

Dyslexia-friendly Transcript for Discover Central, Series 3, Episode 5:
Central Short Courses with Mairi Hayes and Jake Harders



Host: Scott Bellamy

Guest 1: Mairi Hayes

Guest 2: Jake Harders

Guest 3: Sonny Kong

Guest 4: Luke Fox

Article and podcast links:

<https://cssd.ac.uk/discover-central-podcast>

<https://discovercentral.podbean.com/>

[theme tune plays. SCOTT starts speaking]

HOST – SCOTT BELLAMY:

Welcome to Discover Central, the podcast that gives you a behind the scenes look at the life of students, staff and alumni at London's Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.

[theme tune fades out]

SCOTT

I'm your host Scott, and today we'll be joined by Mairi Hayes and Jake Harders, both graduates of Central who now work across the School's diploma and short courses to find out more about their work. We'll also be hearing from Sonny and Luke, who studied on Central's diploma courses, and who will be telling us more about their time with us. But first, I'm delighted to welcome Mairi Hayes and Jake Harders. Mairi Hayes graduated from Central's BA Acting course in 2008, and is now the School's Community

Drama and Diploma Manager with responsibility for overseeing the entirety of Central's short course provision. Beyond Central, Mairi has worked extensively as an actor and theatre maker with companies including the West Yorkshire Playhouse, the Roundhouse, the Lowry Theatre in Manchester, the National Theatre, the Southbank Centre, the UK Film Council, BBC and ITV. She has also worked in a broad range of arts community and educational contexts, including work in schools and colleges, youth clubs and theatres, and holds a Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. Jake Harders graduated from the BA Acting course in 2003, and alongside his co-course leadership with Mairi of the online acting diploma, he is also a Visiting Lecturer across several of Central's short courses. Jake has travelled the world working as an award winning professional actor in theatre, television, film, and radio. He has also studied with and has been profoundly influenced by many of Jerzy Grotowski's original actors at the Grotowski Centre in Poland. Alongside his extensive teaching schedule, he is currently undertaking research for a PhD on the contribution of Grotowski to UK actor training. Hi, Mairi and Jake.

MAIRI HAYES

Hi Scott!

JAKE HARDERS

Hello!

SCOTT

So, let's start. So, as you're both Central graduates, let's start by finding out a little bit more about what brought you to Central to study, starting maybe with Mairi.

MAIRI

So, what brought me to Central... I love acting, I went to a normal state school and college in Manchester, and I was really lucky to have amazing Drama teachers, and also to be kind of surrounded by people who were really interested in acting. And so the first I ever heard about drama school was my best mate at the time, auditioned and got into RADA. And I was like, whoa, wait a minute, this is something that normal people can do? I want to do that! So I decided to audition for drama school. I didn't really know much about it. I just knew I was really passionate about acting and excited by it. And luckily, I was accepted at Central. So I came down to London and did my actor training here.

JAKE

Yeah, well, very similar to Mairi's story, actually, I'm from the North of England, I wanted to be an actor always since the age of whatever, five or six. And so I finally realised you have to go to drama school in order to get access to the industry. So yes, I did lots of auditions, various different drama schools, and had various different offers. But Central was by far the one that was the, clearly the one that I should go to, because it just had a very welcoming atmosphere. And it seemed to be a great course. So yeah, that's what brought me to Central. I had a great time there.

SCOTT

So I guess, upon finishing your studies at Central, obviously you both went out into the world of performance. But then what led you back to central to teach? And I guess, how do you incorporate what you learned on the BA Acting course, into your teaching with students on the diploma and short courses?

MAIRI

As you say, Scott, when I graduated, I worked as an actor and performer on stage and screen. And alongside that I also made work in youth clubs and in theatre education departments, schools, festivals, and kind of developed my facilitation skills and really enjoyed that work, as well. And then after a few years doing that, I came back to Central while still freelance acting, to do visiting teaching work. And eventually that led me to applying and getting my current role lead in the short courses. On the short courses I think what we're doing, whilst its fundamentals are constantly changing as the world changes, actor training has shifted a lot from when I was training. I bring to it everything that I've learned. So that's the sum of my experiences, my own training and my professional work, my teaching and facilitation work, who I am, where I'm from, and hopefully that meets who I'm working with on the short courses. I guess that's one of the most exciting things for me about my job, the wide range of people and the knowledge of the students who, who we work with and what they bring. Yeah, I guess it's a privilege to be constantly learning more about something that I love through working with the students and exploring it.

JAKE

Yeah, I mean, my view is like with a professional musician, you may graduate from a drama school, you may you may graduate from a music college, but you have to kind of keep on practising. You are effectively always training, even when you're working professionally. So I found that I left Central, I was working professionally, but I was constantly updating the skills that I had, I was constantly having to sort of redevelop as the industry moved forwards in different direction. So I was always in a state of training. And then I was invited a few times to come back to Central to kind of share things that I knew about various different aspects of the industry. And I guess I found I've got an aptitude for sharing what I know about acting. So bit by bit, I did more and more than kind of workshops, more and more sort of facilitation. And I

find actually, it makes me a better actor, to try and put into words what acting is like, or how acting could work. Because having to actually explain it to somebody really clarifies lots of questions about, you know, what, what is the nature of acting? So for me, it's a constant exploration. So there's no real gap, for me, between the idea of being an actor and teaching an actor, they're all part of the single package. And I found a lot of my training from Central is basically the fundamental core of my work to do with even the famous acting practitioners such as Konstantin Stanislavski, etc. So, in the short courses that I teach, I'm always finding myself pleasantly surprised how I'm going back to my old journals from 25 years ago to see oh my gosh, yes. Okay. This is stuff that we touched upon then, when I was training. But now 20 years later, I'm beginning to finally understand it, how can I now find a way to help you know, the next generation of students access it as well. So it sounds pretentious, but the students often teach me a great deal as well as me teaching them.

SCOTT

And I guess that's actually one of the hallmarks of good training, isn't it? The fact that everyone is teaching everyone. Both of you mentioned about how you both teach on the diploma and short courses at Central. Can you maybe tell me a little bit more about those? What's offered? What's the experience like of being a student on one of these courses? And, I guess, is there a level of experience that's required to undertake this kind of study?

MAIRI

Essentially, I think on the short courses, what we do is we take Central's expertise and make it accessible to lots of different people through a variety of short courses. So that might be people who are thinking about coming to do a BA or MA and want to experience what training is like, or it might be someone who's already trained as an actor and wants to do a writing course to develop a solo show. Or it might be someone who has an entirely different

profession, but just wants to try something playful and fun and collaborative in their spare time. There's a lot more fun and joy needed at the moment, isn't there? So most of our short courses, anyone can sign up to join them. Normally, we advise people with no experience to start on the introductory courses. And for our diploma courses, students audition. So you don't need that high level of experience. But you do need to have a passion and a love for acting and want to explore it seriously.

JAKE

Yep, so the student experience of though doing one of the courses is, if, let's say you're doing one of the acting courses that I work on, it's, it's very similar to how you would be if you were actually physically at Central. So it's not sitting around discussing literary text, it is practical, physical. So up on our feet almost all the time. We're practically exploring the text, using our voices during physical training, finding ways to make contact with the other person, and even though they're across the world on Zoom, it's quite easy to do that. And then the students identify the goals they want to achieve over the course. And then we work with them to try and help facilitate that so they can achieve those goals over the course. Yeah, so it is actually remarkably similar to the physical version of the courses we taught, except that you're talking to somebody on a camera, rather than talking to them face to face. But the benefit of that is, if you're doing let's say camera acting, it means every single student has their own personal camera to work with in terms of framing, in terms of performance. And that is a definite boon which we didn't have in the face to face world.

SCOTT

And picking up on something you mentioned, Mairi, about how some people will go into introductory courses, some people will go into diplomas. Is it fair to say that there's not a typical, if you will, person, a typical profile of person to go on to one of our short courses?

MAIRI

Yeah, I think that's absolutely fair to say. And I think that's one of the most exciting things about it is that we've got all ages, and the online courses have opened up the world, literally. So we've got people from all over the world who can take part in the courses. That's one of the things that's been really exciting in the last year, actually, people who might not have been able to get to a physical class before in Swiss Cottage where Central's based can now come from wherever they are. I think you're absolutely right. There isn't like a typical, this is a short course student at Central.

SCOTT

And how would you say the shift to online learning has impacted the way you deliver these courses? And I guess, have you had to adapt your teaching to respond to this new way of working?

MAIRI

Yeah, so I think how has the shift to online learning impacted... absolutely massively in some ways, and surprisingly, not at all in other ways. So yeah, overnight, our entire way of working changed as it did for a lot of the world. Before we were entirely working with people in rooms. But as Jake said, it, I think it's really surprised all of us how much can still be done online, how much work you can do, how much learning and connection and togetherness and growth you can get in this format. Of course, there are things that don't work online. I love being in a room with people and I do, I do miss that. But there is loads that does work online. So as Jake was saying, actually, I think some of things that we realised pretty quickly was, certainly for the actor training work, was that we needed to be physically engaged. So while we're teaching, we set up a space where we can stand, we ask the students to set up a space so they can be physically engaged. So it's kind of not just hunching over a desk. In terms of teaching, I think you have to think

about, you know, think carefully about what works online, what's going to be a benefit? I don't know, if Jake, I'm sure Jake would agree, that we've learned a lot about our teaching. And we're going to take a lot of that back into the rehearsal room, when we do go back, it makes you question, what are the learning objectives? Why am I teaching this? Is it relevant? How do students access this in this format, but we've, you know, we've devised films online, we've had movement classes, voice classes, active camera text analysis, the Performance Making Diploma students had a live zoom show where an audience could zoom in from wherever they were in the world. So we've had lots of really amazing, beautiful moments as well.

JAKE

The major thing about any kind of class I would suggest is it's about how are you able to make contact with each other. And obviously, you can do that very easily face to face. But on zoom, or any online platform, it is totally possible to make contact with another human being. And you see them and they're there and close up with you quite a lot of the time. So actually, you see more of them than you would do if you were standing on the other side of a room. So I think Mairi, and I would agree, we find it very interesting, collaborative, shared experience, again, where you can you can really make contact with people in America at the same time as people in in England and in Russia.

SCOTT

I think that's what's really fascinating, isn't it that you know, you are able to deliver these short courses to people across the world, which maybe we weren't able to do in the first place. But although it comes with its challenges, have you, have you found that participants have really been able to develop both individually and collectively, and that you've been able to see that, even though these courses have been being delivered online?

MAIRI

Absolutely, Scott, as I said, there are some things that don't work. But there is a lot that we've learned, and that does, and one of the really exciting things has been the fact that we can reach people across the country, across the world. And we can come together and have a shared experience, despite the distance. And you know, not need to be in the same physical space. And that's amazing in terms of access, people who couldn't access the courses before can now obviously, there are a lot of access issues working online that it brings up. So you have to be careful and not be complacent in addressing those. And in terms of student development, yeah, absolutely. I think that yes, you really can see growth and development through the courses.

JAKE

Yep, it's totally possible to observe the change because the class size is quite small. And the content is creative content. So I would suggest that everybody, anybody can act, it's just a question of finding the right kind of structure to enable that to kind of flow. So we adjust the courses we're teaching to fit the individual needs of the individual students who are there, whether they are complete beginners, or people with some experience already, but you can see them, because they have so many hours worth of practical experiencing of doing the work, you can see their performance style, their creative juices starting to flow. So usually the, the experience that the students have is that they suddenly realise they now have a lot more tools to help them unlock their already existing creativity.

SCOTT

That's fantastic to hear. And alongside our independently run courses, we also partner with Access All Areas theatre company to run the award winning Performance Making Diploma, can you maybe tell us a little bit more about this?

MAIRI

Yeah, with pleasure, the Performance Making Diploma is one of our diploma courses, we have five diploma courses at the moment. And as you mentioned, it's run in partnership with Access All Areas. Access All Areas are a brilliant theatre company who make theatre and performance by learning disabled and autistic artists. We run the Performance Making Diploma with them, and that teaches professional performance skills to artists with learning disabilities or autism. So the students from the last course were nearing the end of that two year course when the pandemic hit and we took everything online, which extended the course a bit in terms of scheduling. They had their final EXIT Festival show, and the students really rose to the challenge. And they made some incredible stuff online. For example, last term, they had a really exciting unit, which was all online. And they worked with co-creation with a team from Sky in a writers' room format, developing pitches for TV shows, and that was about Sky learning about accessible practice and about our students learning about how TV is made. And then this term was their final term. And they devised a show online which I co directed with Helen Breyer, who's the course leader and director of Take Part and Train at Access All Areas and Katy Cracknell, who's the Trainee Co-Director for the Performance Making Diploma, and also we had lots of other students from Central's BA and MA courses involved in that project as creative support workers, creative partners, and we devised a show together online. So they've just finished, this cohort of the Performance Making Diploma. Get ready... There's some brilliant artists coming out there!

SCOTT

That's fantastic to hear. And as you mentioned, the performance making the diploma covers a number of different areas for the students to train in, which also kind of makes me want to ask what kind of areas do our

short courses and diplomas cover? We mentioned acting in a couple of the answers there. But I believe there's a few other areas that it covers as well?

MAIRI

So as I said earlier, it's about taking the range of Central's expertise and reimagining it for a short course student, of which there are a variety. And as we talked about, there isn't like a one size fits all for anybody. So we have got lots of performance courses, acting courses, right from introductory courses to our longer diploma courses. We've also got a lot of writing courses, writing performance courses, voice courses, and we have a growing portfolio of theatre practice courses, as well. So at the moment, all of our courses are running online, as we've been discussing, they're on our website so go and have a look at them. We're opening auditions for our next cohort of Performance Making Diploma students and other diplomas. And hopefully we'll be returning, well, we will be returning to onsite work in the next year at some point. So keep an eye on the website for those on site courses coming back to

SCOTT

And Mairi, you mentioned just then that we're planning to return the short courses to campus on site from next year. What can we expect?

MAIRI

Yeah, we are starting, we are going to get back in person. But we're not going to lose any of the online stuff, either. We're going to, as I said, we want to keep the benefits of both. And we are always closely monitoring industry developments, working with our academics, working with our industry partners, listening to the students and what the students want and need and developing courses. So we'll keep doing that. We'll keep, you know, the core of what we do, but keep listening and adding new things to that as well. So for example, we're just about to start our course in festival creation in

response to, to interest and excitement around that area. I think everyone's dying to get back to festivals. And we'll continue to do that, we'll continue to keep listening. We'll continue to keep developing and responding, always with quality and our students at the heart of it.

SCOTT

So it's definitely exciting times ahead. And certainly students should keep a very close eye on the website for all of the new developments that are to come. What are some of the exciting things that short courses diploma graduates have gone on to do?

MAIRI

Well, because there are so many different courses and people do it for so many different reasons, people have gone on to do lots of things. There's some people who didn't do our courses because they intended to be performers or go into the industry but they've taken what they've got from the courses: the confidence, the communication skills, and they've taken that back into their own careers and their own industries. Some students do want to pursue a career in the industry so have started theatre companies together, made that made their own work. And some have gone on to BA or MA courses at Central or other drama schools. They've gone on to perform on stages and screens across the country, across the world.

JAKE

Yeah, so one of the students from the diploma last year is now on one of the BA courses at Central. Quite a few students have used the diploma to, as a springboard to go to drama schools and they're now at BAs and MAs at other drama schools. It's quite a few diploma courses have finished and then the company, the students in that diploma, have formed their own theatre companies or their own filmmaking companies. A student from the Performance Making Diploma is in Holby City, lots of things where they create

a network, and they continue it and they find ways to continue to work together even beyond their training at Central.

SCOTT

That's a really good point as well about the network, isn't it? Because the students who are joining the short courses and the diplomas, they really do become part of the Central community, don't they?

JAKE

Yep, they certainly do. And they stay in contact with us, as well. But they, they're constantly meeting people who are like minded, who are, let's say, at the start of their creative careers. And they work together. There's always in, in any short course I teach, there's always, there always turns out to be a budding director, a budding writer, as well as obviously lots of talented actors, let's say. So they often formed little sort of units to work. One group I was teaching way back when in October emailed me to say they're still meeting every single week on their own, to devise their own scripts and to film stuff using zoom, because some of them are in America and some of them are in England. So there are lots of ways they can continue to use the kind of the structures that we've given them. Just to keep on exploring, keep on being creative beyond Central.

SCOTT

And as Mairi mentioned, you can find full information on the short courses and diplomas on our website. Mairi and Jake, thank you so much for joining us. It's been wonderful to speak with you both.

MAIRI

Thanks Scott, it's been really nice to chat to you, too.

JAKE

Thank you, Scott.

SCOTT

And now I'm excited to introduce Sonny and Luke to talk about their experiences as students on Central's diploma courses.

SONNY KONG

Hi, my name is Sonny Kong and I'm studying on the online diploma programme. I started out from doing short courses with Mairi and Jake; I was fortunate enough to continue my training with them on the diploma programme. In the past few months, I was mainly working on the fundamentals like texts, movement and voice, which was completely different from what I had in mind. Being able to explore my subconscious, vocal resonance, and having them connect me with the subtext has really set some direction in terms of how I want to approach acting. My favourite part is being able to experiment with imaginary things that are not really human, which probably pays tribute to how our brain really works. And I'm starting to understand the depth of acting. It's mysterious and exciting, and I'm always excited to explore more.

LUKE FOX

Hello, my name is Luke Fox. I was on the Performance Making Diploma course from 2019 - 2021. My highlights on the course were doing the screen work units with Jake. And I loved the master classes we got from the people working for Sky, particularly creating a television show, as well as pitching.

SCOTT

Thank you, Sonny and Luke. And thanks again to Mairi Hayes and Jake Harders.

[theme tune starts, crescendo as Scott continues talking]

SCOTT

We'll be back again soon with another episode. In the meantime, don't forget to subscribe to Discover Central wherever you normally get your podcasts. For now, take care and we'll see you next time.

[theme tune ends, diminuendo]