

Art of Covid Chat – Podcast Series
Episode 2 – Leanne Moden and Bel Greenwood
June 2021

David Johnson: Hello, my name is David Johnson, and welcome to the Art of Covid Chat. We're talking with artists who work in the Fens region about the work and the challenges they face during the pandemic of 2020/21.

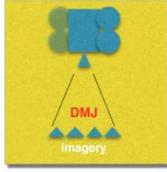
Today, we have one artist from Nottingham who hails from Wisbech and the other one from Norfolk. Please welcome the Leanne Moden and Bel Greenwood, thank you for joining us today. The artists have a background in writing and poetry. Would you please introduce yourself, Leanne?

Leanne Moden: Hi, my name's Leanne Moden. I am a poet, writer and theatre maker. I'm originally from Wisbech, but I've escaped and now I'm living in the East Midlands in Nottingham. I'm currently writing a play based on growing up in Wisbech. It's about music, identity, belonging, and accidentally becoming a teenage goth. So that's quite an interesting look at the area.

My main influences in terms of poetry, I've been writing poetry for about ten years and my main influences are people like Hollie McNish, Vanessa Caseley, Kae Tempest, and I'm really into Caroline Bird and Jasmine Gardosi as well. So yeah, that's me.

DJ: Thank you very much. And Bel, would you like to tell us about yourself?

Belona Greenwood: I'm living in Norwich. I'm a writer, script writer and a creative facilitator. So I'm work a lot in community and in schools. I'm co-director of a regional script development company, and also I have something called the Flying Shop of Imagination because I'm wedded to the idea of imagination and how important it is, and without it, there can be no empathy. So I work with an artist, Kate Munro, with that, so we're was doing multimodal projects aimed mainly at children. So I'm writing but I'm also doing quite a lot of theatre, or I was before the pandemic, and I'm very, very lucky, I've just finished writing a script for a play about a 19th century lunatic asylum. Which is wonderful, actually it's wonderful to do, which was commissioned by the Restoration Trust and Norfolk Records Office. And it's been working with researchers, participants who have mental health problems. They've been researching the case histories, and I've written a play – it can't be a play! It is a play, but it is going to be filmed rather than



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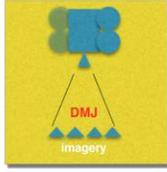
on stage because of the situation. And I've just - sort of creating this eco fable podcast because I'm also part of a collective for combating climate change through the arts, in Norfolk. I'm working in the Fenland area and sort of working online and Zoom, within the community, with community writing projects.

Artistic influences... I find this really difficult because there's so much that you could choose. But I think I have to go with William Blake. It's been very important. And as for a playwright, Rebecca Lenkiewicz, who wrote *Her Naked Skin*. Otherwise it's almost everything I read, everything around. It's really hard to pin it down. I always want to go to music and say, you know, growing up with David Bowie, I mean, so all my influences they're just all around every day, if that makes sense. Whoever happened to be reading.

DJ: That's always a good way. Let's start at where you begin, what sort of, you're talking about influences all around you. If you were starting a piece of work, how would you go about if you had a project, where would you start? What would be your sort of go to places to get the ball rolling?

BG: I suppose, is where ideas for anything can - and quite honestly, they can just pop into your head from walking down the road, you know, from being in a supermarket, from overhearing someone saying something. But once I have got an idea, if I'm thinking about the next play that I'm going to write, it's just come from thinking about a silent character, a character in an existing play who never speaks. I'm wondering what they would have to say if they were given that opportunity. Quite a lot of what I do is about people's voices and making people - trying to provide space for the unheard to have a hearing - that's quite important to me. It's why I set up *Words and Women*, which has stopped now, but it was about giving public space to women artists and women writers, online for seven years. Ideas, honestly, they just honestly comes from anywhere. I don't know. It's really quite hard, David, to pin it down. You just get an idea in your head. It's keeping your eyes open and being open. I think it's being open.

DJ: What you about you Leanne?



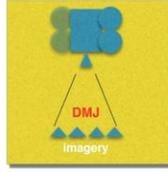
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LM: I completely agree with that. I write a lot to commission, so somebody will send me a brief or ask me to write a poem based on a certain theme. For example, I'm writing a commission at the moment, which is for somebody who wants me to write something about their new home, a poem for their new home. So when you're writing to commission, obviously the ideas have to be funnelled in a certain direction. You can't just wait for inspiration to strike. So I'm a really big fan of this idea of free writing, which is where you give yourself maybe ten, fifteen minutes on a little timer somewhere. And just write around the topic that you've been given. Write the first thing that comes into your head, write and write and write. There's no rules. You can write whatever you want. And the only rule in the no rules is that once you put your pen to the paper, you mustn't stop. And I find that really helpful in getting all the ideas that might be sort of half-formed in my head or all the interesting lines or interesting phrases out. And once I've done that I'm then in a really good position to go, ok, how will I make this into something? And for me, that's a really nice stepping stone to write a poem. My process for writing is a little bit convoluted in that I write a poem, decide whether I like it or not, and then think about writing it again in a different format if it doesn't quite work for me. So sometimes poems have like four, five, six iterations before they become something that makes sense, which is very, like, not efficient in any way. But I don't think art should be efficient. So that's all right.

DJ: Did you do want to add to that, Bel?

BG: No, I'm going to agree with you entirely, especially about that idea of just writing because you always surprised yourself. You never know what's going to come out. I was going to add that the thing about ideas just coming from anywhere, is in a way, we're kind of like story machines. So we take in all this information that's around us from outside and tell it to some people we know and then, you know, and then when we release it, it just comes out in a new form. I do believe that we're like that.

DJ: How do you find, or have you had to change the way you work in the last 12 months during lockdown? Has it affected your process?

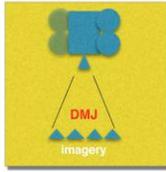


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LM: Yes. Before lockdown, I had pre-set days of the week that I was writing. So for me, Thursdays and Fridays were writing days. Since lockdown, and changes and circumstance, changes in my sort of non-creative workloads, because like a lot of creative people, I have part-time jobs outside of the creative arts in order to make ends meet - and changes to that have meant that I've now had to grab time to write where I can around the edges of things. So for me that looks like half an hour in the morning, perhaps, or like maybe an hour late at night. And that's actually been really - although it was disruptive to start with a bit of a challenge to get into a new rhythm, it's actually been really nice to have that change in that shakeup, and now that I'm used to it, it's produced some really interesting stuff that I don't think I would have been able to do had I not had that constraint of time. Sometimes I find my best writing comes when I'm sort of pushed for time, or I have a constraint, or there's something there other than just the blank page, you know? So I'm trying to take that as a real positive from what has been a really tricky time. And I'm sure a really tricky time for a lot of us.

BG: That's quite funny. It's been fine. I feel very lucky because I had a commission that arrived that had been funded before the pandemic because a lot of my work was affected by the lockdown, and overnight, literally lost all my income. It was hard to take advantage of a certain time because it's so important to give yourself permission to write. And when you have got to think about paying the rent, that is actually it's quite hard to do that. So I was really lucky and have been able to write. I lost all my teaching, I couldn't go to schools, for example. So I was in a position where I could bring out resource book. So I was able to do something like that, to bring in money. But actually, apart from the commission, being free to write other things, it was quite hard to give yourself permission because you're trying to negotiate this new world, if you like. And I think it's been like that for an enormous number of writers.

And the other thing is it's just processing what's been going on and allowing that to come out. Some of my energies were going into doing things like running that competition for scripts about lockdown, and sort of facilitating work to life. So I'm still not completely back to the kind of writing pattern I would like to be living with. I think it's very hard on creative people, actually. I think we're luckier in some ways, and used to insecurity. But I think it's ... it's tough.



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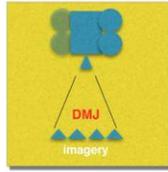
DJ: Yeah, it has certainly hit the arts quite, quite heavily. I think some people are more lucky than others, and have managed to keep going. But it has had a massive knock on effect. In that light then, what have you sort of discovered about yourself during this period? You know, have you have you learnt any new skills now?

BG: I was going to say I've learnt how to clean my house better, but that's not true. Although do you know, it's not related to writing, but I really did last year produce a bloody good flowerbed. I've learnt the value of simplicity. I've given myself sometimes the gift of time because it was very good to slow down, because like Leanne, and like a lot of creatives, I had other jobs as well. And if I look back over last year, the year before and last year, all I'm writing about is how tired I am. And although it's been stressful from another point of view, there was this lessening of work. And that was lovely. So I learnt how attached I am to simplicity and quietness and reflection and not racing around so much. From a creative point of view, I can't tell you the pleasure, just slowing down and looking at things and thinking and creatively about stuff and allowing things to emerge slowly. I don't know if that makes sense.

LM: It makes a lot of sense.

DJ: Yeah, I think so. Although the jobs have stopped, it's had a chance to sort of declutter a lot of stuff that had been hanging around, and sort of finishing off those things that needed to be finished off. So it's almost like a chance to put a line in the sand and then start afresh as we go into this sort of new phase.

LM: Yeah, so I've sort of learned how much I value being in creative spaces with other people and connection and how sort of bouncing ideas off people in spaces and listening to other people's writing and performances was much more the cornerstone of my writing practice than I thought. I was surprised to find that I was much more extroverted than I ever thought I was. I really have missed talking to people in real time and real space, and I think that has been difficult. For me personally, just getting inspiration from those conversations, and using that level of connection to - as a sort of



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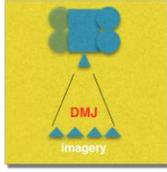
creative inspiration and giving myself a sort of boost. So, yeah, I think very strangely, it's given me the space to be grateful for ... you never you never realise what you are grateful for until you don't have any more, right? So when we are able to get back into rooms together to do open mikes, to do performances, I'm going to grab those opportunities with both hands.

BG: The magic of being in a rehearsal room, as a theatre writer, with people, with the actors, with, you know, just ... I just have a longing. Because so much art is collaborative. There's always that idea of the lone artist. But even as a writer and as a performance poet, as a... actually they're hugely collaborative occupations. And writers, I think, especially need it. So with the script development company, we are storylining sometimes, collaboratively working as writers, and normally we would be in one room together and now we're on Zoom, it's so difficult. It's really strange. The quality of interaction is reduced, it really is. I mean, we know each other well, but it's not as pleasurable. It's so strange. Using words, thinking up a story that I don't know - just physically being in the room with that energy going... I miss that very much.

LM: Yeah, I agree. And that's not to say that I think all of us aren't grateful for having the technology to be able to connect like this over Zoom, because I do think that without it we would, we'd have had a much worse year over the past year. But I don't think it's it's a substitute for being together.

DJ: No, I quite agree. Do you get a lot of your projects that are mainly contracted or do you get a chance to do your own creations? Because I know some people, there's a very different split. I get paid to do most of mine, and then sometimes I get to do things that I like to do, whereas other people are the other way around, how does that work for you?

LM: So mine is ... it's very different year on year. I would say that it varies from about 50/50 to sometimes 75 per cent in favour of community based projects. And some of that is because I really love doing community based projects, work in schools, workshop leading, putting together anthologies with groups of people. Those are the kinds of



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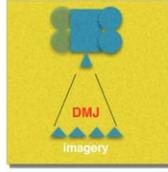
projects that I really enjoy doing. It's also from a sadly very mercenary point of view, those are often the kinds of projects where a creative facilitator can find a little bit of money to pay the rent, as Bel was talking about earlier on. But I always try my best to have projects on the go as well that are stuff that's primarily for me, because as I was saying before, I think that writing should primarily be something that you do for yourself. I run a poetry collective in Beeston, which is part of Nottingham where I live at the moment, and we do a lot of sessions where we sit and write together and things that come out of that I put together for writing projects. I'm also, as I mentioned, writing a theatre piece at the moment and trying desperately to find some funding for that. And that's a whole nother story.

DJ: Have you tried the Arts Council, the dream project?

LM: Oh David, yes. They've said no to me. But we're reapplying and that's all good. But yeah, I was talking to somebody the other day about how for me, I think that writing regularly and writing for my own benefit really helps me in terms of my mental health. So I call it mind jogging because it's kind of exercising the brain and it's sort of feels like it releases the same endorphins as it would if you went for a run. I'm not a runner, but I imagine if I was a runner, it would feel the same way.

DJ: What about yourself, Bel?

BG: I'd say it's always a mixture and it always depends. So I do quite a lot of community, or creative facilitation in different ways. But I also do get commissioned to write plays and do things, but also end up trying to create projects and create work, so on the personal side, I feel like I'm a natural collaborator, so I like working with people. So I might come up with a project where I'm going to have another art form involved, or I'm going to - like creating podcasts. I'm not just going to write a children's story, an eco story, I want to write one where I've got an actress who's going to get some work out of it and will narrate beautifully, and I'll have a soundscape, a musician. So it's really trying to create what you can, and pay people. I think is very, very important to pay people. And then I might be doing my own writing as well. So it's a whole mixture and it really



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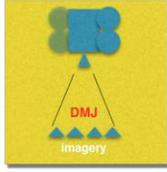
depends. And to try and do projects on all different levels, I think that's quite important too. Your creativity is always actively, massively, actively energized and involved in any community project that you might be doing or working with young people or whatever group I've been working quite a lot with adults from different parts of the community. And that's been lovely. So there's always something new to learn and that always inspires you. But financing resources is so important, and I think for community arts, you know, it's incredible value for money. Any money that goes into community arts helps people profoundly, can really change lives. And so, you know, I just think there should be greater investment in what's happening in the communities, but also in community artists. I think we get - sometimes you have lower status. You shouldn't. We are just trying to change little bits of the world. Which is what being an artist is about.

DJ: Yeah, I mean, funding and art has always been a big issue. And that's sort of certainly this time it's so difficult to keep people in some kind of funding, keep them paid and as you say, writing for people just to give them the opportunity to be paid and to actually work is quite magnanimous as well.

BG: I'd say one of the saddest things I've seen with the pandemic, is to see a friend of mine, incredibly talented actress, who's given up, has had to, and is now working call centre telephone work. And it's just tragic because there's all that talent that is gone to waste. And if you don't work as an artist or in any form, it impacts on your confidence and your ability to move forward.

DJ: Well, that was one of the things I mentioned. That was a project run by the Arts Council, which is DYCP, which is Develop Your Creative Practice, which is an opportunity, a grant for up to about £10,000 pounds so if you have something that meets the criteria and ticks all the boxes. One thing I found is that they won't do film, but they will do theatre and written work and other activities. So it's definitely if you've not come across it, it's certainly worth investigating.

BG: Yeah, it is definitely.



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DJ: One thing that I would like to do is to do a challenge for the listeners, an artistic challenge to try and encourage them to get involved, to do something that's in the style either writing or poetry. With the hashtag #sharelocalarts. So is there something Leanne, have you got something in mind that you can challenge the listeners to?

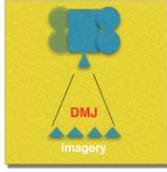
LM: Yeah, sure. What I would like to do is to challenge you to write a short poem. It can be four, five, six lines long. And I'd like you to start with the line "When all this is over, I will..." And your poem doesn't have to rhyme. It doesn't have to necessarily be a story. It doesn't even have to make sense if you don't want it to. I just want you to start with that line and reflect on maybe some ambitions, maybe something wonderful that you're looking forward to doing. Yeah, just let your imagination run wild.

When all this is over, I will...

DJ: Sounds great. Bel, have you got something?

BG: Well, just off the top of my head because I think that you can create stories out of asking questions. So this isn't really related to the lockdown or anything, but it is related to the natural world. So I'd like you to go out and find a stone. If I've been really clever, I'd have one in my hand to show you now but anyway. Go out and find an interesting stone and then and then answer two questions in a very short story - or make it as long as you like. And that is where you found it and what you did with it. And it's quite remarkable. It might be something very simple. It might be that you found the stone and you saw it through your next door neighbour's window. I'm not really advocating you do that [all laugh]

Or it could be you found this stone, picked it up and it spoke to you. Somehow you realise that somehow over lockdown – it could be absolute nonsense - that you had acquired the power of communication with stone. You can do anything with a stone. Or you could you know, you could find it and you could give it to someone else, giving it to someone else, they then gave it to another person and they passed it on and eventually it arrived in the hand of someone who really needed it and kept it in their pocket.



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I mean, you can do anything you like. You can throw it to the moon. It could be a bit of space rock. Whatever you like. Where you found it and what you did with it.

DJ: You've got that meteorite that a couple of meteorites that landed in erm, was it Bristol area, and one in Jersey area, just in the last week or so. So, you know, that's completely plausible. You know, you could go out to your garden and find a piece of meteorite, right there, that would tell a whole different story as well.

BG: Where you found it, what you did with it.

[bell tinkles]

It's nice to meet your cat.

DJ: What's his name?

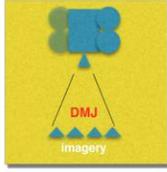
LM: This is Brambles.

DJ: Hello, Brambles.

BG: It's dinner time!

DJ: OK, so something to take away then. What can you share with the listeners? To inspire them to maybe take up writing or poetry?

LM: My inspiration is then... I think that when we think about writing and writers, we think about people who are writing perfect drafts of things first time. So my take away to you is that I want you to take five, ten minutes, maybe every morning just to write entirely for yourself. This is a piece of writing. Could be a journal, could be a poem, could be just a reminder, a list of things to remember for the day. But I want you to write that safe in the knowledge that no one else will ever see it apart from you. And you will be flabbergasted by how brilliant your writing can be when you are freed from the idea that other people will see it and judge it.



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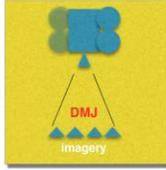
BG: I think that's really true. I echo everything you said, Leanne. I often ask children what's the best thing about writing? And sometimes really, sadly, they'll say, they'll talk about grammar or punctuation, which is what is being force fed on very young children in schools at the moment. But I always say, the best thing is play. I mean, it's just really to indulge yourself, to play, to surprise yourself, because once you start writing, you're on a lifelong adventure. That's what I think happens, that you have to give yourself permission to do that and to go on the adventure and do it for yourself. I completely agree with Leanne. If you're thinking sometimes that you're going to be judged by others, there is no judgment in writing. It's your place to explore the world and to explore yourself. And you always, always surprise yourself. And there's no better way of living, I don't think. So that's my take away.

DJ: Right. We're going to have to end I'm afraid. This is this has been a wonderful chat. And it would be nice if we could maybe do another one in a couple of months time when things have changed and the world has moved on and we can actually do more. It might be worth doing something like a follow up, sort of how we've re-emerged back into the big world again.

Thank you for joining us today. I would like to thank our two special guests, Leanne Moden and Bel Greenwood. We'd like to thank Marketplace for supporting us. Join us next time when we'll be talking to people who have had experiences with video, who've incorporated that within their artistic practices. So until then, thank you very much. See you then. Bye bye!

[🎵 MUSIC]

Thanks for joining me David Johnson and my guests today. The Art of Covid Chat podcast is a DMJ Imagery Production working with Fenland Films Initiative and commissioned by Marketplace: A Creative People and Places project celebrating creative communities across Fenland and West Suffolk. Developed by Arts Council England and supported by National Lottery funding. For more details visit cppmarketplace.co.uk



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