

Dyslexia-friendly Transcript for Discover Central Ep3:

Dr Farokh Soltani



Host: Scott Bellamy

Guest 1: Student Jack Freestone

Guest 2: Dr Farokh Soltani

Article and podcast links:

<https://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 this week we'll be talking with Dr Farokh Soltani, who'll be offering his tips for moving past writers block and getting started on your writing project during lockdown. He'll also be telling us about a unique playwriting initiative with Little Fish Theatre. But, first let's hear from theatre practice student Jack with his top tips for lockdown.

GUEST 1 – STUDENT JACK FREESTONE

Hi, my name is Jack Freestone, I'm a first year Theatre Practice student here at Central um one of my top tips for lockdown is stay in communication with your family and friends, make sure you're having group calls with them, video calls, messages, anything just to sort of keep in the loop. Keep some human contact in your life and some sort of schedule.

SCOTT:

I'm back with Dr Farokh Soltani, before moving to the UK, Dr Farokh Soltani's background was in writing, filmmaking and sound design. He worked in television in his native Iran, writing and contributing ideas to a range of hit programmes. He joined Central in 2010, first as a postgraduate student and then as a visiting lecturer before completing his PHD in Central in 2018. Farokh now teaches the theory and practise of Writing For Film and Performance at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. Hello Farokh, Thanks for being with us today.

GUEST 2 – DR FAROKH SOLTANI:

It's a pleasure to be with you, thank you.

SCOTT:

So, you've had quite the extensive career in Iran before coming to the UK. What kinds of work were you working on?

FAROKH

Ooo everything, I use to describe myself as the jack of all trades of the Iranian cultural industry. *(laughs)* Um so I use to, So, I had a set of skills which, is that I could write and also I could speak and write in English which was a rare skill so, I used that a lot. I used to be a translator, I used to be a film critic, I worked a lot in television. I used to write, this is going to sound strange but I used to be part of a writer's group on a sitcom and as part of that I invented an alternative name for gherkins that became a national catch

phrase *(laughs)* and um that is still my sort of my claim to fame. *(laughs)* Um, so yeah, it was fun, I did a lot of different things and that's really helped me in navigating a very unusual career. I started applying for various master's courses, I was 25 and I got into a lot of them. I got into one of our competitors, I actually paid a £500 deposit to go and study Screen Writing at insert-name-of-competitor here... I'm not going to name which competitor. *(laughs)* And then I got the offer from Central and I had absolutely no doubt that I would attend Central even though I'd made all my plans to go to the competitor. Um I did my interview, I will never forget, I did my interview in the back room on the night of my brother's wedding and what I heard in that interview was enough for me to say 'this is where I want to study'.

SCOTT:

Well, I was gonna ask that as well I mean *(laughs)* I'm not gonna ask what was said in the interview but kind of what was it kind of that gave you that gut feeling that Central was the place for you, given you were already quite invested in another institution?

FAROKH

Um what I heard was a certain kind of err, creative openness that I didn't hear in other institutions. Partly, it might have been that all the other institutions that I applied for um were universities, and Central was a university but also a little bit not a university and I think that was what really invigorated me. The other one was that I went to the website and on the front page there was an advert for the show put on by the MA Music Theatre students and it was "Into The Woods" and I thought wow this is a place where I could go and study and then in the evening after I've finished my lectures, I could go and watch "Into The Woods." Last year, July 2019, I actually got to see "Into the Woods" again in Central on the Embassy Stage directed by the wonderful, wonderful Adam Ranson and it was mind-blowing, it was worth waiting those 9 years. *(laughs)*

SCOTT:

I'm glad to hear it, *(laughs)* I'm very glad to hear it. *(laughs)*

Moving on and thinking about um kind of the next generation if you will, what kind of tips would you give to kind of new writers who are starting out?

FAROKH

Oh um, I've worked with over 100 writers every year and all of them are starting out in, are in various stages of starting out and to each of them I would say something different. So, I assume that if I'm going to give one piece of advice to all new writers it is: figure out what kind of writer you are and don't try to figure out what kind of writer you should be. Each new writer will have to reinvent writing er and to do that they will have to first realise all the things that they shouldn't do, they have to realise what kind of writer they are not and so that takes experimentation. So, second piece of advice probably, write as much as you can. So, writing is not an intellectual labor, there is a difference between coming up with ideas and writing. And I think everyone can come up with ideas, it's just that the process of turning those ideas into writing is really difficult and really labor-intensive. So, the more you do it, the more you become proficient at it.

SCOTT:

So, it's a very personalized journey for each different writer for sure then. Is what I'm certainly getting from what you're saying.

FAROKH

Absolutely.

SCOTT:

It kind of leads us on really and again... *(laughs)*, you've taught us about the difference between an idea and writing, I mean what is the best way to get started working on an idea for a new script, screen play or some other piece of writing? I mean we'll take the idea piece first, what's that best way of getting started?

FAROKH

Trusting one's self, really. The best way to start on any new piece of writing is to trust one's ideas. And it's to start with those ideas, um there are basically two ways in which I've seen people start to write. One is, 'Oh my God I've just had this really cool idea, I should start writing that', and the other one is 'I want to write a play about poverty'. And usually what I've seen is that people who start with the second one, people who start with a concept that they think is expected of them intellectually will not end up with a good piece. I think the best way to find the idea is to trust the ideas that you already have rather than to think about all the ideas that you should have. If that makes sense.

SCOTT

Sure, absolutely, absolutely. I mean, we are in a very strange, we are in a very difficult time at the moment, with lockdown and everything. Some people, their ideas might be flowing really freely, for others I can totally imagine this being a huge thing for a lot of people, might be struggling with writer's block. You know and even keeping up their motivation or concentration in lockdown is gonna be a challenge. What advice would you offer to them?

FAROKH

I was talking to one of my student writers the other day and they said, 'Here's the reason why I haven't written what I thought I would write in the past two weeks, is that I don't know what the point of writing is anymore.'

Because you know, you look at the world you look at the enormity of what is going on, the sort of the feebleness of day-to-day human endeavor. And you say, 'Does it really matter that there is one thriller fewer in this world?' And so, my response to that student was, that 'Yes, it matters'. I think part of the reason why people might be struggling with blocks is that the motivation isn't there. It feels like we shouldn't be motivated to write when we can't be motivated to, I don't know, raise money or protest, or just keep healthy. But I think that valuing the act of writing itself is a really, knowing that what you do matters, even if it's giving someone an idea is a way forward, the other one is just finding ways to make space for writing, any writer again, any writer writes differently, and any writer is comfortable writing in different settings. I for example, the only way in which I can write is lying down while listening to the sound of thunder and fire. Take me out of that and I will stop being able to write. *(laughs)* And some people can only write when there are other people around them, and they will struggle right now so, it's important for anyone to know what kind of writer they are and to be aware of various things that they can do to put themselves back in a writing situation. I hope that makes sense.

SCOTT:

It does, and I think actually your own style and an environment that you need to be in writing kind of really reiterates what you were saying earlier about that very personalized journey for each individual writer, and how individual a process that is, so that's actually really good to hear, and it's a really interesting insight into your own personal style. Going on from that, you yourself you've been working on a playwriting initiative with Little Fish Theatre, together with Dr Amanda Stuart-Fisher and some second-year Central students, working on Collaborative Outreach Projects. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

FAROKH:

Yes, we have. It's this really cool thing that we've been doing, it's the fourth year that we've been running a project for Collaborative Outreach which is a unit that we do on the BA CPP Drama Applied Theatre and Education and Writing for Performance courses where all of our students form groups and they go do various outreach projects. With the Writing for Performance course we have been doing a couple outreach projects where our students used to go for the last few years to primary schools and secondary schools and teach playwriting to children, and then at the end of it we would run a children's playwriting festival. We have been partnering with various organisations, we partnered with Central itself, a couple of years ago, last year we partnered with Tara Arts, which is an amazing institution. This year we've been working with Little Fish. We were supposed to go into a number of primary schools and youth theatres and our students were supposed to teach their students and then we would run an entire festival. Obviously, the world sort of ended um and we were (*laughs*) not able to do that in person, so I am so proud of my students who within the space of weeks created an entirely new form of teaching, so that they could do the exact same thing but online. They have been engaged with it-with this for a couple of months now, it's sort of coming to-I think in a couple of weeks we will have the sharing festival where all the people who have written plays during our students' online teaching are going to perform it on YouTube and everyone is invited to look at them.

SCOTT:

Fantastic, well we'll have to make sure to, yeah we'll have to make sure to tune in to that. For those listeners who aren't familiar with the acronym CPP, that is our BA in Contemporary Performance Practice, just to make sure everyone is staying with us there. I mean I was going to go onto the current situation and those students-they've obviously had to adapt their ways of working for this project and everyone is having to adapt. How have the students coupled with that, how have they dealt with that?

FAROKH:

Amazingly! I am so proud of them and I'm not surprised how well they've adapted. I have utmost trust in my students, but I am very impressed. So, what they did was completely reassess how playwriting teaching works, because it's not just about the concepts it's about the way in which you engage with individual students and you give feedback, also when you are in an online space and you are working with children there's another level of difficulty which is safeguarding, so for example you cannot have personal information from the students because if you are in a class, you invite the students in and you talk to them and then you go. But if you're online, you are going to share their emails, you're going to share their social media, so we needed to create different layers of safeguarding so that those are avoided, which means that our students suddenly realised that it is going to be really difficult to even just communicate with them directly with each learner, and you know what? They created this whole new system so that every participant in the workshops would engage with them via the character that they were writing about. And each of-

SCOTT:

Oh how clever!

FAROKH:

Yeah! Its each of these characters, now has an online space and they communicate with the team through their characters, the team every week gives them a series of exercises through videos and through documents, they fill it in, they send it back. Each character has a passport and after they've completed each stage of the learning, they get a passport stamp-yep, they came up with an entirely new system.

SCOTT:

That's so, so clever.

FAROKH:

Yeah. I'm so impressed.

SCOTT:

And so is this-and so this is part of what's going to be shared on YouTube?

FAROKH:

Um each individual participant has been doing a series of exercises for the last 5 weeks, at each step students have responded to those exercises, they've performed bits of it. If you go to their website they have performed excerpts from the participant's submissions, they have given general feedback, they have given specific feedback and the participants through these weeks are developing texts, plays about those characters and at the end of it these will all be performed by our students, recorded into a film and then broadcast live on YouTube.

SCOTT:

Fantastic. Well we'll definitely be looking out for that one on YouTube that's for sure. Farokh before we finish, I mean just a quick one here, what else are you currently working on that you'd like to tell us about today?

FAROKH:

Um, oh lots of things! I still also have my own writing practice somewhere, and I have a writing partner with whom I've been working with for about 10 years and we have got a lot of encouragement from various producers on this piece that we have been working on for a couple of years called *Daughter of Adam* which is about people in the UK-immigrants to the

UK having to deal with dark pasts in their home countries which I'm really excited about. I'm also-I have a book coming out.

SCOTT:

Fantastic!

FAROKH:

Which is a thing, apparently. *(laughs)*

SCOTT:

(laughs)

FAROKH:

Um my book, which is called..oh, I've forgotten the name of my book.

SCOTT:

This is an excellent plug... *(laughs)*

FAROKH:

(laughs) My book, my book which is called *Radio / Body:*

Phenomenology and Dramaturgies of Radio is going to be published very soon by Manchester University Press, so I'm very excited about continuing my research.

SCOTT:

We will be-we will be sure to keep an eye out for that book, I'm sure it will be an excellent read and of course, I mean to be honest Farokh from all of that, you're clearly a hugely busy person. All I can say is thanks so much for even finding the time to chat today.

FAROKH:

It's an absolute pleasure.

[theme tune starts, crescendo as Scott starts talking]

SCOTT:

And thanks to Theatre Practice student Jack. We'll be back again next week for a discussion about the adaptability and perseverance of our community, who have undertaken an exciting array of work for the summer term-we hope you'll join us. For, now though, from all of us at Central stay safe, and we'll see you next time.

[theme tune ends, diminuendo]