

Conversations Over a Brew

Season 2, Episode 5 - Angela & Mark

Transcript

Recorded 20th October 2021

LW - Lindsey West

A - Angela Samata

M - Mark Storor

30:36

[INTRO MUSIC]

Lindsey West - Hello and welcome to Conversations over a Brew. I'm Lindsey West 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 Mark Storor and Angela Samata. Mark is an artist who specialises in platforming the voices of those we all too rarely choose to hear. He usually works over several years to create extraordinarily beautiful and uplifting work in which community participants and professionals work side by side in genuine partnership. Mark is currently working with Heart of Glass on a twelve year project called Baa Baa Baric, Have you any pull? and over the past four years of this work he's been focused on The Suicide Chronicles, which seeks to develop a collective language for the complex experience of suicide. Angela Samata is a mental health campaigner working in the fields of suicide prevention and postvention. She is a consultant on the Suicide Chronicles project and has also contributed to this project as a participant. In this episode Angela and Mark chat about how the project started and the care needed to produce a project exploring this sensitive topic.

[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 - Well, here we are doing the recording that we've been threatening to do for ages.

M - Yeah.

A - It's great that we're doing it. I just wanted to start by, by just exploring really why you thought, you know, where did the original idea come from to, to do **The Suicide Chronicles** because it feels like such? Well, it's an incredible thing to decide to do as an artist, and I know that it fits in with your practise and your history of, you know, taking the most challenging of subjects and, and exploring them with, with such humility and brilliance. But where did the original idea come from for **The Suicide Chronicles**?

M - Well, first of all, I was commissioned by Heart of Glass to make a piece of work. And the initial invite was to come along and be in St Helens for a little while. And while I was there, one of the negative statistics of St Helens is that middle aged men in St Helens die 10 years sooner than anybody else in the country. Now this was a statistic from six years ago and that may have changed. But on the day that I went, this was a statistic. And it's interesting because it's a statistic. And so men, middle aged men were a statistic in national figures, and I thought it would be interesting to, I don't know how it came to me, but I thought it would be lovely to give these men a voice from beyond the grave because I'm also a middle aged man and I am exactly that demographic. And so I could make the invite to them because I am them.

A - So it was really personal.

M - So it was personal to me. And then we decided that the project needed, if I was truly to give the men a voice from beyond the grave that it would have to be a 12-year project because it relied upon some of them fulfilling this requirement of the statistic to die 10 years sooner. And then the idea was to work with six-year-olds who, who would then follow the same creative process as the men. And in 12 years' time, it would be their responsibility to tell the story of the men, which would give them the voice from beyond the grave,

A - Which is just incredible because I think when I first, you know, when I first received contact from, from Emily at heart of Glass and who said "Would I be interested in working with you on the project? When, when I first had that first conversation and she said that you were going to be dedicating kind of, you know, 12 years to this project, I thought I'd misheard it. You know, I was like "12 what?" You know, because usually it's 12 months or, you know, 12 weeks even, you know, and sometimes it feels like it's 12 minutes. Yes, but the fact that you as an artist are willing to make that time commitment, I think is absolutely incredible. And it feels to me very, very significant to, to, to you as an artist to kind of make that time commitment because it's not just a time commitment, that is a commitment, you know, of kind of emotional input and artistic input and, and to very much steer your practise in that way to, to, to make that that commitment is, is just absolutely incredible. And I just wonder why you? I mean, because you have looked at for the subjects before, but I wondered why you thought it was particularly important to bring your artistic practise to the subject of suicide? You know, as opposed to my mind, it's about, it's about taking that very human experience and the human condition and allowing us to get away in a way from those statistics, you know? You know, six and a half thousand people a year end their lives, you know, suicide is still the biggest killer of men under 49. Those statistics are very, very difficult, certainly for me as somebody who's personally bereaved by suicide. But I think your practise and **The Suicide Chronicles**, I mean, do you agree with me that they give us a moment to really stop and explore what those statistics actually mean and what they feel like as individual stories?

M - I hope they do. Yeah. I just need to go back a little bit with you, if you don't mind, because it's very interesting when we talk about practise and I don't know the difference between practise and life.

A - Yeah.

M - And living and the, the role, to my mind, there art plays in our life and I think it's essential and I think it's another, it's a part of being. So, thank you for talking about the commitment that I've made to it, but the truth is, I don't feel I have a choice because what else would I do? And 12 years can seem a long time in a lifetime, but actually in lots of ways it's not. And to have the privilege to be able to evolve something and respond to it and be responsive is wonderful. But actually, it also, I feel, allows me to be with people and to live with them in a way. And therefore, it's really vital to me that I'm interested in us making the story and, well, telling the story together. And I, and it is a true collaboration. So it's not as if I'm saying, tell me your story and then it goes away and it becomes something else. It stays in the location with the people, with the family, with the person with a tiny feeling or a thought. And what I love is, together we go, how can we give form to this? How can we give form to this to the thing that is unsaid? But nevertheless, we are all feeling and will be touched by it in some way. So. It's not, it is a practise, but I think it's the practise of life and living. And I'm deeply curious and interested in what it is to be human

and our humanity. And obviously I'm driven because in creating the story together, then that makes a connection and that means that I can go on because I feel we are intrinsically connected to one another. And I love that. But I think we live in a world which actually is quite limited in what it finds acceptable and is prepared to say and do. And I think it's our responsibility to, to reveal ourselves and share with one another, for humanity, really. So for me, it's life, it's living, it's essential, and therefore I'm completely gobsmacked when somebody says "No, you can't do that." and it's like "Well, why not? We need to." And that in a way starts to come on to the question that so the project, which began with the idea of giving men a voice from beyond the grave, but actually so that it needed to be 12 years to the, for the lifetime of that statistic, actually the, and so it was very simple, really. It was nothing profound about it. Oh, it needs to be 12 years if we're actually going to do that. But what I realised during the making of the project that as soon as somebody stops becoming a human being with their own personal life story, with their family and community that are connected to them, then that person, whoever it is, has already been put in a grave of societies making. And we've made it because it's too difficult for us to look at why has this person lost their job? Lost their self-respect? Don't feel that they can go on. So the project, the title for it is **Baa Baa Baric: Have You Any Pull?** And it takes the premise that the most brutal act of barbarism that's ever been is civilisation. Because if this is civilisation, it's brutal and barbaric, and we need to recognise that and understand how we might be able to relate to one another differently. So there's a, I wouldn't say that I make political work, but it's the politics of this is that we were in 10 years of austerity, which hollowed out all the, you know, like all the middle filling of a cake being eaten or the sponge so something looks like it hasn't been gone or taking the sweets out of the Easter egg, putting the egg back together, you know? It came out of that, and the way people were becoming brutalised by a lack of care and a lack of funding to be able to care for ourselves to do with education and things that I believe in, you know, that we do believe in.

A - I think that the, sorry, do you want to carry on.

M - Well, can I just say that, so that's the title for it. But then while I was making that work with the men and the children and living in St Helens, so I was actually living there for two years, and this is the most relevant part actually. While I was there, I'm making one piece of work but actually at every moment, virtually with every organisation that I came in touch with or even people personally, someone had been bereaved directly by suicide or knew someone that had and the, and the reasons for it were many and each individual person has their own story. But some of it, or maybe all of it, but for different reasons, was when somebody had completely lost hope and didn't see how they could go on. And that's not right. And the beauty about being in St Helens, which is a small town, for that amount of time and hearing those stories meant that actually I could say "This is what we need to do."

[MUSIC BREAK]

A - Through the Chronicles in particular and those conversations, eliciting in those conversations I think that and the challenge to this stigma that many of us feel who've been bereaved by suicide, I think that challenge is, is so needed, you know. Because I think, you know, when it happened to me, it was nearly 20 years ago, you know, it was nearly 20 years since I was bereaved and I know that the landscape has changed now, and I know that we all like to think that we have a more open and honest conversations. However, I think the fact that people that you were meeting in St Helens were often, I presume, telling you that they were bereaved by suicide you were probably the first person

that they told, I think tells me that this work is so important because you are working collaboratively with people who've been bereaved or may indeed have felt suicidal themselves. But producing, you know, films and, and performances that, that will far outreach that conversation. You know, that will go out into the world in their own right and be pieces of, pieces of performance or art or whatever you want to call it, but will then be the catalyst for, for challenging the stigma of, for eliciting more honest conversations.

M - I hope so. If that is the case, I think it would be brilliant because I think one of the things that I'm proud of, of The Chronicles is that it's here and it's now and it's in the moment. And the fact that we're making it together means that by making it we're challenging the stigma, but also, we're, we're telling the story, but also we're trying to find form for the feelings possibly that there isn't, they're not held well and they're held privately and they're often held in isolation. And we can connect with that, and you know, for me, making art is about giving form to feeling. It's, it gives us an 'other' to look at that we can look at together and we can see that. So, you know. Grief is a terrible thing. Grief that is felt because someone has lost someone to suicide is isolating, it can be filled with shame and humiliation. People are afraid of it because it's for some people, it's the worst thing that they can possibly imagine. And there, and we seem to be trying to run away from it and hide from it. And actually, we need to embrace something that is part of our humanity. And if we can find, if we can find a language for talking about, in a delicate way, actually, you know, in something that can connect to people then it means that we can, I don't know, hold one another more safely. I'm not really sure, I don't have the language to really talk, because it feels like it could do so much. I think we have to acknowledge our humanity and, and our strengths and our vulnerabilities and connect to one another more. And I think, you know, when we, you know, I think one of the things that you actually said to me Angela, I think, was that the whole world flips. That everyone is getting on with their everyday life and your life is turned completely upside down. And that tends to be in, and families close down and carry their shock and their trauma and their shame or their disbelief because it's a seismic event. But actually, in the context of the pandemic that has literally shaken the whole world in a very particular way,

A - But I feel as if it, again just coming back to The Chronicles. I feel as if your ability as an artist to work collaboratively with people to really explore that trauma, because that's what it is.

M - Yeah.

A - But to be able to explore that and to, to find a way to communicate those specific aspects of that trauma. I think within the current kind of climate that we're in now, you know, it feels as if we have all experienced collective trauma.

M - Yes.

A - And I think to my mind what it's, you know, to me what it's done is almost made it even more vital that this work kind of carries on and that you're doing it, you know, and you are the right person to do it, because of that, the way that you work is so collaborative and kind of really, you know, not saying "Thank you so much for telling me your story now I'm going to get on with it." It's not that it's, and it feels as if Heart of Glass is the right organisation to be doing it with. It feels St Helens is the right place.

M - Yes, definitely.

A - You know, it feels like a lot of things have come together and your decision to then make that time commitment really, I think is a, is a very strong signal. I think a lot of times with suicide, we have people who kind of parachute in, and it feels very voyeuristic when people are wanted to talk to us about our lived experience and then it kind of they parachute out and go and do their thing. But this project in particular feels totally embedded. And again, I think that, that really signals your commitment to collaboratively exploring that, that experience. I think it's, I think it's absolutely wonderful that I can't wait to work on there on the next Chronicles.

M - Thank you very much. I mean, you know, we're talking in very serious tones, but actually in making it within that well of despair and grief, actually, the joy in making them is astonishing, really. And that's the beauty of it as well, you know, because in order, because eventually you're all...everybody understands why they're there. So, we've come together. We're going to find a way to tell this story and to communicate it to other people because hopefully, if it might just touch another person who feels that they can go on and not necessarily somebody who may feel that actually they can't go on and want to take their life. But somebody who has to go on for some but feel that they can't, and they don't know how they're going to. But actually, there's something there, and a lot of the work is, the making of it is ephemeral and it happens once, and it happens in the ether. But I really believe how, it's interesting that The Chronicles are taking the form of films. But they're quite strange films in the sense that they, they don't set out to be a film of something. They're a kind of a record of an action or a feeling. But actually, I really believe by being together and doing something the very fact that we've come together in a moment actually changes the narrative. It offers a portal to somewhere else. It's another possibility. And if we, and we have to hang onto those things in order to go on, I think. But, but in making them once you've acknowledged, we're in a very dark place. We've all come together to give form to a dark place. Within then it's wonderful and I loved making the first Chronicles so much because we have to find spaces to be able to be monstrous, to say the unsayable, to understand what is that. And when I say monstrous, I don't, people will have a different feeling of what monstrous is. But I mean, to be in the full power of grief and anger and conflicting emotions. And we can, how do we share that. You know, is, is just, and that is delightful, because you almost, it becomes ridiculous. But actually, from being able to be unedited, actually then allows you to fine tune something that's so delicate.

A - But I think that's what, again just bringing you back to why you felt it was important to bring to, to bring an artistic kind of, you know, why you felt as an artist it was important to, to explore suicide and certainly suicide bereavement. I think, you know, you've kind of hit the core of it really, it is really working with those with lived experience. You as an artist being able to really, really together plunge right to the depths is the only way I think that we can find those, those kind of moments of light, the hope, the hopefulness that can only come from hitting rock bottom, that real hopefulness that real, you know, not, not the tokenistic kind of optimism that we sometimes get kind of, you know, tokenistic sayings and things like that. To, to really feel that and then to really be able to communicate that through the through film or through that moment. I think it can only come from feeling safe as an individual with that lived experience from feeling safe is the only way that you can really plunge into those depths in order to, to find that. And sometimes it's a tiny moment of hopefulness from which kind of, you know, maybe optimism can come.

M - Yeah.

A - But it's that. It's that possibility of change that, that that I think only we can only bring really through, through, through the arts and through performance sometimes.

M - I think so because it's about articulation isn't it?

A - Yeah.

M - And there are few spaces that allow us, or actually their whole raison d'etre is to articulate what is at our deepest core and what it is to be human. And the very fact then for me, you know, we can be in a very dark place, but the very fact that a small group of people have come together to explore the dark place. Who were in the dark place actually means that they're not exactly on their own anymore. Well, you know, and we and what's the point of doing anything unless it's meaningful and it feels important? That's, that's what it feels to me, you know?

A - But there's a level of authenticity, I think that can only come from that real collaboration between an artist and those with lived experience. There's a real authenticity to the work. You know, this is not performative in the sense that you're going to play a role.

M - No.

A - This is real. And I think again, that's where your previous, you know, your practise in your life is, as an artist really delves into that collaboration between an artist and those with lived experience because it doesn't feel it feels seamless. It doesn't feel as if it feels as if the fact that you were living in St Helens and you were, you know, you were breathing the same air as everybody else feels important to that.

M - Oh yeah.

A - It gives it a level of authenticity and and a genuine sense of and as powerfulness, if you like, that actually you wouldn't get if you were commuting on the train, you know, every every other week or whatever, you know.

M - No.

A - Again, it feels as if all of the way that you work is absolutely fundamental to what, to, to the project that you're doing now with Heart of Glass.

M - Yeah, I think so. But I think I'm interested in the, the art of everyday life and that's for me.

A - Yeah.

M - You know, I feel our ordinary lives are extraordinary and epic and the in the minutiae of things, you know? But also, I think another thing that I'm really pleased about is that by having that experience in St Helens, the work originated there and is made there and the people that have contributed to it from St Helens, I don't imagine that I could have even I couldn't have made it anywhere else because of the things, the reasons you've outlined, but also having been with those people. But what I really love makes me really proud is that, you know, Chronicle Three is almost made, you know, it's nearly there. There are another three planned. The final chronicle there'll be seven of them is the coming together

of all of them in a very particular kind of way. But what I love now is that we can expand the scope of the Chronicle. And what's interesting is, unsolicited now we are getting enquiries from other countries and other organisations who are beginning to understand what it is that's happening and saying, "We would like to be part of this and we want to contribute and how do we do that?" And I love the fact that it was in St Helens. But it, and it's not again, it's not to make the reach of it international, you know, so it looks good on paper.

A - No.

M - Not in any way, and I would hate that. What I love is the fact that we've made something that is giving people the courage to be able to say "OK. We can look at it, too, because you've given us something that touches us, and we understand that we can be in that place with you." And I think that's vital, really.

LW - Thanks for listening to this episode. If you are interested in hearing more about The Suicide Chronicles, we will be releasing a new podcast series dedicated to this project in spring 2022. Please check the show notes for further information including where to access help and support. We'll be back again soon with another Conversation Over a Brew.

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