**Bruntwood Prize Toolkit- Series 2. Nickie Miles Wildin and Testament on writing for and with community**

**Nickie:** Shall I start?

**Testament:** Yeah let’s do it.

**Nickie:** OK, hello I'm Nickie Miles-Wildin, I’m a Theatre Director, I am a white woman I have bleached white hair which is short at the sides and bit fluffy on top because it needs a cut. I've got black rimmed glasses, I've got a piercing in my left nostril and wearing a blue hoodie. To one side you can see my curtains, they’ve got red flowers on. On the right there’s a white bookshelf full of books about Theatre and stuff that I haven't read. On top of it I like photo frames, bit of clutter. To the other side there is a painting on the wall of three black cats, you can probably just see one, and that's by the disabled artist Maud Lewis. Just below that is a green plastic tray, yes I do have a green plastic tray Blu tacked on my wall and that's because it's signed by the marvellous Julie Walters from when I used to work in box office. I used to make all the cups of tea and she came to an event and I just asked her to sign it as Mrs Overall and she did, so prized possession to me.

**Testament:** That's amazing that's amazing, keeping Victoria Wood's vibe alive and you were in Manchester was right well, So literally right down the road from Victoria.

So my name is Testament AKA Andy to me mates and I am a mixed race a man, half Ghanian half English. I have very short Afro hair with a big scar in middle which creates a bald spot, I'm unshaven I'm wearing big black headphones. I'm wearing a olive green hoodie, behind me is my daughter’s bedroom. There is a grey bunk bed, there is a white chest of draws with the mirror and kids makeup you get free with little magazines in the supermarket. on the wall as a picture of a bunny rabbit and their stencils behind me on the wall which says ‘Dream, Believe, Achieve’. Another pink rimmed mirror and yeah wardrobe behind me, cheapo IKEA wardrobe behind me with pink and flowery boxes on top with lots of clutter at the back. I'm a writer rapper, beat boxer, and Theatre maker.

**Nickie:** Hey that's not really your daughter's bedroom, it's yours

**Testament**: I kind of wish it was like it has a lot of character, a lot of joy going on in it, whereas me room like it's nice but it's boring.

**Nickie:** So should we talk about our time making Connect Fest last year? Where we worked with...it was an InterGen show at the Royal Exchange for the elders and young, which was supposed to be IRL, in real life, and lockdown happens, well lockdown one in March 2020, and we have to put it all online didn't we.

**Testament:** It was a shock, I was very excited, I love working there (the Exchange), and I'd just finished being a Writer in residence there, which was close to living where I did like 10 years of my childhood. So I used to go to watch plays as a kid to be embassy like you know famous people are telly doing Hamlet or whatever. So it was a massive thing to be a Writer in residence there, and then to be invited to be the Writer on the InterGen, which then will turn into a ‘Den’ show for the elders and the young company was totally dope. Then I found out that you were being the Director who I had met previously, which will talk about later. So that was like ‘oh this is going to be dope’, and it's going to be really nice as well I get to work with a really cool person, a really lovely person. Talent and niceness I really appreciate both those things.

**Nickie:** I think it is like knowing that we were going to work together was just a real spark. We would work briefly together before on a project and then being brought together by the Royal Exchange dispel it's out ace I can't have any other word for it, and the fact that we were going to be working with these different communities to create something in the ‘Den’ as it was going to be which was also epic that feel reaching another community..

**Testament:** Do I just explain what that is? So ‘The Den’ is like a portable performance space which is basically a giant kind of tent which is going to be put up in Wigan and I think they’re going to be some stuff in the works to change building as well but like the main thing was a big run in Wigan reaching another community which doesn't have live Theatre.

**Nickie:** We were and that was going to be around as well in that time an not just felt really exciting and we had we started chatting around what this could be about, and I was in my head thinking: what brings people together is this sense of music, and so this idea that we were going to be specific, we could have people involved, it could become a mini festival we could have people outside ‘The Den’ performing, maybe engage with the community from that local area as well, but then we started auditions. We’d cast it and that was exciting. At the auditions, people had to talk about their favourite piece of music.

**Testament:** I was there for the Elders auditions but I wasn't there for the young company auditions. Sweet festival talk about like why they thought music would be a good thing cause you've got like younger folk and older folk that are going to collaborate on a project together and you had this idea of music and festival. How did you think that would help those two different communities?

**Nickie:** Because I see music as something that ignites everyone, brings people together, there's a real sense of community. It can unite people, and I also this idea of festival was a way for the audience, who weren’t going to be performing, that they could be involved as well, but it felt like it wasn't just going to be that the audience comes in and sits down. It was a feeling of everyone was going to be involved it could feel a bit more immersive. It was just that feeling of unity and whether that is true think like to a lullaby or through being a concert there's something that music really plays a big part in all our lives and remember the audition process for the elbow certainly and I think it was the same for being young company watching similarly incomplete so you sort of chose a format and it's funny because with the audition process literally you're trying to select people that you think would be best for the project.

OK what combination of people, what different aspects are different people bringing in terms of ideas, in terms of performance skills that would fit with virtue of what we could sort of imagine going together. So you're actually taking the community in and taking people out of community to create another new little thing but as it happened, when the lockdown happened, what in the end happened was everyone’s auditions were kind of like a workshop, or a workshop format anyway so it didn't become like just the workshop and selection. It was really the jumping off point for ideas, and it wasn't going to be about selecting people or you know dividing a group or that sort of stuff which auditions normally are, and it became sort of open business like everyone's going to have a part, everyone's going to help be part of the process and it's not just going to select yeah if it doesn't you know it's going to be like today everyone.

**Testament:** So can you talk about it, like why did you choose the audition process? And it turned out to be really good catalyst for going forward.

What will the aspects of the audition that you thought would help that community, or help you as a Director as well?

**Nickie:** well you know, I love to see what people are really like and I think if you think this is an audition, people think they have to come prepared with something, and there's so much pressure on that one piece of text or something they learn and this was really about how all my work is a little bit playful, and I want to see how playful people are.

We knew it was going to be that you were writing it, but a lot of the material is going to come out of their devising process. As well how open how playful were they so for me I do that through like warmup games making it as accessible as I possibly can and having fun and now also I remember we got them to sing.

Yeah, I was racking my brain at what was the audition process is nearly a year ago but yeah we had them singing and that pushed me out of my comfort zone. So I was like ‘I’m going to give this a go’. And then by asking them to prepare something around their favourite song, or a moment where music played a big part in their lives. I was I was really keen to see that. I suppose it's that protection, but also the vulnerability of people. What music they are interested in, what are those events that have happened in their lives that music has played that bigger part and also an opportunity for you to see I suppose what they are, but not what yeah what they're capable of. Where they’re at, what really makes them tick did you get that?

**Testament:** definitely it felt like a bit of a party game, it felt like you know like Christmas charades.

**Nickie:** Everyone gets up and does a turn as opposed to you better nail this monologue, or sing this song perfectly which was really lovely.

When we were in the audition process some people were obviously really experienced performers, some people weren’t experienced but had a really cool idea, or someone else just had that spark in terms of how they spoke about something. So there were clear people that were really useful people to have in the room, but at the end of it I think everyone went away buzzing. We had just had a shared fun time together and we learnt something about each other, Which you know, that’s community isn't it you know and so even the audition was like a mini little community party. Not like you’re just going to stand in the kitchen and drink punch but like a proper party where you do get to hear different people’s opinions, people meet each other and get a sense of each other and by having a sense of each other we feel better, we understand the world look better, understand ourselves better and we appreciate things. So I love working with the Elders, and again it's the moments when someone gets up, and you look at them, and me and my prejudice would like think okay they'll be into this type of music or they'll be into this type of expression, and then they'll come up and say something really different. Just like shut every preconception, and every prejudice that I've got.

So that was really cool.

I mean for me like when you approached me with the project about festivals and music, and how music can soundtrack our lives or bring back memories and all that sort of stuff. I tell you one of the things that the elders all mentioned was this nightclub called the Oasis Club, which is no longer in Manchester. It’s where all great rock bands passing through Manchester played in the 60s and 70s so that was an education for me, and then you're like oh my God right The Jam played there and finding out all these different stories added to my understanding of the community which I thought I was part of.

There's a whole sense of the Manchester community which I thought I knew about which I didn't,so that was really interesting. Another thing for me as a Writer, whenever I did community projects, and I've been teaching music with kids and poetry to kids for two decades now, but whenever I work with the youth club or class or school or in a prison wherever I get sent. I always want the participants to have ownership over it.

It shows that we're building towards something, that everyone goes I did that bit and I put that brick in the foundation and that sense of investment, which means when they perform it, and not just going through motions, it's weird seeing an aspect of themselves reflected even if it's that they created that character. So even in the audition process I was really excited because everyone had prepared these little anecdotes about what music means to them or moments that, on your suggestion, were like great we can weave these threads. These are threads for me as a writer that can help weave fabric which ties together all these communal experiences into a really beautiful thing.

Really people look for things because I think as a writer like it's really easy for me to write from my experience because that's my life so the last big show that I did, I had five or six weeks to do it with least by house this office and the record shop and I thought well I don't have time to do a year of research like I did on previous plays, I'm going to have to write what I know so apart from a few phone calls with people who work at record shops and stuff like that you know, which was which was really great research to get the texture of a record shop like the rest was really my life experience.

When I'm writing about a 60 year old Jamaican man or Jamaican descent man an African Caribbean like that's outside of my generation. I'm half African, I don't know the Caribbean cultures that well despite growing up around some of them in South Manchester, so I have to read into that when I worked with the community project again with a really finite amount of time again.

Thinking of amazing actor Fred from Rochdale, I want some of his essence in the show and him to help be invested in it, but I don't have six months to do that so actually getting his story woven in. So them actually using the diamonds which they've got to build this new construction you know like because you want it to be authentic, you want something to have a truth to it don't you. Even if you're on space aliens, you want aspects of truth going in it cause that's what's transformative for me. Having that openness which is something you share as well, and what people tell input and ownership is really important. And then they're going to have to perform it again and again and again so it's true you know it if it's there it's happened to them, then they can instantly reach it, but I remember from that audition Gill and Steve who were the married couple, and that beautiful moment where Gill was telling us about the concert they gone to, well it was like it was the song at their wedding. Coming with that story but she didn't look at Steve until the very last moment, and that was just like that moment for me as a Director. I'm like ‘that's gorgeous’ and straight away I was like transported to us doing it in ‘The Den’, and then to having their first dance to this song you know and hearing moments from both of them. It's around what you get from those people you're working with that can really spark ideas, whether that's you know written stuff or visual things, it’s really important that it comes from the participants, it’s their show.

**Testament:** Yeah that's beautifully put, and then of course we couldn't be there then because of lockdown etc. and I thought I know that's that bit of work going and then they won't change, but now we're moving on to zoom doing online which was brilliant and actually it turns out serve the community really well, because in the time when were cut off they got to make things online which is which is super-duper, and some people were shielding, isolating. The messages we got on afterwards saying this really helped me get through that three weeks, and I've just made new friends even though not physically but like we made a real friendship on online was great.

**Nickie**: Like the cast size doubled! We we’re only having I think between like what 15 people and then we ended up with a cast like nearly double that because it became important that people wanted to be involved they could be involved because it felt like you say it felt important, that we gave people the chance to come together to be part of this community where maybe they were on their own.

I think people started as we moved online and we were talking about music, it became even more important the use of music around the world. Remember how in Spain people on the balconies singing and having concerts in Italy as well. Those countries that have been harder hit than we were with the pandemic at the beginning. So people started to really think about the use of music.

I think someone said someone would have concerts in their street you know once a week. I don't know, it felt like the theme was that even more central more important to all of us getting through that first lockdown

**Testament**: Yeah definitely definitely and I want to talk a little bit about that, it was really great for me as well to be honest. Andy Barry was producing, and Carys [Williams], and there was also the element of wanting things to be safe, people to be safeguarded cause it was a really vulnerable time. I mean as a Director/Producer team normally face to face you want to make sure everyone's emotionally and mentally alright, but it's even more pronounced and more even sometimes, more risky. For example what happens if a story moment comes up and actually triggers something or really affect someone in the same way and Andy and Carys were really great like keeping it safeguarded digital environment and checking in with people, checking with me as an artist as well, and probably with you to make sure that you were alright. I had the sense that as a team we will sort holding a space for community not just holding the creative thing, which we really wanted, I want to be proud of and that we will be proud of as well

But actually holding a community space and we’re custodians of that. Me, You and Hannah [Sands] were working crazy overtime which actually was something about creation.

We didn't have to create five 20 minute episodes which is online, so we ended up being an online TV series really

**Nickie:** I hadn’t heard about zoom till like March 16 and going what is it. Like I remember I was going ‘what is it going to be’, and then we were like it'll be 15...10...probably 10 minute maybe radio episode’s and then it grew and what went through your head as a writer at that moment in time?

**Testament:** What it has been really funny the timing of it was very serendipitous coz I just started writing for TV. And I'd done my first radio drama on Radio 4 that the summer previous so I was actually really good head space for writing which wasn't just on stage, it was rap songs or songs because my wheelhouse is really like music first and then probably theatre second.

The other thing/rod that I made for my own back was that I wanted everyone, all 40 participants, to contribute an idea, and I wanted to use ideas from all of them.

**Nickie**: So let's talk through it; the process. How do you get a community to throw ideas into a melting pot?

**Testament:** I think is well let's add that which works into what you said a little bit previously around safeguarding. I remember us all having that discussion about the project and going you know, If we are exploring things that are you know deeper meaningful to them. So at that point I think we said this has to be character driven so that then we're not leaning into people's personal stories, like we might have been if it was live.

Let's make it character driven because that way we're protecting that community we're working with. There’s that little barrier isn't there between you telling me about the birth of your first child, or the experience you being bullied, and then saying there was a character who had a baby, there was a character who was bullied and I find that in my prison work that when we design a character or telling stories, we get the participants to create their own stories and often it's full of like their own biography, but there isn't that vulnerability and exposure saying all this happened to me, you can say I know what happened to, you know, Terry the alien instead.

So that was really important. We actually did a lot of sort of play writing, 101 stuff like this.

This is how we can create a character; this is how we can create a scene.

Music as well I didn't wait yeah yeah watch it yeah so I do I do that I don't want to do that with my do it with spoken word workshops. Often I play a piece of music for writing activities. It is writing spontaneously out your brain or trying to get people to visualise imagery or words when you hear an instrumental, or maybe a famous piece of music so we had DJ ‘Wild One AK rocking, playing the tunes over Zoom which is which is which is fine and especially seeing everyone in their little boxes

So using music to help create a character, what they're doing during this song, what are they doing, what kind of person is it, what's the name etc. All the classic sort of play writing, 1 to 1 questions and then I got sent all those character breakdowns and ideas,

And sometimes it was a really grounded character -this person has a very bad relationship with his dad, or whatever and other times it was this is Luxor who is the goddess of love and all this kind of thing. So it works out really well.

Turns out it's like a sort of collage, all these ideas and I sort of tried to thread, okay which one is a family, which one is a band..we have five different pieces which interlink. That’s the kind of stuff I like, like Magnolia and those kind of films, or Skins you know, where the story, the characters have got their own stories in the mains link.

**Nickie:** So we developed this narrative around the festival and we had a band that was reforming for it. We had family members who were involved in the band, people that were former lovers of people. We had people joining the band as replacement, one person that would join the band as replacement singer, we also had fans people that were going on a date to the festival. So we had these like 5 inter-weaving stories where character from one episode, would eventually like bump into another character.

Sometimes they would meet, reconnect their love, sometimes they would just literally just run into each other, or have an argument over a tent at the festival, and all these different aspects which I really love doing, and that is totally what I've been thinking a lot about as a journalist anyway like I love interlinking stories, Imagining how connected we are, how we actually are communities, even though we're in our social bubble and our Internet you know social media bubbles and listening to different news and whatever else look other problems that we've got it is a society.

**Testament:** So Luxor for example end up, like the goddess of love - we could have had the goddess of love appear but we actually already had some supernatural characters in the story

**Nickie:** Yeah, the narrator –

Testament: the narrator was sort of a supernatural time traveller type person where music would be the trigger for time travel. Erm… what a great idea (chuckles) but now I’m thinking about it I’m like, ‘aw maybe I should use that again’. Erm and then – so Luxor then ended up becoming a dating app erm so that was really interesting. So still using like, even if it was just namechecking an idea or taking a concept. Erm so that was really exciting for me, like putting a jigsaw together and sort of asking for permission from the participants we’re gonna butcher this and cut it up and copy and paste.

**Nickie:** And they really went for it as well. And I think, you know, it wasn’t just the participants that were actually in the final… er… in the final version. We did have input from other Elders that couldn’t you know, didn’t want to come to the sessions due tech but I would send them erm me or Hannah (the assistant director) would send them questions, tell them what piece of music to listen to or send them a link to it to come up with characters. So, we fed some of those characters in as well. So there was still as sense of if they couldn’t be here online so they could present in the project somehow which I think was really important for some people to do that whether that was by phone or by email.

**Testament:** Yeah, that was really cool. The other thing we tried to do was a bit Mike Leigh-ish which was your thrust(?), your idea. So, everyone playing the characters or versions of the characters or something associated with what they’ve written in an improvised scene -

**Nickie:** Yep -

**Testament**: So a bit of whose line is it anyway. So it could be a council planning meeting for the festival let’s have a heated debate or…

**Nickie:** The camping situation someone’s got a new tent, all of that–

**Testament:** You want directions? (laughs)

**Nickie:** And I think wasn’t one about being given a birthday gift? There was something,

**Testament:** Yes! And a lot of sections or character beats found their way into the script.

**Nickie:** And I think the joy for me as a director on Zoom, like those improvs were really handy. And then I could send each actor their kind of – you give them perimeters of what improvisation is, but then I could send them things on chat to drop in.

**Testament:** Mm hm

**Nickie:** So, like your character is now really angry or send them a bit of a line a bit of a hook in. And they brilliantly took it. Erm… so you could, I suppose it was a bit Mike Leigh: letting them play and then us feeding bits in to see where it could go, what the potential was.

**Testament:** Is it Sally Cookson who does a similar thing? So the national theatre did erm Jane Eyre and –

**Nickie**: and Peter Pan

**Testament**: and Narnia.

**Nickie:** Yep, Narnia.

**Testament**: Yeah, so like apparently, she uses improvisation with her company and stuff to generate like script which is really exciting and you know that a certain, an actor will come up with – well a community actor in our case but they’re definitely actors – would come up with some zinger line and I’ll be like file / save that one.

**Nickie:** I remember Gordon erm… didn’t he? He was always late coming to the sessions -

**Testament**: Right.

Nickie: And at one point he was like, ‘Incoming! I’m incoming’, and I was like we’re having that, we’re having that for Gordon’s character in the play. So, as he comes online, he’s, ‘Incoming! Incoming!’ Erm yeah.

**Testament:** And do you remember is it Jim from Scotland?

**Nickie:** Yep, John

**Testament:** Oh, right yeah. And he had this lovely story about a lighthouse and a beach and walking a dog which those totally found its way in and became this moment of reconciliation between an uncle and a grieving son. Yeah, it was you know really beautiful. It gave me a lot of nutrients to turn into script. Really proud of those being involved and what the scripts turned into. And then against the clock because we had these deadlines, you had to work out how to direct community actors on Zoom with some quite complicated script.

**Nickie:** Yeah and I think for us that, I found some of that the hardest. Like not directing them, but being able to have those conversations with you going, “We need to cut this, we need to jump that. Like, you know ’cause you can’t have that unless we go out to a separate breakout room on Zoom.

**Testament:** Mmm

**Nickie:** It’s just… if you’re in a space you can go and sit with each other at the table – you can send everyone else on a 15min tea break whilst we sit there and go back through the scene to then try it again. We couldn’t do that and I think I found that the hardest - that we then have to have a Zoom after having been on Zoom for 2hrs.

**Testament:** Mmm

**Nickie:** Or doing it over phone or WhatsApp. You know, there were points where we were both there in those rehearsals, we could screenshare the script with them so they could read it off the screen. Then we worked out that you could record Zoom like that and that felt like, ‘Wow!’ and epic moment. But it was that. I really missed that. And also with Liam, who did a fantastic job of the editing, with Alex and Annie that were doing the sound and getting our Young Makers involved. I really missed that, being in the same room as everyone – to have those creative conversations. But we couldn’t so we had to so, you know, me and you had to have those phone calls or our emailing system of I’d email you at the end of the working day – I knew that you were looking after your kids, getting them ready for bed so then I knew when I got up at 8 o’clock the following morning, I’d have your list of notes from when you’d email me at, you know, 1 o’clock in the morning. And we fell into that clear line of communication.

**Testament:** Sorry my kids burst into the room – one second I’ll just close the door.

**Nickie:** Ok, back now. So yeah, we fell into that sort of line of communication. We found a collaborative way to work which wasn’t our norm.

**Testament:** Yeah, definitely. Yeah, I mean the good thing is like, I really trust you as a creative and there’s like a trust there, I think you trust me. And there was a… yeah, it was hard going back and forth but like yeah, I guess we’re part of the Royal Exchange Theatre community and there’s already bonds there so I am always quite happy to get your notes quite frankly. And sometimes you might give me a note and I’ll say ‘oh that’s really good but I don’t like that solution but I’ve got maybe another solution which may meet both our needs’. So yeah, trying to cut the scenes down because it was such a fast turnaround between ‘right the script needs to be ready for this night and then ok we’re recording it two days later’ and it’s like ok, how’s this going to be. Whereas normally, in a real – in another thing we’d have weeks.

**Nickie**: We’d have script development weeks like for doing what we did. Did you know what I mean?

**Testament**: That’s crazy.

**Nickie:** But that was also the love of working with the people that we were working with. Like not just us as creatives but that community team like they were so behind it as a project that they were like, ‘yep, I’m happy to come and be online for two hours and do that. Oh, we didn’t record it properly on Zoom or we’ve made some changes can you come back? Completely on it. We were really luck with that flexibility as well.

**Testament:** It felt like… it didn’t just feel like we were doing a theatre project. It felt like were really serving a community and arts were really crucial at giving people that little holiday in the middle of the day but also a sense of fun, a sense of purpose, a sense of representation – that their voices are important, that their ideas are important and we’re creating something special that’s going to speak to people and speak to me, myself, as a creative, I was really spoken to by their input and by everybody. And by actually seeing how different people conduct themselves like Andy Barry, like yourself and the care and not just being jedi creatives but actually like what a good human is like is really lovely, really inspiring. Especially ‘cause politically like all kind of rubbish had happened before or was happening during and before then, it was so nice to restore your faith in humanity.

**Nickie:** Yeah, and I also think it reminded people of the importance of the Exchange at a time none of us could be in that building. Like we were all a community of that building – the Elders, the Young Company – and so even though we didn’t have our home as it were, we were still all together.

**Testament:** Yeah, I find that it’s really interesting The Royal Exchange is very interesting because it’s like a prestige theatre company, it’s in this glorious grand building in the centre of an international city so you expect it to be like it’s all la-dee-da and that but actually it’s so rooted in people and all the people that come into the city, the suburbs and even beyond Manchester into Greater Manchester and beyond. So, there is a community. I mean that speaks to our society at the moment. It is like, some people might not talk to the neighbour who lives two doors down but they’ll have a really intimate relationship with someone who is like, you know, 200 miles away just ‘cause of how communities make links now.

**Nickie**: Yeah, it was a grand project. And the fact that Matt wrote the epic shapes of love song

**Testament:** Aw yeah, that’s one of the members of the Young Company. It was a really great song

**Nickie:** And we had Bill as well, like, on his piano - it was all epic. We had a band! And Alex did a fantastic job. And also, the day we filmed everybody on screen, singing along to the song for the last episode… that feeling of everyone coming to a festival was just like. Yeah… yeah, it stays with you, that moment.

**Testament:** [sings] Your shapes of love. Your shapes of love

[Nickie joins in]

**Testament:** It was so good, so good. And yeah, our narrator, Tony, was sort of using poetry to sort of interweave in between sort of naturalistic dialogue and bring all those stories together but actually being revealed as actually being a character in the plot as well was all really cool. Really proud of it. And it felt like actually the community engagement is a preparing ground like, not just for the show at the end of the run but like preparing us artists to work on the next, prepared me for lockdown at lot more. Like it was a super intense version of everything I was going to be doing over the next year like turning over scripts really quickly the editing process, connecting with people, getting ideas, other community projects. It felt like actually it was a really intense you know, few weeks which actually equipped me mentally. Like if I can get through that, if I can get through Connect Fest which was so quick turnaround, such a sudden surprise then you know by the time I got a commission from Leeds Playhouse in whenever September - late August, early September - I was more than ready. And that was another really quick project as well. But also, the community stuff and the workshops I’ve been doing online as well.

**Nickie:** Has there been any artist that has inspired you in your approach in working with communities?

**Testament:** That’s really hard because I feel like I’m so new to theatre –

**Nickie:** Yeah, but you work with communities in other ways, don’t you?

Testament: Yeah, but often you’re like, especially like ‘cause hip-hop is my first sort of art form. As a hip-hop artist you’re very rarely you’re there because you’re the novelty normally. So, it’s like, right ok, we’ll send you into this, let’s say if it’s a school there’s only going to be you there who’s doing your practise. Even if a theatre context there’s only going to be I have a really weird I’m a beatboxing storyteller it’s like ok. So, although I do find Kae Tempest massively inspiring - and Kae comes from hip-hop as well to be fair - there is something about the way Kae talks about humanity and every human in sort of a, every human being mega important holding divinity, holding something significant spiritually, of worth in each and every one. There’s something about Kae’s practise where which I find mega inspiring like in terms of like theme and writing but then also you know people like Chris Thorpe again there’s like he’s got like a real sense of like talking to people and people being important. So in terms of writing those are two people I find mega inspiring. In terms of practise and working in communities I find it really…. I mean I just start saying Nickie and Andy ‘cause those are the people I know who I’ve seen like totally smash it and both have been mentors as well to me as well you know. I’m trying to think of other people that I find inspiring in their practise but it’s often... I’ll tell you who’s really inspiring Jacob Sam-La Rose who is a poet from London or is a London-based poet who trained me on Apples & Snakes project which is a spoken word thing – there was like a National Slam thing and all the poet coaches had to have training. So I was one of the Leeds poet coaches and all the Leeds poets who were teaching slams in different schools etc we all had training. So, it was learning loads of cool spoken word games and tricks and all that kind of stuff. So, I find which I think I’m sure as a director you pick up a game, oh the EastEnders gam oh this will be funny, this will be a good icebreaker or let’s create a poem one word at a time. That’s totally from Jacob Sam-La Rose. I don’t know where he got that from.

So each participant gives one word or a punctuation and you go round the circle or the Zoom boxes as we did to create a poem which finds its way into the final piece you know… image generating imagery. So, either normally on my jones in the room or I guess theatre-wise it’s seeing –

I’ll tell you someone who’s really good someone who used to work at Leeds Playhouse called Gaby Paradis who’s not only a really good Drama workshop leader but was a manager – an award-winning manger – and she works for the council now I think in Leeds Council but she cared about not just the young people which is mega, mega important but also had an eye-out for the artists as well which I find in the different theatres that I sort of navigate often they’ll be like right come and do your special thing right see you later. And they won’t be like, ‘Oh you alright mate? What’s your career doing at the moment? How can I help with your career?’ Like you don’t get that very often so Royal Exchange is like one of them like they’ll have a little chat with you about, ‘Ok, what’s your journey? What are you doing? So, that’s really cool.

**Nickie:** Yeah, it’s epic. And I’m just like, thinking around just before we head off, thinking around working with communities like it just came to me actually – particularly when you’re working with young people as well which I do a lot of it’s just reminding them it doesn’t have to be academic. Do you know what I mean? Because we’re so brought up that if we’re making a play or making a piece of work that it has to be this, this and this. And actually, it doesn’t and sometimes we have to give permission for people to be creative.

**Testament:** Tell me a bit more about that – what do you mean? What do you mean by academic? All I can think of is like big words when you say that.

**Nickie:** Well, yeah, big words; that a play has to have a certain you know form, a structure; that you have to be, you have to have knowledge and have read loads of plays in order to make work and actually you don’t.

**Testament:** Thank God

**Nickie:** And I think particularly for young people, even sometimes how drama can be taught in school, it feels really like… it’s just school structure isn’t it? It’s having this academic purpose whereas actually if you all allow yourself to be free and playful, creativity comes easier or it does to me anyway. Of like taking that pressure off yourself. And I think it’s about reminding, particularly working with young people, that ‘come on, this isn’t about who’s the best at this now, like this isn’t about who can copy the best play out there or the most fantastic structure of a play. This is about who are you as a person. What is it you want to say about the world? How can we tap into that and give you different tools to allow creativity to come?

**Testament:** That I think you really succeed in that Nickie like I said with the workshop but also with the Zoom sessions it was playful, it was fun and a sense that everyone had a voice, I think you totally nailed that.

**Nickie:** I think both of us did that because it’s not about… with that community, we didn’t want it to feel like it… we were listening to them like you said around Chris Thorpe and Kae Tempest, it’s around them, those people.

**Testament:** Yeah, yeah I mean as a writer obviously like we both knew there was a deadline, something had to be shared, it was going to be uploaded to YouTube via the Royal Exchange so I think that’s really interesting but the glorious thing about what Carys and Andy said as producers was actually for us it’s more about the process, we want the process to be quality, and for people to get stuff out of the process which feedback-wise we did and actually, the great punchline to the whole Connect Fest is that afterwards the people kept online, there were loads of relationships after the project had finished.

**Nickie:** Yep

**Testament:** And actually, decided we’re going to do another show and actually we’re going to do something else again. And Andy Barry is going to direct the next one and it just continued on. So, it was sort of a catalyst for people being creative, stuff to do during lockdown, to keep you sane as a community.

**Nickie:** Yes.

**Testament:** And there were people who had only just joined the Elders like almost just before Connect Fest and by the end of it they were feeling invested, being interviewed about the project on you know by BBC radio and all this so like, it was really great. And when they got to reflect their communities, their ideas, their personalities and that to be created. Before we go, Nickie is there anyone who sort of like inspires or influences you in your work?

**Nickie**: I think like as a disabled woman I found when I was at uni coming across the work of Augusto Boal as a theatre maker and how it became around the… like for him putting on those plays for certain communities in Brazil, getting the audience to become part of the action, the whole thing of forum theatre where the actors come up and they become that role and they can challenge the situation that’s going on and that’s always stuck with me. I think that always comes, that’s always at the back of my head. Like what is the engagement here? What’s the impact that theatre can have? So, I think yeah... it’s kind of Boal’s work, cardboard citizens work, the work I’ve done through Graeae as well, just seeing the importance of allowing marginalised voices to have a voice. Because that in itself is a community. Yeah, and work that I’ve done with my colleague Daryl Beeton with Kazzum Theatre company in London like it’s just seeing the importance of the work.

**Testament:** Something that the legendary, famous and fantastic Suzanne Bell once said to me when I was working on a play – which I’m still working with Suzanne which I’m very excited about – she talks about how is this piece of work / writing going to change the audience?

**Nickie:** Yep.

**Testament:** You know working with like script editors in TV and producers in radio their like, what’s the story beat? You know, how are we going to make this as entertaining as possible? Which is like great – I love watching you know binge-worthy TV but the stuff which stays with me is the stuff which has changed me and changed my perspective on the world, made me feel something really profound and that I think in terms of Connect Fest you know it’s like how do we change not just the people clicking on the YouTube link but like us? And I think that there was a shift in me and it felt like we were literally using theatre to serve the community and to change the way things are on the ground and that’s going to stay with me for a while.

**Nickie**: Yeah, and who theatre is for is a big one. Yeah, it’s a mega question.

**Testament:** Yeah.

**Nickie**: but you know that’s what keeps us alive as artists whether that’s you as a writer me as a director like as long as that question is in me you know: what is theatre, who is theatre for, why now? then I’m going to keep making work. When I stop asking myself those questions then I’ll have to go and maybe you know by then I might have become a world-famous DJ with the decks that I’ve bought. Who knows?

**Testament:** Is that next week when your decks arrive?

**Nickie:** Exactly and when I’ve done my tax return. Yeah, it’s been epic and we learnt loads. We learnt how to work with people on a different medium so…

**Testament:** Yeah, it was like you’re going to make 5 mini dramas - TV dramas - on Zoom and it’s encouraging ‘cause like some professionals do it and it’s not very good so I think we did pretty well considering.

**Nickie:** We did.

**Testament:** It was really a beautiful thing to be a part of.

**Nickie:** It was. Shapes of Love.

**Testament:** Shapes of Love [chuckles] Shapes of Love for life

**Nickie:** Yay. Cool well, thank you Andy it’s been a joy.

**Testament:** No, thank you Nickie, right back at you.

**Nickie:** Boom. Bye

**Testament:** Bye.