



Lets Talk About... Podcast Transcript

Episode 5: What if there was an artist in residence in every early years setting in Scotland?

Featuring Hazel Darwin-Clements, Heather Fulton,
Katy Wilson and Matt Addicott

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

On today's Let's Talk About... I'm going to be chatting about something that I've wanted to for years. Something that Starcatchers advocates for and a model of arts engagement we aspire to. What if there was an artist in residence in every early years setting in Scotland? I am joined by Katy Wilson, Matt Addicott, Heather Fulton and Hazel Darwin-Clements, artists who have worked with Starcatchers in a variety of projects over the last 15 years. Join us as we explore the Starcatchers journey.

Rhona Matheson 1:08

So, I'm delighted this morning to be joined by four artists who have been involved with Starcatchers for, well, nearly the whole 15 years that we have been around. So, I'm going to ask each of you to introduce yourselves and tell us a little about who you are and the kind of work that you make, kind of work that you're interested in. And then we'll take it from there. Matt, why don't you go first?

Matt Addicott 1:34

Okay. My name is Matt Addicott, I'm predominantly a theatre director and performance maker, and an arts administrator as well. But I've worked with Starcatchers mainly to create live performance, some film work as well, and a little bit of, like, in recent years, sort of working as part of a team to do some consultancy work with early years audiences as well. But yeah, predominantly as a theatre maker really like making work that takes place outside of kind of conventional theatre settings, so like with Starcatchers made some work in swimming pools, and libraries. And with Katy inside a large Hoover and with Hazel inside many, many nursery schools looking for, for some stuff for Santa Claus. Anyway, making work. It's a bit kind of unconventional like trying to find places to meet people and to introduce like folk to different things. That's what I'm into.

Rhona Matheson 2:31

Brilliant. And I'm just having a little recollection, but actually you out of all the artists that we've got in the Zoom Room, just now in terms of actual Starcatchers projects, you're the one who had a connection with us, earliest I think, because you were a performer in a Starcatchers' show.

Matt Addicott 3:00

Erm, First Light

Rhona Matheson

Little Light

Matt Addicott

Oh yeah, Little Light. I used to get so annoyed whenever, when anyone made that mistake and I've just made that mistake. Yeah, the with the little blow up...

Rhona Matheson

Yeah, light bulbs, Yeah. Okay, It's all coming back to me now. Heather, do you want to go next.

Heather Fulton 3:23

Yeah, yeah, I'd love to. And so yes, so I'm Heather, and I am associate artist with Starcatchers. And I also was part of the pilot project with Starcatchers, so I was the first director, in that sense to work with and yeah and then that's when I worked with Katy, and another artist called Greg Sinclair and we kind of did that year together, really. And that was really my first introduction to working with babies that young. And it was really interesting because we worked with a researcher, who was micro-analysing what we were doing with the babies, so that was really interesting again we got to experiment loads and have that long time, of a year working in nurseries and yeah discovering what we found interesting about it and what really excited us. So, and yeah, I've made a few productions now with Starcatchers, working with Hazel on the Attic and a development of a new show, that's still in the pipeline. I also have my own theatre company which is called Frozen Charlotte and making work for children and young people and work about children, as well. And yeah, I feel like Starcatchers have been in my life since pretty much my entire professional career.

Rhona Matheson 4:52

Pretty much, and I've certainly been because I was, I worked with you and Katy with Mrs Castle which came before, but that was you know, that was probably one of the first pieces for really young children that was ever made in Scotland, so you know that's, that goes way back so that's you know like 17 years, Heather rather than 15 years. We're all so young really. Hazel what about you?

Hazel Darwin-Clements 5:21

Maybe I am the newbie then probably only like 14 years rather than 15. I did make toast for Mrs Castles, I don't know if that counts. Definitely one of my more significant contributions, I'm sure. So, I'm a theatre maker and a puppeteer and performer, and I do podcasts at the moment, and I write as well. And generally, I'm really proud of the community stuff as well that I've done with Starcatchers so working on Expecting Something with young parents and also I work on Creative Skills with Starcatchers as well so I'm kind of involved in lots of different areas and have been for a long time, and the shows that I've made include like Hup, and Too Many Cooks and The Attic and Shake n Bake, and the Elf Experiment, a few different things, Round in Circles, yeah. And I've also had lots of residencies, which has allowed me to really develop my practice over a long period of time and make like proper meaningful connections, journeys and discoveries I guess over periods of several months with the same families, or the same nurseries and staff so that's been really wonderful, and it has it's been the bulk of my work, I think, for a good while. So, thank you.

Rhona Matheson

Thank you. Katy, over to you.

Katy Wilson 6:48

It's also been the bulk of my whole career since coming out of art college. I met Rhona and Rosie Gibson, who was working with children in North Edinburgh Arts Centre. And one day, Heather came along. Me and Heather started working on a show for Early Years. I'd always been interesting in, after art college, doing some set design and just kind of, I didn't realise how, it just actually came to me quite easily, I'd basically done installation work at art college and kids had loved it – which wasn't particularly my intention, but I was really intrigued by, so I started working with children and then found different people in this sector via trying to work with kids basically. And then ended up doing one of the residencies, the big residencies with Starcatchers at Tramway. Yeah, worked with Hazel, and Matt, and Heather and attempted at the start of that residency, I kind of thought it would be difficult to have a whole year of making work for under 5s, but here like, however many years later, that is what I'm basically still doing, never mind a year. Because it just actually felt like it was the most open, it really actually suits the kind of work I want to make anyway. I kind of want to make work that appeals to adults and their kids genuinely at the same time. But because I came from a visual art background it kind of started by making things like a light installation, and then I tried out making a gig for kids, which was called, is called, Sprog Rock, because it's still going now. But that was started with Starcatchers back at Tramway. And then yeah, I've just kept going and that's my sort of main, the way I look at the world basically is through making work for Early Years. And work right now

outdoors with Starcatchers on Expecting Something, so sort of never out of the way. Even though since Tramway, I've had my own children, they're past the Starcatchers age, I'm now with the babies in the forest basically at Wester Hailes, so always working with little ones.

Rhona Matheson 9:10

Great, thank you. It's just really interesting hearing you kind of talk about some of those experiences that we had some of the work that you've been involved with. And I suppose to go back to the beginning again, what was it about the Starcatchers opportunities that you, you know that were there, so the pilot residency and then the Inspires, so Matt, Hazel and Katy were all involved in our Inspire project, leading year-long residences in different spaces there. But you know what was it that attracted you to the work and kind of applying for that work? Because, like 15 years ago when I was saying to people, I'm going off to manage this pilot Starcatchers project, and it's about theatre for babies. Because at that point it was, we were just zero to three at that point, and, and people looked at me like, you know, I'd grown horns, and, you know, couldn't understand why you would do anything kind of artistic for that age group. So, I suppose I'm curious about you know, what was it that was the catalyst for you in terms of wanting to explore the work?

Hazel Darwin-Clements 10:26

Perhaps for me one of the things was that it was a big challenge, and it was a blank canvas.

Heather Fulton

Yeah

Hazel Darwin-Clements

And that was probably what drew me in, but then what kept me in, was the fact that people really loved it and responded to it and had these kind of really moving experiences in it, and the fact that the challenge, kept going because you to be like truly in the moment and connecting on that day is like an acting or performing experience that you just don't get anywhere else. And you can't just like relax into it and kind of go through the motions. So, I think that kind of journey that year, and I love a challenge a blank space anyway, but I don't know, I don't think I would have stayed once you'd fill that blank space you wouldn't stay if it hadn't been absolutely magical. When you started realising it, and then especially it got even more interesting when you added other layers of like appreciating how that was part of a kind of cultural understanding of how we are with our children, with our babies which has to be one of the most important things that we can talk about and think about, and nurture, right? And, and so and then with the other layer of like, oh and what happens if you start being confident enough to let the babies or the little children lead and to kind of adapt to different groups that you're working with and really include everybody, and so there's just so much, there was just so much to explore. Once we got started, we weren't going by anybody's blueprint.

Heather Fulton 12:04

Yeah, and that's exactly yeah, exactly what I was gonna say as well. It was also something about the length of time, to be able to keep experimenting, and keep trying stuff out and being able to build relationships with nurseries and with groups that would trust you to try things that one of the experiments we did in nursery in Hilton, I think it was Hilton, we had, I think it was balloons tied to our hair. Do you remember, Katy?

Katy Wilson

Yeah

Heather Fulton

You know, and we're just you know it's all kind of really

Katy Wilson

Helium balloons? Yeah, really up high.

Heather Fulton

Yeah. Yeah, so it was just, just totally experimental things that we couldn't have explained at the time, like why we were doing it or what we were just, yeah, we were just kind of following our gut and trying stuff. And the fact that these nurseries that we were working with were supporting us and doing, you know, letting us do that.

Rhona Matheson 13:03

Yeah, I have a very vivid memory of being in that little room in the nursery, where you sort of revealed from behind some covered chairs with you and balloons with kind of just slowly, like, can't remember what else happens, but I definitely remember that.

Matt Addicott 13:26

I think for me there was lots of things going on around that time. Like it felt like, you know, as other people have said like Starcatchers always feels like it has been there in my career, I guess, when you know I finished studying in 2004 and did kind of work for a couple years but then quite quickly, just sort of met like the project I guess really, and like I always bang on about this, Rhona, and you're probably bored of hearing it, but like that moment for me when it was two things I suppose but I think the first thing that happened was going to your symposium, or the, like, one of the first symposiums maybe that the company did and just hearing lots of people from like a whole range of different industries and backgrounds, talking about how important this work was and how significant it can be, and it was really exciting I hadn't, like, kind of, sort of encountered that the thought that this was a, maybe a like an element or a bit of the, like the art form or the or the industry that you could actually go in and, like, have impact, or make you know, like search, kind of learn like do all these things, kind of, like, for the first time as well. So, I guess this is probably like ego things in there as well where you're like, okay, yeah let's go and try things, but it just felt like a really, really exciting project to, to kind of like go and, and try and I guess at that point as well like I didn't know what I was doing with anything,

Heather Fulton

Yeah

Matt Addicott

So to speak is really cool to kind of like work like be in situations where everyone's asking how do we do this, like, what, what can we do, how do we how do we do this, how do we do that. So yeah, I loved it, and I think that's, that's still there, and there's probably 101 things to talk about like in, in terms of how the room is set up or the projects are set up, there's always this kind of curiosity which I think is really cool. But the other point as well was absolutely performing in Little Light where, like, for me it was it was total, I'd never performed for an audience of babies, and, like, as I suspect we all

know, like that feeling of connection with tiny eyes, is unreal like it's really cool. And I think, you know, I kind of stopped trying to persuade people of the, like the benefit or the power or the impacts of the work, and just encouraged them to go and experience it because I don't, I don't think there is any way to kind of, you know, describe it with words. I think you have to be in the room and see but like to see people like impressed with their child. How kind of focused or attentive they were during the experience. Yeah, it's like learning more about themselves and each other in that space. Yeah, I was, just kind of a bit addicted after that, I think.

I'm sure it's probably a terrible performance or whatever but like I just remember one child right at the end of the of the work just completely unprompted, just sort of standing up and clapping. And I'm like, okay, so, you know, he's a few months old. And I'm like, ok can people learn behaviours and this kind of thing, but ah, that's interesting, I can get on with this guy.

Katy Wilson 16:47

I think for me it was like with working with Heather on a show called Peek with Starcatchers I'd kind of like really recognised the creative freedom that you could have. And so, when the residency came up, I sort of knew that I could be trusted to try lots of things out and I think the kind of preconceived idea at that time when people were like, what? Baby theatre? what's the point in that kind of thing. And I wanted to rebel from that a little bit and surprise people because I think at that time say in 2008 or nine, it would have been thought of as a very twee thing, and I thought, I think I can make some stuff that completely turns that on its head and makes it like, absolutely not that. So, I enjoyed trying new things that were like the opposite of twee basically.

Rhona Matheson 17:40

One of the conversations I remember from the Inspire project. So that second phase of working, it started in 2009, yeah, was a conversation that we had with the researcher, so we worked with Sue Young and Nikki Powers, in the pilot project and then there was a great team from Strathclyde who came in to do the evaluation research on the Inspire project. And I just remember it sort of felt like we were having to upskill them in the kind of work that we do you know. I think there was a perception that what we were doing was like theatre in education but applying that in a, in a kind of very early years context and it was kind of saying well no this is not about educating, yes there is an educational there's a learning benefit that comes through this work, and you can apply that to babies and really little children as much as you can with three, four and five year olds. But this isn't about education, this is just about experiencing art and performance and kind of creative experiences that are shared between the babies and their parents and carers, but also the audience collectively. And that's, there's

something really amazing that happens in those performances and I think we've seen it in all of the work that you shared, is this kind of community moment that happens in performance. And there was always something. There's always those things that you can take away, so Matt your experience of that little, that little baby who kind of clapped at the end, in every single performance that we've done, there will be a little kind of little golden moment like that, you know. And I suppose for us, we get to a point where, you know you've seen it, we've made like 30 odd productions. By the time we taut everything up. And so that's, you know, hundreds of experiences maybe near, you know, depending on some, I mean a Little Light, I think we did some ridiculous number of performances of Little Light, so we're probably like 1000 days' worth of, you know, experiences that have been shared. But even though some of those experiences are not new for some of us, because we are, we're in the work. Seeing the, the kind of parent/carer response to the baby response when baby a young child responds always just, it always brings me back to why we do the work that we do. And you know I love that sense of like parents are carers like they're looking at their, their child in a very different way it's that sense of that their child has some agency, and kind of a little bit of independence and a little bit of, you know, they're, they're soaking up this experience in their own way but there's, there sort of connecting that with the parent and whoever else is in the space. But it's that engagement that takes place is so unique that I think that's kind of one of the drivers and why parents are kind of quite often so amazed by what by what happens.

Katy Wilson 21:08

It makes sense like because when you want to go out with your friends, you'd often like think of going to some, like the cinema or like something arts-related to enjoy with them and if no one's done that with their baby yet, suddenly they get a realisation that we could have a lovely time together, like because all you've been thinking about is weaning them or those kinds of things like the daily things that actually you can just have like a really lovely time together doing something that you really enjoy together.

Matt Addicott 21:43

Yeah, it sort of ties into that thing as well like we're hearing people about, like, it's always, there's this little thing that's always felt like it's quite a political, there's a politics to it as well in a really, like, I think quite a positive way, where it's like I want to live in the society that kind of respects, like babies and toddlers enough to kind of produce quality artworks to, you know, for everyone to experience, I think it's, it's like there's something really loving, as well about it and respectful. I guess there's loads of stuff with Starcatchers as well where all the kind of advocacy work and, like, you know the work that you do but that that thing for the rights of the child, and this notion that everyone is entitled to quality, sort of cultural provision, I think, I think it's I think it's really good. I think it's, it's, it's a really lovely, like positive thing, I think it's right.

Heather Fulton 22:36

I was just gonna say that, it is that thing because I think for a lot when I say to a lot of people what I do. The first reaction is oh that's good, that means they'll go to the theatre when they're adults. And, you know, it's like it's not, you know the audience of tomorrow. It's like no, no they're the audience of today. Yeah, and like just changing the mindset and it's like, children aren't unfinished people. They are people, and that is the kind of a lot of the culture we live in is like about wait until they're adults and then they can contribute something.

Katy Wilson 23:12

I was thinking of just when Matt had said about it being a loving, I don't know exactly what he said but something has been a loving thing to being a loving thing to do, as well, because we've been just touring a show to school playgrounds with the early part of the primary schools, called Mixed Up, and it's about emotions and stuff as well, but actually it's mainly been a bit of a party in playgrounds with really good new music and amazing dancers and lovely artwork and a drummer and stuff but the kids responses have been so loving, like it because we give them a chalk as part of it so they can draw whatever they want and often they've drawn like the dancers and written, I love you underneath and want to hug people and like this really overwhelming sense of their love, that they are getting like it's, it's reciprocated because it's such a joyous atmosphere but and the teachers are looking at them with loads of pride, because the kids get to dance and it's always the kids that you don't expect to dance that are right up in the middle giving it laldy. But it's amazing to think as well and like sad to think like how little they've had of that recently so when you do something now, the reaction is pretty big, like we did Sprog Rock with Matt at Platform and that was really joyous and loving as well wasn't it?

Matt Addicott

Yeah

Katy Wilson

And it was really interesting, that sorry this is a tangent, but that was really interesting because it was for the early years, but it really showed me us how much the big kids needed to play and feel freedom like that because the big kids were wild for it because they're just like being a bit starved of these experiences and so just everybody's need to play and enjoy themselves over the last, however long it's been

Rhona Matheson 25:00

I mean I think you're, you're absolutely bang on and I guess I suppose that's some of the things that we're trying to champion at the moment, you know, we've got, we've got babies who have been born in the last 18 months who've barely seen, you know their

relatives, their grandparents their aunts or uncles, barely had opportunities to, you know, participate in, you know, whether it's baby sensory type classes or Bookbug, you know the kind of Bookbug sessions in libraries and things like that. So it's a very kind of a very different experience for those little children and then you have the impact on preschoolers and then children just generally that have, you know they've been in, they haven't been in school or they've been in school in a very strange set of circumstances they're not having access to all of the other stuff that they would normally have access to and I suppose that's where the kind of work that we do becomes even more important than it was before you know I think there's I, you know, I'll shout about the intrinsic value of the arts, particularly for very young children till the cows come home but actually the impact of what's happened over the last 18 months, to me, means that there's even more need. And if we're looking at, because we don't really understand what impact that will have on those children for a number of years to come. So, what we need to do now is be is ensure that there's as many positive kind of rich, arts and cultural experiences that that children, young people can access as a means of kind of trying to scaffold against some of the challenges that they've had over the last wee while. There's a little soapbox moment from me.

Katy Wilson 26:56

That's true because some kids have not done anything like they've not been out, they've not like was particularly anxious parents and nowhere, nothing that accessible I know from working on Expecting Something at Wester Hailes that they're, sometimes I asked have they done this before and they'll be like they haven't done anything before, it's like, they only see me, you know, so it wasn't long ago that kids were coming out and actually seeing other kids' faces and stuff as well so never, yeah,

Hazel Darwin-Clements 27:29

Yeah, it's my daughter's third birthday in a few weeks, and I don't have lots of people to invite this year because she hasn't been to any classes or she hasn't had any arts experiences but I think, on the flip side of that, like, I, we have had a lot of calmer experience, she's had a lot of time with me that she wouldn't have had, we've had a lot of nature experiences that we wouldn't have had so, hopefully, there are lots of, lots of learning with that as well about not just kind of more, better, bigger like how many like classes can we fit in our diary, but I would love for her to now be able to come when, while it's allowed to some really beautiful quality experiences. Do I mean so I suppose I'm saying what I think is Starcatchers do really well is a few quality experiences. It's not just about as much as we can fit into our tiny little lives that are already chaos with the whole like eating and sleeping and, oh, yeah, all the essentials.

Rhona Matheson 28:41

Yeah so thinking about some of that and some of the stuff that you were touching on, Katy, I suppose it's about, you know, a big strand of our work has been about community engagement, and the community engagement work that we do now you know to me connects back to those residencies that you were all doing kind of back in those first kind of project phases of Starcatchers and so can you talk a bit more about what that experience was like, that a sense of being rooted in a, in an arts venue or in a community for a kind of a period of time and, and kind of some of the things that maybe you've kind of continued to build on and in your work, because of that experience that you had then.

Matt Addicott 29:30

Yeah, I mean like I'm still, I'm still kind of in residence, like that's like a 10 year, but like, I think it's one of those things you, you stick around long enough, you end up with the keys, but like for me, it's like starting from, from that model has kind of informed everything that's followed. Like, I can't really remember the original job description, but like, I'm sure it kind of had this thing of, although is this sort of interesting territory to negotiate with nursery schools and childcare centres at the beginning, where it was kinda like I just want to, I'm just going to be here. Just like I'm not necessarily going to bring any work, or at least to start with I'm not going to, don't change the nursery to kind of, like, like, have an end on, this is a performance, because there's, the artist is coming in, or something like that but it was quite an interesting conversation to have, and that now I feel like I've had it a lot. Like you know I'm quite comfortable with having it. Is that thing of just, like, from the beginning, collaborating with the audience, I think was quite revolutionary for me and my understanding of what like practice could be, but it's so important. And like so many, like, small and big things have come out of it, just in terms of like knowing how like form and content, like wearing in like the, then through the role that I've had with Platform so originally, I went in residence with this venue and Starcatchers and then kind of moved into different roles with the organisation, programming and now kind of like leading the organisation, but like those kinds of experiences, like, kind of manifest in different ways, like they, they're certainly the model of residencies that we look to do all the time whenever there's funding and resources to do it. That model of, of kind of listening, as a first kind of or as a really important bit where you're just like looking at what is happening in that setting, what the children are doing what the adults are doing in that space what the parents and carers need or require from that interaction. And then it like turns into things like Play Cafe, which, which ran here before the pandemic for about seven or eight years, just in a way that I don't think I'd have got to had I not been listening and observing what was happening, or that been a thing. And in all the different shows and experiences have been involved with like it. It's been really beneficial to collaborate so

closely with the audience to kind of just be embedded in different places and see what's going on in a way they get really, like, I think it would be really positive for other like performing arts for other audiences to do something similar, because I think sometimes it's really detached from what you want as an audience member and it would, it probably would have changed and evolved had people being embedded in a particular setting for a period of time.

Heather Fulton 32:36

It's also though it's like, you know, because I've moved I was in Edinburgh for a long time and now I'm in Moray. And it's that idea of the it's a two-way thing with the community, you know what you are giving, you're getting back, you know, and it's been lovely. We've got a show touring the moment called Woodland Creatures, and I'm seeing people I know, I'm recognising and I feel like there's this two-way thing where they're appreciating the work that I'm doing and I'm appreciating giving something to their families. So, and it just feels so much more meaningful when you've got a relationship with your own community. And in this, you know, the kind of system we've got into with theatre and touring is that we, we land in a place for a day, and we you know we do a performance and we leave, and apart from it, you know, being really bad for the environment, it's also not that satisfying I think as a, as a touring company you know it's and that's not to say obviously we want people to, to have experiences of different shows and different performances and different nationalities, you know, different cultures of work, but, but yeah, it feels like that's a real, you know, we all know the benefit of being able to really embed ourselves in communities and that's why, you know, can we do more of that and can we kind of look at changing the way that the system is working, so that we can just do that. For me, my frustration is that, you know, we'll do a show once a year or once every two years. So, when you know you have that great experience with children, and you feel like you know you've really connected. And then there's not something to follow up, there's nothing to follow up with that and, you know, there's definitely the feeling that I'm getting from doing this show is that people are so desperate for things and so loving these experiences, and it would be lovely to be able to say to them, oh, there's something in a couple of weeks.

Rhona Matheson 34:43

Yeah, it's just that thing it's like taking work to those kind of bigger venues, is really, really important but also being able to get those performances into community venues, whether it's a community centre or a library or a hall is also really, really important because, you know people from, you know, people won't necessarily travel to somewhere like Inverness from Elgin or somewhere like that. So how do you, how can we have a model that is about a consistency of access, but can also be, you know, socially, environmentally, kind of appropriate. So, I think there's a whole, there's a whole

load of areas of work that need models that need to be explored over the coming years as we kind of come out of this, this period of the pandemic and, and, you know, without reverting to form you know that's my biggest concern is that we just go back to how we did things before because everyone knows how that works. But we all know that that didn't, there was a lots of things there that didn't work very well. And so, we need to take this as the opportunity to make those changes and do things differently.

Matt Addicott 36:02

Yeah, I think you put it really well as well, Heather, because it is that kind of like that local response, I think is really important I think it's really like it's helped demystify things as well. I think there's like loads of language and things that are loaded. Like, if you if you're coming to them for the first time like even the notion of having an artist come to visit, like your, your, your, your setting or your kind of nursery or such things can be quite, I think for some it's quite intimidating where it's like it's unexplained but like it was really useful to, and it is not quick I think it benefits from, like, from a sustained long relationship, but you just build trust, like, and, you know, sort of familiarity, I guess, and then, and that feels like a positive, positive thing to do. Like especially when you're kind of touring around and parachuting in and kind of like leaving quickly it's like well, it's sometimes hard to kind of know what, maybe what the aim behind the work was what the ambition or the hope, but I think it's easier to track when you're making it alongside the community or in full sight or plain sight of the community so then it it. I don't know, there's something that happens which is quite transformative I think it's the thing it's a good thing. And I guess that's where things like really specifically like that is exactly where Play Cafe came from was this desire to knowing that there was an audience there but knowing that resources meant that you could only ever sort of see that audience or have something to offer that audience like once or twice a year but wanting to see more of them. So, finding ways, I'm guessing like that's sort of similar for Expecting Something as well, right? That that regular contact then becomes a way to have a conversation that's more sustained rather than just, oh you've enjoyed that. See in six months.

Rhona Matheson 37:51

It's all about that consistent contact, and I think that for me that was a lot of the learnings from the work that we did on those residency projects that you were involved with, and it was sort of really building on that, because, so my observations from the Inspire residency: so the framework for that was that you got paid for your time so you didn't have to be kind of doing other stuff, necessarily, and you had to make a piece of work but you all made three or four. And you had to engage with childcare settings or create your own kind of parent and baby groups in the

communities that you were in. My observation from that was that those, the relationships with those kind of, the settings or the groups were kind of a bit sporadic so you might go in to your nursery for four weeks like four-week block or might have a six-week block over there you might then be going to different groups in between. And that was brilliant in terms of building those relationships and making those offerings to those groups. But when we are looking at the, the real potential of what can happen when there's a consistent contact between artists and the same groups, that's where I started to kind of go, we need to unpack that more. So that's why we did they ended the Playground residency which was the first residency project we did after we became a kind of a company, and the artists were based with childcare settings or family centres, that's where Shake and Bake, that Hazel was involved with came from. And the response from that was phenomenal actually the kind of the feedback from parents, but also from the staff in the settings, mainly because of how the projects were constructed, and the relationships that we had with the staff, and how they valued appreciated understood what was being offered to them. Because it was a bit of a gift you know you've got an artist, you don't have to pay anything towards this, but you've got an artist who's going to come into your site and work alongside the staff for you to kind of more or less a year, a year's worth of time it was just, it was amazing but it was then we there's limited resourcing nowadays for those kinds of residency projects. I mean I'd love for us to be doing the Inspire type residences, again, but you know that was a huge budget that we had for delivering four of those simultaneously. But that's how our community engagement work has evolved, that sense of saying, well, are there other ways of constructing this and Expecting Something has been in Wester Hailes since 2014. And then it was in Fife for a number of years and then you know when we've done these other projects in between. And the work evolves from that. And I guess you've all, you've all experienced that you know the kind of constructs of those engagement projects are different depending on what they're what they are. Hazel can you talk a little bit about Nickum?

Hazel Darwin-Clements 41:14

Yeah, I was just thinking of Nickum as you were talking about that. So we went up to Aberdeen, I went to Aberdeen, every week for six months, and worked in partnership with a composer called Abby Sinar, and we went to one family setting, and it was like a childcare setting and actually there was, we were working with social workers as well and the families that they were supporting to come into that session but it was also open to other families because it was just supposed to be a space that they could make friends and they could have like a really beautiful experience each week. We always had live music, and we always had something visual and interesting that we were exploring. And then we also worked in a nursery and actually in both the settings, the nursery, and the Family Centre, I think that we had an almost unintended impact on the settings in terms

of the staff having like quite a journey with us. And I suppose that connection with those people who do have that continued contact with young people and the families and over years and like not over at six months is a long residency for me and it was wonderful, but they have, you know that experience from when the child is born until when they go to school and perhaps even longer. And so, making sure that those relationships really work is really important. And so, you're not just parachuting in and parachuting out again. So yeah I like really enjoyed that and actually also felt like creatively we had the opportunity to make the most amazing show together, that we could have made, like if we'd gone into a studio and just worked on that on our own, for even a long period of rehearsals like even for six weeks, we never would have come up with what we came up with, it's because of those children in those families and their input, so we definitely got as much out of it as, hopefully they got out of it. Because I think over that period, perhaps those children had development as well, the staff developed the settings developed, and, and in the especially in the family centre when people had really meaningful friendships to come out of that and yeah just maybe changing, I mean some of, like for example, somebody might say like this has changed the atmosphere in our house because we are using a lot of music. So, we put on music and they're like, so now I just put on music, and we relax together, rather than feeling like I constantly have to entertain my child or something like that. So, like I am no way, trying to say that they might not have achieved that by themselves, or they might have not have found something else similar, but it's their journey, you know, I'm on that journey with them and adding something just by perhaps the care that we put in to what we brought and the energy that we had. Having just spent lockdown with very small children myself and being quite worn out, and even if I have like artistic skills myself, for somebody else just to come and share that with me would've just been really lovely. And so, I can appreciate the situation that they were in at that time now, a bit better. Yeah, so that was a nice, really nice experience.

Rhona Matheson 44:26

Yeah, it was a great project. And then the evolution of Hup, but actually could you talk a bit more about the evolution of Hup for where we went from, because obviously it was made, there was a work in progress that came from Nickum? Then the parameters that you set, around the actual production.

Hazel Darwin-Clements 44:43

I think we were trying. Initially, our interest was could we create a piece that toured to nurseries and childcare settings and family settings. So, we spent quite a bit of time just visiting lots of places and talking to them about what they would like and what they're picking up on what their anxieties about that would be and it's not something that happens all the time. Quite often you get shows that tour into schools, but not so

much into settings and they're going well, we don't have the space, and so we're like, we're, we've made something that's adaptable to suit your space and it will be fine. Oh, we don't have, you know, synchronised naps and you're like that's okay because if some of the children come that day and some don't, then we're relaxed about that and just kind of building up those relationships and starting that conversation. But we also found that there was a desire to put it in a theatre, sometimes, and that it was really beautiful if we did, and we had a set and we lit it, and that we could do both at the same time, so we even had a tour which was flexible, into different spaces. And, and that's really accessible for people because it's not every family that would be able to afford or want to go or feel like the theatre was for them. So, it's always important, isn't it to do work that reaches out to all of the children, so that everybody has access.

Rhona Matheson 46:06

Katy, can we talk about Blue Block Studio? It was one of the most, I suppose it's just one of the most, it was probably the biggest piece of work that we've shared because of the because of what it, what it is. So, and how we toured it as well so can you, can you kind of talk us through Blue Block Studio?

Katy Wilson 46:26

Yeah, so basically the point where I thought of the idea for Blue Block Studio, I had a little boy he was crawling, he's now 9. But, yeah, he was crawling around and, and I just had this really, really big feeling like the world wasn't made for him like everything was either dirty or ugly, or smelly like the old soft plays or like, I just was not satisfied with his experience of like where he got to go and roam around, and it just didn't feel nice enough so I was like, I want to make up a bespoke space that has beautiful lighting, beautiful sound, and feels very clean and feels inspiring and like, basically we turned it was like an art gallery but where you could touch and play with anything and the way that you wanted to do it. And I wanted to make a pop-up space. Wasn't that pop-up in the end but had the feeling of a pop-up space because it, one of my favorite locations that I went to was a shopping centre where people were walking past with their bags of shopping and they would just put them down by the sides and come in and stuff so it really was catching people unawares, which felt really nice because it was like this quite magical, nicely lit space. It was for under 24 months because I specifically wanted to make it we actually made it one-to-one or two-to-one like we wanted to create this space that was nurturing for the adult and the child together and say if there was an older sibling or something sometimes, and this is true at Expecting Something as well, because quite easily the older one can kind of take over, and you can forget to look in the eyes of the baby and see what they need as well because there's this one like bombarding the space or whatever so we wanted it to be like, really, like a bonding experience as well where everybody would have a lovely time together and the music helped with that as well. Yes, it was quite specific in a way.

Rhona Matheson 48:46

Yeah, it was just that sense of having a visual art installation, that babies could kind of take over and play with everything in anything in that space. And that sound that soundscape that Kim Moore created, it was really that sort of, that was the narrative that drove the experience.

Katy Wilson 49:08

It was your own kind of journey, but it was the music led it through somewhere so yeah actually that there was a bit of a journey to it, but it was like your own thing.

Rhona Matheson 49:18

I always loved was that that kind of point at the end we're, like, parents were like, we want to stay we just want to stay for it like they wanted it to be, because it was only 45 minutes but they like wanted it to be twice that, but you could actually see that the babies were so stimulated, that they were all just kind of falling asleep literally as they were being taken out of the space, but that, you know, it was right for them. And I think there's this thing for us as adults, the adults were kind of saying, we've never had this kind of experience before, and we love it. And so that's why we want it to be we want it to be longer. And also remember in Mull, because there's nothing was ever, you know, that was the first time we'd ever taken anything to Mull, I think, and certainly for that age group, and you know the parents coming almost on a daily basis because this experience was there and accessible to them. And just, yeah, it was just fantastic in that sense.

Katy Wilson 50:22

Yeah, yeah, it was quite crazily like, we had a feedback box. And it was like ridiculous there was like, never anything negative, it was a real experience that I've had so it tapped into something for other people as well, like we do it there is a need, like for that. And people since like, Xana has been like I wish that was here for Kia, like people, there is, there is a beautiful spaces that are completely suitable for little ones aren't that easy to come by.

Rhona Matheson 50:53

We're gonna have to reinvent Blue Block Studio.

Katy Wilson

That's fine.

Heather Fulton 50:58

Such a shame that these are being made, and where is it, is it sitting in a store somewhere?

Rhona Matheson

Yeah

Heather Fulton 51:04

That could be an installation somewhere for a month, two months, six months, you know, it could be being used all the time and it's again, the way these things are set up that all these beautiful shows that we have, you know, children can be seeing these, like, weekly, you know, daily and it could be, there's such a body of work that Scotland has built up.

Rhona Matheson 51:30

Might need a bigger team to facilitate that, but, you know.

Heather Fulton 51:34

You know it's not saying that it's just Starcatchers, but you know that there's a, yeah there's a way of taking advantage of all this work.

Katy Wilson 51:43

Yeah, your shows as well, Heather, like with Valentina's Galaxy and Too Many Penguins like they should be there every year, somewhere.

Rhona Matheson 51:50

We just need to figure out a kind of a new model, and, you know, there's the government's new culture committee are doing a kind of a, an investigation it's there, they've asked for calls for submissions around, you know what culture funding might look like. Initially there's focus on 22-23 but it's also then saying, actually a lot of the things that we're talking about now are actually about the long term. And, you know if there was some increased investment, it doesn't need to, you know, increased investment in terms of culture budget, like a small increase we have a massive difference across the whole sector. But if we could come up with some collaborative models, I think, you know, we could really revolutionise the kinds of experiences that are offered, absolutely for babies and young children but actually for people across the board. There's then ways of us looking at if this kind of work becomes embedded in our communities. And it just becomes part of what it is to grow up and then to live in Scotland, then actually, what are the other ripples that can come from that in terms of how we operate as a society can be absolutely transformational. But it would take, you know, it's, it would take a couple of generations to kind of bed in, but if there was a sort of a vision and a will there, then it could be incredible.

Hazel Darwin-Clements 53:20

If we have something like solid and sustainable as a place I think is really important and I'm thinking about the Forgotten Forest residency, yeah. In the Botanics for like six months, and we actually got lots of complaint letters when we took that away. Because people we're so angry because we had built up somewhere that they could go for free with their children, and we did perform there and we changed it we had different artists every week bringing something new to the space to both change the space so it changed with the seasons, but also to bring up small performances, but the rest of the time it was just a safe place that people could crawl around and there was something interesting there but it was very open ended so that their play was creative and imaginative. If we could have a few of those dotted about it would just give people something solid but they could build something sustainable from. And it wouldn't end up in somebody's garage. I've got a cellar full of shows.

Katy Wilson 54:16

Yeah, so have I. I feel like somebody out there could have an idea for how we could do this.

Rhona Matheson 54:25

Maybe we just need to have a little, a powwow, and together and just kind of go, right, how can we do this and then go and speak to some funders and come up with a suggestion.

Hazel Darwin-Clements 54:38

We need to not think of it as an annoyance as well not thinking, oh this is really irritating we can't keep working in the same way it's like the moment that we've all felt 15 years ago when Starcatchers started, which was like, there's going to be something new, something interesting, a big challenge, let's all get on board with that and see what we can make happen. And find out along the way, what works and what doesn't and, yeah, that's what we're good at, that's what attracted us to this work.

Katy Wilson 55:05

And it is always exciting to like do something new. And, but you can also take we can take the things that we've already made, and you know, put them in a forest instead or whatever feels like my like, outdoor agenda, like, you know, there's so many good shows out there that need to that yet have so much more life in them and kids would really love. With a new fresh, fresh pair of eyes as well maybe.

Matt Addicott 55:32

Yeah I think it's tricky. Isn't it because like an old model, or like the thing that always quite often you hear is like talking about it in purely financial terms about like a smaller audience and it being hard to kind of cover the costs and do all that kind of stuff. So there is that, and that is, we can talk more to that or we can go there but there's so much kind of time and money, and resource that's kind of ploughed into trying to find an audience for a one off show, or to do that thing and it's so well if you, if you have an audience, or if you have a community, it's always there, that's using your building or using like the woods, and it's, there's, there's a group of committed kind of people that you've built trust with over a period of time, and you don't have to spend the other bit of money to get them there, when the one show comes along a year like it's, I don't know. Yeah, I think it's worth chatting further about this.

Rhona Matheson 56:22

Let's do that.

Hazel Darwin-Clements 56:23

It's quite an interesting thing about this touring sustainability conversation as well where what you really want is for people to walk to the show, rather than drive to the show. And so, if you go to them and you go to their community hall, and they're nearby then one, even though I'm making one train journey, and ideally, without too much stuff like physical stuff because that's sustainable but with, like, twinkle in my eye. You know, carry with me lightly.

Heather Fulton 56:59

Yeah, yeah, that also, like we've because that's what we tried to do with this tour was take it to local places. But what we found was a lot of the time people just travel to the date that suits them better. You know we went to Lossiemouth, you know, and lots of people travelled to get to Lossiemouth. It wasn't local people that came. Yeah, we went to Fochabers and it was all local people that came, so it's like you know it's kind of but there's not the length of tour as well because that's what I've always felt like the length of time you're in a place because it's word of mouth and then what happens often is that frustrating thing about, you know, they've missed it, it's gone.

Rhona Matheson 57:41

I think there's definitely potential in this sort of Slow-Touring model where you can be in a venue or a kind of a community for, you know, a few days at least if not a week. And so that you're getting beyond that kind of one, the one nightstand or the or the one morning stands that we would do with our work. And that's certainly what we're, we're trying to move towards. But you know I think there's a, there's a mind shift that needs to

happen within venues. And I think the venues and the funders need to kind of really get their heads around that approach because I remember with a Small Story, that we made with Andy Manley and Andy Michaelis from a theatre in Berlin, we did that, we were a week in kind of four reasonably sized venues across the tour because we wanted to try a different approach. And in some of those in two of those communities, it worked really well because the venues, well, one of them was the children's festival so that was sort of automatically kind of did really well. But the other venue, it had kind of a better understanding of how you kind of market to kind of audiences for this kind of work the other two venues, and their approach was very much like how they would market, a Christmas show like a Panto, and it was like well we do a mailout to schools, and it's like well this is not this is not a show for schools, this is a show for two to five year olds. So the onus then came on us to do the work to find their audience, and there's just something fundamentally not right about that because, yes, the those audiences become our audience in terms of that piece of work, but those are audiences that those venues should then have been really nurturing and saying well actually, you know, there it comes back to that point about, you know, really little children being entitled having a cultural entitlement and right to access work, and that they are, you know, human beings of now and not human beings of the future. And so, you know, there's a real missed opportunity for those venues to really unpack how they were then, you know, developing relationships with those children and families and settings to then think about what other provision might be made available to, I mean that was quite a few years ago now, I think doing that approach now, would probably be quite different because I think a lot of venues are thinking about this audience in a in a slightly different way although I think we've still got quite a long way to go.

Heather Fulton 1:00:28

Yeah, because they're there. They're there, we know that they are, we know that these families are here. So, why aren't they, this should be a really easy sell. It's a great experience, you know, it fills so many of their needs.

Rhona Matheson 1:00:44

So, if you were to think back across your whole experience of working with Starcatchers, the last 15 years, what are your highlights of Starcatchers?

Matt Addicott 1:00:55

I'll start by saying, like, one of the things I haven't said, but like, when in residency and like, just not as well, like before and after, like it's always felt like there's a lot of openness and generosity and support like between like peers and colleagues and friends in the work that's being made, like, I guess, I suppose, particularly when there were four of us going through similar experiences the same time it felt like it was, you know, a lot

of time was spent, kind of blurring the lines between work and like you know chatting shop, like when you weren't working or whatever but it was really cool to feel like there were other people doing similar things, and that that kind of happened like and continues to happen in a way but I saw when I think back that period of maybe, I don't know, five years or whatever, felt really like just part of a community of artists making work, so yeah that was, that was cool.

Heather Fulton 1:01:48

Yeah, one of the things for me was it's this kind of work and this kind of industry is that you feel like you are, or I feel, like a lot of the time, I have to prove myself and explain myself or justify what I'm doing so, having a relationship with a company like Starcatchers for such a long time, you know and that has been you know nourished, it's not been working with the company full time over that time at all, but it still feels like it's an organisation that I'm a part of. And it just feels like it's, it's an organisation that trusts me and understands what I'm trying to do, and that I don't have to justify, and I don't have to explain every time, which means that I can push myself creatively, knowing that I have that backing and that support and that's what, you know, that's what the good things come from as well. Otherwise, we'd all be stuck just making the same show.

Hazel Darwin-Clements 1:02:52

For me when you ask that question, like there's some images popped into my head. There's me with like red cheeks being an elf in the car waiting for Matt who had forgotten his notebook to come out during a massive school run in Easterhouse with loads of parents being like why is there three adults with red cheeks in the car, and standing in an Alien Costume outside a creche being like, are they gonna invite us in with all these little faces pressed up against the window being like looking at our spaceship that we'd landed outside, and, and yeah, like there's throwing Rice Krispies all over every theatre in Scotland which we still get comments about today, because they're still clearing up the Rice Krispies from the end of that show, which was hilarious. Yeah, like so, just loads of images of joy and fun things that I've been able to do, courtesy of Starcatchers.

Katy Wilson 1:03:53

Same here they're just like the images of like different kids' reactions or little families like having a great time and stuff but then I suppose like just last week in the school, some of the feedback from Mixed Up that we've just had like a kid shouting as they're leaving you: that was the best thing that ever happened to me my whole life! And one kid shouted, which school are you going to next cos I'm going to move school. And all that kind of stuff is just like fresh in my memory, and there's lots of chat about Mixed Up feeling free, which was not a thing I've thought about and lots of kids just felt their main feeling was feeling free which I think is quite beautiful, and maybe a little bit sad as well. But I'm glad that

we've managed to like give them the creative experience that lets them feel free. But I genuinely don't know if it wasn't for Starcatchers if I'd still be doing arts stuff like I feel like it's been a massive like arts studio like experimentation that if I hadn't found I don't actually know what I'd be doing right now. So, I've got a lot of gratitude to everyone.

Rhona Matheson 1:05:04

And I've got a lot of gratitude for all of you. I mean, like I said at the beginning, you know, we, I'm not an artist, and even though there are times when I've threatened that I might do something I've never done it. And I'm now at a point where I'm never going to but you know we can, we can't do the work that we do without you, you know it's so fundamental, all the experience and practice and curiosity and creativity and artistry that you and the other artists that we work with bring to us as an organisation because, you know, all of what we do is informed by what you're interested in, the kinds of work that you might want to make or explore or, you know, give you the challenge you know that's the kind of thing that excites me in terms of career we can be going in the future. There's lots of things that we've learned, and I hope that we've taken on board the kind of feedback that we've had from you all as we've worked with you in different ways over the years to adapt and do things differently, where we've needed to or, you know, really hold on to the positive things that make this work really exciting and satisfying and challenging. I've even come back to challenging, I love the fact that, you know, I do think this work should be challenging if it wasn't challenging, I think it would be really, really dull. But, you know, I know that there are times when we're all sort of slightly tearing our hair out because of things that we're trying to navigate in different, you know, different aspects of the work of the organisation but it's brilliant when you see, you know, the outputs of the work, whether it's whether it's an, you know, an Expecting Something session or whether it's in a production or whether it's early years professionals, being totally inspired by the connections that we make with the artists who are delivering on that Creative Skills programme, it's all just, it's incredibly rich, and that's what we need to hold on to as we move forward and make adjustments.

1:07:23

I just want to say a big, massive thank you to you all for your time this morning. I think that's been a really brilliant conversation and hopefully people listening will feel inspired and have had a little insight into what it's been like to have been working on, on some of our work over the last 15 years so thank you very much.

Rhona Matheson 01:00:53

Thank you for listening to the Let's Talk About... podcast. The music used in this episode is by Marcus Britton, Matt Elliot, Nick Padgett Tomlinson and Barney Strachan from Mixed Up by Katy Wilson. You can view the transcript of this episode at www.starcatchers.org.uk

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