

# Dyslexia-friendly Transcript for Discover Central Ep1: *Dr Nicola Abraham and Dr Selina Busby*



**Host: Scott Bellamy**

**Guest 1: Dr. Nicola Abraham**

**Guest 2: Student Darius Gervinskas**

**Guest 3: Student Moneka Prato**

**Guest 4: Dr. Selina Busby**

Podcast and article available at:

<https://www.cssd.ac.uk/news/new-central-podcast-launched>

*[theme tune plays, gradually crescendo. SCOTT starts speaking]*

**HOST - SCOTT BELLAMY:**

Welcome to *Discover Central*, a 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.

*[theme tune ends, diminuendo]*

**SCOTT:**

I'm Scott and together we'll be taking a closer look at Central. Answering your questions, finding out what it's like to work and study with us, catching up with our alumni in the industry and hearing more about the new and innovative projects that members of our community are working on. We had of course hoped to record this first series of episodes at our campus in Swiss Cottage and to give you a sneak-peak at our end of year productions,

exhibitions and showcases but due to the Global Covid-19 Crisis, plans have, well changed. Our buildings might be closed, but Central is still open, remotely that is, and this allows the creating and collaborating to continue. For the next 5 episodes we'll be checking in with each other from our homes across the world. We'll find out how our community is helping to combat this global health crisis in their own communities. We'll be sharing tips on looking after ourselves in these new and uncertain times from prioritising our mental health and wellbeing to nurturing our creativity in adverse circumstances. We'll be finding out how teaching and learning our continuing remotely and how we're all adapting or struggling to adapt to new ways of working. And we'll be discussing what the impact of all this technology might be on the future of art and performance. Today we'll be celebrating work that is making a real difference right now. Projects that operate at the intersection of the arts, the community and healthcare and in particular the important work that our students, staff and alumni our spearheading to help support our amazing NHS. We'll be speaking with Dr Selina Busby, whose work with Company Three's *Corona Virus Time Capsule* is digitally connecting young people in lockdown across the globe, and we'll be hearing from some of our Central students about the projects and initiatives they've been working on during lockdown. But first we are talking with Dr Nicky Abraham whose award winning project with London's Imperial College Healthcare NHS trust was Interrupted by Covid-19 but thanks to the quick thinking of the project team including the students, Nicky and the wonderful nursing team, was able to take new shape.

**SCOTT:**

Hi Nicky, welcome and thanks for joining us.

**GUEST 1 - DR NICOLA ABRAHAM:**

Thank you very much for having me.

**SCOTT:**

**So, you have been working closely with Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust for the last few years, tell me how did this work first come about?**

**NICOLA:**

**Well, it came about in 2016. I had an email that came through from the reception team's enquires, from a nurse from Imperial who asked if we could do a play for patients on different wards to support them during their hospital stays to see how that could impact on wellbeing. I said yes because you know that's the kind of work that we do in applied theatre is to go and support communities, but I offered alternative models so: it might be a play for patients, or it might be interactive storytelling workshops, there is a plethora of different methodologies that we could use to support Imperial with their work. They joined, they liked the idea and we set up our first project which was with Collaborative Outreach and our second years.**

**SCOTT:**

**And tell me why is applied theatre so beneficial within clinical settings?**

**NICOLA:**

**I think It provides respite, provides a sense of joy and happiness, it's person centred which is really important. We're really lucky to work with a very inspiring dementia care team with Imperial led by nurse consultant Jo James who is a legend and who has an amazing team who are completely person centred and who do incredible work. Applied theatre is about that as well, it's about putting the community first and finding ways to support the community, to listen and to respond so that they've got agency. And often when you're in hospital someone else has agency over your care, your body, the way you're spoken to, and a lot of choices are kind of taken out your hands. You have some of course but sometimes, particularly if your living with dementia for example, agency is a tricky topic. Sometimes people are**

making decisions on your behalf, so we wanted to create a practice that was responsive to each individual. Whether someone is verbal or not there is always a way to engage with somebody and I guess the flexibility of Applied Theatre allows us to do that.

SCOTT:

And I guess we touched on it a moment ago but how was the project impacted by COVID 19?

NICOLA:

Well we've had to adapt because we can't be on site at the moment. So, for example, if I could tell you a little story:

SCOTT:

Sure.

NICOLA:

Thank you. We worked with a ward called Auchie, which is an acute dialysis ward at Hammersmith Hospital. We've worked there for a few years now and we do a project, usually creating a film with patients, and that involves bed side, one to one storytelling to develop the plots, the location, the narrative, the twists and turns that usually come up. It's usually, I wanted it to be a rom-com of some sort or a sit-com so that people would recognise it, a bit of like a soap opera, but every year it turns out to be a crime drama, which is fine, that's what the patients like to explore. So there are lots of twists and turns in the plot that the students explore. And sometimes they are going into the ward in role as the characters that the patients have created. And they're working out the who-done-it mystery with patients by using hot seating, so, interviewing the patients in role and they're playing maybe a neighbour who's observed what's gone on.

This year we got part way through that project which would normally result in, say, a 50 minute film. The students had written the scripts which they devised with the patients and they all had many different ideas that were put into it. And then access to the ward was stopped rightly so for health and safety and to ensure the patients who are, you know, compromised because they're on dialysis and many other things are going on for them. To make sure that we could continue the project we had to find another route, so our first port of call was to buy a green screen. And the dementia care team took a tablet that had skype on them set up so that we could interact with patients that way, and then wards staff was re-distributed to other wards so we had to rethink. Um so we thought great, not a problem, Central's site was still open at this point so we thought we'd do a radio drama with the cast of students and external actors who had kindly volunteered to take on the roles for this new project. And then of course the site was shut for safety as well, so we used WhatsApp, never to be defeated. We used something called the Water Methodology, which I can tell you a bit more about later on if you're interested. Which is about flexibility and working. So we created a WhatsApp chat where people would use the audio recording function to send their character's lines in with a pause between each line so that I could edit them together and add sound effects so we that we could create an immersive story using pan sounds, so if your listening to it, it feels you might be sat between the characters for example. Um and we created that together and then sent it by email to the ward so that could go to patients. So, we just found another way, there's always a lot of different ways to do things and I think for us the commitment to our communities is the most important, is the heart of our work. So, thinking like water means that we look for alternative routes to reach where we want to go. That's just one example of the projects adapting. We also have plans for our intergenerational project next year to be a virtual project and we're setting it up at the moment with schools to think about how we use Zoom, how we use part live interactions to create some work with students in schools and then exchange virtually with patients who

are having the same project delivered one to one with the nursing staff, or if we're allowed on site one to one with us, and then exchange virtually to reduce physical contact but respecting the idea of distancing in that respect. So, we're doing lots of projects at the moment to try and adapt to the situation, and to continue to do important work to support people, and thinking about the impact of social distancing on the well being of people who are not having any contact, or having reduced contact or social connection with their loved ones at this point, whether they're in care homes, or hospitals or at home and not having an awful lot of interaction with people they normally would, so finding ways to build new connections using the virtual tools that we've got at our finger tips.

**SCOTT:**

And I think kind of building on that you just talked there about the range of projects and initiatives that you've been working on in addition to the work with Imperial. Where is this work being used?

**NICOLA:**

So, the projects we're doing at the moment for the Applied Theatre curriculum are part of our collaborative outreach project and we've got 15 projects running, they're not speculative, they're happening via Zoom, or via YouTube, or via Twine which is interactive open sourced storytelling software. We're working with a lot of different organisations in the UK and internationally, South Africa and India as well at the moment to support the communities we made a commitment to work with before sites and spaces were closed for lockdown. So many places, many different partnerships we're working with including the Proud Trust In Manchester which supports LGBTQIA+ young people, we're also working with including: The Greater Manchester Youth Network, SEN schools, Primary Schools, Secondary Schools around London and around the UK more broadly.

We're working to support as well unpaid carers who are kind of the unsung heroes of this. It's really important that we do our clap for the carers to acknowledge the amazing work that the NHS are doing. But there's a lot of people who are caring for people 24/7 who are unpaid, who aren't being recognized, so for carers week we've been working with Camden Carers to support and recognize the creativity and the amount of support that unpaid carers are giving to the people that they're working with as well.

SCOTT:

You touched right there on the Collaborative Outreach Projects which the undergraduate applied theatre students would typically be embarking on at the moment and these usually take them to, kind of, different education, community and performance settings across the UK, and around the world. Now, obviously you talked a little bit about what they're doing instead of that, but how have the applied theatre course team and the students responded?

NICOLA:

Erm, I have to say, brilliantly, with real heart, to the projects. The applied theatre course team, we've worked together to find these ways to reinvent and make sure we've got exciting projects for the students to undertake and that continue to adhere to the initial ideas and briefs for the projects that we've put together. And the students have worked brilliantly to adapt their practice, to think about how do we use digital tools to be responsive and supportive to the communities that we're working with, and how do we create something that is meaningful, and how do we do that if we're working over zoom because that's a different experience of facilitating. Which we've been learning as we go. So we are working together on a lot of this, and learning together, that's the ultimate, kind of co-intentional environment where we learn from each other as we go. And our hosts learn from us and we learn from them so it's a nice communal kind of project, particularly this year given the circumstances. And the students were also

supported by a specialist tutor in the industry who's got experience of online practice or is also adapting their practice at the moment to work in this way. So again, another part of the importance of our team working together. And the students have been innovative in the way that they're taking on the projects, they've done amazing things, I've seen just the other day a trailer from one of the projects that's going out into a primary school in Cornwall. They've created a brilliant drama looking at climate change and the forest, and there's lots of supporting sessions that are going with that. And we're using YouTube as a platform to share and disseminate work. There's lots of different things we're learning as we go but I'm very proud of the students and how they responded thoughtfully and with heart. And that's the core of the field, it's the foundation of what we do. We're doing this for our communities, to make meaning with them and to support them in this really, really difficult time for everybody. And I'm very proud of the way they've embraced it, I hope they're listening, because they need to know that.

SCOTT:

And I guess, you know, that need and that ability to adapt the practice from, kind of, face-to-face to online, that ability that they're learning through this process will only help them in their future careers I guess.

NICOLA:

Exactly. I mean at the moment this is the time that we should step up and innovate, and that's what creative people do. And I think as an Applied Theatre course, we're used to adapting and responding to unknowns. It happens to us all the time when we're in workshops, you never really know what to entirely expect. And being flexible and finding creative ways to navigate, with people who maybe aren't used to theatre in that particular context, it's really important, it's a central part of our ethos. So being able to innovate now and learn these new tools and skills will put them a step ahead in terms of what's going to happen with the practice in the future. At the



moment we're learning that, we're finding that out, but also deciding that to a degree because they're doing the projects at the moment. And I guess that's what's really exciting about this term, that in the midst of a horrible global situation there's these moments and pockets of hope that come from the innovation that the students and the course team are putting forward with their communities, to create opportunities to find ways to cope with what's going on in the world and to create exciting work.

SCOTT:

And it just kind of reiterates the kind of the inspiring nature of the work that both yourself and the students are working on during this difficult time. Nicky, tell me, what for yourself, what are you working on next?

NICOLA:

At the moment I am working on many things. But one of the things that I'm working on is preparing for our student knowledge exchange project, which is a joint funded project that we're adapting at the moment to work in the NHS, that will be quadrupling the work that we've been doing. And I guess at the moment we're innovating and trying to find ways to make that happen virtually, so we're adapting projects, we're finding new ways to work together with the NHS team at Imperial, the dementia care team, to find ways to make the projects happen that are still exciting, and trying to fulfil a need for the projects. So, we're at the moment tentatively putting out ideas for the project that will support people, as mentioned earlier, who are at home, and socially isolated, and maybe don't have an awful lot of contact with other people. That can be a reality for all of us, but we're looking particularly at communities who are living with dementia, and are maybe at home, or are missing social contact, or only have contact with paid carers, for example. Which is really important but that can create a lot of problems in terms of social world, mental health and social health and wellbeing. So, we're thinking of how can we enhance that, and reach those people who are

maybe missing support, because they're not in a hospital at the moment or they're not in the care home, they're just at home. So, trying to find ways to reach and support that group. So that's one project. I'm also working with Mel Phillips who's been working with this for Collaborative Outreach, she's a tutor with us, she's helped us a lot with the digital work that we're doing to create an escape room which is something that we've been playing with for a while, and we want to demonstrate some of the tools that the students are using this term, to see what's possible. So we've been doing a couple of little things through term, we did a robot face sort of quiz/ scavenger-hunt earlier in the term through Zoom to demonstrate what the software can do, and what we can do through Screenshares. And now we're thinking about how we're using immersive sound and video to create a durational piece that's about commemorating an event. So thinking, again, about how do we mix methodologies that already exist, and use technology to innovate and create flexible ways to interact with theatre. Which we're hoping to share in the next couple of weeks.

SCOTT:

Sounds like a very busy but very exciting time. So, Nicky, thanks so much for speaking with us today.

NICOLA:

You're very welcome. And thank you for having me.

SCOTT:

That was Dr Nicky Abraham and we'll be back after this short break.

*[theme tune kicks in, crescendo as DARIUS starts speaking]*

GUEST 2 - STUDENT DARIUS GERVINSKAS

Hello, I am Darius and I'm a second-year student of the Drama, Applied Theatre and Education course. I am currently working on a Collaborative Outreach Project, engaging in a letter-writing process with older people who are isolated due to the COVID-19 crisis. And we're also making a reminiscence audio play about their life experiences, which is absolutely amazing and very, very interesting.

**GUEST 3 - STUDENT MONEKA PRATO**

Hi, my name is Moneka, I'm a second year Costume Construction student, and to support the NHS I've been making bags for nurses to keep their scrubs in.

*[theme tune ends, diminuendo]*

**SCOTT:**

Welcome back. We're talking with members of the Central community who are working on innovative projects developed in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Our next guest is Dr Selina Busby, Principal Lecturer in Applied Theatre at Central and the Course Leader for MA Applied Theatre. Since the start of the lockdown, Selina and her MA Applied Theatre students have been working with London-based Company Three and other arts partners and organizations from across the UK on the Coronavirus Time Capsule. Hi Selina, thanks for being with us.

**GUEST 4 - DR SELINA BUSBY**

Thank you for inviting me.

**SCOTT:**

So, tell me, how did you get involved with the Company Three?

**SELINA:**

Company Three have been part of my research and London-based applied theatre sort of knowledge and experience for a long time. They're an amazing company who set up in 2008 to work on long-term projects with teenagers exploring what it's like to be a teenager living in London today, but with a really high emphasis on making quality theatre. So- Lyn Gardner once said in a review of their work that it's most definitely not social work, it's theatre and artmaking. And as a result of that they make some really interesting, remarkable, funny, moving, beautiful pieces of theatre about teenage life in London. And the reason I'm most interested in their work, is because of all that, but also because they have a long-term commitment to the 75 young people they work with at any one point in time. So they might work with the same young person from the age of 11 until 19. And my own research very much focuses on a long-term impact of making theatre with different community groups. So, there's a synergy in what they're doing and what I'm interested in. So I was particularly interested in their work called *Brain Storm*, which they produced in their own theatre and then it transferred for 2 runs at the National Theatre so it's one of the very few examples of youth theatre that has transferred to the main stages of large theatres in the UK, when it wasn't specifically commissioned for that or written for that so their work is really quite remarkable.

SCOTT:

Fantastic! And can you tell us a little bit more about the *Coronavirus Time Capsule*.

SELINA:

Yes! Well, having a long-term commitment to young people making theatre is really tricky in lockdown, clearly because theatre making- you usually think about it happening in a building in a space together. Company Three is committed to that long-term engagement, so their artistic director Ned Glasier decided that he needed to find a subtitle for that during

lockdown. Because young people in lockdown are-find it particularly difficult particularly-it must be particularly frustrating to be 14/15 and not able to leave your house. So to give them something to do, but also as part of their long term mission of exploring the life of teenagers. This is a remarkable time to be exploring the life of teenagers. So it felt like, in some ways, a very natural extension of the work that they do anyway, but obviously they have had to be more inventive about the ways that they deliver that. So, effectively, time capsule is a project that week-by-week documents the lives of young people living in lockdown-originally in Islington because that is where Company Three is based and Ned and his team very carefully curate a series of exercises or themes week-by-week so that each episode tells a different aspect-a different story about what's happening to them in lockdown. It's very much a series of episodes, so Friday afternoon at 3 o'clock each new episode is released, and I think this week is episode number 10!

SCOTT:

Wow, 10 weeks! Have we been in lockdown that long?

SELINA:

We certainly have!

SCOTT:

Ufff! In terms of yourself, what's your role in the project?

SELINA:

Aahh, my role's an absolute joy! I get to observe the project. So I get to watch each episode as it comes out! But also on a more serious note to evaluate the impact it's having on the young people's lives. So, it's an extension of my usual research looking at how theatre can impact on young communities, but this is a particularly interesting project because it's

happening simultaneously in lots of different places in the world. It started with Company Three in Islington, but they've rolled out a weekly blueprint so that any theatre company or individual that wants to join in can also record their own episode each week. So at the moment the company is right across the UK making this work but there's also a company in the Netherlands, there is one in Australia, there's one in Spain, there's one in the United States of America and many other places. So we're trying to capture as much of the young people's experiences in as many as those different places as possible to see how theatre making is helping, interfering, hindering their process while they're in lockdown-and obviously each of those countries is in a very different process in the lockdown, or is out of lockdown, or is just going into lockdown. So the comparison of where they all are is going to be absolutely fascinating.

SCOTT:

Absolutely, and I guess you're working alongside a group of Central students themselves aren't you, how are they getting involved?

SELINA:

It's too many companies for me (*laughs*) for me to interview. So, we have 7 MA students who are each following the progress of two of the companies that are making work, they are interviewing the young people, they are interviewing the individual directors and then each of the students will write an evaluation report for each of their two companies to deliver to that company and then as a team we will pull all that information and write a master evaluation report that covers as many different places and experiences as we possibly can.

SCOTT:

And teenagers, as you said, from around the world are contributing to the *Coronavirus Time Capsule* project during lockdown, supported by a

range of youth theatres, education institutions, drama groups and community arts projects.

SELINA:

Yeah.

SCOTT:

If young people are interested in taking part, how can they find out more?

SELINA:

The Company Three website is the place to go. The minute you hit the website, the first thing you see is *Time Capsule* and the blueprint for week-by-week session plans for how to produce each episode is on there. There is also a compact version, so if you're coming in at week 10 rather than week one, you can do an edited down version, if you know that you're only going to have 2 weeks or 3 weeks to be able to make the piece of theatre then there is a mini version-or you can start at the beginning and work all the way through all 10 episodes.

SCOTT:

So I guess that tailors quite well for as you said earlier those countries that are at different stages of their lockdown, I guess.

SELINA:

Absolutely, so we had some companies who started in Australia in particular, who started the project and then went back to school very quickly, so their situation changed. Whereas we've got other companies that have been involved right from week one in the project and will keep going until, we're out of lockdown I guess.

SCOTT:

*(laughs)* whenever that might be.

SELINA:

Whenever that might be!

SCOTT:

And kind of on that I guess, that is the big question: what is next for the project.

SELINA:

It's a really good question. I'm not sure that I'm qualified to answer that. I think that Company Three will continue to make episodes week-by-week until life becomes more recognisable. They're going to continue to make theatre with young people, whether they're allowed to get together in a space or if they can't. I assume that they'll go into a process where with social distancing they might be able to get some people into a real space. But when you're working with 75 young people each week, that's a lot of people to try and find a creative outlet for. So my hunch is that the project will keep going until we can bring all of those 75 young people together again.

SCOTT:

And I guess it's going to be useful beyond lockdown in a way because we can go back and we can look at those journeys, I guess.

SELINA:

Absolutely! That's the beauty of it: it is a time capsule of what it's like to be young in lockdown and I think there's going to be all sorts of valuable information in there for sociologists, for therapist, for drama workers, about what effects being in lockdown has on young people and how we can more



creatively use their time to explore themselves, explore their world, engage with politics, engage with the world around them-beyond physical lockdown, there are techniques that have gone into making this project that will be valuable for-as for long time to come, I think.

SCOTT:

Selina, I know you as someone who is one of the busiest and most hard-working people I know. And I know therefore that since lockdown started-

SELINA:

*(laughs)*

SCOTT:

-you've been working on the *International Applied Theatre Project*-tell me, how did this initiative come about?

SELINA:

Ohh! This was-this is another-there are two big joys of being in lockdown, one is the *Time Capsule*, and this is the second-and I didn't initiate either so I've been a very lucky passenger in both projects. The *International Applied Theatre Project* was set up by Professor Peter Duffy in South Carolina. He has a group of Applied Theatre MA students and is in touch with several other universities and people who delivered applied theatre programs across the world and knowing that everybody was in lockdown, in a similar way to Company Three, he wanted to find a productive way of being creative and using time. So he contacted me to say that he had a group of students who really wanted to make a piece of theatre, did I have any that would want to join them-of course, I said yes, absolutely. And at the same time, he contacted an academic in Australia, two in Germany and one in Togo. And together, we pulled a group of students-I think all together across all 5

countries we have something like 35 students, who we then split into groups so that each group is a group of 5 to 6 students who are in their early 20s to late 40s who are interested in applied theatre and each group represented at least-one member in each group from each of those countries. So, effectively we had 5 mini theatre companies each representing an international dimension and their mission was to create a piece of performance that would contribute to their mental health during lockdown-so again to find ways of exploring creatively what can be done in lockdown. So over a period of 4 weeks, each group worked together-there is a website dedicated to the project-to create a piece of theatre and then last week we got together to see the performances-I'm not sure if performance is the right word because some of them were purely soundscapes, some of them were puppet shows with spoons as the leading characters, some were created of everyday sounds that people were listening to during lockdown, or they were the sounds of their lockdown so the sound, everyday sounds ones went from people-the noise of people cleaning their teeth to the music that has kept them up and upbeat during the process to a beautiful moving story about a lonely cat during lockdown that was taken into a house and rescued-so really, really radically different types of performance and we had an international sharing via Zoom, where we had participants from all of the countries, sharing each other's work, commenting and feeding back on each other's work. And there's a little catch line that goes with that project that we came together-we came together because of isolation, and certainly that project has been really eye-opening in all sorts of ways, but particularly in the way that technology can be used really beautifully-it's not a replacement for real theatre, I don't want us to be online continually-but how it can have the power to bring people together who would never meet in their everyday life and create something really moving and beautiful for them, for each other, and hopefully for a wider community when we've worked on it a little bit longer, we will hopefully be posting some of the work on the website. But to-just to see faces and hear sounds and see pictures from Germany, Australia,

the United States of America, Togo and the UK coming together in a really inventive, creative way was an absolutely beautiful moment of my lockdown.

SCOTT:

And I think you've kind of hit the nail on the head there, in the way that-within this, this very strange period for us all, technology has had a crucial role to play in bringing people together, I think that really is something that is a key takeaway from, from both projects, in some ways actually-

SELINA:

Yeah.

SCOTT:

-for sure.

SELINA:

Yes.

SCOTT:

Selina, all I can say is thank you so much for talking to us today, it's been an absolute pleasure and I hope that the projects they continue to go from strength-to-strength and I hope that, you know, the stuff that's coming out of them-it sounds fascinating to be honest with you and I look forward to looking at both of those websites!

SELINA:

Thank you, thank you for talking to me!

*[theme tune starts, crescendo at Scott starts talking]*

SCOTT:

Thanks as well to Dr. Nicola Abraham and to our fantastic students Darius and Moneka. And thank you for joining us for our first episode of *Discover Central*. Join us for our next episode when we'll be talking to Dr. Farokh Soltani, Jessica Bowles and hearing more from Central's student community with ways to nurture your creativity and look after yourself in lockdown. For now, take care and stay safe, and we'll see you next time on *Discover Central*!

*[theme tune ends, diminuendo]*