

Transcript - Podcast – A career in performance and production

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Speaker: Stephanie Smart

Katie:

Hello, this Future Me podcast has been brought to you by the University of the Highlands and Islands Careers and Employability Centre. My name is Katie Masheter and in this Episode I'm speaking to Stephanie Smart. Stephanie teaches on our drama programme at the university. She's a trained actor, director and producer. Across her career she has worked with companies like National Theatre for Scotland, Grid Iron Theatre company, Strange Town Theatre, Artichoke Trust, Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Screen Academy Scotland, Canada Hub, Eden Court Theatre and Marvel studios to name a few. In this episode we'll hear more about Steph's creative practice. So let's get started.

Hi Steph, how are you doing?

Steph:

oh good thank you and yourself?

Katie:

Good! We'd love to hear about you and your career to date.

Steph:

Yeah, sure. So it's kind of an interesting one actually. From a young age, acting was what I wanted to be involved in. I wanted to be an actor and that was that, there was no changing in my mind. At the age of 17, I went away to go to college at Dundee. And I lasted a week, but I wasn't ready to be away from home. I was still so young, in my mindset. So anyway, so I then started working in IT, and I worked as an IT consultant for four years, and then I came to realise this is not really where I want my life to be. But during that time, I became really ill. I have a condition called ME, and at my worst I was bedridden for 8 and a half months, and I had to relearn how to speak, how to feed myself, how to walk as there had been so much damage done to the muscles just from being bedridden for so long. It caused me to question, you know, what do I want to life. And so I'd gone back to the IT work and, and they treated me really differently. It wound me up. I was like 'I haven't really changed and it's still the same person', but you're treating me like I'm not capable of doing the work. And so at that point, I decided to go back to college, and I did my higher English because I had failed it twice at secondary school. This is funny because now part of my degree is literature, which is hilarious. So learning point number one. There's more than one way to get to where you want to be. Yeah, I started back at college part-time, but I was also volunteering at a local primary school just teaching drama to them and that was so much fun. I did that on a Thursday on a Friday afternoon, we'd just play drama games and then we'd work towards production. It kind of reignited the spark that was missing, I guess. So then after that point things kind of quickly spiralled. I finished my higher English. I then went on to an agency acting performance at Inverness college. And then I went on to Edinburgh Napier University and did acting and English Lit there. And then again, that whole time being driven by 'I want to be an actor', 'I want to be an actor'. And then I got to fourth year. And I went, 'I don't know if I want to be an actor anymore'. I'd found out that producing and directing, mostly for theatre experience, although I do have some experience for short film as well, was the direction I wanted to take. But through the whole four years of being at Napier, I was working on short films. I've done about 13 short films in total that I'd acted in, and I had done short theatre skits. I was also working with theatre schools. So working Razzmatazz theatre, working with

Stagecoach Theatre, TFX up here. so I would be living in Edinburgh but then I'd come up to the Highlands most weekends. So yeah the whole time, you know, making contact and chatting to people, being interested in what work they were doing. As part of my 4th year project we had to have some kind of performance output, whether that was a short film, or whether there was a theatre piece and then we did it in the fringe. So I chose to do a film. And I produced and wrote a short film. So that was kind of what I was being graded on, but the guys had asked me to work with Mainframe theatre to see if I was interested in directing them. And I said yes, having never really, you know, I did a module in directing but I had never really grasped any major understanding of it, and it was amazing. I loved it. I loved every second of it. And we got five-star reviews at the Edinburgh Festival. And so that was like this, this is where I want to be. I was working in a bar, and I was still teaching drama schools on a Saturday, and I wasn't really going anywhere. I'd kind of come to the point of standstill, and at this point I was working with Strange Town. And so, teaching them in the evenings, I was teaching at TFX at the weekends, and then I was at a bar in between. So you know balancing all these, these things. I was applying for so many jobs, anything, I was looking for something that was sustainable and that was long term. But in the arts, they are quite difficult to come by, and it was all soul destroying, it was a really, tough time. And I think that you need to have, you need to remind yourself why you're doing what it is that you're doing. Yeah, I applied to the masters, and yes I was offered a place, and it was an ongoing joke actually, between me and my pals. So in in first year, I was in a shared flat with a forensic psychologist, a social scientist, and a mechanical engineer. And then there was me. What do you do? 'I do acting'. And that's not to downplay the skill and talent involved in acting. But it was that perception of acting versus these other disciplines. So anyway, I went on to do a Master's for a year. I worked with Marvel Studios on Avengers Infinity War. So I was doing location marshalling on that, which in itself as a role is not dreadfully exciting, but the opportunity to be on set and seeing how they film stuff was incredible. I also worked with Artichoke Trust on their processions project, which was to celebrate women getting the vote, and we did this big massive march in Edinburgh, but it was also coordinated with London and Ireland, and Cardiff, and that was amazing, but all of these opportunities have been because I've known people, and have proven in past work that I'm capable. Chat to people, get them invested in who you are, and what you want to do, and where you want to go. That takes us up to... I graduated in June, 2017. I had come up to Inverness college UHI as a visitor to do a chat about career pathways and where I was, and then through that, they then said that there was a position available, and they wanted me to apply. And here we are, three years later.

Katie:

This is why I love this podcast series because you think you know someone, and then you hear the backstory and there's always challenges, there's always aha moments, there's always a lot of self-doubt maybe in the first few years of your career. Leaving university feeling like you've got a bit of a background knowledge in something but you don't know where you're going to take it and yeah, you have clearly shown major character Steph, with strength and resilience, going through such a challenging time with your health, and then I guess that must have given you a different perspective in a lot of ways on how you approach life and how you approach opportunities. And then the ultimate portfolio career, juggling so many different things, and that is a representative of so many creatives. Thank goodness that you're able to do that, because you bottle all these great ideas you've got and share them with so many. You have touched on the perception of acting. And so that kind of leads on to the next point, like working in the arts and creative industries, how people perceive it. I know we've touched on this before about the consumption of the Arts and Media, and performance, and it's kind of almost expected to be there, maybe with a lot of people not realising the talent, skill, time and dedication that goes in behind the scenes to churn out that content. So,

you want to give us just a bit of an overview of your thoughts on working in the arts, obviously things have changed massively during COVID-19, do you have any idea of what the future might look like?

Steph:

Gosh that's a big question. Before I get to the future, I kind of want to talk about the present. I guess, you know as students who want to go into the creative arts, I'd say absolutely do it for sure, because it's so rewarding. There's a lot to be said for being creative. And I know that there's kind of a lot more research now that is being done into creative practice and wellbeing, and that's definitely part of where my academic research interests lie. But you have to want to be in the creative industries, to be in the creative industries. It's not, in my opinion, an industry that you can just kind of waltz into and hope for the best. Although there are some lucky people out there, that works for them. But I think because of the level of rejection that you are up against. Because of such an oversaturation, particularly looking at it from an acting perspective. You absolutely have to want it, and you have to be able to take those knock backs and not take them personally. And you know, have your little wallow, eat your ice cream, pull up your pants and get on with the next one. You can't let it put you off, because if you can't survive that, you are not built for it, and that's the harsh truth. But it's not a rejection of your character, necessarily. The wonderful thing about our own brains is that no one else is inside. You know no one else can hear what's going on, so you know your standing in, ready to go into an audition and no one else can hear the talk that you're giving yourself. No one can hear that, all they see is the energy that you bring into the room, and yeah, if you don't have that confidence, fake it that you have that confidence. If you need to create this whole persona. You know, that can be your networking persona. Find a way to have the confidence to chat to people and to present your best self. I know that's not always easy. It's not, there will be times that best self just doesn't come through. Again, it's that rejection, you know you can wallow in it, or pick yourself up, dust yourself off, get on with it. And coffee is currency – 'I'd really just like to hear your story and learn a bit from you, would that be okay? Would that be okay?. I'll buy a coffee for you'. Most people will be like, sure.

Katie:

I think that's actually how I first met you Steph. 'Can we grab a coffee?'

Steph:

Totally was. And yeah, pretty much every single creative that I have ever worked with has been because I've had a coffee with them first. And okay, that time period between coffee and project might be months, maybe even years, but the point is you're putting yourself out there to be like 'hey'. You know, you could be pleasant, you can be punctual, you can be hard working - you don't just have to rely on talent, because at the end of the day, I truly believe that a director, a casting director is more likely to pick someone that they know can do the job and have those excellent people skills.

Anyway, with regards to the future. I don't know is the answer. Part of me worries about the future of the industry. But in the other part of me is empowered by it, because actually it's an industry that comes back, time and time again. As humans we are built to be creative, since the caveman times, you know, we've been drawing pictures stories, telling stories and teaching others, through storytelling, so you know it's partly what we're built for. So I think that it will survive, but what shape it will take? I don't know. I think we have to go back to the drawing board and look at technology and how we build in a bit more, and go back to the basics of, why are we doing what we're doing, what do we want to achieve from it. So yeah, I don't know, what shape it will take. I certainly hope it doesn't go down that route and we all end up wearing VR headsets in our homes imagining that we're in the theatre. That would be my biggest nightmare as I'm a big advocate for live theatre and

being in the space. I think having hope and looking for opportunities where we can find them is all you can do, and support one another as well, because it's a tough time for so many artists.

Katie:

That's actually probably quite a good point with the creative process too. So with you having written performances, taken them to the Fringe, being rated five-star, working with students on a day to day now trying to coach them into kind of future thinking and how they can serve the future industry. How do you think the creative process changes when your virtual delivery in virtual learning? and how do you find your inspiration I guess because you've mentioned characters that you've lived with in the past, is there a process you follow when you're working on something? and does that change when it's virtual?

Steph:

I absolutely think there is virtual space to have virtual discussions for creativity. Absolutely. 110%. An example of that, last semester I was teaching an introduction to directing module, and it suddenly had to go online. You know what, the students were incredible. They did their rehearsals, so it was director & actor. Although initially the assessment was for a group setting, per group cast sorry, we then brought it down to a monologue. Just because not only were people having to try and still keep their lives together, but they were having to adapt to virtual learning. So it then became that the directors worked with one actor and created a monologue. They did all of the rehearsals online. All of them, and the calibre of work that we produced was excellent. I absolutely believe 100% yes, you can still have Creative Conversations, you can still be creative, but it's about being imaginative. So like, have, have a look around right now, whoever is listening. Have a look around to the space that you're in. You know, where you see a chair, I see a boat, with a rocking chair because then you can move it with it with your oars. What's your lighting such in your house? Do you have standard lamps that you can put your coloured film over? Do you have greaseproof paper that you can colour in to go over a light? You know, it's like all of these little things, it's about, in, going back to basics and a little bit like going back to preschool. What mess can you make with what you've got? Because play, that's at the root of it. We have to remember how to play, and how to be playful, and how to have fun.

Katie:

I'd love to be a fly on the wall right now seeing everyone playing with all their homely items.

Steph:

Yes, it's like that skit 'Who's line is it anyway' when they've got a box of props and it's a hula hoop, but then all of a sudden it's a halo or, you know, all of a sudden it's a mobile telephone or, it's a go cart. It's about opening your imagination.

Katie:

Brilliant show!

Steph:

So good!

Steph:

So, with regards to my creative process, it has changed a lot. In the sense that I definitely take more time, you know before COVID, I mean I'll admit I'm an absolute workaholic, I work a lot, and although I've been really good at kind of channelling that to make sure that I take time away because when you are so close to something you can't see how good it is or how bad it is. So you

need to be able to take a step back and I think it's almost an expectation in the arts that you have to work your socks off to get anywhere. And whilst yes that is true. You're no good to anyone if you're crumpled in a heap due to a burnout. My creative practice had become built around self-care a lot. For example, first thing in the morning, I wake up and do some yoga. I am not bendy remotely but it doesn't mean they won't do it. And you know just waking up the body, making sure that I get time to step away from a computer, and go outside. But with regards to how I create stuff, the foundation still there, in the sense of I have an idea, and I let it simmer, I write down, you know, I've got different notebooks for different projects. One that has just ideas and one for academic research, and one that's only projects that may be, I have some projects that sit there for years and years and never get touched, but I still know that they're here.

But when it comes to creating work, I don't have a process that's set-in stone. I rather have a toolkit that has a lot of different things in it that I will kind of pick out, to be applicable to the work I do. So for example, if I'm script writing, something about creating these characters. I talk to myself a lot and use different voices and think about these characters and who they are. But if I'm also directing something that's very different. It'll be centred on sketches and a lot of imagination, and a lot of work my eyes closed to try and sort of visualise what it is I'm trying to achieve. But then if it's academic research, it's reading journal articles and trying to suss out what they mean. I think that's also an important thing to note, research is important in the arts. Don't think of it as this kind of stuffy practice, that's, you know, stuck in a library with loads of archives. Research doesn't need to be that. Research is about what's happening around you, what is happening in the world of work, in the industry or who's creating what, what topics are hot just now, who's creating work such responses or commentaries to that. You know all of that is still research, and I think you need to be doing that, to keep ahead of the game. There are some things that I will always have, as a director I will read the text 20 million times, first time for enjoyment, second times for little notes and then third onwards, it's all about you know nit-picking things and trying to get down to real ideas. Then you know working with the actors, doing improvisation exercises, get trust exercises, build that rapport with these people, because you know you're all working together on a project, and you care about projects. Then rehearsals will change, I like a lot of movement and sound and music and song in the work I produce. And also about letting people explore. I don't think a practice should be concrete. I think it should be playful, it should be open, it should be safe. So yeah, the fundamentals are there for creative practice but it changes depending on what it is I'm actually working on.

Katie:

Thank you. It's so interesting to hear you kind of working through it in your head.

You've touched on some of the skills that you think are really important to be successful within the creative industries as a whole and for drama, production and performance, but you've also got experience as a board member, and I think that's something we're always kind of encouraging students and graduates to think about, is those kind of overarching, quite often voluntary roles, that give you a lot of insight into what's going on and help you kind of develop personally and professionally. Can you give us just a bit of an overview of your role as a board member and how that kind of has helped you develop?

Steph:

Yeah, sure! So I'm a board member for Dogstar Theatre Company. It's quite scary, in the sense of when you are a student thinking about it, when we say to you 'you should go to a board, you'll learn so much'. I don't know about you guys, but there is, there was always this kind of element of 'I'm not professional enough' 'I didn't have enough prestige to be on a board' 'I can't be a board member'. And that's a lot of nonsense! Because you will learn so much about business and how companies

operate. So Dogstar is obviously a theatre company. It's a registered charity. And so you will learn about funding, about budgets, about financial management, you also learn about marketing, about fundraising, about keeping your networks warm, you know, how do you keep people interested when you're not necessarily producing work. There's so much that you can learn so if you can get on a board, do it!

Katie:

It comes back to those contacts again, just building that network. So, yeah, a whole abundance of learning, notes that we're all scribbling down here. Yeah, really interesting. Was there anything you think we might have missed, anything you want to add?

Steph:

Yeah be curious, find out what's going on. Absolutely. Your networks, yeah speak to people, make contact and find out what work they're doing, find out what they're interested in, because you never know you might have crossovers. From a studying perspective, you never know who your next opportunity is going to come from. So it might be you know you're 10 years down the line, and suddenly someone that you were in class with, but weren't necessarily that pally with, has got in touch and said 'hey we're working on this project I think this could be something you'd be interested in'. And before you know it, you're full steam ahead in the project. Keep learning. Be interested in the world around you and don't necessarily remain in the arts. As an example, I'm learning about motorcycles just now. I've got my compulsory basic training, which means I can ride a bike, a motorbike with my L plates. It's refreshing to be learning something that's actually not related to the arts because I feel I'm always learning stuff related to the arts and sometimes, to be honest, I take that a little bit for granted. With this, it is something that is not in my comfort zone at all.

Katie:

Thank you so much Steph. I feel like any students tuning in, you're going to have so many requests for coffee, whether it's to talk about drama & production, or about biking.

Steph:

I'm cool with that!

Katie:

Thank you for sharing so much, really inspiring! I'm always blown away by the people I work with! This podcast has been brought to you by the University of the Highlands and Islands careers and employability centre, students and graduates tuned in, don't forget we have a project for life offer which means you can contact our careers advisors at any point to get help with your CV, interview prep, access to market intelligence, or just have a 1-2-1 about how they can potentially help you develop your career. Speak soon!