

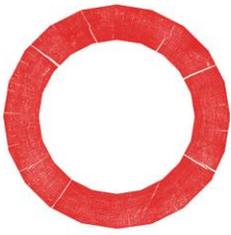
Such Stuff podcast
Season 8, Episode 4: Inspirations

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Imogen Greenberg: Hello and welcome to another episode of Such Stuff, the podcast from Shakespeare's Globe. In this latest episode in our series on arts and wellbeing, we'll be taking a closer look at inspiration. In this series, we've been exploring the ways the arts can help enrich our lives, to tackle mental health issues and help us find expression and connection again after a year of isolation. And of course throughout this year without the opportunity to go out, we've been turning inwards to books, television, films, plays and paintings. How can these inspirations help us to find escapism in difficult periods or bring comfort in moments of crisis? In this episode, we speak to three wonderful creators from our Globe network about the inspirations that have saved them in this period and why the arts provide such a vital lifeline. So stay tuned for actor Tom Stewart talking to our very own literary manager, Jess Lusk. You'll also hear from actor, storyteller, writer and global education practitioner Alex Kanefsky and Shakespeare scholar, Dr. Vanessa Lim, both in conversation with our very own lecturer and senior researcher, Dr. Will Tosh. Up first, Tom and Jess.

Jess Lusk: For this particular episode, we're looking at inspirations. So we sort of wanted to talk to interesting creatives who we adore about the things that inspire them, whether that's books, plays, paintings, whatever, and also to try to inspire the audiences, the people listening, to kind of connect with things that inspire them too. So is there a play, a book, a painting, a speech, a bit of Shakespeare, a bit that's not Shakespeare that you find yourself coming back to again and again?

Tom Stuart: I think the piece of art that I always seem to come back to a lot, particularly in hard times, especially over this recent period, is this poem that my mum introduced me to by Maya Angelou called Still I Rise. And it's this incredible poem about not just surviving but thriving in the face of adversity. And it's a very



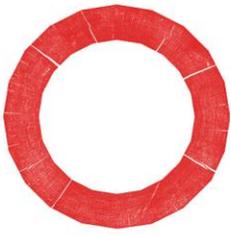
powerful, galvanizing poem that I sort of loved as a teenager when I was having a tricky time at school and being bullied and I'd have it sort of secretly in a book somewhere and I'd flick and look at it. And then every so often I just remember it and I come back to it and yeah. That's been quite a important poem for me really. And it has been something that I've looked at over this pandemic. Yeah. So I suppose that's the most obvious thing.

And then there's tons of films that I go back to for... I suppose it's for two different things. It depends what I'm looking for. If I'm looking for comfort, then I have all these films I used to watch as a kid. I was a bit of an isolated kid, and so I realized that the thread throughout all of these films is community. So it was Kenneth Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Muriel's Wedding*. It's quite a gay list. And *Peter's Friends*, which I think is another Kenneth Branagh film, and *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*, that I just used to watch again and again and again. So when I put them on, they felt like old friends. So if I'm looking for comfort I can go to one of those or any film that stars Whoopi Goldberg, Tom Hanks or Goldie Hawn is my go-to place.

But if I'm looking for inspiration, if I'm looking for something that's going to take me out of myself and inspire me and allow me to reflect on my life and what I'm going through, then of course there's always Shakespeare. And I think in those moments, you need to look for things that are bigger than you, that are bigger than yourself. And of course in our culture, there's sort of nothing bigger than Shakespeare, but I obviously get that through foreign language films, French films and Spanish films and stuff.

JL: This episode isn't actually about Shakespeare necessarily, but are there particular bits of Shakespeare that you will find yourself coming to that feels sort of bigger than you or inspiring particularly? And if not that's also fine.

TS: I think for the grandness and the complexity of the love that's being expressed and hidden and shied away from, for me, the play I always go back to of Shakespeare's is *Much Ado About Nothing*.



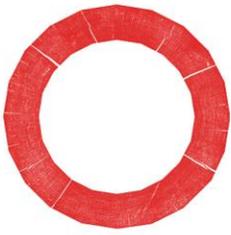
I'm a bit of a romantic at heart and that's sort of... Yeah. So that's probably the one. And if it's for grandness of thought, then I probably think of King Lear maybe over Hamlet actually, although Hamlet's the obvious one, isn't it, for existential angst? But I suppose, yeah, for some reason I warm more to King Lear.

JL: I'm sort of coming back to your first question. You talked about Maya Angelou. When you think about that poem now or... Are there particular moments that you think, "Gosh, it really helped me through that particular thing or..."

TS: Yeah. The Maya Angelou poem definitely helped me through a tough time at school when I was being bullied, for sure. And it's also been... Well, to be totally honest with you, I lost my mum a year ago just before the start of the first pandemic. And so of course, that poem, because it was a poem that she passed on to me, that had took on extra resonance. And so it's been really helpful with that, and more generally it's been helpful with the pandemic. Whatever life throws at you there's still an opportunity to rise above it, keep going, keep going. Yeah. There's a lot of joy in the poem, so it's very joyful and galvanizing.

JL: I've only got one more really on my little list which is just sort of quite a big one, really, which is why do you think the arts matter? Why do they matter to our mental health? Why does having things that inspire us matter? Why does creativity matter?

TS: I think that the arts really matter for our mental health. I think it's vital because it's like what I'm saying about whether you're looking for comfort for something or whether you're looking to be taken out of your moment and inspired and excited and galvanized, then there's nothing better than the arts for that in any form. And also as a writer that having the opportunity to work stuff out. So it's not just as a viewer or as a reader but actually to be a participant is so important, whether that's professional or not, but just to actually sit down and write your thoughts out. And you could be writing a story about something that's completely unrelated to what you're going through, but unconsciously you'll probably be working through so



much stuff that you didn't even intend to explore. So yeah. I think I'd almost say there's nothing better than the arts for mental health really.

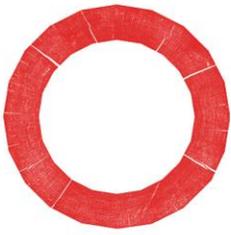
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Alex Kanefsky: What I find is that I constantly almost have too much stimulus. That tends to be my default setting. I realized this the other day. I was trying to do a bit of a clear out in the bedroom. On my bedside table there's a stack of books yea high, and then I was like, "No, no, no. These are essential. I have to have this seven books here at all times." And it's always that way. And they're not the same ones though, constant revolve. And I think that's kind of the way I operate in that I feel I need just constant stimulus from loads of stuff all the time. There's seldom kind of one or two things, but I generally have as much as I can grab at any one moment, although what I did reflect on, because I was thinking about the past year, there are those things that we and I in particular sort of tend to turn to as kind of comfort, escapist kind of things.

And I've got a couple of comfort blankets that I reach for which do tend to be books one of, which is just anything by Terry Pratchett. Unusually for me, it's something I will reread and reread and reread and reread. And one which has become more interesting recently is always, always had some old Asterix books lying around from when I was a kid and when my wife was a kid as well, so I've got her old copies. And my daughter who's four has just recently kind of gone "Read these to me daddy." We've been doing a lot of those together and she's obsessed with them now. And that's been really interesting just going back through stuff that's funny and quite comforting and helpful in that way.

Will Tosh: What is it do you think about the return to sort of childhood reading that serves as a source of support or inspiration in difficult times?

AK: It is literally just that comfort, isn't it? It's about having something familiar that, as you say, that you can return to. I'm very

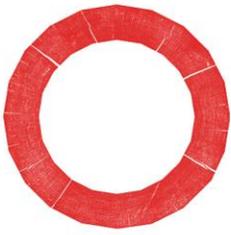


lucky, very happy childhood, and kind of one of my things was just escaping into books in general. And it might be about more than the content of what those books are themselves, but more stepping back into a time when everything was great and comfortable and you could kind of go, "I'm just going to go and hide off in a corner for a few hours and read this." And so in that way, being able to share that with my oldest has been really lovely because I can kind of see her repeating the same kind of things that I've found really, really helpful and comforting as well.

WT: Just circling back to something you said at the start, you talked about your bedside table sort of heaving with books. Say a bit more about that. What is it about the kind of plenitude or the sort of quantity or... It sounds there's a support in that even if the actual specifics of those books are sort of less important. Is there something about having a kind of bulwark of books?

AK: I like that phrase, "a bulwark of books." Yeah, I suppose there is. I think one of the things I've been quite lucky with certainly during the last sort of 18 months is that I have been able to work artistically. I'm really fortunate in that respect. So I've been doing some writing. I've had a commission. I've been sort of putting some projects together. One of the things that I feel I need to do whenever I'm doing that is I need to feed that beast. I need to constantly look for more inspiration, more stimulus, things that maybe are related, maybe are not related at all. So within that pile of books there is usually one or two non-fiction, maybe just something that interests me for the day. But I'll dip into that, sort of more political things or historical things.

And then there's a constant fiction thing, and that will quite often be just a means of escape. Even if it's not something familiar, something new, it's a way of dipping into another world, and that becomes particularly important when the world as it is feels a bit tiring. It feels exhausting sometimes, and you just want to go, "I just fancy some escapism, actually. Thank you," and sort of not think about this for a while. And that can be really reassuring I think and just sort of part of that process of disentangling yourself kind of



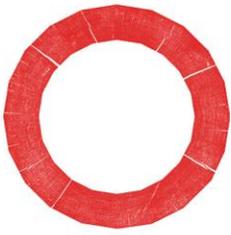
serves two functions for me. Definitely that bulwark thing is it's just a little bit of a break between you and everything and all the noise I suppose and getting out.

And certainly one thing I've noticed recently is, because naturally all of our contact has to migrate online, it's really good to have a break from that, to step away from all of the action that's going on on screens in that way and do something that feels a bit more manual, whether it's reading a book or taking a walk or painting something, cleaning something, building something. That feels hugely necessary in a space in which we're constantly staring down this kind of screen tunnel into this other world.

WT: Can you think of a time either recently or further back where sinking into those stories, those books have helped you in a particular way or kind of helped you get through a particular moment or kind of understand or take stock or step back?

AK: I thought of a very specific example of this actually which was this time last year, it must have been about April time. It was the Jewish festival of Passover. And I'm not particularly religious anymore, but my family certainly are. And it's one of the big festivals where family come together and we couldn't do it. We were in the middle of lockdown, and I felt it very acutely, really felt that kind of distance. And my response to that was immediately I felt like, "I have to make something. I need to do something here. I can't be with my family." So my daughter's just at the age where she could start to kind of engage with that properly. And I wanted to do something with her within the tradition, the Jewish tradition, what you tend to do is tell stories. And certainly in Passover you tell the story of the Exodus. That's built into the whole kind of ritual and everything.

So the way that I did that was I just made a little video and I made it with the family helping me out as much as possible. And it was all just shot with kind of silly stuff around the house, toys and bric-a-brac and so on. And that felt curiously healing and kind of active and something that could be done that was positive and had a bit of



a lasting impact to the point where I reused it again this year. It was part of a way of kind of going, "Well how do I reconnect with my heritage and history, and how do I pass that on as well? What kind of conversations can we spark from that?"

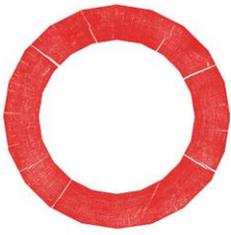
In terms of what that's done, it kind of allowed me to go, "This is why we do that. This is why we tell these stories. This is why these stories are important." And if I do bang a particular drum when it comes to art, it's about story and the importance of story and why some stories endure. And these we're talking thousands of years people have been telling these stories. I feel that was really important to me. I did another one later on when it got to the end of the year for Hanukkah and another festival with a good story as its center. And again, it was just about connecting with those things and feeling a bit rooted in a way that I think otherwise it would have felt a bit adrift, just kind of not being with family and so on. And those stories and that being part of that really allowed me to... It was a way of connecting my family and those things that were important to me as well.

WT: You mentioned that you reused your Passover film this year. It's almost you're building a new tradition.

AK: I think that's really true. Who knows? Maybe from now on, whenever and if ever... Hopefully we do get back together. Maybe we'll tell the story with Lego and bits of toys that we have out on the table. That might be the way forward.

WT: What is important about that form of inspiration and comfort that art and literature can bring and why do you think it matters?

AK: This is one of those questions that's so large it's almost impossible to answer it, but it's a great question. So I was sort of banging the drum of story before. I think stories help us define who we are. They help us shape our identity whether or not you ascribe to the notion of there being a culture war that exists. Certainly you can see the way people are fighting over... At the very least kind of debating over the stories that we tell ourselves, how important they



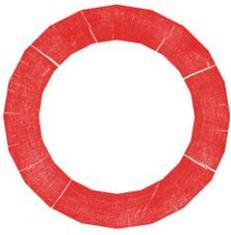
are to us. But art more widely, more generally has probably taken on a whole new meaning for most people I know, certainly, in terms of helping them get through difficult times which a lot of people are experiencing at the moment. You feel it most painfully when it's taken away from you. I always knew how important theatre was to me, but I've never felt the kind of longing of just wanting to be in a room and sharing an experience with people as I have recently. I think that art allows inspiration, facilitates a human connection.

And one thing I've been really lucky with is that, because I've been able to do some storytelling and so of this work through online and so on, is that you do still have these moments of human connection that're hugely important. And that's to me as an artist, kind of doing that with people and finding that spark and getting it back as well, but also kind of consuming that from the other end as well. And I've just noticed, everything is magnified, isn't it, at the moment. And you see just what an important place it takes, yeah, in everyone's experience.

[Music plays]

Vanessa Lim: So I'm actually a great re-reader. I really like rereading things. Something that I've reread countless times when I was younger and which I've been rereading in various bits and pieces over the last year in lockdown is a series of books by an author named Jasper Fforde, which follows a literary detective named Thursday Next. And these books are set in the 1980s in an alternate England which is obsessed with literature. And the series starts off with *The Eyre Affair*, in which Thursday our heroine has to solve a serious crime, namely the kidnapping of Jane Eyre from her novel. And I think there are six or seven books.

Over the last year and lockdown I've been reading the series, and a very special book to me in that series is the fourth book, which is actually one of the books that made Shakespeare come alive for me as a young person. It's called *Something Rotten*, and Hamlet, the prince of Denmark as we know, decides that he must know what we in the real world think of him. And so he's taken out the world of

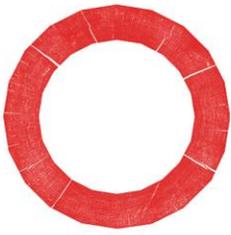


fiction for an excursion in our real world. There are some consequences to this little excursion. Without its lead character, the play Hamlet starts to collapse into The Merry Wives of Windsor to very disastrous consequences. It's terribly funny, and in a Douglas Adams, Terry Pratchett sort of way, it's been an alternate world I like to return to, especially in times of crisis, as a form of escape.

WT: It sounds fascinatingly like it's working on two principles, of alternate world, which is more beguiling than the real world, but also nostalgic return because you read it as a young person, and so it's a form of comfort and security when you come back to it as a grownup. What do you think you get out of the books as a form of inspiration or a form of comfort?

VL: I think when you work with books and texts every day, they can sometimes lose their shine. I tend to take things a bit too seriously, and I don't like that. I like to be able to laugh at things and laugh at myself, so reading something like that helps to remind me of that. And like you pointed out, it helps to make Shakespeare interesting for me again. So in rereading it I'm kind of reminded of that rush, that first discovery. And I also think it's important to read something lighter in times of crisis. I find that I can no longer read my favorite writers like Elena Ferrante or my favorite poets because they make me feel too much. And sometimes when things are bad, you don't want to feel too much when every single day is already too much. So I've been enjoying works which have an alternate world in which I can escape to.

WT: I was speaking to someone else who like you actually picked some things that they read as a younger person and are forms of literature and literary culture that are entertainment. And I think particularly people who work with texts there is a form of an enjoyment, isn't there, in just kind of going, "This is just sort of for the greedy joy of reading, consuming something joyful rather than something..." Well not rather than something thoughtful, because joyful can be thoughtful, but there's something that you're very much not doing for work.

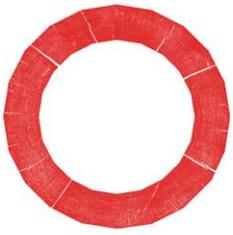


VL: Exactly. And I really liked the way you put that. It's a kind greedy joy. I want to be entertained. I want to laugh. I don't want to think seriously about Shakespeare or Hamlet. I want to have a joke. And I think that's so important when you're locked down and you've got four walls and you can't get out. I think that's really crucial, having a sort of imagined world or space you can step into and especially one that you've stepped into while you were younger. It's like the pleasures of revisiting a holiday spot you had with your family ages ago. Yeah.

WT: That's beautifully put. I love that image. Yes, completely. And just thinking sort of more generally, I suppose, about art and poetry and literature, why is the stimulation, the inspiration that those things bring important? Why does it matter?

VL: Well for me personally it makes me feel brave to encourage myself to step into a new world or see things through someone else's eyes. Art for me creates an imagined space, which I don't have to be myself. It's a different time and place I can explore. I am very much a late comer to the field of Renaissance in early modern studies. My undergraduate degree was in something entirely different. But I remember very vividly the moment where a piece of art hooked me and drew me into that world, and that was the first time I saw Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* in the flesh at the National Gallery. I'd seen pictures of it before, but I had never seen it in person. And as you know, it's life-size. It's absolutely humongous. And looking at it made me feel like, "This is a world I want to step into, I want to explore."

And I can still see that room in the National Gallery very vividly in my mind because I know on the right hand side of that painting is Holbein's portrait of Erasmus. So it's a really surround sound, immersive effect. And I'm in the Sainsbury wing of the National Gallery, but I also feel like I'm in the Renaissance. And so I think art has this really powerful ability to take us out of our own time and place and make us feel curious about how other people are living, have lived, what their experiences were like.



IG: That's it from us, but we'll be back next week in an episode focusing on creativity where we'll catch up with more creatives and practitioners from our Globe network to find out how they've kept their creativity alive in the last year. And now that we're opening the theater again, if you're looking for some fresh inspiration, do visit our website to book tickets for the summer season. We couldn't be more excited to welcome 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.