have our plan A and we implement them, what's been interesting is how long do we keep trying this for? What's the right time to go, "It's not working, I need to go to Plan B," because it felt for quite a while there everything was, I'm using the word frantic, but I kind of mean that we were looking for a result. We wanted to make sure we're doing okay. We need to be engaging, but it's not working, so we need to try something else.

Actually, in some respects, we do need to take our time. Certainly, at Toonspeak, we decided that we had to get it right from the start, we wanted all the safeguarding in place from the very beginning. There was no point in throwing out programs left, right, and centre if we didn't have the foundations in place. It takes time and it can be frustrating, but if this is going to be with us for the foreseeable future, then it was so important to get that right.

In other ways, you might try something and you might know within a couple of days this just isn't working. Like you say, you've got to, at the moment, just go, "I've made a mistake, I've not thought about X, Y or Z," or, "This is not working because of-- and we need to start again." We have to be brave enough to do that and we just have to, in some respects, take a leap of faith sometimes with some of what we're doing because it is quite uncharted.

LISA: What do you think, what concerns, or what hopes do you have for the youth theatre, for the youth arts sector in the coming months?

JULIE: Well, I think the digital working is going to be with us for a while. In some ways, I feel quite mixed about that because, for me, nothing will ever beat being in a room, creating and having ideas and bouncing ideas off and just your very basic human contact. Nothing will beat the experience of a live theatre event for me. Whether that's as an actor, whether it's as a director, whether it's as an audience member.

Whether that is as one of the hundreds and hundreds of jobs that are involved in creating these experiences, all these artists with skills that we're not hearing about just now. Nothing will ever beat that experience, so my hope is that one day, we will be able to return to that and we will return with such joy, but by the same account-- I know theatre is a voice in a way and no theatre can be political, which is important, but I don't want to have a program of work that's all about COVID.

I want there to be shows that maybe-- of course they're going to be influenced by it. We've been through a human experience here but I don't just want to hear about COVID and lockdown and being alone in my home. That would be a concern, but a hope I suppose in the same way. A concern I have at the moment is there's some mixed messages I think about not necessarily arts organisations, but just organisations in general who are getting back to business and doing things.

I am a little bit of a worrywart, I'm not going to lie. I want us all to have the same kind of-- I want us to make sure that we're all going to be safe and we're all doing it in the right way. I think having been a freelancer for the majority of my career, I know what it's like when you get mixed messages when you're working for different organisations and some people do it this way, some people do it that way. I think if we do that on our return after COVID, that's going to be horrendous to manage.

I really do want all the organisations that are employing freelance artists to really think about one really strong voice and what that is, and how we're looking after people. I want to see a growth out of this. What has been amazing, I think, is particularly and again, sorry, I'm bigging up the YTAS here.

LISA: [laughs]

JULIE: The managers meetings have been so good to chat to people that you always knew existed, you always knew their name, you knew of the organisation, but you maybe had never met before, and whilst I'm sure we could always have picked up a phone or sent an email, the very fact that we're doing that so regularly now, I think is fantastic and it's something I hope stays, just that sense of sharing across an entire art-form across a country, I think is absolutely fantastic. I would love all that to stay so that we're not working in isolation in our own organisations.

That feels like there's a real shared experience and hopefully, that will, in some respects, sometimes we can become quite parochial in our thinking and in our approach, both as individuals and as organisations. I'm hopeful that as a sector, that positivity will find its way down to our young people and I would really like to see them being much more open to trying things. I would like to see them having more opportunities and finding ways to engage in things that they haven't before and having almost being a little bit more

fearless about trying something new. Fearless is an interesting word choice to use in these times when all we're hearing about is safety, and precaution, and rules.

LISA: Absolutely.

JULIE: Theatre has always been about trying to break all that down. In a way, I'm going, it's the practice of the young people. I would love for them to just be bringing in all sorts of art forms and just engaging and twisting things up. I think that would be so exciting. There is plenty to look forward to I think.

LISA: Yes, and I think that's a great outlook to have and that we should all try and engage with it. What are the positives that we can hopefully find at the other side of this, and what have we learnt that we can take forward in terms of our wider sense of community and our connection to each other? How can we keep that, even once we hopefully get back into our spaces, how can we stay connected? definitely. We're moving out of lockdown a little bit now, more, people can gather in a garden and you can use people's toilets and all that kind of stuff now.

[laughter]

LISA: What are you most looking forward to, maybe in your life outside of work?

JULIE: There's two things. I've said, I'm going to use the C-word live on air here. I'm going to use the Christmas word. I have been thinking about that because it's coming soon and for me, that is a bit of a goal I need to work towards, in terms of, where will we be family-wise and friends-wise at that point? Because I can't quite believe that we're halfway through July already. People have heard me banging on about this, Lisa, I'm beating my own very sad drum but because I stay myself for such a long time, I saw nobody apart from on a screen.

When the changes, when they started to come in, there's an oddness to it because, yes, you're talking to someone, but you're in a garden and they're sitting at the other side and there's still not that physical contact, as such. I'm waiting to see where we're at by the end of the year. I feel like I need to plan something. With my family, we've had a few big milestones in the last wee while and none of them have been celebrated. I feel there's something. There's definitely something to be done there.

The other thing I'm looking forward to, and this is going to sound utterly ridiculous and flies in the face of everything I've been talking about, but I really want to go away camping somewhere quiet where there is nobody around. Somewhere really remote, and I think part of that is about doing it because it's a choice. That's something I would have done before anyway. I love doing that, but I'm doing it not because somebody is telling me I can't

see you, not because somebody's saying that I can't come two metres within you, it's because I'm going to choose to just go away and pitch-up and paddle in the sea and cook macaroni cheese on my Bunsen burner.

LISA: [laughs]

JULIE: You know? [laughs] I'm really looking forward to that.

LISA: Yes, that's idyllic.

JULIE: [laughs]

LISA: Both ends of the spectrum. Great things like Christmas Plan A, and also a super quiet camping trip[laughs].

JULIE: Exactly. It's kind of like a - what would you call it? - a kind of an oxymoron of answers there, that's it.

LISA: Well, thank you so much, Julie. It was so great to chat to you and hear about all of the amazing stuff you guys have been doing over at Toonspeak and how incredibly hard you've all been working to engage your young people. Thank you for taking the time to talk to us.

JULIE: Not at all. I'm quite sure when I listen back, I probably barely mentioned the program. I've wittered on about me, me, me. I'm very sorry about that. All the information is on the website, Lisa, so if anybody wants to look at toonspeak.co.uk, then, of course, they can, or they can contact me, give me a phone or an email. They can get that from YTAS and I'll happily chat through in this spirit of sharing where we all are at the moment, I'm happy to.

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.