

FROZEN LIGHT

Frozen Light Podcast

Episode-Nine – Interview with Stephanie Tyrell Arts Manager at SENSE

- Lucy:** Hello and welcome to the Frozen Light Podcast.
- Amber:** A podcast aimed at staying in touch with the PMLD community in the age of coronavirus. [Music]. Hi everyone. I'm Amber Onat Gregory, one of the Co-Artistic Directors of Frozen Light.
- Jingle:** *Jazzy piano music*
- Amber:** I'm Amber Onat Gregory one of the artistic directors of Frozen Light
- Lucy:** And I'm Lucy Garland, the other Artistic Director.
- Amber:** Frozen light are a theatre company that creates multi sensory theatre for audiences with profound and multiple learning disabilities and tours it across the UK to theatre venues and art centres.
- Lucy:** We're currently not on tour due to lockdown restrictions.
- Amber:** But we're looking forward to a time when we can tour again. We are currently recruiting new trustees to join our board.
- Lucy:** And we are really excited to hear from you. We really want to encourage applications from individuals who identify as disabled and from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. We want to ensure that as a company we are led by a team of trustees that represent the experience of the diverse make up of the UK. We understand the huge value that a mixed range of voices on the board will provide the company.
- Amber:** So you can download a trustee pack and watch our trustee video on our website at www.frozenlighttheatre.com and if you have any questions about joining the board you can email us at info@frozenlighttheatre.com.
- Lucy:** And on today's programme we have the lovely Stephanie Tyrell who is Arts Manager at SENSE based at TouchBase Pears in Birmingham.
- Amber:** Let's give Stephanie a ring now.
- Phone Ring:** *Phone ringing sound effect*
- Lucy:** So hi Stephanie, thank you for coming on the podcast today.

- Stephanie:** Hello, thank you very much for having me. It's very exciting to be here.
- Lucy:** So can you introduce yourself and TouchBase Pears, and SENSE to the listeners?
- Stephanie:** Yes, absolutely. So my name is Steph Tyrell. I'm National Arts Manager for the disability charity SENSE. SENSE is a 65 year old charity. We've just had our 65th anniversary and we are a charity that primarily started to support deaf blind people and over the years the number of people in our services has grown. We work nationally. And the range of disabilities that we support and people we support is really varied.
- So we not only support people with deaf blindness but we've moved now to support people with complex disabilities and that's people with acquired deaf blindness or congenital deaf blindness, and we have a mixture of residential services, day care centres, colleges, supported living and most recently we've open SENSE TouchBase Pears in Birmingham.
- The idea is that we take the provision of a day case centre and we mix that up with the community and we have arts and wellbeing studios there. We have a community cafe there. We have a college base there. And then also other community groups that come in and use the spaces as well.
- Lucy:** Yeah, Frozen Light spent a day there doing some R&D with some people and it was really cool, and a really beautiful space, and it just felt really inclusive and lovely.
- Stephanie:** Yeah, there's been a lot of consultation around when SENSE was creating the building there was a lot of consultation with the groups that we support around access and thinking how we can best serve the SENSE community, and I think that's been reflected in the space. So we do get, when groups come in the access of the space and how light and modern it is, is one of the real pluses of it.
- Lucy:** Cool. And tell us a bit about you and your role.
- Stephanie:** So as National Arts Manager I'm responsible for setting the framework of arts provision across the organisation. We fundraise and support for art provisions and arts activities, and we also work in partnership with a lot of artists and organisations to support their delivery of work around – for people with complex disabilities and really look at how we can raise the game in terms of visibility for art makers with complex disabilities.
- Amber:** Wonderful, and can you tell us a bit about what happened to TouchBase Pears when lockdown began, but also as you've spoken about being the national lead for arts based activities what does that look like across the country within your role?

Stephanie: I'll start with TouchBase. So I feel like we had the most boring day at work ever where we just had to cancel everything in our What's On Guide which is our programme of arts and wellbeing activities, and arts, sports and wellbeing activities. That was a really unusual day. I've never in a career setting had that where you just cancel everything back to back.

Amber: We had that day and it was like -

Stephanie: It's hard.

Amber: - we kind of just went into this kind of very sad sombre mood for a good two days. It was not nice.

Stephanie: It was really horrible and it was also very kind of, I felt very connected to the audiences that we worked with and that kind of word of safety is paramount. We were very aware of that but in doing that we were closing down everything. So we've cancelled all of the arts activities and events that we had programme and then it also meant nationally for our other services they were unable to go out into the community or access other arts provisions.

Because there are other TouchBases around SENSE around the UK. They don't have quite the same activities happening in their arts and wellbeing spaces but everything was closed down. People weren't coming into day care centres and so we moved into a realm where a lot of the people that we support were in our residential settings and so we did a huge u-turn for the team which is, there's three of us that work within the arts team.

And so we've been on a massive u-turn and journey around how we can enable people with complex disability to access arts, culture and wellbeing within a residential setting. So that's where we are at the moment.

Lucy: And how have you stayed in touch with the people you support during lockdown?

Stephanie: Good question and it's a very multi layered answer. Because the range of people we support is so diverse and the range of staff that are in settings is really diverse, and the amount of technology that each service has is also really diverse as well so I feel like the team and I have fallen back in love with the good old fashioned phone call.

There's been a lot of movement, you know, Zoom and video calls but actually the telephone has been the best way for us to get in contact with services to assess where they are. What they need and how we can best support them because when this happened we were really keen that arts played a pivotal role in people's lives, that it wasn't taken away, but to

create something that was reflective of the situation we didn't – we were very aware that some services were really, I wouldn't say crisis mode because that's very emotive language.

But it was about surviving because we have a number of support staff that were shielding or self isolating. So we wanted to make sure that the tone was right as well. That we're offering our activities that support staff can engage with easily and then because they have that engagement they can connect with the person that they're supporting.

So we've been sending fortnightly resource packs which is a mixture of our creation online and offline content to support people but in that process we sort of had to go okay if you're deaf blind how are you going to connect to digital content and how can we stay true to our values when we're learning and delivering, and evaluating at the same time. So it's been busy.

Amber: Are there any particular projects that you want to tell us about?

Stephanie: Yeah, I mean I guess in general, so if I talk about the kind of resources that we've been sharing internally, so that's gone to a mixture of adult provisions, children and young people, colleges, and older persons groups and what we've done is in the creation of our own content we've kind of looked, digging into the internet and arts organisations, and finding what's happening out there.

And then taking these kind of conceptual ideas or artistic visions and then simplifying them so that if I'm a support worker and I've got somebody with me and we're looking for something to do on a rainy Tuesday that I can quickly access that information and what resources I need, and it's also created a level playing field.

So we'll have things, you know, like make your own sensory activity at home alongside the – Shakespeare Globe have got a performance or the National Theatre have got a performance that they're streaming and there's been something really levelling about having the two provisions together. It's kind of got rid of sort of that equality of high art and low art in some SENSE, not that I'd ever talk about it in that way.

But that's felt really refreshing to us. That we've been able to reach that to people and then also with the video content we've been creating, and we're still really at the start of this journey so I'm not speaking as the expert in this, I'm speaking as I'm sharing what we've done place. So in creating the YouTube and the activities is so what can people do at home.

What can they grab from around the house. They haven't got to out and buy it. And in the delivery of that we are making sure that everything has got BSL, has got captioning and then we've also looked at auto description

which is – so in the delivery the person is describing what they're doing for vision impaired audiences but it's not a bolt on, it's as they're delivering.

And then we've also made sure that in that delivery we've had the facilitator at the start of the session articulate five words. So it might be exciting, playful, theatre, if it's a theatre workshop landscapes, and colours, for example. So that if there are neuro divergent audiences accessing the work the support staff then has five words that maybe they can repeat whatever communication that person uses.

Giving them a confidence of like this is what the workshop is about and so in trying to encompass those different elements we're trying as much as we can to stay true to our values, being honest and open that it's a journey and we're still really learning.

Lucy: That sounds really fascinating and I love that idea of, you know, that it's just levelled the playing field. All art is the same. I think that's something hopefully that moving forward we can stick with and get rid of these hierarchies of art. I like that.

Stephanie: Yeah. I've got my fingers crossed. Yes, you hope so. I do think this, I don't know, this is an opportunity to hit the reset button for everybody and to come when it's shared across the cultural sector you want to ensure as much as you can that the privileged don't stay privileged and the under represented don't stay under represented.

You really hope that in doing this you can create more space for the audiences that we work with to be better represented. I want SENSE and the partners that we work with to try and galvanise on that opportunity, that we're all re-thinking how we deliver work to people.

Lucy: And I think there's a big movement of a desire for that in theatre makers at the grass roots but we've got to hope that the bigger institutions are hearing that and going forward with it.

Amber: One of the reasons we feel quite passionately about getting back into the rehearsal room when we can is so that as soon as our audiences with complex disabilities are ready to come back to the theatre that we are ready to go and in those positive relationships with venues so that we can provide that accessible offer as soon as we can to make sure that all the work in access that's been built up over the years isn't lost because of new financial woes that everyone is going through.

But we need to make sure that even though the difficulties that the world is currently facing, that we are still able to make art accessible.

Stephanie: Yeah, absolutely. It will be such a vital part of the communities that we

work with that everybody has that equal opportunity to access great art and culture, and that we make people's – the people we support are experience rich not experience poor.

Lucy:

And going completely off topic but interested to hear just from what you've just said I think with – in this every sector in the economy is having to fight for investment and fight to survive, and prove how economically viable they are or how important they are and I think it's important with the arts that we're not just constantly trying to talk about money and how much money it brings in.

Or about the education part of it but actually about art and what it does for the soul and why it's important, and just hearing you say that I think that's really interesting. I would be really interested to hear your thoughts on I suppose what art does for the people that you work with.

Stephanie:

That could be a whole other conversation. I could be here for ages. The role of art for the people that we support, I mean it's absolutely vital. We're under the belief that everybody should have the right to arts and culture, that it enables people to live active and creative lives and so we think it's essential that as a care provider, and this is one of the great things about SENSE.

And why I was attracted to the organisation is that it sees art as a vital part of living well, and to embed it across everybody's lives and to give choice to people. And so, you know, we celebrate the nos. If somebody is informed and they say "Actually no I don't want to be involved in that arts activity" that's a great thing but really as an organisation we really want to look at how arts can play a role for people to develop their confidence.

Their social connections, their skill development, their wellbeing and that's a journey that we're going on at the moment. About how we embed that across the organisation and how we distill that SENSE of collaboration with support staff because you can have the best artist, the best concept, the best ideas, the best venue, the best equipment but if you have support staff that are under confident with arts they are the – in terms of collaboration they are the unrecognised heroes of that process.

Because for somebody with a complex disability to have an independent informed choice of what they're doing that support worker it can often be the bridge between the artist and what's happening. And so it's vital that support staff understand what is collaboration, when to get involved, when to step back. When to share their own experiences of that.

And I think that's something that the organisation is invested in doing, about how we enable everybody to have that choice in being active in their own creative journeys.

Lucy: That's really interesting because that's what we see in our Frozen Light shows. We tour all over the UK and we are completely reliant on the relationship that the performer has with our audience member with complex disabilities but also their support staff or family member. If the support staff is doing a wonderful job of supporting the person with complex disabilities we have an amazing show.

Because they're enabling that person to really access the experience in a way that's appropriate for them.

Amber: And we're only with audiences in a show for an hour so obviously we learn so much about the audience and communicate with them during that hour but the people they're accompanying with to the theatre know them so much better than we do so that's why we really enjoy celebrating that relationship that we could all have together.

Stephanie: I bet if you had a pound for every time somebody went "They've never done that before" in your hour then – yeah, absolutely and that's again, you know, it's so important that people with complex disabilities have that opportunity to step into that high quality art space and be cocooned by that arts and creativity in a way that's accessible to them, and gives them new experiences.

And gives them choice and autonomy in what they're experiencing I think is really, really vital. And then we're also really committed in ensuring that we're diversifying the workforce that we're employing so that deaf disabled new divergent artists are supported to deliver and create fabulous work and we're creating disabled role models within the organisation as well.

Lucy: That sounds really cool and I think that's right, if we can empower people and empower support staff within organisations to feel confident to do that I think that's what it is. I think so often support staff and carers are so undervalued that they don't feel empowered and confident to go out and do that, and if larger organisations and society in the sector can do that for people then everybody is going to have a better time.

Day services for people with complex disabilities they're regular audiences for Frozen Light and especially we get a lot of SENSE groups. We see a lot of SENSE groups across the country which is lovely. So regular audiences for Frozen Light, and we visit theatre venues nationally, but do you guys have a plan on how you may be able to approach trips out safely in the future?

Amber: Or is it too soon to ask the question?

Stephanie: I'm avidly, I'm not avidly watching the Government announcements but I am looking at their guidelines constantly and I think it's a huge, huge challenge because we run a multitude of arts, sports and wellbeing activities. So trying to make headway through the guidance and then have your, okay but audiences with complex disabilities, where do they fit into this.

There isn't guidance specifically around people with complex disabilities accessing arts and culture which is like a huge thing anyway. That could be another conversation but it's a huge challenge. We do have very robust guidance because people that are in our services are still being supported by people and so touch is such an important part of the support that we provide. You can't eliminate that from what we offer. It wouldn't be possible.

Amber: We feel the same about our work and touch.

Stephanie: It's hugely vital for what we're delivering. So honestly I think it's going to be a real learning journey about how we look at the guidance that's out there and how we marry that with our own expertise and the support that we're offering to create a clear pathway forward. The timescales of that are changing variably and so looking into what that would be and when that would be I think is a massive challenge for everybody.

Amber: It's just such a big one isn't it. Just to say we're recording this on Wednesday 15 July, so things seem to be opening quite quickly now but again from everyone that we're interviewing on the podcast no-one has kind of information that they need about how long they need to shield for, whether or not they need to shield.

Most people who think they need to shield haven't even got a shielding letter. People with complex disabilities because they haven't been recognised by kind of anyone who cares for them that that is necessary, so no-one has the information that they need which makes things even harder.

Stephanie: I completely agree. I mean say, you know, kind of planning ahead and looking at business cases for kind of the people that we support and work with are going to be shielding for the longest I would then question ourselves and the team about how we can use social distancing or isolation, or virtual connection as a form of inspiration and access.

Trying to think of it on it's head as a positive rather than a negative if we can't do this, we can't do that. I don't see what else we could do if our audiences or participants, our art makers are able to come back into spaces, what can SENSE do to radicalise how we're supporting people with new technologies or new initiatives. It's by no means an easy feat and I don't have the answers for that.

Lucy: Yeah, and we are all trying to find those positives and find new ways but it's, yeah -

Stephanie: It's hard.

Lucy: - it's very hard.

Stephanie: And prioritising self care for the team as well and for all of us so that we don't have burnout or we can keep being – it's very hard to be creative within this context as well. So prioritising kindness to yourself and the team is really key as well.

Amber: And are there any changes that you hope will support people with complex disabilities in the future that might have been influenced by this time in lockdown?

Stephanie: I think there's opportunities, like I said before, about pushing the reset button. About everybody taking a step – all venues, arts organisations, taking a step back and really questioning how they engage with audiences and the work that they do, and by questioning that process enable space for further conversations to happen.

I think there could be a really interesting shift in technology especially within adult care services, in particular with the people we're supporting. Sometimes things can have a habit of being well we've always done it like that so we're going to keep doing it like that. And that just can't stay anymore. So by trying to capitalise on that well there's a need for that as well.

But I think you've got to keep listening to listening to deaf disabled artists and a lot of the provisions that are now happening they've been fighting or expressing for a long time. So looking at able-ism as well and bringing that into the mix of what you're delivering and what new processes and models you might set up in terms of working forward. I think it's really, really key.

So we're doing a lot of listening and discussions right now to see what do deaf disabled neuro divergent artists want and how can we support them moving forward.

Lucy: And that I think has been echoed in different people we've spoken to in disabled artists like people have been, you know, there's quite a lot of people who can't leave their house for various reasons and they've been asking to go to virtual meetings and to be included for a long time. And it's been, you know, everybody is like well it's too difficult and then suddenly overnight when the whole population has to do that oh okay yeah we can do that now.

And we need to learn from that and learn to be more flexible for people in different positions, and I think that will be a good thing that comes out of this hopefully.

Lucy: And is there anything else you wanted to share just before we go?

Stephanie: Yes, there's loads of stuff we've got going on at work but for this, I think the thing that I would want to share is just people be kind to themselves. I think we can't underestimate how important it is for all of us to share how we're feeling, our mental health and to just really be – I feel like there's a lot of empathy and openness around that.

But I think the more empathetic we can be the better that we'll survive, and when we do come out of this we'll be able to create better work and feel more resilient in the future.

Lucy: That sounds like a lovely message to end on.

Amber: Yeah, I second that, thank you.

Lucy: So thank you so much Stephanie, it's been really lovely talking to you today.

Amber: Yeah, and we've met Stephanie a couple of times and again it's one of those things in our sector, you kind of have these sector friends that you rarely see apart from when you're on tour or at a conference, so really, really great to see you in these lockdown circumstances.

Lucy: And we had such a lovely time when we went to TouchBase Pears and we did a scratch performance for some of the people they support which was really lovely and really kind of helped develop The Isle of Brimsker.

Amber: And I remember at the centre itself they just had some really cool resources out. They had those kind of vibrating packs that you could try on and listen to music, and have it vibrate, and all that kind of really amazing stuff that was just out and available for people to try out and use.

Lucy: But it's also a centre that's really heavily based within that community and it's got a cafe, it's open to members of the community to come in and get a coffee. So it's a really lovely inclusive space.

Amber: Some of the things that I thought came out of that interview was Stephanie mentioned the importance of using touch and the challenges that they've had around that which is something that we keep thinking about in our work because it's not that – the multi sensory theatre show is all about touch but just touch as part of the communication that we use is relatively inevitable in all our shows. So it's just how to deal with things like that as

we move forward.

Lucy: But it sounds like they're developing some really cool resources and getting them out perhaps to people in SENSE services and SENSE homes and supported living who the art service may not have reach before so that's a real positive to come out of this.

Amber: Yeah, and I think what was really great was how Stephanie was just saying we need to use this time to reflect and make sure that the future we go into is something that is more accessible for more people and we need to do it with kind of almost a relaxed mindfulness and joy that we could all feel in our lives which I think is very, very true.

Lucy: And a lesson I think everybody can learn something from.

Amber: So up next on next week's podcast we have Carol from Jolly Josh.

Lucy: And Jolly Josh have been doing a really cool looking lockdown photo project which seemed a really beautiful thing to be doing so we're really interested to talk to them about that.

Amber: So we really hope you are enjoying this podcast. Please do rate, review and subscribe.

Lucy: And do send us an email, get in touch if there's anything that has sparked an interest. If there's anything that you want to tell us. We would love to hear from you and we'd love to hear if you've been enjoying the podcasts. You can get in touch with us on info@frozenlighttheatre.com.

Amber: And you can visit our website at www.frozenlighttheatre.com.

Lucy: We're also on Facebook at /frozenlighttheatre. Twitter @frozentheatre and Instagram @frozenlighttheatre. I'd particularly like some photos of you listening to the podcast. I don't know what that looks like. That would be fun.

Amber: Amazing. Brilliant. Thanks so much everyone and see you next time.

Lucy: Bye.

Amber: Bye, bye.

Jingle: *Jazzy piano music with scatting*