

#NWConnect Ellie Keel Podcast Transcript

NB. Your hosts, Kim and Amelia are in bold.

Intro Music: Snappy, an instrumental and upbeat jazz track plays underneath the opening dialogue. It features clicks and a bass guitar.

Kim 0:00

Hello, and welcome to North Wall Connect

Amelia: A new podcast series where we talk to the talented artists featured here at the North Wall Arts Centre.

Kim: brought to you by your hosts Kim

Amelia: and Amelia.

0:07 Amelia: Today I'm talking to independent producer and founder of the women's prize for playwriting, Ellie Keel. We speak about her journey as a producer, the recently founded women's playwriting prize, and the upcoming Alchemy Festival, which for the first time, will be digital, here at the North Wall. Hi, Ellie, can you tell our listeners a little bit about who you are and what you do?

Ellie 0:27 Hi, yeah. I'm Ellie Keel. I am the exec producer of Ellie Keel Productions, which I founded in 2019. And I'm also the founder director of the women's prize for playwriting, which I also founded in 2019.

Amelia 0:45

I think producing can seem a bit of a mystery to a lot of people out there. Can you describe what it is that you do exactly?

Ellie 0:52

Yeah, I can. I think, I think one of the things to remember with producing is that it does differ from context to context and project to project. And that there's a big difference, for example, between being a producer in a theatre building and being a freelance producer, who moves between different productions, in different venues, and different projects. A lot of producing might not actually be producing a show, it might be producing a workshop or a podcast, for example, like this. And particularly in the last year, as we all know, the definition and shape of things has changed a lot. But I think, in essence, producing is about making things happen. So cultural projects of all kinds, getting them off the ground, finding the resources to make them happen. Forming teams, recruiting people, managing schedules, setting goals, it's about holding all the threads of a particular enterprise, and ensuring that they come to fruition and that they're successful. And I think in a, in a broader sense, it's about identifying needs. So the need for a particular project and the needs within that project and making making that happen.

Amelia Thornber 2:31

So a bit of everything really

Ellie 2:33 A bit of everything. Yes, there's a broad skill set that's required in an ideal world. And, you know, the, as I've said, the skills that you need are constantly evolving. I mean, there are some common themes to it. You know, it really helps to be a good communicator. It helps to be a natural optimist I think. It helps to be good with the spreadsheet, as well as, you know, decent with words, and to be a fast reader, and to enjoy meeting lots of different people. But yeah, but the, the skill set does evolve with time and according to different projects that you might be working on.

Amelia 3:23

So could you tell us a bit about your journey? You've set up Ellie Keel productions now, but were you always freelance or have you worked in venues? How did that come about? How did you know it's the right time for you to start that production company?

Ellie 3:35

Yeah, well, when I first graduated in 2014, so I've been working for about seven years. I worked for two years as the Oxford University drama officer, which involved working for and with Oxford Playhouse, the Cameron Mackintosh Foundation, and Thelma Holt limited. And that was actually the start of my journey with the North Wall as well because before I was a Drama Officer, but there was no student work from Oxford University at the North Wall, which I thought was a real shame because it's such a lovely theatre. So that was that was a that was really the start of my freelance journey as well because I got to know the North Wall, putting on student work there and then started to work on Alchymy festival as one of my first ever freelance projects. But because I had this, the salaried job with the university and the Playhouse and Cam Mac and so on it meant that I could start a strand of independent freelancing without being too worried about money because sadly, when when you start off unless you're very lucky, the money in freelance producing is not very good. Or, at least that was that was the case for me. So I started doing very small shows in Oxford and London with a group of trusted collaborators. For example, we did three nights of something, theatre 503, and we did a one nighter of something that the North Wall. And then we took two shows to the Edinburgh Fringe. And that was another sort of big step in my freelance journey as it were. And then I worked in touring productions for Opera Up Close for 18 months, and alongside that did more freelance producing. And then I realised this is what I want to do, I want to be an independent producer with a brand that makes sense for me. And the ability to commission and create new work to quite a precise artistic brand. And so I dived into it, basically, and set up the company. And as for why it was the right time, I don't particularly know that it was but I wanted to take a season of four shows to the Edinburgh Fringe, and it made sense to do that, as a company with my name on it, because it needed a common identifier. So that was that was why I launched it in May 2019 it was when when we were announcing the shows at the fringe.

Amelia 6:23

I think as a freelancer you can always be torn between what's the next right move? Do I continue this? Do I try and like make the leap? or?

Ellie 6:32

Yeah, I think I think it's important to say that you will never know all that you need to know for the next step. And you can wait around for a long time perfecting and refining your your skills and building your confidence. But actually, you need to learn by doing.

Amelia 6:50

Yeah. On the job.

Ellie 6:51

Yeah, on the job. Particularly if you haven't done, say, a master's in producing something like that.

Amelia 6:59

The women's prize for playwriting, how did that come about?

Ellie Keel 7:03

It came about, because I saw that there was a problem in that not many, or relatively few plays by women were being produced on major stages. And I found this really troubling because I was receiving or reading a lot of really good plays by women. And I just couldn't understand why there was such serious inequality. As you looked up the ladder, and it seemed to me that theatre was sort of dragging its heels a bit in terms of parallels with other professions where the glass ceiling is closer to being broken. And I thought about ways that I could improve that position. And I suppose as a young, relatively minor producer, there wasn't much I could do off my own back, because I didn't have huge commissioning resources, I don't have a building, I don't, myself have the means to get these plays on major stages. But I thought, well, what I could do is create an organisation that would shine a light on the problem and help to address it by celebrating the quality of playwriting by women. So that's where the prize came from. And what I set it up to do was ultimately to find a winning play, and then to produce it. So there's two steps to it. Both are equally important. And I'm so proud that in the first year of the prize, we have done this, we have found a way to get the winning play on even in the middle of a pandemic. The prize was always intended to do those, those two things, and to contribute to the number of plays by women being produced on major stages by literally doing it.

Amelia 8:59

I know it was very popular in its first year especially, you had a really quite high volume of applications.

Ellie 9:06

Yep we had, I think it was 1163 submission. And I think a big part of that was that the other founding partner on the prize was Paines Plough, who had just been they just got

two new artistic directors who were joining the organisation at the same time as I was setting up the prize. So it was a real sort of marriage made in heaven when I met Charlotte and Katie at the fringe. And they said, this is something we would love to do with you. And it helped us to get plenty of publicity and plenty of writers who were excited about the prize but linked it to a really successful artistic brand. And, you know, in Paines Plough and good people in the form of Katie and Charlotte and thought, well, this is something I trust to submit my work to you because I think that's something about prizes that you need to remember. Is that you, you there's it's not automatic I think that people should submit to you, you know,

Amelia 10:09

As we're both aware, obviously the past year has seen a massive growth in digital work and that includes, do you say Ellie Keel productions digital or EKP digital?

Ellie 10:19

I now say EKP almost all the time because people seem to find it funny. And I get lots of EPK for and PKE and stuff like that. So yeah, we I go with EKP

Amelia 10:33

And I now know you're branching out into film and requesting film scripts. What's it been like trying out these new mediums that are different to the stage?

Ellie 10:342

Well, I, I still have very little idea how to produce a short film, which I possibly shouldn't say, on record. But I think when we made that call out, we were quite honest about wanting to sort of go on a journey and experiment with people. And Jessica Lazar of Atticist Productions, who I'm doing the short film with does know how to make short films. So that's very handy. In terms of the audio work, that was easier to learn, and it was great fun, I'd always wanted to make a radio play. And so I started working with again, Jess Lazar on that and Jessica McVay at 45North. And we, you know, we really went for it, as soon as we'd done our trial of three short pieces, which as you know, we did with the North Wall. We, we we committed to a season of of eight pieces straight away, some of them quite ambitious. And we just found that there was a real appetite for it, and that it was a good way of employing lots of people, it was a good way of, I think, just finding some really interesting work.

Amelia 11:57

And keeping that work going during a time that was quiet for so many people.

Ellie 12:01

Exactly, yeah, that I would say that was the most gratifying thing about it, giving giving people jobs.

Amelia 12:08

And so tell us a bit more about Passion Play, because yeah, as you say, that was in collaboration with the North Wall.

Ellie 12:014

So a Passion Play was a seed commission by Paines Plough, I think about 18 months ago, or even two years ago, by Margaret Perry, who's play Collapsible, I had produced with High Tide at the fringe, and then off my own back at the Bush Theatre. And, you know, we had taken it on tour. So Margaret and I had done a lot together. And I'd always wanted to, to work with her again. So when I read the seed commission, which was, I suppose, six pages long or something like that, I was really intrigued. It's a lovely story about two teenage girls in a church in Cork, talking about the local Passion Play and the roles that they will have in it. And so we commissioned a slightly longer version, and we cast Nicola Coughlan and Hannah Bristow in it, which was a really nice piece of casting. I think it really worked for the piece. And yeah, just a really good team, all recorded remotely. So Nicola was at home in Ireland, and Hannah was in London, and that has its challenges. But it's they're all sort of overcomable. And yeah, Jessica Lazar directed it beautifully. And we're hoping very much that will shortly be able to announce a really super further life for the stage show. But unfortunately not in not in time for me to talk about it today.

Amelia 13:51

Okay, Alchymy festival, for the first time this year is going to be digital. And tell us a bit more about that. And your relationship with the Alchymy festival and what we can expect this year.

Ellie 14:04

Yeah, well, Alchymy has been a huge part of my career so far, it's probably the thing I'm most proud of. Because it was my first big freelance project that Lucy Maycock, the former artistic director of the North Wall, sort of devised with me and put me in charge of, you know, going back to the thing about not not being ready for new steps, I definitely wasn't ready to be in charge of a festival. And I had, I ended up needing, you know, quite a lot of support from John and from Sherrell, and so on. But it was just, you know, the chance to create artistic opportunities for that number of early career artists and to work with them and meet them and have discussions and you know, what, what I think we did most successfully was the combination of shows and panel events, I think was really good. And we had tailored individual workshops as well. I really tried to think about what young artists need, what early career artists need in order to progress. And yeah, tried to put that in place. And we did it all on a bit of a shoestring really, but it's fantastic. And I was so sad not to be able to do it last year. The fact that it's returning this year in any form is just brilliant. And actually, I'd say that digital will work for Alchymy, because, you know, it's always been a really responsive festival in terms of the things that are discussed and the shows and stuff, so I think it's great.

Amelia 15:45

So tell us a bit about the audio dramas that you're working on as part of the Alchymy Festival this year?

Ellie 15:50

Yeah, absolutely. So there are two, the first is by Marika Mckennell, who is a Catalyst writer from a few years ago, and also the writer of E8, fringe first, award winning and so on. And it's tentatively titled, Nomadic Souls. And it's, all I can say at the moment is that it's a piece about race and identity. We're recording that next month, excitingly, and yeah very excited about that. And then the other piece is it involves more writers, there's four writers who are each creating a two minute piece, which will be in response to a theme and will sort of compile them in a in a way to be decided, once they've been recorded, but they will each have a different cast. And, and those writers sorry I should say, are doing the Catalyst programme this year.

Amelia 16:51

So what are your hopes for the future? Generally, workwise...?

Ellie 16:54

Well, I really hope that the cultural sector can recover. And it won't only be the big organisations that remain, I don't think that will happen. I think there's been enough of enough grassroots movement to to prevent that happening. And actually, there has been some support recently for smaller organisations coming through. I hope that programming doesn't regress. In the sense, you know how ambitious it is, I don't want to see sort of 50 productions of Hedda Gabler, next year, even though it's a great play, I really want to see new writing continue to flourish and touring continue to flourish. And all of this and I, I think, the confluence of the pandemic, and Brexit has been really tricky, particularly in regards to touring internationally. And I think that's a great shame. So I hope that we find ways to sort of remedy that. And I hope that the theatre industry continues to, to try to be more open to people from all backgrounds. So that's audiences and practitioners. And I think we have to always have our eye on that because it would be easy for it to be even more of a closed shop than it currently is. Particularly in the less stable roles where the where your income is less dependable and stuff so I would want to see a lot more support and bolstering around freelance roles and and how we can support everybody to have access to them. And finally, I will bang the drum again, I want to see lots of big plays by women made on big stages. And for for true equality to be reached, very soon.

Amelia 19:02

What's next for the women's prize for playwriting?

Ellie 19:07

Well, by the time this podcast goes out, I suppose the news will be out so perhaps I can say it now. So one of the, there were two first prize winners, who each received £12,000, and one of them reasons you shouldn't love me by Amy Trigg will premiere at The Kiln in late May, early June, for three weeks in a full production, socially distanced audience, with live streaming as well. So we're really excited about that. It will also have an audio production with audible and I believe that the screen rights have already been sold as well so there's you know, huge response to that play. And You Bury Me the the other first prize winner will go into development later this summer. I can't say where I really can't say where yet.

Amelia 20:03

That's so exciting though, both of them

Ellie 20:04

That play has an equally exciting and and prestigious feature. It just has a larger cast, so is less pandemic friendly. But it's great. It's got big things ahead of it. And it will be directed by Katie Posner from Paines Plough, while Charlotte Bennett directs Reasons. So they both yeah, they both got a really exciting future ahead of them. And we will open submissions for the next prize on the 7th of April, with a fantastic judging panel. And again, by the time this podcast goes out, you will be able to go on website and find out all about it.

Amelia 20:44

That's amazing, especially in the first year that they're both doing well so...

Ellie 20:48

We're really grateful to the Kiln for their enthusiasm, I think I think they phoned me about it on the day that we were announcing the winner. They knew that they had won because Indu is on the judging panel. And she's also the artistic director of the Kiln. But it was it was great to have that level of response to it was absolutely fantastic.

Amelia 21:12

What are you looking forward to in the next year?

Ellie 21:14

Oh, I'm looking forward to all of it. I'm looking forward to Alchymy this year. I'm looking forward to running the prize and reading fantastic submissions with Paines Plough, I'm looking forward to getting back into Soho theatre, and sitting in the main house was you know, 150 other people laughing, crying and dancing. And getting back to getting back to working outside the home. I think you know, it's been calmer in a way to be able to to be home based for a while but I think I'm really keen to be back face to face with collaborators old and new.

Outro Music: Snappy, an instrumental and upbeat jazz track plays underneath the opening dialogue. It features clicks and a bass guitar.

Amelia 21:57

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Kim 22:00

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Amelia 22:02

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Kim 22:05

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