

Dyslexia-friendly Transcript for Discover Central, Series 3, Episode 3:

Dr Kat Low



Host: Scott Bellamy

Guest 1: Dr Kat Low

Guest 2: Alexandra Netea

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 speaking with Dr. Katharine Low about her research, her newly published book, and the work that she and her students have been undertaking over several years and in collaboration with partner organisations in South Africa. We’ll also be hearing from third year Contemporary Performance Practice student Alex, who has been assisting Kat and artist Erica Lüttich on their project in South Africa, and which has been supported by the Global Challenges Research Fund. First, I’m very

pleased to welcome Dr. Katharine Low. Kat is a Senior Lecturer in Community Performance and Applied Theatre at Central with teaching and supervisory responsibilities across the schools undergraduate and postgraduate Applied Theatre courses, as well as research degrees. A research practitioner in the field of Applied Theatre and sexual health, she has worked transnationally in South Africa, Tanzania, Europe and the UK, and has a deep commitment to feminist lead research, arts in health, theatre making in urban settings and the role of women in theatre. Since 2003, Kat has researched and developed social theatre practices as a way of beginning discussions around sexual and reproductive health. Her work is based in participatory theatre and arts based projects based around social concerns, whilst her research practice covers the intersection of health education, sexual rights and space for exploration beyond stigmas associated with certain health experiences. Hi, Kat. Thanks for joining us.

DR KATHARINE LOW

Thanks very much. I'm really excited.

SCOTT

So to start, maybe, can you tell us a little bit more about your background? how you got involved in the arts? And what led you eventually into academia?

KAT

Thanks. Um, yeah, so I've always been really interested in this move between academia and practice and research. And I think for me so much about this idea of academia is about how do we shift knowledge bases? How do we hold spaces for different kinds of conversations, especially around health, and particularly for me, and my interest is really around sexual health. So I'm South African and Swiss. So I was born in Johannesburg, and I had most of my schooling in Switzerland before I came to the UK. But in my Swiss

primary school, local school, I was 10. And we had a really fairly open conversation about sex. It was, it was very heteronormative. But it was really eye opening, had very few moral judgments for a 10 year old. And I think that's where my interest in sexual health comes from here. It's like, how can we hold spaces with lightness and openness to talk about sex. And for me, the role of performance and theatre making is a key part of this, because it's about offering different ways of approaching these sensitive or difficult conversations, I come from a long line of teachers from both sides of my family, and I always swore I wouldn't be a teacher. But I think academia and academic research leads to a different form of conversation, we actually allowed to have much more frank conversations. So yeah, that's how I ended up here.

SCOTT

And then that eventually led you to Central where, of course, you work across the Applied Theatre courses, as well as supervising research students. Maybe you could tell us a little bit more about kind of what that work entails.

KAT

For sure. Um, so I teach across three different sort of types of degrees at Central. And actually, that multiplicity and all those different types of students is one of my biggest joys, because I get to teach with different students and different types of students in different stages in their academic journey. And for me, the great joy is really about being in the space with students, obviously, that's been really virtual over the past year, but the joy I get in hearing students ideas and dreams and their visions and where they want to go next, for me, and so much of that is about a space again, to shift conversations about where knowledge is held. And really about working towards much more in sexual understandings and experiences of knowledge and how we can better embed anti racist teachings within our work, with our practice, and just in our general interactions with everyone. My pedagogy,

the way I hold a room is very much based in laughter and sort of play and joy. And I think that's really linked to my practice. So for me, my theatre making and my teaching isn't so dissimilar. It's really about creating spaces of playfulness. There's always a lot of laughter, but actually, there's something in the playfulness, that it creates a space where I think we can talk together and deepen questions, and actually build trust because by having a space of openness, it also becomes a space where you can be challenged as well. So this idea of buildings spaces of open, challenging discussion which are foundationally based in trust and respect for each other. So yeah, I love working across all three courses, but not three to crease.

SCOTT

It certainly sounds like it's a very kind of fulfilling area of of teaching and of study and discussion. So that's fantastic to hear. And kind of keeping the focus on your work with Central students, I mean, you've established a number of connections with artists and organisations in South Africa. Can you tell us a little bit about how you and your students work in collaboration with those partners in South Africa.

KAT

So we've been hugely lucky to work with some just genuinely awesome human beings, both amazing artists and organisations, as well. One of the first groups I wanted to kind of talk about is the Outreach Foundation, which is based in Johannesburg, and we've been working with the Hillbrow Theatre in particular, which is part of the Outreach Foundation, since about 2015. Working closely with Gerard Bester, Mike, Phana Dube and Gcebile (the other facilitators at Outreach Foundation), and the students have been able to work in close collaboration with their group of young people. And more recently, over the past year, we've worked closely with the Loxton community in the Karoo, which is a very rural part of South Africa with Erica Lüttich. And that was much more of an environmental project. Both

projects have worked with second year students and occasionally third year students on the Contemporary Performance Practices degrees, we follow what our hosts interest or desires are. We often talk a lot about gender and sexuality. But the deep value the value that keeps coming back and keeps being fed back to us from our host organisations, is those side by side conversations that students and learners in South Africa have the opportunity just to talk a bit more widely around certain issues and certain questions and to build relationships. There's something really important about creating spaces for young people to have different types of conversations with different young people who have different life experiences. And actually what was really lovely was last August, we presented at a conference as part of Drama for Life, which is based at the University of Witwatersrand in Joburg. So we presented as a group of graduate and current students talking with some of the learners from the Outreach Foundation, and some of the learners from Loxton and we everyone sort of shared what that experience has been like, firstly, working under COVID. And actually, we had one of our graduates, the wonderful Maame Atuah and Ben Gunn, who both have gone on to do really exciting things, came in and spoke. So it was really a space for the young people and the graduates to all talk to each other, because they hadn't seen each other in a couple of years. So that was lovely. And actually, fundamentally, that idea of collaboration is about co-collaborative, working. So working together, side by side and thinking carefully, ethically and consciously about what's the right thing here. How do we ask questions how we ask sensitive issues and address those. But then real space for side by side conversations and learning from each other.

SCOTT

And you touched on it actually, just then about how things kind of changed because of COVID, and it does seem at the moment that you can't really talk about work without discussing the the impact of the pandemic. So

maybe you can touch a little bit on, kind of, how the work adapted as a result of COVID-19.

KAT

I think it completely, like for everyone else, it completely changed. And one of the things we've always been so lucky is that the students, the Central students, have been able to be in situ for like four to five weeks at a time. So you really get a chance to kind of build relationships. And now there was the shift of how do we build relationships, virtually, when so much is about being in a space together. So that was one of our big challenges. And also in terms of, sometimes, language barriers, because often there's lots of spaces in which different levels of translation are required. The first big project we did last last May actually coincided with South Africa's lockdown, it was really as extreme, probably more, maybe more extreme in terms of impact in South Africa than has been felt in the UK. And so many of the learners, the young people, didn't necessarily have as much time to be able to go online and be online. So there's been a real shift - or, actually, have the equipment to be online - so they couldn't come and meet at the Outreach Foundation, for example. So we had to think creatively about thinking about what feels like equitable access. And so we had really important conversations about understanding about low definition data, low Wi Fi, thinking about different ways of accessing and sharing information in a virtual manner, which doesn't require too much data, a lot in terms of providing equitable access to data. So we made an online project for both groups that had a lot of space offline, created opportunities to share and exchange that way. It was a completely different project for both groups. But I think really successful in different ways. So, one of the groups in Loxton, the Loxton, young people in in the Karoo, were able to share some of their experiences and thoughts back. Fevered Sleep have been capturing young people's experiences of COVID, and their experiences from Loxton have been placed alongside other young people that Fevered Sleep has been speaking to, so actually there's a really

interesting opportunity to have a conversation with different groups that we might not necessarily have been able to connect up. With the Hillbrow project, one of the Central students is based in Birmingham, and she works at a dance school in Birmingham. So she connected up some of her young people from Birmingham. So there was exchanges that had been happening, that might not have been able to happen otherwise, had it not been for being online. And then the other thing we were able to do is start working towards the My Body, My Space Festival, which is this amazing online virtual festival that some of the young people we started working with in South Africa have been able to contribute to. So there's really interesting links, and we wouldn't have been able to take part in them, the My body, My Space Festival, had we not been in lockdown, because it has become a virtual festival. In that way we were able to exchange. And I think you're going to speak to Alex a bit more about how that project stemmed out of the Global Challenges Project.

SCOTT

We certainly will be. And I think what's great is that so much of this work that's being done in South Africa, it dovetails with your own practice and your own research into sexual health, reproductive rights and urban living. So maybe this is a good point for you to tell us a little bit more about your work and the influence maybe that it has had on your teaching.

KAT

Of course, Scott. I think everything that I've said so far is a way is indicative of how much my practice and research and ways I work is so closely embodied and embedded in my teaching practice. What I learn in running workshops, or working creatively with colleagues in South Africa, or here in the UK, definitely informs how I interact with my students, and how my teaching practice shifts and vice versa. The joy actually is playing a game or doing an exercise with some students and then taking them and doing the

same exercise with the group of participants. That I find deeply joyful. One of the biggest joys actually for me this year has been our ongoing partnership with Positively UK; so, Positively UK is the most awesome peer led HIV charity based here in the UK, it used to be called Positively Women, but now it's Positively UK. And we've been working in partnership with Positively UK since 2016. And we've often run events or conferences, or artistic development moments, often based around International Women's Day. And it's been a really interesting and exciting opportunity. For the first time ever, Positively UK have taken on students as placement students, our students have been offering and supporting Positively UK and running online workshops. And actually, in fact, we're running a workshop together some, two of the MA Applied Theatre students and I are running a series of workshops with Positively UK. So we're going to do that on Monday. There's a lot of dancing and hilarity and, and silliness, but also an opportunity to connect and to hear new stories and other stories that we might not have met. And having worked with Positively UK now for five years actually, what's been really interesting about being online is I've met a whole bunch of people who, who might not know me be able to access the physical venue but have been able to access online. So there's a lot to be said about, re-shifting our ways of engaging with people and offering both, perhaps.

SCOTT

Absolutely. And, yeah, it's difficult to imagine a future where both physical and virtual are, kind of, not offered. At the same time. You've also been working with artist Erica Lüttich on a project supported by the Global Challenges Research Fund. Can you tell us a little about what's involved in that?

KAT

Yeah, so Central has been the recipient of a portion of funding from the Global Challenges Research Fund. And I've been working with both Erica

Lüttich but also Gerard Bestier at the Outreach Foundation, on a series of projects specifically focused on global challenges or around urban or rural living. But thinking about what some of the global challenges facing certain countries are. The fundamental importance about GCRF money and funding is that it's about the country that we're working in collaboration with actually holds and says what we should be doing and what we should be talking about. That's such an important part, especially when we're thinking about funding practices, and ways of working. It's about equity in our partnerships and equity in our relationships and how we take space to think carefully about who is holding funding and who is supporting research. This past year has obviously all been online. So we've had a digital storytelling project that's been working with the Outreach Foundation. So that's been going on for two years now and had a huge festival in 2019 in person. And then last year, we're training up young people to do some digital storytelling themselves. So hopefully some interesting stories are going to come up there. And then with Erica in Hexs Valley, which is in, in the Western Cape, we've been working with a group of women, the Hex Valley Lappies, is led by a woman called Katrina Mokwena. And we've set up a space which considering when we originally envisaged the project, I was going to be there in person, we have built a relationship over zoom, and over WhatsApp and over sharing stories and ideas. The project is fundamentally about creating a space for women to talk about what it has been like to live under COVID in South Africa, especially for women who often times in full time employment are bearing a lot of the carrying responsibilities for the for the families. So we set up a space where we met weekly, I was virtual, everyone else was able to meet taking COVID secure precautions. It was about creating an opportunity to connect and interact to make, to create space for every woman as a creative artist in a whole, whatever medium they were interested in. So we have dance, some performance, and a lot of visual artwork and a lot of sewing as well. The project was about finding links, and just creating a gentle space to begin to start talking about maternal grief. We've had a series of

events and a series of moments over the past year that we were coming up to a year and in May. And the big one for us was in August last year for National Women's Day in South Africa, to share and talk about what they've done. All of the work around the GCRF work is about shifting narratives of what it means to live in South Africa. So for example, Hillbrow has an infamous reputation. But that's not the true story of everyone's experience of living in Hillbrow, people live well, and have all sorts of things that happen. They live full lives. So how do we shift these conversations from these negative and reducing narratives to actually creating spaces for the whole person to be heard and seen on their own terms? And that's a really big part, is how do we create spaces for young people, for women, for anyone to talk about their views, their beliefs, what they want to tell, but actually on their own terms? That's where Erica and I come in, like, how do we hold and host a space so that Katrina can tell us things that she might not necessarily have had an opportunity to share. And then we'll be writing some articles about that, and actually got an article coming out about the Hillbrow project soon. So that will be exciting.

SCOTT

We certainly look forward to reading those articles and hearing more about the projects through that as well. As if you weren't busy enough, you've also recently published a book, which is based on research that you undertook for your PhD, and your work with young people in Cape Town. How did the publication of the book come about? And can you tell us a little more about the work and research that it builds on?

KAT

For sure. So I was really lucky to be able to work with an HIV charity. And that started off as an HIV charity in South Africa, but it's actually much more of a community support organisation called Etafeni in Nyanga, which is a township based just outside of Cape Town, I worked with two awesome

groups of young people. And I was much younger myself at that point, too. And we talked about creating spaces in which I think was sort of the backbone to what I now talk about in terms of shifting narratives. But also just it's also set up a space to talk about safe sex on their own terms, or just sex on their terms of what felt right, but then sexually, and the book is an account of that process and of their practice. And how do we set up participatory theatre practices. It's also 10 years on from the practice and offers a space for reflection and thinking about what happens after What I really wanted to, and I hope is clear in the book, is about thinking and encouraging us as practitioners, to think about what happens in the margins of the work. So I've coined this term apertures of possibility. But it's an invitation for everyone to pause and reflect and to kind of clock what's happening on the sidelines, what's happening in the margin. So we see this massive moment or this wonderful exchange or this shift, but actually, it's small conversations that happen on the side, or the fact that we're still in touch with a group of people are still in touch 10-12 years after the project took place, and to think about what are other possible possibilities in applied theatre practice, more than just transformation and change but actually more subtle things that come out of it, and encouraging us to think about different types of values. And one of the things I think is about a network of care and network connection. So yeah, so that's the book. It's got a very snazzy cover, so if anything, it will look pretty, I hope, on someone's bookshelf. It's an excellent purple, and yellow {laughs}.

SCOTT

And of course, we would urge everyone to check out the book. And as you say, if it's got a great cover and looks good on the bookshelf, then absolutely do check that out. {laughs}. You know, we've, we've covered quite a lot already in this session. But tell us what else are you working on at the moment? And, and, also what's coming up next?

KAT

So the joy of working at Central is that we get to work across all different departments, I think, and one of the big things that I've been working on this this term in particular since January, or since last December, has been working on a project which is called the Advance Programme, which was started by Tonic Theatre, which looked at: how do we create space? And how do we move towards gender equity for women in the performing arts industries? And so, with Professor Gilli Bush-Bailey and Gabriel Vivas Martínez, who is a PhD candidate here at Central, we have been examining National Portfolio Organisations here in England and looking at the impact of their work and what they've done since they participated in the Advance Programme in 2014 - 2016. And we're we're literally crossing the T's on the report. So that should be out at the end of the month, to talk about these great changes and or significant changes that have happened in terms of gender equity, but also fundamentally to draw a marker in the sand so that we don't lose these changes, these advancements that have happened as a result of COVID-19. So how do we hold on to these changes, because change is slow, and change takes time. But, like, we can't afford to lose these advances. In other news, I am also attempting to develop a podcast about academia, motherhood and other forms of caring. So if I tell people about it, it will happen. I'm also carrying on doing practice with Positively UK and we're working together on another project. And two other moments of great joy: I have been, through the British Academy and with some new colleagues from universities around the UK and in Canada, we've come together to do a piece of work around vulnerabilities and thinking about research methodologies, and how do we work equitably, ethically and collaboratively when we research with other communities? So we're going to develop a whole series of methodologies to share, and thinking about opening up access again to, like, how do we shift knowledge bases? How do we hold knowledge and, not hold knowledge, but shift knowledge on and create better access into methodologies, research and so that research becomes

more and more equitable. And the final joyous thing I've done this term is I've been able to work really closely with some awesome colleagues who you may know of - Selena Busby, Sylvan Baker and Tanya Zybutz. We've been running a series of workshops for PhD candidates on doctoral training programmes, and the workshops have been about creating a space for neurodivergent PhD candidates to come together and collect on challenges they might experience in their research practices, but also gain agency in their research. So how do we shift conversations about what it means to be neurodivergent? And how actually being neurodivergent makes you an awesome researcher. And... juggling a four and a half year old who's now gone back to school. So yes, to the teachers out there who've opened up, and to everyone who survived lock down number three with some sanity and, and lots of red wine.

SCOTT

I mean, that is a huge amount of incredible, exciting and impactful work that you've talked with us about today. Kat, thank you so much for giving us your time today. There is some absolutely incredible work going on. So thank you so much for your time today. Thank you for coming on.

KAT

Thanks very much, and thanks for listening to me rabbit on.

SCOTT

More than welcome, it's really, really interesting. Now I'm pleased to introduce third year Contemporary Performance Practice student Alex to tell us more about her work with Kat in South Africa.

ALEXANDRA NETEA

My name is Alexandra Netea, and I am a third year student on Drama, Applied Theatre and Education. On my professional placement, I worked with

Kat Low and Erica Lüttich on a project called The Colour Blue, which was made for an online theatre festival initiated by a theatre company in South Africa. The project focused on the exploring of young female voices through movement, dance and creating artefacts living in the current atmosphere of a global pandemic. I was the creative coordinator linking three teams, the UK Central team, a South African team and a Romanian team. I come from a world where borders were built in each individual, where freedom of speech did not exist, where encountering other cultures was forbidden, and where the correct ideas came from the well-structured state. Although during my life I had the opportunity to discover different cultures while travelling or studying or being a migrant worker, for me, this project was the breaking point to a new and deeper understanding. The project connected people from different socio-economic, ethnic and political backgrounds, creating a safe space to celebrate us. We were no longer divided into inhabitants of a country, we were no longer different. We were just people working together. When people are using their native language, and when you find them in their personal space, you understand the other individual in a surprising natural way. Perhaps we can connect better with each other without being in the same place or speaking the same language.

SCOTT

Thank you so much, Alex. And thanks again to Dr. Kat Low.

[theme tune starts, crescendo as Scott continues talking]

SCOTT

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

[theme tune ends, diminuendo]