

**Such Stuff podcast
Season 8, Episode 5: Creativity**

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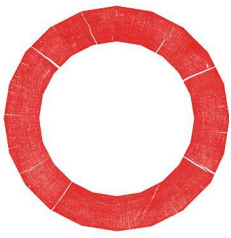
Imogen Greenberg: Hello and welcome to another episode of Such Stuff, the podcast from Shakespeare's Globe. In the last episode in our series on arts and wellbeing, we'll be taking a closer look at creativity. In this series, we've been exploring the ways the arts can enrich our lives, help us tackle mental health issues, and help us to find expression and connection again after a year of isolation. Creativity has come up again and again in this series as a way of expressing ourselves, but also as a way of managing the thoughts and the periods in our life which can feel overwhelming.

Why is exercising our creative brain such a helpful way of taking ourselves out of negative thought processes? How can all of us, even if we don't think we're particularly creative people, use creativity to feel better? In this episode, I chat with our wonderful Literary Manager, Jess Lusk. As someone whose job is saturated in creativity, what's her relationship to that crucial connection between creativity and mental health? And Jess speaks to actor and writer, Steffan Donnelly, and our Associate Artistic Director, Sean Holmes, to get their ideas on why creativity matters so much and to hear some of the many ways they've kept their creativity alive this last year whilst they've been unable to work.

Up first, here's myself and Jess.

Okay. So Jessica Lusk, lovely Jessica Lusk, our Literary Manager extraordinaire. We are here to talk about creativity. Who better? What role does creativity play in your mental health?

Jessica Lusk: I mean, I can't overstate this, that creativity plays a gigantically huge part in my mental health. I'm going to sound like such a drama queen when I say that I literally think it's lifesaving, but I really do mean that. I've always struggled with anxiety and depression and I'm getting better at



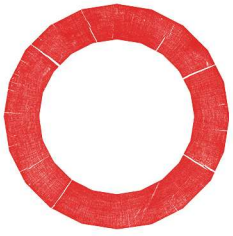
picking up on the signals and the things I need to do for myself. But I remember a few years ago I was going through quite a big low and my partner bought me one of those ship making kits, a little model ship kit. And I would just spend every evening meticulously gluing together these, I don't know how many parts of a little ship and painting every single part of it.

And there was just something about getting out of my brain and having to give it all my attention that was just so helpful for me. Yeah. I just... Yeah, it was just incredibly helpful. So I find stuff like that, it feels like two things. It's completely escaping my thoughts and not letting myself spiral and spiral and spiral and getting more consumed by my own brain. There's also something about working on something and seeing the progress of it and that dopamine hit of going, "Oh, look, I've made something. I've done something creative." I think those two things together are what has really helped me.

IG: So my next question was going to be, how does engaging with your creative side use or exercise your thinking in a different way? And it is that thing that you were talking about, I find it's life drawing, it's a massive amount of focus, but absolutely no thought.

JL: Yeah, exactly. Exactly that. I mean, I don't have lots of model ship making kits, but I do have knitting, baking. I have adult coloring in books. So if I can feel myself getting really bad or just needing to get out of my brain, then yeah, I'll go to any of those things because you're right, it's that thing that's, it's not difficult, it's just meditative and quite consuming and just means that you just have less space in your brain for some of the other stuff that can go on.

And I also find that when you have those, I think it's called flow, isn't it? When you go into those periods of concentrated, meditative process, when you come out of it again, I often feel like my brain has, because it's had that moment to rest and reset, the things that felt so overwhelming just feel slightly less so.



IG: How does that play into what you see with the creatives that you work with?

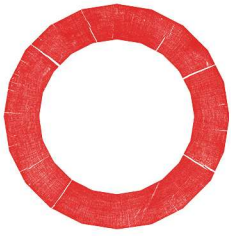
JL: Yeah. I mean a lot of the writers that I work with, they sort of.. I mean, I think they're incredibly lucky in some ways that I think for a lot of them, their process, their job, their process is the thing that also saves them or helps them or helps them figure stuff out. I think that often the best writing is the stuff that feels so intensely personal.

IG: So if you were going to recommend something, an exercise or an activity, perhaps something like shipbuilding, for audiences at home to try to connect with their creativity, what would it be? Because I often feel like it's interesting the examples you've chosen. People will tend to say things like, "Oh, I can't draw," or, "I can't sing." "Oh, I can't do that. That's not for me." Part of this series has been talking about the arts beyond just actors who stand on stage or anything like that. So what would you recommend?

JL: Well, I mean, I think creativity gets a bad rap really because it feels like people can stand in opposition, either you're creative or you're not. And actually, I think there's something creative in planning a really nice dinner and thinking about what you're going to make and then making it, that's creative. Or just going for a really long walk and daydreaming or listening to music or just getting out of your own head. Even stuff like thinking about what you want to buy your friend for their birthday is a creative pursuit.

I think all these things are creative, but I think, yeah, exercise is for people to do. I think just coloring inside the lines of someone else's drawing. You don't have to be good at it, but there's just something about that process of creating color and spending time outside your own brain that I think is really helpful. So I think you don't have to think of yourself as a creative person to find creative things that just let you escape yourself a bit.

IG: Because there are so many more people who engage with other people's creativity, but wouldn't consider it a pursuit of their own. And I



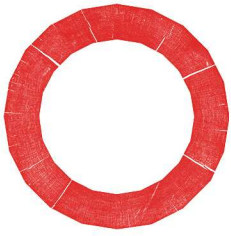
think that anyone who enjoys reading, watching TV, watching, stories of any kind, colors of any kind can benefit in that way from creativity.

JL: Yeah. And also I think we forget, when we're small and we're babies and we're children, all we are is creative. That's literally all that we are. We learn through play, we play in the sand and we build sandcastles. We paint, we draw, we color in, we make messes. We create imaginary worlds with toys and dinosaurs and Lego and rocks. That's how we are. And then suddenly as we get older, that all just gets completely crowded out and it's seen as something that's not useful or productive or whatever, but I think we still need those things as we're older, even if they come in different forms, even if that play becomes watching a play, watching a film, reading a book, we still need that play.

And I also think a lot of it is about escapism and, yeah, as you say, books, films, et cetera, we've needed that so much over the last year because we just need to escape ourselves, escape our reality, escape our lives, and engage in play.

IG: So the big question, why is creativity important and why does it matter?

JL: Oh man. I'm just going to repeat what I've said, but I think creativity is so important. And I do think it's had some bad branding and people think it stands in opposition to being productive or useful or whatever. But I think creativity is in literally everything that we do. It's how we learned to communicate with people when we were small. And it's what we have all been doing the last year. Even if you think of yourself as not a creative person, you've probably escaped into a film or a book or something and felt better after for having got out of yourself. I think that's why the funding cuts that the government are suggesting to the higher ed art subjects is so galling, because I think it somehow makes us all think of them as not being useful. But I think they can't be... I don't think we can only think about things financially. It's like, what does the arts contribute financially? But it's about what they give us in life.



IG: Because it's like, the quiet moments in between work is the way that creativity is often considered. Its value is therefore degraded as being not work or not valuable.

JL: Yeah, but in order to engage in that hour or that series of 24 hours of TV, someone else's job is creative and that is what's giving you that escapism, that joy, that moment of relief from your own brain. There's just nothing more important than both creative people doing creative things so that we can enjoy them, and also engaging in those tiny moments of creativity that help us function, that help us be productive people in the world. I just think without it, we would really suffer. And for some of us, we wouldn't be here.

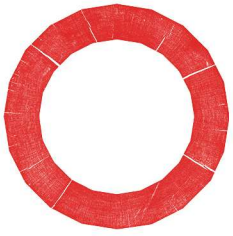
IG: Up next, here's Jess and actor and writer, Stephen Donnelly.

JL: So first of all, what role does creativity play in your mental health?

Steffan Donnelly: I hadn't realized how important it was until the pandemic and then everything goes, work went, and that thing of thinking creatively, dreaming stuff up, making stuff with other people, that social connective aspect of collaboration, I really missed. I think it gives me connection to new or different ideas in a way that I don't have to have the answers, you can ask questions and maybe more questions come out of that. It really stimulates me. It makes me feel more curious about the world that we're in and this changing world that we're in and my place in it.

I think creativity helps my mental health because it makes me listen rather than jump ahead or judge, I think. Yeah. And that thing of feeling like you can explore topics or ideas or your own identity or other people, a bit like going abroad and traveling, another thing you can't do in this time. It's like that exploration, that freedom. So I think it has a massive role.

JL: And what sort of creative activities or exercises or things have you turned to in this period?

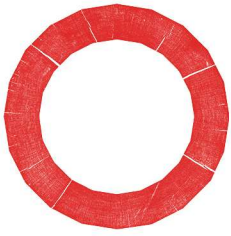


SD: I've done a lot of yoga and breathing, which sounds like such a cliché, doesn't it? But actually, I've really, really found it has helped this time more than any other time. I've always like dipped in and out of doing that and at the Globe, you do loads of that with warm ups and brilliant yoga stuff within that, but I've found that each time I come to do the same movements, the same patterns, I'm in a different mental state and forming shapes, but I'm also forming ideas. And ultimately, it just helps me bring a lot of focus to my day. Walking as well. Again, everyone's been doing that, but that really helps me if I'm sitting and writing in that slight zone, to be able to pull out and see loads of other stuff happening and then coming back to the work, it really helps. I guess that's just taking a break and reminding yourselves that that's okay to do.

JL: And I'm sort of steering off topic slightly, you're a writer. What is it about, I might be making a leap here, but do you think writing is good for your mental health? And if so, why?

SD: I think writing is useful for your mental health. Yeah. I think one of the things that a lot of writers do is stream of consciousness writing. So it's almost like connecting the pen or your keyboard to you rather than having to structure and think before writing. And I think that sense of jumping into something with curiosity really helps, rather than overthinking because I think when I overthink, that's when stuff gets difficult for me.

And then I also think when you're fully writing something like I've been trying to write all these little short films over the last year, I've been really interested in thinking about forms. So once you have something roughly written, I'd be thinking about how else could I convey this idea? And I think I do that as well when I'm reading stuff. So sometimes I'll be reading a book and ask, what would this be like on stage? What would this be like as a film? What would this be like as an installation? So in a way, holding stories and ideas, but considering how else is it possible to tell this, giving yourself little challenges like that, I think is really playful and helpful and stops you getting down one track.



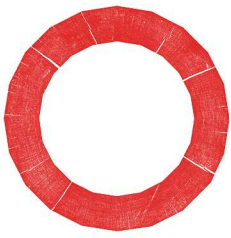
JL: And again, you don't have to answer this or talk specifically, but can you think of difficult times where you've found something creative that's helped you in a period of difficulty?

SD: Yeah. Over summer I was doing a lot of quite academic writing. I was writing articles and stuff and I felt like it really sucked a lot of that questioning thing. I was questioning, but it was in a different way, having to have answers to the questions. And then it was really refreshing when I just decided to do these really short things that I was going to film on my iPhone. Almost basically they would just be two minutes, micro films. And there was something really freeing about the project not being this massive daunting hill of writing a 60 minute film or even 15 minutes.

And I think sometimes you can bring ideas that don't need to be really fully formed, ideas that don't need to yet be that 15 minute film, and just condense it down and just write that. And that that's okay, and that that is the beginning of it. I think very often I'm jumping ahead to like, "Okay, what's this going to be in six months' time?" But it's actually fine to be like, "I wonder what I could do in six days' times, six hours' time." So I guess that's about expectation and it's about just taking it easy with writing creatively.

JL: So can you recommend an exercise or activity that our audiences can do at home to connect with their creative side?

SD: Yes. I'd recommend the stream of consciousness writing. So that's just getting up and writing pages. So it can be a couple of pages and just whatever comes out, you don't have to read them, don't have to do anything with them, bin them if you want. And another exercise I'd recommend is reading a poem out loud and then responding to it by either speaking back to it, maybe after each section or just at the end of the poem, or writing some kind of response to it. So anything from the poem that inspired you, a word that you want to take and use and make something with, a different track the poem may have taken. I really like this because it's standalone, it's poetic, it's short, and I don't know, when I read poetry, I feel safe in a way that it's okay to talk about these things in bite size,



maybe even poetic ways. And I think being able to chat with a poem is a really nice thing to do.

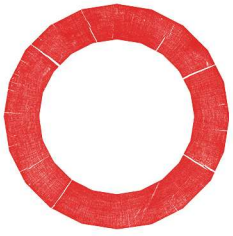
JL: I love that. And then a lot of people have talked about stream of consciousness writing recently. What is it about that that you find helpful? I guess this is the question for me, as well as the audience, because even if you don't look at it again, what do you feel like it does for you?

SD: I think it makes the blank page less scary. So you suddenly scribble stuff, and often actually I'm just scribbling, not necessarily writing words sometimes. And I think it also is like a brain dump on where you're at that morning. And I think that a lot of people say, that's particularly if you've got a lot on, it's a good way of just releasing all of that. But I also think that some mornings that I feel the clearest, the calmest, that actually that is just as daunting as well, because I feel so Zen. I've almost got nothing in my head, so I need to wind it up and encourage it to write. So sometimes those mornings is often maybe just half a page or just, whoa, thinking, not much coming out. So yeah, it's about switching on and switching off, I think, at the same time.

I don't do it all the time. I'm not a, unfortunately, I'm a real big advocate of it, but I don't do it all the time. And I think that's also cool. Do it when you need to I think, but a lot of people really swear by it. And definitely I think when I have had a lot on, it's been super useful.

JL: And then the final question, the big one, why is creativity important? Why do you think creativity matters?

SD: Creativity is a massive word. And actually, before doing this podcast, I looked at the definition and it says, "Creativity is the use of imagination or original ideas to create something," which is really daunting because it sets a really high bar. It's like, "How imaginative am I? How original is it?" And actually, I've been thinking, tiny acts can be creative. I found myself talking to obviously loads of people who do creativity professionally and this year has been, like we've all been saying, we feel really uncreative. And I think



that's to do with the loss of work and the slowly building up that muscle and then losing it all again. And I'd just been in R&D for two weeks and it's exhausting and exciting, but also like, my god, being in a room with five other people inventing stuff again, it takes time.

But yeah, going back to those tiny acts, I think that's something I've been really excited about is seeing my friends who are non-theatre, not in this world at all, working in industries with nothing to do with what we do have been painting and being starting all these stuff. And that's not necessarily to do with originality or anything, it's just to do with the act of creation. And I think that's why it's important. It's about doing something practical that maybe encourages us to think about the world in a different way. It maybe calms us. It can be a gift that you give to someone. I wrote a short poem for my friend. And these kind of things, I think we need to bring that back. I really hope that creativity can be a mainstay of the way that we do stuff post pandemic.

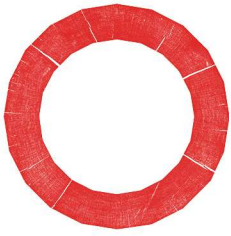
And I mean that in the least fluffy, artsy sense. It's just like, let's build into the fabric that we are all creative. We all have a right to be creative. You don't have to have a title like dramaturg, writer, whatever. I really love that idea. And I think more and more of my work is going to be looking at how the arts can be more accessible, but also just working with communities on shows, working with people who are non-theater professionally and getting involved in that way. I think that's where it's at.

JL: Amazing, amazing. That's perfect.

[Music plays]

IG: Last, but by no means least, here's Jess and our Associate Artistic Director, Sean Holmes.

JL: So, it would be amazing to just hear a little bit about what role you think creativity plays in your mental health.

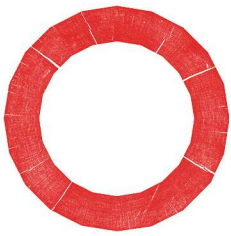


Sean Holmes: Yes. Very good. Okay. So in terms of my mental health wellbeing or sense of self, I think creativity's obviously really important part of that, and I think that's tied directly to the job I do, to directing because somebody asked me the other day, why were you drawn to theater? And I suddenly thought, "Well, actually, I'm not sure if I was drawn to theater per se, as so much as I was drawn to directing." Because I think directing, I called it the other day three-dimensional therapy, because you're basically working with all these complex characters with their own forms of psychosis often. I'm talking about the characters now, not actors, you're trying to understand and resolve and then present their behavior.

What I find creative about that is the great thing about being a director is often you're sitting in the imagination of a really good play for six or seven weeks trying to solve the puzzle of what came out of their brain. And obviously for us at the Globe, we've got pretty good house playwright. So it's a real privilege and pleasure to sit inside that imagination. And so it's a constant, ongoing creative process where you're being challenged by or provoked by all sorts of things.

What I suppose I'm saying is, for me, the practicality and creativity sit very closely in being a director. So that's what I quite enjoy about it. I suppose it's worth acknowledging I'm not a, or very rarely, a purely creative artist, i.e. somebody who sits down and creates something that never existed, writes a play, writes a book, paints a picture. I am somebody who is part of a network of other creatives. And so one of the things that I find really helps me is my responsibility to a large team of other people and my responsibility to their wellbeing and happiness.

Because on a good day, working in the theater is better than working and we all got away with it and we're lucky. So it seems to me a shame when we're not having a good time, which doesn't mean it can't be difficult, it doesn't mean it can't be challenging, it doesn't mean that it's got to be tough conversations, but those things are really productive. It's about embodying and empowering other people's ability to be as creative as they can be. So I suppose that my definition of creativity in terms of how it



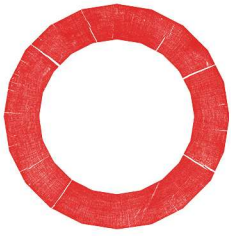
responds to my job, which is being a director, is creativity is quite multifaceted and comes in different forms because I'm constantly asked to solve things in a lot of different creative ways, as well as being creative about if you like the atmosphere, the room, the working environment, the management of people's fears and expectations and hopes.

JL: That's really, really fascinating. And this may or may not apply, but outside of your job and outside of directing, do you feel like you engage with your creative side or exercise your thinking in a different way? Are there things that you turn to, aside from work, that you find helpful?

SH: So outside of my job, there's not a direct creative pursuit, so an outlet for creativity and for wellbeing, i.e. I don't paint, I don't write very often, a sort of secondhand creativity or enjoyment of other's creativity. So I read loads and I find reading both just a pleasure and enjoyable in itself, but what I like to do is I like the way that it tangentially informs what I'm doing. I deliberately don't read things that are like the play I'm doing, if that makes sense. I want that pleasure to be separate from my work. It doesn't mean I won't read some things as research of course, but then what's interesting about that is the way things jump between unlikely sources. So that would be one thing.

I also link I would link, I think, exercise to creativity by which I mean, I've never been to a gym. I find it really hard to exercise for exercise's own sake, but I cycle a lot and cycle to work and I quite often walk to work or do a big walk and walking, I find in particular, is really useful for when you're trying to resolve or solve things, as well as I think it's quite a... I've really noticed it over this year, like a lot of people, because the city's changed, because it's less busy, because you've got time to properly walk and consider and to notice things that maybe you've never noticed before about the city you live in, that all of those things I find is really, really useful.

I notice the difference if I find myself stuck in all day on bloody Zoom. That is a deadening of that low level creative crackle. It's that crackle that keeps you feeling alive and well and sane and interested. I think that's the really

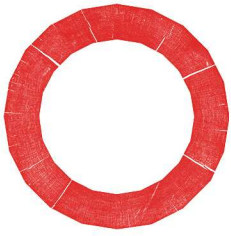


great thing about theater as a profession. And it's what you notice about the best actors. And indeed, everyone in our profession, it's something that makes you very interested in stuff, because you might be doing a play, I don't know, about 18th century tulip trading in Amsterdam and then doing another play which is about 14th century power politics in medieval royal families. And so you need to be really open and interested in those different things.

JL: If you had to recommend a creative exercise, obviously not everyone can be a theater director, but if you were to recommend something creative for people to do to help them in some way, what do you think you would recommend?

SH: One simple thing that I've been doing recently is I think a lot of what this... Oh God, this sounds so theatrical and embarrassing, but anyway, what I've realized because I've been reading some plays recently, Shakespeare plays, but also contemporaries of Shakespeare. And whatever it is, reading them out loud makes them so much easier to understand. And actually is much more enjoyable and nobody has to... I'm not acting the voices, I assure you. It's not about that, but it's about a way to understand and articulate what those plays are, when they're very hard to read on the page sometimes. Even for somebody who's spent years directing them, you start to lose the will to live.

So that's one thing that I thought if you want to be inspired by a Shakespeare play, reading it aloud quietly to yourself, not to anyone else, not doing that, having to do acting is quite satisfying and useful. I think the other thing that I found very useful and helpful in the beginning of lockdown, the first lockdown when we were all in that shock, is a friend of mine who's a writer was saying, "Oh, I can't really write plays at the moment. It seems crazy." And I was like, "Yeah, I can't work either." And we did a thing where we basically wrote each other a question, which the other person answered.

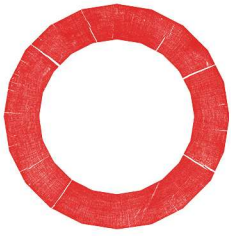


So it was a form of, by email, but it was a kind of form of correspondence and that weird 19th century thing or early 20th century thing of, in effect, writing letters to each other prompted by a question was really satisfying because there was something about having to consider this question, whatever that might be, however silly or however profound, and answer it to somebody you know well, but who doesn't know these things about you necessarily. And it's not that it was particularly confessional, I don't mean it has to be like that, but we were, for example, writing about, what's the best experience you've ever had in the theater? What's the worst show you've ever done? What piece of art has been the biggest influence on you? Things like that.

And it led to all sorts of very interesting things. For example, we ended up realizing that we're both massively influenced by Scorsese's film, *Taxi Driver*, but also realizing that that's kind of problematic when you really think about it. Anyway, so that was something I think about writing at length, not necessarily for anyone else's benefit apart from each other's, and that sense of creativity with connection was also something that might be useful. And going for a big, long walk is always good, even though I know that's blooming obvious.

JL: That's brilliant. I think that's really a genuinely helpful one for people to hear. And then lastly, this is quite a broad question, why do you think creativity is important?

SH: So, why do I think creativity is important? Well, the thing that's interesting about it, isn't it, is that it's like saying, why is food important? Or why is central heating important? It's just like, you kind of need it, don't you? And creativity... And it's interesting, we all can understand it. So if you think about something, the way that a lot of men, the method by which a lot of men talk about emotion is football, for example. So somebody who might deny any other creative aspect will watch a wonderful pass or a brilliant goal and their enjoyment of that is aesthetic. They are appreciating the creativity of that player.



Somebody who might hate sport will watch a dancer do some physical act of great grace or beauty and will respond to that. But also on a more fundamental level, creativity informs the bike lanes that they just built on my street that have made cycling safer because somebody's thought about it and thought creatively about it. It affects the food that we eat, because somebody decided to make butter out of peanuts. Who would have thought of that? And suddenly there's a... I don't actually like peanut butter that much, but lots of people do.

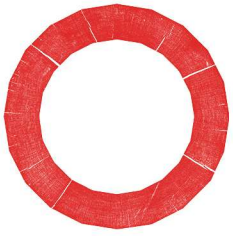
For me, it's just naturally in the air that we breathe. And the problem with it is the idea that it's something that exists separately, that there's these people called creatives or artists, and then there's everyone else. Whereas it's clear that we're all on a spectrum of creativity and just it's to be encouraged to use it.

This gets into broader questions of education and the structures of society and dah, dah, dah, dah, but to be able to look at things from different angles, to imagine things in different ways, I think what also helps you to also connect with people more, to understand other people's point of views, hopefully, to form communities and so on, can all be based on that, most of us as possible can access our creative side in whatever, however tangentially that might be.

JL: That was brilliant. I love the idea of going, the way people design bike lanes is creative. That's such a lovely way of making creativity feel accessible and normal. And yeah, that was brilliant. Thanks, Sean.

[Music plays]

IG: That's it from us. You can catch up with the rest of our series on the arts and wellbeing in all the usual podcast places and on our website. We are so, so thrilled that we're able to reopen again for performances. Do visit our website to book tickets for the summer season, whether that's coming down to the Globe itself, or accessing a live stream online. We couldn't be more excited to be welcoming you back through our doors safely and securely. So, do check out the wonderful season we've got coming up.



You've been listening to Such Stuff with me, Imogen Greenberg. To find out more about Shakespeare's Globe and what's on, follow us on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. We'll be back soon with more stories from Shakespeare's Globe, so subscribe wherever you get this podcast from.