

# Spotlight on the Sector:

## Season Two • Episode Six



## Morna McGeoch

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 Morna McGeoch from Birds of Paradise about accessibility, planning for the future and working from home.

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

**MORNA:** No worries at all. It's really nice to speak to you.

**LISA:** Brilliant. I'm looking forward to hearing all about what you've been up to. I suppose it'd be good to start off with just a wee bit about yourself and where you are, what you do and I think maybe more specifically, I suppose, what you were doing before all of this happened, before we were in lockdown. I suppose we're coming out lockdown a little bit now but tell us a little bit about yourself.

**MORNA:** Sure. My name is Morna McGeoch. I am a freelance theatre-maker. I work a lot with people and communities across Scotland. I'm the development officer for Birds of Paradise Theatre Company. That means that I work on all the development projects. Mostly I focus on a new project called BOP Young Artists. Often I'll refer to Birds of Paradise as BOP.

**LISA:** BOP. [laughs]

**MORNA:** Just to let the audience know in case they're like, "What are you talking about?"

**LISA:** What is BOP? [laughs]

**MORNA:** Birds of Paradise Theatre Company, we are a small touring theatre company based in Glasgow, Scotland. I think, at the moment, we're still the only disabled-led theatre company in Scotland, which is a really exciting thing. We have our theatre productions course, which we aim to put disabled people's stories and stories about disability at the core of our work, and that is integral to the way Birds of Paradise operates. As well as our theatre productions, we also have a strand, which engages a lot with the wider arts sector and aims to increase awareness and knowledge and offer support to the rest of the industry in relation to disability equality and accessibility.

Part of that is our Youth Arts Consultants project, where we have young people who are involved in the arts and they offer consultancy services to arts organisations regarding accessibility, which is a really exciting thing, just to touch on the sort of young people-focused parts of the organisation. We also have a strand which is focused on development. That, primarily, at the moment we're focusing a lot of attention on BOP Young Artists, which is the program for young emerging artists who identify as being disabled. It's a space for them to come together and collaborate and make work.

Just before we went into lockdown, which is really funny, because we were-- The BOP Young Artists, they were working on pieces of performance and they were getting ready to present a scratch performance or a work in progress at Youth Theatre Arts Scotland's National Convention of Youth Drama.

**LISA:** I know. Oh, gosh. So close. We were so close.

**MORNA:** I know, and which is really bizarre because we were absolutely at the point where we were getting all of our equipment and props and really considering all the tech stuff. We were basically, pretty much ready to go, and then it was like, all the stuff in the news was just escalating, and then, obviously, then YTAS, you had to make that difficult decision of actually going, "No, we need to cancel this event for everyone's health and safety," which was absolutely the right thing to do. It was just a really funny thing of that build up and that just anticlimax of going, "Oh, okay."

**LISA:** Absolutely right on your cusps as well for-- Just to give context for those dates, it was literally-- The Convention was supposed to be Friday, the 20th of March. Obviously, we then went into lockdown three days later. It was lucky.

**MORNA:** We were days before I totally had this really strange feeling and moment. Very odd.

**LISA:** Tell us a little about how things have been going since then.

**MORNA:** When we ended up that we found out that DramaCon was canceled. We just had to go, "Oh, okay. Everybody, go home." It's that kind of

thing of trying to then reconnect and check in with people when they've had to go into this lockdown, but when we did get back up and running with conversations and we started doing video calls via Zoom, reconnect via emails. We were like, "You put a lot of work into this, which actually the working title is *Locked World*, which feels very serendipitous. It's quite strange.

With the *Locked World*, it's not about COVID-19. It's not about the lockdown at all, even remotely. It was a phrase that one of the young artists used when we were exploring ideas to describe their experience of being autistic. They said they felt sometimes like they were in this locked world and that the neuro-typical world and non-disabled world was locked for them, and there were ways that they could have keys to get in and out but there were some doors that just wouldn't budge. The other young artists had a lot of resonances but in very contrasting ways.

Some in more similar ways and some in contrasting ways, but it was really interesting that it definitely brought a response from everyone. It is about exploring that concept of dealing with this locked world, and whether that's a sense of feeling locked in, or locked out, or being quite happy being locked because it's your experience and no one can have that. There's a lot of different explanations going on within that but it's just that ironic thing.

**LISA:** Were they continuing to work on these pieces over Zoom?

**MORNA:** Yes. What I had said, "Right let's keep working on this because we are in the middle of a project," because BOP Young Artists runs at a yearly cycle. This was actually the first-ever cycle. It's a year of development and then a staggered exit strategy, but we obviously have said to all of the artists that we're currently working with, we'll - fingers crossed - always be here. We're here as a support and as advocates for you as a human and as an artist. We'll always be there. The year-long process has ended up going a bit over, but, obviously, just because of these extenuating circumstances, it's really difficult to just--

We couldn't possibly just wrap up the project and just say, "Okay, you've put all this work in, but now you're not going to get to do the performance, that's your year over. Bye-bye."

**LISA:** Yes, oh gosh. Of course not. "This massive global pandemic's happened, but your time's still up." It'd just be awful.

**MORNA:** I was like, "Well, let's keep working on it," with the view that we don't know when we'll get to perform it, but we will at some point. As it continued, the lockdown, it was like, actually, maybe it's worth us considering changing the format of this work. The young artists were quite excited by that and they started the idea of changing the format and creating more digital artwork, work that can be experienced digitally.

Rather than see it as a challenge as many people have done and are continuing to, this group, they're really embracing the opportunities that come along with that, which is really, really exciting, and they've got some really exciting ideas in store that are being explored. It's brilliant. They're a great bunch. I feel really privileged to have the chance to work with them.

We've also just recruited a second cohort, if you like, of BOP Young Artists. We had put a call out. We've recruited five new young artists to be part of a second cohort, but rather than just putting out a general call-out as we did the first time, we just said any disabled young artist who want to get involved, want to develop their skills, apply, and hopefully we'll be able to support you just now and if we can't just now, hopefully at some point in the future. We decided that, actually, it would be more beneficial just now. How can we use this digital working, this physical separation to shape the work and to make as much of an impact as possible for people that we're engaging with?

We ended up that we decided to do this digital BOP Young Artists so all of the contact will be done digitally, with the hope to actually connect with disabled young people who, even if there wasn't a pandemic going on, that there would be significant barriers to coming to Glasgow and working with BOP.

**LISA:** It's almost opening up the accessibility even more so, there's probably a host of people who the barriers are there to come to a space or maybe that's just also not their preferred way of working, they would rather maybe, access something digitally.

**MORNA:** Absolutely, and it feels like the whole world would just become very aware of what it's like to actually work from home. For it not to be accessible or not possible to go outside and go and engage with other people, with other spaces, and for many disabled people, that is part of our lived experience, is part of our reality. People are noticing that there are actually really huge benefits to working from home. There can be, depending on your personality and how you interact with the world, there can be massive benefits, but it's that awareness that actually, a lot of people who are disabled and are working, do quite a lot of work from home.

It's really exciting because we're now working with young people all over the country and with a range of quite complex access requirements, which have meant that they have faced massive barriers to engaging with other work on a physical level.

**LISA:** That is incredible, and that's so exciting as well, for the opportunity that that's offered BOP in terms of the reach of young people, yes, exactly. You would have never been able to work with a young person from really far away, otherwise.

**MORNA:** Absolutely.

**LISA:** It's that, as you say, the opportunity that's come from there is incredible. What have you noticed since you've moved BOP Young Artists kind of digital working, what have you noticed about the engagement of the young artists, during this time? You were going to chat about the barriers and the opportunities, and I suppose the opportunity is that you can now work with young people from-- locality is not a challenge anymore.

**MORNA:** It's really interesting because it's stating the obvious, but each and every human being is completely different and unique, and that follows through with them when people identify as being disabled. People have different access requirements, they have different identities and different needs. It feels like there's never going to be a general trend of engagement. Some of the young artists are engaging at a much more focused way than they had done when we were meeting in person, but then some of them are finding it quite tricky to be consistent with their engagement. Which is also really interesting because there's a lot of other things going on, and there's no dedicated time and space.

Then there are also some of the young artists who have become much more comfortable with using technology, and they never thought that they would use video call technology, it's not something that they were daft about, that they were really interested in beforehand, and actually one of the young artist's parents, we were in contact, they helped to structure their young person's schedule. In fact, he referred to his mom as his momager.

**LISA:** [laughs] Brilliant.

**MORNA:** Momager which is hilarious, but she totally is, she's a brilliant manager. She was saying to me that actually, this young person, I say, "young person," they're a young adult. He's like 22 or 23 that actually, they have started actually using their email. They only ever had an email address in order to upload content to YouTube, but now, they are actually using their email to send emails and be in contact with people. For some people, it will seem like a really small thing, but for his parent, she was saying that it's a gap in skills that that has now been bridged and it's a massive deal.

Then you've got, on the very opposite ends of that, there are some of the young artists that I've been working with for the past year and I've worked with on other projects for years before that, who have not found engaging online accessible. It's been more to do with how they process the world and they're just being that barrier where they've just gone, "No, actually I'm not going to engage in this now just now," and that's my right as an individual to say, "Actually, that's not accessible to me and I don't see a workaround, therefore, I'm going to step back."

I totally respect that because I think, "Yes, encouraging people to engage with technology sometimes is a good thing," but also I don't have the right to push

that on anyone. I don't think anyone has the right to push something on someone and say, "Oh, we can make it, we can make it accessible for you" because sometimes that's just not possible and it's not what that person wants either.

**LISA:** Yes, I've similarly had some young people I work with who are just like being on a video call, it's just really anxiety-inducing for me. I can't be on this, I just don't enjoy it and I don't feel engaged with it. Yes, you're absolutely right, at that point you just need to go, that's completely your choice and we understand and support what you want to do. We're starting to obviously ease a little bit now. It's a hard one, but what does planning for the future look like for BOP at the moment or for you or for the young artists? What's next?

**MORNA:** It's challenging, it's really challenging to work out what next because we really have no idea, however, basically what we are doing as a company, is we're just trying to be as flexible as possible. It's a funny thing because, as an organisation, we're used to being flexible and working with what people need on an individual level. It's quite an interesting thing to be responding to what then people need on an individual level as disabled people, but also as non-disabled people, as audiences, as artists, and also as the world and as the Scottish theatre industry and the Scottish art sector.

There are so many layers and it is quite tricky but what we do have in this pipeline with BOP Young Artists, I think the next cohort, which the intake would be probably around May or June next year. We're hoping that that will be an in-person engagement but we are fully prepared for if going to not be that if it's going to be digital again. We're looking at again, how we can use that as an opportunity, perhaps in a different way to the way that we've worked with the current cohort who have just come on board. There are other things that we can explore with those projects. It's difficult especially planning theatre productions.

It's really complex because, in my opinion, theatre is not the same when you're not in the room with that happening. It's not that other formats that are inferior, they're just different and I think that is that's totally okay for it to be different but one of BOP's main responses at the moment in terms of theatre performance, is that we don't want to just be reacting, we want to respond and give it the time to actually go, "What is it that we want and need to be making or doing right now in order to benefit the wider theatre sector and art sector and disabled community, not only in Scotland but UK-wide."

**LISA:** We're coming to the end of our conversation. We always finish with a wee question that's just about you. My question to you is what does self-care look like for you at this time?

**MORNA:** It's a tricky one because actually being in lockdown has affected me. Apart from not getting to be in the space with people that I'm working

with, I've actually found lockdown really beneficial for me. In terms of just work-life balance, which is very odd because you would, I don't know, I think you'd automatically expect that if you're working and living in the same environment, that it would be more difficult to separate things out but for me, I think actually working and living in the same environment, it allows me to be able to structure and compartmentalise more effectively.

I really benefit from taking a nap, and I know that [chuckles] sounds such a silly thing because I know it's something that people say a lot, like, "Oh, just have a nap. Have a disco nap." Genuinely, if I don't have a nap in the middle of, or if I'm just finishing work, I find it incredibly difficult to transition into time off in the evening if I don't have that time for just a 20-minute nap.

It's something that I wouldn't be able to integrate into my working day without having been in lockdown and actually experiencing that, having that opportunity and being able to make that space for myself to just go, "I need to have a nap," and yes, having a medical condition when your body needs to rest, I just need to rest. If I'm in the office-- with BOP we have quite a nice, little cozy office but we don't necessarily have a couch or a bed to sleep in, and there's not really a quiet space in the building that we residence in to do that.

Which is really interesting because it opens up questions about, "Well, when we are back in an office environment or in a working environment, how do we use this time as a learning experience to create spaces for self-care within our workplaces?"

**LISA:** On that brilliant note-

[laughter]

**LISA:** -we've come to the end of our time but thank you so much. It's been so great to chat to you, Morna, and hear everything about what's been happening at BOP, and we'll all look forward to your world domination.  
[chuckles]

**MORNA:** Yes, and definitely keep an eye out for *Locked Worlds*, the performance, it'll be filtering all over the web.

**LISA:** Thank you, thanks so much. Have a great rest of your day.

**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](http://www.ytas.org.uk).