

Dyslexia-friendly Transcript for Discover Central Ep6:

Alma Prelec and Gabriel Vivas-Martinez



Host: Scott Bellamy

Guest 1: Student Phillip Olagoke

Guest 2: Gabriel Vivas-Martinez

Guest 3: Alma Prelec

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[theme tune plays. SCOTT starts speaking]

HOST - SCOTT BELLAMY:

Welcome to Discover Central, the podcast that gives you a behind the scenes look at the life of students, staff, and alumni at London's Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.

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SCOTT:

I'm Scott, and thank you for joining us for this the final episode of our first series of the Discover Central podcast. Today, we'll be talking to PhD candidates Alma Prelec and Gabriel Vivas-Martinez about research at Central and their recent curation and co-artistic direction of The Theatre Times International Online Theatre Festival. But first, we're checking in with third year Acting student Phillip with his top tip for looking after yourself in lockdown.

GUEST 1 – PHILLIP OLAGOKE

Hi, my name is Phillip and I'm a third year Acting student at Central, and my top tip for staying sane during lockdown is looking after yourself physically. I think I've been playing a lot of sports recently and making sure that my body is always moving for at least an hour throughout the day. And I've been playing a lot of basketball, really something that I'm not actually that good at but has been fun getting better and also something to focus on.

SCOTT:

We're back, and I'm delighted to welcome Alma Prelec and Gabriel Vivas-Martinez, both of whom are PhD candidates at Central. Alma and Gabriel were also the co-artistic directors and curators of the second annual International Online Theatre Festival, which ran throughout May 2020 in conjunction with The Theatre Times, Central and Digital Theatre. The theme of the festival was 'In a world where you can be anything...' and it showcased the work of diverse global artists for free to audiences anywhere in the world. Hi Alma and Gabriel, welcome and thanks for talking with us today.

GUEST 2 – GABRIEL VIVAS-MARTINEZ:

Hi Scott, thank you. Thank you for having us.

GUEST 3 – ALMA PRELEC:

Thanks Scott, thank you so much for having us.

SCOTT:

So let's start with your backgrounds. Tell us a little bit about your backgrounds before coming to Central.

ALMA:

Well, my background is a bit different, I studied modern languages - Spanish and Portuguese - at Oxford and then stayed there for a Masters. And although the course was very literary focused on fiction and poetry, wherever I could I took modules or specialised in playwrights before coming to Central, so I ended up focusing on Lorca and Cervantes before writing.

GABRIEL:

In my case, I am an actor, I studied my dramatic arts degree in Spain. And then I started researching on Applied Theatre. That's also kind of my other important branch of the background, which is as an Applied Theatre facilitator. And, yeah, before coming to Central, I was working both as an actor and also as an applied theatre facilitator.

SCOTT:

So it's fair to say quite different journeys. Before you came to Central, what inspired each of you then to embark on PhDs essential and if you want to please do tell us a little bit about your areas of research.

ALMA:

Sure, so I think certainly there are differences but also, as Gabriel and I have gotten to know each other this year and through the festival and also from being part of the same cohort, we've realised how many research interests we actually share in common, which has been really wonderful. So in my case, because I was so focused on Spanish theatre, and Maria Delgado is such a huge and influential thinker in this field, I'd always hoped to one day do research with her. And my particular interests were on my research focuses on Spanish theatre and theatre from the former Yugoslavia and how these two regions have engaged with each other in the cultural sector. And

suddenly this project appeared at Central which is called staging difficult pasts - it's an AHRC project. And they were looking for a PhD student, and it seemed to match my interest very closely. And when I went to the interview aisles, I met Maria and I also met Duska Radosavljevic who is now also my co supervisor and someone whose work I very much admire. So it fit in perfectly in that sense. And on another level I also beyond the study of theatres of literary text, I was always into performances, and also trained as an actor and started performing very young. So I loved how Central combined theory and practice and that was one of the huge reasons I wanted to study here.

GABRIEL:

Yeah, I totally agree with that Alma, and that was the main reason basically the combination of practice and theory and the opportunity of doing a practice research project, because my kind of big fear with research was that, you know, it was a little bit the idea that I had it was a little bit too theoretical for me, and I am an actor, I do like to move, I do like to make things and make theatre. So when I had the opportunity to discover this approach, during my MA at Central that I did my MA in applied theatre, then I confirmed that this practice research approach was what I wanted to do. And I met Dr. Kat Low and Dr. Sylvan Baker that are my supervisors, and I was sure that they were the perfect supervising team for me, so I decided to do it. My research project goes around masculinity, ideas of toxic masculinity, in particular with young people, and how applied theatre intervention projects can contribute to challenge those ideas of toxic masculinity, going from an embodied experience to perhaps building up safer and kinder home and social spaces.

SCOTT:

Thank you for that, those sound really, really interesting. Can you tell us a little bit then about the international Online Theatre Festival?

GABRIEL:

Yeah, the International Online Theatre Festival, it's an annual online theatre festival that aims to show a very diverse range of global artists and their work. So in collaboration with The Theatre Times and Digital Theatre, the aim was to create this space where we could share different approaches and different conceptions of theatrical space, in line with that theme of this year that was 'In a world where you can be anything'. So what are the responses, the global responses that we're getting for that? The idea is also to kind of create this sharing space beyond the watching of the place, but also having perhaps interviews or, you know, meetings or perhaps podcasts, different material around the productions, so people could actually engage beyond the mere watching.

SCOTT:

And how did you both get involved in the festival, maybe starting with you, Alma?

ALMA:

Well, I think this goes back to what we were talking about before about the emphasis at Central combining theory and practice. In another way as well Central offers its research students certain opportunities at different points throughout the year to engage in placements. And one of these was the role of the artistic director, the co- artistic director of the IOTF. And so at the time when this call came out, I was actually involved with a different placement that central had organised, which was at the ICA collaborating with Nico Marzano for their film festival Frames of Representation. So I very much wanted to

get involved in the IOTF. But I knew that doing it full time would be simply too much. And with that said, Gabriel and I had, as I mentioned before, so often discussed our similar interests and similar kind of creative projects that we hope to one day do together. So we got in touch and decided ultimately to do a joint application and to hopefully be able to work together as we'd imagined, specifically in the context of this festival.

SCOTT:

And tell me a little bit about what the process of artistic directing and curating the festival actually entailed.

GABRIEL:

Well, it was a collaboration process between the three of us which is Xunnan Li also, from Royal Holloway, Alma and myself, also with our executive director Maria Delgado, and also with The Theatre Times directors, Magda, and Kasia. And the first thing was watching a huge selection of amazing productions from all over the globe and deciding kind of a thematic line, how could we group them or not? Or how are they responding to this year's theme 'In a world where you can be anything'? So yeah, the first thing was receiving lots of submissions and watching and enjoying them.

SCOTT:

And you mentioned the theme there again, 'In a world where you can be anything'. It's an incredibly thought provoking theme. You talked there about getting to watch through a really diverse and large range of different productions. The programme itself was incredibly extensive and varied. Did you have a favourite piece or production?

ALMA:

Well, I think it's I think it's very difficult to pick a favourite, I think every single production that was there and also the films we that screened had a very specific role to play within the the broader programme. I can say that in my case, there was one production that I was particularly excited to see. And that was Tiago Rodrigues's *Sopro*, which was actually included. So we ended up extending the festival to it was really going to be two weeks to a month and then we had a month plus seven. As we were constantly adapting to these, you know, ever shifting circumstances. And Tiago's play it came out a few years ago in Portugal and had these incredible reviews and I'd always wanted to see it but I was never quite in the right city at the right time when they were touring. So when we found out that Tiago was on board to join the festival, it was very special to be able to see this play which turns theatre on its head and it's a sort of meta theatrical rumination on the aspects of a play that we don't notice.

SCOTT:

And what about you, Gabriel?

GABRIEL:

Um, in my case, I was just thinking that it is very difficult as well because there were many, many amazing productions. But perhaps one that really inspired me to think and to reflect on the nature of theatricality was *(A)pollonia* by Krzysztof Warlikowski, especially because not only the combination of theatrical languages, but also because they had the opportunity to see life in Warsaw around two years ago, so that combination of the experience that I had back then and the experience that I was having in that particular moment now through my laptop, was really interesting food for thought for me as a researcher, as a theatre practitioner on what are the limits and the possibilities of digital work and digital reality.

SCOTT:

And Alma, you, you refer to the fact that the festival was extended, of course, it was already planned for digital delivery prior to the start of the global pandemic. But did you notice any difference in the way that people were engaging with the festival due to lockdown?

ALMA:

I would say that we did. We already had the theme before the crisis really hit. And we already had a sort of idea of how we wanted the festival to play out. But it became very clear that as lockdown was introduced not just in the UK, but in so many other places, that people were going to be really hungry to engage with theatre in any way possible. And not necessarily with just the productions themselves, but also with anything that could, in some way, link them to the theatrical world. Gabriel, as you mentioned a little bit before, we decided to have a stronger emphasis on certain events than we necessarily thought like, you know, roundtables and live Q and A's, because we wanted to recreate that special something that obviously cannot be fully transmitted on a screen - the sense of a live event. But there is still something about that, about people logging in at the same time and, and watching, watching a conversation in real time that we hope to replicate. So that was it. I think, I think we would probably both say that the festival gained certain, a certain sort of relevance that was particularly unique to this strange period that we're all going through.

GABRIEL:

I would say also, even with the companies, because we had that submission deadline and after that we were already curating, but we kept receiving with lock down proposals like, "Hey, we would also like to share our work", which was a beautiful opportunity for creating this

kind of collaboration and networking on people that were offering resources online and their productions online. So at the end, we added way more productions than what we had planned. I think we planned 25, to include 25 productions, or that was like the initial idea and we ended up having more than 40. So that, that is really also a response on this generosity from the companies from the theatres, but also on the demand that we got from the audience and the engagement that people were having with the festival.

SCOTT:

I think it's really interesting because a lot of people not just in the theatre world, they're referring to this phrase "The New Normal" aren't they, already? Do you think we'll see more digital performance and digital festivals in the future? And, you know, maybe as a result of COVID-19?

ALMA:

I think it's almost inevitable that we will. How much of an increase are we looking at? It's difficult to say because so much of it depends on, well, this new normal depends on the development of a vaccine, and it depends on how long it will be until theatres can reopen. And after they reopen, at what capacity they're going to be producing their plays for. I think something that will be important for the theatre community to think about and for ourselves as practitioners to consider is, what can theatre, digital theatre, offer that is different from film? Because if it's just a poor version of a live event, then we might as well I'll be making films, right? We have to think about what is special that can be transmitted about a performance online, and if we're able to do that, then maybe maybe we're at the cusp of something very exciting. That's certainly a conversation. I think it's worth having.

GABRIEL:

Yeah, I agree with you, Alma, and I also think that we will see more digital probably festivals and digital performance. I am already seeing companies that are creating shows specifically like Zoom intended, for example, or Instagram intended, which is really inspiring. And it really amazes me how creative our industry and our our talent are, that they are just taking what we have and creating something. But at the same time, I also reflect a lot on the fact that perhaps we couldn't consider these as a substitute for the theatrical event. For me, it's important that we reflect and be grateful and open to all of these proposals, but also not pretending that they can substitute the theatrical event because I'm not saying that it's not possible, but actually there is this ritualistic approach to being together in the same space living an experience that perhaps we have in digital environments a little bit of a challenge there. So I would say that the more the merrier. The more creative proposals we have the better, but at the same time, let's not pretend that it can substitute what actually bringing people together in a theatre can be.

ALMA:

I completely agree there Gabriel, and I think it's important to make a distinction that while there may be very exciting things about the development of online theatre, inevitably people are going to want to convene in a theatrical space and be together because that's such an elemental aspect of experiencing a show. It's a question, it's something to think about while we move forward here.

SCOTT:

Absolutely; and from being together to, going back to us being on our own in lockdown, how are you both continuing your research in lockdown and what's next?

GABRIEL:

Well, in my case, my research is very much focused on embodiment and physical contact, which is quite a challenge in these physical distance times, I wouldn't like to name it social distance, I don't think we are socially distant but physical, physically distant. So in my case, for example, it will be about exploring what possibilities of perhaps contributing to the practice in the workshop room, the digital medium office. For that I have been very lucky to be part of the collaborative outreach unit in our second year Drama, Applied Theatre and Education cohort. And I am working with them as a tutor and lots of inspiration ideas on how we can use the mediums that we have for workshop facilitation or for embodiment. This is a very big fountain of inspiration for me. While we see how the development goes, I think that the initial idea is to be aware that there are lots of important things from the digital world that we can take in. For example, sharing content globally, sharing with others that are very far from us physically, that can bring us together in a digital form. But at the same time, thinking also how we can be preparing the ground for when we can be together and hug each other again.

ALMA:

Yes, I would also, I have to say that I have so much admiration for the PhD researchers like yourself, Gabriel, who are in the world of these practice PhDs. And it's certainly admirable what you've been doing to move the research forward. And in my case, my work is it's purely written, it's a theoretical piece. So it's a little bit easier. But my research focuses on, a lot of it draws from source texts that come from the 1930s. So I'm looking at the representation of the Spanish Civil War in the space of the former Yugoslavia. So there's a lot of archival work was meant to be in in Spain and in Serbia and Croatia that I've had to

put off for the moment. And of course, limited resources with libraries being shut. So it has been difficult. It has been less than ideal, certainly, but I would say that Central has been incredibly accommodating and helpful and where they've been able to they've, they've helped us access certain, certain resources and so forth. So we do we do have much to be thankful for in that respect.

SCOTT:

Alma and Gabriel, thank you both so much for joining us today. It's been an absolute pleasure talking to you.

ALMA:

Thank you so much.

GABRIEL:

Thank you.

[theme tune starts, crescendo at Scott starts talking]

SCOTT:

Thanks, as well to final year Acting student Phillip. And thank you for joining us for this first season of Discover Central. We'll be back again in the autumn for more conversations with Central students, staff, and alumni. We hope you'll join us then. For now, wherever you may be, stay safe, and we'll see you next time.

[theme tune ends, diminuendo]