

Grow Your Emerging Theatre Company

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SPEAKERS

Phoebe

P Phoebe 00:00

It's about untold stories and about utilising platforms and kinda, taking a bit of social responsibility. And the audience as well, because like if you've got an audience that you care about and an audience that you're trying to work with rather than against, I think that's when you kinda get the special moments and it can be really nice.

P Phoebe 00:19

Hello, my name is Phoebe Byrne. I am a theatre-maker from Cydebank and I'm a co-founder of SKELF Theatre Co. This is a video about how I started my emerging theatre company and how we continued on that journey to put things in place to get to where we are now.

P Phoebe 00:43

So I remember calling my Mum and like I vividly remember being like, I really, really want to do drama lessons. Like I want to learn more about theatre. And she called me back like, and an hour later she was like, "Okay, I've got you like a free trial of this place. You can like see if you like it."

P Phoebe 00:58

I went and it just like stuck. Through that kind of figured out that I wanted to try and do this as a career. So then when I was leaving school decided to go to college and study acting. The summer that we did start SKELF was the summer that we left Youth Theatre, and we realised that it was the first summer or time in years that we weren't actually working on something.

P Phoebe 01:20

We recognised that there weren't any existing projects for people who were at our stage in the game where we were still in training, but we would also add that emerging artist point as well. And we felt like, you know, we had like a good like bank of work beneath us. And we were ready to start creating. But there just wasn't really anywhere to do that. We were getting to choose the work that we were putting on. And it could be about the things that we found interesting or that we found important. And that's kind of where the idea started.

P Phoebe 01:49

SKELF Theatre Co. is a collaborative Theatre Company. Getting people involved in a way that's really cyclical and on like a skill sharing basis. So you come on board as like a director or something, then maybe in the next show, you might try your hand at performing or you would have something that you've written and want to put on. Giving people those first opportunities to do something. Now that we are at the point that we're writing our own work and we're creating our own work. Because we've been working together so long, a lot of the work is still kind of the same feeling. And the same elk even though we've explored and really different subject matters. And it's, it's a little bit dark, it's a little bit taboo, it's a little bit edgy, it's trying to push boundaries. And it's trying to tell stories that you maybe don't hear all the time, but that deserve a platform.

P Phoebe 02:36

We knew from the get go that the name was going to be really important. And we didn't want to pick something that we were going to hate in five years. We knew that we wanted something Scottish, but also something quite blunt. We also liked beyond that, that there's a lot of imagery that you can associate with that. And we kind of develop the tagline, 'under your skin' as well from that which we all just really love.

P Phoebe 02:58

Our most recent production was a show called The Seagull (Not that One) which was written by myself and my friend John. And then after doing that initial run, we knew that we really wanted to try and take it to a fringe. Edinburgh Fringe can be quite inaccessible I think for a lot of emerging artists just because of the kind of associated costs. And there are so many other Fringe Festivals out there. And Prague's a really cost effective one and it's one that you can do on a smaller budget and it's not going to totally break the bank. We took the show to Prague and done the full week run. And it was a total hit like it went way better than I think any of us had expected it to go like we we thought it would be successful because we've done the run in Glasgow but it really exceeded our expectations., I think, and we managed to come home with a couple of Prague Fringe awards as well.

P Phoebe 03:45

I think that a lot of people get put off maybe trying to take their shows international because they think that it might be really specific to their community or their town or their city, especially if you're writing Scottish work, like we think that it's very specific to us and a lot of it

is. But a lot of it's really translatable as well, a lot more people related to the work than we thought would. The fact that it was set in Glasgow, and it really was Glasgow centric, and it was about that community and the kind of sense of social decay and isolation in that community. It was really translatable in Prague and we found a lot of people spoke to us about that. I think because it's such a melting pot for culture and people come from all over the world we're seeing a lot of work that was on maybe at like American festivals or there were artists there from Ukraine who were putting on work in preparation for the first Ukraine Fringe, and we just got to meet so many interesting people.

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Phoebe 04:41

Well, three of us knew each other from going to Youth Theatre together. So that would be me, Cammy and Ariana. Cammy and myself met Sophie when we went to college. So when me and Cammy wanted to put on a two hander we're putting out feelers to try and find the director and we didn't know anyone our age, who was directing, really at that point, we were quite, we were just kind of in acting circles. And we didn't know any directors, or people who were trying it out or that had an interest in it. Our friend, Ariana said that she would really like to give directing a go. And then when we were speaking about this idea, and Sophie was there, she said, she would also really like to give directing a go. So they decided it would be really good for them, if they could co-direct together for their first stab at it, just to kind of learn what's right and wrong from each other. And we were just like, well, it's a company, now.

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Phoebe 05:33

It can be a nice, safe environment to do that in when you're working with people who understand that this is your first time having a go at it, and they can really support that.

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Phoebe 05:42

From then, we've worked with other performers, we've had people in for development days, we've worked with sound designers and people in marketing. For us, it just is about giving those opportunities to people who want to do it for the first time. And it's good, because you can kind of support each other in those networks. So you know, oftentimes, when you are trying to start a company, you're working with your peers. So it's people who do want to just get the experience at first and get that under their belt before they start kind of branching out. And doing it in other places.

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Phoebe 06:15

I think we just all had our hearts in the same place, to be honest, and we really held a lot of the same values and ethics, when it came to theatre. When everyone's on that same page, it becomes really easy. And it, it was almost really obvious that we should have been doing this together. Because we've always been able to listen to each other and grow together, it's meant we've been able to grow the company together as well, and kind of work out what that's gonna mean to us down the line too.

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Phoebe 06:42

The kind of people you want to be working with need to be good listeners, they need to be good collaborators, they need to be able to take on feedback, as well as offer their own ideas. Ultimately, you need to just be a bit of a go-getter, like you need to know what's going on in the kind of theatre circuit around you and be aware of what opportunities that are for you. And I think it's people like that, who kind of are able to climb the ladder a little bit quicker, like you need that awareness.

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Phoebe 07:10

Our first production was in 2018. And it was a two hander called, 'Pretty Pieces' by Charles Robertson. It's quite dark show, honestly, for the first one, it was pretty dark, but at the time, it felt right. And it was kind of what we were going for. And we realised that maybe other companies who were just starting out, weren't really looking at that kind of work. So we wanted to do something a bit different.

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Phoebe 07:33

When it comes putting on a piece of work, and you've got no money that is a challenge in itself, for the show, we kind of like begged, bartered and borrowed for a lot of things and getting the play-rights was surprisingly, one of them, because we thought we're just gonna have to pay outright for that. And you know, done the thing where you, you emailed the person to get the rights and the writer actually got back to us. And we've kind of given him a bit of background about what we were doing and who we were. He'd said that his mother was from Glasgow and was also a working-class creative. And because of like our story and what we'd put forward to him, he actually wanted to give us the rights for free, like it was so nice. From the get-go, there was someone on the other side of the world, like routing for us, before we even put on our first piece of work. People want to help you and people want to share resources, you just need to find the right people.

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Phoebe 08:20

Well, when we were starting out again, when we had like a little bit less money behind us because we hadn't had that previously run of work to give us a little starting boost, it really is just about utilising the connections you have around you and like being able to work in partnership with people. Start small, start realistic, get a cast, the two or three people together, it doesn't have to be a huge ensemble chorus piece for your first show, it can be something really simple. You can learn a lot by creating simple work.

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Phoebe 08:47

We were very aware from the start that if we were going to do this, we had to be careful with money because we didn't have much of it. We were quite strict with budgets from the get go, which I think was very valuable. And we've learned a lot about budgeting from that, and we're

kind of still building on that knowledge. Sort of the spirit of like Poor Theatre in the work that we were making, it almost became a stylistic choice. It's a bit more of a creative challenge, right. If you have a bigger budget, it's not as challenging. And you don't really have to think outside the box. But you know, like we've created whole sets from masking tape and paint like you don't need a lot to create something that's visually interesting.

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Phoebe 09:23

I think we've had two big changes. The first is that we stopped using existing text and like applying for rights for that which one, saves us money, but two - also gave us the creative freedom to write the work and devise the work and actually make the work that we wanted to put on and it can be really specific to what we wanted to do. It also allowed us to start engaging with writers as well and people who we maybe wouldn't have worked with before on that capacity.

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Phoebe 09:51

The second biggest change is that at first when we were working together, we were kind of bringing people in on like, almost like a contractual basis. You know, like people we would interest in working with. And when they would come in for the project, maybe they would be involved in the next project, maybe they wouldn't. But the four of us were kind of the key members of that. We've come to accept that, you know, the four of us are really busy people. And as we've grown up, you know, we've moved, geographically and metaphorically as well, you know, like, we're busy doing different things. And we still touch base a lot. And we still talk about ideas to each other. And if we want to float, something that is that key four that, we can run things by. Creating multiple pieces of work at once and it doesn't need to be like a sole focus on one project.

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Phoebe 10:33

I feel like this company is my baby at this point, like there is like nothing I wouldn't do to keep it going. I just like look a bit further down the line and into the future and I know that this is what I want to do as like my full time job. And it's not just a "passion project", which isn't, and I don't view it that way. But I know a lot of people outside of what we're doing, maybe would view it that way. Because we're not doing this in a paid capacity. Everything I'm doing outside of that, I'm only doing it to bring back into SKELF. And that's what keeps me motivated with it.

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Phoebe 11:02

We were all working on other things at the same time as doing The Seagull. It was just about being realistic with our time and our timelines. Some of these larger organisations that are working on professional performances, they're able to do a two week rehearsal period and then put on a tour or put on a run. But when you're working on something part time in the evenings or around full time work, you need to be realistic with your timelines. So then we started

looking at getting a creative team on board with that. And as you know, you do just need to look around because you will have people who are more than capable of doing the job around you. And either you just don't know yet or they don't know it yet.

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Phoebe 11:41

Finding it a rehearsal space is really your next big one. You do just need an empty room, take what's available to you and like run with it. We always do like a post-show debrief. And that's mostly just to cover, you know, what went well during the process. We're quite good at communicating throughout if I find but you know, if there was something that was communicated that maybe the action wasn't taken to try and fix things, or maybe it didn't work the approach to fix an issue we were having like the debrief process at the end, it's just a good opportunity to bring anything like that up as well as celebrate the work you've done. Like it's It's definitely like a joyous thing. And it's a celebration, it's not like, "Oh, we don't that's wrong, we need to be 10 times better that next time", it's that but it's also like taking pride in the work that you've done in the fact that you made it to the other end. Having that debrief to celebrate, but also to grow and learn and collect feedback is useful. And it gives you more ideas on what you would do differently next time or how you might approach a new project and those initial stages the next time as well as in the output because it really does all start at that choosing the play and getting the people together in that process. And how prepared and organised you can get during that time for the end.

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Phoebe 12:54

Our next piece of work that we're working on as a play called 'Three's A Crowd' by one of our co founders, Sophie Michelle. It's about three girls in Glasgow, exploring the lesbian community in Glasgow and other parts of LGBT culture and it's looking at queer relationships. It's very different from anything we've done so far. But I think that's what makes it really exciting.

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Phoebe 13:16

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