The Traverse Podcast
Episode 7: Jess Brough

DEBBIE: Welcome to The Traverse Podcast with me, Debbie Hannan. So, theatre has changed. COVID-19 has sent us into a reflective pause. It has inspired art activism, the examination of power and demanded a new normal as we all invent what comes next? This series is inspired by Arundhati Roy’s statement, ‘The pandemic is a portal’, and these podcasts are a selection of interviews with the people who are shaping that feature inside and outside of theatre. They are intimate, candid conversations about lived experience, where people speak their truth to power. It's important to say here that our interviewees speak freely on a range of topics, whilst you might not share all their points of view, they are here to be heard. Each one is a provocation, which looks to examine theatremaking and storytelling, how we do it and its place in our new world. Today's conversation is with producer, academic and all-round cultural figure, Jess Brough. Jess is the founder of Fringe of Colour, which began as a list of shows by Black artists at the Fringe, and which in 2020 became an online festival of short films by artists of Colour that ran through August, dropping a whole new set of films each week from narrative to dance films to recorded performances. It was incredible. It completely blew apart what an online festival could be and the content was varied, bold and brilliant. I speak to Jess about being one of the first companies that went digital to much success. Their other writing as well as their PhD, and their hopes for the future of the Fringe post pandemic.

Hello Jess, how are you?

JESS: Hi. Hi Debbie. I'm very well. Thank you. How are you doing?

DEBBIE: And you're speaking to us from…

JESS: Barcelona.

DEBBIE: Very nice.

JESS: Escaping the Scottish winter!

DEBBIE: We're all wildly jealous! Could you kick us off by telling us what you do, perhaps an example of your work?

JESS: I always start with the PhD cause that's technically my main priority and my real job. So I’m a third year PhD student and I research language production. So I look at things like perspective taking, when you're describing interactions between people and you bias towards seeing that through one person's eyes or somebody else's eyes. And then I also run a project called Fringe of Colour, which is and arts initiative which supports Black and Brown creatives either to create work or to go and see work at art festivals. It’s Edinburgh based, so at Edinburgh arts festivals, and this year we started off first online arts festival, Fringe of Colour films.

DEBBIE: And it was incredible. Every week you got a new drop of films, of all kinds, spoken word, some documentary, some were narrative fiction. There was a beautiful dance piece by Mele Broomes. It was a huge range of artists, a huge range of work. And you pivoted to the digital world online so easily. Like it just felt like it should have always been there and it should be there forever. So just an incredible feat, Fringe of Colour of course began in the 3D world, in the before times. Can you speak a bit about its origin way back when?

JESSS: Yeah, so back when we were allowed to go out, it started in 2018…. So I was in an interesting period between just finishing a research project and being about to start my PhD. I had a free summer, which I was intending to spend at the Fringe obviously. And I saw that a few other groups were putting together spreadsheets of shows that were around that group's interests. So there was a feminist society at Edinburgh University who were putting together a list of shows by women. I thought that was a very interesting concept because finding shows by Black creatives, which is who I was specifically looking for at the time - that's where I wanted to spend my money - was actually really, really difficult because it felt like there weren't that many, just by walking around the city and looking at posters. And I assumed that if I was struggling to find those shoes that other people were as well. And so I started making my own list and shared it with a few friends who thought it was really cool and a good idea. And you know, this is when Twitter gets really helpful because I also shared it with other people online. It was just a Google sheet, so it was publicly available and yeah, people were talking about it and using it, and you can see all the anonymous animals pop up on Google Sheets that, you know, shows you that people are actually looking at it. And it just seemed like a cool idea to keep going with. So I was adding to the spreadsheet throughout August and artists were emailing me asking if they could be put on, that kind of thing. And of course at the time there were shows at the Trav that would have been on that spreadsheet as well, and it was a really cool way of getting to know the venues a bit more at the Fringe because I'd moved in 2016. One of the reasons I moved to Edinburgh, the main reason was to do my Masters, but the pull to the university was that it's right in the centre of the festival. And that's when I visited for the first time in 2016, so I loved it so much that he three weeks later I moved.

DEBBIE: Wow.

JESS: And started my masters. I’m very into spontaneity. Occasionally!

DEBBIE: You’ve got serious gut instincts that you go to.

JESS: I think so. I mean, we'll see, we'll see if my gut instincts are good when I figure out if moving to Barcelona for six months works in a pandemic. So that was 2018. And the following year, I guess I was thinking about what else we could do to support artists. Because by that point I had the pleasure of speaking to a lot of people who'd were coming up to perform and you know, those, the artists of Colour meet a group where they have really great conversations about what they need and what they feel is missing. I met quite a few people through those networks and those groups. And one of the main issues that kind of came through those conversations was the idea of, I guess, isolation and tokenism and audiences, and, you know, performing a show for three weeks, but maybe it's about a really important element of your identity and your community, to people who aren't in your community or don't reflect the things that you're talking about and how difficult that must be for almost a full month, which is already an intense period of time.

So that's why we started the free ticket scheme. I think it was a way of speaking to venues about the problems that artists were having and getting them to reflect on how they were a part of that problem. Not only by tickets being expensive and inaccessible to a lot of people, but also not actively inviting people into these spaces who might not see it as a place for them. There's a lot of assumption on how to get people into seats and theatres. That's just, you know, we have cool show on the people will come and it's not really that simple. So I think at that point, we'd spoken to eight venues in 2019, who I chatted with and got to commit to donating a bunch of tickets to a selection of shows at the venue across the month. And those free tickets went to people of Colour in Edinburgh and beyond who then could go and see those shows for free and be faces in those audiences for the artists. And it was kind of working on this idea that the audience supports the artists and the artist supports the audience. Cause you can't have one without the other really. I mean you can, but it would be strange…

DEBBIE: It’s stressful.

JESS: Yeah. Performing to an empty audience. I mean, I've done it.

DEBBIE: We’ve all done it!

JESS: Yeah. So that was 2019. And I suppose that was the plan for this year was to continue with the free ticket scheme and maybe grow it a little bit in terms of getting other venues involved and getting our networks to grow a bit. So more people have access to those tickets. But unfortunately, as you know, we were hit by a pandemic and the Fringe was cancelled and that was, I don't know, it just threw it, it just threw everything sideways. Because by that point we'd started building a website in February for the free ticket scheme and having our own sort of box office to distribute these tickets. Before we'd worked with the Fringe Society who’d done a lot of that legwork for us, but it was very manual, and so we were trying to work out how to make that easier for everybody involved. But there are no tickets if there are no shows!

So we had to think a little bit about what we wanted summer to look like. Is this the universe telling me to take a break and do something else, or are there all of these people who are now left in the lurch who still need support, but need it in a completely different format. That's how Fringe of Colour Films sort of started, just thinking about our responsibility as a platform and what we have the capacity to provide, knowing that we were already in a position of building a website and you know, what did we want to see in this summer of cancellations? And so we started putting together an online arts festival, and that was all of August.

DEBBIE: Yeah. And the most amazing range of artists. I don't know if you want to speak about one or two of the pieces that were on there that had high impact for you or meant a lot to you personally?

JESS: Well, we had 51 films at the festival. I would like to think each of them left a lasting impression on me, but it was particularly lovely to work with artists directly to commission work. So we commissioned eight new films and also worked on producing one that already had footage and just needed some editing. And that was Selina Thompson's *Race Cards*, which was about three hours and 45 minutes long of Selina reading out 1000 cards with questions about race. And that had been an interactive exhibition that toured in America. And so I suppose working with Selina and asking, how do we bring this to a screen? It was really interesting to watch the analytics about how much people watched, because it's so long and you're not supposed to watch it all in one sitting really you're supposed to dip in and depart. I think that Selina’s intention, but some people got quite far! It doesn't tell you the individual, it tells me sort of the average amount it’s watched. And I was impressed by some people's staying power. There were films that were kind of brand new concepts, like Mele’s film *A Service in Committing to Love*. And it was, I think, something that she had been working towards, but hadn't yet come to a place of knowing what she was going to do with that idea. And it was so beautiful. It's just this luscious, pink, gorgeous piece, beautifully edited by Tao who is our in-house video editor. It was called *A Service in Committing to Love*. And it was just a very, very loving piece. It was all about self-care and feeding yourself, and beauty and letting your body go to all of these places. And I think Mele is just an amazing artist and it was just super exciting to work with her on something for the festival and for her to trust us as well, with work for the festival.

We released that actually the same week as another dance film, which I still sometimes watch back, cause it's just so beautiful. And what was my mum's favourite film? Did you see *Bloom*?

DEBBIE: Yes.

JESS: It was a pole dancing film. It was about three, three and a half minutes long. The background music was *Summertime*. And in the background you also had sort of outdoor noises of Kenya where it was filmed. And I think watching it, you just feel like you're there watching A.T. in the studio doing superhuman movements on a pole that I couldn't even dream of contorting myself into, but it was just so magical. It was a beautiful, beautiful piece. And the way it came together as well was very collaborative. I think talking about the music that they wanted to use and the style, and again, working with our video editor to put that all together and yeah, absolutely loved the dance films were just… I knew they were going to be great!

DEBBIE: The expansive vision of it is outstanding in that way, that it felt like it was like by values rather than by this really boxed in idea of what a festival could or should be. And it naturally broke down a lot of those very much made up barriers on what art is and I wanted to ask you, you had a really brilliant team involved and accessibility was built into kind of every element from your editorial content to your videos. And you had an accessibility officer, Jojo Fell - is that right? Was that in your plan from the beginning or was that something that you realised you needed as you went along? What was the logistics of that?

JESS: I mean, nothing was in the plan from the beginning!

DEBBIE: Because it was just the pandemic.

JESS: Yeah, it was! I mean, we made up everything as we went along, but having somebody on the team who understood what a streaming platform should have and also social media content that does make it more accessible to more groups of people was really important to us from quite early on. And it was just really, really clear to me and Hannah - Hannah was the assistant director on the project - that we didn't have that personal experience. You know, we don't use things like screen readers. I would never click on something to get the alt text description of it, that kind of thing. I think you can have the best intentions of trying to figure out how to do that stuff if you have no experience with that. But really if you don't, you wouldn't really know where to begin and you probably would end up short, so it was important to us to bring in somebody who was disabled and did have experience using things like screen readers, things that help with visual impairments, for example, onto the team to kind of advise the website designers, but also advise us how to curate our social media. And also one of the really, really important conversations that we had with Jojo was about the content and having films at the festival that were about disability that were not by disabled artists was something that we really wanted to avoid, because that's a big issue that a lot of disability activists talk about, you know, that idea of ‘nothing about us without us’. And that's the slogan. We had one submission that was doing that. And that was probably the only film content-wise that we didn't put into the programme. We had other films that were submitted that went by artists of Colour, but the only one that, you know, this is a good film, but I think this is contributing to this erasure of disabled voices on this specific issue. And that conversation with that artist was also really constructive. But I don't know if I would have had the language to talk about that or recognised that had I not had this consultation with Jojo, you know, few weeks before that. So Jojo was a really, really important member of the team and has also done this kind of thing for festivals before so we were in very good hands.

DEBBIE: Yeah. You seem to be at the front of the conversations of things around articulating intersectional thinking, meeting Scottish cultural institutions, because you spread across theatre, literature, academia. With that kind of overview - it's a big question -What do you see as the most urgent to tackle or what's at the front of your mind?

JESS: I mean, what now?

DEBBIE: Right now in Barcelona in the middle of pandemic.

JESS: Right now, during these COVID days, I guess it's really urgent that the arts are respected as something that is valuable beyond financial gain. I think the way that we have come to think about art and performance, writing and everything has become very measured by money and numbers. I mean, one of the things that we tried to avoid with the festival was the idea of quantifying value. So we had a writing platform called Fringe of Colour Responses that involved a handful of writers of Colour responding quite personally to films of their choosing and not giving reviews, not giving stars. And yeah, that was deliberate way of just being like, this is not how we want to be thinking about art. And I think the way that we have embraced that numerical approach to entertainment and culture is why we're having these conversations now about what is and what isn't worth saving and who is getting money and who isn't getting money, because it's all about money. It's all about numbers.

I guess, Scotland - I don't want to pretend that I know too much about the sector - but it's going to be a really, really important conversation about how to preserve people's livelihoods and people's passions and not making it about saving X venue over Y venue, because this venue makes more money or this venue brings in more publicity or whatever. It's about how it's connecting with people and who it’s connecting with who otherwise would not have these resources or these stories or experiences if you take that thing away. I think Scotland also has a big issue with supporting talent from Black and Brown communities, because there's so much here, but why is it that when I search, you know, ‘famous Black Scots’ it comes up with a very, very short list? You know, where are these people going with their careers and their skills? Why don't we know more than a few Black Scottish novelists? Why have they left Scotland and gone somewhere else? There needs to be a serious conversation about what's not here in support for these creative people, but that again is a big question. But there are people doing things about that, you know, like the Scottish BAME Writers Network who are making it very clear that there are writers of Colour here who are doing amazing things and they are supporting each other, but they also need support from the institutions that are the gatekeepers to this work.

DEBBIE: If you could say something to institutions and gatekeepers like a gesture or a direction, or just a statement of intent, what would you say?

JESS: I think when you have worked in an institution for so long, you can forget easily why you started there, who did you start working in the arts for? And who did you notice at the beginning of that process was not in the room or not on the stage? But once you get into a habit of kind of, this is the job, and this is what we do, I think you forget to look around. Everybody really needs to have a moment of stepping back and thinking about why they're doing what they're doing and what's the consequence of them leaving out certain people, or what would be the negative outcome of figuring out how to bring in more people into the industry. I mean, even with the online arts festival, something we weren't able to do this year was incorporate sign language interpretation onto films, that kind of thing. We had a really, really good team doing - I say ‘team’ - one person making all of our captions and subtitles.

DEBBIE: Wow.

JESS: Yeah. I mean, they did an amazing, amazing job subtitling all of our commissioned films. And then also some of the films that were submitted that didn't have the proper subtitling, which is another conversation that we'd had with Jojo about what worked and what didn't work. Not having anything that helps people who are deaf or have impairments with hearing, that’s a lot of people that can't enjoy the content that you've painstakingly put on this platform. So it would be really interesting to see what other people have managed to do on that front and, you know, audio descriptions, that kind of thing. How clever is tech at the moment with something like a streaming service and providing these extra tools for viewers. So just, yeah, everybody needs to just stop what they're doing sometimes and figure out who's not there and fix it. [laughs]

DEBBIE: I couldn’t agree more. Your PhD topic is so prescient and fascinating, a really quick summary - it's the social effects on language production and language biases. You're at the University of Edinburgh doing that. Does that intersect with your work that you do and all these other cultural elements or are they really separate for you?

DEBBIE: This year it didn't really feel like it had intersected thematically. I don't use recordings of performances or that kind of thing to create my experiments. It's very lab-based experiment based, but tech wise, I mean, working with a website designer and talking about things like HTML and how to go into the site and change certain things, it was really useful for me to have that programming background that I have from doing my PhD and sort of knowing what, what is possible. So yes, I guess technique wise, it intersects of more on the programming end.

DEBBIE: You recently had a piece published in the Scottish new writing magazine. I guess we could call it *Extra Teeth*, which is a piece called *Thank God and Acknowledgements*, which is like sort of apocalyptic nightmare about submitting a dissertation as the world ends, as creative writing. Is that element a side that you want to develop more? Is it something you're doing at the moment?

JESS: Really I've escaped Scotland to come to Barcelona because I need to focus on my writing and I can't physically write in a cold flat. So that's my excuse for moving to Spain! I love writing a lot. And that was one of the hard things to actually do this summer because running the festival was such a big task, which is ironic because, you know, you set up a platform that promotes other people's writing and then you don't have time to do your own. And I think that's a struggle that a lot of people who do these kinds of projects and these initiatives have, you know, this is something that I've spoken to Nikesh Shukla who did *The Good Immigrant* and *The Good [Literary] Agency*. And you know, how do you find time to do your own writing if you're putting all of this energy into supporting other writers? And the advice I got from him was really just like, at some point you need to pass it on to somebody else - that you've created this thing that's working, and you're not always going to be the right person to do both of those things because sometimes you have to focus on other things.

So yeah, I didn't really do that much writing this summer, but I am in a brilliant writing group with Hannah Laverty who had a film at the festival actually of an extract from *The Drift*, which is a play - a poetry play - that she'd written about her dad. And it's just really, really moving and brilliant and Hannah’s an incredible performer and just fabulous mentor and teacher, and I have a lot of respect for Hannah. But *Thank God in the Acknowledgements*, that was that was such a strange time of my life bracing. That that was my master's dissertation that was kind of featured in story’s semi-autobiographical the short story about me and my very good friend Rihanna. And we were writing our dissertations in August while the Fringe was going on in 2017. And it was just hell, it was absolute hell. The worst period of my life. It was really, really intense.

I mean, we were not sleeping. We were doing all-nighters and it was like the last few days before our deadlines and all of these food trucks were outside. All these people were outside having fun and it felt like the end of the world a lot of the time. So I think writing that was definitely a way to kind of memorialise that moment for the two of us, because it was a bit more exciting than keeping a diary and maybe like a little bit of sadistic pleasure of considering what would have happened had a few of these people fallen into ditches who were doing that silent disco tour around the city while I'm trying to write a discussion section of my 20,000 word thesis. So I'm glad you liked it. Heather and Jules are doing amazing work on that magazine. And they're really just two of the most committed people I've met here. Moving to Edinburgh has introduced to a lot of incredible writers and people in the literary world. And I hope everybody goes out and gets the two copies, the two issues of *Extra Teeth* that are out cause not to toot my own horn, but writers who founded it. Fantastic.

DEBBIE: It's true. Yeah. Big shout out to *Extra Teeth*! You also set up Black Unicorns, which is a reading group for queer Black readers discussing queer Black writing. And I know that was in connection to two really key bookshops in the central belt. I just wonder if you want to speak a bit about that?

JESS: Yeah! With Black Unicorns, so that's something that I started setting up this time last year. So, near the end of 2019, and then we had our first meeting this February. I mean, up to that point, I'd been in quite a few book clubs at Lighthouse [Books] in Edinburgh on various different topics. And I just absolutely loved them. I loved being told sometimes what to read and having a deadline. That's the only thing that I think gets me to finish books sometimes. But also, you know, when you talk about it with other people, you have a completely different experience to the book that you would have had just reading it on your own and putting it on the bookshelf straight after. So I love book clubs. And one of the things that I think I was missing in the city, cause I do feel pretty comfortable and fulfilled and happy in Edinburgh, but there is this whole community of black people that doesn't feel so established as it is in other places that I've lived. Not to say that we're not here, but it can be really hard to find each other, especially outside of a drinking or a clubbing setting. And like, I just like to sit down and talk about books and just assumed that other people would too so that's why I set it up. You know, a non alcohol-related meet up for Black people who'd like to read and - or maybe who don't like to read and but need a bit of encouragement to read something that they might enjoy. And we split that between Edinburgh - so Lighthouse Bookshop - and Glasgow - Category Is Books - because they're both are very supportive queer spaces. And that meant that we met new people each month across the cities, cause not everybody would travel from Glasgow to Edinburgh and vice versa. Being able to be mobile in that way as well, felt quite important considering the main aim was to meet this new community and kind of put faces together. But then Coronavirus happened and we couldn't meet in person any more. So I feel like every story from anybody this year is ‘…and then Coronavirus…’ but you know, it wasn't, it wasn't all lost. We moved on to virtual meetups, which has been a blessing in disguise, because a lot of people outside of Scotland have been able to join and talk about these books. And we've been able to bring in a few authors for Q and A sessions who, you know, won't have been in Edinburgh or Glasgow so wouldn't have been able to meet up with the group. I know our next one is in November and the author of C*inderella is Dead* is going to be joining us and she's in the States. So it's been actually really, really fun to do things online. But I do miss being in a bookshop and sitting there and drinking all that tea and then buying ridiculous number of books afterwards, despite already having like 30 unread books at home. So looking forward to going back to that!

DEBBIE: I went to Foyles for the first time - first bookshop since lockdown started - last week and like, just added to the book collection that already needs to be tackled. So I really feel you.

JESS: I think it's just like part of reading is buying more books.

DEBBIE: Yeah! Bit of a final question. But if you were to come back to the Fringe in like five years, 10 years, somewhere down the line, what would you like to see? What differences would you like to see?

JESS: Oooh! I would like to see far fewer stressed artists. I mean, artists are great, but by week three you go to a bar and meet some of your friends and they're just so stressed and so unhappy, but like they still have to look like they're having a great time, and that can't be sustainable or healthy for anybody. So I would love for everybody that I meet who's there to perform, to just be really chilled and relaxed and laid back and having a great time. Maybe that means not having this culture of having to perform every single day for three weeks minus two off days, and then on your off days having to find something else to do. I would like people to also feel like they have not spent their year’s savings or however much savings on the privilege of coming here to perform.

I think it's a really interesting model that the Fringe and quite a few film festivals have where you pay to register, whereas these are people who are putting all their work and their effort and their love into creating work for us to view, they should be paid for their work. Obviously with the current model that the Fringe has, that wouldn't be possible, but that's why I'm interested in new schemes, new projects and new ways of thinking about art.

What else would I like to see? I guess, like venues that are entirely inaccessible to people who can't climb down a bunch of stairs or climb up a bunch of stairs, there are so many spaces on the Fringe that are not disability accessible in any way or accessible to people who might be claustrophobic or have asthma. Like it's just, there's so many spaces like that.

But it's billed as all part of the fun, like, oh, performing in a shoe box down in like a dungeon, which does sound fun. And it's fun for me because I don't have any kind of health issues, but the Fringe has not been designed with all the people in mind. And that becomes more clear to me every year. And I think it's possible to have a festival that is as ambitious and wacky as the Fringe is and include these people. It just takes a complete change of thinking and planning. And maybe that's something that might happen in a few years’ time.

DEBBIE: If there's anything that will do it, hopefully it's a global pandemic! On that vision of a utopian Fringe where all the barriers are gone, we can finish there. And just a massive thank you for sharing your process and your values and your thoughts with us. And you've been an amazing guest with lots and lots to think on for the future. So thank you, Jess!

JESS: Thanks very much, Debbie.

DEBBIE: Thank you for listening to our interview with Jess Brough and checkout FringeofColour.co.uk, where you can still watch some of the selected works online. Please tune into our next episode where I'll be speaking to actor and writer Bea Webster about the differences between how English theatre and Scottish theatre work with deaf actors and audiences.

The music for this podcast was composed by Patricia Panther with sign designed by Richard Bell. And I've been your host, Debbie Hannan, please do check out traverse.co.uk to see our upcoming work in Traverse 3, our online venue. The traverse is funded by Creative Scotland and the City of Edinburgh Council with additional support from the Scottish Government’s Performing Arts Fund. The Traverse is a registered charity, number SC002368