

Dyslexia-friendly Transcript for Discover Central Ep2:

Jessica Bowles



Host: Scott Bellamy

Guest 1: Student Clara Coslett

Guest 2: Jessica Bowles

Article and podcast links:

<https://www.cssd.ac.uk/news/new-central-podcast-launched>

<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 Scott and in this episode, we'll be taking a closer look at the life of our students and staff in lockdown. And we'll be getting some tips on how to nurture our creativity and make new work in adverse circumstances. We'll be talking with Jessica Bowles, course leader for Central's MA/MFA Creative Producing course about how we can collaborate and create new work even when we find ourselves in very different places from the people we're collaborating and working with. But first, let's hear from MA Music Theatre student Clara with her top tips for looking after yourself in lockdown.

GUEST 1 - STUDENT CLARA

Hi, my name's Clara, I'm on the MA Music Theatre course and my top tip for looking after yourself in lockdown is keeping up exercise. This has really helped my physical and mental wellbeing. And also keeping a routine each week and speaking to friends and family.

SCOTT:

I'm back with Jessica Bowles, Jess is an academic with a background in professional practice as a theatre designer across the UK including at Dukes Playhouse Lancaster, the Young Vic and the Royal Shakespeare Company. She's also a producer of large-scale festival experiences. At Central Jess is the course leader for MA/MFA Creative Producing and is known for her ability to connect people and facilitate collaboration, two things that have never been more important than at this moment. Welcome Jess, thanks for speaking with us.

GUEST 2 – JESSICA BOWLES:

Hi Scott.

SCOTT:

So, in your time at Central you have been instrumental in establishing and writing several of the School's courses. Can you tell us a little bit more about your time here at Central?

JESSICA:

Absolutely, it's an amazing community; it's got all the best of a space where people are passionate about the same thing, basically. We're all wanting in some form to be part of the storytelling process of making performance, making theatre, and actually all the other kind of things that roll out of that process. So, as you say my background is as a designer and I'm

very passionate about how much the aesthetics does contribute towards the stories that we tell but I became really fascinated about how we make stuff go from an idea to become reality, and in particular it's about reaching audiences. And essentially what a producer does is they act as a conduit between the arts and the artists and the audiences that, um, could respond to that work in some form. So, a producer's job has many different aspects to it, it might be the fundraising and it might be the, sort of, the administration, the artistic administration but it's actually fundamentally part of a creative team, taking that story to all the audiences that it could possibly reach.

SCOTT:

And I guess you, kind of, very much touched on it there and I mentioned in my intro you're the course leader for the Creative Producing course. Tell us a little bit more about the course; what does it entail and how is it typically delivered?

JESSICA:

So, um, it's really, got the best of both worlds, it's bespoke as in every single person goes on their own journey, going through the course, so we don't have one kind of model of producing that we secretly want to turn everybody to commercial producers or independent producers. All models are welcome and in fact the more diverse the cohort the better. Um and the cohort is very deliberately international in its make-up. Roughly speaking, about half the cohort are from UK and Europe and half the cohort are international. And the reason we construct it in that way is so there's an incredible global network that arises out of the connections that are made. Um, and the way in which it normally happens and the way in which it will happen actually, are start from the same place and much of the same things happen exactly the same way. Um, it's structured; for the MA it's structured over 4 blocks of time; the first being really intensive about building a kind of producing tool kit. And really, really, crucially about understanding what your

vision and what your values are and therefore what you bring to any work that you're going to be involved with. And we do that in so many different ways; we do it in small group work we do it in, in larger groups we work with a lot of external experts who provoke us and get us to think differently about the work we make and why we make the work we do. We do some really important practical skills and that's woven through the whole program but intensively introduced in the Autumn. And that is demystifying what a budget is, really giving everybody agency, whether they come from a creative background or they might come from a business background. All of those backgrounds are welcome, and we develop that tool kit in that first block of time. And then from then it's about a mixture of engagement with the industry, individually, according to whatever route you want to take as a producer, uh, and also work that you connect with other students. And the way that happens is we do a lot of face-to-face stuff in the course. At the moment it's face-to-face online and actually I have to say I'm really enjoying it at the moment, you know it doesn't feel massively different. They're still very bespoke, so we work in pairs quite a lot so that there's a kind of, you know, sharing experiences so fundamentally the online-ness has not interrupted any of the stuff that we normally do. I'll give you a quick example, um, we have in the block of time essentially from January through to July; students either working on placements or they work on their own projects, or they do what we call work-based learning so, they already come with a job if you like and they critically reflect on that stuff, so those three things. That hasn't changed. We have actually still got students on placement with organisations; with *Les Enfants Terribles*; with *Improbable*, with *Actors Touring Company* and they're essentially online officers of those organisations. We're also working on a project with one of the lead producers from *Les Enfants*, um, getting the specialist skills of making a site specific, immersive project happen in a heritage setting. And each of the students is working on that in their own way because they want to take the learning from that and apply it to wherever they wanted to make the project. So, some are going to apply it in

Singapore, some are going to apply it in Southport...you know, it's, it's bespoke to the student. And they'll be pitching those ideas to an industry panel in two weeks' time, uh, and getting feedback and suggestions for how they can develop that work. So, we've got essentially all the stuff that we normally do, it's just the medium in which we're doing it is slightly different, we're not in a room in Central, we're in a kind of digital room.

SCOTT:

And you've talked there in great depth about how all the challenges that lockdown has brought and the kind of things you're doing to combat that. The key question in my mind is, as the course leader, how do you feel that the students have responded to that challenge?

JESSICA:

Oh, amazing, absolutely amazing. I mean I think we're really lucky, in that, you know it's a relatively small course, you know, we normally don't take more than 20, so that's a small group. I think, you know, we are now all over the world when we're doing a session, we've got some students in Chile, the US, and we've got some students in Singapore and China, and everywhere in between. But have found the time zone that works for us. And actually, what we're doing is, it's like every session is a kind of reporter's insight into what's happening culturally in those spaces. So everybody's actually getting the benefit of minute-by-minute understanding what's happening there. I'm not going to say there haven't been challenges with that, you know, the internet connections and things in the very early stages were tricky but all of that is now being sorted out. And actually, one of the things that we found is that pre-recording some of the sessions and then focusing on the Q&A element when we meet live has been fantastic. And actually, it's something I would want to carry-on anyway because I recognize that quite often you might want to go back to a lecture, we've got now recordings of all those things. So, yes, there have been challenges but there's

also been some fantastic things that come out of it which are really fantastic people are now available to talk to us directly, and I think, you know, essentially you could see producing us training for leaders (*inaudible*). And if there's one thing that this crisis has shown, it's we really need agile, articulate leaders who are very in touch with their vision and values, who know how to make ideas happen, even if the idea you originally had was going on one route, to have that agility to move around and kind of see how you make that thing happen still. So, in a sense everybody is kind of giving us their reports from the front line about how they are managing that. Just a couple examples, so you know we had Finn Ross share his work in projection in live performance the other day. So, we started thinking about all the affordances of digital work that can be made now. We've had Brian Zeilinger who's a graduate from this program, with his partner Jack Maple, has been doing an amazing Commercial Producing Masterclass which has brought - he's an award-winning Broadway and West End producer - you know, we've had his, you know, amazing time over, I think it's four sessions now - and he's been kind of giving us stuff that we would never get insight to because, you know, it's Chatham House rules, we get to see the budgets as they actually are, he's been really fantastic in kind of taking us through all those steps. So, to some extent, you know, that, it's, it's an affordance of this situation.

SCOTT:

And you touched on it there, you know, there's been loads of kind of normal, traditional festivals canceled over the last few months and an increase in digital festivals in response, do you think we are likely to see more digital festivals and performance in the future?

JESSICA:

I think, I kind of...Yes, is the short answer because I think that will be the immediate reaction. And I think the sort of, in a way, the change to digital has been happening anyway and I think for example The National Student

Drama Festival pivoted from being an actual festival to an online, I think in less than a week, which is absolute credit to that team that made that happen. So, I think the knowledge was already in all of us but it wasn't the kind of, the impetus to do that wasn't there. However, I do think that people are just going to long to meet in a room and they want the communal experience. I think what digital offers is an amazing, bespoke experience, it almost feels like - the online performances I've taken part in as an audience member - you feel it's kind of being made for you. But you don't feel you're in the room in quite the same way that you feel if you go to a space. So, people like the producers of *Great Gatsby* announce that they are doing a COVID secure production starting in October and I think once the initial, kind of, sort of response towards safety, to address people's fears and making stuff in a certain kind of form, I actually think there's a kind of much more nuanced and incredible vibrancy in the solutions that are going to come up. And that's what really excites me actually about this next generation of producers, both the ones I'm teaching now who have learned how to navigate change at a rate of knots which nobody has ever seen before, and they've done it. And I feel so proud of them. But also for the incoming students, I think that willingness to draw from gaming and also think about, you know how work exists in live, sort of real spaces. And it's almost like somebody's kicked the door down on what theatre making can be and how it can exist. And it was already starting to happen, because like the reason we do the *Heritage Project* is because I think people want to engage with their histories, for example, in a new way. And one of the really important things, that I want to give a shout out to Connie Bell, from *Decolonizing the Archive*. I think what we are able to do is re-examine some of the, sort of, tropes that we built a lot of assumptions on. And with Connie, for example, we were looking at, you know, how do you decolonize the archive, how do you look for work and look for the origins of work that can happen in different ways. So that's, that's, in a way, that's the form and the vessel in which it's in, I think we can be much more adventurous about it, digital is one form but I

think we're gonna be looking at many other hybrid forms, we're gonna be looking at, thinking about audiences in a much more nuanced, less stereotypical way. I think we're going to be looking at what I would call hyperlocal because everyone's been living in their houses for so long, their awareness of their locality is fundamentally different, but as we've seen with current events, I think the global matters, and we see that we have agency, and we see that we have a responsibility to be part of a change that we might want to see culturally. So I think the, sort of, the dimensions around that question are how do we want to tell stories, so, you know, in a way coming back to my beginning and digital is just one of the platforms in which we would do that and it's become - we've just become much more familiar with it and less afraid of it and potentially so have our audiences but actually I think it's a part of the diet not the whole of the diet.

SCOTT:

I guess, you know with things during lockdown like the National Theatre Live opening up theatre to new audiences potentially, but also things like live streaming which were already gaining traction. I guess they could take off in a quicker way now and I think that kind of goes on to my next question around how you feel the wider industry might change as a result of coronavirus but more importantly how do you think that will impact the role of the creative producer?

JESSICA:

Mmhh. Umm I mean I think it's really interesting with live streaming and you know we know this from what we've experienced - with the explosion of material that has been available, but way before that, the appetite for NT Live in no way diminished the appetite for tickets in a real space. So it's not like one or the other, I think, I think you know what I would hope comes out of this is a diversification of audiences because, you know, I think culturally there are a lot of assumptions about who consumes theatre and I think hopefully

people will have encountered it in a different way and they've encountered it in their own space and on their own terms which I think is really, really important and I think a bit of humility from us as cultural producers, in terms of in like, well are we telling a story - not the right stories - but are we being open-minded enough in where our stories that we give platforms to are coming from. So, I think, I think the thing I've really loved is the sort of co-creation of work and we've seen, you know, adverts which have been, you know, done on people's phones, we've seen panel shows that are in everybody's living room - so there's this sort of destruction of some of the rather useless, sometimes veneer of finished-ness and professionalness that's been around theatre. So I think that was already happening the sort of desire to make theatre more communally, you know like to be, to represent and to give proper voice to communities that we are working with but I think that will definitely explode because I think people have got an appetite and not least there has been writers writing and you know people thinking in all these confined spaces, that's going to explode (*laughs*) in 2021. So, one of the implications for producers is there will be a massive, sort of, amount of material that is looking for producers. But I think fundamentally the question about implications is you know this is a world that has gone through a shared experience. As somebody described to me, we have all been in the same storm but not everybody has had the same shelter and I think you know that's made me ask a lot of questions about, you know, what privileges I might have. And I think that comes back to producing because I think producers, if they're going to make stuff happen then they really need to be thinking about, you know, what is selected. Do we want to do all the stuff that we've been doing for years and years and years, or do we actually want to find some new voices and do we want to make sure that we are listening a bit better in terms of, you know, what people really want to engage with because theatre is a discourse, you know, that's why we get so much enjoyment out of it, it's not a one-way process like consuming television that, that being in that space we feel like we are also contributing to that

experience, no one show is exactly the same as another show and I do think whether that's live streaming or people in the room, liveness is incredibly important to who we are. I think there is a really, really, important thing in terms of, I suppose, our kind of group responsibility for both organisations and individuals. So, theatre is an incredibly complex ecology, producers are used to navigating that because we are fundraising - we find money - it's about kind of understanding what a project needs and navigating all the various different elements, orchestrating them if you like, in order to make something happen. I think one of the things that COVID has exposed is some of the, sort of, more systemic issues to do with work that is, you know how work is supported so there's a lot of credit given to the shows that are made and people understand the actors are needed to make those shows the reality. I wonder how much public understanding there is of all the technicians, all the video projectors, all the stage managers, the puppeteers, all the people whose livings also go into making that work. And I think you know that is important that you know we kind of value - it's a bit like, I suppose the key workers is exposed all the - our understanding of what it means to get our everyday bread. I think this is also exposed that the fact that we need a lot of people to collaborate with in order to make performance and that's one of the brilliant things about Central is that there are specialist in every single *(laughs)* expertise around you and in a funny kind of way it doesn't actually make that much difference whether they're in the room with you physically or that you are able to reach out to them digitally, it's the conversation that really matters and that's what I love about Central, is that if we are trying to - in this post COVID era we are remaking what our theatre landscape looks like, we've got everything that we need to start re-imagining that at Central; we've got all the disciplines, we've got all the passion, we've got all the kind of experts, and it's a great time to do it because you know we are in this thinking time if you like, theatre is taking a breath and this is now a time - if you want to come and influence the change that is being made, to come and do it here at Central.

SCOTT:

And Jess, it has been wonderful to hear that and, you know, it's very lucky to get to speak to one of those experts right here, right now in yourself so thanks so much for talking to us today, really appreciate your time and I'm really pleased that you said about things not sounding polished and things like that as I've heard 5 motorbikes go by-

JESSICA:

(laughs) yeah yeah, likewise there - there.

SCOTT:

So ah, ah-very very topical stuff. Thank you so much Jess for you time today.

JESSICA:

Pleasure, pleasure.

[theme tune starts, crescendo at Scott starts talking]

SCOTT:

Thanks as well to MA Music Theatre student Clara, and if you're listening to us at home, thank you for joining us! We'll be back next week for a chat with Dr Farokh Soltani who will be talking about moving past writer's block and offering some tips for working on your writing project in lockdown. We hope you'll join us. For now, from all of us at Central, stay safe and look after yourself.

[theme tune ends, diminuendo]