

Conversations Over a Brew

Season 2, Episode 3 - Amy & Pippa

Transcript

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AA - Amina Atiq

A - Amy

P - Pippa

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[INTRO MUSIC]

AA - Hello and welcome to Conversations Over a Brew. I'm Amina Atiq from Heart of Glass and we are an Arts Organisation based in St Helens, Merseyside and broadly speaking we support artists and communities to go on creative journeys together and make art. Conversations over a Brew is a series of intimate recorded conversations exploring the stories of the people we make art with. This podcast is about the power of listening and conversation, and how making art can bring us together and create change. In this episode, we hear from Amy Pennington and Pippa Sterk. Amy is an artist whose work is founded upon collaboration with others. They use humour to connect human experiences and socio-political issues. Last year, Heart of Glass commissioned Amy to create Queer Treatment, an online workshop to explore queer identity and representation within our media culture. This workshop went on to inspire an animated film of the same name. Pippa is a writer and researcher, who is currently preparing their PhD research on LGBT+ experiences in higher education. Amy and Pippa met through the Queer Treatment workshop - Pippa as a participant and Amy as a facilitator and during this conversation, the pair reflect on Queer Treatment and what it meant to them.

[THE SOUND OF A KETTLE BOILING FADES IN, THE CLICK OF THE SWITCH INDICATING IT IS BOILED, WATER BEING POURED AND THE CLINK OF A TEASPOON STIRRING TEA IN A CUP]

A - I guess we first met when you took part in the workshop of Queer Treatment.

P - Yeah. So that that was actually, kind of completely on a whim. It was just yeah. It was very sort of coincidental and serendipitous in the sense of it was just a friend of a friend had posted the link. And I looked, I thought that looked really amazing as a workshop and then just sort of attended because it looked interesting knowing not that much about what it would actually, you know, involve. And then, what is it? Nearly, nearly a year later we're, like, here having done quite a, quite a few projects together.

A - Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, I'm glad that your friend forward, forwarded it on. It's worked quite nicely. And I guess what the workshop was about was I was interested, I was doing a project with Heart of Glass, which was, started pre pandemic, and it was going to be me working with a lot of LGBTQIA+ young people of St Helens and, you know, slightly further afield. And I think I went up to St Helens in the February and by the March everything had shut down. So the project went from being something that was going to be in person to something that kind of switched to online. For me as an artist, it was, I guess, getting my head around to doing more things online, which is where an idea for the workshop came about as a way of gathering Queers together and looking at, yeah, queer treatment and I've always been really interested in telly and films and the, I guess the workshop was a way to bring people together and have, you know, some fun, but also to share things and to think about representation in TV and what's what that's been like. And, yeah, what do you think Pippa?

P - Yeah. Because that, it's really interesting how, how that happened with the pandemic, because the thing that for me felt so special about like taking part in the workshop, just like as someone who wanted to attend something to meet other queer people and then

obviously getting involved further and further down the line. Yeah, the thing that stood out to me was just a really instant connection to other people, because also there were people from like, was it California or somewhere in the U.S.? There were people -

A - Somewhere in the U.S.. Yeah.

P - And just having that connection with basically like no one in attendance knowing each other prior to being at the workshop was just really nice, especially during that time. So it is interesting that that was something that you clearly like had in mind even before everything, you know, went weird with a pandemic and then was so much more necessary because of the pandemic. Yeah, because I feel like that's, that's the aspect of it that felt really, yeah, like refreshing and very like sort of a new opportunity that maybe wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for the pandemic, because a lot of online communities that I took part in initially, I think, were just sort of communities that existed anyway and then had moved online. And I think this is one of the few things, or the earliest things that I took part in that really was like "OK, I don't know anyone, but we're all going to have a good time and we're all going to you know, we're all here to connect to each other and to bond over this thing." Yeah, because, because you did a couple of, a couple of sessions, right, with a couple of groups?

A - Yeah, I think there was a few bits. And then I kind of spoke to some kind of younger people that were going to be involved in the project in person. So, we kind of switched that to an online thing and also a queer youth club in St Helens that we did some work with. And so, yeah, so it just shifted the whole dynamics of the of the commission, really. And I guess that was something that was interesting, as and it really opened it up. So, you may never have been in that room because you're not based in St Helens and you're not that age range in St Helens. So, it kind of worked things differently and I guess as well, what happened there was that the people at school, the young people at school, were just completely overwhelmed with having to do Zoom and Teams online and everything moving online. There just wasn't the time anymore. So, it had to be done in kind of, with smaller groups and different people and open it up. And I mean I think that's happened a lot with the pandemic things of I mean, it's been obviously very closed, but it's also opened a lot of online things up, which I think has been interesting. And I think that there was a sense when the workshop was taking place and there was, you know, definitely people sharing a lot of personal things with, with characters that have informed them or they were inspired by or didn't like or, you know, real big stereotypes that people really shared. And, and I really felt like a lot of, I felt safe in the room and I felt that everybody, you know, really got something out of it, which was really nice to see that could happen online and not just in person I guess. I think I was really interested in that. And I guess how the project has kind of developed and moved on is that Pippa kind of went then on and wrote about Queer Treatment in a really beautiful way. And I think it worked so well that Pippa was there at that workshop to then write about it. And we were just really lucky that, you know, you're a writer.

P - Thank you.

A - So and that, yeah, you got to write about it, that just worked so well. And there are things that I think you highlight in that text that, you know, make me think slightly different about things.

P - Yeah. For me as a writer, I think that, again, sort of the whole community and interactive aspect of it was really like, I don't know, I don't want to sound cheesy and be like, oh, that was so thrilling because it kind of sounds like I'm giving like an Oscar speech. But like it was.

A - I'll take it Pippa. I'll take it.

P - Because it's, yeah, because I feel like if you do writing like, you know, like I do like article writing or like research writing or short stories and something like that, you only work with text. It's really easy to just especially if there's, you know, social or pandemic reason for it is really easy to just shut yourself in a room and just type away and then deliver the final product to whoever's commissioned it or wherever you're pitching it to. And then that's kind of the end of it. And you don't you never have to, like, see someone and never have to talk to someone in, like, a face-to-face way. You just you know, you you write stuff, you deliver it, you write some emails, you do some invoices. That's, that's it. But then taking part in the workshop and then writing about taking part in the workshop and writing about the film is, you know, you do actually have to think about other people's perspectives and you have to, you know, take into account, you know, for the writing I sort of yeah, we had another couple of chats talking about your, yeah, your view for the project and what you intended with it. So, it wasn't just my perception of taking part in it and then watching the film. It was also very much about, yeah, both, both our involvements at the same time. And I think that, kind of, sort of broke through that layer of like writing as just being a very sort of solitary, alone activity. Which was really nice just from, you know, both from a creative perspective in that it actually makes your work better if you get other people involved. But also, just from a social perspective and like a mental health perspective, of like, yeah, I'm not just sitting in my room all day doing things by myself. There is, you know, there's other people to get involved with.

A - Mm hmm. And I think the project as a whole, kind of like you do a bit and then a bit more'd come. So, you know, it started off where it was going to be a project, you know, completely different in person. It changed to kind of these small online events. And then I kind of did the, our kind of Queer Treatment workshop and then something developed that me and you kind of start working together after I'd, because then I made the film of Queer Treatment, which involved you within that, because I was quoting you and I was quoting the other people that took part, and then you wrote about it again. So it's, it's like it's, yeah, just very process based and kind of organically, I guess came about like bit by bit more kind of revealed itself and to the point where we're sitting here now again, which is really nice.

P - Mm hmm. Do you think that, like, the fact that both the workshop and the film so sort of rely on collage and like taking different elements from different things and from different mediums? You know, you got like the cartoons and the archive footage and the, you know, your original animation in that and your voiceover mixed with these pre-existing characters. And it's almost as if the way that we've then gone about talking about it and doing further projects based on that in itself is also a collage of like, yeah, our feelings towards the project, project and our interaction and how we've, you know, yeah, developed our like orientation towards, towards the workshop. Does that make sense?

A - Yeah, I'll go with that. Yeah, definitely. You're the writer here I am just, lapping it up.

P - So much pressure.

A - I think that like as well this kind of collage and kind of different mediums that we used within the film, and I guess even in the workshop, different things like that is something that I'm always interested in playing with. Like I really like, you know, using film one minute, doing a drawing in the next, doing a performance. I really like mixing that up and for a time I think I was like "Oh no, I've just got to be one thing" and I did a lot of drawing and now I really like mixing it up because that just excites me, do you know what I mean? So, I think the film had that kind of level to it and the workshop did. Yeah. And I think that that can be really fun sometimes, you know.

P - And it also just feels like a more honest way of how people actually engage with these things, because, you know, as you grow up and you interact with, like queer media, like if you go into, like the textbooks of representation, it kind of feels as if the, you know, first there were books than there were films and now there's television and, you know, never the three shall meet. But really, you know, obviously in our everyday lives, we do take bits of everything and use that to think about our own identities and our own, you know, yeah, our own queerness and it's not yeah, we don't just, you know, read one book, project ourselves onto that book and then that's it. You know, we take, we take bits and pieces, we take, may take, you know, bits of a character that we really like, but then leave the bits that we don't like and then take a bit from another character in a different medium. And that does just feel like a more genuine way of how people see themselves in characters.

A - Yeah, definitely. And I think that was what was interesting in the workshop, actually, was looking at how varied the characters were that people brought to the table. You know, from a cartoon character with hairy armpits to your McCloed's Daughter one, it's like these different, these really completely different, I guess, genres and, you know, films and TV, these completely different characters have all mashed into one. And I think you're absolutely right. We do pick and choose all these different bits to what suits us. And it's always growing and it's always changing, just like queerness, I guess.

P - Yeah. And I think, I think what would be I don't know, maybe, maybe people have already contacted you with regard to this or like, you know, maybe in a more casual way just spoken to you about it. But I just kind of like imagine people seeing the film that came out of Queer Treatment and yeah, doing like a similar thing with their own friendship group or with their own, like, acquaintances and seeing like, "OK, well, which are, which are the characters that we grew up with and that we found ourselves in and we related to. And how can we make that into something that's, you know, like like this collage, but with our own twist on it."

A - Mm hmm. Yeah, definitely. And I think there is something, there's something really for me empowering and like I say in the film cathartic about having those conversations, because I never got to have those conversations as a kid, you know, and you just didn't, you know, when I was growing up, because I'm talking 20 years ago that I came out or something. I'm 37 now. And, you know, there's a lot of shame. And so it was, you know, reclaiming it all of having these conversations yeah, as an adult, as older, but it felt really nice to have them. And I think that that's something that, yeah, like you say, other people

could do it. And hopefully it does encourage people to have those conversations and thinking about what's different now and how it's changing and what's going on and how people are using all the different platforms is really interesting, I think.

P - I love the bit that you included about TikTok and gaming kind of making it more like democratised and like a interactive platform for young people to now, because yeah, obviously, you know, with stuff like film and TV and books, you can't you know, the characters can't really talk back to you, you can't talk to the characters or the people involved or you don't have any sort of agency in that. But with the more, you know, like new media, there is that interaction and that sense of like already being able to make it your own, not just in your interpretation, but also just how you interact with it, like, you know, there are you know, there are people who are like very big on social media that you can actually, you know, in many ways talk to and can react, you know, sometimes in real time. There's a lot of people who do live Instagram's or like live TikToks where they actually will respond to the comments as they come up. So, it's a very interactive process as opposed to a character in a book which is kind of, you know, by the time you read the book, the character is already, the, the text is already finished and you can't respond to it and you can't really interact with it. So, yeah, that would be really interesting to see if, if, you know, when people have the same conversation in, like 30 years' time, how will, how will that sense of, like, interpretation and agency develop as, as the mediums develop?

A - Yeah, definitely. It's like the modern equivalent of choose your own adventure. You know, I don't know if you can remember that, but it was like you'd roll the dice and then you'd have to go to chapter six if it rolled on six or choose something. It's like, yeah, it's advanced a little bit, let's say.

[MUSIC BREAK]

A - And I guess like I'd be quite interested to know, like what type of things inspire you like Pippa, whether that's with your writing or anything else, like what, yeah, what gets you going?

P - I think with writing in general and with Queer Treatment I think both I feel like I'm becoming kind of less, less cynical about things and yeah, feel like over, over time and over, you know, having written things and having people interact with it, realising, yeah, like, like, you know, a lot of people do have the same values as I do. And a lot of people, you know, want, want the same things as I do and yeah, like people will respond to emotion or to taking a particular stance in a similar way. Which again, when you when you put writing out in the world, having not interacted with anyone before it, maybe it can feel a bit like, "Oh, maybe, you know, maybe I should have just kept this to myself. Maybe no one is going to, like, resonate. Maybe this isn't going to resonate with anyone." And then when it does, it's really rewarding. And it's very like, "Oh, I just I just wrote this thinking that I was just talking to myself. But actually I am talking to other people. I just didn't know it yet." Because have you found that a lot with, with your art?

A - Yeah. And I think maybe because I work a lot with people and make things within collaboration with people. It's kind of a joint effort in a way. And I guess when the pandemic hit, it, I had to like really, I guess it was an opportunity to turn the lens on myself a little bit and make some work that I was thinking about, I mean, of course, I'm thinking

about the collaboration work, but it was in a different way, like I didn't have to necessarily, I could just really focus on what I wanted it to be. Which obviously you can't when you like making a co-creation, it's about, you know, done well its people are heard and people listened to and you make something together. And whereas, you know, I started off I made a film which was kind of part of all this project, which was called 4.3, which refers to the aspect ratio of a television, back in its day, rather than a widescreen. And I kind of got all the, some of the queer characters that I remember watching on telly, and I dressed up as them and I kind of recreated scenes within them. And it was bad wigs and, you know, slightly dodgy acting that went in with it all, but I really enjoyed making that. And I think that that was, yeah, yeah, new for me because I'd not kind of turned the lens on myself for a long period of time. And I think that there's something that for me is, like, worthwhile doing that, you know. I love collaborating and it's nice to sometimes make my own work as well. And also, I think both fits together. So, kind of after we did Queer Treatment I really started getting interested in like Cow and Chicken, this old Cartoon Network show with a cow and a chicken. And I'm like, I think it relates some way to my gender identity, and I'm just like, it is kind of just going on in the background. This is what these drawings are behind me. And that, you know, I'm just kind of doing my other work as in I'm making a film with my family. So that's going on. I'm kind of doing this presidency with this theatre company and that's going on. So, there's all these projects. But then like today, I just turned around and did a little drawing of it all and I was just like, "Oh, I think it's nice sometimes when things like, you know, subconsciously they're just they're ticking over and you kind of come back to them." So, I think it's really made me. Yeah, think about that a little bit more. And yeah just think about my practise a bit more, which has been really good.

P - Are Cow and Chicken going to feature in some of the next films?

A - I think they need to. There's an episode of Cow and Chicken and it's about when basically these women come on motorbikes and yeah, just basically it's very referenced lesbianism, but in a way that you like "Your most likely cis white straight men that are writing this is just so inappropriate." And it got banned, and I think there's definitely something that I would like to do with that episode. And it's, it's really hard to find it and that sometimes it manages to get online, and I managed to find it the other day and watch it. And I was just like, "Oh my God, I can't believe this got on television." But I think there's some kind of collaboration that needs to happen with that episode and me with other people somehow. I think it could be a fun thing to explore.

P - That, that just made me think about how like people's, how people talk about their relationship to popular culture, to me, it always feels like how people talk about astrology. As in it's very like, I feel like you get to conversations that you wouldn't really get to if, yeah, if you didn't bring those sort of outside elements or these outside sort of archetypes to, to project onto. Where, yeah, you know, I'm, I'm, I dunno, I'm such a Capricorn, or you know, I'm a Capricorn, but like, you know, I don't have any of the traits of a Capricorn feels very similar to like such a I'm such a chicken character. I don't is the character called Chicken or is it just chicken?

A - Oh yeah, one's Chicken, Cow and Chicken. I'm going to send it you Pippa. You've got to see it.

P - That's so exciting. I can't wait to see it. Yeah, so now that we're kind of, you know, coming towards the end of, of the podcast, is, is there anything in particular that you would like maybe to for people to take away from watching Queer Treatment?

A - I think, well, watch it definitely. Love another view of it. And yeah, I think it's something that could be interesting for people of all ages to watch, because I think it goes from something, so many different people's experience of queerness in different ways. And the narrative moves through different, you know, from my childhood things to somebody else's first film that they've watched to something else that I think it's nice that it all, a lot of it comes from lived experience. And I think that that's always something quite special when that happens. And I guess I'd, yeah, so, and I think it's maybe good for families to watch or parents to get an idea of and I think that that could be beneficial in some way. And maybe even, there's, I might even, it might be something that I end up working with in a schools context soon with like, Heart of Glass, in some way. And I think I'm interested in seeing how that could evolve. You know, there's so many different options with it there that I think there's something with, you know, LGBTQIA+ issues, that it's important that topics remain in school. And I think that's really important. And like I say within the film, you know, Clause 28 that Maggie Thatcher brought in had a massive effect on queer people growing up. And, and that needs to be addressed and it needs to not happen, and it needs to be on the curriculum, like many things that I think need to be on the curriculum. So, I would be interested in seeing what it's like to take it a bit further. Because what would life have been like if I'd've watched something like that at school? You know, how would I have felt? And probably the same for you Pippa. I know we're a different generation. But I think anything that kind of can validate you in that way and makes you feel seen, even if it's not quite right, is a really important thing to bear witness to.

AA - Thanks for listening to this episode. Check out the show notes for more information about this project. We'll back again soon with another Conversation Over a Brew.

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