



**Lets Talk About... Podcast Transcript**  
Episode 2: Baby Theatre

Featuring Festival Director of Imagine, Noel Jordan and Executive Director of Catherine Wheels Theatre Company, Tony Reekie

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## Intro

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 Sector in Scotland to talk about a range of topics from baby theatre and children's rights, to being an advocate and why the arts?

Today let's talk about...baby theatre. I'm joined by Tony Reekie from Catherine Wheels and Noel Jordan from Imagine, both close colleagues of Starcatchers. Thanks for joining us as we explore the Starcatchers journey and the development of theatre for babies around the world.

Rhona Matheson 00:14

Good afternoon, I am delighted to be joined by Tony Reekie and Noel Jordan. This afternoon we're going to talk about baby theatre, which is an absolutely fundamental part of what Starcatchers does. And as we're celebrating our 15th birthday this year, I felt it'd be really important for us to have a conversation with two people who are really key figures in the young audiences sector not only in Scotland, but also international stalwarts of the young audience's sector. And both of whom have had made contributions to the work that Starcatchers has done in many ways over the last 15 years. So we're going to talk about baby theatre. So welcome, Tony and Noel. Do you want to introduce yourselves to our listeners? Tony, why don't you go first.

Tony Reekie 01:07

I gotta go first. So I'm I'm currently the Executive Director of Catherine Wheels Theatre Company, who are a touring Theatre Company for children and young people. And previous to that I worked with Imagine and the children's festival. So I have been it's been one of my great pleasures and privileges to have watched the rise of work for very young audiences over that time. And it's lovely to be here have a chance to actually talk about that.

Rhona Matheson 01:35

Brilliant, thank you. And Noel

Noel Jordan 01:36

Excellent. Well, I was Tony's replacement at Imagine. So I came in in 2015, we went through a restructuring, and part of that process, they decided to split the role of CEO and festival director. And that's where I came in. And I've been working for many, many years in Australia, actually, as a maker director in this field, and but I didn't start programming or curating until about 17 years ago. So yes, it's a pleasure to be here today.

Rhona Matheson 02:08

Absolutely. Do you want to just say a little bit more about who you Imagine are and what they do?

Noel Jordan 02:12

Yes certainly! So we actually, beyond the festival we do many things. Essentially, we promote and present high-quality work, theatre and dance work for young audiences. And we generally concentrate on the age span of zero to about 14 years. We have all sorts of kind of partnerships like Theatre in schools, Scotland, with the National Theatre of Scotland, that travels literally to every local authority t

throughout the country presenting works in schools, sometimes in nurseries, but the festival is kind of the main jewel in the crown, if you like.

Rhona Matheson 02:43

And I suppose actually Starcatchers, isn't perhaps the most prolific organisation to have been presented at festival over the last 50, something like that. I can't remember it. I did a count earlier on, I think I got 11 pieces of work that we've shared at festivals since 2000 and, think the first year was 2008.

Noel Jordan 03:05

You did two pieces in 2008. Here's me because I've just been into our incredible timeline before this session. And I was shocked at the amount of presentations of Starcatchers. So many! It's just like every other year or some. And in the first year it was two!

Rhona Matheson 03:22

it was two, and then a couple years later, it was four at the end. But we can come on to that because that that was a very particular there was a real journey there, I suppose in terms of why that happened. And, but it was, you know, the festival and having that opportunity to share this work has been so so important to our development and actually being able to share this work with international audiences subsequently. And so I think it's really, it's really useful to touch on some of that. So, Tony, what was what was your first experience of theatre for babies?

Tony Reekie

I do actually remember it really, really well, because it was at the Children's festival. And it was at the Children's festival before I joined. So I was there with Visible Fictions doing a show, it wasn't a very good show I seem to remember. It was, it was kind of at the beginning where a lot of the Scottish companies were kind of trying, trying to find their way. So, we went along with with, with something. We quickly got into that thing about being part of a festival was really, really good because you got to meet people and you got to see other people's work. And at the festival that year, there was a director called Lauren DuPont from France who brought over a piece called Robinson Crusoe. And I remember that show really well because it was a beautiful production. And also myself and Andy Manley went to see it about four times. We would just go back and see it, and go back and see it, and go back and see it. Because it was so good! He said and started to talk about that he had this other show. It wasn't part of the programme, but he talked to the makers, talked to the producers of the festival. And so he was going to do it at some point. And the children's festival at that time was in park, was in a park and it was in tents in Inverleith Park. And so he found basically a space in the park where he just started to perform. And they've done it so that there was a sort of group of parents with toddlers there. And I mean, we were we were all basically very, very skeptical about this was really was a case of I'm not entirely sure what's going on here of what's going to happen. And he just started to, to do things he started to play. And he started to do sort of performative things. And he had some objects and ping pong balls, I seem to remember. And we just watch these toddlers go from sort of, you know, because it's in the middle of a park, so there's all these things happen. Their focus, just got more and more and more intense on him. And after 10 minutes, three of the other children were basically just climbing all over him, taking little

bits off him, walking away. They were focused, and then they would go off and do something else, and then they would come back. At one point he was doing something that he preferred pretended to fall asleep, at which point like for children who were moving about all stop really, really still and then all started to move towards him and started to sort of touch him and stroke him and things. And we just were I mean gobsmacked by this, I mean just gobsmacked there was just this truly incredible experience. But the interesting thing about it was after we'd seen it, we kind of all forgot about it, it was a bit like, well, that happened and it was kind of special and kind of magic. But we'll just get back to what we were doing again. And so, when I joined the festival, which was maybe a couple of years afterwards we went back to that thing, where the audience was 5 to 12. And the young kids went into a creche. Because the interesting thing at that time was, the interesting thing about Lauren DuPont's piece was that it actually started off at a bar, which was actually really, really high. Because the stuff that I started to see, and it was really difficult to find stuff then because people weren't not programming. You know, people thought it wasn't real, people didn't get it, programmers didn't get it, artists weren't really wanting to make it. And the ones that were making it, a lot of them were stuck in this thing that what they had to make was a piece of theatre. And so, it was all very quite traditional, it was all quite end on and a lot of it just didn't work. And so you had that thing. I mean, I think we used to talk about that stuff in the early days Rhona out about two people on stage, bugging about with sand, you had that thing where you had this, this performance sort of happening away from children who had to be held in place to watch this thing and appreciate it. And if they were good enough, then, then maybe they got to play with something afterwards. And, and so it was we kind of we started to go on a journey of knowing that there was something there. But we kind of had to wait. And I think in a sense for the artists to start to interpret it in a way that actually made sense and started to really push the form forward.

Rhona Matheson 07:57

I suppose it's that thing when, we were really, really conscious when we first started that, it was one of the first things I did when I joined the Starcatchers pilot project was we went to Glitter Bird, which was a European funded project festival in France and saw some work. What was really interesting was that the work that we liked was more installation based rather than performance based. And I think it was that sense that the artists that were with and I suppose our context meant that we needed to find our own way with, What does performance for babies look like in a Scottish context? And that's, you know, that's a journey that we are, we are still on. It's really interesting that you talk about Lauren DuPont as being one of your your being that first piece of work because he's still making work. And we are connected with the company, he's the director of compagnie ACTA, who are based just outside Paris, and we're, we've done an Erasmus plus exchange project with them, and we're actually just starting another one at the moment. And you know, he's he's a force of nature, he's just really incredibly passionate about work for children broadly, but really what you do the work for the little ones, the kind of language that he would use, and the, the kind of precise nature of it and the beauty of it of the kinds of work that he wants to be sharing. There are aesthetics there that sometimes I might not lean toward. But that's that doesn't take away that doesn't detract from the quality of the work that's there. Noel, whatabout you? Was there much work for babies going on and in Australia?

Noel Jordan 09:34

Yes, you have to remember my career started in the colonies. It was a very different situation. So obviously, I'm just going to set the context for you. So in 2008, I went over to the Adelaide, the Assitej Adelaide festival, kind of you know three year showcase World Congress, and one of the guest speakers was Suzanne Austin and from Unger Clara in Sweden, and Suzanne did this presentation on baby drama, a work that she had made in 2006. So it was only two years old. But this was a seminal work in the development of work for babies. And I have to say like Tony's already said, the key word skeptical was absolutely the crux of my attitude towards baby drama. The more Suzanne spoke, the more confused I became, it was, you know, in a kind of financial setup, it made no sense there seem to be far more actors on stage than there were babies in the audience, let alone their carers who are with them. However, Suzanne spoke so eloquently and passionately and also had clips of and the the engagement of the children was quite remarkable. Now, I walked away going well, this is obviously something only the very wealthy theatres can explore. It makes no sense in the context here in Australia, no one was doing any, any work like that. However, I don't know at what point are selling chance also based in Adelaide, again, to explore this territory. But in 2013, she made a piece called This Baby Live. And I know, I think it made a clear view of the festival. I sat with Tony in the audience, actually, for the first time watching it, and it took my breath away, there was no set we were in a foyer, essentially, these were a group of mothers with children who, you know, they were from a disadvantaged background, kind of a socio economic disadvantaged background, and they have been essentially made to go to the show that their children were, oh, their babies were absolutely engaged. And I kept looking at the work going, trying to break it down and make sense of it because it was seemed so simple. There was, it was, Sally in a sense is this kind of host to keep the piece moving, there's a musician and a male and female performer I think she had in that piece. And there's a lot of mirroring that occurs and it looked like essentially almost 35-40 minutes of mirroring between the dancers, and the dancers and the children and the children once they realised they had control of that loved and enjoyed, kind of, yeah, pushing, pushing the dancers on a journey. So I programmed the work at a Kosala powerhouse in Liverpool where I was working, and it was identical. And I loved as in the response and friends brought their child that had difficulty kind of focusing and concentrating and here they were engaged with this work. So I'm really glad Sally Chad's kind of kick started the, the baby drama exploration in Australia and did it in a way that was not seen as elitist. It seemed very accessible to all members of the community. Obviously, we always know at the end of the day that we're subsidising this because, because he can only have so many people in the room. But that was my beginning journey. And then I came over here in 2008, and saw Andy Manley's ha, my own?

Rhona Matheson  
My house.

Noel Jordan

My house, my house. There you go! I might have got the date wrong for that one. But yeah, that was that was kind of one of the first Scottish works I saw.

Rhona Matheson 09:47

Well, it was only the second, well, I suppose. So my potted history of theatre for under so say, under three's, for the first piece was by Heather Fulton, which is a piece called Moussa's Castle that she made, that I produced before I was part of Starcatchers. And she had done a residency with Imagine and had been based at North Edinburgh Childcare. So all kind of connected to where Starcatchers started. But this is pre-Starcatchers. And she had developed

this concept of this story. It was based on a true story of a man from the Lebanon who wanted to build a castle for his wife, essentially, and it was about his sheer grit and determination that he would build a castle. And Heather works with Katy Wilson, the visual artist and designer and created a cardboard castle but the performer is creating throughout this show, the performer and a guitarist. So that was the first show that was set for two to five year olds. And that was just before it kind of started the Starcatchers pilot and we had in that first, in the first six months of the pilot, we created two pieces of work. One was Little Light which when you think of it your first attempt at a piece of theatre for babies. That's really what it is because it had everything and the kitchen sink in it. There's bubbles, and glitter balls and balloons and feathers and shadow puppetry, repetition, brilliant music by Steven Deazley and Dee Isaac's and music that I can still sing like I could still sing the songs to that show now. And it was brilliant and it captured people's imaginations. And you know, as that first attempt at this work, that piece of work was so important. Because yes, we were at North Edinburgh arts at the time, it's based in Muirhouse in an area of deprivation. But there was a lot of audience who were coming in from outside of that community to the, to the Art Centre. So it certainly was engaging with the kind of the, the mums and the families from Stockbridge and Comely bank and places like that. But it did also really connect with the local families as well. And then we toured that show, we toured Little Light all over the country, and it went to Take Off. And I think we could have done it for years and years and years. But I think the tour that we did, I think we did 104 performances of it and the two performers, because we were doing two to three a day over in about eight weeks or something. And I think by, by Christmas Eve, the performers were about to kind of, their heads were about to explode. But the second piece, so Andy Manley made Little Light with Vanessa Rigg who was the other original artist on the on the pilot project. But then in his, he, Vanessa was only three days, Andy was five days. And in his other time, he shut himself in a studio and, and thought and played and came up with my house. And my house is probably the only production that we've ever made that was never really tested with an audience before it was put in front of an audience. So, the first performance of My House was at our first international symposium in 2008, or 2007. And we were all slightly petrified because not only did we have little children and their parents and carers, we also had delegates, we had about 40 delegates from all over the place who were coming to kind of, the Scottish delegates were coming to understand why on earth you would be making work for babies, and then we had international colleagues who were coming to tell us why we should be doing it. But we were sharing this work. So that was a terrifying prospect. But what I always remember with my house is just that response that you had from from, from the audience, and I can see it time and time and time again, when I see our work when I also go to other places and see see worked for babies and just that there's this incredible thing. And you know, when when we go to the theatre as adults, you know, we sit there the lights go down, and there's a there's a level of anticipation there. But it feels like it's sort of heightened with work for babies, because I think the parents are slightly anxious, but the babies are having this whole other experience that they've never had before. And then then the magic starts to happen. And when you when the work is right, and maybe we can talk about the complexity of simplicity at some point, because my favourite phrase when the work is right, and the babies are responding and whatever way is right for them. It's just magical. And I guess that's why after 15 years, we are still here. Noel you've sort of touched on that with My House being your first experience of Starcatchers Tony I suppose your first experience of Starcatchers was kind of similar, but I suppose there was a closer relationship between Starcatchers, there's always been a close relationship between Starcatchers and Imagine but you were quite involved before I even started because there was a pilot project was funded by Nesta, the Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts. And there was a steering group that you and Alice McGrath who was the general director at the time were part of. But I don't know what insider information you've got on the kind of the pre, the pre-me, Starcatchers. If there is any?

Tony Reekie 18:51

There's not that much to be honest. And I mean, apart from what we what we recognised at the time was that we needed to do something about it. We recognise that it was out there. And we'd we'd gone beyond that conversation with a lot of the other countries who were just like, no, this work is just ridiculous. It's not real, it's such and such, and got and gone beyond that and started to say no, this stuff is real. And there's actually some really, really good examples of it. And if that is the case, then why would we not be exploring how we could actually do that in scope? And what would that look like? And so really, it was it was very much from that point of view of actually just going, let's try and provide some kind of platform and then see what actually develops and what actually grows from that. And then to be honest, fortunately, you, you arrived and then and then took it forward. And you know, and so to actually take it into the direction that needed to go and so that kind of relationship that we had was actually just about then supporting you as much as we could on that journey, you know, but it was about responding to the fact that we needed to find that old fashioned thing, we needed to find work for the festival as much as anything else. We knew in the end, we were going to have to start programming work for babies as well. And work for younger audiences and to start to look for that, and at the same time then to say, well, if that's the case, then we need to actually be looking at where that Scottish work is going to come from.

Rhona Matheson 20:17

That leads us. Yeah, to My House, like it was the first piece. Moussa's Castle was in there as well though before My house?

Tony Reekie 20:25

Yeah. Moussa Castle came along, it was it was a really, really big, big hit. And I remember it because the sponsors liked it so much, that we actually did a special performance at the headquarters of the Bank of Scotland on the Mound so that they could bring along their families of employees to watch her just for a special, a special performance. And again, it just absolutely worked. And it goes back to that thing, which is we knew that we needed to drive it and we knew, we knew we needed to explore it. But we also knew that we needed the artists to start to create the work, which would actually give us that momentum to actually keep that going. And with those kind of people; Heather, Katy, Andy Manley, you actually had that start, where people, were they kind of hit the ground running.

Rhona Matheson 21:12

It was Yeah, it was. It really felt like a kind of, it was a catalyst actually across the whole of the sector at the time. And then so our that pilot project at North Edinburgh ended in 2008 and that's when we, we moved into town and became part of Imagine for about three years and ran our, our next kind of residency project which had four, four artists in four different art centers, in four different parts of the country at the same time. And it really, it was that sense of how do you build on that kind of foundation and learn, use the learning from that pilot project to inform this next phase. And so, Katy was involved as a lead artist in Tramway and Matt Addicot was at Platform, Hazel Darwin-Clements was in at the Byre in St. Andrews, and then Sasha Kyle was split between Carnegie Hall and Lochgelly Centre. And what I loved about that project, and that approach is that we had a framework that was we will pay you as a freelancer, we'll pay you for a year, we pay really well for a year, so you don't have to do anything else. You can if you want to, but you don't have to be trying to fit lots of other things in. We'll give you a development budget, so you can play and you can take some risks. And we'll give you a small production budget, but we'll give you a production budget and you can make a piece of work.

The only thing you have to do, is you have to engage with nurseries or parent baby groups or create your own baby, parent baby groups within the communities that you're in. And inevitably, each of those artists approach that work in a really different way. But all of them created three or four different pieces of work, you know, we only have said you need to make one thing at the end of your residency that will be the kind of the culmination of this kind of process that you're going through. But they all created three or four different things from installation. Matt created an amazing installation in the library at Platform that happened over a couple of weekends and was never seen again. Sasha created a sort of an inflatable installation Baby Chill space that we were able to tour, kind of pop up in this kind of inflatable space appeared. Katy Wilson then really began to explore installation-based work that and actually that has really informed the development of her practice over the next 10-12 years looking at work that can blend between installation and performance. But thinking about why we had four pieces of work at festival in 2011, we had these four incredible artists who'd gone through this kind of 15-month residency project and had created all of this work. And we needed to really celebrate that so that's why we've done our International Symposium in the March and shared some work there. And then we shared other work at festival and it was really about giving those artists a platform to share. And some of that work ended up going to some international festivals. But it also allowed other organisations to understand the potential of these artists, I think, and really allowed them to progress.

Tony Reekie24:19

And also it kind of set it in a sense, it was actually going this stuff is here now and it's here to stay. There was an element of, of that it was about trying to make that kind of statement of saying this is this is really important. That's why we're actually you know, providing this platform as well, because it is important, and it's important we show it and it's important. We talk about it as well. But the other really interesting thing is when you talk about that project, and you talk about the nature of the project, which was back in when 2010-11.

Rhona Matheson

Yeah!

Tony Reekie

In a sense, it actually foreshadows, kind of in some ways, where we are at the moment and potentially where we're going to be, where we need to be moving forward. That idea of artists in communities, that idea of artists working locally and closely with communities in all different kinds of levels, and that reality that for a lot of us, we're gonna have to do a lot more of that, as opposed to sort of heading back to this thing that we had pre-pandemic, where we were just like, oh, let's just do it whenever. The meaningful relationships and the things that can come from those meaningful relationships?

Rhona Matheson25:25

Absolutely. I mean, I've been desperate to try and revisit that model for years, but it's always been financially sort of beyond because, you know, those were the halcyon days, when there were these big pots of lottery funding available in, in Scotland. And, you know, that project that we did with Imagine it was, you know, we had a, we had £450,000 from the Arts Council. You know, and then other topped up with in-kind support from the venues and all sorts. So, you know, but it did so much, you know, I suppose in terms, in terms of the return on investment, actually, it over delivered in terms of what we, what we originally, originally thought and give the foundation for Starcatchers to



move forward. But also, I think, really, I hope, opened-up the platform even further for other artists in Scotland to begin to think about making, making more, and venues to really think about why they should be thinking about programming.

Noel Jordan26:20

See, it's interesting to kind of hear that information and compare it to the situation and the development of work in Australia and why it's essentially been in the hands of only a couple of people, because the funding and the funding wasn't there. So people didn't see it as a as a pathway for a career. But Sally, thank God, has, has decided that this is where she would specialise has gone off and done, like a lot of good study based herself in local nurseries in her community. But if you look around the rest of the country, there are so few examples of artists even making one or two works, excuse me, in this field. And so I think the Australian scene very much could have been left behind. And indeed the, Tony and I did a visit to a Melbourne Fringe a couple of years ago and saw a work from a local artist. And it was the first worksheet created for babies. And I'm sorry to say it looked like it. And it just didn't stand up on a kind of International platform in any way. But the way they were talking about it locally was that was this cutting-edge work. And it just simply wasn't. And so part of me kind of was really disheartened by that. But I can really see how having organisational structure and real kind of a plan of action around how do we create pathways for others? How do we create the right environments that the work can be explored and crafted is the way to go. And, you know, it's really lovely that in terms of Katy's career, that our 2021 commission was with Starcatches and Katy and the work although it's a slightly older, kind of four to eight, I think off the top of my head, she's just done such a remarkable job under extremely hard conditions of a COVID lockdown, and she's created it in a medium she's never really worked in which is film.

Rhona Matheson28:18

It is really incredible. But I suppose what I can see in, So Mixed Up is, is the piece and was originally going to be performed in school playgrounds. And you know, and it's talking about, you know, it's, it's a piece about emotional resilience and kind of giving the opportunity for children to really express themselves after this time that we've all been through, that's been so challenging. And you know, and she had this really clear vision for what that would be. But she, she and the rest of that team really rose to the occasion to challenge themselves to make the film and it's and it's beautiful. But what I can see in the work, I can see everything that she's done over the last, you know, how long have I known her? More than 15 years, I can see that progression and how the work that she does in other spaces with, whether it's the kind of the, the young parents project, Expecting Something, she works on with us and has done for the last six years or so, or whether it's other work that she's done with older children. It's all, it's all influenced the other work that she's, she's doing and you can see all of that within it. And it's there's real nuance and subtlety to it. And, and it's brilliant. And hopefully what's, what's really exciting is that we'll there'll be a live version of it later this year. And that will go into some school playgrounds and give kids the live experience as well as having had this this filmed experience too.

Tony Reekie

And there's something really interesting about, is that Noel talking about that experience in, in Australia and you can understand it that thing about you know Australia, just the sheer geography of it, the stretched-out nature of it and how difficult it is in a sense to actually go, wait, where is your focus? Where is that place where stuff will happen?

That it really in sense, you can understand how it's only one or two artists that in a sense, plough that furrow, for themselves and then go outside to get those connections and bring that back. That is in a sense, it's like the Scottish thing was that small country thing is always an advantage. When and in sense you're starting to have that conversation on a national basis, because small population, but also small area that it makes it slightly easier. And then you have the happenstance of it, in a sense, which is you then have Starcatchers, which provides focus. So in a sense, rather than focusing on maybe one company or maybe two companies that what you have is this broader organisation, which is actually looking at the development of it in its entirety. And so you can actually keep having that discussion, and not have to, in a sense, worry about the success of the next show, because it's actually a much, much bigger thing than, than that. So there's that thing about, there's lots of things that have come together, which were right, but which were also lucky because of the nature of what we are and where we are. Whereas as I said, it's like, somewhere like Australia, you go there and you think God Almighty, that must be really, really difficult to get people together and have those discussions.

Noel Jordan 31:23

And in a way that's why Adelaide works so well as a festival city because it is a smaller population. It works very well as a gathering place. And it's the, the youth arts sector has been very well funded there for a long time, because of state government kind of initiatives. So I totally agree with everything you're saying. One of the things I love about Starcatchers is the continual kind of flow of artists who you know you've got your long stays like Katy Wilson, for example. But other people who come in and done collaborations like Curious Seed with MamaBabaMe, so you never know, the people who did Little Top?

Rhona Matheson

Ellie and Kim? Superfan.

Noel Jordan

So what I love is that you never know there's not a stamp or a style that you're ever going to get with the Starcatchers work because you have so many collaborators. And it's really it was always on a sled. You know, you're almost like a kind of reducing harm in some ways you more than that. But it just means the work is not definable in a in an easiest aesthetic it changes constantly. And for me the superfan work Little Top, which we had hoped to do in 2020 and planning to do in 2022, which is ridiculous, the two year gap, but it to me is one of the most beautifully constructed works that I think you guys have been involved in. It's stunning, it just it, it totally connects with its audience, the setting is that simple circus space. And it's the same the complexity and visibility is exactly that. Particularly it opens with a ball a person in a ball. And because it captivated these babies are captivated by a ball and the rest. I mean, I was sitting there going No, no. And sure enough, it slowly builds.

Rhona Matheson

Honestly. You're absolutely right. And lots of things I love about the, the way that we work now and the fact because when we were doing those residences, and that work was kind of kicking off, it was really important that the artist had that opportunity to be going out and connecting and doing workshops and playing with the audience to kind of create the work that they wanted to make because there was no work to see and be inspired by and understand. So when we then began to really, Curious Seed actually, and MamaBabaMe was the first time we commissioned, like we sort of it came from a conversation that I had with Chris after I sort of talked about and cried my eyes out for you know, every time I see it, but there was something in her sensibility that I kind of thought she would make a really interesting piece of work for babies and I planted a seed and she went away and came back with

the concept and it and it developed from there. But I think then there was a similar conversation that then began to happen with other artists in terms of how we've begun to, to commission work since then. And that commission with Little Top and Superfan with Ellie and Kim was exactly the same. Kim, Kim had done a placement with us when she was a student doing on the contemporary performance practice programme, and then had done some little bits and pieces on some of our community engagement work but she'd never had the opportunity to make us something but she had all of this experience but she also then had seen lots of work and Ellie had never made a piece of work for, for babies, but she'd had, at that point, she just had one but she was then going to have a second. And was really fascinated with her son's response to the work that they were seeing together. And from that came this kind of concept, and Ellie is this incredible circus artist, director, creator and, and Kim is a great theatre maker. So that combination coming together and saying we've got this idea, and I went down to they got some support from a venue in London that I can't remember the name of, and I went down for a day and hung out with them. And they were just, you know, playing in the studio, and we were just talking more and more and more. And it just felt like it was the right thing for us to do to find the resource to allow them to develop it and produce it. But I remember I was, had a very similar thought to, you Noel at the beginning, and because, you know, even after all of these years of experience and having seen, you know, hundreds of shows, I was sitting there at the beginning going, is this too slow. It's just because it is, you know, it is exactly that, it's Arron this juggler with a ball, and that builds with, and there's a lot of silence. And there's, there's a lot of gaze, between the performers and the audience. But it's not like you know, you have lots of action, action left, right and centre. And, and I was really, I'm sitting in a dress rehearsal with no babies. So, you know, there was that other element. And then I saw it with the babies and immediately kind of relaxed, because that's where you have the trust in the artists who know their craft, and what Ellie and Kim had been doing throughout the rehearsal process was refining and distilling all of the elements to create something that appears, it appears to be incredibly simple. But the complexity within it is, is immense. And it's absolutely right for that audience. I can't wait for us to be able to get, get that show out again and just be able to share it because, you know, all you know, it's a juggler and two acrobats and, and, and another performer, who kind of guides, guides the audience through, through the show, and they were incredible artists to be working with, and the skill they have is phenomenal. And the idea that you can do kind of full-on juggling, yoyos, you know, the, the point of tension is when Arron is there with his yoyos, and there, it's millimetres away from baby's faces, but he knows what he's doing and is able to kind of pull that back. Or the, you know, the acrobats throwing themselves in a very small space. But just the baby's responses to that that kind of joy that you got, it was just fantastic!

Tony Reekie38:13

It's been it's an interesting thing about the form. And it's that thing about how important it is. And because it's one of these things where you know, when I talked to like students and people that are drama students or people that are making theatre, and that kind of context, it's that thing about saying you need to go and see baby theatre, you need to go see children's theatre, you need to see a lot of children's theatre, but you really need to go and see baby theatre. Because it challenges a lot of your own assumptions about arc, and journey and narrative and all these things. But also that thing about complexity and simplicity, how much you have to do. That sense of when people are doing, people that have made work for children before, as you say that thing that there's a tendency to throw the kitchen sink, and, a glitter ball and bubbles at it all the time.

And that thing about going but what happens when you don't do that, what happens when you hold silence, and then you hold it that little bit longer. And then you hold it even longer than at that point where you don't think you can actually do it any longer. It's about that kind of form. And just the whole thing about challenging the nature of audience, what does it mean? What is their relationship with a piece? Where are they, you know, what are they going to be doing while you're performing? All that kind of stuff. It's It is such an important form, not only for the audience for you know, it's obviously important for the children for the babies, but actually for us as practitioners and artists is such an important form to be engaged with. I always have that thing when people say I don't really see that kind of stuff because it's you know, it's kind of, you just kind of have to drag them along and to these things and then say right, have you got it now? Okay, that's fine. You'll come and see the next one. You know, because it's that important.

Noel Jordan40:01

I would also add to that, Tony, when you see this work, you get an immediate appreciation of the intelligence and empathetic response of the audience watching. And that so when you hear the theory of baby drama, and you know, going back to Suzanne Austin's lecture years ago, but honestly, if half the room came out completely sceptical, but we're all fascinated, because we didn't have an experience to compare, we had no solid, grounded understanding of what the word meant in reality, but the minute you see a good piece, and I'm saying a good piece, because there's some bad work out there, we all know that. When you see a good piece, and it resonates, and it captivates and engages, you see the, the responses of the child and, and that kind of amazement, they're, they're really looking for understanding and there is a connection with the performance that you cannot emulate. It's, that's what I think, was the most amazing experience for me as a programmer, who is at a certain point in my career that Oh, yeah, I know what I'm doing, and I see that work for the first time and think, holy crap! And then you wouldn't, you wouldn't do a festival without a work for babies, you just wouldn't do it. You know.

Rhona Matheson41:22

And that's the fascinating thing, but in, you know, in 15, in 15 years, that's, that's the, it's not even, it's not really our journey, our journey. It's actually the journey of the form globally. Because, you know, going back to Tony's experience with Lauren DuPont back in, when would that have been late? 90s?

Tony Reekie

No, that would be 2004, maybe.

Rhona Matheson

Right. So, but they had been making work in France, and in Italy, and places like that for 10-20 years before that. But, you know, there was something that happened, there was a real kind of Zeit Geist, not just here, but across Europe around kind of 2008 or so and it's just really built, and it's then begun to spread. So, you know, we're now, there's work that's been developing and in Canada is, was in Quebec, it's been connected to the development of the work in France, but in other parts of Canada, there's no work that's beginning to be made. There's a festival in Toronto, that's really establishing itself as a very specific early years festival, you know, go to IPAY, and we're starting to have conversations with other North American colleagues, particularly the ones in the US about making, them making their work for, for the very young, and that, in itself is quite a fascinating

prospect. Because, you know, we're talking about, you know, what's the context of work for, for babies in Scotland, but, you know, what, a US context is almost unthinkable, unimaginable, actually, it's almost it has to be state by state. And there are some states where there's work happening where and another's, I don't know if it'll ever happen. But it's, it's become a kind of a global form and touching on Noel's point about the finance of it, you know, I think we all we all know that it doesn't work financially, and that it's something that needs to be subsidised. But it's the kind of the social, emotional, cultural value of it, that is what I suppose venue programmers, festival programmers kind of our investing in and being able to see that as, you know, in a very kind of black and white terms. For some people, it's actually just see it as a loss leader, you know, because you get them in, and they'll, they'll keep coming back. And they'll be coming back for 10-15 years, you know, as their children grow up. But you're starting by making an offer of beautiful, culturally rich experiences that we're all entitled to, but babies fundamentally are entitled to and don't often get.

Tony Reekie44:07

But there was something that happened that around about that time when there was that sort of the sort of explosion of it when it really started to boom. And one of the really important things that I saw happening was, and one of the things that that's that you Rhona and Starcatchers were really, really smart doing was that as the form was developed, and also there was a huge body of scientific work that was happening that time about the development of children. And that thing about tying those things across that you were actually then starting to say normally at these shows good and the lovely and people having a nice time. But also we can actually bring this professor from this such and such a university who's now gonna stand up and say, and this is what it does to their brains. This is how it actually helps them develop. This is how it actually allows those connections and neural pathways in their brains to work and so that their connections, their communication with their peers, and their parents, all these things are affected in this positive way, through experiences like that, which means that you are then able to have that discussion with the government, and in a way that for those of us who were most of the time working with a much broader audience and our older audience, we actually missed a trick, in that sense, in some ways, which has actually gone, you know, it's actually quite useful having scientists to step in and say, oh, by the way, this stuff is really important. Because, you know, because we can say it's really important, but you actually, there was a thing that was gone along. So you'd have these big conferences, and you'd have shows on and then you'd have all these professors going and this is what's happening at this point. And I think it was, it was really, really useful in terms of driving all that forward.

Noel Jordan45:57

I would say that the development of work for babies in early years theatre here is one of the most radical developments in theatre in the past 100 to 500 years. It is absolutely a major shift in thinking. And it's happened relatively quickly. I think that period of scepticism, you know, it didn't love it probably lasted five years. The minute you saw your first work, you were convinced and, and I think the more that we present, the, the argument is there for us. And you know, every time we put work on for this age sector, it's the first to sell-out. Parents know. They know. They want their child to have a cultural experience. And then when they see them responding in such a positive way, they, they want more of it. So yeah, we can never do enough at the festival for this age.

Rhona Matheson46:53

We need an early years. Like we need a baby festival. Right?

Noel Jordon

There you go Rhona. Another opportunity, or an opportunity for someone else, maybe?

Rhona Matheson

Yeah, well, exactly. You know, and there was, there was a period of time where there were some, cause ONFife did a wee, sort of an early years festival for a period of time, and there was something that was happening, that happened in Glasgow, but the kind of, you know, ebbs and flows. And it wasn't, I suppose one of the challenges there was it wasn't an international festival. So it was trying to draw on work that was that was locally available. And sometimes that's, that's challenging, given the context that we're working in and how funding works and, and those kinds of things. But you never know, someone might, might come up with a baby Theatre Festival, somewhere in Scotland at some point. But it's not, it's not in my plans right now. Where do we go next, with work for the very young and I suppose, how does how does it sit alongside you know, Scotland's always had this reputation of making incredible work for young audiences? You know, here we are saying, Noel, you've just said that you think work for the very young, or work for babies is the most radical thing to have happen in theatre in the last 500 years. And I suppose, in some respects, work for children is some of the most radical work that's happened in the last while, but it's not resourced in the way that theatre for adults or everyone else is, and I don't know that it's really valued. You know, I think that are still, there, there have been the sceptics within our sector that we've over, we've overcome with giving them the opportunities to see the work. But how we, you know, how do we get the government and how do we, you know, the wider government and, and how do we get, you know, the wider funders, the Arts Council to really embrace it, because I think there's a sense that sometimes it's said that it's valued, but it doesn't always feel like it's really, truly valued for the important and experience resource opportunity that the work presents. So.

Tony Reekie

That's a never-ending journey. Unfortunately, and, and it's something that you just have to keep on pushing against, and pushing against because it's not just the government level, or at Creative Scotland level, or at local authority level that it actually is something that permeates all the way through to our own theatre industry level. You know, there are varying levels of what people regard in the end as being sort of the important stuff. And that goes across the board that was that quite an interesting thing. You think about the success of work for children, young people across the board over the last 25 years in Scotland in terms of things like the Theatre Critics Award, no children's pieces ever won the best piece of theatre in a year and in a sense you can be kind of guaranteed that for the foreseeable future, no children theatre piece will ever win that. And for me, there's an element of that when you think about, you start to go through the shows, you go. But that's actually ridiculous. But it's part and parcel of that. And the thing is, you know, we've been talking a lot about unconscious bias for a long, long time in lots and lots of different contexts where there is an unconscious bias against work for children in general. And I think we're always going to be pushing, you know, against that. But that going back to what Starcatchers is, and what that work is about, and you go back to that thing about being close and based in community and being close to the audience, that there is, if people were smart to actually go well,

that's actually the kind of model that we need to start building work from in the future. And seeing it as the real opportunity that it is, about how you have artists engaging, you know, and I really, really meaningful way, you know, which spreads through. If you think about the work that Imagineate have been doing the last couple of years, with those work in schools and stuff like that, it ripples through the ages, and shows the possibilities of what, what we can do. But in terms of the work that we have to do, we just have to keep on chipping away making the argument because I think we'll always we're always going to have to be making the argument.

Noel Jordan51:28

I totally agree, Tony, I think it's one of our biggest challenges that it's, it's advocacy, it will never go away, we'll constantly have to fight for our corner. But there's something fundamental about the value and place of children in our culture that is undervalued that I don't know how we could ever change the perspective of. I don't think it exists in every culture, every country. And you know, you look, for example, you only have to go as far as Belgium and see the work there and look at the relationship of how they treat child performers, as genuine artists, bit like in works like Cabinet Kay and I just think we have to just kind of keep fighting the fight. And I do think the ripples happen, absolutely, through the groundwork, such as artists in schools. I was really heartened a few years ago, when we were able to present a work of scale and expense that was Punch Drunk's Small Wonders, and we there was no sniff. I was worried that there would be a backlash from within the sector, even about the amount of money that a work like that cost, but because it came through with additional funding, and it was, we particularly had gone in terms of our relationship with the festival, we want to be able to, to present works of scale that we couldn't normally do and hear for the first time as a means of doing that, that didn't affect the rest of our festival budget. And I think for local children to see a work of such imagination, and equally kind of blows your mind. And you know, I'm aware that you could kind of if you, you could interrogate the work and go, Oh, we did this or didn't do that. It was a bit English. It was a bit that but at the same time, it was about children's incredible capability to empathise, and go on a creative journey. And so, I think we just have to find the right pockets constantly, like your 450k that you guys jumped on years ago. And we, that's how we can make a difference.

Tony Reekie53:49

Yeah. And there's something about, you know, the discussions that we've started to have, and different forums, in different places, which are starting to look at that thing about, which has been pushed forward by the COVID and the pandemic experience, which is, how well do we actually serve children and young people across Scotland? Are we doing it as well as we could do as a nation, not just as a sector, as a nation, how are we doing that? And how could we do it better? And then you do that thing about going because we have the tools and we have the organisation, we have the people to actually start to reach out to all the different parts of Scotland, and in a sense to go back to that thing about your look at what the Norwegians have in terms of every child having six cultural experiences a year or whatever and actually saying, even if we could get two or three wouldn't that be something you know! And that cultural experience can be anything! It can be what they decide and want it to be. But fundamentally, its starts from the moment they are born. That's the that's the huge difference now and you know, you know, with in some senses fortunate we have a government who are open to those ideas, you know, and our government who are open to something like the baby box, you then go, well, if you are open to the baby box, then what about this as well? What about this kind of thing, which we can actually start to take out and look at

everyone, let's think about what that means, again, things which are really hard to achieve. If we don't have that kind of, the bars way up there, but we still have to try and go there, then the danger is what happens is that we end up in a place where we're actually serving very, very small communities, you know, so it's, it's fundamental stuff for me, but I think we weren't as good a place as any at the moment, because, you know, things are new.

Rhona Matheson55:37

I would certainly agree with that it does feel like there's a, there's a clean slate almost. And I don't, I don't necessarily feel like we're in a really secure kind of place financially and things because actually, at that point, that's probably the piece that is the most fragile, and it will be for all of us. And it's not just, you know, with all of the funders and supporters that we might have, what if what happens next, is going to be critical, because the, you know, the impact of COVID. And how that is paid for is going to have a ripple effect on, on budgets moving forward. In terms of a community of people within the sector that we've got, who are supporting each other. And I think we are, fundamentally, we all want that we want that same thing we want there to the we want the children of Scotland, regardless of how old they are. But children from Scotland from birth, that they're able to access, high quality work, there's absolutely a push around high-quality performance work. But there's also, you know, I think, what's one of the things that I think is interesting for us to think about moving forward is how does this work, and this part of our sector connect with those organisations who deliver participatory, their main function is to do participatory based practice, because we've all got something to offer. And I think if it makes our case stronger, as a whole to be saying, This is what culture could look like, for Scotland's children, but this part of it, you know, I think, but there's gonna be a big group of us in this in our corner, kind of fighting for our, for the kinds of experiences that we make, because it sometimes feels like they get kind of pushed over to one side, because participation is being viewed as being something that's giving the children the skills, you know, it's those kind of creative skills, but that sense of actually, but what does live performance give you? You know, they're the kind of the whole experience the community experience, the empathy, that understanding, all of these things that you get. So you know, I, I am, I am really hopeful, you know, I can't, I can't imagine working in another sector, to be honest, it feels you know, it's so special. And I think we're really privileged actually to, to be doing this work.

Tony Reekie58:00

I'm just responding to the Time to Shine because I'm on holiday when it's when, when that first meeting is on. And I'm actually taking notes of what you're both saying as well. Because it's actually incorporating that into that discussion. They because they asked that question, what can Creative Scotland do that they're not really doing at the moment. And it's it is part and parcel of that thing, which is, you know, they have to, I'm trying to catch it in a diplomatic way. But that thing about saying, you have to stop your obsession with participation, not that participation is a bad thing. But your interpretation of what participation is so narrow, and doesn't actually include the experience of any member of the audience viewing, participating, seeing, listening to something and actually engaging with a piece of art on that basis as being as important as picking up an instrument or reciting a line on stage. It's part and parcel of these things. Because otherwise, it's that thing about going why tell children stories? Is that really not important, is it? You know, and it's unless they engage for that thing about what participation actually means, because it's like, every single child and baby that goes to our show is participating in that



performance, they may be watching it, they might be watching something else for a small while and then watching it and going on stage and then coming off stage and all that kind of stuff, but they are participating in that.

Noel Jordan59:25

All of what you're saying Tony reminds me of my training in drama education as a teacher, it's about making, creating and appreciating. It's, they all you they need to sit in harmony together, then then it's the fully rounded experience, to understand that you need to be able to have, have a go at creating it yourself, but you need to be able to appreciate what others have created and understand why a piece of work resonates with you or doesn't resonate and be able to verbalise that and communicate this.

Rhona Matheson59:58

And I suppose thinking, going back to the beginning of Starcatchers and some of our conversations and thinking about the research that we did was looking at, we created engagement signals about how our audiences were engaging or participating in the experiences that they were having. And being able to, just because a child doesn't appear, doesn't appear to be feeling like focused, doesn't mean to say that they're not participating or, or engaged in, it's just a different type of engagement. And so, I think there's a whole whole suite of things that we could be exploring and shouting about in terms of this, these kinds of performance experiences and why being in an audience with your peers, with your parents with, sharing, you know, this that shared experiences. The other, you know, other kind of pillar of, of what we talk about Starcatchers is that babies are sharing that experience with their significant adult, but also with their peers. And it is really, a really, really important experience to have.

Tony Reekie1:00:59

It's, it's so important. If you and if you think about it, from the point of view of imagine what would have happened if we hadn't had the children's festival in terms of audience experience over that time, and the ripples and that the impact that it has every addition that goes on the, the inspiration other artists get from watching the work, they experienced that the children and the audience have when they're there. Imagine not having that. And instead of that saying, yeah, but we have a series of workshops that are going on all the way through the year. It's like no, no, the workshops are really, really good. But you really, really need this stuff too. Because that gives you the balance. That's where you have the balance. At the moment, we're kind of out of balance.

Noel Jordan1:01:43

And I grew up Tony in a city, the, you know, the second largest city in Australia with no children's festival. I then moved to the largest city in Australia with no children's festival. And you can see and the artists, particularly in Sydney, it's not a healthy sector, it's fractured, and whereas some somewhere smaller like Adelaide that does have a bi-annual festival. That does appreciate the artists who work in this field, there is a market difference in everything, in children's access on a regular over a year, the course of the year, how many times they can engage with work. It's also work that speaks to their culture that is made from people who live in their communities. Not constant imports, you need both you need stories from around the world just as much as you need stories from Grandpa Tony, for example.

Rhona Matheson

I'm just going to say thank you very much, Noel and Tony, for joining me and talking about, talking about baby theatre but then going off on a magical chat about what the future might hold and, you know, watch this space I guess, is all we can say. Thank you both so much for that.

Tony Reekie

Thank you!

Rhona Matheson

I really appreciate it.

Outro

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