

Lizzie Lovejoy 0:15

Hello everybody, and welcome to the Change of Perspective podcast where we look at art and creativity from many different perspectives. I am your host, Lizzie Lovejoy. And today we are talking to Lisa. How are you doing?

Lisa Davis 0:26

Yeah, I'm good thanks, Lizzie. Thanks for inviting me on.

Lizzie Lovejoy 0:29

It's wonderful to have you. So tell us a little bit about yourself, give us a quick introduction to you.

Lisa Davis 0:35

Okay, so I'm Lisa Davis, I'm the founder of Changing Relations, which is an arts education company based in County Durham. Prior to starting the company, I had a lot of years of experience in various guises within the education sector, always sort of touching on the arts, my subject of teaching was English. So we're always looking at literature plays, whatnot. And I founded Changing Relations following my initial involvement in One Billion Rising because of the feeling that the arts was a really fantastic tool for tackling issues relating to gender inequality.

Lizzie Lovejoy 1:11

So I guess I'd like to know a bit more about that. How did One Billion Rising influence you in starting Changing Relations? And how did the start of Changing Relations go?

Lisa Davis 1:24

Yeah, so, in a way, it's a bit funny how certain events that are, can be really, really far away from you, geographically perhaps, or interpersonally, can have a really massive impact on you. We saw this recently with the case of Sarah Everard, where lots of people who, you know, wouldn't have any personal connection to her as an individual felt really moved about what had happened and it inspired protest and reaction.

So, a similar thing really happened for me personally, but I think, you know, not just for me, with the case of Jyoti Singh in India in the end of 2012. It was a

case of a brutal gang rape and murder of a young woman travelling on a bus in India. And it was just one of those cases that sparked kind of, worldwide outrage and it just really kind of struck me quite powerfully, because it was a very visceral depiction of the fact that misogyny does exist - misogyny obviously meaning like the hatred of women, you know - and I always feel that it sounds very extreme to say those words, like hatred is strong, and I think lots of people might think, oh, no, come on, that's an exaggeration, but incidents like that, I mean, how else does one describe that such things happen and why they happen? It's such a blatant disregard for the life and the value of a woman. So it really galvanised me into wanting to do something, and it happened that at the same time, Eve Ensler, the writer of the *Vagina Monologues*, who, you know, has become a sort of passionate campaigner against violence against women, she was starting the One Billion Rising movement, the thinking behind it being that in the global population, there are a billion women globally, one in three women will be affected by violence against women in some form or other, whether it's sexual violence, sexual harassment, domestic abuse, and that's such, when you look at those kind of numbers, that's such a lot of women.

So yeah, so she, she started this with the idea of on Valentine's Day, when we're supposed to be kind of celebrating love, that we would kind of make a little bit of a stand and say, okay, well, what's this with love, when actually this stuff is also going on? It was kind of one of those moments where things just come together. So for me, that incident happened, I saw that this campaign was starting, and that it was something that was happening all around the world. And so I just really wanted to get involved and started off trying to arrange something to happen in Durham City. And that really then was the journey towards me setting up Changing Relations. Partly because what I realised is with activism, you can have the risk that you're only preaching to the converted, and that other people feel a little bit like they're being preached at. And that isn't interesting for them, they don't want to engage in being preached at. And I think particularly in the period of time in which we are, it's sort of quite an oppositional time where, you know, you're either on one side or the other in terms of whatever issue it is, you know, political or, or whatever social issues. And that's not really conducive to people having an engaged debate and really listening to these different perspectives and opening minds to different perspectives.

So I think for me, that was really the moment when I started to say hang on a minute. The arts actually is a really handy tool, given that context to reach people in a different way, and encourage them to think but from a less preachy starting point. So, you know, I think the arts has got amazing power to reach people in their heart. So there's like an emotional engagement that can happen that I think is really useful, especially when what you're wanting to generate is empathy for what is happening to other people, you know, beyond your own experience. But there's also this sort of curiosity aspect where it can make people go, oh, yeah, I never saw it like that before. You know, that's also a really useful thing, because lots of the time, people haven't necessarily joined the dots.

So you can have lots of people sort of going, oh, God, feminists, what are they going on about? Like, why is that necessary? We've got gender equality, it's fine. You know, women can do this, that and the other. It's no problem, why are you making a big fuss? And I think part of that reaction is around not having joined the dots with how certain issues or certain experiences that people are having actually do relate into gender inequality. So you know, if you can, if you present things, interestingly, in an artistic way, it can help people sort of go, ah, okay, and it's like a little light bulb can come on. So that really was behind why I started Changing Relations.

Lizzie Lovejoy 6:25

Yeah, I completely feel that because it's the moment of making someone pause and actually look at something and like, think for a second, how does this, how does this make sense? It's like you're saying, joining the dots, that's like, a really good metaphor for that. So that touches on what I was gonna ask you about next, which was what can art do to help educate and explore and explain? So I guess more about what I want to know is how do you use these creative methods? What kinds of things do you create? And how do you think that's beneficial?

Lisa Davis 6:53

So we are a combined arts organisation. So that means that we are not focused in on one art form or another, you know, we're not a theatre company, we're not a music company. We draw from the breadth of artistic

media that exists. For example, we created originally a play but we now have a film version, which is called 'Make Do and Mend'. And that is, that's about domestic abuse. But then we also created a soundscape that has a set of lovely illustrations that you created, also about domestic abuse, but taking a different angle.

And we've literally just finished creating, 'Sometimes it Hurts' which is an illustrated book, and also an animation. And that is, again about domestic abuse. But the angle it's taking is looking at the experiences of children and young people who might have this happening around them in their homes.

So we select a range of different art forms, I guess, depending on what specific angle we are taking on a given subject matter. And then the way that we use those, we really use them a little bit similarly to what I've described as being why we chose to use the arts. We use the artistic outputs that we create, kind of as the starting point in an educational context. So I mean, it might be that they are in a public context as well, you know, it might be an exhibition, there might be a screening, where people have that opportunity to engage and to have a pause, as you said, and just to think and go, okay, what, what's this, what's this telling me? But we also situate our artworks in an educational and training context, where we're using them as that stimulus really, to get people really thinking and feeling about the specific subject that we're looking at.

So for example, we have a professional training that we offer, it's called Demystifying Domestic Abuse, where we would show our film to professionals in a workplace context. And then there would be a series of activities following that where it's really sort of unpicking what it is that the people in the training room have collectively experienced. You know, what are the stories that they've just encountered? And what do those stories tell them about the experiences of those who have survived domestic abuse? So for example, one of the things that we might be tackling there, and lots of people have this reaction of what, you know, why hasn't somebody just left the situation? It seems to be this thing that people go to as their starting reaction a lot of the time. Even sort of at the top of the government, I've seen that people will come out with this kind of reaction. And so one of the things that we do is we take a series of quotations from the characters in the film, now these

characters are based on real people and the real words of real people who have experienced it.

So we take these quotations and we ask people to unpick, what does that tell you about why it was really challenging for somebody to leave that situation? What was going on for them that made it so difficult? And, you know, once they've looked at a few of those, we say, okay, what about if all of those things were going on for that individual? What, how would that make it even more challenging to leave, given that there's all these intersecting barriers in place for those individuals. So really, we're taking whatever the given art form is that we're using in that moment, we're taking it to engage and then we're moving on from that to really sort of unpick and explore what those stories have shown us about the experiences of others. And it's all about the empathetic power of the arts, I guess, you know, it gives us an opportunity to engage in somebody's experience, and to open it up and have a little look around and then reflect what does that mean for us then, in terms of our behaviour and our reactions? How could we be more constructive and supportive in terms of what we do then, if we know that that is what it is like for other people?

Lizzie Lovejoy 11:07

Yeah, I'm a little bit - just feeding off what you've said, just then - I'm interested in people's responses, like after you've gone through a session or training or watching something, because I know, just for some context, for everyone who's listening, I worked on the Us Too project a couple of years ago now, it was fantastic to work on. But being part of that, I actually came to a lot of realisations about the history of my own relationships and what I was in at the time, things started to click in my brain just from having the experience of learning about other people's stories and getting to have that kind of information. So I'm interested in the kind of responses you get after a training session is done.

Lisa Davis 11:45

I mean, even before you sort of shared about it giving you the opportunity to reflect on your own experiences, I was going to say that that is one of the things that we often see with people who themselves have been affected. We've had responses along the lines of it made me feel like it wasn't just me. So I think it can be a real relief for people to realise that other people are in the

same boat, because then there's less self-blame. You know, I think sometimes when people are in an abusive situation, some of the messaging that they're receiving, can give them the impression that, you know, it is just them or whatever is happening is their fault, because they've done this, this, this or this, whatever kind of made up excuse for what is going on. And so I think it can be really useful for somebody to be able to see, no, it isn't just me, and actually this, this is something that is experienced more widely.

Another thing that happens for people who personally have been affected is that they have the opportunity to see that people are getting help, and that there is a way out. Because the stories that we've gathered, you know, they're, they're not only focused around doom and gloom, we've sort of made sure to build in that element of people getting on a recovery pathway. Because I think that is, you know, that's really important to see that those, what some of those options might be. So for example, in our film Make Do and Mend, the three people who, whose stories we gathered, were all in a craft therapy centre. And they sort of talked about the way in which engaging in art and craft was something that really helped them in different ways to recover from what had happened to them.

And then with within Us Too, as well, Us Too is slightly different, because rather than using actors to present the stories, it's the actual voices of real life survivors who have been recorded. And then music has kind of been woven around that. So you can hear the voices of people describing things that have happened to them, but then also that kind of recovery journey and what that looks like for different people. So for example, one of the survivors whose stories is told within Us Too talks about how they're really thriving in their life, now they've managed to create a really positive relationship with somebody who treats them with respect and equality. So that can be a really positive thing for people just to have that realisation of what can be possible.

And then what I would say is on the other side, people who have not been personally affected, it can be really helpful for them in terms of an opening their eyes kind of way. So one of the organisations where we went and delivered our training, a particular individual there explained to me afterwards that, you know, she was sort of almost a bit almost a bit annoyed about like, having to take time out of her working day to do this thing, because she had so

many different things to do. And it was almost as if she couldn't necessarily see why it was so important. You know, why is this such a big problem? And then actually having experienced the training, like going back to that light bulb metaphor, you know, she suddenly realised, okay, this is something that affects a lot of people. There may be people around me who I have not realised have been affected and actually now that I'm switched on to realising that, I really want to try to make sure that we as a company do all we can to help those people.

So, you know, people can be walking around with little blinkers on thinking, you know, everything's fine. Well, those kind of issues, they don't happen to anybody that I know. So I don't need to have to think about that. So, you know, it can be really useful as a way to switch people on to going, right, okay, I do actually need to have these kind of issues in my head. And I want to be primed to be able to help if I notice somebody around me who is affected.

Lizzie Lovejoy 15:31

Yeah, I think that really does highlight how important it is to discuss like these topics in particular. So a little bit off topic, I'm a bit interested in why you selected to use artistic methods. Like you said earlier that you found that it's just an effective, it's an effective tool using different creative mediums. Do you have a creative background yourself? Or was there anything specific that you saw that made you think that?

Lisa Davis 15:53

So I personally am not an artist, but I was an English teacher. And as an English teacher, a lot of what you're doing is unpicking and analysing literature in its different forms. So whether that's poetry, whether it's prose, whether it's a play, or even a film of a place, so for instance, you know, that classic thing that you do with GCSE students is Romeo and Juliet. And of course, you know, you watch the Leonardo DiCaprio version with the teenagers because they love it, and it engages them. But a lot of what you're doing there is you're analytically unpicking an artistic product, as it were, whichever form that takes, and you're trying to understand, what is the message in there that the writer has delivered? You're looking at what are the themes?

So I think for me, that really is the grounding that I use within Changing Relations. And my Artistic Director, Polly Turner, also has a teaching background where, you know, she was a visual artist, and was teaching art. So with us both having that background that's educational but also connected to the arts, very much what we're interested in is, it's the interplay between the art that has been created by somebody who does have some sort of a message to deliver in some shape or form, and then the audience or the reader who is engaging with it, and who is in some way receiving that message.

So yeah, I think that is what's behind wanting to set up something that uses the arts because my background means that not only do I understand that the art can have this emotional response on people, but I also understand that it's there with all sorts of layers of meaning that can be unpicked and explored. And so that lends itself to being used in an educational context. Because for us, those two things are inseparable really, the art and the education, that I could never say we're just an art company or we're just an education company, we're both and they kind of wound up together.

Lizzie Lovejoy 18:05

So what is your - what's your favourite past project that you've done? Do you think? Or is it hard to pick?

Lisa Davis 18:13

That's really, really hard to pick. Um, I mean, I think what I would say is, I love that as a team, the way that Polly and I work is that every project we do, sort of feeds on from a previous project, and something that we have identified in the delivery of that previous project, that is a gap.

So for example, in terms of domestic abuse, we started with Make Do and Mend. It only involved - it only involved women, because it had sort of come from One Billion Rising, so we were interested in looking at women's voices. Make Do and Mend is, is really good in the way in which it presents an overview of the different ways in which domestic abuse can manifest. So from sexual abuse, to financial abuse, to physical abuse, to no physical abuse being evident. But you know, there's all these different little subtle ways of controlling somebody. So it presents a really useful overview of domestic abuse. But it does just present women. So we still use it because of the way in

which it is, is that really useful overview. And I was also previously describing the way in which it very usefully presents how difficult it is for people to leave and kind of get out, but it really - some of the responses that we had in different ways, made us want to create Us Too, so for example, you know, there were - not a lot I have to say - but there was the odd man who would say what about the men? Which is, you know, fair comment, because whilst it does disproportionately happen in the stereotypical way as in it's more likely that the perpetrator will be male and more likely that the victim will be female, nevertheless, that isn't always the case.

But the other kind of stereotype that we were coming up against was people assuming that it's much more likely to happen in a working class context. And so therefore, somebody who's in a professional environment, or somebody who's living in a kind of posher part of town, let's say, they're not likely to be affected. And that really concerned us, because as we were going around and taking Make Do and Mend to places and talking to people about it, the impact of that was to open up a space where then people would come and tell us what was happening to them, you know, which is great, that's really important to open up that space. So we were hearing these stories of people who were professional or well educated or, you know, a little bit better off. And we were sort of feeling that there was this clash between the perceptions of some people that it didn't happen to the kinds of people who, in fact, were telling us that it had happened to them. Um, so we really wanted to create Us Too and that was kind of a riff on the #MeToo hashtag of saying, of showing the breadth of people who domestic abuse can affect.

So Us Too is inclusive of people who are non-binary, it's inclusive of those who are in lesbian relationships, it's inclusive of those who are older and younger, men as victims, women as perpetrators, people from different sort of socio-economic backgrounds in terms of, you know, some people being in quite high flying jobs, and yet still affected by domestic abuse. So, you know, there's just this sort of trajectory from one project to the next in terms of us really listening to what are the responses that we're getting that tell us what it is that we need to make next.

And so similarly, with The Child's View project that I mentioned, or I might have referenced it as Sometimes it Hurts because that's the name of the book

and animation that has come out of The Child's View project, you know, it was a similar thing, in that, you know, we were taking the content that we already had to places, so including schools, for example, and what, and the response that we received in a couple of different settings was adults being really anxious about the children and young people who have experienced domestic abuse in their homes. And those adults wanting to know, how do I respond to those children and young people? And, you know, we could really see that they were quite apprehensive about, you know, starting that conversation and worried about perhaps triggering the young person, whereas our experience generally had been that actually, whether it's adults or young people, people appreciate the space being opened up where this stuff can be talked about. But what that did, that little bit of feedback that said to us, okay, so, then people need help in how to open up a space to talk about this from the young people's perspective.

So we started The Child's View project, where we worked with young people learning their experiences and gathering their perspectives. And because we wanted, because it was young people, we wanted to make sure to create sort of additional layers of anonymity. So you know, we didn't want to use just their voices in the way that we had with Us Too. So we worked with a fantastic writer, Bridget Hamilton, who, she wrote the stories, but she was writing the stories inspired by what she had heard from the young people that we had worked with. And then when she'd written them, we sort of took them back to the young people to check, you know, does this ring true for you? So it's still being created in a participatory way, but we've added in this kind of layer of remove also from the, from sort of protecting the young people's perspective.

So I think that what I love rather than a particular project, it's that mode of working, where it's very iterative and we always, you know, we're listening. We're learning. We're taking on board, what people are saying is needed. And that then informs us writing the next project.

Lizzie Lovejoy 24:01

I love that that's reactionary, a reactionary process. Because I think the entire world right now is on a learning curve, like it has been, obviously, it's constantly on a learning curve. But currently, everything seems to be very - okay, we're learning that this thing has been going on for a long time, and now

we're going to start to deal with that, and this thing has been going on - and I think it's great that you're able to translate that over.

Lisa Davis 24:25

Yeah, it's really important to us to be like a learning organisation, I think.

Lizzie Lovejoy 24:29

So, I was going to ask a little bit about your current projects. But obviously, you've talked about Child's View, which sounds fantastic. And I've been hearing increasingly more and more about it on your social media and everything. What's your, what's your next step? What are your plans right now for what's going to be happening the rest of this year, next projects, that kind of thing?

Lisa Davis 24:49

Yeah, so a few different things. We've sort of come to the end of the first phase with The Child's View in terms of creating the artistic work and then doing like a little test run of sharing it with a range of different professionals who work with young people, but then also sharing it with young people themselves and gathering those responses. And so then now what we're doing is we're looking at, okay, where do we, where is it that we need to take that next, given those responses that we've had? And, you know, what we're always interested in is, how can we make sure that people can use the content that we've got? So, you know, I explained that the starting point for The Child's View was hearing teachers and others who work with young people saying that they wanted to feel more confident of how to broach this topic with young people. So one of the things we're looking at is, do we need to create a set of, of teaching resources that go with the book? And, you know, to make it really easy, one of the things that we're looking at is if we do that in a way, in a digital way, so having a website where all of the content kind of sits, and that, you know, teachers might be able to download some resources, that also might be some things where young people could sit at a computer in school and be able to engage that way. So that's one angle that we're looking at.

We're also looking at whether we, so we have these six lovely short stories, gathered together in an illustrated book that we're looking at, do we then create a version of the book that has pages in between where young people could interact with those stories and pictures themselves, so other, some little

activities or scribble pages or something, you know, to make it more interactive for young people? So that's one of the angles that we're looking at as well. So we're just really in that phase of scoping out, what is the development going to be of that initial content that we've created to make sure that it can be used by adults and young people?

Then what we're also doing is we are starting a new project in the autumn, which is called Let's Talk About Sex. And this is a response to an incident that had happened at Durham University, and I don't want to suggest that it's only an issue in Durham University, because it's patently not, but there had been something at the start of term where an incident hit the national papers of a little bit of a competition on a group of boys' WhatsApp, where they were talking about trying to sleep with the poorest girl, which is kind of offensive on a couple of different levels. There's obviously that treatment of sleeping with a girl as being almost like a sort of trophy prize, which is not pleasant, but then you've also got that classist dimension that's going on there of, you know, the poorest girl, that's a little bit offensive from that perspective, as well. So I think what also galvanised us was when Everyone's Invited hit the news pretty much every day around the same kind of times that things were happening in the media with Sarah Everard as well, and it was really bringing together the breadth of how much negative sexual behaviours are happening. I can't remember exactly where we're up to in terms of how many testimonies Everyone's Invited has gathered, but I think that the last time I looked it was over 50,000 testimonies of young people in our schools and our colleges and universities talking about unwanted sexual behaviours being directed at them, you know, which really shows the scale of the problem. And so the project that we want to do is very much speaking to that issue.

And we're going to be working together with Durham University, The Northern School of Art, and Bishop Auckland College, creating a group of young people who are going to help to guide where the project goes, and the artwork that is created so that those young people will get a little budget to be able to commission some artists to create some work. And then we will be looking at how that work gets shared. Why I'm saying it in those kind of quite broad, non-committal terms is because deliberately the point of the project is that we are going to have this group of young people who, who shape it and who make decisions about what the work is, how and where it's shared. If there's a

workshop that happens in local schools and colleges, you know, they will be involved in designing what that looks like. And because, you know, we're talking about an issue that is affecting young people, so we really want to take a lead from young people about how that goes down. So that's our, that's our newest project that's going to be starting in late September.

Lizzie Lovejoy 29:16

That's absolutely - obviously grim subjects - but it's fantastic to hear. So it's fantastic that there's more of this awareness happening in that you're doing a project that is specially directed by people who are currently or recently going through these kinds of things. It's becoming more evident that everyone's thought 'it's only happening here', and it's actually happening all the time.

Lisa Davis 29:38

Yeah, fingers crossed we're going to start off with a sort of artist in residency approach where our Artistic Director Polly is going to be in each of the sites doing some different things with young people. And that's going to be our means of recruiting our group of young people, so there would be four or five young people from each of the three educational institutions that I mentioned, would be, would be gathered together to form this little group who are going to be our action group. And that sort of action stage then would happen after Christmas with the, whatever sharing is going to result, would be happening in the summer term. So we've got a kind of a three stage trajectory for the next academic year planned.

Lizzie Lovejoy 30:18

I guess now, I just want to, I want to know if there's any final thoughts? If there's anything you want to, you want to talk about, want to promote specifically, anywhere you want to direct everyone after they've listened to this, anything like that?

Lisa Davis 30:31

Yes, just to say, you know, we are always keen for people to engage in what we're sharing on social media. Like we're a participatory organisation in terms of the way that we create our work, and through the pandemic we very much recognised that social media can almost be like our sort of exhibition space, or our you know, it's the space in which we can communicate with people whilst

we can't always be in the same room. So we'd love for people to follow us to see what is going, what's going on, what's coming up with our different projects. And you know, just comment, and there are often times for people to share what it is that they think, or what it is that they themselves have created, and we'd love to hear from people and see what it is that people are doing that relates to the themes that we're working with.

Lizzie Lovejoy 31:20

Well, that brings us to a close for this episode of A Change of Perspective. Thank you, Lisa, very much for having this conversation with me. It's been great.

Lisa Davis 31:28

Thank you for having me.

Lizzie Lovejoy 31:30

Talk to you guys later. Bye.