

Community Conversations

Episode 3: Zoe Milner & Izzy Hollis



Alison Denholm: City Arts' Community Conversations podcast explores the diversity of Nottingham's creative community. Series two shines a light on the lives and work of deaf, disabled and neurodivergent artists in Nottingham. Part of City Arts Residence project, it's hosted by Laura Guthrie and Jay Sandhu. The production is supported using public funding by The National Lottery through Arts Council England.

Laura Guthrie: And today we are welcoming two disabled artists who have created work as part of the City Arts Commission program, and we'll talk a bit more about that program a bit later on. But welcome, welcome to Zoe and Izzy. We have Zoe Milner with us today. Zoe is a visual artist studying fine art at Nottingham Trent Uni, whose work uses protest as a starting point. As part of the RESIDENCE project, she created an installation inspired by her experience as a deaf person. The work combined typography with imagery from BSL. And today, Zoe is going to be voiced by our BSL interpreter Kat. So welcome Zoe.

Laura Guthrie: Izzy Hollis. Welcome. Izzy is a theatre designer, a puppet maker and puppet theatre maker. Izzy's last piece was called Why Fish, and it explored her experience of living with Tourette's and it was presented as part of a Puppet Cabaret held here at City Arts and all of that was part of the RESIDENCE program as well.

Laura Guthrie: So welcome. Very nice to meet you.

Izzy Hollis: nice to meet you too

Laura Guthrie: So shall we start with you each just telling us a bit about your practice, what kind of work you create, and also if you could audio describe yourselves for our audience and we'll start with you Zoe.

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): So, today I've got on a purple hat. I have short brown hair, and I'm quite tall, and I've got a black sweatshirt on today. I'm female. My work practices on, focuses on deaf identity and deaf culture. I study at Nottingham Trent University and my aim is to create work that represents deaf culture and protesting for the deaf community. I use typography and different colours to show that I'm proud of my identity and to show that their deaf community can be beautiful.

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): Recently, I had a residency here and I created a large piece of typography that linked to my lived experience growing up as a deaf person. I was born deaf, but my family are all fully hearing, so I wanted to show both the negative and positive aspects of that communication and that lifestyle and any issues that I might have experienced mixing between both worlds.

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): I want to educate and raise awareness for people looking at my art, and it's really important that my work is protesting so it links to the BSL bill. I hope that in the future BSL will be recognized as a formal language, and I hope that this will influence my work in the future, and then I'll be able to broaden my experiences and educate further.

Laura Guthrie: Thank you. Thank you, Zoe. It's really interesting. It's interesting to hear about where the motivation comes from for your work and the idea that the work you are creating is going to change people's minds. And obviously, like you said about the BSL bill, that's a relatively new piece of legislation. Well, very new. It was only this year, but a massive step forward for the deaf community. So it's really interesting that in your work, you are beginning your career in a way at a time where things have shifted just a little bit. But like you say, there's still a lot more work to do and the work that you are producing is very much about raising awareness and changing some of those perceptions.

Laura Guthrie: Really interesting. Thank you, Zoe, thank you.

Jay Sandhu: Can I just add Zoe's got some of the nicest trainers that I've seen on, and I don't feel like that was mentioned in that audio description. I clocked the Jesus [shoes] as soon as she appeared. I felt like I should have mentioned it. Feel like people just need to be aware!

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): Didn't think about my trainers when I was describing myself. People watching can only see from the waist up.

Jay Sandhu: They're missing out, they're missing out

Laura Guthrie: Izzy. Would you like to describe yourself and your work to to introduce yourself?

Izzy Hollis: Yeah. I am average height. I've got blue eyes, I've got brown messy hair up in a loose sort of high ponytail. I'm wearing a green dress that's got some like pink embroidery on it, and got a cup of coffee right in front of me

Laura Guthrie: Very important things, and I'm right in front of you.

Izzy Hollis: Very important thing! As for my work, I am a theatre maker, I specialize in puppetry, so I perform and make puppets. And as you said, yes, I've been working on a show called Why Fish that I'm hoping will sort of raise awareness and spread like the message of acceptance about people with ticks as well as just like, share my experiences and [Tic: Fishes]

Izzy Hollis: as well as, yeah, just to spread lots of information. Cause it's a really misunderstood sort of condition. Only 10% of people with Tourette's swear, and that's all that's ever really shown in the media. So it's, it's just, there's a lot of unknown stuff that's still being investigated and I think it's really important to let people know and that there's also just so many different types of tick that everyone's experience is different. So the show concentrates on my experience and the hope is that other people might find that relatable. And I'm currently in the process of applying for further funding, so I want to take it on and tour in the future.

Izzy Hollis: So, fingers crossed,

Laura Guthrie: Brilliant, thank you again. Somebody else making work that's very much embedded in your lived experience and about raising people's awareness to the different lived experiences that disabled people have and the impact that it has on you and, and how other people can understand and build their own knowledge and understanding of all our different lived experiences.

Laura Guthrie: It's really interesting and the fact that you want to take it on tour as well and kind of take it as far as you can.

Izzy Hollis: Yeah.

Laura Guthrie: I think it is in Wales BSL is part of the curriculum in education.

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): Scotland is actually a legally recognized language. Wales, they recognize it. England we haven't caught up quite yet, yeah. Quite shocked.

Laura Guthrie: It's terrible. If you think back to the start of the pandemic and all of those emergency statements that came out standing in front of the lecterns. Not one in England had a BSL interpreter present.

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): No, you were [rusty?].

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): Yeah. Yeah. For quite early on there was nothing, and then there was an interpreter, but you had to go onto a separate channel. Yeah. It wasn't on the main BBC channel. And that became quite confusing for the deaf community because we had to work out, you had to go on Plus One or find the channel where the interpreter was put in vision. Like we had to check all the channels and just, it was hunting for the interpreter really.

Laura Guthrie: Which when you consider how important that information was for everybody is shocking because the Scottish and the Welsh announcements all had BSL interpreters on, next to the Lecterns. Next to the person

Jay Sandhu: do we think that's an England thing or a government thing,

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): Interesting question

Jay Sandhu: Is that a government thing or an England thing?

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): I feel like it should be nationally the same, but actually it's very different between England, Wales, and Scotland.

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): Like, I don't know where the decisions are made, but we're not all the same. I mean, all the UK, it should be respected equally across, it's our rights, England hasn't done that. I feel that we're behind, it's not fair.

Laura Guthrie: Mm-hmm. Yes, I agree. So it'd be interesting to hear a bit more about having the bursaries from City Arts.

Laura Guthrie: Could one of you, I don't mind who answers the question first, but it'd be nice to hear from both of you about the process of getting the bursary, what it actually is, this program that you are on, it's called RESIDENCE, isn't it? Could you tell us a little bit more about the process of getting the residency and what it actually gave you in practical terms.

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): Oh, it's such a long time ago. So I saw it advertised at university. I didn't really know much about it at that point, but one of my lecturers said, you're deaf, so they gave me the application, so I applied for the bursary that way. It felt like a perfect match for me because I'm deaf and it was aimed for deaf and disabled artists.

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): My English isn't good, so that was a bit

difficult, the application process,

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): but I felt it was important to apply. I didn't think I'd ever be successful, but I was really shocked when I was awarded it. I had the email to say that you've got the place, and that you've been successful in your application. I was really excited and happy about that because I just didn't expect it. And then I came here and I met lots of people and everyone's been so nice. And then communication has been difficult, but it's been a really good experience. I had a three day residency here, so that's good. I was able to produce a lot of work. It's really valuable to me as an artist.

Laura Guthrie: So did you, it's interesting that your lecturer encouraged you to apply. I think that's really encouraging that at university, lecturers are looking out for opportunities like this. And also, I wonder, when you, when you said you came here and did three days work, was that practically here, creating your work in this space?

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): Yeah, I came here to the space. It was difficult because there was a limit for the time and when people were in and out of the building. So finding that time was difficult. But, Alison booked some dates and times for me, I think it was a Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday block and I had lots of big pieces of paper and I did my work here.

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): So yeah, three days work, it was really good. I was able to work quite far to have quite a lot of ideas about my life and, and my experiences and that really fed into my work. Yea, it was a good use of time.

Laura Guthrie: Would you mind describing the work that you made?

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): I hadn't really planned a lot before I came here and I was on holiday, if I'm honest, I was traveling, so I didn't have a long time. But I had an idea when I got here, so, I got my ideas out quickly in rough, linked to my childhood, communication difficulties I had, I felt like I had a lot of experience that I could then bring to the work, and I wanted it to then use, use my work to educate people, not in a patronising way, and people were amazed at it, the size of it all.

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): And the fact that I hadn't put in a lot planning beforehand. I had no technology. I was just painting. But the end result was perfect really. It was very good.

Laura Guthrie: Could you describe the end result to us? What did the paintings

look like?

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): I had long rolls of paper, and I'd painted all of them and so all strips of paper everywhere.

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): And Alison walked in and was like, oh my goodness, its so bright, so its colourful,

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): So I had three days really where this was in situ. I think it was really good that people could see the bright colours, and that that raised interest in awareness and challenged people's perception. And it was a really beautiful representation of the colour that can be found metaphorically in the deaf community.

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): So yeah, it was very, it was a good experience.

Jay Sandhu: I had a little question here. You said he was travelling, now these might be ridiculous questions, but is there, like, accents in BSL. And is BSL International?

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): No. So for example when I was in America, and they use American Sign language ASL and the alphabet is one-handed. It's a one handed alphabet.

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): But here in the UK it's different. But, for example, within the UK, you go to Cornwall for example, and the numbers can be completely different in the way that they are signed, and this happens nationally. Like, I live in this country, shall I visit him? But what are these numbers! Globally sign language is different around the world.

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): But also within the UK, England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, we all have different types of signing and accents. In Manchester, there's a strong deaf community there, and there's a big deaf event recently, and it was fun, but I would meet people from the UK and what on earth are you signing. It's so different. Oh, you're from Scotland. Okay, now that makes sense. It's a really good experience, particularly at that event of meeting people in the UK. But it was a challenge for me to adjust my communication and to recognize those regional variations. I mean, even London, if you go to London, the signings very different there

Laura Guthrie: thank you very much there.

Izzy Hollis: [Tic: I'm a lion, crackers]

Laura Guthrie: Izzy How did you come about to be on the...

Laura Guthrie: lots of work in the past with city art and to do a lot of work with Alison. And so I've been following them online for ages, and I saw the, saw it pop up on Instagram and other people that I know from Nottingham were sending at me and I was like, yeah, yeah, uh, I'll get it in, I'll get it in.

Laura Guthrie: And then I did and I got the Wild Card funding, which was really exciting, cuz I've had this idea for the show since I started Uni like eight years ago, and so I was like, this is an opportunity to actually do this thing that I've been brewing for years and to get started and get that ball rolling.

Laura Guthrie: And it's been, it was just really amazing. Alison was so supportive and she's helped put me in touch with people. So we had some days here as like an r and d process, I made the puppets and they're like small, sort of ball size, but they're shaped like brain neurons and they have stretchy elasticated legs.

Laura Guthrie: And so during the show they attach onto my body in different places, by magnets. So it was a lot of, a lot of sewing and gluing to make them, and I did that here. And then I also rehearsed here with Sarah West-Valsar, helped me with some of like the directing and like helping me with the story plotting cuz there was just so many ideas and, we did a scratch performance at the puppet festival [cabaret], which was great and it had a really nice energy and we got some really lovely audience feedback as well, which was so good to hear.

Laura Guthrie: Then it just, yeah, it lasted. I, I had like odd days over the course of months, so it feels like it's taken the whole year to do, but it's been really, it's been really good.

Jay Sandhu: Izzy, why puppets?

Izzy Hollis: So when I was studying Theatre Designer at Trent, our first module was puppetry with Sean Myatt, and I just fell in love with the art form, and I was like, this is what I wanna do. And so I've just, yeah, pursued it in every avenue I possibly could since.

Jay Sandhu: And you had no idea before you went to Uni that that's what you wanted to do.

Izzy Hollis: No I saw it on the modules and I was like, hmm, I'm more, I'm more there for set and costume, but it's just another string to my bow you know?

Izzy Hollis: And then, yeah. That module just changed everything and it's been perfect because for my tics, like everyone in the theatre community and especially the puppet community, has been so supportive and lovely, and no one's ever batted an eyelid at it. And I just, I'm so grateful to be in a career that is so accommodating that that is so loving.

Izzy Hollis: I just feel like if I was, it would be so much harder if I was working, like in an office, where people would be like, can you be quiet? Like when I, you know, it doesn't matter if I'm being noisy, in a studio making puppets and everyone's just happy for me to be there rather than like wanting me to be quiet and you know, fit in

Laura Guthrie: Isn't, isn't it intriguing how we, like, we've met quite a few deaf and disabled artists through this podcast. And something that seems to resonate with everybody is that sense of belonging, that sense as a deaf or disabled person, that in this space where I'm creating work, whether that's poetry, music, theatre, visual art, it's, it's a space where I feel I belong, where I feel my voice can be heard.

Jay Sandhu: Have you ever worked in an office? Because interestingly you saying that, when we were spoken to everyone, every, literally every podcast someone has said, I can't imagine being in an office. I can't imagine doing this in an office.

Izzy Hollis: I did three days in an office over the pandemic, cuz I did work front-of-house at the theatre.

Jay Sandhu: Okay.

Izzy Hollis: And coz it's owned by the Council, we shifted once we were furloughed to try and help call round vulnerable people. And even though I knew it was the same people I worked with at the theatre in the office, but, the pressure I was putting on myself to not tic, like down the phone at these vulnerable people.

Izzy Hollis: I was very aware that everyone's on phone calls trying to help people, or trying to get work done. And if I'm shouting, *fish* down the phone, that's very confusing. So it just was mentally really exhausting and I know, after three days I was like, I just don't think I can, I don't think I could do this. It was eye opening.

Laura Guthrie: I'd be really interested to know a little bit more about the kind of motivation behind the work that you produce. So, Zoe, you were talking very much about the protest angle of the work that you produce. I mean, how, do you see yourself as an artist always doing work like that? Or do you sometimes feel just because I am a deaf artist my work doesn't always have to be about my lived experience, or do you feel it's just so much part of you that it will always be part of your work?

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): I think my work will be varied. At the moment, the focus is on protests, because that's a strong part of my life and so that influences my practice.

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): But my full lived experience isn't all just protest. At times I felt quite vulnerable. I think it's important that my art can raise awareness. So yes, there will be an aspect of protest in it, but, but you know, when the protest is successful, then there's other opportunities. So also I'm interested in like digital art, photography, newspaper culture, that typography as well, and printing.

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): And I've had a... some of my work has been focusing on the finger spelling with the alphabet and handshapes linked to the alphabet and creating posters and artwork that can educate about BSL so that people can see my work and then learn from it as well.

Laura Guthrie: But for you as well, Izzy, did your work, do you feel your work continuing along the same vein or have there been other topics you've, you've looked at or?

Izzy Hollis: Oh, so really the Tic Show is the only show that's really focused on my tics. Normally, like often the work I'm creating, it's to a different brief. I do a lot of performance work where I'm performing other people's puppets and you know, then the ticks are just something that comes alongside and when I'm performing, I don't tend to tick, so that's not often a problem.

Jay Sandhu: How comes

Izzy Hollis: Yeah. I don't know. I think they're researching it, but apparently like people with ticks, like when they're playing instruments and stuff, they won't tick. It's like some sort of, it's something to do with it with the level of focus.

Jay Sandhu: Like all your brain power's being used to do something.

Izzy Hollis: Yea, I'm not a hundred percent, it's really nice. So it's kind of like a

nice break. So a lot of people will like sing or play an instrument. It's like a bit of a break from tics.

Laura Guthrie: Interesting though, because you are creating a piece of work, yet when you perform, the chances are that you are not ticking. So how does that work

Izzy Hollis: So the show is very confusing for me because, because when I'm performing I don't tick. But also when I talk about my ticks, I tick more. And the show is both of those.

[laugh]

Jay Sandhu: Are there other points where you've had to put on the tic, in the performances?

Izzy Hollis: Yeah. It's a very interesting dynamic, but it was really interesting getting the audience feedback because people who know me and you came to see were like, I could tell that tick wasn't real. And it's like, I don't know how to portray them genuinely because my plan for the further development of the show is to sort of, shut myself in a room for a day and just film myself.

Izzy Hollis: Ah. It's like film and record it, just like trigger it as much as I can, be tired and you know

Jay Sandhu: Like a mad, social experiment.

Izzy Hollis: Yeah, that.

Laura Guthrie: May I ask what you feel the bursary, the commission, the RESIDENCE from City Arts has done for you in terms of where it can take you next?

Izzy Hollis: For me, it let me have that base of a show, so I have now got a really solid base to apply for further funding to develop the show further. I'd love to make it so it's, you know, a fully formed show rather than just a scratch show. I wanna add like a soundtrack to the back of it and eventually take it on a tour as well as try and make it as accessible as possible and just, there's so much I want to do with it as a show.

Izzy Hollis: I think that the bursary just gave me that sort of really strong base. And also like the connections with Sarah and City Arts as a whole is just

always so supportive. So hopefully the Arts Council will like the fact that I've got this sort of strong base and it will help me get that funding for the future steps.

Laura Guthrie: Yeah. I'm sure it will

Laura Guthrie: Zoe, how about you? What do you feel the residency at City Arts has done in terms of where it can take you next, or what ideas it's given you?

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): I feel like the residency has really helped me develop my ideas. Without the residency, I might have been lacking clarity on what I'm gonna do, and so I know that university finishes soon, but at university, whilst I'm there, I don't have a lot of space, and at home it's the same. I don't have access to this, this space here or the materials, so it's a really good opportunity for me to do a large piece of work, and I feel like having done the residency, I feel like I've got ideas that I can take with me to the future or that I could possibly take into different directions.

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): It's also given me confidence for the future as well. Because I've developed work at university, but I had more time here to develop those ideas in detail.

Laura Guthrie: So it's been a really good starting point for, well, not even starting point. I think what you're saying it, it feels like it's given you, well, confidence is one thing, which is just so important, isn't it?

Laura Guthrie: because as creatives we we doubt ourselves so much, often, don't we? So that's really important that it's given you that. But that idea of giving you clarity on what it is you want to do and how you want to create work, but importantly, just the space, I suppose, you both said that, that having this physical space here was a real, made a real difference

Izzy Hollis: It really did.

Izzy Hollis: I, I know I already had a connection with City Arts, but I dunno if that will be beneficial for you in the future because they helped me so much when I left university, just to sort of be involved with the local artists scene and everything. I think as a company, they're really useful for local artists and to get to know

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): Yeah, I agree totally.

Laura Guthrie: And it's just been such a joy to talk to you both. It really has and I think for me today been a really kind of like eye-opening conversation around that whole concept of how the work that you create impacts on the people that see it. And the passion behind what you do, being about the experience of your life.

Laura Guthrie: And the joy with which you both talk about your work. It's just lovely. It's really, really nice just to hear artists talking so fluently and beautifully about the kind of work that you are making and what you want it to do and where you want it to go. The exciting thing is the idea of seeing Zoe's work bigger and bolder and in more places and seeing your piece finished and on tour, all those things, they're just, yeah, just waiting to happen. Its exciting.

Jay Sandhu: I'm really interested to see how your stuff works in different spaces. Just cause I think if you did it in a really small venue that's got 50 people in here, it would have a very particular vibe, but then if you went to somewhere bigger that's got 500 people or two hundred, whatever, it'd have a completely different feel.

Izzy Hollis: Yeah, and the puppets would have to be bigger. I think. 500 people, the person at the back isn't gonna see this puppet

[laughs]

Laura Guthrie: And also the protest. Change has to happen and, and culture and the arts and creativity is a way for it to change. So let's just do that

[edit note]

Jay Sandhu: So guys, thank you very much for coming down today and being on the podcast. There's been so much, again, I feel like we could have spoken for another two hours to be fair.

Jay Sandhu: But I think there's been loads of stuff in there and yeah, I think that's everything from me is that, have I forgotten anything?

Laura Guthrie: Don't think you've forgotten anything Jay. That's all good. Thank you very much. Thanks

Izzy Hollis: [Tic: Big lions]

Jay Sandhu: and yeah. And speak to you soon

Laura Guthrie: Thank-you

Izzy Hollis: [Tic: Pie on your face]

Zoe Milner (Interpreted by Kat): Thank-you so much, it's been so interesting