



Episode 6: Plans For The Future LIFT Anniversary Special

[00:00:00] **Kris Nelson:** Hello, everyone, you are all very welcome to this special LIFT podcast. I'm Kris Nelson LIFT's artistic director and with me today is my dear colleague Sella Kanu, our executive director. We are joined by the incredible, amazing, intrepid Rose Fenton and Lucy Neal, LIFT's founding artistic directors, forces of nature, [00:01:00] festival visionaries recognized here in London and around the world for the incredible impact they made when they dreamed up LIFT, and when they kept dreaming up LIFT through all its many incarnations and through where we are now, our 40th year.

So this is a special edition podcast which we are doing to celebrate our 40th, celebrate Rose and Lucy, for Stella and I to talk a bit about where we're going and what's coming up next for LIFT, where we are now after the pandemic, or in the middle of the pandemic and all and sundry. I suspect we'll be talking about amazing art, wonderful moments in London, dreams for the future and all kinds of other things.

So, I'd like to introduce all of our guests. As I said, I'm Kris Nelson, LIFT's, artistic director. Stella, would you say hello?

Stella Kanu: Hello

There's Stella Kanu, our executive director. And Rose Fenton, would you say hello?

Rose Fenton: Hello

And Lucy Neal.

Lucy Neal: Hello!



So, [00:02:00] it's a lot to talk about. We've got 45 minutes for this podcast, so who knows if we'll get a year for each minute? I don't think we'll even get close, but I mean, Rose and Lucy, the history of LIFT has become kind of lore or legend, certainly in Toynbee Studios where we have our HQ, but also really around the world. I've met numerous festival directors who were there when you were involved in their beginnings as the iron curtain fell, and you were supporting festivals being born in the Bulgarians or in Latvia or in Poland. I've met a writer in Kampala who presented at a festival of LIFT's in the nineties with the play reading, and now leads the playwright writing program at Macquarie University in Kampala.

Every Londoner who's in theater loves to tell me, anyway, about how LIFT somehow touched [00:03:00] their lives, the moment they saw a LIFT show, when they were an extra in a LIFT show, their first ever performance (that's Tarek Iskander, the artistic director at BAC), when they were a LIFT alumni, et cetera, et cetera.

I love the beginning story too. Where did it all come from and, what was the highlight after, uh, in your first 10 years?

Rose Fenton: Blimey, that's a big question, Kris! Lucy, do you want to start or shall I plunge in?

Lucy Neal: No, you plunge in Rose.

Rose Fenton: OK well, I mean to start right at the very beginning and thank you, Kris, that's rather an amazing introduction. But to start right at the beginning, Lucy and I were at Warrick University together where we spent many happy years making theater at the art center and [00:04:00] assisting some rather wonderful experimental British work.

Whilst we were there, we'd been invited to a festival, an international student festival in Coimbra, that was in our second year. And we put together a play - David Hare's Fanshen a very verbose, wordy play - and presented it. It went down like a lead balloon at the festival, we have to be honest. But what we saw when we were, there was some amazing



shows from Czechoslovakia, Poland, Portugal, Germany, which were so different to the theater that we've been used to, which were multidisciplinary, which kind of provided a window on the world of what was happening in their countries, which really inspired us to say, "why don't we create an international festival when we get back to Britain?"

Originally, it was going to be a student festival in our third year at Warrick. However, [00:05:00] events, including exams, took over. So we decided when we left Warwick we would try and create a festival in London, an international theater festival, which would give a window on the world through theater as to what was happening in the world, politically, artistically, socially, but also introduce British audiences to theater from other traditions.

You have to remember the British theatre, our word for audience is audience - we listen. In many other languages the word is spectator - who watch. So, theaters don't just happen in the theater space itself, but outside in found spaces in other traditions. So, that was very much our intention.

And remember, this was 40 years ago. Maggie Thatcher had just become prime minister, vowing to put the great back into Great Britain. We were once again, [00:06:00] confronted with an island mentality. British theater was considered the best in the world by the British theater, and was often invited to festivals around the world but, no festival existed to reciprocate that invitation.

It was rather like, we used to say, going to other people's parties and never inviting people back yourself and having your own party. So we decided that's what we should do. And I think the third thing, and we even wrote a paper about it, was that international festivals like the one we were proposing would stop the third world war. In that we were following the tradition of all those festivals that were founded after the Second World War, the Edinburgh Festival being one of them. So nations could come together and through the exchange of arts, culture, ideas, actually promote understanding. [00:07:00] So, that was a little bit



of a gallop through of where we, we began, but Lucy, maybe you want to pick up the threads of how we got it going?

Lucy Neal: I think once the idea had seeded from Portugal, but also our own, you know, we spent a lot of time making theater and producing theater when we were at Warwick so we had that sort of theater spirit, you know, firing us up. But I think that the early days of setting LIFT up were fueled in their own way by need and by curiosity. I think that every day we ventured out to sort of put our idea, to start delivering it and making it a reality. We just everyday recognized the need for it, so we never doubted ourselves at all, that there was a need for an international theater festival that really connected with some of the artists coming in and the kind of incredible story of London and it's diversity and its people and its communities and its languages and it's cultures.[00:08:00]

But I think also our own personal curiosity. I can remember that some of the really early trips we went on, I think it was incredibly lucky that one of our first trips to see work was Poland, because it was just before Solidarnosc and the sort of military oppression and communist era, and simply diving in to seeing the work of both students and professional theater in Poland at that time, it was like a fire of what theater can be, you know, when it is seeking to tell the truth that is a hidden story when so much is buried and not allowed to be spoken of. And we were right in the thick, you know you can say that it's political but actually it's just people telling the stories of their lives, you know, and so therefore it was our own curiosity in what theatre be. You know, my goodness, it can be this and that. So we were constantly being reaffirmed with the idea that we had, and actually in just sort of talking about these early days of setting up the festival I want to say how hard it was because I salute - yourselves included - I salute every single festival director going, because you're being a diplomat, you're being a traveler, you're being an explorer, you're being a producer, you're being a conjurer, really everything is complex and dynamic and changing. So it's a lot to juggle. And we did, in setting the first festival up, it was hard work and there were many days, I remember walking around Buckingham Gate one day we had about 79 nos for fundraising letters and I remember Rose announcing very suddenly, "this is the worst day of the festival". And we went, yeah, this is really bad, but then of course, other things started to



happen. [00:10:00] We got an amazing team together because essentially that first festival we were all volunteers so it was really everybody. We just handed jobs out. We just said, oh, you can run the box office. You could edit a newspaper. Oh yeah. Could you organize all the accommodation for the students? So there was a spirited a character, the setting up of that first festival.

But then when it actually was live and we were selling tickets, you know, again this curiosity of the audiences to see the work that we'd brought, and the fact that the shows sold, and that LIFT had made a space for itself, albeit against the kind of Thatcherite economies of the time, sort of against quite a lot of odds. And of course, then the challenge was sitting down and going, "Are we going to do this again?" And in terms of how we developed LIFT, I think it's fair to say that after every single festival, and that was the biennial nature of it, [00:11:00] we did sit down and go, "Are we going to do this again?" And I think that that constant questioning of 'why would you do that?' And constantly trying to take the learning from one festival forward into the next, I think that helped us really play with the experimentation of site-specific work, of exploring distinct communities that could connect to particular shows, and constantly trying to ask everyone, "What are we learning here? What is important? What is happening politically? Where might we go? What, what are the stories that haven't yet had their voice?" And I think just following the resonances of LIFT now, I think that, that constant, where are the stories we haven't heard yet, you know, where are those transformative narratives which we have to hear because they've either been silenced or haven't yet had a chance to play.

Kris Nelson: there's something in what you said there, Lucy, that I want to pick up on, because I think it's true of LIFT, of all the [00:12:00] festivals that were born at a similar generation and the ones that proceeded you, that thing about making a show or landing a project, or a connecting an artist with London, with communities here.

That LIFT was by far among the first around the world to start doing that. So I'm curious about that evolution of values. Rose described those first values of what we're not seeing here in London, connecting with



important international stories, the urgency of political and personal voices, that's always been part of the LIFT DNA. And I'm curious about the values that you added to the organisation as it grew and as time passed. And one of those, I think truly is that thing about presenting work in a way that meant it was owned, inhabited and created by and with Londoners. So where did that begin?

Lucy Neal: I would say that we evolved it's values, but I would say that at the [00:13:00] very beginning it was incredibly important for us in terms of how we hosted. And I think that hospitality was always a key kind of value in that, in terms of the experience that artists had when they were in London and this sort of constant oscillation in who is the guest, who's being invited and who is hosting. Because of course we were hosting artists, but we were the guests at their shows. So you would never losing that oscillation. And I think that, you know, we took great care of looking after them and they had group hosts to make sure they were okay. And I think that you can build so much else on top of the quality of hosting, and that notion that to be guest and host at the same time is a very beautiful, endless play. And of course, culturally, across the world, how we're hosted, how we're a [00:14:00] guest, how we greet, how we meet, how we welcome strangers, how we provide an extra place at the table. All those things culturally are profound in terms of how humans are making space for each other in world. That is I think a value that was there at the beginning and continued to find new manifestations of how that actually was then delivered.

Rose Fenton: I would add also, you know, that sense of understanding of what true exchange is, and true collaboration. And every time we did a festival, looking at what we'd learned and where we might go forward, but responding very much to artists and to our audiences. So right from the very beginning, we were amazed when we put on the first festival. Suddenly an audience came out of London, which we haven't really thought about. A whole Polish community came to see the Polish shows.

The Brazilian community came to [00:15:00] see Mako Naima. And we realized, you know, the whole international makeup of London as a world city. And that sense of us being a world city was something we



then built on. And also then the artists that started coming out of the woodwork in Britain, and also internationally, who'd heard of LIFT and our openness to putting on work which perhaps broke barriers, which was not conventional. We then found ourselves with propositions. We worked very closely with Artsadmin and artists who would like to put on a show in the docks in London or in an abandoned building. So could we respond to that? So there was this constant play between artists, audiences, and then, how might we work with those different communities within the city and what kind of connections could be made?

And so you're then looking at LIFT beginning to [00:16:00] commission work, commissioning work through our education programme with the visit of the *Hanoi Water Puppets* in '93. How might we then connect up with the Vietnamese community in Greenwich and do a four month programme within the schools where there was a large proportion of children with Vietnamese origin, celebrating the culture, which they could then share and show to the visiting artists.

So again, there was that exchange and also an excavation if you like, of London's fabric, social fabric and the stories within it. And that became a really, really rich seam of work at the beginning of the nineties. But then also, how might we make connections between artists and co-commission? So something like the commissioning of *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, the adaptation by Biyi Bandele. We teamed up with The [00:17:00] National Theater and the West Yorkshire Playhouse. So we were starting to collaborate with other venues and organizations, to create this collaboration between British and Nigerian artists and actors.

So that sense of not just traveling, buying in a show, but also commissioning. And even when we were just presenting we would see how British artists could be involved. So like Enrique Vargas' *Oráculos*, 12 artists came over, but then augmented the team with another 12 British artists. So again, that whole principle of exchange and taking risks.



Lucy Neal: And just to say something about audiences. I remember, I think it was something like '97 or '99, we'd commissioned Deborah Warner to create the some St Pancreas project, which was a kind of journey that you went on on your own [00:18:00] as an audience through that amazing abandoned building, before it had become a flashy hotel and YOU - The City had done something similar in '87 with Fiona Templeton where you were on your own, and you went through this kind of, you know, uh, each actor became the next sort of battle and that the audience had to pick up on their own, but we came up with, and we were I'd say rather chuffed with ourselves. We came up with this notion of the creative audience, and then the notion that actually an audience member were themselves party to the creation of the work.

I remember we were a bit chuffed about that, and of course, you know, when you're looking at theater that's really exploring particular sites that have got their own existing stories, how the audience stepped into that is a key factor.

Rose Fenton: Yes. And I think that sense of adventure, I mean, [00:19:00] we took risks. Audiences I hope began to understand that if you came to a LIFT show it was an adventure. You may absolutely love. You may absolutely hate it, but you'd never remained indifferent. You would debate it. It could take you to parts of London you never knew existed. So it was a kind of exploration of London as well as a theater.

So you were kind of primed when you booked your LIFT ticket to go on an adventure. And I think that's a really important quality and, people often initially reject the new and criticize it. And then you find five, 10 years later, it's the established norm. And I think that sense of trying to listen out, listen to the artists, engage the audiences, encourage them to take risks, very, very important part of LIFT's role for us. And it looks like it also is for you. I think [00:20:00] that's LIFT, really.

Stella Kanu: Absolutely. The audience experiences that we hear about, people talk about that kind of, the flow between form, the kind of, sometimes it's one person, sometimes you're in a group, sometimes



you're in a huge crowd. That's definitely one of the characterisations of LIFT through the years.

And I guess I have a little bit of a question about, if you can, what is your favorite memory of LIFT, either as a production or a piece of theater or a relationship with a particular artist or company? What's your favorite memory?

Lucy Neal: Shall I go first Rose?

So, this was the first thing that came to my mind in consideration of that question and actually, it was a moment. It was a moment at the reception that LIFT held in South Africa House in [00:21:00] 1999. And we were being hosted by an extraordinary woman called Cheryl Carolus, who was the first female, black High Commissioner to be sent to London by Nelson Mandela, who was the government at that point. And the story of LIFT's relationship with South Africa over the years was a very rich one, starting out in the second festival, we were getting permission really, and a blessing from the ANC in London to actually stage a play during a time of cultural boycott, during the apartheid years.

But when there was insight given into the experiences of apartheid, then the cultural boycott would allow us to put on, in that instance, a play by Maishe Maponya. But going forward to '99, we had consistently been interested in programming work that was both emergent or established in South Africa. And that year, in [00:22:00] 1999, we had no less than three companies. We were hosting *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, which was William Kentridge and handspring puppet company. We were hosting a play called *The Story I'm About To Tell*, which was about the truth and reconciliation work that was happening in the country around truth and/or justice, and then also a new initiative of LIFT was Phakama, which was this youth exchange between young people in South Africa, from many different parts of South Africa and, and youth theatres in London.

So this moment at South Africa house, which you have to remember had had a picket outside it against the apartheid for all our early years of



living in London, and then this kind of extraordinary moment where we were asked into the building. And at a particular moment, Cheryl Carolus spoke, we had the funders there, it was a reception, you can imagine, you know, everyone was kind of gathered to welcome these artists into London. And Cheryl Carolus spoke very honestly about the [00:23:00] pain of the past and about apartheid and the artists were celebrated and then one of the Phakama participants, Pagosi, suddenly just began to sing and he began to sing Shosholoza, which is actually quite a popular rugby song, but it comes from a Zulu song and it's about migrating peoples traveling by train.

And he just begun to sing. And then all the other Phakamas began to sing and then they started to create a human train around this great hall that we were in. And Cheryl Carolus joined it. And even the funders joined it. And in the end, I think there were only about two people sort of hiding behind pillars who were a bit nervous of it.

So I just cite that as a memory because it was a moment of joy. It was a moment of theater of its own that came out of that moment. And as this human train, it involved [00:24:00] absolutely everyone at the reception, and it was just that moment when you really felt that both the theater that was being made, the people that were present, the truth of that moment, um, that change could happen. And that theatre was there. It was right there, taking in all that story and turning it into another story. So, that was just a kind of moment. And, and remember that all the walls are paintings. We were surrounded by ethnological paintings of a colonial age or of the Boer War. Those were all there.

And this human train singing Shosholoza was kind of moving and weaving its way around.

Stella Kanu: And for you, Rose?

Rose Fenton: Oh my goodness. That is such a hard one. So Lucy told me what she was going to talk about. So I thought, okay, I'm going to talk about something different because I mean, there's so many kind of politically charged, bridge-building, rule-breaking stories about LIFT,



[00:25:00] but this one needs something quite, sort of small, but very kind of deeply felt.

And you mentioned Stella about, you can find yourself in a show one at a time. And this is actually a show which was for an audience of one at a time. It was a *Rockolas* by Enrique Vargas from Columbia.

And I'd seen this in Bogota, the Bogota festival. We staged it in a derelict bus station in King's Cross having kind of discounted number of other places, power stations down in Southeast London, the volts of the Round House. We couldn't find the right place to house this rumbling labyrinth made out of canvas and boxes, which was creating a journey for one person at a time.

And it was a journey of self discovery working with all the five senses Enrique used to talk about the theater at the five senses where everything came into, [00:26:00] play, touch, smell, vision, hearing, and taste because we know how do we get away from the head? How do we actually understand the world using all the five senses?

And so it was the most extraordinary experience. You went into a kind of wardrobe and were told to choose a coat. And you will wandering around this wardrobe and you suddenly realized there were various mirrors placed around you were totally disorientated. And then after about five minutes of panic beginning, somebody back into the next room and then you found yourself in the most beautiful sunlit glade. Green fluttering leaves, a beautiful lady in a white dress, swinging on a swing, sound of birds, smell of flowers. And then she jumped off the swing and started playing hide and seek and all the gauze curtains. So you were trying to follow her and you couldn't, she kept [00:27:00] escaping you. And then suddenly we were pushed into another space.

And then we were confronted with a pile of corn, and we were shown how to grind it. And out of the flour that was produced, we then had to mix it, knead the dough and take our small loaf of bread into another room where it was put into an oven so we could smell bread baking. And



so it went on, there were moments where we could sit at a desk and write down our thoughts.

Another moment when this rather extraordinary devilish androgynous person came and pulled us into a room and danced tango, and then insisted on doing arm wrestling before she puts you in a sort of upside down box and tumbled you into the next room. And so it went on, it was an assault, but not in a terrifying way, in a surprising way.

All your [00:28:00] senses were alive. And then right at the end of this journey, which lasted for about an hour, we found ourselves in a group, you came into a room and the other people who've gone before you sitting in a really calm space, drinking mint tea, and eating bread, the bread that has been baked previously.

And then we were brought together as a community and talked about our experiences. Talk to the way which we wouldn't have done before in an open way, all sorts of barriers were broken. It was an extraordinary experience. Very like theater, you know, theater is there. People say it could be cathartic. It could be. Understanding yourself and your place in the world.

And I felt like I've just been on a long holiday, but I've only been in there for an hour. It was like the whole of my whole body had kind of relaxed and I thought, but goodness, is this theatre, can we put this on at LIFT? When [00:29:00] I saw it said, well, no, why not? It's is this isn't this exactly what we should be doing? And again, the debate ranged, but even the most hard critics came out saying 'I feel spiritually refreshed. This is a playground of the imagination' and absolutely it was. And I think the other interesting thing, it broke down so many barriers, but also in terms of the art form and the people who Enrique worked with.

Cause it wasn't just actors, but there were psychotherapists, there were anthropologists, there was auromatherapists, it was really a coming together. Different skills to make what was an extraordinary piece of theatre?



I think there are quite a few people who still talk about it. And of course now it may be not sound so extraordinary because we have immersive theater, you know, Punchdrunk and everybody else, a number of people would say, well, probably that's where it began.

Well, we like to think so, [00:30:00] but anyway, it was personally a very, very enriching experience.

Stella Kanu: I absolutely wish I had the depth of recall that you both have those experiences. And now feel like I just go into events and I go into venues and I'd go and see theater, and I just experienced it there and then. I'm really present and I forget loads so that I feel like you took us back there really in terms of particular experiences.

Kris I'm always really fascinated with how much, you know, about LIFT productions and the pieces that you've seen and recall over the years, any favorites?

Kris Nelson: For me, I mean I love LIFT's history, because it matches alongside the festival that I first had my mind blown out, which was the Festival TransAmériques in Montreal. And of course, Lucy and Rose as founders of LIFT were very close colleagues with Marie-Helene Falcon and Jacques Vézina, the founders [00:31:00] of FTA Montreal, and as a young theater maker and producer, you know, I was involved in the birth of PuSH. I was like the kid who drove the van when the PuSH festival was being born in Vancouver.

Then from PuSH to go to Festival TransAmériques, where there was this massive sense of scale that we just could never achieve in Vancouver. There's been a correspondence there for me with LIFT for sure. In terms of the work that I've seen? I think the pieces that had the biggest impact on me was when I first came to London with the team as they were delivering the 2018 festival.

And they're two flips of a coin, I guess, one being a *Session*, which was the result of an incredible collaboration between Steppaz, Empire Sounds and Dan Cannon. The work [00:32:00] had this power I had



never seen from young performers, I never encountered it in Dublin and I hadn't encountered it in Canada before. A piece that was made with incredibly talented young people that in no way could be seen as less than any of the other pieces in the festival.

It was local, it was made in Tottenham. It was extremely high caliber and the energy that was created and rippled through the audience as these young people performed was like a total tonic and I mean, I went back every night.

Lucy Neal: Oh, wow.

Kris Nelson: I moved things around to go back every night. Then you know, with our sister festival, Make in Bristol, we toured it around the country and had a performance at the River Stage at the National Theatre. And it had a massive crowd of thousands of people.

And it just like in [00:33:00] every context that piece landed, it made a situation for itself that made the audience, like they could not deny the work. They could not deny the energy. They could not deny the expertise, the skill, the guessing at all the interplay between all the different performers and who is trying to outdo the other. It was just phenomenal and very deeply, deeply local.

And then I think the work that might've had an impact on me. And certainly it had an impact on LIFT would be *Fly By Night*. The Duke Riley pigeon project where 1500 pigeons flew over the over an abandoned golf course in Thamesmead. I think it's an example of that expansive imagination of LIFTs.

There was a beautiful moment of calm as you heard the creaking of the pigeons wings as they flew over the sky. It was something that for the few people that got to see it, I think we were all really, really proud of. [00:34:00] And dotted in there, actually there's a lot of LIFT lore and LIFT stories that I've absorbed from people telling me about projects.



And what about you? Stella? You've seen many LIFT productions over the years.

Stella Kanu: Yeah, in the conversation with Claire, the other day, team member, Claire, we were talking about, I was kind of listing LIFT productions that I've seen over the years. And many that I hadn't realized were LIFT at the time, which is really, what's really extraordinary and really good to kind of talk through.

But *Session* for me is also a really big deal. And it's partly to do with, there's a real kind of deep sense of why for me, that was really extraordinary and looking at the audiences and how they were responding, but also seeing that particular type of work, because what was really significant for me was as a British born Nigeria. Really interested and connected to the culture in which afrobeats and that style of [00:35:00] dancing comes from, you know, it's, it's, club-based, it's about these kinds of group and community environments where that level of electricity and skill and movement is just regular.

And to see that in a space that is deemed to be, you know, the River Stage at the National Theater, you know, it was so theater and not theater. It was so performance and not performance. And it's kind of, for me, it's one of my real interests around the kind of work that we do at LIFT, which is how do we deconstruct and make less elite the kind of experiences that we have that we have in this kind of live performance and theater space.

How do we absolutely transpose what is all, what already exists in lots of marginalized communities, in terms of how they embody and develop and share the art forms that we commodify. And what I was really amazed at was how [00:36:00] natural and how naturally transpose that experience was. I feel it in the audience, the electricity that you would feel in the club that you would feel when there, there were particular dances that they do, and it just electrify the audience when it's in a clubscene or a community event or at a dance hall, or we know we have regular dances where Nigerian dancing is kind of a real feature. Both young and old.



And for me, that was just such a great experience to see what I always want to see in theatre is this deconstruction of the eliteness of the experience, the eliteness of the art form, which is why LIFT for me is such a really great platform to consider how we kind of approach the breaking down of all of these different forms and norms and expand it and stretch it.

And that was a really great example because I saw myself, I saw my cousins, I saw my nieces and my nephews in that space. And, and that broke down a lot of barriers for me and feeling that [00:37:00] electricity in the audience, that's, that's always what you want. I mean, you can go to lots of music concerts, and always get that. And there were some moments where I'm like, why can't theatre do this all the time! They're all singing unison, they're all pumped with the same energy. And I think that theater is at its best when it does that.

No matter what the energy is, even if it's grief and sadness and recognition.

That was a long answer, but yeah.

So I guess Kris, that always kind of in a way we've kind of charted the course of LIFT over the last 40 years, but definitely it's kind of early beginnings. And where we are now is in some ways is really similar, in terms of the backdrop in which we're working against, but also LIFT has changed and shifted a little bit.

And how's how has the last two years been for you in terms of the pandemic and its impact on international touring and LIFT?

Kris Nelson: The last two years have been [00:38:00] revolutionizing. That's not quite it. That's not the word cause I didn't say it right. It's been...

Stella Kanu: Another R, like rubbish.



Kris Nelson: Robbery! I think it's been, you know, I've certainly hit all the different poles of the scale. It's been traumatic. It's been deeply affecting. The first wave when artists said, whoa, slow down, give us a second to figure out what we're doing before you throw a bunch of commissions at it at us.

I heard all of these different calls that artists were making about how to respond to this time, we're really powerful. And then some people started to innovate. And then I think people who took that first pause also started [00:39:00] to imagine how they would respond to this new world, these new possibilities rather than the limitations.

So I think out of the, a big sense of grief in the international festival world, for sure, came new reckonings, new understandings and new ways of collaborating. So, you know, we've launched our concept touring commission, which is about seeding artists to collaborate with with little or little to no travel.

That's been amazing to offer that kind of sandbox and opportunity for artists to collaborate. Certainly was a battery recharged for me, and I could see it was a battery recharged for them, but also that's part of a movement that's happening around the world where other organizations and artists are starting to lead on things where we're all imagining how to move differently.

With climate crisis, the pandemic sort of fast forwards all that 'Oh yeah, it would be good if we did a little less planes.' It just hit the fast forward button on all of that. [00:40:00] So that's really changed. Also the constituting thing was born out of, A, the pandemic, B, figuring out a cogent interesting, exciting response for LIFT to engage with the climate crisis, but also some of the work in conversations we'd already been having about the difficulty for artists to come to Britain, to do their work. The conversations I've had with international artists to try and convince them weirdly to come to London.

I promise you, I know the home office process will be terrible, I know it will be demoralizing. I know, you'll get treated poorly. But I promise you



coming to London will be worth it, because of the audience that you'll meet here. I mean, that's, that's tricky. And yet Lucy just popped into the chat hospitality.

Absolutely, that has now become part of the invitation. So hopefully that shows us a new way around international collaboration. It's been amazing to see festivals get back on their [00:41:00] feet and, it's really different in different places in the world. Like France, for example, never stopped the theaters.

The theaters were deemed in a central place to work. So they know two seasons of work that have only been seen by professionals that are ready for audiences. Whereas you have other places where, artists in Beirut, for example, who are completely, they're trying to rebuild their city as much as they're trying to rebuild their cultural sector.

So the differences are starker. The foibles of politicians decisions, the caprices of political decisions, where all the cultural scene is much less uniform in terms of how we're all responding to it. But I think there's so much new ground to cover. There's old ground to go over again, because it's important to. And all of those things that we've been talking about in terms of hospitality, in terms of the invitation, the electricity that [00:42:00] an audience can discover when they see artists from abroad or see their own local artists presented in a different context. Those are all still things that are really, really true. And they're true for London and LIFT as much as they're true for other places that I've seen.

Stella Kanu: You made me think about a few things there, about how, yes, the last 18 months, two years has been full of a lot of turbulence but it's also been a period that has allowed us to kind of better articulate what our current values are as LIFT.

And I think what's really what was really interesting listening to you, Lucy and Rose, you talked about the work and you talked about the productions, but I could really hear, because I lived it, I could hear, you know, the eighties and the nineties were such turbulent times in terms of what was happening globally.



And it was internationally turbulence that was felt in the UK, even though we're a [00:43:00] small, tiny island and had a small part. But we often were in these environments that touched us and that theater and the work that LIFT did in those early days was against this kind of real turbulent backdrop.

And what's been really interesting is also the conditions in which the art sector was also working in. And if you think about the eighties and nineties there was such a focus on how the arts could meet social priorities, whether that's this kind of soft power that the cultural sector has been able to develop in these exchanges.

And then you get the kind of 2000s where we were all about kind of proving our financial sustainability and borrowing from the business world and beating them with their own stick of leadership. And now we're in this really different space that feels like there's a potential for a kind of softness.

There's a potential for us to look relationally about how we're [00:44:00] dealing with each other more humanized. How can we ask ourselves the right questions now that are yes, about the work, but also the environment in which it's taking place, which again, just echoes the early start of LIFT.

And we've been able to ask ourselves the kind of questions, like how can we be more generous? How can we be more inclusive? How can we be more humanized? And I think what we're getting into now is this kind of period where the value of ways of working and the value of even our staff teams and the cultures that we're creating, all of that is kind of being taken into consideration as well as what environment are we creating for artists?

What environment are we creating for our audiences? How are we expanding our audiences? And I think that's a very, very different world that we're entering into. And there's a lot of [00:45:00] goodwill, intention, but also pressure to kind of get it right. And that all of us that are



contributing to the cultural landscape are being asked to consider the value of people in a completely different way.

And that means that for us, at LIFT, we've been able to spend some time just refreshing and articulating what our values really are. And in reality, I don't think they're any different from the values that LIFT started out with. But we've kind of turned the volume up a little bit on those kinds of people values, those kind of sacred values almost. We've got 10 new core values.

And we're talking about things like integrity and generosity and advocacy and care, and that kind of just. It lends itself to almost, um, a kind of newness about what the future can be and what the next 40 years might be about and how that might impact, not just our [00:46:00] sustainability, but how we redefine what it means to be international.

Lucy, I love your concept about what it means to be a host and to be welcoming and where that welcome is and how that welcome now is both inwards and outwards. Um, so it's re. The next 40 years of lift are still to be decided like what that backdrop will be, what the environment will be, but it's still with that sense of adventure still with that sense of how can we stretch the form?

How can we maximize the relationships? How can we make sure that we're developing product, for want of a better word, that people want and need? I'd love to be able to say the next 40 years are in excellent hands, which of course they are, but it's still to be seen what that will look like.

Lucy Neal: I want to say something, can I say something? I've just been up in Glasgow during COP or other sort of not-COP and the reason I'm [00:47:00] so excited about what both Kris and Stella have outlined is that the strong story that needed to be told at COP and that wasn't told at COP. You know the story about, what's called the justice narrative or it's formalized in loss and damage, which is that we simply cannot live in a world where the global north is living and the global south is dying.



And that all the stories that need to be told, are those that have been marginalized, and whether they're the small island nations or the climate vulnerable forum, is that the justice narrative is that the voices of those that are on the frontline suffering now, not about the future about now.

And so this newness, as you put it Stella about the hidden stories, the marginalized voices. You know the multiplicity of voices that we [00:48:00] need to hear. I agree. It's the same thing. Let's hear the true stories that *need* to be heard. And in being heard changed the world because we see with new eyes about the justice narratives and whether that's about colonialism or going back 400 years and changing every system so that we get so that we can live on this planet so that we can co-exist on a livable planet. It's it's the same story.

Stella Kanu: Totally. Totally agree. And that need for balance and the need for it to be rebalanced is it's just so stark and it's so now, but it also is what makes now really exciting potentially.

Rose Fenton: Yeah. This emphasis on humanizing because it brings everything in. Absolutely everything brings everything down to the human, you as a human, other people as a [00:49:00] human.

And that in a way you can't kind of go wrong. If you feel it, if you follow that principle. And of course, we used to talk about consuming the arts or participating in the arts. You mentioned the word product and you looked slightly uncomfortable.

Stella Kanu: I'm sorry I said that.

Rose Fenton: Well no, all of that, actually, all that can be part of it.

As long as what's underpinning it is that sense of actually it's humans, making, sharing, creating, and opening up. So I think that sounds really hopeful and inspiring

Lucy Neal: Agree, agree.



Stella Kanu: Wow. We kind of went everywhere and anywhere.

Kris Nelson: Rose and Lucy, do you have any reflections now that IFT has turned 40 about what the future is for arts and culture in this country and in the world?

Lucy Neal: [00:50:00] Vital.

Yeah, I think if we started out with a need for LIFT, then that need is much as ever. Stella, I think you said, that it's, it's great than ever. And I think I can say that with sufficient heart and sincerity, that every single time I catch a glimmer of LIFT's energy, the team's commitment, the stories that you're making space for I just completely saluted from my bones.

But I think it's needed more than ever. I think it's needed more than *ever*. Theater above all convenes, theater is a place where we gather and theater is a place where whoever you are wherever you are from whatever your lived experiences, is that you can find a place for it, for yourself and a [00:51:00] place of connection with others.

And that is what is needed this sharing this empathizing, this connecting, connecting, connecting to each other to the natural world it's needed more than ever.

Rose Fenton: Yeah, I absolutely agree Lucy, this sense of connecting. This sense of connecting and there are so many possibilities now of how we can connect, look at what we're doing now and actually, how do we marry that with the live in person.

Is there a distinction? How can we bring the best of both worlds together also bearing in mind how we need to act responsibly and our carbon footprint. I think there's some really exciting possibilities ahead for the role of arts and culture. I think the biggest challenge will always remain, but how do we have an equitable conversation across the world?



We are still [00:52:00] in a very privileged position in the northern hemisphere, how do we kind of shift things? How can we together find ways of having an equitable creative conversation, equitable creative work, which opens up new horizons. I think it's a big challenge.

Kris Nelson: Wonderfully wise words from our founders.

Thank you both for joining us today. And we've been Lucy Neal, Rose Fenton, Stella Kanu, and Kris Nelson. This is LIFT's special 40th edition podcast and thank you all for tuning in.

So you've heard some incredible memories today and incredible stories about LIFT and our past. If you've loved LIFT, we are doing a Crowdfunder to celebrate our 40th anniversary and raise money for future LIFT magic moments.

To make future memories and future powerful things happening [00:53:00] in this city. Please check it out via our website, [liftfestival.com](https://www.liftfestival.com). You can find the links there or go to [crowdfunder.co.uk/LIFT-festivals-40th-birthday](https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/LIFT-festivals-40th-birthday). Buy us a pint, throw us some quid, treat yourself to a luxury Crowdfunder item.

We would love to have your support and keep making this wonderful festival happen.