File name: David Belshaw
Length: 50:45

I: Hello, my name is Rio; nice to meet you. What's your name?

DB: My name is David, David Belshaw.

I: And how would you spell that?

DB: It's B-E-L-S-H-A-W.

I: Great. So just to start things off, could you tell us about how you were introduced to Half Moon and how you came to join?

DB: I suppose I saw an advert, that's how I first knew about the Half Moon, I saw it advertised in the paper. And at the time I was living in Newcastle, in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and I'd finished my degree in drama, specifically community drama, and I saw this job for a workshop leader, and I applied; so it was kind of that simple really.

And in fact me and a friend applied at the same time and came, I remember travelling down on the train together; and she came from London and I thought she kind of knew it all, and I was just a bit of a, I don't know, I suppose I didn't really know London that well. And I remember getting off at Stepney Green and going, God, this is like a completely different world. But, yeah, that's how I kind of got here.

But I kind of always did drama, I always kind of studied drama. On my course my background has always been in that kind of community-focused kind of theatre and drama world; so when I finally got here I discovered it was quite a good fit for me.

I: So you said when you got here you discovered it was a good fix; but how was your actual, your first day here – and also your friend – how do you think you felt during your first few days in Half Moon?

DB: I thought it was really…we were based up in the old building in what was the main house theatre, and I thought everybody was very friendly, very warm, very kind of accommodating; it seemed kind of very exciting really because just kind of they were doing quite…lots of really interesting and exciting work, so it felt quite natural.

And I think being part of the main house it felt there was lots of other things going on as well, that it wasn't just the kind of the youth arts and the professional theatre company, there was kind of lots of stuff going on; so it kind of felt really busy all the time.

I say that though: two weeks into starting at the Half Moon is when the main house went into liquidation, so I'd only had the job for two weeks and then maybe not the job because we were all up for redundancy; and it was only Debbie Bestwick's – well, the company as a whole, but really led by Debbie – who really saved the company; I think there was a desire by the Arts Council and the funding bodies to keep this, well, what's here now, going, but actually the legal ways of getting out of being part of one company and being another company, and then getting public money in, was a kind of an enormous task really, and I think, well, you're still here so she did a really good job, I think, of that.

I: So what work did you actually take part in in Half Moon, and what did you do? How were you involved?

DB: So I started off being a workshop leader on a project, because it was supposed to be a time-limited project, called Positive Knowledge, and it was a piece of work which was about HIV and AIDS, and kind of a drama education programme based in schools. And it was really, there was a woman called Caroline Burns who was the kind of leader of that programme really, kind of came on and developed it; and I was the other person working on that. But it was very much her baby and I was kind of helping to work on it. But over time I suppose we grew as more of a partnership, but really it was her; we kind of had to create it really out of nothing.

And it was an interesting piece really because I suppose it was one of those first pieces which really kind of tried to tackle that kind of Augustus [sic] Boal Theatre of the Oppressed kind of thing; it was about trying to get young people to engage in quite difficult conversations, trying to kind of rehearse what they would do as they kind of became more sexually mature as well as sexually aware and started thinking about making those choices.

And a lot of those things, especially around here, are tied up with quite a lot of gender politics, so it's not just a safe-sex education thing, there's lots more going on and kind of things to weave through, and characters to kind of weave in, and experiences in understanding of sexuality and what that means really; it wasn't kind of as straightforward as we originally maybe thought it was going to be.

[05:08]

And getting young people up on stage to try and test with the actor, with us, what it would be like to be in those situations was immensely powerful, I think, it was a very interesting and dynamic way of teaching, of teaching through drama, I think.

And I think the feedback we got from schools was it was, like, invaluable, because it was something I think they couldn't really teach, or found very difficult to teach, that kind of the notion of safer sex practice. And I suppose we took it on in quite a direct way, we were quite kind of bold about it and I think we were, like, relatively shocking for some of the schools it went into, but I think once you were over that initial hump and barrier there was lots of kind of two-way conversations with the young audience; to the fact that when the money ran out we stopped, and we found that we got asked to do it again, so we kind of recreated it about a year later, I think. So yeah.

I: And how did you personally feel during your working in Positive Knowledge, the workshop? Did you enjoy it? Did you think it was successful?

DB: Yeah, I think it was really successful, and yeah, I did really enjoy it, because I think for me it was working in schools and in an environment which is probably quite unique in lots of ways, this part of London, it's so diverse but also so kind of quite vibrant, and [inaudible 06:48] people aren't shy of having an opinion; and it's they're not passive audiences in schools in this area. So yeah, it felt quite alive, and it felt like we were doing something quite new, I don't think people had really kind of approached it in the way that we'd done it. Okay, and it was called Positive Knowledge because it was supposed to be quite a positive; and I mean there was a…it was a reaction really to kind of a government-led AIDS agenda which was quite negative and quite, like we were all going to die; whereas this was about making quite positive choices, and as they said, it wasn't really just about the sex, it was kind of more about gender politics and gender issues, and about that kind of power thing between boys and girls of a certain age.

I: And you said it was a new thing, a unique workshop; do you think you've kind of come to work in anything similar, or would you like to work in something similar again or see it happen again?

DB: Yeah, I mean I think it's kind of probably lots of other people are using those techniques a lot more as we kind of went on, I mean I think Cardboard Citizens have taken it; Adrian, who was at The Bubble and has now kind of gone on to run Cardboard Citizens, and that's very much part of their ethos and their way of working; and we'd done workshops with them over at The London Bubble were kind of learning some of those skills. So yeah, I think it'd be… I mean I don't really work in the theatre in that way any more so I don't know whether they're kind of doing it now; but I think it is still very interesting and exciting, and that kind of Cardboard Citizen testament to that kind of work being really still powerful and vibrant.

I: And what did you go on to do after your work in Positive Knowledge?

DB: There's a question. I think at the time…I think I became education manager, or education officer – I think that's what it was called – I think somebody left, and I think we were now based in Dame Colet House, which I don't know whether you know that bit of the history, but it's basically a kind of a community centre just up on Ben Jonson Road. Whereas this building was kind of…well, we were fundraising really and developing this building, we were in some very interesting offices up the road.

So I kind of did more working with schools and kind of creating some of the education material around some of the touring shows, and running some kind of workshops; I ran some of the youth theatres. But yeah, I did that for a little while.

I: Did you have any kind of specific memories that you kind of remember from this time period, or anything that kind of stuck with you?

[09:54]

DB: I do remember us getting our first computer – so that's how old we are – but I remember the old education officer used to kind of have to…I can't remember what they're called any more, they like…what are they called, they're like carbon copies and you used to kind hand roll them, they were like printers; and you used to handwrite all the letters to all the heads of drama in all the schools.

And then we got a computer. And when we moved to Dame Colet House we got more computers. So I do remember that. And I remember having to treat Jenny Sealey, who's one of our actors who I think you might have interviewed already, teaching her how to use the computer, like turn it on, that kind of thing. And now it just seems insane that any kind of organisation doesn't have technology, but you just didn't. But yeah.

I: And after that what did you go on to?

DB: I think, because it was kind of ran more of as kind of a collective as an organisation people – not that I was ever an actor or that kind of thing – but when people moved around, and I think Debbie then went on to go to the Oval House, and I kind of took on more of a directing role; because there was something I was…always wanted to do, that was my passion really. Yeah, so I kind of just started taking more of a kind of a directorial role looking at…on the professional touring company side.

And at that time I think we were bringing in new writers, so we'd have writers in residence; so one of those writers was Lin Coghlan, and she was based with us working with young people but also writing her own work, new work for the company. So that was kind of a developmental process that I was kind of heavily involved in with her.

I: So you said that you kind of started taking on a more directorial role in Half Moon; and how did you actually feel about this kind of change?

DB: I was very happy about it because it was something I kind of always wanted to do, and I kind of felt…well, I suppose I felt I had something to offer and creative things to say; and it was an exciting time, it was an exciting and creative time for me, so yeah, I was very happy.

I: And what did you work on while you were in that role?

DB: So I can't remember the chronological order, so you may have a problem with that one; but I worked with Lin on a project called Waking, which was a play which was set in the West Coast of Ireland. She's an amazing writer, I think, Lin, and an amazing kind of creative collaborator, I've got a lot of respect for the way she works, the work itself but also the way she works. And I remember she invited…and I kind of really like secrets, I like kind of all that immersive theatre stuff and kind of opening doors and…and I do remember, like, she invited me on a walk, she just said, oh meet me…I think we met at Waterloo, in Waterloo Station somewhere, and she said, I'm taking you for a walk. And thinking back about it, it was probably only two or three hours, but it was kind of quite exciting being led somewhere and being told a story and just talking about stories and things what we were interested in. I think we ended up going to the Clink and we ended up kind of…this was a museum down on the South Bank, and we ended up walking in the back streets around the…talk…kind of talking about atmospheres and places and an idea of…and a sense of what our backgrounds and where we come from.

And I think from that kind of led into us going to Ireland together on a kind of very kind of similar trip; we talked about pilgrimages and walking. And that's kind of where Waking came from really. So we decided that we'd go to the West Coast of Ireland, which is the most westerly point in Europe, the next kind of parish along is New York so it's kind of the edge of the world really, or edge of the known world, the old world. But we also decided that we'd kind of try, like, a modern-day pilgrimage, that we wouldn't take a car, we'd go on public transport, we'd kind of try and get there as much under our own steam.

And because Lin is an Irish writer and was from Dublin, and it was a really interesting…to go with her and see…it was like going on a very peculiar holiday, but a quite intense holiday, it was, like, February and it was, like, snowing; but was really what Waking was based on, this notion of journeying, and Waking being about a man who is dying, journeying from one side of life to another side; but really about his family coming to terms, about…it was three generations of men.

[15:17]

And it was again something we hadn't really tackled before. I think quite often there was an emphasis on work which looked at kind of issues and drama from a female perspective, and I think it felt kind of quite [inaudible 15:36] quite refreshing; and I think when we took it into schools I think you could see people's reaction was quite strong and quite…because it was quite a bold piece really doing it, it was a young people's theatre and we had an older actor doing…he was not quite…with a kind of quite older actor really, and it was dealing with quite adult subjects, it was talking about death.

And I think what was interesting about that is that it was adults quite often speaking, and we would always immediately think that a piece of theatre for young people needed to have the young persons at the centre of it; and a young character in that piece very rarely spoke, but what they did they never left the stage, they were the only people who never left the stage. so you saw him reacting all the time.

And I think that is what's quite true of lots of young people's experience is like they're not at the centre of their family life, they're often viewing it; but at the same time they're very much having a reaction to it and being influenced by what's going on in their family life, but they don't necessarily have a voice. And that was what was happening on stage, we used sort of very…and you could see that, it was quite carefully crafted, that the young people in the audience were completely viewing it through what…from his viewpoint, they completely understood it. And I think that was something that was really exciting and clever in terms of young people's theatre, and was quite brave really, because we didn't know where that was…whether it would work really, whether not having all young people, young kind of characters in it… And it was very moving, it was a really moving piece, and I do remember making quite a lot of teachers cry.

And it led to lots of discussion, and I think schools got a lot out of it because it dealt with quite big issues about kind of, well, people dying, yeah, and grief; but also kind of lots of stuff about gender and what it means to be a man was in there, and I think there's a really…you could draw out a lot of stuff from it. But, yeah, it was very much a coherent play.

And I think the other amazing thing about that play was Lin, when she left, took it with her, and did some work extending it – because we had to have a quite short play – and it became one of the first plays of the Soho Theatre opening in the West End, it was one of their kind of inaugural plays. So that is, I think, an exciting and wonderful thing, that a play designed for young people became a main house West End theatre – well, off West End theatre – play, in one of the kind of big new-writing venues. And it was a great testament to her skill as a writer.

I: And do you think your work on Waking came to influence the way you worked on other plays? Because you told me about how unique it was.

DB: Yeah, no, definitely. And I think it, for me it became really exciting about working with…I mean we were always working with new writers, but it became a bit more important that that writer had more of a voice, that it was the kind of a bit more author led, and that some of those rules which we'd all kind of lived by, we didn't really need to live by them any more, where you could kind of tell stories which felt a bit more complex and a bit more grown up, and a bit more complex I suppose, not grown up, it's the wrong word, complex; and we could tell them in kind of quite an emotive way and still feel we were getting through to our audiences and kind of still hitting, there's things we still needed to hit as a young people's theatre company.

I: And could you tell us about any other plays you directed or worked on?

[19:58]

DB: Yes. So I think we followed on that with Lin, a play called At The Edge of the Sky. And that was more, like, slightly older, like, again the same age range, so kind of secondary school, and kind of followed on as kind of some of the same themes really, and that was more about travel and migration, I suppose. And was a bit more of a production number, as I remember, it had a lot more kind of…it had a set which was the heaviest set we'd ever built. It was a bit of a nightmare trying to get it to work. But, yeah, it was a…

And I suppose then the other end of the scale is for younger audiences we did a show called Wimp, which was again a really interesting experience for us because it was, and as I said, we were always kind of looking for working with new writers; but I think I was also quite interested in working with international writers, or on some stuff which was not UK based. And that came about, it was a Danish play actually, Wimp, originally, and it was adapted for the UK by a theatre maker called Sarah Argent who was then working with an organisation called Assitej, which was the International Association of Theatre for Young People and Children, and she's now a very successful young people's theatre director in her own right in Wales. But she spoke Danish and had done translations before. So, yes, I worked with her quite a lot on this adaptation.

It was quite a physical play, it was about a boy who was being bullied, and kind of about boxing as well, which was kind of it resonated because of that kind of East End tradition about boxing, but it kind of felt quite modern, kind of a little bit Rockyesque, and it became quite upbeat. I do remember we wanted to kind of feel very, very youthful, and the kind of set was very youthful; we had a really great movement director working on it who'd worked quite a lot at the National, so it kind of felt really physical and was quite like we'd done quite a lot…I think I'd done quite a lot of work working with Lin and it was all very kind of soulful and meaningful; and this felt kind of different and kind of a bit more, well, punchy, it was literally punchy.

But we got sponsored by Reebok, I remember, they all had really flash Reebok trainers on; and I never really understood the power of marketing and branding until we had our first show in a school and all the kids were so obsessed by the people's trainers; it became a bit of an issue really, it was kind of like we were trying to kind of make them dirtier so they weren't just kind of…people didn't really…they weren't lusting after the trainers and not listening to the play. But, yeah, so that was…and it had quite a young kind of cast, we kind of got some kind of some actors who'd just come out of drama school, so it kind of felt kind of quite vibrant and youthful.

And I think it was interesting because the language in it, whilst it worked, whilst Sarah had done a great adaptation it also still felt that you were telling an international story really and it wasn't…it could have been anywhere. And there was something about those playgrounds where you kind of went for…we went for a walk actually, I remember looking at these playgrounds, that they're kind of identical, they're kind of like…they get built on these estates and they all kind of look the same, but they're all…equally could be, if you're being bullied, like the most terrifying place in the world; and they were like a…but they were kind of all painted bright as they were suppose to be kind of fun, but actually they're potential prisons for lots of kids. And I quite like the idea, that that was…that's going on, that situation was going on kind of across Europe really, so it was kind of interesting to kind of pull some of those stories. So yeah.

I don't know, I can't remember what else I worked on; what else did I work on? Does it say in the list?

I: And here it says you also worked on a play called Always With You; do you remember anything about that?

[24:52]

DB: Yeah. All of a sudden it's dawning on me that I must have been quite obsessed by death, because that was another play about death; rather worrying. And again we were touring, that was a play which was very much geared at kind of 15, 16, 17 year olds, and we performed it really for like a young theatre audience, so we kind of toured to places like the Oval House, and other venues; but we also toured to youth clubs. And was a play about a family who'd lost their father, and what that was like, dealing with death, dealing with cancer.

And it was a difficult touring because we hadn't really done much in…the theatre venues were kind of fine, but with the kind of…I don't remember that the youth venue, the youth club venues were really tricky, they were like a…they were quite unruly; and I don't know whether we hadn't briefed them enough, or it wasn't…and some of them were brilliant and then some of them were really, like, torturous, and they had to keep stopping the shows, and it was very hard to get through to kind of…I do remember having to kind of stop the play in one place and shout at the audience, which is something I've never had to do before.

But I think what was interesting for that, or what it really taught me, is that sometimes you just don't know, people don't know the etiquette of theatre, it's a kind of it's a learnt thing, isn't it, if you've never really been to the theatre why shouldn't you kind of just talk all the way through it and just get up when you want to get up, and go and play snooker when you want to play snooker. And if you haven't really been taught those things then it's kind of a…you've to kind of…it's a difficult thing, isn't it, it's that you go to this space every…you go to this space every week and then all of a sudden it's been taken over by this theatre company and they're asking you to sit quietly so you can kind of really think about something. And I just kind of wonder, yeah, there's a kind of a…it was interesting, and I think we needed to think more about the process of how we kind of went into some of those spaces and how we kind of set up the experience of watching this play, do you know what I mean, maybe we needed to do some more workshops and more kind of talking beforehand; I don't think we ever really kind of came to a satisfactory solution with it really. But it was definitely an interesting learning curve for the whole of us really, as a tour it was quite a struggle.

But I think the play kind of held up really well. And there was lots of music, I do remember there was lots of music in that, and we had to kind of basically train one of the actors to learn the saxophone to a level where he could properly play the saxophone, so he had lots of… I mean he could only play one thing, but he could play it quite well as we kind of got into the run of the show. But yeah, so…

I: And you mentioned that you had to train one of the actors to play the saxophone; how do you think that kind of felt, having to train…

DB: Well, I didn't have to train the actors because I can't play the saxophone; we got something in to train him. But it was a…well, I think it…I suppose actors have to train to do lots of different things, isn't it, if they can't do it they can't do it, and we wanted him to do the part, and it was a vital part of the role. I don't know, you'd have to ask him that.

I: So how do you think Half Moon has affected the wider world of theatre and acting?

DB: I think it's given lots of people…I think personally it's given me my first…it had given me my break into theatre, from being at university and then…I'd done a couple of other small things but it was really a big break for me, I'm forever grateful to them, for the Half Moon. I should think it's done that for quite a lot of people, a lot of actors have worked here, have gone on, and a lot of writers have gone on to do other things. I think, yeah, I think it's done things which are quite innovative; I think that bilingual work was at its time revolutionary. I think thinking back on it it was revolutionary, at the time it was just a necessity, do you know what I mean, I think you just had to be able to do it. But it is revolutionary, I think it's worked with young people and its training programmes were kind of second to none; and I think you still see people in theatres – especially working backstage – who had their break here, did training here; and I think kind of raised the game, I think.

[30:16]

I think moving into this building and being independent from the main house, I think it made it more valid and more high profile, it wasn't hidden, do you know what I mean, we used to call it the giraffe house, which was this tall, thin building which was behind the main house, but actually it was kind of hidden behind the garden wall, that this was very much kind of a public space, we were going to venues under our own steam and people were coming in here; so it kind of, I think, kind of raised the profile but also kind of did new things and tried to kind of be more challenging in its content – well, that's what I hoped it would be – more challenging in its content, and that actually you didn't have to do what you perceived to be plays for young people.

When we auditioned actors we always dreaded…we always asked people to perform a piece they thought was suitable for young people; but as soon as they started singing, I don't know, Pinocchio, or some kind of song from Disney, we were like, what; and then quite often they didn't get the role; so it was, do you know what I mean, we wanted people who were prepared to kind of go on a journey with us and wanted to kind of work with young people but in quite a relatively challenging way really and push subject matters which really were perceived not to be kind of suitable really, yeah; or they were perceived by the wider world but were kind of things that young people needed to grapple with.

I: So in 1996 the company was undergoing some changes in staffing and just generally how it was being run.

DB: Yeah. I think because when we had the building – and this is kind of a personal thing really from when we had the building – it became impossible really in some ways to kind of run it all without making more instant decisions. So it became I suppose more hierarchical, we kind of added more of a structure; we had a board which was a bit more…we'd done quite a lot of training with the board and finding new board members, they became a bit more professional. And we had a new administrator who'd come from more of a traditional…which had come from the National Theatre, I suppose kind of more structured way of working.

And then I decided to leave, so I suppose there was a moment of time where it needed to kind of refocus really and kind of think where it wanted to go and what it wanted to do, and I suppose when Chris came in that's…we needed…that was his first big task really, and that's what he needed to do – and he's doing it very well. So yeah, it kind of felt it was kind of moving from…yeah, it was move…it needed to kind of move, to kind of move forward really. Yeah.

And getting to this building was such a monumental effort for such a small tiny company. I remember being here quite late at night with the builder looking at videos of just like down the drains, looking at videos of like his camera going down the drains looking at how much it would cost to sleeve a drain and whether we could afford it; and it was quite, do you know what I mean, that the building, because we were spending quite a lot of money and they needed decisions to be made, kind of four, like, men that we were…and it was such an effort to get into this building that once we were here it was kind of like that was the time to kind of reflect and sit back a bit really and think what we were going to do, what was the next phase of the Half Moon. And I suppose that's what Chris kind of came in to do. So yeah.

I: And are there any other memories about Half Moon that you think you'd like to share with us?

DB: I think one of the things I do – I've actually just remembered when I just walked in – is that this building was always designed around trying to be accessible, it's not, do you know what I mean, it was a very difficult building to make accessible, but we wanted it, like, both physically and sensory and like it was going to be inviting for young people, and lots of different access things.

[35:04]

But we've spent a lot of time and a lot of money trying to get access into the building. And it was something that the builder – the builders who actually did the development of the work on it – became quite obsessed by; and the guy who was the head builder who was like right East End, you know, it was like he was kind of like in Essex, discovered by himself, he'd taught himself Braille because he was so interested, and he discovered that the Braille company, the sign company, had got the Braille wrong for the toilets, you know, he's not a Braille user but he'd made himself learn it. And when we got it checked he was right, it was actually the wrong toilet signs.

So I think that's what's quite exciting about, you know, being here, it's like everybody was quite passionate about it, is that even the builders were kind of quite excited about being involved in it, it felt like they were…I think they felt they were kind of putting something back; and I think that's what we felt we were doing as well.

I: Okay. Thank you very much for sharing this.

M: You really need to ask the last question.

I: The last question? Okay. Do you think your time at Half Moon has impacted your career in any way?

DB: Oh yeah, a hundred per cent, definitely. Yeah. I think…I went on then to kind of run arts spaces and festivals in Croydon in South London, but I always kind of come back to some of the creative experiences I had here, especially working on things like Waking and working with Lin; and now I'm kind of at the BBC and working with kind of writers and producers, I still kind of use some of the techniques I kind of learned here in kind of working with creative people. Yeah, no, definitely, it's just a great place.

I: Okay. Thank you for…

DB: Thank you very much.

I: …coming to talk to us.

DB: Thanks, Rio. Anything else? Anything specific? I can talk a bit more.

M: Can you just tell a little bit about the sort of the [inaudible 37:20] movement when you first came here? Because we haven't got anything on that. The nature of it, because it was so complicated.

DB: Yeah. [Inaudible 37:31] Yeah, there was Greenwich, wasn't there, now is Greenwich still going?

M: No.

DB: No, okay.

M: Not in a way, it sort of finished.

DB: Yeah.

M: I don't know, I just think maybe [inaudible 37:41] something like can you tell us about the theatre for young people movement in the early '90s [voices overlap 37:52]. Is that okay?

DB: Yeah.

M: Just that, just to give context [inaudible 37:57].

DB: Yeah.

I: So could you just tell us a bit more about the theatre for young people movement in the early '90s?

DB: Yeah. I mean all of us were born out of that theatre in education kind of history; and I think we were here in the East End, specifically in Tower Hamlets, and there was Greenwich Young People's Theatre kind of looking after Greenwich. But it was kind of difficult times in lots of ways for funding, because lots of local education authorities were kind of cutting back, and this is one of the resources, we weren't a protected resource in terms of budget line, so lots of times we were kind of being threatened with closure, and Greenwich was being threatened with closure, and you know; so there was lots of kind of sharing of information, and campaigning together to kind of protect the sector really. But equally we were geographically divided so our audiences were very kind of separate.

But we felt that some of our work, especially some of the bilingual work, was so unique that it kind of could travel; so we always had kind of a desire to kind of work beyond the boundaries of Tower Hamlets. So I do remember that we took plays internationally but we also took them up to places like Glasgow and Scotland.

But that was kind of, other than Theatre Centre, which was the national touring company for young people, all the other kind of companies really were tied in with a funding model and a funding body which was about the local authority. And in some ways that was a great brilliant thing to have access to all those people, but also kind of it was a burden, it was also a challenge – not a burden – but it was also a threat that actually that once that funding source got turned off you potentially kind of could disappear.

[40:24]

So I think in the ’90s a lot of the struggle was about trying to present the work in lots of different arenas which weren’t tied in to that funding model but also trying to find other income streams to make the work happen. And we always did charge for our work in schools, I think a lot of other theatre education companies didn’t; I mean historically we might not have charged, I don’t know, but the whole time that I was here, that we did make a nominal charge; not that it ever really was about making money back, like, in that way, but it was about them feeling it was they’d invested in it as a school.

But I think it felt very much at the time that it was a shrinking bit of the kind of the arts sector, and yet it was doing some kind of really important work, and also kind of really creative work, and we were…but, yeah, it needed to kind of…it needed to kind of be more arts focused but yet still retain its education focus. But I think some of the other theatres, some other companies were far more going down the kind of education-led routes, I think we were trying to kind of make a balance between the kind of, well, the arts, theatre and kind of the education content of it. Yeah.

I: And do you think this affected the creative choices you made in the future and [inaudible 42:15]?

DB: In my personal future? Yeah, no, definitely. I think I said before, though, I kind of became quite interested in the…I suppose I kind of became quite interested in spaces and how they got used, and moving into this building became an interesting thing, I never thought I’d actually really be interested in running a building, but it became really where that people had a different reaction when they came in the building, that they used it in a different way. And I thought there was some really interesting work to be had and programming work to be had.

So I think that’s one of the reasons I kind of left to develop that kind of work in South London, doing it on a kind of bigger scale, I suppose. But, yeah, definitely, and one of the programmes we did down in the Clock Tower, was trying to bring in more of a young theatre audience, so we started programming a lot more younger people’s work. So, yeah, no, it definitely had an influence on me.

I: So just going back to something that you've mentioned a bit before, you mentioned the Half Moon's bilingual work quite a few times, and I was wondering if you could tell us a bit more about that.

DB: Yeah. I suppose it's probably relatively well documented because it was kind of quite unique in the sense that we were performing bilingually in English and Sylheti Bengali. And it wasn't, I suppose, the mechanism of making it work was the mechanism how bilingual children speak anyway is that so I could say to you, hello, in Bengali, and you could say, oh, I'm fine, thank you very much for asking, in English; and somewhere between that, the whole audience will have an understanding of what the conversation is about.

So it wasn't necessarily about making work which was just half in English and half in Bengali, but at the time it was kind of felt, when we kind of first created it, that it was a necessity really to kind of start creating that kind of work, because a lot of children, especially in the kind of five, six, seven, eight year olds, their mother tongue was Bengali, and that actually it was really difficult to have a play which was all just in English and for them to get any meaning out of it.

So it was – this is very much Deborah Bestwick's kind of legacy to the company really – very much about trying to find a creative way and an empowering way to look at language and look at that language as a benefit, to tell really interesting stories in two languages; and actually kind of a third language because they were quite often speaking colloquial English, you know, like East End English, so it was all kind of mixed up with very much about where they are, where that audience was at that moment.

[45:43]

I suppose over time there was less and less children who couldn't speak any English, but I suppose that's over as that generation, as those kind of communities became more settled here; so I don't know whether it became less important to actually have that. But it felt quite…to have a non-Bangladeshi speak Bengali as an actor on stage was a very powerful almost political act really, and it really meant something, and it really meant something for the audience, especially a Bengali audience, and it kind of affirmed that notion and then heritage of their language in a way which thousands of books and pamphlets could never have done, do you know what I mean, it was quite transformational.

And I remember one of the actors telling me when they'd been up to Scotland, of which there is quite a strong Bangladeshi community, those children were terrified of these other people speaking their language, and that they kind of wanted to shut them down because they didn't want to be picked on, because basically because they had the non-Bangladeshi speakers had to turn to a Bangladeshi speaker to find out what they were saying, do you know what I mean, they were empowered actually as translators in a kind of split second. And it was a frightening thing really because they'd never been in that situation, it was always seen to be something not to be shared and then not to be proud of, because it didn't really have…that they didn't really have the kind of education system way of dealing with languages as we did down here.

So that was, yeah, it was kind of a, you know, it was an extraordinary, I think for them, for the actors, it was an extraordinary moment when they kind of saw that up in Glasgow. Yeah, it was quite…yeah, that they were very moving pieces, some of them.

M: Can you ask, just say that you said…you said that it became less important as time passed. Could you ask the question why do you think it became less important, the bilingual work? All right?

DB: Okay.

I: So you mentioned that you think the bilingual work became less important as time went on, and why do you think that was?

DB: I suppose important might be the wrong word, but necessity, do you know what I mean, I think it was a necessity to get into schools where most people didn't speak English as their first language at the beginning; and I suppose as that generation grew up and the next generation came in, they had more English and they were more assimilated into the kind of English language teaching, so it became less of a necessity. I don't think it was particularly less important but I think it kind of empowered people in a different way, that it was kind of interesting in a different way.

But I kind of got the sense that we weren't getting as much demand from teachers that actually that's really what they wanted and needed. And we were still doing them as kind of, I was still here, and I know – I don't know, Chris, sort of I'm looking [inaudible 49:36] – like, I mean I don't know how we kind of developed after that or transitioned after that, but I kind of felt…I mean you could feel…that I can…I got the sense that you could feel that there was less of a need. And also we'd lost some of the…I think we'd lost some of the actors [inaudible 49:56] the core acting company had built up the language skills as well, do you know what I mean, the kind of non-Bangladeshi actors; so I suspect it probably became more difficult to find non-Bangladeshi actors who we could train up in the time.

I mean this is beyond…I mean this is…we did…I did bilingual work when we were here, but I suspect that's what it…that's where I think we were going really.

I: And do you think the bilingual work that you did in Half Moon has gone on to influence you in your work later on?

DB: Oh I mean I work, I suppose…I work in an international context now, so…but I don't…I mean directly with Bangladeshi, no not really.

End of transcript