**BACxHoG - Artists**

Transcription

C - Conrad Murray

M - Marjorie H. Morgan

S - Sheila Ghelani

Recorded remotely via SquadCast.

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**S -** So I'm Sheila Ghelani. I'm in the East Midlands at the moment, and I am an interdisciplinary artist.

**M -** My name is Marjorie H. Morgan. I'm a writer, researcher and storyteller, and I'm living in Liverpool at the moment.

 **C -** My name is Conrad Murray. I'm from Mitcham 'M-town' southwest London, and I'm the artistic director of the [beatboxes] BAC Beatbox Academy. [Beatboxes]

**M -** How do you define your practise in terms of working with others? My practise is always collaborative once I finish writing. I usually write on my own, but then I work with, if I'm doing a theatrical piece, obviously I've worked with directors, the crew behind the scenes as well, as well as the actors to produce the piece. And if I'm filming obviously I'll have a, a film crew as well. But yeah, primarily I always start off on my own, but then I work with other people and then the end result is obviously, you know, sharing in public. At the moment it's sharing online, but it's always, you know, I prefer the, the live theatrical aspect of things.

**S -** So I sometimes work alone, but often work with others through teaching, mentoring. I collaborate with other artists as well, and I'm an associate artist of lots of different companies. And I try and work with others from different fields as well, whenever I can. And also audience, I often try and involve them in the work. And I think I do all that because I'm interested in hybridity and thinking about cross pollination. Which at the base of it is just informed by my own experience of being Indian and English. And I think that's what is at the base of all my work and also in the community as well. I work with lots of different types of people whenever and wherever I can.

**C -** Yeah, in terms of my practise, I guess a lot of what I do, the practise in and of itself is collaboration. So I guess one of the main, I would say that my craft is collaboration and learning how to kind of work with other people and take them on a journey. Like this, almost, like, by the end of it they think, "What did you do?" But you're kind of preparing yourself for that. It's about setting the tone, giving, setting a direction and a mood of but kind of letting everyone else kind of paint, paint in the pictures and join the dots and stuff. So, yeah, in terms of my practise, that's kind of how I define it, working with others and also do lots of workshops and stuff like that as well. But it all kind of stems from the. Shout outs to the, the British and Indian mixed people.

**S -** It's really rare, isn't it.

**C -** Yeah

**S -** What, if anything, does the term Co-creation mean to you? I really remember the first time I came across that word. Probably about seven or eight years ago when I was doing a project and being really baffled by it. And, but now, obviously, it's like used all the time. But for me it means like working with others, it means careful listening. It means conversations. Trying to create or hold a situation where those involved maybe have an equal voice or as equal a voice is possible. Even if I'm sort of the lead artist holding that space. And it's about developing an idea together. I think it's all those things.

**M -** Along with Sheila, I think it's working with others because although as a writer, playwright, I usually start off doing things on my own, but also when I worked with Heart of Glass, I've got, I had a producer working with me who would suggest things and I was like, "Oh, I didn't think of that." Or do you want this person to come along side, because they can do this and free you to do something else? So I think having producers is really good as a, as a means of co-creating, because they can guide you and put boundaries in, but also the other creatives in the process are invaluable as you, as you go along the path from the beginning to the end product, to the end delivery. So that's I, as Sheila said, it's something we've always done, got a nice new term for it, but it's, it's as an artist, you've, you may think you're isolated, but you're always working with others, I think co-creating.

**C -** Yeah, I kind of remember the term kind of also appearing, out of the darkness. I mean, I guess the difference in co-creation and in a way that maybe people saw other ways of using other other ways and phrases is non-hierarchical, kind of like working together. I think the, the aim is that I guess how I kind of see it is we, we, we do something called a Circle Jam where we sit in circles. So you can all see each other, so everyone has a say, making sure that everyone in the room at all times is having some sort of saying voice in the co-creation. I don't think there's, there's necessarily a power. You're trying to break down those power structures, so it feels co-created, and it's about letting go of that kind of that, "This is my role, this is your role" and building that from, organically from scratch. That that's how I understand co-creation.

**M** - Why do you as a practitioner choose to make work in this way? Is there really any other way of doing it? Because I think we just discussed in previous questions, we always end up working with people, co-creating. Even if we are a solo artist in name, once we get a bit further down the stage, we have to involve other people, whether it's through the materials that we've created or the people that we need to deliver the end product. I think everything at some stage has an element of co-creation in there. It just depends on the project, how much of it and what, what part of the project that you have the most co-creation or I'm going to keep using this non-hierarchical working together.

**S -** I think also I think, as I've already said, there's something to do with cross pollination that I'm interested in. Bringing different people, ideas and that kind of, yeah, interactions into contact with each other. So there's something to do with that. I really enjoy conversation. I think that's sort of, like, basic thing that draws me into sort of making this type of work. I think there's something really a bit political as well, like, I'm really interested in working with people that are often perceived as being on the edges, I suppose. I think, so I might end up working with, like elders or, I don't know, in a psychiatric hospital or like. So I’ll actively seek out some of those constituencies of people to work with. So there's something a bit, yeah, to do with politics because I feel like people on the edges, I don't know, we've just seen during the pandemic who's, who's forgotten and who's, who's not.

**C -** I think for me as a practitioner, and why I choose to work in that way is from being a participant and an audience member of performance and being a participant and that feeling of having no agency. And actually feeling that this work has not been made for me and that being in sessions that people have come not to listen to what I have to say, but just to show me art and give me their ideas and their experiences and their culture. And it's quite oppressive. And with that, you know, builds up all of those kind of barriers towards access and performance and knowing that it's not actually about your story. No one cares about you. No one wants to listen to you. So it's about going through that experience and, and feeling, you know, like this is all great, but like, let's tell our story. Let's tell your story. So it stems from that experience. And as an audience member, you know, when we're watching the show at The National, and it's about people in care homes and like there was people on stage, like "Yo Wagwan my brother." And people in the audience were in tears, like, "This is so real, this is so real." And it's like, "Nah, this is fake. This is so fake." And you knew that like it was written by people that were not from, don't understand care homes. Don't understand working class people. People almost in tears in the audience and you're thinking, "This is bringing you to tears? I'm almost in tears because I feel insulted right now. Mad insulted." So I want to do some Googling and research on all the characters. Like these people didn't have experience of, of this story. They might have been telling some, like, essence of someone else's story. But like in some homeopathic way, it's like a grain of, grain of the drug in all the water that you put into it. But it was not there. It had been removed. The truth had been removed. So, yeah, that's, that it’s those experiences lead me to work this way.

**M -** Whatboth Conrad and Sheila just said there about getting the, the truth from the voices of the people whose stories you're telling or your story if you're one of those people who've been marginalised or decentred, I love the way Sheila put it, say that, you know about repositioning them because they, the people don't feel themselves marginalised. It's just the overriding, stale, pale male gaze that marginalises people. So repositioning the gaze and recentering people, I think that's why we work in the collaborative way. Because we can't, our story is not just the only story. We find other people's stories that need to be told as well, and I think at the, the essence of it all from what I, from me and from what I’m gathering is that we're all storytellers in some way and it's important as a storyteller to get a layer of voices. To share the truth from different people.

**S -** What do you think are some of the defining principles or qualities of this practise and why? I guess conversation, as I've already said. Being together, listening, really careful, listening. Not knowing, so like following an idea or following a thought with a group. Like I would say, tea and cake, but that might just be my practise, I don't know. [Laughs] Like, care. Being a bit non precious as well, so like, really being open to see where something goes. Also, like, seeing what, I've always asked a question about, what a particular group might want or need from an interaction or from a, from the project, like whatever however they perceive it, they might not even perceive it necessarily as art sometimes.

**M -** I don't think I've got much more to add than what Sheila has already said. That kind of covers it all. You know, especially the listening and going into it with the sense of not knowing what it's going to end up like. Yeah the concept of the unknown is quite important.

**C -** Being kind of brave enough to kind of go out into the unknown and, like, letting it go on that journey. Like not worrying about having so much, your control, in the fact that you're so you're so confident in, in allowing people to speak. That's where the strength comes from. It’s being confident enough to allow people, giving people a voice. And that is I think that is a skill. I don't think everyone can do that. I think that people find it hard. It's not just about listening. It's about listening and giving that platform and giving that space for everyone, for everyone to talk and not letting the usual suspects talk out, being fully aware of controlling, controlling that journey. So like, like creating an environment where everyone feels able to do that. It's about safe environments where everyone feels included.

**S -** Yeah, it's kind of like being like a host or something like holding a space. It's really hard sometimes and it's exhausting, and sometimes I was going to sort of jump in and say that sometimes that not knowing you can feel like you don't know what the hell you are doing. Well, that's my experience anyway, but then I do think you are doing something very particular when you're holding the space to try and make everybody feel like they can speak equally.

**C -** I think that the people come first and that is the, that is the art, that is the product. So I think that it's the people first. And we don't, we don't obsess over, because although we said we don't know where we're going, it's also the freedom to not obsess about that part. And it's about taking each moment in and of itself and every interaction in and of itself each session. So I think it's about the people and that, and that process is also part of the art form, because that's 99 percent of it. I think a lot of people aspire to do that in all, in all performance. But it's not, it's not true. You know, people torture companies to get to that tiny bit at the end. I think that if you're going to do co-creation, a massive feature of it and a quality, a quality of it is that people often, their memories aren't only bound up in the performance, but it's about their experience and it's about the sessions themselves and about that journey journey for them. And often that energy and that spirit is given in the performance. And that's, that's the spirit and the energy that you create in the rehearsal space, or where, how we define that space; a rehearsal space or meeting space, or whatever.

**M -** I love that.

**S -** Yeah. I think that's a really good point. Definitely, yeah, it's about being in the moment isn't in the in the, in the space with people. And like I'll often do a plan, just say that I've got a plan, but often I do not follow that plan because the ideas go somewhere else.

**M -** And that goes back to you saying not to be so precious about things. The old writer adage, 'Kill your darlings', you've got to be able to do that.

**C -** What would you say are some of the biggest challenges facing co-creation as a practise?

**M -** Time and space. And the opportunity to fail. Because sometimes if you haven't got time, the time and the space, you have to work so hard to get that product to make sure it works and you've got something to show, that if you were given those elements, repeat again, time and space, you could fail a number of times and still enjoy the process. So that, I think that's one of the biggest challenges of everybody's under a certain amount of pressure to produce something within a given time frame.

**S -** Yeah, I think I'd echo that. And like I would say also some of the places or spaces that I've ended up making work in can be quite challenging in the sense that, like, I don't know. It's something to do with, I don't know, some of the spaces that I'm invited into, sometimes I just feel a bit out of my. Maybe about out of, it can feel a bit overwhelming. Okay, maybe that's, that's a better word to use because you're sort of you, I think, I certainly, like, have to be a bit aware of the spaces I'm going into. In the sense of being aware that maybe I'll need extra support from other people, so I feel like I've got better at supporting that, not supporting that, spotting where that might actually happen, because I've definitely been in situations where you're supposed to deliver something, like, which is just. Yeah, it's just ridiculous, actually. And so, yeah, that's to do with whoever you're working with as, as maybe like as a stakeholder, I suppose, for want of a better word. Like you're, for me, certainly I'm sometimes brought into places and supposed to like solve world peace maybe or, you know, I mean, it just can feel like that. And it's absolutely like ridiculous. And so it's about downscaling what some of those sort of expectations are around a project. So I would say that can be really a massive challenge. And like, I've certainly experienced burnout as well. Probably about I would say maybe about seven or eight years ago. In the sense of, again, that trying to deliver too much on too little. So again, it comes back to time and space. And I guess we have to mention money. So there's that, that feels like a challenge sometimes the expectations are too massive, I think, compared to like what the resources are. I would say.

**C -** Yeah, I think expectations from people. Sometimes people want you to do co-create something, but they don't actually understand what they're asking you and don't understand the process itself. They also don't understand the communities who you work with and those people because they might not be in the sessions, or their expectations of their expectations. And this is part of a, you know, class system or whatever, that what they're expecting is ludicrous. Also expectations from participants. Sometimes there can be, people also can be confused by the process that you're going on. So what's interesting is if you co-create with a lot of people who have no training but who are very artistic have loads of ideas, often they're fully on board. You know, everyone gets their say, we chip in, we put something together. But sometimes when you get a couple of people in that room who are trained, they talk to you like shit. Like you're a moron because, "Where's like with my lines, what am I doing?" And it's like, "What do you think you should be doing?" "If you can't give me everything? If you can't spoon feed me every single moment, then you don't know what you're doing." And it's like, like "You need to calm yourself down." I think sometimes it's the, unfortunately, some people need to be deprogrammed because they're unwilling to see, they're willing to see and take in what's around them, the people that are around them. I would say that's, that's a challenge. And it, but it's all linked to expectations and understanding of this sort of working. I don't think everyone respects this way of working or understands. I don't think reviewers always understand. I don't think producers always understand. People like the concepts of certain things, but they're stuck in kind of old ways of thinking. When they come into a room, they don't know what they're looking at. When they watch a piece of work, they don't know what they're looking at and they don't understand the idea of, “Who's writing this, who's writing this? It's like well, everyone's actually working together, you know. Someone might be in the room or, you know, who's in control here? You know, that's the point. It's like someone's leading in directing it, but, you know, everyone's having an equal say.

**M -** I think sometimes for me, I've had when you're faced with these enex-, unrealistic expectations, that they sometimes in me trigger an unfounded impostor syndrome. You know, because sometimes I think, "Am I, am I the right person to be doing this now. And it's, you know, "Did I get this under false pretences?" Almost, because they think I can do something where I can't. So even if you know that you can do it, when people come with these unrealistic expectations, you find yourself doubt, I find myself doubting myself more than I would normally if I was starting off with a project on my own and working with people from a similar, maybe untrained background or more open and realistic about what they what they can do and what they want to be done as well.

**C -** Yeah, I relate to that. Make me feel like shit, basically. And yet you know what it is you're doing. You know how to deliver it or you maybe feel like "What? So do I not, am I crazy then? Do I not know what I'm doing?" Or you start, or you feel like, "Why you, why are you constantly testing me? I didn't see you, I don't see you testing so-and-so over there." Who is not doing what I'm doing. It's a completely different thing.

**S -** I was going to say there's something to do with like, what's valued and profile and within the sort of wider art world. And part of me also doesn't want to say it because part of me thinks it's all ridiculous. But then it does also matter because you need to, you need to access, to access money or to access spaces you need to have some kind of weird, like whatever profile, you know, whatever I mean by that, that term. So it sort of does matter as well. It's sort of a strange thing and it's something to do with the type of practise that's valued and what isn't and also where you'll find that type of work. That type of work I mean, the kind of work that I do, that we do.

**C -** Yeah, it's difficult to get onto the main stages and get the funding, or get some decent funding without those good write ups or good reviews, that we all know are actually in and of themselves worthless as one person's idea. But at the same time, if you don't have them, other, other people who you maybe, maybe you even respect them people, but they don't want your stuff on in the main space or give you the money. It's a horrible, horrible, a horrible game like and some people are lucky and some people are not. And people get caught up in it, you know, like, and you have to remind yourself and other people "We're just lucky."

**M -** One thing we haven't said is the gatekeepers. Those are some of the biggest challenges to co-creation. The thing is Conrad's just raised that because, you know, we shouldn't have to think of ourselves as lucky. Because we should, everybody should have equal access to all these opportunities, but, you know, sometimes it's what you know, who you know. And Sheila said it's about people defining what art is and is what we're doing art? Not according to them. So there's a divide. You know, it's almost you could say it's a, a class divide or a new money versus old money divide. It's that kind of things. So I think those are some of the biggest challenges to co-creation. Get, getting people with money to back those without, but who have the ideas and the gatekeepers are the ones who decide.

**C -** I think the, the story that everyone tells about every, every piece of art, every performance that's made, that one genius went off on a rock and came down and made the thing on their own is what affects everyone. Because like you said, even if, even if somebody has a writer or whatever is still co-created. There are still designers, there are still people come and give voices, editors. In every process there are lots of people. But we live in a culture and a society that likes to award just one person. And unfortunately, that one person always looks the same as probably always a man and probably already from money and writes a certain way or talks a certain way. And again, it's about, it's about challenging that. What sometimes they do is they, they'll pick someone else who they may look different, but they'll also be the same as them. Like, it will be another man and from the same background as them, regardless of anything else. And I think that that's what, that's what the, what is a massive problem.

**S -** I think sometimes also there's not those like, support networks around. Well, I've certainly found myself in positions where I've been working with a community or say a group of people and maybe something's not, I don't know who's there to support the artist sometimes, that's what I think is also a challenge. Like certainly the organisations like Heart of Glass, etc, are unbelievable in terms of how they support you as an artist, you'll never be going into a space just on your own. The producer will always be with you or I don't know, and I really value that. Having been in other situations and making situations where you are sometimes just left to your own devices, so like, I feel like the support around you, like it's you know, there's there's just so many people that need to be around an idea, holding an idea up. So sometimes that can be a challenge, I guess, when something is not funded properly so that they can't be those extra people supporting a project or a thing or etc.

**M** - What are the supports you’ve needed and or lacked in terms of making work through co-creation?

**S -** I feel like, having just someone supporting you with the idea is a really amazing thing, and I think that's something that Heart of Glass did really well, in my experience with the projects that I've done. So, yeah, it just feels like an equal relationship as well. It's not like artist and producer. It's collaborative and creative, along with all the participants as well. Everyone's equal, as we already said before. So I feel like that relationship's really important. And I also the other support is just like time and so really having time to go and meet the people that you might be working with properly first. So almost like research trips and recognising that that's part of. That's part of the whole process that it's really slow, it's really slow.

**M -** The equal relationship and collaboration so important. Before working with Heart of Glass, I'd only experience that with one other organisation, that was Metal Culture and they also are brilliant and I think it's a smaller arts organisation who give the best support. They actually value your input and your time, and they allocate resources for that. They don't just say, "Oh, go away, produce, for example, ten thousand word essay and do it by tomorrow evening." They'll give you the time to think. They'll give you the time to create things from your thoughts. I didn't realise that I needed a producer or a sound engineer, but the producer at the Heart of Glass suggested that to me and they can give you suggestions to help your creativity blossom even further. So I think, sometimes you don't know what you need and somebody else outside of the artist, the main artistic creation can give that to you.

**C -** Yeah, I think supports that I've needed are general, a general support, so I think like, being listened to and being respected in what you do. I think being continuously questioned, patronised when you know it is what you're doing, like you have a clear practise and idea and why something works and a track record of holding a space or doing what you do. And it's all about I guess a lot of this has to do with the staffing, the gatekeepers and the class problem in the arts, because the people, you know, it can be a revolving door of staff. You know, sometimes these people leave Bristol Uni, they walk in and they can't believe they have to work with someone like you, God forbid. And so the same level of respect isn't given. For, now I can only talk for myself, but I think it's for certain artists who work in a certain way, and I think it's in a lot of times in the co-creative way, which often is working with mixed communities, people of different backgrounds, people of different experiences. And to me the support that you need, it's just that respect and being treated, as respected as other people, other artists they may work with, because how they treat you is how they'll treat the young people you work with because they're going to grow up too. Like, you know, I think sometimes also when it comes to support, it's about staffing. It's about, again people that don't understand what you're doing often because it's not only, you don't have to be from a same geographical place, but if they're not, if they don't understand the geographics, they don't understand the demographics, they don't understand there's multiple layers, they start not understanding. So it's very difficult for someone who's never starved to say, "I know what it's like to starve." But you don't. You don't. We're humans where we can show empathy. We don't know. If you don't know, you can understand what it must be like. I guess. It's very academic. You don't understand, these things are very, very complex. And I think the support is just actual respect and about the general, general support from people who actually respect the artform that you're doing. That is not just a buzzword or it's not something that's really cool. This is like sometimes really, really serious, sensitive work, working with sensitive people. If you fuck this up, you're going to ruin the experience of theatre and these organisations for these people forever. You're going to ruin their experience of working with other people forever. You're going to create loads of distrust amongst this community forever. You not, you're going to, you're going to leave this room and you're not going to understand that you've just sparked off some sort of arguments that aren't going to, going to end. I think it's it's, it's giving you the relevant support.

**S -** That makes me think also like, of the importance of like, local expertise in the sense that for me, I'm often going into a place or like, I if, if there's not someone that I'm going to be working with who really understands the area or the local needs etc., then I probably, I often will try not to go there or take that particular work if I can. Because it's just really important to you to have someone that really gets, that's, that's particular to me, because I'm often not working where I live like, I do sometimes, but I'm often really sort of all over the country, etc. I'm really wary about that. So I always have to, yeah, because I'm really wary of the idea of the artist obviously being flown in and then flown out, etc. So it's really important to have local support and someone that really knows the community really well. And I think yeah, I think that's what Heart of Glass do. And I worked with a really nice producer at Peterborough Presents recently who just was so keyed in to the local community, like literally everyone knew her and that just opened lots of doors, and it just meant that the project was possible in a different way.

**C -** How do you address your professional development needs currently? Twitter.

**M -** Yeah, Twitter is great.

**S -** Yeah, in a couple of artist groups as well, which I feel like peer support. So when I'm frequently stuck with a project, I'll go and talk to them and, but I guess that's more I don't know if that's professional development. Like I actually did apply for a DUI CP and got one of those just before the pandemic. Actually, it might have even been quite some time before, but I hadn't, that was all. Basically, I designed a whole programme of professional development for myself. But obviously when the pandemic hit, I wrote to Arts Council and asked if I could, if I could just use that to live on. And they said yes. So I didn't actually manage to, you know, to, to see that programme that I put together for myself through. And it was to try and find a mentor for myself, because I mentor loads of people all the time, but I felt like I would really like some mentoring and also just some ad-, I don't know, sort of loads of, I just need loads of professional development support, need lots of things to be sharpened up. So yeah. So I design it for myself. And I will look out for things, but again, because time is such a problem. It sort of, if there's something like, I know that BAC for instance, they often offer interesting opportunities for artists to, you know, to maybe get some training on how to work in schools and things like that. That's really useful. And I look out for those things. So it's a bit ad hoc.

**M -** It's generally a lot of DIY. You know, looking on Twitter. In Liverpool, we have quite a good network of people, writers and theatrical people, and I keep in touch with them and we will touch base via Zoom. Although, everybody gets Zoom fatigue nowadays. We've gone from back to telephone calls, which is great. Just supportive telephone calls and friends will share things if they've been on courses that for one reason or another that you can't afford at the time, because, you know, we have to face it. We're not always rolling in money. So they will share the resources for that with you. You know, if it's legally allowed, I have to put that in there, it'll be alright. so, yes, sharing, sharing with the other people within your, your network is always helpful. But, yeah, I would love to have as Sheila said, a mentor. Because I, I support people as well. So I do creative writing courses and I support people in their journey. But yeah, to have somebody supporting me like I did when I had the producer from Heart of Glass was brilliant. It was kind of like a weight off my shoulders thinking, "I don't have to worry about this, that." They're looking out for me, so. An angel on your shoulder in the form of a mentor would be absolutely perfect.

 **C -** I think asking for help is quite difficult, actually. Because you don't know what, sometimes it's difficult to know what you should ask for help with an who, who will help you. I think the only professional development needs, why I said Twitter is because you can read some stuff and find out about things on Twitter. But also like if you were to tweet a couple of times I've tweeted something and people called me to ask if I'm alright. So actually, other people reaching out to me, which I don't know if this addresses that question, but it is kind of weird to, like, look up to the sky and hope that someone's going to call you. But basically lucky enough, a few people have called me and, you know, there are some good people out there. But I guess the people that I shared, I have shared frustrations with. So, yeah, I mean, basically it's just relying on friends, basically. But I think it's quite difficult. Well, I think it's a problem. I don't feel like I can ask people. I feel like the arts is very passive aggressive, in my opinion. And I feel like if you ask for help it's a sign of weakness. And I know that, to a lot of people that might sound ridiculous, but I've worked on the other side. I work with producers. I work on interview panels for many, many different organisations. So I'm not just talking about one, I'm talking about loads. And you see the way they talk about people, if someone gets upset, the way they talk about someone, you realise, "Whoa, there's no understanding there. You're making judgements on how they feel right now. Are you kidding me?" So that working on the other side you, it's very hard to know who you can trust because people judge other people. In a industry that doesn't really have HR, doesn't really have people complain about HR, but in an industry that doesn't have it whatsoever it's very difficult and in a very competitive industry as well. Like, again, how I could do it, I could do courses, I could do that fine. But actually, there are other things that you maybe want to ask about that are more boutique, they're more catered to you. Maybe it's someone had different experiences to you. Someone who's a bit older. Courses and books can't address all of your needs in a very human based job, being an artist, having a career working with people. But I don't believe that that, that help is always there in those ways.

**M -** I think development’s really quite, quite hard, professional development, because we're all individuals, we've got our own paths, this new job description, as you say, there's no HR. So whatever we're trying like with the time and space we mentioned earlier, we also need permission from ourselves, to ourselves to be able to fail and from, we need that from our support group as well. That it's okay to fail and that we're not going to give each other grief if that something doesn't work out because that just closes down your creativity. You know. So we've got to, we've got to be more generous with ourselves and with each other, I think, going forward.

**S -** I think that's so hard as well, isn't it, because I like, I when, when I've had projects go wrong, it almost is like there is no space to fail, really. Like everyone like, I know that that's, that's exactly like practise is, you know, sort of making something new out of nothing and, but yeah, like Conrad says, if you sort of mess up or you or you fail publicly, like, I don't know, it is, it is a, it's seen as a sign of weakness.

**M -** And like, there's no way to come back from that sometimes because, you know, if there is one what people consider a failure, like you didn't get a four or five star review for something then, you know, people say, "Well, I'm not going to see that again. I'm not going to be interested in their work." The fact that I don't know, for example, on the night you had the standing ovation, but the one reviewer didn't like it, people will take the one reviewer over the fact that you had a standing ovation in, in the room. So it's like public censor from, once again the elite, who will stop you moving along your chosen trajectory for your career path. So, yeah, I think we can, we can hurt each other by not being open enough to allow, you know, mistakes.

**C -** Yeah, because like it's, like in this work that we do, there are no mistakes or even failure. It's just because like, we're just trying.

**S -** If you could give some advice to, or make a request of funders/commissioners or policy makers at this time, what would it be? Oh, God, stop making us apply for everything. We're like, wasting hours and hours on writing applications.

**M -** I agree.

**S -** Or pay us, pay us to write the applications initially or.

**M -** Or at least when you write the application, get decent feedback. Don't have to beg for it, you know, if, if you're unsuccessful, having to then go and say, "Please tell me what I did wrong or what I did right and what I can improve on." Because it's, it's soul destroying and draining to keep doing all these applications and tweaking them, you know, for this arts organisation, that arts organisation, sometimes I just, I want to apply, but it's just the prospect of it just makes me feel I can't. I really haven't got the energy to do that just now. And I know I need the money to be able to make the work. But it's that bit in between.

**C -** I think they should be more transparent about the who reads them and who judges them and what the make up of and background and experience of those people is. Because it would be great to see them lined up and know their experience. I don't believe that one person or whatever it is, ten people could judge, like all the different, like, varied things that come through the door. Also, like, why the artist? Like, we either have to go begging to the Arts Council or hoping to get commissioned from venues like, why don't, and who get the lion's share the money, why don't you give just give more money to the artists? So instead of giving the venues millions of pounds, let's say we apply for 15, they've put it up to 30 now the lowest one. If it's 30 then you give me 50 and you give, you take that away from the venue, they don't get the money. What if the artist had to vie, the venues had to vie for the artists to come to their venue? I can't spend that money on anything, I have still, because we don't waste money. What if the artist paid the venues and then the venues got a proportion of that money, if we wanted to work, and work with their staff. Some of these venues would get a rude fucking awakening because like you said, the smaller organisations are the ones that are treating people with respect, that treating people kindly. That are actually value in the work and they understand the value of the work. Imagine if that, the artist got all the money and paid for the venue. We would see a completely different makeup and people would be dancing a different tune and acting completely different. That's how it should change.

**M -** It's, I love the idea of twisting it on its head. I really do. Because now there, you know, while theatres and other venues have been dark, they realise how much they need the artists, but as you said Conrad, the artists are the last ones to get the money.

**S -** In terms of policy makers, that's a massive one as well. Advice would be value the arts, wouldn't it, because they clearly don't at the moment, the policy makers.

**M -** Yeah, valuing the arts. Going back to Conrad's point, about these, our applications always being judged and we don't know who they're being judged by, are we, are the artists themselves or are they just policy makers?

**C -** It's a tick box to tick box, they got a few things that they look at and that's it. I mean, like that's why if you get one thing wrong in your budget, they will throw out your whole damn thing and get you to turn it around in another six weeks. And we accept that as normal as opposed to saying, giving you a your phone call, "Hey, you've got this. Can you just do this and send it back and we'll have a look at it tomorrow. This is a great project." No, it's a whole ‘nother six weeks.

**S -** I was just going to say that something that really annoys me is that as an individual, I can't apply for lots of things because I'm not a company. And so I can, you know, even though I've said I don't want to be applying for things, but it sort of really annoys me that, like, I can't access certain pots because I haven't got the right company structure. So there's something to do with that as well that I think is really not right and a bit broken because there's something that values, like a company more than an independent or an individual.

**M -** No, I agree 100 percent because applying for local council grants and things like that. If you're not a CIC, you can't do that. If you're not this, you can't do that. Individuals can't. But if you're a sort a one man band, you've got this idea, but you still work collaboratively, you can't do that collaborative work because they stop you from getting the funding. And it's so frustrating.

**C -** Another thing I noticed is why is it that you've got to write them? Like why is it you've got to write all these essays? Why can't it just be a video of what it is you want to do? Why can't it be talking your idea? But also, why can't you just be some evidence as well as what it is you do? Like that, it limits the kind of, who can apply. Not everyone wants to fuck off essay to get some money. Which is such, it's so limiting like to who can apply. I know so many rappers, emcees, people from other art forms that's never funded and they won't be funded because they can't, they don't want to, they've never written an essay before. They've never written anything like it. And they think it's not for them. I'm like, "Well it is for you. It's for everyone." And you see that by in venues, how much kind of like rap based stuff, hip hop based stuff is in venues in the last 20, 30 years? It's quite old art form now. Not that old, it's all relatively new, but it's only 40 years old. None. How much like grime. Nothing. Very, very, very little. So any artist who is their practise performance practise heavily relies or comes from that. That isn't, that isn't built on essays or, or different kind of criticism, maybe they watch, you know, interviews or vlogs or other things. It's just very, very limiting to who they allow to apply. And again, when they say they want to open up, be more diverse. What are they really saying? It's still we want the same sorts of people that are fortunate enough to go to university regardless of background, we want the same, or lucky enough to have, to have a mentor. Like not everyone has has that opportunity. Maybe some things will be funded more than others. They need, they need more creators on it. But certain art forms will never get funded, will never will never get their money in, will never be part of, of certain art won't be won't be part of it in theatres or certain spaces. So it's not really respected. And also the people argue, why is the content of certain genres the certain way that is? Well, it has to be because you won't let it be in other areas where they can start experiencing other things and talking about other experiences and in doing that. Because on road, if you're not getting funded, or whatever, you do it for clout, you do it for likes. If you're doing it for clout, you're going to have to say certain things. You're going to have to do certain things because. Because what else is there? There's no there's no, no one else. You haven't got any other option. It's not making conscious buzz. You're going to get punched up in the face. Man turned soft. Like it's a lot deeper than what people think. And this is, there are serious, serious things. It's annoying. I know some some amazing, amazing, amazingly intelligent emcees, but they won't apply because there's no precedent for it. "They're not going to give it to me."

**M -** Well, I think that the fact that you have to be an arts administrator to apply for an arts grants is quite exclusionary. Yeah, and that's one of one of the problems because it's, in my opinion. I've actually worked for the government on, on occasion, not for the central government, local government, but the the arts form is similar to government forms where they are trickster's. They ask you questions that they ask in a different way in a different part of the form to try and trick you up. So I think if it was, for example, a plain English form. You know, simple. That would help people to get through, but the fact that we're always been tripped up or tricked in some way, that I think that's problematic. That, that's probably not as eloquent as Conrad just put it. It was passionate. Same sort of feeling. It is, they stop you accessing it. Although to be fair, there are some groups since the pandemic hit and access has been opened up a bit more for certain people to apply via video or audio for for grants. But those are a small micro commissions. But if they were to be applied for the larger ones that we're thinking about, especially for the the art forms that you're talking about there, Conrad, I think that would be useful. It would really open the gates, you know.

**C -** Oh, mate. It would yeah. It would it would change a lot. It would change a lot. It would be great if they could do that. But like you said, why do you have to be an administrator to do this? An artist should be able to do it. Also why can't the artists just put their art in there? Why can't they show you their art? Why can't they just show you what they do? And, like, explain to you what they need and what they want. Invite them for interviews, have a conversation with them. "I've seen what you do, had a conversation with you here's a-." Like everyone else, no one gets the big money straight away. Everyone builds up to it anyway. Build more, more and more. Let's see. Let's see what you do. Let's see what you do.

**M -** Arts Council is a bit like Hobson's choice, but, it's also like a bit like the poison, poisonous chalice as well, because you have to sell so much of your soul to, to get in there.

**M -** I did want to go back to something that Conrad said about, oh what was it? When you ask for help, it's seen as a sign of weakness. Is there anything that you can think of or suggest that we could do to get get around that? I think we may have answered some of it, but I just, because that kind of hit me because, yeah, it really hurts. And this has been sort of a session for me, full of empathy and understanding. So what what kinds of things do you think we could do to, to change that, to be able to be vulnerable? Because that's what the arts is about, sharing the innermost part of us, but as practitioners we find it hard to ask for help.

**C -** I think the, the people that we work and we need to be more than just arts administrators don't they. And like, everyone, even the, even the producers and the venues and all the different people we work with. They need to have that, that sensibility. When they just see you as a commodity, it's easy to just write you off. We don't write off people, members of your community. A lot of these venues they use big words, "We respect this community, we respect that community." But that's an abstraction, there's no such thing as the short community where all the short people hang out, all the short people buy coats and we hang out and wear short clothes. That's not true. But there are real communities and are real people live locally to your area. And there are the real people that you meet all the time, once a month, could be more regular than that there is actual people.

**S -** I guess we just have to, as artists, almost like ground ourselves and, in the sense of, and just be, just keep on being vulnerable and keep on speaking the truth, whatever that might be, and, yeah. It's really just hold our own, I suppose.

**M -** I think as well, that, our mental health as well. Sheila mentioned about mentors. I think it's important to have the network and people we can talk to about our mental health as well. Because the stress and strain of these forms, you know, people who understand. Maybe the Arts Council should have a mental health mentorship programme for people, whether people have got arts grants or not, they should have that accessible to anybody who calls themselves an artist and who wants to start on this journey of being funded by the Arts Council. They should have a mentorship programme. Sometimes with your, we work collaboratively generally, but, you know, when we get the stress of being criticised or something didn't work out, we're over budgets or something like that we have to make to somehow the pressure on us is, is immense. And those, you've got a contact at the Arts Council. But if we can have specific mentorship for mental health as well. Especially in these these times, because as in the past year, specifically because we've had to still keep creating art to survive while undergoing the pandemic as well. And that's been so tiring. You know, if we could have some support or some acknowledgement, you know, just throw a couple, you know, 10, 20 thousand to keep us going so that we don't have to stress about it for the next year or so as Conrad said the 30 grand that it's gone up to. If we could have something to hold us instead of sort of saying you can, you've got to do this in order to get that. Just give a grant because we've been artists under pressure. You know, that that would be helpful. And we could actually instead of stressing every night or every month about what's going to happen next. We could think, "I've some breathing space, I can I can now experiment more." You know, I'm not saying that we should have it every, every year, but, you know, once in a while, everybody should get a grant to just be.

**S -** That's like that comes back to the idea of universal basic income, doesn't it? Which I think is a brilliant idea that everyone should get this base amount. I think that would, that change the world.

**M -** I agree, I wrote a play about that in 2018 I'm all for that. Definitely.

**C -** Just just for Arts Council to think about they gave these massive payouts to all these venues or massive amounts of money. All these venues are focussing on their five year plans and their five years plan for the staff or the staff. But the artists ain't got shit. Five years. We can't even plan for tomorrow. It's difficult. All the staff and them people there on their salaries, they can have mortgages, they can like get finance and nice cars, all this shit and their venues have just got massive amounts of money and they're making their five year plans. Like how is that getting passed on to the artists? Are there other venues not under the same scrutiny we're under when we were having to write these applications? I don't see that it is getting passed on.