

The Creative and Cultural Skills podcast: Build Back Fairer Episode one: Class prejudice in the cultural sector – has the pandemic has made it worse?

With the pandemic having a disproportionately negative effect on young people trying to build careers in the creative industries, has an already-established prejudice against hiring from disadvantaged backgrounds become even worse?

Joining the discussion is Suba Das, Artistic Director and CEO of [HighTide](#); and Vilma Nikolaidou Associate Director, People Strategy [University Arts London](#).

We also hear from Danielle Edmunds and Calum Macdonald, two young people who participated in the [Cultural Ambition programme](#), and shared their perspectives on pathways into the museum and heritage sector.

Transcript

Danielle Edmunds They ask you "what type of work do you want?", and they just thrust you into, like, factories and basic office work, and they don't seem to encourage people to have a bit more ambition.

Vilma Nikolaidou Inequality has increased, particularly after the financial crash of 2008. So we have a whole generation of people working against institutional inertia, whether you're a young graduate or not graduate.

Calum MacDonald Non-degree routes definitely need to be signposted better when teachers are talking to students about next steps.

Suba Das It's sort of perverse and problematic, in a way, that what was seen as the pathways to theatre careers have become so literary and so academic. Actually, it's one of the forms that should most rail against that.

Posy Jowett This is the Creative and Cultural Skills Podcast: Conversations and key questions about the future of our cultural sector. Here's our host, Rob West.

Rob West We are already seeing that the pandemic has had a disproportionately negative effect on young people trying to build careers in the creative industries, but has the pandemic also made an already established prejudice against hiring people from disadvantaged backgrounds even worse? Joining me to discuss this is Suba Das, Artistic Director and CEO of new writing

theatre company High Tide. Suba was a director, producer and dramaturg who started his career as a Resident Associate Director at the Theatre Royal Stratford East, before going on to become the youngest ever director in residence at the National Theatre Studio. Welcome Suba!

Suba Das Hello, thank you. What a lovely intro. I did do all of those things apparently.

Rob West Great. And Vilma Nikolaidou is Associate Director for People Strategy at the University of the Arts London. Vilma started her career in retail before going on to work for Arts Council England, and also the Tate, prior to taking her current role at the University of the Arts. Welcome, Vilma.

Vilma Nikolaidou Welcome. Very nice to be with you.

Rob West Now, I wanted to start by asking you both about the thoughts on the jobs that you do. What do you think of working in the arts and cultural sector, and how does it compare, do you feel, with other jobs in other industries? Either ones that you've done yourselves, or ones that you're aware of. Vilma, let's start with you.

Vilma Nikolaidou I think of my job as having two parts. It's a job in human resources and people strategy, and all the people stuff in organisations - which is a job that can be done in any industry, really. But in my case, it's a job done in the arts and education sector, and that's the real joy of my life. So between the two, there's sort of commonalities - particularly how young people enter into the arts and education sector or the human resources profession. And there are some differences as well, so I can talk about that. It's a joy

Rob West It's a joy. Very good. Suba?

Suba Das It is, of course, also a Joy. I think it's schizophrenic at times, in a way. So, High Tide is a national portfolio organisation we're subsidised by Arts Council England to deliver our activity. And when you say you're Artistic Director of a theatre company, the conception is that you're spending all of your days in a rehearsal room, and that's probably about 20 percent of my job. Because actually, as well as running an arts organisation, I run a business - or rather a charity. So a huge amount of my energy and effort is on our compliance, our governance, our human resources, as Vilma mentions. It requires wearing all of those hats. And it's a sector that is misunderstood by the public, and I think that's partly because of a lack of transparency in our operations, which touches directly on the theme of this conversation and pathways in. I think we're not hugely transparent about the ways in which work gets made, and the mechanisms that are required to deliver that. And then the final complication in the picture is that the arts and sports, which are sectors which also have an amateur ecology, (i.e. we do things that other people do for free in their spare time because they love them so much, and the personal rewards are great) - and that also generates some misunderstandings, some frustrations, some comprehension of what it takes to be making culture work viably for as wide and diverse an audience as possible. Which is what we try to do day in, day out at High Tide.

Rob West

That's a really interesting point. I think we'll come back to this theme about hobbyists versus professionals later as well. But do you both think there are particular barriers for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to get to work in our sector? And if so, what are those barriers? Vilma?

Vilma Nikolaidou

There's huge inequality in society - in our society, in most Western societies - and inequality is growing bigger. And I think that the covid pandemic has focussed our minds on these inequalities. There are barriers: There are barriers that have got to do with, as Suba says, the ecology of the system, with how arts and creativity is understood or misunderstood, how and where we place value in society, what types of things, what types of jobs, what types of activities... There are barriers around transparency, and how do you get to these jobs, and who do you need to know or what you need to do? There's a whole education system that I don't think is geared towards supporting careers in the arts. And loads of other factors. But fundamentally, societal inequality is the bedrock for what we see in the arts. And that's why we've got to find systemic solutions.

Rob West

So Suba, would you agree with that? Is it societal problems? Or is there anything specific about our sector barriers that you might not find elsewhere?

Suba Das

Yes and yes, I guess. In terms of the societal challenges, here we are less than a year after the murder of George Floyd, and I was asked to comment for a range of sector papers and panels, to ask the question; "Does theatre have a race problem?"; as part of writing important research and stuff like the Black Lives Matter movement. And, of course, my answer was "well society does, so why would you think that theatre doesn't? Because it's the same people. It's all just human beings with all of the training and misconceptions and all of that nonsense. So absolutely and fundamentally, theatre and the arts replicate various barriers and inequalities faced elsewhere. However, I would say that the arts does something peculiar around that: The making of art, or rather the perception of the art, fetishises this idea of the struggling artist, and the artist in their garret starving while churning out their magnum opus. It's an image of the impoverished artist. And the amazing Toni Morrison, in her book of essays 'Mouthful of Blood' talks about this; that actually our support structures have come to fetishise this idea of "struggle" as innately linked to the idea of art. And it's a false perception. But what we've seen very specifically in the arts is a certain amount of hiding: A certain number of very high profile artists and directors and leaders who assert their working class backgrounds. And then if you scratch the surface of that, you're like, "well, I struggle to see how you have a working class background if your dad was the artistic director of the Manchester Royal Exchange", for example. And that is uniquely challenging within the cultural space because it perpetuates a myth around access, and a myth around the journey of the artist, which is that "if you're good enough, you'll make it." Because it consistently conceals the pathways that have been made available to those artists who have made it. And that's not to say that they will always be a struggling artist from a very challenging background who finds their way through, who breaks through. And I think there's also, in relation to my arena which is new writing, the way that new writing is spoken about. There was a very significant new writing award that was a few years ago by a young woman who, in all of the press, was "a girl

who sells perfume in a perfume shop has won this major playwriting award. Goodness me!" Which totally ignored the fact that she'd been to Oxbridge and had done a playwriting MA before. You know? And yes, she was working part time in a perfume shop - but actually, there was a huge amount of investment and resource that went into that forward journey. And it's there's something very specific about how we represent the journeys of people navigating the cultural space that is exceptionally unhelpful.

Rob West

Do you think, then, that some people have an unfair advantage when working in our sector? We've talked about people being disadvantaged, but are there people that actually have an advantage because of their background?

Suba Das

Well I think, as with anything, you get good at something by doing it. You get good at something by seeing it, and by having access to it. So if you're fortunate enough to have gone to school with a theatre... I did, I received a scholarship to the very good school near me. I grew up in a council house. My dad died when I was 10, and my mum brought us up on benefits... All of which said I got that scholarship - and therefore, in some way, shape or form, had been making theatre since I was 15 because I was at a school where there were the resources to do that. So one would hope, twenty years later, (LAUGHS) that I'm not that bad at it. But it is about access to that opportunity. So of course, if you're from a background that more enables you to attend such schools, from a background which places culture within your spectrum, parents who take you to the theatre, and understanding that that is available to you, then of course you're going to more logically see that there might be a pathway for you in that world.

Rob West

Yes, I can see how you're right, really, that access to opportunities and access to experience helps to set the tone, really. But some of these things we've known for a long time now, we've known that it's a very graduate-rich sector. We've known that. And there's been numerous interventions and schemes and ideas that have been floated. Why hasn't there been a change then?

Vilma Nikolaidou

I think two reasons for that. One is that it's exactly the word you use; schemes. It stays, for many institutions, in that level of sort of "initiative", Arts Council funded "project", National Lottery Heritage Fund "project"; something that has a start and a finish that brings people into the sector, but does not become embedded into the running of the organisation. So it remains a "special". And once the funding goes, some of that goes. Organisations say that it's difficult to conceive that embedding - that sort of redesigning their systems and their processes to take those special projects and make them their everyday way of doing things. So that's one. The second thing is - and again, we can't ignore what's happening on a grand scale - inequality has increased. Inequality has increased particularly after the financial crash of 2008. So we have a whole sort of generation of people working against both institutional inertia, and in a world where it's becoming a lot more unequal and a lot more difficult, whether you're a young graduate or not graduate. And I think that accounts, in my mind, for this stagnation - this point where "how is it that we're still talking about these things?" I did my first Arts Council scheme for BAME graduates in libraries, archives and conservation, I think, back in 2003, 2004. I have done

these things even before that. I use the term "BAME", as I know it's a hugely problematic term, but that was how the scheme was called when it was set up - which just gives you a sense of almost 20 years that I have been in this, and others much longer.

Rob West

In setting out to create this podcast, we wanted to make sure to represent the spread of opinions and reflections, and include the voices of not only people who've established lifelong careers in the creative and cultural sectors, but also people who are emerging into these industries at the very start of their journey. Peppered throughout today's podcast, you'll also hear from Danielle Edmunds and Calum MacDonald, two of the young people who've taken part in Creative and Culture Skills' Cultural Ambition Project. Funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and the Welsh Government's Museums, Archives and Libraries Division, the project aims to prepare young people with paid training placements, in partnership with various places across Wales. It's a way of gaining valuable experience and skills in the cultural heritage sector. Let's meet those young people.

Danielle Edmunds

My name is Danielle Edmonds. I worked at Big Pit, Tredegar House, and Gwent Archives.

Calum MacDonald

My name is Calum MacDonald. During the Cultural Ambition Programme, I worked at the Wrexham Museum and Archives, and Erddig Hall.

Danielle Edmunds

At the moment I work as a carer because I was working at a Big Pit, but obviously they had to shut. And because my position wasn't a full time contract, they couldn't furlough me, so I had to find other work. But I've got an application in process with the museums at the moment, but obviously covid has put it on hold until the end of the year.

Calum MacDonald

Covid obviously put a big stop on a lot of my plans as well. But where I am now is I have a few applications in for heritage sector jobs, as well as regular jobs as well.

Danielle Edmunds

They ask you "what type of work do you want?" And they just thrust you into, like, factories and basic office work, and things like that. They don't seem to encourage people to have a bit more ambition. I know it's not very pleasant being on Universal Credit and job seekers and whatever, but they need to encourage people to be a bit more imaginative. So when you do say when you do say to them, "I want to work in this sector", they kind of just look at you, like "well, you don't really want work, then, do you?"

Calum MacDonald

Jobs requiring degrees, I feel, is quite a limiting factor. This isn't just in the heritage sector. I ended up dropping out of university, and now the more I see "degree required for this job", the more I feel like, "oh, that was a horrible, horrible mistake". Even though I didn't enjoy university - a combination of mental health issues, and just not enjoying the course. It wasn't what I thought it was going to be when I applied for it.

Danielle Edmunds

Yeah, a lot of my friends went to uni, and all the courses that they've done, hardly any of them are actually working in the profession that they got the

degree in. A lot of them have gone in a totally different direction. I just think what a waste of like three years of your life. And the money! (LAUGHS)

Calum MacDonald

Yes, yes. I think non-degree routes definitely need to be signposted better when teachers are talking to students about next steps. Even if that non degree route is just getting a basic entry level job, and waiting a few years and seeing how you feel as a person, because even at the age of 18 you're still a child, you're not going to be able to make a good decision about your future.

Rob West

So thinking about interventions, then, apprenticeships feature heavily in the work of Creative and Cultural Skills. We were the organisation that introduced apprenticeships to the cultural sector. And we believe in this route to work because we feel it can address those skills gaps and shortages. But why is our sector not better at embracing apprenticeships? Employers who use them and reap the benefits speak highly of them, but it does seem like it's still going to more advantaged backgrounds.

Suba Das

I think apprenticeships are a really significant route into accessing this business, theatre. My version of an apprenticeship was the year I did at Theatre Royal Stratford East as part of my director training, where I was sent into the theatre for a year to just be a resident assistant, and whatever happened would happen. And of course, I learned more in that year than I did in the rest of the course in a way (LAUGHS), because theatre is a practical endeavour. It is about departments, and it's about understanding how the whole machinery and infrastructure slots together. So it's sort of perverse and problematic, in a way, that what is seen as the pathways to theatre careers have become so literary and so academic. Because, actually, it's one of the forms that should most rail against that. But in terms of thinking about why there's been a failure to use the opportunities of apprenticeship schemes, and think about things like the Weston Jerwerd Creative Bursaries, and other such interventions - which are about saying, "well, how do we give opportunity to people from what are referred to as low socio economic backgrounds?" I slightly hate that phrase as well, because that "lower" thing does something very uncomfortable for me around status and hierarchy. But anyway, that's the prevailing terminology of now, again. But part of the challenge there is zooming back from the organisation to look again at the system, and to look at the way in which the majority of theatre organisations in the UK (certainly those that are subsidised) are locked into a kind of conveyor belt of production that leaves very little time for critical evaluation. The reality is, if you looked at the theatre production process now and compared it to about a hundred years ago, you wouldn't see much difference in how a play gets commissioned and then produced. And the outcome might have a bit of projection in it, or some fancier hydraulics, but the ultimate core gesture would kind of remain the same. The processes have largely remained the same. We're not very good at evaluating, I believe, and we don't often leave ourselves space to do that. And if you don't have the space and opportunity to take the foot off the accelerator pedal, and therefore think in detail about how you're going to transform your system in order to support an individual accessing that from a different background - you may bring a different vocabulary, you may bring a different understanding of codes and untaught knowledge. Here we are in England and it's one of the nations most defined by what's unsaid, and nuance, and

all the things nobody teaches you. So, I can see exactly why, for so many organisations that have undertaken apprenticeships, the attractive option is to go for the financial support to employ somebody that already gets it. Because actually, if you look at the hours that are worked in the cultural sector, and if I think about my journey as I've had to work, most of these organisations are squeezed to within an inch of their lives trying to fulfil an ever-expanding brief with ever reducing funding. These are not circumstances that very comfortably lead to supportive, inclusive training and development.

- Rob West** Is that also partly an answer to one of the questions that our young people we were talking to, Danielle and Calum, were asking about finding jobs and accessibilities? I mean, they were posing a challenge of "where are they? Those jobs, they're not advertised in the places that myself and my peers would look to for those."
- Danielle Edmunds** There's lots of jobs, but I wouldn't say it's easy to find them, because I don't think they advertise them very well.
- Calum MacDonald** Yeah, I definitely agree with that. You really have to delve into the depths of council job sites.
- Danielle Edmunds** They advertise on Facebook and that from their own personal websites, but unless you like them on Facebook you're not going to see them. Or unless you're signed up to the newsletter, you don't see them. And they're not on, like, Indeed and Reed and stuff like that at all. So finding them is really hard.
- Calum MacDonald** Yeah, I think I've only found maybe one listing on Indeed for heritage sector work.
- Danielle Edmunds** They always give a heads-up to the people who are already there, or like for people they know. So, like, "tell so-and-so of keep an eye out". And I think it's not very open at the moment. Like unless you're in, then you're kind of out of the loop a lot. I found that people I spoke to didn't even know the jobs existed half the time. And they're like "how did you get into that?" It's like, well, I looked on the website, but a lot of people don't even think to do that. They just go on the general ones that people point out that are there, and they never go further in depth, so they never get those opportunities.
- Calum MacDonald** I think going to schools and universities could also be a big benefit.
- Danielle Edmunds** Maybe go to job fairs, and go to the job centres themselves, and encourage the job centres to tell people about how to find them and things like that. Because if you say to the job centre "I want to work at a museum", they just kind of brush you off and laugh at you to be honest.
- Rob West** And that surely is something that organisations could fairly easily rectify, you would think, wouldn't you? By just advertising in different places? What do you think, Vilma?
- Vilma Nikolaidou** Yes and no, in the sense that there is a plethora of media today. There was a time when that Monday's Guardian was the place where loads of arts organisations - at least those with resources - would advertise a lot of jobs.

And there's been competition there, there's a lot of boards that come and go. I think most organisations now advertise on their own website, and there are some communal platforms doing that as well. But it's a congested environment. There's no uniformity around how these roles are advertised. We still have the very poor practise of not disclosing salaries within adverts. I was really heartened to see this - a grassroots campaign, and I think some trade unions are getting on board now, the hashtag is #ShowTheSalary. Things that subtle things like this that put people off even when you see the role. There's other things as well, which we found out through experience: I worked on a National Lottery Heritage Fund programme for traineeships in Tate, and there was interesting things like how we used to call roles internally, how the professional body of people who did this role wanted to call themselves, and how you just needed to change that job title when you went out in the market - because people didn't know that 'Sculpture Conservation Technician' was somebody who had joinery skills, because you would be making cases for big sculptures that the Tate has. And we were given that advice; that this role is advertised with this title that is meaningless to a lot of people, probably quite alienating or scary, whereas in effect we were looking for people who had done a joinery / carpentry apprenticeship and would enjoy working in an arts environment as opposed to another environment. So there is internally. I'm always looking at how organisations can change their practise. That to me was an eye opener.

Rob West

I like the point about the #ShowYourSalary campaign, which Creative and Cultural Skills have signed up to. That's certainly an action that businesses could take. Again on something else that Calum and Danielle were talking about was how job applications could differ: They talked about government applications on local authorities being quite long, and how that puts you off. Others might ask for a CV and a cover letter.

Danielle Edmunds

For the Museums of Wales, I have applied for two jobs only now, and the actual form itself is about 30 pages long. They said they have tried to whittle it down, but they want to see who's dedicated enough to fill in the form before they even start the process. So it's kind of like a test is ridiculous (LAUGS). But it is a really hard process, and it's a really long process as well, I think it lasts about three or four months before you even hear anything; whether you got the interview or anything like that.

Calum MacDonald

I don't know if you've noticed this, Danielle, but I feel like it changes depending on which heritage place you're applying to. I generally find that with the councils, you get a lot of those long forms that take forever to fill in. But with the National Trust, it was just a case of CV and cover letter, and that was it.

Danielle Edmunds

Yeah, the National Trust are a bit more lax, aren't they? Because the other ones are run by the Welsh government, so they're all the long winded ones, aren't they?

Calum MacDonald

Yeah, yeah.

Danielle Edmunds The Welsh government, they just use the same form for nearly everybody, and just although the questions a little bit. And then you got another form to fill in that says all your personal details, and then you fill in another form that's exactly the same as the first form. So it's really long and really boring.

Calum MacDonald I don't think that's necessarily a heritage sector problem, I think that's jobs in general these days.

Danielle Edmunds A jobs are like that, it's a bit ridiculous the amount of forms you've got to fill in.

Calum MacDonald One of my experiences when I applied for a job in Erddig, where I did my placement, after submitting the application I did go up there and talk to everyone and say "hey, I've put an application in, look out for it". And I did end up getting an interview, and I got very good feedback on that interview process, even though I didn't get the job.

Danielle Edmunds (LAUGHS).

Calum MacDonald So I'm saying it it's definitely better. But maybe the fact that they already knew me, I let them know that my application was in, I think maybe helped my chances.

Rob West What they didn't talk about, but I'm aware of, of course, is a lot of jobs are at least shortlisted by algorithms using A.I. To some degree as well. Do you think the advent of technology in a jobs situation may make it, again, more difficult for people from disadvantaged backgrounds to shine through? Because what they're offering, as you were saying, Suba, is potentially something different.

Suba Das I mean, I think any of those interventions around technology which are about organisations.... You know, it's exactly the same with Tinder and what have you... Anything which is about going "this is what you're looking for". All of this is so detrimental to the creation of extraordinary art, because art is about surprise. If we think about where our great artists originate from, they're very unlikely to have been the wealthy or the privileged, actually. I mean, we go all the way back to Shakespeare, who was derided by his peers and mocked as the "upstart crowd", hence the name of the comedy series, because he was the sort of upper middle class lad from a tradespeople family. And he was sneered at by the nobility, who imagined themselves to be the poets and the artists. We don't talk much about them, and we quite talk a lot about Shakespeare - still! For better or worse. And that is kind of because great art is always created by people who have extraordinary perspective, and your derive your best perspective on what the hell is going on anywhere from a margin. I've come up against this so much in my career, in terms of the practises. We have at High Tide - for us, that things like

stating the salary, stating your holiday entitlement, all of that is fundamental to us. But so often I encounter instances in which that's not the case in this sector.

Rob West

It's an important point, the thing about arts and culture being about surprise, isn't it? Because I think that relates, or explains potentially, something Calum and Danielle were talking about which was to do with poor careers advice. I've been part of discussions with careers advisers, and you get a bad press, but in fairness to you one of the reasons is if you ask two people who are doing the same job role within theatre or the arts, they will probably give you a different pathway that they used to get into that particular role. So how do you advise people to do that?

Danielle Edmunds

We didn't have a career advisor in my school. (LAUGHS) We didn't even have one in college, I don't think.

Calum MacDonald

I think the careers advisers were more about general careers skills, so like building CVs and writing statements, interview skills, that kind of thing.

Danielle Edmunds

They just kind of told us to go to uni. Just like "go to uni, life will be fine".

Calum MacDonald

Yeah. So when I was thinking about university, I was weighing up either history or computer science, and I didn't really know about what kind of jobs you would get in a museum. And so that kind of influenced my decision in the wrong direction, I would say. If I'd have known about what kind of jobs are available back then, I definitely would have gone for a more history related degree.

Rob West

What could a careers advisor do that would help a young person overcome some of those potential barriers? Would it be teaching people how to get past the algorithm, or is there another approach? Vilma, you often deal with people and people strategies, is there any interaction you have with careers advisors?

Vilma Nikolaidou

Yeah, I'm also an Enterprise Advisor, which is a professional that helps in secondary schools with their career advice - it's a voluntary role. And I took it on particularly because I'm so passionate about people having access, or getting the information that these careers are out there. One of the things that I'm particularly keen on, and I've tried to work with all the schools I've ever encountered, is this idea of transferable skills. It is very unlikely, unless you are very lucky or very well connected, to land your first job exactly where you wanted - for it to look and pay exactly what you thought. So sometimes, the roundabout way of getting there, as long as it can pay you a salary and all of that, it's not a bad idea to start. And I started my career in retail not because I was particularly interested in selling, but that was the only job I could get. And I've learned so much in retail that I would never have learnt in any other. I wanted to become a psychologist, it was impossible for me to secure an associate psychologist job in another

profession where you have to work unpaid, do loads of voluntary work. Same issues in many industries. But I needed to live, and I needed to live in an expensive city. So you learn a lot through all of these important skills that employers, particularly for young people in their first jobs, are looking for: Teamwork, organisational skills, ability to turn up on time, ability to make decisions, to refer to authority, customer care... All of these things that I took with me to my next job that made me better, and more efficient in my next job. This isn't to say that everybody should try a supermarket job, but I don't think supermarket jobs should or should be seen as something that have no value. Jobs have good value because they have got transferable skills. And that's one of the things that I'm trying to get people to think about. It's a series of steps - we don't land on our preferred option straight away.

Rob West

Is what we're talking about here class discrimination? The TUC (Trades Congress Union) that you mentioned earlier Vilma have proposed in some of their debates before about class being a protected characteristic. And certainly, many other European countries provide legal protection against discrimination on grounds related to social and economic status, whereas we don't in this country. Suba is that a start a step too far? Or would that be useful, to add legislation?

Suba Das

We have seen over the last 15 years or so, a systematic removal of arts subjects from the national curriculum, and the focus on STEM, not STEAM, etc. etc. All of this based on a narrative which is that "the arts won't help you". That's fanciful. That won't enable you to get a good job. And my career, if no-one else's, is testament to the fact that you can pay all your bills with the "Director" in your job title. But of course, what's happened at the same time as the such as being pulled out of the national curriculum, and therefore out of reach for state and comprehensive schools who don't necessarily have the additional resources to provide drama and art as extracurricular activities... What we've seen alongside that is, of course, that Eaton still has a Resident Director. As does Harrow. So I kind of have to ask the question, which is, "well, if it's good for the goose, why is it not good for the gander?" To misuse a cliché. And that does really start to point in the direction of something that is about class-based oppression. Because it's very interesting in this pandemic / post-pandemic moment, which is... Art, theatre making, historically has been a mechanism of protest. Historically, it's been a mechanism for challenging the status quo. And you have to consider what it might mean for the means of production of art to be removed from the hands of people from working class backgrounds. That feels inherently classist, it feels like oppression to me, and it does feel like something that warrants protection.

Rob West

And you're bringing us back there to the idea of the pandemic - and right at the beginning, Vilma, you talked about the pandemic as "focussed our mind". So if it's focussed our mind, how do we build back fairer?

Vilma Nikolaidou I think both the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement, and everything that followed the George Floyd murder last year... There's a lot of commonalities in the themes; the themes of kind of unfairness, inequality, oppression, and this idea that we need to rebuild. We need to really go back to those processes that make a difference. In my area, it's how we attract people, what stories do we tell about our institutions? How we recruit; it's interesting, the issue around application forms. Application forms have become that long precisely because they wanted to address inequality issues. They've gone too far now, but to your young audience, that was the reason why we've ended up with these competencies and long descriptors. So now is the time to do it: There's a momentum. There is, if we believe the government's agenda around levelling up, there is a national prerogative behind all of this, and the government force behind it. I think we can and we must rebuild. It will be different artistically for sure, but it will be different for me organisationally. For us is more around those processes right across the life of the institution; not just in the entry level, not just the apprenticeships, but what happens all the way from the start to the top, and every stage in between.

Rob West OK, so there's a number of things Vilma's suggested that she would say to leaders. Suba, in terms of leaders of the cultural sector, what would you tell them needs to change?

Suba Das I mean, it's nothing that hasn't been said before. But if we continue to believe that diversity and inclusion are a "nice to have", or are doing anyone a "favour", what we'll ultimately find out is that all of our audience is dead, and nobody's replaced them. And this takes me back to, I guess, one of the fundamental things about the theatre sector, and its relationship to the inclusion of people from lower socio-economic or culturally diverse backgrounds: We are losing talent, actually. If you think about the extraordinary artists in this country who are now picking up their phones and becoming YouTube vloggers and influencers, as opposed to accessing theatre space as a mechanism to share or tell their story, what we're seeing is a fundamental drain of talent. And we won't get it back. Why would an extraordinary artist choose to travel into a space that has not been welcoming to them? Steve McQueen has never made a Theatre show. He's one of Britain's greatest storytellers. That provocation should be more than enough for cultural leaders to understand that actually this is urgent. And it's, as I say, not about doing anyone a favour.

Rob West And Vilma, this goes further than just even the talent on stage or around that stage as well, does it not? Danielle and Calum, working in the museum and heritage sector, the various roles that are built around making something happen means that it's just the same, isn't it? That those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are being disadvantaged by the sector's unjustified behaviours? And actually, when we talk about opening up, it's about opening up to all the job roles that exist within the creative sector.

Vilma Nikolaidou Completely. There's this idea of talent, and the concept of talent pool. As Suba says, it needs to be as wide as possible. But demographically, in Europe and North America, we're challenged. We're not young societies anymore. So, absolutely, we must treasure and nurture young talent geopolitically with Brexit and everything else. So I think the idea that we have this pool of

young people with all their talent, with all their ideas, their creativity, that remains untapped because of unseen or legacy requirements or barriers that are there, and we're not prepared to dismantle, is a crying shame. And that's something I will be fighting forever against.

Rob West

Great. Thank you very much Suba Dad and Vilma Nikolaidou for joining me today on the podcast. Good luck for the future for you, and especially for those young people that are trying to build their careers.

Vilma Nikolaidou

Thank you. Bye bye, take care now.

Suba Das

Cheers everyone!

Rob West

Bye. Thanks to our guests Suba Dad, and Vilma Nikolaidou. And thanks to you for listening. That's it for this episode. If you'd like to get in touch, you can find us on social media, on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram, by looking for "CCSkills". Or you can go to our website - www.ccskills.org.uk

Posy Jowett

The Creative and Cultural Skills Podcast was hosted by Rob West and produced by Jay Sykes. I'm Posy Jowett. To join in our discussion, and share your thoughts with us, please get in touch: On Facebook and Twitter, you can find us @CCSkills.