



Lets Talk About... Podcast Transcript

Episode 1: Artistic practice and what our youngest children tell us through their play.

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Rhona Matheson

Welcome to Starcatchers' brand-new podcast series Let's Talk About... a podcast celebrating Starcatchers' 15th birthday in 2021. I'm Rhona Matheson, Starcatchers' Chief Executive, and I'll be joined by friends and colleagues from across the arts, education and third sectors in Scotland talking about a range of topics from baby theatre and children's rights to being an advocate and why the arts.

This is our first episode in the Let's Talk About series, and I'm delighted to welcome two of Starcatchers' artists, Rebecca Fraser and Matt Addicott. So, today, Let's Talk About...Artistic practice and what our youngest children tell us through their play.

Rhona Matheson

I am really delighted to be here today with artists Matt Addicott and Rebecca Fraser, who have worked with us on various projects over the last few years. And we're going to have a, we're going to have a conversation essentially, about them and their practice, but also have a focus around a project that they've been working on most recently for us called the Today Museum Play. Matt, you can go first.

Matt Addicott

Thanks, Rhona. And yeah, nice to be here. Thank you! So, my name is Matt, I've been working with Starcatchers for quite a while now. I think since 2007 was maybe the first time we worked together, which feels like a lifetime ago! All good! So, my practice is as a kind of a freelance performance maker and director. And in sort of recent years, I balance that with, with programming performance for Platform to the Arts Centre in Easterhouse. And, you know, I first arrived at Platform as an artist in residence with Starcatchers. And we will talk about this a little bit, a little bit more later on, but really from, from that beginning and kind of collaborating and co-creating with early years audiences has really kind of led to kind of what my practice is now and how I approach, you know, kind of making work and programming work. It's been really influential. And, you know, there's layers and like crossover and sort of echoes of all of these projects with, with each strand of practice as well. But yeah, I'm an artist and a programmer.

Rhona Matheson:

And Rebecca.

Rebecca Fraser

Hello. And yes, I am Rebecca, and I work in Parkhead, in Glasgow. I'm a freelance artist, as well, similar to Matt. And I do a lot of children and families work. And I started working with Starcatchers in, I think, 2018. So, a lot more recently! I was part of their emerging artists bursary programme. And then after that, I went and did Expecting Something in Fife for a year. And then in COVID, I was very happy to be part of the Big Inspirations project and I did a project called Move and Make in Tollcross in Glasgow's East End. And from that, I got to work with Matt on Pom Pom, which was a little video documentary we made, and then recently did Play as part of my Today Museum Parkhead, kind of a wider programme.

Rhona Matheson

Yeah, kind of a real range of experiences there. And I suppose actually in terms of talking about your practice. What kind of arts practice do you both have? Because I guess that's maybe for you, because, Matt, you're a theatre practitioner, essentially. And while you're here, I am telling you what your practice is.

Matt Addicott

No, quite right, please do that's most useful. It's really working with people. And I think, you know, the more I do, especially I guess, during, during the last year or so, like, it's really varied, like it's ever increasingly, I think we're sort of being invited to use different media and different forms that potentially when people, when it's harder to be in the same space with other people, but when it when it all kind of boils down to my practice is working with people. It's collaborative. Yeah!

Rebecca Fraser

I think, yeah, I think increasingly over COVID as well, it's made me really aware that, yeah, my practice is working with people a lot more than making my own artwork. I suppose I would technically be probably a visual artist, and my background would be like drawing and painting and printmaking. But really, when you're on the ground, working with families, especially young, young children, early years, I mean, it's really everything; it's performance, it's movement, it's a bit of visual arts, a bit of sculpture. And that is the beauty of it because you get to just draw from all these disciplines. And I suppose I'm quite like a magpie. It's quite hard to limit myself, like at the moment I'm dabbling in audio art, and really enjoying that. And I suppose if you've got that sort of personality, early years art is brilliant because you are just free, because the children are so free, and they want to dabble in everything. So why shouldn't we?

Rhona Matheson

What brought you to early years in the first place, Rebecca?

Rebecca Fraser

So, I always loved working with children. And like when I went to art school, I suppose I didn't really have a clear end goal. But I did think that probably would be to teach art in some way or work in communities in some way. I did some art therapy stuff in art school, through like, some organisations, and I really enjoyed that. And then when I left art school, I was very much like community worker, in different fields, and actually in mental health. And then I kind of found my way back into the arts. It's just something I've always loved doing. And now I'm a mum of two young kids as well. And I was just thinking this yesterday, like I am, well, my interest grows as they grow. So, at the moment, because I'm in that early years zone and it feels so immersive and natural to just, that is my specialism because I'm living it. And I feel like especially in the past year, it's been really valuable, because I've known what families have wanted, because I myself have been there. So, a lot of it has just been coming from what I'm experiencing, and then also what my friends experiencing, because I'm in that sort of early years world, school gates, nursery drop-off land.

Rhona Matheson

And Matt, I suppose your journey into, into it may be slightly different in terms of how you, yeah, tell us about where you were back in 2007.

Matt Addicott

Blimey, I think the thing that really sticks out in my mind Rhona and I don't think this will be a surprise to you because I've possibly said this to you a few times. But I kind of came along to a symposium, Starcatchers symposium, like, around that time, and was completely blown away by the speakers and the presentations, like, you know, you'll forgive me, it's Colwin, Professor Colwin

Rhona Matheson

Travathin Yeah,

Matt Addicott

yeah. just talking about what is possible. And, you know, of course, you know, we know, it's possible, but the complexity of conversation between adult and child from, from, from the get go from, from, you know, from the very first moments, and how rich that kind of potential is to share to exchange to kind of learn more about one another, from conversations from, from, from our from, from sharing, artistic and creative and cultural experiences. And it just felt like I guess it was almost like a, you know, I know other people like Suzanne Zeedyk talk about a call to arms and about, like, how, you know, how important it is for, for this for everyone to have access to high quality, well-made, well-crafted cultural experiences. And I think the point, which I sort of met and heard from these people, it was a complete eye-opener for me, because I don't think I'd necessarily spent much time, I was already making work for children and young people, and already really interested in in that sector, but making work for early years was, it, I was just new to it, and then all of a sudden to kind of hear you know, I guess other people like Harry Burns and Yuman John...Carnichan?

Rhona Matheson

Oh, Carnichan, yep!

Matt Addicott

Yeah, talking about like, how if we invest in the first three years of life, what the implication of that is, as a society, how much it kind of, you know, potentially saves in, in like schooling or in the criminal justice system later on in life, all of these things just felt like hugely exciting, really interesting kind of pauses, and sort of a really interesting place to make work coupled with the fact that not many people were doing it. So, I was like right, well, let's go and do it, because it needs to be done. And it's quite rare in sort of maybe theatre and performance to kind of find a sector of the industry that, that doesn't feel like it's, you know, covering old ground, you know, so often it feels like, you know, you're thinking about new ways of presenting old stories, but actually, this was a completely different provocation, completely different invitation as an artist and a maker. And it was hugely liberating to just be like, well, we can do anything, you know, we you know, try things out and Easterhouse, you know, performances in the swimming pool, and the library is great and it felt like a hugely creative, exciting, like, fertile space for making cool work. It was great.

Rhona Matheson

I think you've sort of almost articulated why we do what we do. You know, I think, I suppose the journey with Starcatchers has been really interested, interesting over the last 15 years in terms of, you know, how, how do you make the work? But, you know the question that we were being asked back in 2007, when we had that symposium is why? Why do babies and young children need theatre? Why do they need performances? Why do they need culturally rich experiences? And you know, people just kind of look at me, like I'd, you know, I was saying I was going to the moon when I was saying I was doing that pilot project because you know, the sense was, well you can kind of put anything in front of a baby, plonk them in front of the telly and they'll engage themselves and they'll be fine. You know, it's like, but actually, it's that sense of saying well, yes you can, you can do that, of course you can, but actually they are these amazing human beings who connect and engage and are constantly learning, and if you offer them these experiences, then you get incredible things back from them. And I suppose that's become really rooted in who we are as an organisation and that sort of sense of what is the voice of the child, and what are the children telling us in the work that we are delivering? And I suppose this maybe begins to take us into this conversation about the work that you've been doing more recently, but that's, you know, obviously, over the last few years, there's been an increase in conversation around children's rights in Scotland with the, particularly with the incorporation of the UNCRC into domestic

law here earlier this year, and you know, we always talk about article 31 of the UNCRC, it's about children's right to access play, and recreation and cultural arts and cultural life. But actually, what we do also is a gateway for children to access their other rights. And, and one of those is fundamentally about how children's voices can be heard.

Matt Addicott

I don't know if it's useful. It's just, just in terms of what you were saying, there on a like, you know, when we, when we first, I remember when I first kind of, sort of started working in early years, and was chatting with someone that worked at a venue, and they were quite concerned, because they didn't know if the dressing room facilities that we had for early years theatre would be okay, because how would the babies see into the, into the dressing room mirrors? And how do they, how do they learn all their lines, like real sort of, so which again, just, just you know, it's just from a place of not having seen or experienced too much work before. And I think even now, you know, there's the best sort of advocacy I can offer is just come and see it and experience it and watch, you know, go and experience a Starcatchers performance or something, because you're right, like, we can just you know, plonk ourselves or plonk our children down in front of the TV, and of course you can, that's fine. But it's that thing, and you know, not dissimilar to any of us, like if we see somethings that's pitched too old or pitched too young for us. We experience it in a certain way. But to see something that's kind of pitched right for early years audiences. I mean, it's tangible, You can see it! The opportunity for growth and development for like, it, the stimulation like it's so present.

Rhona Matheson

The whole process that we have gone through with the work that we have delivered has always been about making sure it's right for the age and stage of the children that have been involved. So, there's almost been that sort of constant consultation and engagement with the audience. So that's absolutely informed what we've done because when we first started we had no idea, you know, what could you do for babies? You know, and those first few performances where we were just sitting and going "oh my god!" It's like, you can put a baby in a theatre space with a performance that's been made for them and they will sit and engage for half an hour, for forty minutes. They, there's something really, there's something really tangibly exciting about that. So, I suppose that, thinking about that consultation, that kind of constant feedback, and that links I suppose to this, this work that you've been doing more recently, and this, there's a need that's coming from Government and Local authorities, and other bodies like Creative Scotland that, you know that, the voice of the child is really fundamental and how are we consulting with children and young people. And one of the challenges that we've had over the last while is that people keep coming to us and saying can you do a consultation with really young children and babies and how do you do that? Because we are, kind of, constantly responding to the needs of babies in our groups, there is kind of one way of going well actually we are constantly observing babies and kind of understanding what their needs are but that's not, that doesn't fit the purpose of a Government consultation. Maybe we can have a bit of a chat about some of the, about Pom Pom actually, about the one we did last year, and how the work that you did on that influenced the work you then did on the Today Museum, because I think it's really, I think it's really fascinating.

Matt Addicott

I'll jump in here, and you keep me right Becky, I think we had, there was a little, actually, Geraldine and I, like as in Geraldine Heaney, filmmaker, working quite a lot with Starcatchers as well and worked with Rebecca and I on Pom Pom, like so we done an initial consultation a wee while ago about out of school care. And that was with slightly older children, like it was pitched at slightly older children, so, and there was also, like there were tangible ways into that conversation, like what do you do in the

morning? What do you do in the afternoon? So it was quite, as a starting point, it felt like when we started Pom Pom, looking at maybe what the impact of Covid-19, public health kind of restrictions and what that had done to people's sort of creativity and creative life. Like, it felt like we'd started off with questions and then quickly found that actually it was really leading for us to kind of start questioning in a way that felt like we were trying to get, or hint at, or unlock a particular answer, or do something like when we heard or listened to the footage back, I think we all collectively got really bored of listening to our own voices trying to kind of haring the children we were meeting into a particular place or particular outcome. Does that sound fair?

Rebecca Fraser

Yeah. And it was ironic because I don't think we had gone into pom pom, not wanting to do that, but we had just automatically by default, fallen into that position of interviewer, interviewee or like consultant and console consultee. And even though because pom pom kind of stems from Move and Make, and I've actually even spoken about how Move and Make was actually a consultation process in itself, because just watching children carry out very small, creative interventions in their community. You can learn so much without asking any questions and just observing and just listening. But then when we went into pom pom, even though we knew all this, it's that we've just been programmed to fall into back into that sort of like questionnairing kind of format. And so, it was you can see the process how it's been learning, a process of learning, then by the time we got to, we got to play, we were a little bit more confident, I think Matt and you can even see throughout play with them for maybe 15, sessions, 15 stories. And you can see how even though within that short time, we refined the process, our voices became a lot less, the children's voices became a lot more, but you wouldn't know that unless you've done all this groundwork beforehand. So yeah, I feel like it's quite an exciting crossroads here.

Matt Addicott

I think I think you're totally right. Like in the previous one with pom pom, and this speaks to kind of like there's a hierarchy, right, or there's like a is internalised but it's kind of everywhere, where it feels like, in the meetings and the encounters that we had in the previous kind of consultation, it almost felt like we would talk about, we talk about creativity, we talk about play, we talk about what the last few months have been like, and then we would share time and space, and we would kind of like, do something else. So then it would be kind of finding different ways and a situation, which kind of leads that so sometimes we meet people in their back garden, sometimes we you know, we'd go on a journey to a local park and the child would lead us to the park, but actually, it was those bits that then and Becky, you brought some materials in from make, Move and Make sessions so that the children could share what or show us what they had done during that project. And initially, it felt like, you know, this was the, this was the other bit that after the consultation or after the kind of like the walk or, and but what progressively became really, really clear, is when we looked back at the film footage, it was none of the the consultation in in kind of air quotes, it was the, it was the play, that became the focus of the film, maybe we did it out the other bit, because actually, it was so much more revealing to, to listen, and I think this is where what you were talking about earlier Rhona with the many different languages and I'm paraphrasing, right here is over this notion that you're born with, like 100 languages, or, and actually development is a progress to kind of unlearn some of those and just be left with kind of the, you know, the few that we move forward with into kind of adolescence and adulthood. But like, you know, in these encounters, as you know, like, if you kind of tune into nonverbal cues to kind of to see what, what kind of material and how that material is used and shared, negotiating, navigating shared space with strangers. Like it's, it's, it's, it is so rich. And yeah.

Rhona Matheson

Yeah, I suppose that's why I find this really interesting, because I think often times, when people talk about the voice of the child, it's what the child who can talk will tell you. And, you know, obviously, our general target age range is zero to five. So we're often talking about pre or non verbal children. And so being able to have the skills to make the observations that you were making through these projects is really special, because you're absolutely tuning in to the voice of those children. But they're there, the language that they're using, isn't necessarily a kind of a herd vocal language. It's, it's, it's using all of the different kinds of languages that we have, and there was there was kind of relationships, and the kind of cues that you take from being in close proximity is is really, really, really, really important. What do you think some of the some of the challenges are, or the preceptor challenges of engaged engaging with those young children are?

Matt Addicott

When we were working together we worked with, well we worked with someone who was 22 months, which is probably younger than the age that we were kind of looking to look into working with. But like, it's just the baby was so active, and like, kind of really, you know, exploring everywhere in the park that we were in. But there was a moment and it ended up being used in one of the animations in the film, which was about nurture, because every kind of turn, though, there was a real keenness to make sure that mum was watching. And to make sure that, you know, that, that maybe that particular climb up the hill had been seen or registered. And let's say that, that's like infinite and it's kind of like, what what's going on here? What sort of what is this? And it was a pattern that that happened with other children as well. You know, I think back to three children quite I think probably one of the first meetings with this one that we we had Becky, when we kind of went round, and then all of a sudden, he had these three adults kind of just doing anything that they wanted. Like, all of a sudden, you know, after a year of lockdown, where, you know, they've been kind of just pretty much in their home, for most of it, all of a sudden, they've got these three strangers kind of coming in, well, two strangers and, like, a familiar face, but like doing different things. And yeah, I just think there's, there's so, so much you can see from where people's instinct, and like, what what they're kind of, I don't know, yeah, we've kept coming back to this notion of needs and wants, as well as how, how, how do they appear? How are they manifest is not always like, I would like this. And I need that. So actually, it's more implicit than that. It's behaviours and actions.

Rhona Matheson

Today Museum Play was a consultation for Scottish Government to understand the sort of the needs and wants and priorities of young children as we come out of the pandemic. So it was that sense of, yeah, just trying to understand what was important to those children just now. Do you want to talk a bit about Today Museum?

Rebecca Fraser

Yeah. So Today Museum, so we started Today Museum in 2018. And it's a social history, archiving tool and process. So, we gather together small groups in the community, and we discuss a theme, and usually that would be endorsed around the table. And then once everybody has created the table together, it's a bit like a flat pack, IKEA furniture. And once you've created the table, they each in turn, bring an object to share with the group, a bit like em, show and tell that you would do in school. And we go round, we would tell our stories, and there's little emotion blocks, which people can then add, after someone tells a story, that kind of feedback, what emotions did they get from the story, what sort of things that they draw out of it? So yeah, so pre COVID, we do that indoors, and then we will take time to do some creative reflection afterwards, drawing or photography or whatever, obviously, in COVID, we've had

to think outside the box, and outside. And we usually document all our stories online. Under the today, Museum, Parkhead website. And it's been a really nice way to collect stories through voices in the community. And obviously, working in Parkhead, an area which does face a lot of kind of barriers to the arts, and to kind of social history and also just getting their voices heard. Historically, it's been hard. And it's really nice to have like a tangible place online, where they can see that the voices have been recorded, and people can hear what they've got to say. So, it felt like a really good fit for this project. Especially the idea of giving voices to people who normally wouldn't be heard. And so yeah, so we asked all the children to bring a toy, to that's probably the most formal part, maybe Matt that we did was it we asked the children to each bring a toy to the museum. And then instead of a table, we had a parachute. And we each place their toys on the parachute. And we've got them as like a little icebreaker to tell us why it's a favourite toy. And then that kind of sparked the play that then went on for maybe an hour or so with each family.

Rhona Matheson

And that was, so when we were asked by Scottish Government to undertake this consultation, we're obviously it's really exciting to have these opportunities to think about how can we translate what in some respects feels like a really formal thing. It's like someone needs to know some information. But we you're trying to engage with a really particular audience. And so when we were chatting about, you know, if, if you were interested in doing this piece of work, and that you, you Rebecca came and said, well, actually, I've got this model, because we had some questions about, you know, that we had kind of a fairly quick timescale that we had to work to, and actually, how do you, you know, how could we put something together that would be meaningful, when you came in you kind of shared this approach that you were taking. It was really, it was really exciting, but it was really kind of really easy to see how we could translate or you, you guys could translate that approach for, for younger children and having that and creating these little spaces for these families to come together and to share and to play and I suppose for the, the rest of the families as much as we were trying to understand what the needs and the wants of those individual children are, it's also really interesting that you kind of get that family perspective and also for the families to have that understanding of this is what these young children are saying is, is important to them as well.

Rebecca Fraser

Ultimately, we wanted to give them a really fun, lovely hour of play, you know, we wanted to, of course, like, gather some information and hear their voices. But I think, us being brave enough to be like, that is not the end goal here. And we're going to try and go and agenda less, and just make sure that they were having fun, and having kind of quality time as a family for this hour was our ultimate goal really.

Matt Addicott

Oh, joy, I think like, to kind of play and like to kind of in a very, sort of, mentioned it before, it's over the thing of like, negotiating space with, with people, you know, you don't know so well. I mean, like, for me, and some of the families, Rebecca you had, you know, kind of a relationship with them through different things. But like, for me, it was this this thing of, like, it's so it is so important to find ways to, to kind of share an experience together, like, and there's 1,000,001 different things, but it's the uncertainty of what the next hour will be, what will be asked of me, what will you know, like, Oh, just see those things. And it's, you know, we talk a lot about, like, how emotional resilience is kind of, like, created and developed or, or, or, you know, encouraged, I guess, and, you know, for all of us. You know, speaking personally, and I know that from the conversations, it's, it's so true, like, it's such an important thing to kind of to have those experiences that are surprising or unusual, or that we don't know, necessarily the outcome of, and I think that in a in a small way, that's what each of those sessions was in a kind of big way.

I think, I think you're right, probably informed by the fact that we've done one or two, I think it's probably a feeling of, of being emboldened to kind of whatever would happen during those meetings, and encounters would be something worth talking about. And I guess until you've kind of done one or two you like, or is it going to be enough? Do I need to have the bullet points? Or the, the answer, like, you know, does it need to the outcome or the output needs to look a certain way, but actually, you know, it's been nice to kind of just collectively embrace the feeling that whatever, we whatever is generated from, from these meetings will be we'll be in and of itself, something that's, that's really interesting.

Rhona Matheson

Through these play sessions, you then sort of identified themes. So, can you talk a little bit about how you kind of identify what that will look like?

Rebecca Fraser

Yeah, I think we were just keen to do very good listening and very good watching, I think observing and to be involved in the play as well as, as playmates. That was something that we had learned through pompom to try and go in, and just free play. We had our suitcase that has our materials in it. And it did feel unnerving. I remember messaging Matt and Ashleigh, the day before, and being like, I've got my kit in the bag, I slightly tailor tailored it to each family, how old the where, and how many kids and I was like, but I have no plan. And it felt daunting. It felt like I had stage fright, but I knew my gut, like Matt said ,like, I knew my gut that we would get really good stuff from each play session. But it kind of felt a bit scary. And before we did the first weekend, and then once we got into the rhythm of it, we were like, no, this is good, we can do this. And I think a lot of it was through observing and just kind of mentally taking notes. I think each family map really had a had a vibe or like a spirit about them. They were all so different. And I felt like afterwards, when we had like our little debrief, we often were all in the same mind of like, oh, that felt like that family was just full of nurture. Or we would come out of our family and be like that family just felt very confident in their creativity, or their freedom to try new things. So, a lot of it was just naturally through observing and listening to the kids and their parents interact. And then also we were doing audio recordings so, that was really helpful because we can all be in the same place at the same time. So, we could listen back and there was just certain little nuggets of audio that would just hit us all, like in the gut when we were listening back. And we're like, wow, like that's something that needs to be captured for a wider audience.

Matt Addicott

I was just going to say, I think, yeah, I think that's all really true. And I think probably another layer to add as well is it's been really cool working with Ella as like an animator to kind of like, that gave us like quite open sort of quite laser guided focus in some ways, because Ella wasn't ever going to work with screeds of the material that we've collected from, from the workshop, we were looking to kind of distil an hour, essentially, sometimes down to kind of 10 to 20 seconds to kind of really like, look at, you know, from the discussions that we've had, what's the kind of Yeah, the one interaction perhaps in that session that feels like it gets straight to the heart of what it is that we've observed and felt during our time together. And that was, again, this this kind of notion of being liberated by constraint to start with, it was terrifying to think that we have to kind of boil it down into this sort of short space of time. Actually, by the end, it was quite positive, I felt great, because it's like, well, this is it. No, that's definitely it, then then it gives you a feeling of certainty, perhaps that that's, and also really cool, just to then see how Ella interprets that and how she gives it a different kind of creative life and turns it into something really, really beautiful.

Rhona Matheson

For our listeners, there are a whole series of these very short animations that Ella Mclean, our Illustrator and animator put together responding to the, the themes that came up in the in the session. So I think we've got seven films all together. And one of those is a compilation of all of the different themes that came up. And they are truly beautiful, just with the combination of her illustrations and the audio from the children and the sessions, it's just a really kind of beautiful snapshot into the lives of young children at that time. So, it's just really beautiful to see. You've touched on it a little bit already about the, you know, that's sort of shared experience. Starcatchers talk about positive shared experiences all the time, because that's kind of a fundamental for us, because we never do anything, where we're just working with the kind of little children or the babies, it's like, you don't come and drop your kid off and go away and do something. It's always this sense of, we want to create these positive shared experiences that both the adult and the child can benefit from. I think we learn about themselves, and they learn, and they learn about each other through these experiences. So, I'm just curious, how, you know, what the role of the parents were in the sessions that you were, you were doing?

Rebecca Fraser

I think it was quite mixed, depending on each family. I think, I mean, a lot of families do feel, a lot of parents feel quite burnt out, I think after the past year. And obviously, us arriving with our suitcase, and all our energy, I think was a really nice relief for them that they were like oh great someone is here to help me play. I mean, none of them were, you know, that everyone got involved. But I think it was a good reflection, I think of the realities of how parents are feeling just now coming out of COVID. And I think each parent, like really impacted the session through how they were communicating with us and communicating with their children.

Matt Addicott

Yeah I think it's a really interesting experience, it felt quite different for me in a way, because I guess I haven't particularly led that many workshops with one family, like, where I'm kind of going in and dispersing directly working, we're working together with, with one family unit. And that was really, it felt quite different. And it felt perhaps inevitably, you just, you know, you get to know people, and it's only a short time that we're together, I realise but then all of a sudden, he sort of felt quite, like able to kind of say this, you know, make quite big calls about like, you know, so many times we'd go in, and you know, that just the love and admiration that, you know, the people there had for each other was was really, really strong, and like people wanting to kind of show off what they've been doing or what they were into, but also, you know, kind of talk proudly about, you know, what, what their children have been up to, or what they've done together as well. So, in terms of format, it was it was quite a nice way to quite quickly get somewhere that you possibly don't when it when it's a bigger group. I think that I mean, I think there's lots of different things and like, you know, we can problematize in some ways, our approach and what we've done. And I think that, of course, I welcome, it's not perfect, like at all and you know, welcome those conversations, like one of the things I think it feels like is that we, we talked about, maybe run a programme of work at platform called play cafe. And we've used the Today Museum Play sessions as a means by which to get in touch with some of those families, we did get in touch with some of them. And, you know, I'm hopeful that it can lead to more sessions like this as well. But it's like, it's still that thing of how did you get involved? And like, how do you kind of, you know, how do we reach maybe the families who are less proactive or like, kind of quick to answer an email or be available or doing different things with different situations and circumstances. So, I'm reminded that there's, you know, we did a very small section of families and there's, there's, there's more folks out there and I'd be interested to kind of look and explore different ways of getting in touch with different people. Almost, like that thing when you do something in a public space, then you meet and encounter people that didn't know that it was gonna

happen. And then something really interesting happens there. As with shared experiences, I think you're so right, it's like it, again, it goes back to that thing of like wonder and surprise. And it's like for for a short period of time, it's something that you're not leading, you can participate in with your child, with your children, with your family. And, you know, the, the time, it was quite conscious of it, like, the time that those guys came and brought a suitcase, and we played in the back garden and did this, that and the other, it becomes a memory becomes a thing. And like one of the families that we went to, which I think maybe is the same family, maybe you will speak a little further on as well Becky, but like they were like, we did this exercise, or the materials that the children wanted to play from, from the case kind of involved like a big kind of roll of lining paper, a catapult, and some like small sponges, which got soaked in paint, you know, completely child led, and then like, catapulted it on to the, to the, to the paper to form this beautiful image. I think I'm right in saying that that image was then kind of like cut up and framed and it's now a picture on the family's wall. And it looks beautiful, it looks stunning, but you're just think, well, it's that interaction, it's that thing. It's like going to see that show or like experiencing that time when, you know, all of a sudden there's a sculpture, I'd say these are how memories are formed these the kind of pins in the rock face for us. So yeah, if it feels like, you know, we've been shorn of those or like, they've been harder. They've been different, I guess, in in lockdown. And it was nice to think that, you know, maybe, maybe some of these might go on to form lasting happy memories or positive experiences.

Rhona Matheson

Is there something here about how we can reflect on sort of pre or non-verbal children's voices, because those are the ones, those are the ones that people think are the hardest to capture. And we talked earlier about, you know, the that sense that we're observing, kind of the range of the languages of children through their play, through their, you know, expression, whether they're, whether they're verbal or not, they're, you know, there's, there's noises that children make, there's faces that they make, there's gestures, there's, you know, there's all sorts of different ways that we can engage with them. But is there? Was there anything that stood out for you from, from the, from the from the project?

Rebecca Fraser

Yeah, I think that's right. And I think, like Matt was saying about us picking, the audio ended up being just like 20 - 30 seconds from each family. And, and there was a risk there of therefore picking seven stories that had very good audio, that you know, that told, you know a very succinct story in about 20 or 30 seconds. Obviously, some families, just, that wasn't the case. And yeah challenging ourselves to say, no we're going to pick the stories that actually we feel are important, regardless of whether we've got good audio verbal articulated points of view to go along with it. One family we worked with, they have a range of children from a newborn baby, and a small toddler, and then a 10 year olds who happens to be non-verbal. So actually, the conversation that happened within that dynamic was so different from the other families, the mum was so integral to the children's play, and their communication, and translating it for us and helping us to understand how to work with all three of the kids. And actually, her, us picking her family story to be included as part of the animations actually has had a real impact on that family, because honouring voices that are non-verbal is such a big deal to them. And I think they felt very moved that they were included. And it shows how the parents are so important, as part of this sort of consultation process. And not in a way that we want to use their voices to, you know, to instead of their children, but just because it is such a natural tight partnership. Yeah, I think the legacy of these workshops or just any kind of creative activities as a family, like you're we're seeing the ripple effects can keep going on and, and I think that's that whole thing with baby theatre or baby art is that sometimes you don't see the results from the first time you know, they look disengaged, or it's been, you know, it

was hard to make them work, however, the show was supposed to go or whatever. But often I found with my children, it's like six months down the line where all of a sudden, they'll say, oh, remember we went to that show with them, the dancers and the lights, you know, or they'll say remember that funny man with the hat, and they're more eager than to go back. And I think you think you're making art that's, you know, boundary less or barrier less. But even just that getting out to a venue or a place is a big deal for some families.

Rhona Matheson

Have you had any other feedback, have other participants seen the films?

Rebecca Fraser

Yeah, I mean, we've had a lot of laughter, a lot of a lot of people saying that their just the kids loved it. And we're, I find them really funny. I mean, children just love seeing themselves and their siblings captured like that. But a lot of I mean, a lot of the mums teared up, they really did when they watched the animations. And it's just been such an emotional year for parents. And I think they all just so genuinely enjoyed their little play session. And then to see that captured for, you know, permanently. I think they all felt quite moved. And I think Ella did such a great job of capturing all the children. And although we wanted them to be universally drawn in a way that, you know, we can take a lot of parents could see their own children in these stories, I think a lot of them do really capture the spirit of each child, then I think the mums really loved that.

Rhona Matheson

Think everyone needs to go out and find the films on our social media, or on our website and and take a few minutes just to celebrate, those, those stories and those, those families. If we were asked to do another consultation, what is the next step in the learning? What do we take from, you know, thinking about the schoolish childcare consultation way back then Matt and Geraldine were involved in, then we had Pom Pom, that then Rebecca you were involved in with Matt and Geraldine. And then Today Museum Play, if there was another experience, what would the learning be?

Matt Addicott

To me, it feels like there's a real absence quite often in the child's voice from my in my bubble, like it, you know, like, whether it be, I don't know, listening to the news, or watching the telly or, you know, less. so, with work, I sort of find this, children quite a lot of work, which is quite happy. But I think that I think that it feels like if anything, could be awesome to find new ways of hearing from children in daily life generally. And like, I guess that's kind of like, that's the biggie, big take home, because it feels like I know that we, we, you know, perhaps the three of us, and I suspect strongly, probably anyone that's listening to this will kind of be on board with that as a start. But then when you think about, like, the future and what those engagements are, it's not, it's not necessarily straightforward, I think the kind of the consultation, wherever the focus of a future consultation would be, it's then trying to find a way, you know, if what was right with this one was, was trying to create a time and a space to share and play together, it sort of felt like that was the way into the conversation about other different kinds of things to think that there's an onus and responsibility on us as artists, or as adults or whatever, to try and find a way of creating, making, sharing space with children that allows them to contribute freely and openly and confidently in, you know, in the way that they want to with the language that they have, whether that be verbal or nonverbal, or any way of expressing themselves. And I think that it's, it's not a given that the way that we do that, as adults and artists will be the same. It might not be, might be, but it might not be, it's trying to, you know, it's, it's graft, it's work, it's trying to find a means by which we can share space in a way that has some kind of equity that, you know, that allows people to come in and contribute.

Rebecca Fraser

Yeah, I've also been thinking about how I mean, this is, I mean, this was quite a big ask, you know, us trying to capture what all children want in Scotland, for what what's important to children, you know, in Scotland coming out of COVID-19. And how these national sort of consultations are obviously, so important, but how the sort of grassroots, you know, like if we could capture all children's voices, you know, and give all children a space that they can feel that they can be heard is so important. And I suppose maybe coming out of this, not the idea of like another big national consultation, but even how can we take this learning so that everyone can use it? And you know, so if a, you know, a council could use it, or a housing association, or a community garden, a nursery. How, you know, we've had this gift, I suppose Matt, over the last year of being allowed to trial these things and you know Starcatchers were so good at being like, okay, like we trust you that you can do this in a slightly different way. And you don't need a spreadsheet or a tick box form. And how can we, can we make this more like a natural part of our culture, when we're speaking to younger children? I suppose that's my main takeaway from this is how can we use this to kind of re-shape stuff?

Rhona Matheson

Well, I mean, to me, it sounds like what you're what you're talking about Rebecca is sort of the kind of the drive and ambition that we have, you know, from Starcatchers perspective, which is about the role of artists in early years and about, you know, the fact that you know, what you, I think the reason why these projects that you've done have been so powerful, has been because you're not you're not coming from, I mean, obviously you, you really interrogated it with Pom Pom, in terms of going, we're gonna start with these adult led questions. And we're gonna see where that that takes us. But it's that sense that actually, artists kind of come into a space, whether it's a community or a venue or a family's garden, it's about a meeting point. And it's about an exploration of ideas and questions, but it's being able to tailor them for the audience that we've got. And I think what it does is, it kind of it opens up the possibilities. And it brings people together. And, you know, we constantly I have been known to talk about the need for there being an artist and every single childcare setting in the country. And I'm gonna say it again. And I'll probably say it again a few more times over the next year. But you know, if we really want to kind of unleash the potential of our children, and then think about what our society looks like, in 5,10,15,20 years time, that actually, if we embedded artists, into our communities, into our settings, where, where young children are, then things can look really, really different in a really brilliant, positive way. So I think I love that sort of sense that this is where all of the kinds of threads of what we do kind of come together into one space. And, you know, I think there's still a huge amount of work to be done around this idea of consulting with young children. And we'll continue to do that through the projects that we do, because that informs the work that we're doing. But when we are asked by Government or by Creative Scotland or you know, someone else in the future, if we would do another of these kind of consultations, I think there's you know, we've got this kind of foundation to build from. My little thing that I really want us to be able to explore is really how do we how do we do consultation with pre and nonverbal children? Because I don't think anyone's really done that. And I think there's, there's something in that that needs to be explored. And, you know, maybe there's a methodology that could be developed as part of that. So, we need to keep having conversations about that over the next wee while.

Matt Addicott

I was gonna say that, it sort of feels like that kind of addresses what I was talking about, at the beginning, in a way, because, you know, from being an artist and residents embedded, essentially in kind of like a series of nurseries in Easterhouse when I first started working with with Starcatchers and platform, like it is that thing, and this is a tangent, but I go up and think but like, I think it's a shame that theatre and performance and art generally, for older audiences for adults, and isn't kind of there isn't that

same approach? Because I think what, what, what the result has been, like, you know, over 15 years of, you know, Starcatchers making work is that, like you say, you know, the decision for the shows in the form that they take, and the content that they have is based on knowledge, having spent time co-creating and collaborating every step of the way with the audience. And, you know, that leads to different things like it develops the art, because it's informed by what you've done before. What worked What didn't, in a way that I think it's sometimes taken for granted that because we're because we're adults, that, you know, we have an understanding of what we might like to see in, in our own culture. And I think it'd be really cool to have more artists embedded lots of different places. Like, and I think it's really interesting as well, because it's sometimes the things that you didn't expect to kind of get from, it's always the things you didn't expect. There's no, I suppose, but like, all of a sudden, from being kind of like, based in that nursery, you have no knowledge or an awareness that this might be possible that might be possible. So yeah, I think there's this kind of model of co-creation and collaboration with, with people in place is, is really exciting. It's, it's really cool. I think there's something in the back of my mind that like goes to, you know, always quite conscious that like you say, I think I think you embrace your job and your practices and artists and like, celebrate the, what we see and what we can offer. But equally there is the kind of thinking of like, I wonder what a child development specialist, a child psychologist like that, like, you know, I remember doing a research project with Starcatchers and academics from Strathclyde uni and they kind of came up with this whole like screed of different kind of attunement signals and observations they could see in, in the children and their families as they watched and experienced some of the work. And that was really interesting to me as an artist to see what it was that they were picking up on. And the depth of, of like complexity in the smallest of moments. And there's something that I'm not trying to talk myself or ourselves out of a job here. Like, oh, I wonder what someone from those fields would make of what it is that we saw, what it is that we kind of collected and collected from these, these encounters and exchanges, if you know, if Scottish Government or anyone else has this commission are happy with our observations, and that's cool.

Rhona Matheson

Thing is, you know, you, you might not be, you know, have a degree in child development or child psychology, but you have all of this rich experience of engaging with young children. And that gives you the qualification to meet to be able to observe and make those observations that are there. And I suppose thing as the engagement signals are a tool, and we actually still use them as part of our evaluation processes, because they're an absolute kind of resource for us to use to look at, you know, understand how children are responding to experiences, and probably should have shared them again, with before you did the consultation. You know, I think it would be really interesting either to have you to the artist, and the sort of child development specialists, again, we're kind of working together on on some projects, because I think there's, it's a little bit like, you know, when we when we are working in nursery settings, and you have artists working alongside early years practitioners, and it's that kind of peer to peer sharing, where you've got people coming with different expertise, but you're coming together, and you have that place to share, because the thing that brings you together is the child and the responses of the children. So you've each got something to contribute to that. So it's a, it's an interesting observation to kind of say, Well, actually, these are, these are our responses as, as artists to the engagement that we are, we are having, but what would a child development specialist? How would they respond? They, I don't think it would be that different, to be honest. Because it's all about human connection, isn't it?

Rebecca Fraser

I think we've got this golden ticket, as artists, I think, to come in, and not be, you know, like that

statutory person or that healthcare person, like, we are very non-threatening, I think, you know, we're there with our big blue stick case, and streamers and confetti. And that's where you get that real oph, like families breathing in this space, they're interacting completely naturally with each other, because maybe, some of us are less well-known faces, but you know, like they feel, especially if it's community artists to who they've already got relationships with, you know, it's like a friendly face. It's like a family member, there's less facade, you know, so actually, Matt, maybe, maybe we get but yeah, maybe the translation of it or like, if you know, like, when you then take it to somebody else who can see different things. I mean, I think that would be a really exciting collaboration of having like a long term collaboration between like a child development person, and our artists in a community. So, both of them became well known faces to that group of families, and then you could chart it for a long time. That would be really exciting!

Rhona Matheson

It's absolutely the kind of stuff that I want us to be doing, because that, that sort of residency approach, you know, that's what in our some of our other engagement work, we are, we are, you know, is about a longer term, consistent contact. So, like when you were working on Expecting Something, Rebecca, it's like, it's about the relationships that you can build up. And I suppose, Matt, when you were doing your residency at Platform, it was about having those kind of connections, because, you know, there's no doubt those, those sessions that you've done as part of play were really important, and it gave those families that time and space with you. But actually, what happens when you, and that's why I go on by artists in every childcare setting in the country, or in every community, it's that thing, it's about relationships, and, and the trust that's built, and then the kind of possibilities of, of what can come from that. So, you're yeah, there's totally something, the idea of being able to do some something really, like a longitudinal project, but with a long, with a longitudinal study attached, it would just be the dream, maybe, maybe for the next 15 years.

Matt Addicott

Yeah, absolutely.

Rebecca Fraser

And, and something that I thought of, well, I found when we did Move and Make was like, how the existing relationships, the people, the children, existing relationships, you know, they are the experts of those children. So, you know, the parent and I was thinking about that, how can we use this as well to empower parents to further become the expert of their child, and in their child. So given them the tools to look almost like through our eyes of like when they see their children play, we gained, you know, this whole vast amount of knowledge from that one family for one hour. And when I was getting feedback from Move and Make, you know, I was getting these really insightful comments from parents who through these little art interventions for learning new things about their children every week, and therefore becoming more and more the expert of their own child. And like, I think that's something I would be really keen to do. And I am keen in my own practice, I think and like helping parents become the expert of their own child, which is supposed to come as background to that whole, like national consultation versus like, grassroots, you know, like local consultations for like smaller things, but like, even within a family, how do we help parents consult with their children, you know, in everyday life? And that's something really interesting that could come out of like a child development plus artists co-lab, but with parents very much involved.

Rhona Matheson

Yeah, well, it's a sort of three, well, it's almost you're then into kind of four way, you've got the professional, and I include the artist in there, the parent and the child. And it's that kind of the relationship between that triumvirate and what can happen, because what you talked about about, you know, the fact that artists can come into the space and are they're not they're not service provide, you know, that will your service provider, but you're not there as a, you know, as a family support worker, or the health visitor, you're there as an artist. And, and we found that, you know, in lots of different projects, that actually the, its relationships form really quickly. And people might feel slightly intimidated first, when they come into some of these experiences, because you come into an arts experience, what does that mean? Or you might be going into an Art Centre that you've never crossed the threshold of before, and that can be that can be challenging, but actually, once you come into the space and begin to engage and participate, that actually the, the artist is the real kind of conduit to opening up the possibilities. And, you know, we've, we've had, you know, educational psychologists tell us before that, you know, how they've observed engagement between parents and children that they've never seen in other, in other sessions that those families might be participating in. And, and my judgement on that is because it's the artist, and for me, the input of the artist, and how they are engaging and how they're delivering his insight is in a different way to how there was other practitioners deliver. And it's, you know, it's not saying one is good, and one is bad, but it's different. And I think that that puts a different spin on things for people and I think can allow them to open-up and, and it's expressing yourself and being heard. It's, it's all of those things for the adult, but it's also for the, for the little children as well, that and, and with that.

Matt Addicott

Fantastic thing, isn't it? Where, you know, people are surprised that child sits through an experience, or does this in an experience? It's like, it's just what it comes down to that's, that's what it is that we do, isn't it? It's like, experiences that we can learn more about ourselves and each other in, like, that's the space that we make. I think you're quite right, I think there is lots of and we quite often talk at the Art Centre about the offer, what's the offer, because quite often an artist will want to work with members of the public or a particular reason I want to work with x, y and z for this. And it's like, well, that's very good. That's great for you but, people come along to your session, and, you know, you get ideas or you get, but what, what do we get in return? And I think, you know, it maybe speaks to what we're talking about before. But I think there was something really joyous about this project. Like it's a real treat and privilege to work with people in space and to kind of work Rebecca with yourself with Ashleigh who's the photographer on the Today Museum project as well. It was just like, a real treat to kind of to have the offer right beside like you say, like an hour of just fun. Like, that's cool. We can all sign up to that, we've had fun and and that's like, I think, again, speaking to this hierarchy where it somehow feels less but it's not and it shouldn't be an absolutely if there's anything there's this kind of worth fighting for and shouting for and advocating for then it's play and it's fun because it's vital and important.

Outro

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