**Conversations in Social Justice**



**Prison Partnership Project:**

**Prison Placements and the Student Experience**

**Podcast transcript**

Series 3. Episode 5.

*In this podcast we hear from two former York St John theatre students – Jordan Towers and Maia McConnell – about how the Prison Partnership Project creates the perfect landscape for students to transition confidently into employment and professional industry roles not only with exceptional experience but also with knowledge and skills in good practice.*

**Paula Clark**

Hello.

**Jessica Robson**

Hi.

**Paula Clark**

And thank you for joining us for our third and final podcast in this series about the York St John University Prison Partnership Project, community initiative *On the Out*. One of the most incredible things about this project is the opportunity that it creates for real life student experience in professional settings and for professional development, with lots of students actively choosing York St. John for this very reason above other maybe London drama schools and things like that.

**Jessica Robson**

York St. John Theatre Department has a reputation for its excellence in applied theatre training in real life settings, enabling students to be supported in applied theatre settings across communities for the first time as they learn, develop and hone their practice. The reason that this works so well is because all the teaching staff and lecturers are themselves practicing artists, directors, facilitators, and researchers.

**Paula Clark**

This sharing of live practice and professional experience with students creates the perfect landscape for students to transition confidently into employment and professional industry roles. Not only with exceptional experience, but also with knowledge and skills in good practice.

**Paula Clark**

Today, we'll be talking to former York St. John Theatre student Jordan Towers, about his transition from student into professional practice. And also, to Maia McConnell, who studied Drama and Theatre at York St. John, and then continued her journey here on the Applied Theatre MA. Welcome both of you. And thank you for joining us today. So, let's start off Maia and Jordan, both of you, could you tell us a little bit about what initially drew you to choose the Prison Partnership placement whilst studying here?

**Jordan Towers**

Um, honest truth is like I only discovered the Prison Partnership in the second year of university and pretty much immediately changed my qualification from Drama and Theatre to Drama and Education within the Community. It just seemed like a very unique way to challenge myself and take myself outside my comfort zone into a completely different setting.

**Paula Clark**

Maia, how about you?

**Maia McConnell**

I was aware of it before I started at York St. John. It's actually one of the reasons that I chose the course, because of the sort of variation of placement opportunities in second year. But I chose this specific placement because of the pull of working with women. That is what my whole practice is about, and especially women who are largely invisible within mainstream society, especially, the idea of theatre being used to give a person or a group of people a voice, is something that I found really powerful.

**Paula Clark**

Thank you. And what was your experience then of working in the prison as students?

**Jordan Towers**

For myself going in, as a male in an all-female context it gave me a chance to go into a setting where men are usually only found in powers of like authority, and roles that are found like usually in like the traditional hierarchy of like the prison system. However, what it afforded me was the chance to go in there as an equal and work with these women, very much kind of on the same level as like an outside voice in there to help them

**Jessica Robson**

And before going into the prison, did you have any kind of pre conceptions of what it would be like to work in a female prison with being a lone male facilitator?

**Jordan Towers**

As I previously mentioned, I was aware that it probably pushed me out of my comfort zone, and I was I was just wary how it would be viewed in that setting. But as with the course, I just found that going in there as open as possible. And as honest as it could be to myself. I should have done okay, at least.

**Jessica Robson**

yeah, fantastic. And the skills that you kind of learn on that placement and you know, being open in your facilitation and how you are with people, do you still use that kind of approach to your work today?

**Jordan Towers**

Very much so I'm currently on an MA in Drama Therapy, well, I'm halfway through it now. And eventually, at the end of next year, should be entering professional practice. And I'm hoping to one day work in prisons again. But the prison taught me quite a few different skills and while matters of just completely stepping away from the student setting and seeing like a completely different level of engagement, really having to listen to the other participants as well in the workshop. It was a lot of self-learning as well. That's very important.

**Paula Clark**

Maia, tell us a bit about your experience as a student going into prisons.

**Maia McConnell**

I thought I'd be a lot more nervous than I actually was. I found it really sort of enriching and it wasn't at all like expected, the only scary bit was going through the security. But working with the women was really powerful. And I found that even though we were only in there for quite a short space of time at first, working in HMP New Hall, they didn't sort of see us as outsiders even though we were coming in to work with them. They were almost welcoming us. So it was, it was amazing.

**Jessica Robson**

Did you have a favorite moment or a moment that was kind of significant to you? That stuck with you from working in the prisons?

**Maia McConnell**

Yeah, in the first project that I worked on, I remember, we're like we were doing sort of share backs of storytelling and writing that we'd written. And I scribed for one of the women a letter that she would hope that her solicitor or lawyer would write to her. And I found that even though we were basing it off of a character, she really opened up to about the whole experiences of this in her real life. And that was the first it was sort of it felt like they trusted our work and what was going on and trusted that we were in there for like a good reason. And that really stuck with me that feeling.

**Paula Clark**

Jordan and Maia I’m going to ask you both the same question, what is it do you think that is the value of social justice community places that there are on the degree courses? And how do you think it has actually effected your career choices moving forwards?

**Jordan Towers**

For myself I would say in terms of the student experience I think that there is only so much learning that can be done in a university education setting. For example, theatre workshops with students the level of engagement is usually quite high and people are very quick to get on their feet and feedback is also usually very good. However, if you step into a different context what you might find is it might be a completely different reversal if you will, like, of engagement. You might really need to flex the drama muscles and that education and those skills that you take into those settings too help people find a way of expressing themselves and doing what that you probably take for granted working in theatre spaces at university. I would say that certainly what the value was for me, and seeing that as well.

**Paula Clark**

And Maia, how about You?

**Maia McConnell**

Yeah, I feel really similarly to Jordan. I think the opportunity for community placement whilst studying at degree level is invaluable for a person's education because learning in a lecture theatre in comparison to learning through active work in a placement is vastly different. The life, the real-life experience in a placement leads to a deeper understanding of the given context, which I think is really beneficial if you want to work outside of studying from a degree and due to having experience of placement prior to finishing my degree course meant that personally I was able to make more informed decisions about further study and what I wanted to do next because I had already had a taste of what it could be like which is why I ended up staying on and doing a masters.

**Paula Clark**

And what would you like to do next Maia?

**Maia McConnell**

That’s a hard question. I am currently working with me theatre company making work about women's safety and women's experiences, their lived experiences. Hopefully, we will be going into colleges later in the year to run some workshops and things like that.

**Jessica Robson**

What would you say is the benefit of having lecturers that are practitioners and artists themselves, teaching and modelling the practice to you when you are a student studying on the courses?

**Jordan Towers**

Personally, I would say from working in the prison I was able to witness the head of the partnership, Rachel Conlon, actually work and do her job outside of the university. What I have also found is that career practitioners and lecturers, everyone listening might be able to understand this, that they take on the stories of the context they enter and the people they share the experiences with and they keep those with them in a way that can almost be dispersed and passed down tastefully to the students that they work with in the future. It's almost an experience that has to be lived. It's very hard to articulate it as I am right now but it's kind of something that you just get and you need to put yourself out there to work with these people.

**Paula Clark**

So Jordan, how do you think that your York St John experience has impacted your career choices?

**Jordan Towers**

Well, I would say after, I mentioned earlier on about being honest and open, I was previously in the military and I left that with the sole intention of becoming an actor and here I am now half way through an MA to become a Drama Therapist. I would say in terms of YSJ there are so many experiences but prison really was eye opening into how, kind of what we enters, which Maia has touched on previously, that these women that we work with are almost an unseen minority in the United Kingdom. Even HMP New Hall where we worked it's in almost in a crater of land so that it's not even visible from the outside and you're going in there and you are helping people who've got these stories to find a method of expressing them and allowing their voices to kind of leave this metaphorical hidden place where HMP New Hall was. The series of workshops was very informative to where I am now.

**Paula Clark**

It feels like the sort of practitioners who are interested in social justice work all have a real reason why. Jordan, do you have a reason why? Why do you think people are drawn to social justice work as artists?

**Jordan Towers**

I’d say it’s a tough question because cos think it is all, it is all very very individual to where your going. I’d say why people are drawn to it is because it's very important, as I have touched on, to enter a different space. If you have got, if you’re a drama student, if you a theatre student it's definitely a skill to take with you to be able to perform in front of other people or to really be able to get yourself out there. Which is usually, considering how the arts are viewed mostly across society, it is a set of skills, it's not really championed within the community, it's not really seen as very important. But it absolutely is. To be able to go somewhere and help people who, I don’t know, for example, who’ve never felt like they have been able to express themselves or they have always felt oppressed or that they could never truly be the leader. You know you can help them achieve that in a way that is safe and contained.

**Paula Clark**

Thank you. Maia, what is your experience? What do you think is the draw is to social justice work?

**Maia McConnell**

I think, like Jordan said, it's really individual. It can be really personal or it can be quite varied. My draw to social justice work was that I wanted to work with people with their stories specifically storytelling. And I think there is so much power in sharing stories that it can do a lot of good for social justice work, I guess. I think the power of art within social justice is really, its hidden, and I would really like to see more of it.

**Jessica Robson**

Fantastic, thank you Maia. What would you like to see happen in the future for this kind of work?

**Maia McConnell**

In general, I would like to see more awareness of the arts especially and specifically within the criminal justice system. I mean, when I talk to people who are not involved in it about my experience and my work within women's prisons, they are always like shocked that it even exists because they don't see how theatre or art can link to the criminal justice system. So, I think in the future if more people knew about this work and knew how valuable social justice art can be specifically, in this pocket for prisons, it could lead to some really great projects and really big things.

**Jessica Robson**

Yeah, absolutely and you mentioned about when you tell people about the kind of work that you do they are shocked. How do you tell them what you do? Because I get this question all the time and I am curious about how you articulate what you do now.

**Maia McConnell**

Yeah, I usually if they ask me about it, I will say “like I have done a drama degree and a lot of the work was in female prisons” and they will sort of be like “oh, but why? Don’t you want to teach or don’t you want to act?” and I'm like well why would you not want to go into a setting and take the power of theatre workshops in with you and see what difference you can make, see how, like Jordan said, specifically in HMP New Hall, most female prisoners are quite invisible and using theatre and workshops to, sort of, tell stories and reinstate their voice that they have had taken away from them. Like that’s how I justify it to people who are like, “why would you want to do that?” I say “why would you not want to do that?”

**Jessica Robson**

Absolutely, and I'm just going to add something a little bit to that. I always say when I am going into do the work that we do as well, its that we are working with the woman as a whole not their crime so that’s really important to us.

Thank you, Maia. Jordan what kinds of thing would you like to see happen in the sector in the future?

**Jordan Towers**

Echoing Maia slightly, I would say that what people fail to see in the criminal justice system and the prison system is like the word rehabilitation, that is what this is important for. If you look at statistics regarding re-offending and stuff like, you kind of from an outside view think, what’s going on here?

So, when we heard Maia talk about the values of the stories and seeing the women as a whole and helping them. That’s what drama allows you to do. It allows you to step out from yourself and take a step back, maybe gain a measure of objectivity that wasn’t available to you before and there are so many ways you can work with drama to do that and it's just a completely different skillset and toolset to what is usually found in prisons. Hopefully getting the recognition of that.

**Paula Clark**

Jordan, now that you are established in your own right and developing and establishing your own practice. What advice would you have for any student's theatre about to embark on prison work?

**Jordan Towers**

In regards to going into the prison, be honest and be yourself. Don’t put up a kind of front or façade because the people that you are working with will almost immediately see right through it. And just enjoy the experience as much as possible and check in with yourself. Like Maia said, if you are feeling a bit nervous or apprehensive before you go in, it might be completely different once you are in that setting. Just really take it as a just a fantastic learning experience that’s almost essential. It will be an experience that very few people manage to ever gain access to and if you actively listen and you are present for it then you will take lessons that will stay with you way beyond and well into your life.

**Paula Clark**

That’s brilliant advice. Maia is there anything you would like to add?

**Maia McConnell**

No, I think that’s what I would have said as well. Don't go in and pretend to be something you are not. They will see right through it and you want to be there in the moment with them and offer as much truth as you can. So, yes. Do it. If you have the opportunity, go and do it, it's amazing and will stay with you forever.

**Paula Clark**

Thank you so much. One more final question to you now. How best do you think that universities can really support students into their future careers and employment.

**Jordan Towers**

In terms of careers and employment I would say, really enjoy the undergrad and really tune into what you enjoy the most, as I mentioned I joined YSJ to solely become an actor. However, here I am now. It's essentially, you need to be, my best piece of advice, you need to be highly driven to forge a career in the arts. You know, as Maia kind of touched on its usually, I always say, you're just going to become an actor when questioned upon it by someone who hasn’t done the undergrad and it's just like no there is so much available to you but you really need to put yourself out there and almost aggressively hunt down what career you want to go into and if you put that effort in you will find it.

**Paula Clark**

And how do you think Universities can support that, what's their role in moving students on into employment?

**Jordan Towers**

I would say, it’s kind of like in terms of my own experience, it's really making almost friends with the lecturers and talking to them and using what experience that they’ve got and bring it onto yourself. The university in my experience really did the best with that. Everything was highly informative. Opportunities were always there and there was always a good method of communication. But, it's also always important to listen to that and be aware of it as a student.

**Paula Clark**

Maia, anything you would like to add? What did you think that the university did well at York St John?

**Maia McConnell**

I think it's quite obvious that leaving the safety net of uni is so daunting. So scary. And I think York St John deal with this really well. But the, most important thing that uni can do is, like providing some level of support particularly in the form of creating contacts and staying in contact. For example, when you are in uni you have a question, you know who to call or email or do whatever you need to do. But when you leave uni it can be really difficult to find a resource or to ask the right question to the right person. So, I think York St John have done this so well especially because you can still get in touch with your lecturers after you have left. Creating a network of people within your, um let's say the realm of social justice work or community arts is the best way to support students within that change of leaving and finding new careers.

**Paula Clark**

Jordan, Maia, thank you so much for joining us today.

**Jordan**

You are very welcome thank you

**Maia McConnell**

Thank you

**Paula Clark**

It has been lovely to have you here and thank you for sharing your experiences of being students and your transition into your careers as practitioners in the field.

**Jessica Robson**

We would like to thank everyone, as well who has followed out On the Out podcast. We hope you have enjoyed learning about the York St John University Prison Partnership Project, the work it delivers and the student participation and staff experience. We are excited to see where the new community initiative goes and to continue the work an able more women to access the arts as the York St John Prison Partnership Project enters its 10th year.