**Pandemic & Beyond Podcast Episode 11**

**Heartbeat: Flute Theatre, People’s Palace Projects and La Plaza Theatre, Peru on Making Theatre with Diverse Participants – automated transcript**

**Pascale Aebischer:** Welcome to the *Pandemic and Beyond* podcast, the podcast in which we talk to some of the researchers whose work has transformed lives during the COVID 19 pandemic and has shown us ways in which that period of trauma could also catalyse innovation and fresh ideas about how to connect as a society.

Today, I'm speaking to a group of people who've been involved in working with neurodivergent individuals and their carers, that is, one of the groups that we know have been most affected by the global COVID 19 pandemic. They have adapted theatre based methodologies to enable recovery from COVID 19 and build resilience amongst young neurodivergent people.

The lead researcher on this project is Professor Paul Heritage at Queen Mary University of London, who is the director of People's Palace Projects, a research centre which for the past 20 years has been creating and debating art that makes a difference to people's lives. For the Heartbeat research project, Paul has been collaborating with Peruvian theatre company La Plaza Theatre and British Theatre Company Flute Theatre. And together they've done theatre based work with autistic and neurodivergent people and their families and carers. Paul is here with me today, along with Kelly Hunter and be the director of Theatre and Alexandra Ajauro Alvarez of the La Plaza Theatre in Lima. Also with us are Joshua Welsh, actor involved in the project and a longstanding participant in theatre, and Lisha Rooney, who is the mother of a young neurodivergent participant, and she is also the governor at her son's school, which is specialising in working with autistic children.

Thank you all for joining me today. And I'd like to start by asking you, Paul, a question. Could you introduce your project to us and explain a little bit about what brought you to work with Flute Theatre and to reach out to the La Plaza Theatre in Lima?

**Paul Heritage:** Thank you, Pascale. They reached out to me first, so it's great they invited me to go to Lima to work with them on Shakespeare. I went there to do some, just some lectures and workshops with their actors and I fell in love. I love the theatre. I think it's amazing experiments the way this is structured without public funding, but actually making some of the most innovative new writing based work that I've seen in Latin America. So I was really excited by what the potential of what they do, what they do.

And so then I invited them to join a project that we're doing, funded by the MRC, which is a five year project looking at the way in which the arts are a potential resource for young people with depression or anxiety. So we just started doing much about a year and the pandemic hit, so we did another project with La Plaza on COVID, looking specifically a shift to the digital, how does that affect young people?

So we were already engaged in this relationship when finally I was able to say to Kelly, who I have known for so many years that this, I think, could be the chance that we could do some work together because we – People’s Palace Projects - has been running something called Shakespeare Forum for about twenty five years. We bring Shakespeare practitioners from all around the world, mainly to Brazil, but to other countries in Latin America to co-create workshops to debate with audiences and think about Shakespeare in Peru or Shakespeare in Brazil or what actually Shakespeare is in our lives today. And Kelly is someone I wanted to bring to that work for so long, so long.

And then she invited me to a production of *Pericles* online – a play I really detest. I must admit it was like the first time in all these years I'd gone to production prior to this and thought, ‘Oh my God, that's what the play is about’. And that's where it came from, the belief in works that really crosses those frontiers.

And so I was able to say, Look, Kelly, we're in the middle of this pandemic. You're already doing this. We're like, Why can't we do it across to Lima as well? And I know this company not only that great practitioners they're engaged in work around thinking about neurodiversity because they've just done this incredible production of *Hamlet* with a neurodiverse cast and audience. And so it felt like this was an encounter that had to happen.

**Pascale Aebischer:** It really does sound like, you know, all sorts of different pieces of a jigsaw were falling into place at that point with the work that was already taking place in Peru and the work that Kelly was doing and the work that you were doing. And it all just fitted together with the pandemic working as a catalyst for all these groups to come together.

That's absolutely brilliant.

So Lisha, can I turn to you next? I was really struck when preparing for the interview by something that Paul said in one of the documentaries about the project because he spoke of a brave new world of disability inclusive recovery from the pandemic. And as I said in my introduction, we do know that disabled and neurodivergent people were particularly vulnerable to COVID and to the side effects of lockdown. So can I ask you what the challenges are that you and your son have been faced with and are still facing during this pandemic? And how participating in such a project in theatre making has affected all of you and changed your lives?

**Lisha Rooney:** Yes. Yes, of course. So in our flat, there are three of us. There's myself, a single mother and a teenage son and my autistic son, Lumen, who's nine years old now.

And at the start of the pandemic, I'm not going to lie, … it was horrific because thinking ahead for a child who is outside about three hours every day, just walking around the park thinking that we would have to stay indoors, just looking out windows was anxiety inducing, to say the least. And then also knowing that he wouldn't have his routine of going to any sort of school or just any sort of routine, no consistency whatsoever, was very worrying. So we didn't have a plan, actually, because it all sprung quite quickly. We have a trampoline in our home, we have a swing in our home. We have things that he can use to try and regulate himself. But it was an incredible worry.

And later, as it progressed, it just became increasingly worse and more increasingly worrying because we weren't allowed to go outside because he had medical conditions as well and we were trapped. I think the first lockdown was maybe twenty four days without going outside, and we basically did whatever we could to survive and survive.

I do mean survive. There was quite a bit of violence because when he becomes dis-regulated, that's his communication is hitting, punching, biting, scratching and completely understandable because I think any of us in that situation who are trying to say something, voice our concerns and don't actually have the words to do it – it will make you mad. It would make any neurotypical person mad, so completely understandable his reactions.

And it boiled down to a point where he was crying so much – I think it was maybe a three hour span – that the neighbour called the police on us and said I was abusing my child.

**Pascale Aebischer:** Oh, that's awful.

**Lisha Rooney:** It was horrific. I mean, it’s lucky this is a podcast and you can't see me because it always brings me to tears the thought of some stranger thinking that I'm abusing my child when actually I'm trying to do every possible thing within my means to appease them and just make him, you know, help us all survive.

So when the police came, they were kind and they said that they would help us and they did end up speaking to his school and getting us some help, just some sort of respite. But in the end, the people who know us and who have known us for years were Flute Theatre. And so my instinct was to call Kelly and cry and ask for help and ask what I could do.

And she just said: ‘Look, we need to get you online. We need to do more online.’ And because my son had adapted before to some of the ‘Heartbeat hello’s, she offered to do it on a daily basis and if need be on an hourly basis, whatever she could do.

And luckily, it worked. It absolutely worked. My son's accustomed to using a Kindle, so he knows the screen. They use screens at school, they use iPads, so it's not foreign to him. But to see all these familiar faces, to hear these familiar voices whenever he needed them just gave him comfort. You know, it wasn't just me or his brother, it was all these faces, all these voices simultaneously doing what he had done before, and it just gave him the calm that he needed, just gave him the space back that had been taken away so horrifically.

**Pascale Aebischer:** That's a really inspiring and terrible story that you're telling us there, and it's just wonderful to hear how the routine and the engagement with other people through a screen made it possible for him to find some rhythm in his life again, some structure, I suppose, but also connection.

And you were talking about the ‘Heartbeat hello’, and I'm just wondering: can you tell us something about what it was like to watch him communicate through the screen? What did he do? What was his way of participating and what sort of creativity and ability to influence what was happening through these activities?

**Lisha Rooney:** so Lumen is non-verbal, but he communicates more than any other human being. I know it just takes someone to listen to how he's communicating, and he does it with sounds, he does it with gestures, he does it with repeating certain words. If he likes them, he does it with splashing water on you. I mean, the way he communicates is absolutely beautiful. It just takes, you know, the right people, and Flute are the right people.

So when he started doing the ‘Heartbeat hellos’, there was an instant connection and he had done them in person previously, so he was familiar. But when he started doing them on the screen, something clicked and it was the first time he ever said ‘hello’. So he had been doing them for a while and by chance I was recording him. I was actually recording him so that I could send back to Kelly his communication because she couldn't see everything that was going on because she was focussed on him. So I had a phone on the side recording him and I was singing ‘hello’ to him, and it was the first time he ever said ‘hello’.

So as the parent of neurodivergent child, you know, at that moment something has happened. That the synapses are working. There's remembering what has happened before. There's a comfort level, but he feels like responding to what I've just said. And in that moment – there is a video of him – in that moment, he shocks himself, surprises himself because you see him smiling and then you just see his eyes get wide, as if to say, I've just said ‘hello’, and I'm happy that I've done it so.

It not only helped his speech (to me that was secondary, the fact that he said ‘hello’) – it was everything going on behind that, that ‘hello’, that will always leave an impact. I think anybody that's seen the footage, I know when I showed it to Kelly the first time. She was very emotional. And even to this day when I show family, everyone gets emotional.

**Pascale Aebischer:** Since there is a recording of Lumen saying ‘hello’ for the first time in one of those workshops, let's just have a quick listen to that now.

**Video content:** ‘hello’ … ‘hello’

**Pascale Aebischer:** So that was that extraordinary moment when Lumen said ‘hello’. Now we're going to have a listen to another clip. And this is of Kelly talking to an entire group of participants in one of her group workshops. So let's have a listen.

**Video content:** [Kelly Hunter:] OK, so you want to reach through the screen and through your heartbeat? Begin a conversation with someone who finds life very difficult.So we start again. I'm going to start. Olà, olà, olà, olà, olà. Olà …

**Pascale Aebischer:** So Kelly, having listened to this, could you explain why the heartbeat is so important to you?

**Kelly Hunter:** Yes, happily. I also want to add something in these heartbeat circles and these hellos. We don't do them in order for the person to say ‘hello’. It's not that we're waiting for this magic moment when the person joins us and actually says ‘hello’, if that's like an … amazing thing that happens. But actually the spirit of the thing, the spirit of sitting and making heartbeats and whatever reaction or whatever shape with the fingers or click or noise or anything that the autistic participant feels like doing is great.

So it's not that we are wanting some neurotypical reaction. But that's really essential, and a lot of people don't even get that. But for me, that's the most natural thing in the world because when I created this, I was making it with the neurodiverse group. I wasn't waiting for them to do something that I was doing. I was actually jumping into what they were doing, and it just so happened that then it mixes about and of course, for a parent, it's amazing when a non-verbal child then joins the verbalisation of the neurotypical.

But as Lisha knows and is as any parent of non-verbal people will say, there's communication 24-7. It's all communicative. Whether or not it's the English spoken word of ‘hello’ just doesn't really matter, although it is a beautiful moment within complete communication.

**Pascale Aebischer:** So, Kelly, why are you focussing on the heartbeat and Shakespeare and how you're translating these two ingredients into method for inclusive theatre that works for children such as Lisha’s?

**Kelly Hunter:** Yes, happily. Actually, the Heartbeat and Shakespeare are one and the same thing. So the heartbeat is based on the iambic. I was an actor at the Royal Shakespeare Company and doing pretty well about 20, 21 years ago, but I felt very frustrated myself at the potential life changing, transformative power of Shakespeare and how it wasn't being accessed at Stratford-upon-Avon and at the Barbican Centre, where I was currently working as an actor.

So I took myself off to a special school, the Glebe School down in Beckenham in South London, and I left the RSC and I sort of offered my services to work with people who had no access to the arts to explore the power of Shakespeare, to explore this fundamental life changing source, this sort of force of nature.

For me, the iambic gave me as an actor so much power on stage that if I landed the right word in the right place, Shakespeare had given me the chance to rock the audience. And the idea of Shakespeare's four key words eyes, mind, reason and love, which appear more and more, is a poetry of the seeing brain and the loving eye. These two elements were what I wanted to explore.

So the school welcomed me with open arms, if not a little surprised and said, ‘Yes, please, please come if you'd like to, you can work with anyone, but you can't work with the kids behind that door.’ And they pointed to a door and they said ‘that's where the autistic kids are. They just wouldn't be able to play with you’, and they just dismissed the people behind that door as if that was the most normal thing in the world. And then this teacher carried on talking about something else and it landed with me very strongly.

So I sort of said, ‘What could you wait a minute? Why can't I go behind that door? What on earth could be different about those people behind that door?’ And he just hadn't, it wasn't that he had made that decision that it couldn't happen, it's just he didn't even think that those people behind that door who actually were just put in front of computers with ear-defenders and little kind of boxes and being sort of managed throughout the day would have any interest or be able to play.

So those … were between 12 and 15, those were the people that I played with first and mostly non-verbal, but actually a great cross-section of what you can get in the autistic community. Some actually incredibly chatty, never shut up and [some had not] ever spoken a word. And everybody in between. And we sat in a circle and I just had this idea of making the rhythm of a heartbeat because it was the iambic and it didn't involve the spoken word. And with that, I created what I call the conversation of the soul, the conversation of the body, which is exactly what Lisha is saying Lumen responds to, is that Shakespeare is allowing us to have this rhythmic conversation where actually you can land on certain rhythms without worrying about what the spoken word is, and you can have an emotional and empowering effect.

So Shakespeare is working not just with the intellectual sense of what is being offered, but also with the emotional sense of what is being felt. That's poetry. Otherwise, it would just be a scientific manual. It's poetry because it lands with an emotional hit at the same time as intellectually. So, yeah, I stayed with that group of neurodiverse 12 young adults for three years. Me, their teacher and then I learnt from them how to play with them, and I created games of eye contact of spatial awareness, of imaginative play with them. And we started every session with making heartbeats, and we finished every session making heartbeats.

And I learnt that someone with autism is likely to be struggling with a level of anxiety, and that level of anxiety biologically will make your heart go faster because you will be slightly panicked. Someone autistic once told me it was like standing on the edge of a cliff and as if they were in a panic attack that never, ever finished. So making a steady heartbeat, giving an architecture to the biological sense of being … actually allows regulation, self-regulation. It's as if the heartbeat is giving the message that says it's OK. The next thing is just another heartbeat. It's just another.

A lot of autistic people I've met over the two decades will ask what the time is. ‘Is it finished yet? What time is it now? What time is it now?’ Which is not necessarily because they're bored, but just because the sense of time can be perceived as something different from neurotypical person. So these heartbeats, I learn from that three years working every single week with that group of autistic people was something that they could enjoy that alleviated anxiety.

And from that we could add in hellos. We could play with faces because many autistic people struggle with recognising and expressing different expressions that became the structure for a beginning in the end of the sessions. And a couple of boys from that original group also had moments like Lumen with his first Hello. I will always remember a young boy called Matthew after about six months of us sitting with making these heartbeat circles, calling out as if from the depths of another planet: ‘Hello’ as he sat as if he was far away from us, he was in the circle with us in Beckenham. But that first hello came from somewhere else.

It's a complete privilege to play with people who are neurodivergent. They seem to know more than I do when I say they, I mean *they*: as a group of individuals, I've worked with many, many autistic individuals and each one as different as all of us are, but each with a seeming knowledge that they have in the universe and that there is something magnetic about being in the universe that is not so concerned with the everyday, but actually can bring us back to something deeply creative and spiritual. And that brings me back to Shakespeare.

**Pascale Aebischer:** That's really wonderful to hear. And what strikes me there is the way that you’re explaining how children who are having mostly nonverbal patterns of communication can engage through theatre making through communal rituals in something that creates a community and creates that connection. And I'm wondering whether you could say a few words about how that is translating into the Zoom environment in which there is precisely not that sort of common presence in the room that normally when we talk to theatre artists, they're all talking about liveness and the need to be in the same place at the same time, and that's where the magic happens. And it can't possibly happen through a screen because at that point, you're not co-present. So could you just talk about what it was like to translate that to Zoom and how it worked?

**Kelly Hunter:** Basically, I'm a frustrated filmmaker. I love film. I think I certainly as much, if not more than I love theatre. And I don't understand when people say that you can't communicate through film. I mean, like look at Charlie Chaplin, look at, look at Al Pacino, look at the eyes on some of these film stars, look at the way they make you cry and feel before, you know, before you before they've even spoken to you. So if something is alive behind the camera, it will have an effect on the audience. I know that. Love it. Feel it. That's probably one of my biggest inspirations.

So we didn't try and film what we do in the space. The bold move that we made is when we're in our space. We work with a maximum of 15 autistic individuals per performance or per workshop. What became very clear for the pandemic when we wanted to adapt it very quickly was there was no way we could reach 15 boxes on Zoom. So we did it for one person at a time. We just went, OK, we can't do this for 15 people at a time. We'll do it for one. And because gain has never been my thing, it's never been a box office saying I've always or endlessly fundraising because I don't make money from what I do in terms of an audience coming, it just made complete sense and freed us up to concentrate all the energies of all the six or seven or sometimes 14 actors, when we had our Peruvian and English company together to work beautifully together to cheer up the person who was locked away. Basically, Why not? And to engage in some way or other the spirit of that person? So I guess what we invented was a combination of sort of Pina Bausch and Kelly Hunter.

**Pascale Aebischer:** This collective movement in each box, which is very, very enjoyable, is very choreographed, very specific, very, very nuanced, very beautiful, I must say. So I’m wondering wondering whether I could just move on to Joshua, who is an actor in those in those performances. Could you just tell me what it's like to be performing on Zoom with a company and this neurodivergent individual whom you haven't met in real life, whom you don't know, but you are playing with them? Could you talk about that?

**Joshua Welch:** Yes, sure. Honestly, and I think people always feel a bit shocked when people say this, but I honestly felt no different doing it on Zoom did in person it just apart from your surroundings, obviously you were in.

For the first lockdown, I went up to my parents’ and I was in the living room there and I came back down, I headed in my bedroom and that's all a bit weird, but once because the objective of it is so clear and the games are so clear and everything is communicated well, it doesn't feel any different because you had to put the same amount of love and energy. And as you just said, to cheer, to make everything jolly, you know you had to do. That's exactly the same thing you would do where the person sat next to you and when you knew you got it right, when it felt like they were sat on your laptop that they were, they were in a different room and it didn't. It's only now that we've stopped doing it, that it feels odd that we were. I was here in London and people were in Peru and India at the time. … It just felt the right thing to do. So it didn't feel any different doing it. Yes, it didn't.

**Pascale Aebischer:** So what have you learnt from doing this sort of work?

**Joshua Welsh:** Yeah, actually, I came to Flute via Drama School. I've learnt a lot about the actual power of theatre that cannot be so moved because I remember being a kid and having the feeling in the room, the feeling of why I think everybody - most people, anyway in my group - wants to do theatre in the first place because when we were that the age of the children were playing with it, it was an escape for us. It was it was the chance to have fun and be silly, and it was a release and to see locked-away children have that release was so moving.

And also, when you sought to do it more and more, it gets addictive because all we want in life is to have the thing that we're going to be used to change people's lives.

**Pascale Aebsicher:** And that's quite extraordinary. It certainly puts paid to that myth that actors and freelancers were doing nothing during the pandemic, when in fact, so many of you were actually doing some very vital work, reaching out to people and bringing happiness into these locked-down homes and families. But it's a global pandemic, of course, and we know the work that you were doing mostly what was in Britain.

But we've got a Peruvian theatre company in this room with us in the in the shape of Alexandra. So I'm wondering, Alexandra, could you just tell us a little bit about the La Plaza Theatre and how it was affected by the pandemic?

**Alexandra Araujo Alvarez:** Sure. Well, the place that we are in space for theatrical creation that investigates and interprets reality in order to construct a critical point of view in dialogue with our community. And for the last few years, we were working with actors, with Down syndrome. We made our own world their own version of *Hamlet*, and they had a very successful season that actually change our whole company. So we then when Paul, when the pandemic came, we were also working close to it with these actors and other people that are always knocking our doors to do some workshops. And so when Paul actually told us about Flute’s powerful work and the Heartbeat method, we knew immediately that we wanted to work with that.

So we started to do some functions. I remember we started to work together with some actors from Paris and with our company of actors with Down syndrome. And it was amazing with this project, with the productions we just had, we have impacted the lives of autistic people, but not only of them, but especially their families. And they're all older, all their lives, not only in Lima and especially because of COVID, because that the technology has allowed us to expand the boundaries.

**Pascale Aebischer:** I can see Lisha nodding along throughout your answer and clearly agreeing with the with the notion that this is transformative work and that it is helping the families in wonderful ways. And so I'm wondering, looking forward to the future, what do you think La Plaza will continue doing that they've learnt to do during the pandemic?

**Alexandra Araujo Alvarez:** Well, we're working with Kelly and with Google to make sure that we can make this project live because actually, we've only done it through Zoom, which, to be honest, has been an amazing tool to get closer to different to new autistic people that we would like to tour the project in different communities around Peru and maybe around Latin America. Because to be honest, this is something that is not really done in Latin America, and we could do more of all this.

We would like to work also with state colleges, with the teachers to make, to teach them how to do the games because it will definitely help people's life and autistic people's lives.

**Pascale Aebischer:** So this project is having a massive impact internationally and from this little seed that was planted many years ago, something amazing is growing and is changing so many lives.

Thank you very much, all of you, for being so passionate and for really bringing this work to life for us. And I would recommend to anyone listening to this podcast who would like to find out more to follow the links that are at the bottom of this page.

So thank you now to my guests Paul Heritage, Kelly Hunter, Alessandra Araujo Alvarez, Joshua Welch and Lisha Rooney.

The Pandemic and Beyond Team are Sarah Hartley, Victoria Tischler, Des Fitzgerald, Karen Gray, Benedict Morrison, Garth Davies and me, Pascale Aebischer. To get updates on the project, find out more about the latest arts and humanities COVID-19 research and to access other episodes of the series, you can find everything you need on our website: pandemicandbeyond.exeter.ac.uk, , or you can follow us on Twitter at @PandemicBeyond.

Thank you!