

FUTURES | on the needs of emerging theatre-makers in the Highlands

Transcripts

These transcripts are in accompaniment of the FUTURES Report 2023, written by Laura Walker on behalf of Vivid Roots Collective.

You can read the full report here: www.vividrootscollective.co.uk/futures



Bluebell, Buttercup, Clover, Snowdrop, and Holly

VRC: Firstly, I would like to ask you all to talk organically about your relationship to the Highlands and Highland arts.

BLU: I guess, to start off with – originally, my plan, when I was looking to go and study arts in further education, my plan was, because I'm originally from Fife, was to stay kind of local and go to Edinburgh. But I did end up moving to the Highlands and I was there for four years, and obviously, apart from the opportunities that we got through the university, of getting to go and see local theatre¹ and stuff, that kind of felt to me like the only kind of – except from producing our own work through the course – it felt like the only outlook on the arts that we got in the Highlands, which, obviously Vivid Roots are working on getting theatre-making in there, so that's really good.

SNO: I agree with the bit that there wasn't much exposure to it, partially because of course, when you were getting a lot of the opportunities through the university for most of our course, then it was all in lockdown, so we didn't have a lot of opportunity to see Highland-based creative stuff. And, I feel like the amount of exposure we got to it was quite minimal. The shows that I did go to see when they opened up again was either more largely-produced things, or it was the panto, which is a Highlands-based thing, but it wasn't – it was another en-masse-produced kind of thing, rather than created for the Highlands, by Highlanders, so I'm not sure how much exposure there has been to it.

CLO: Like Snowdrop has said, of course, we were in the middle of lockdown, so of course that caused a lot of issues when we were trying to create work or get it – or see work, as it were, but I can see that in the last year or so of being there – it's going to sound kind of silly because of course in our industry, it is very important to have networking opportunities – but I found that in Inverness, you start finding opportunities as soon as you have that circle of friends to work with, but if you are kind of the brand of performer or creative in general who doesn't have these connections straight away, there isn't much – exposure is the kind of word I guess I use for practices – because in the last year or so we ended up getting

involved with the Nairn Arts and Book Festival in Nairn². I'd never heard of it until the college directed us in that direction, there was nothing that would have told me otherwise that that was a thing that was happening. In general – and again, obviously Vivid Roots came along but otherwise, I would have heard of work that's been done by people from college, but there was no advertising going on – like you couldn't hear about an acting opportunity unless you already knew someone who was an actor, or just a creative in the Highlands, and they were sharing someone else's work who was their friend in that way. Generally, working in Inverness was quite nice, it is a very nice kind of place that offers a lot of opportunities, I think. It's just about being able to utilise them to the best ability that you can, and I don't think there has been much individuals who were able to kind of harness that while we were up in Inverness, but that's more of a guess on my part as to why it wasn't as prominent when we were up in Inverness.

BUT: I'd like to be more involved with the arts in Inverness, but I have no current plans in development to do so. I feel as if I know really of one arts establishment in Inverness, obviously being Eden Court, and the fact that I just said Inverness and not the Highlands in general I suppose is also telling because the Highlands is a large, expanse of basically half of our country, and it would be – I would be keen in the future to engage with Highlands-based arts as and when, but I do believe that there's potentially an issue with advertising, like CLO was saying, because I have no idea what goes on in Nairn. I don't know if this is because I don't follow Nairn-based companies on social media or Thurso-based companies on social media, or if there are any, or if it's an issue of: these companies are under-funded and can't pay for advertising that would reach me in Edinburgh or Fife, or even if these companies would want to market to Edinburgh/Fife or if they would rather start by just marketing to their audiences in Nairn/Inverness. And that extends to I don't know what the audiences in Inverness are like – I can ask you guys what they're like to give context from my understanding – like Aberdeen I feel the audiences – bringing in an

¹ Meaning: theatre touring to local venues, not locally-produced theatre

² The Nairn Book and Arts Festival

audience is the hardest challenge of coming up through youth theatre and making my work, and trying to get in shows in Aberdeen, the hardest part was audience.

VRC: Can I clarify that what you are saying is that you have an interest in potentially forming a relationship with Highland arts, that not necessarily knowing what audiences like up here is a barrier to a connection for you?

BUT: Yeah. I don't know if I'm that audience – I'd like to think I am if there's good work being made in the Highlands, I'd like to know about it, and I'd like to be there.

HOL: I'm trying to find an articulate point that hasn't already been said. I feel like Clover and Snowdrop have very well articulated my thoughts. Highland art for me – I don't know if this is me misinterpreting what Highland arts is – but it kind of feel like if you're not Dogstar³, you don't get representation of Highland art. Obviously there's you guys know, which is fantastic and I love to see it, but in the past, it felt like if you weren't Dogstar Productions, you didn't have a foot in the door when it came to exposure or anything like that. Also, a mild side-note but a connected point, I completely agree with BUT that Aberdeen audiences are one of the hardest to get, because if you're not clapp-y, sing-y, danc-y, musical type, nobody shows up to your performances. It's not like that in Inverness; I felt that a lot of people are far more open to seeing more abstract, serious, drama kinds of performance, as opposed to the happy, clappy, sing-y, dance-y stuff, we love a good bit of cheesy musicals as well, obviously, who doesn't? But I think Highland audiences, from what I have seen are far more open to more serious and other kinds – 'branched out' I suppose are the words that I want to use - kinds of productions and shows. I feel that, due to personal things that I'm not going to get into, because we don't have the time for that, Highlands productions and Highland theatre, I don't think I can come back to at least for a couple of years until I at least have myself back together. But I would absolutely love to come back in the future when I feel ready to, I would love to come back and do stuff there, because the audiences are great, and you've got great spaces hidden in where you think is nowhere, like there is wonderful performance spaces in Nairn, and in Elgin, and there's one tucked away in Forbes, and there's so many tiny

places that you can kind of go and expand your art in. I suppose for me, at current, it doesn't feel like the right space.

VRC: Thank you for your responses. Next, I would like you to take a minute to think about three things that were missing from your training. Please put them in the chat when you are ready.

CHAT RESPONSES

CL0: Entrepreneurship and business management which was only introduced in the last years of college / I feel both freelance and company management have been missing. We touched on company management but since it was a new course introduced, there was little detail and freedom in the education we got / Production elements of performance. There was still a lot of acting focus and the involvement with production elements was deeply theory based, but I know there could have been so much more we could draw on /

HOL: Things that were missing in my training: / I feel that a proper introduction to filmed performance and branching out into screen was missing. The way the course was changed on us meant that, as we were entering as second years, we missed out on the introduction to screen that the first years below us got / Proper health and safety practises both as a part of a cast and crew were also missing / And better understanding of what it means to be a freelance artist vs part of a collective/company and what that really means in terms of the industry as it stands right now /

BLU: Networking, Financial/Business, /

³ Dogstar Theatre Company

SNO: Stage combat, more networking practice/ opportunities, self management skills /

BUT: -1 mental health support -2 variety of industry professionals -3 'next steps' planning

VRC: For those of you who are finished, I'd like you to pick one of those things and tell me how you would like an organisation to fill that gap.

BUT: I think the company would be really great for what I have referred to as 'next steps' planning when coming to the end of training. It's something that I feel personally I have failed at in leaving training. I left training with my company – we did our showcase at the Fringe⁴, with a show that we had rehearsed for months and planned for months and there was so much thought and effort and everything put into all aspects of it, and this took up the final three months of our training. Then we did it and then it was like 'oh, what next?' and I feel that this is the same as other groups that had graduated with us. I won't mention other groups, but they also didn't have anything come out of their company for at least six months after the Fringe, maybe longer. So, in retrospect, it would have been great to – for training to have used that time, or to have got people in to help us use the time that we had, where we were so tunnel-focused on one thing, to ask: 'what are you doing next? What's the future plan? What's happening in the next year?' Not even doing five year plans, ten year plans, and all that business-y stuff, because that all changes anyway when you leave – or it did for us – but that immediately, 'what's the very next thing?'.

VRC: Is that something that, in an ideal world, you would like for companies to deliver through education or outwith education?

BUT: Maybe a bit of both. My instinctual reaction was the former, was – to construct a situation, say you have University of the Highlands and Islands students preparing to do a showcase or preparing to leave their training, a company like Vivid Roots could do a workshop over one or two days with the students – if they have companies planned, if they have plans to go out as individual freelance creatives.

HOL: The first thing that comes to mind is my point about proper health and safety practices; they were kind of somewhat touched on when we first got into entrepreneurship, but it was more like 'yeah, there are proper health and safety practices – do me a form for whatever production you want to put on' and it wasn't until I looked into it myself that, like, if you use running water in a production, under certain council rules, you have to do a legionella test to make sure no one is going to get ill, and you have to do all of these small things, that are really important in the grand scheme, and I would really love to have actually been told what it means to come at the production, the crew side of things, from a health and safety perspective. So, I would love to get stunt doubles from films, or people who do stage fighting, like people from previous crews who have done complicated pieces of work to talk about how they went about making sure it was safe not only for the cast and the rest of their crew, but the audience as well. That kind of thing would be really eye-opening and helpful for, if you want to put on a big show with, you know, pyrotechnics and running water, and all this flashy stuff. If you want to have a sky-is-the-limit type of production then you need to know the safety that goes in behind it.

SNO: I think one of the issues that I think I'm having is that I haven't quite figured out how to properly network. What kind of events I might need to go to, or what I might need to talk about, because I, obviously I've got a lot on Backstage and *inaudible* on Facebook, that kind of thing. But it's difficult to get involved, especially when the only things popping up are things that don't fit your specific area or the kind of person that you can be cast as, because most of the things I'm seeing are male or older or a race that I am not, so it's – I think by having more practice on how to network, and more opportunities to expand the field of people that I have in my contacts list, that would be really helpful after – for leaving training and getting out there, and if people had – like if those groups of people that the uni were inviting around the time that I was leaving, that probably would have helped out a lot.

BLU: I would just like to tag onto the end of Snowdrop's point about networking. I feel like there's also an element of – I guess I'm kind of narrowing it down a little bit – like professionalism. I know that's something you have to learn as you go, but in my current

⁴ Edinburgh Festival Fringe

work, I've just had to learn how to talk to promoters and things of some really big shows, and sometimes that's really hard to do and sometimes you can't always keep them happy. And, I guess on the business side of things, we did a little bit at the end [of university], which was 'how to start up your own theatre company' and things like that, but I guess in terms of business, I really mean more about what goes on behind all of the different things into putting on a show. Because, now seeing that from working in a theatre, you just get to see how much there is actually involved in the more behind the scenes, the more financial side of it. And I guess you have to learn that as you go, but it would have been nice to have a bit more on that.

VRC: In an ideal world, what kind of form would you like that learning to take?

BLU: That's a hard one – I think that business is a very 'sit down and learn it' but I know that's not everyone's style. I guess like getting to shadow – going into an office space with a theatre and seeing what they do on a daily basis that would be really helpful.

VRC: What about you, CLO?

CLO: This idea of shadowing producers or directors. There's not many but obviously, there is opportunities to work with other actors and kind of work on the acting side of things, and for acting, we get a lot of training for that – various acting techniques – but you don't really get experiences of being a director or a producer, until you do it. It's not something that you get a chance to try, you just do it. I think the only opportunity that I can think of that was like that was – the TV show they were advertising for assistant directors – but I have heard unpleasant things about it is all I'm going to say. But it would be an amazing chance for – whether it is for a whole show, like a whole big production, or whether it's maybe like workshops that are like a week of putting on a small production to just people involved in the workshop or an actual audience. I think it would have been great for people to get a chance to actually work with a director or a producer who has actually gone through that process and seeing 'okay, this is actually what it entails' and having someone there to help you out while you're learning.

VRC: The next thing I would like you to think about, and share in the chat is: one thing that you would like to see from companies that are wanting to engage you as emerging artists.

CHAT RESPONSES

CLO: I'd argue either physical requirements of the role required or a little bit more detail in role descriptions that go beyond just the gender of the character. The latter is a bit better I find nowadays, but there's still issues where I'll all too often see very minimal notes in open calls or casting calls only to find out there's more details or requirements that just weren't included in the initial advert

HOL: I agree with CLO; I was working on saying the same but he said it in a far more articulate way

BLU: I find training has in my experience sometimes been rushed. Due to starting work after lockdown it was straight back into shows and not a lot of time to learn the admin side of things. Not sure if that's what you meant by that question

SN0: I feel like a lot of the time theatre companies can feel very closed, likely not on purpose but getting involved can feel difficult, especially when as you discover a company they are doing a piece you do not relate with

BUT: I had nothing to add for the moment.

VRC: While you are finishing up, Vivid Roots is developing a plan for online 'hang outs' for emerging artists. Can you show me on a scale of 1-10 how interested you would be in participating in that kind of programme?

CHAT RESPONSES

CLO: 7

SN0: 8-9

HOL: 8

BLU: 8

BUT: 10

VRC: Next up, I would like you to tell me the two big asks that you would have of a

networking event that was targeted towards emerging artists.

CHAT RESPONSES

CLO: More targeted networking events alongside more broad ones. Events specifically for directors or writers alongside general creatives networking events. Like Natalie said, maybe opportunity to show work or bits of work alongside interaction. /

BLU: Some kind of fayre or festival where you could see shows and artists and talk to them about their shows after. /

SNO: Ideally I'd be looking for as many different areas of the industry as possible. perhaps with presentations of their work or such, I think a relaxed environment is also important

BUT: Money no barrier: It'd be really attractive to come up to the highlands for networking if travel and accommodation was helped with / Vivid Roots Highlands Mini-bus! Joke aside, I love a casual networking event over formal and structured

VRC: The final question is: what are the top three topics that you would like to see being offered in workshops targeted towards emerging artists?

SNO: I think workshops that teach skills you don't necessarily think about such as in depth self care workshops or audition/ interview workshops to give us a real idea of how to look after ourselves and how to get into the room with professionals

BUT: It would be great to have workshops that are 'crash courses' of different facets of being a theatre-maker. As I said earlier, I trained as an actor, and now I'm finding that I must be a director, and a producer, and a writer, and I feel really under-qualified to do a lot of these things to the point where I feel like 'oh, I want to try this' but maybe I need to – maybe it won't be considered, or maybe no one will

consider it, or no one will come to see it, or maybe no one will be interested unless I've gone through three years of more training for it. So it will be nice just to get the crash course on these things.

CLO: I agree with what BUT said, there is a lot of focus on acting, which is fine when that's what you primarily want to do, but also having been in this situation of 'well, I started training to be an actor, and now I'm doing everything else but acting'; there's not much opportunity there. There have been situations where people will be looking for specifically tech-experienced people, but unless you were, I don't know if 'lucky' is the word, but if you were lucky enough to be in a circumstance where you had a chance to learn that and be in an environment where there was no highly experienced person to do the tech for you, it's unlikely that you would have the opportunity to actually properly do it. I'm certain that we all can agree that we knew that one person who did tech, and that was that one person who did tech. You know, there's – I feel like that is a great opportunity for workshops – whether that is actually run by a company, or facilitated, because obviously, there aren't that many people who are familiar with tech enough to teach it, or at least pass on their experience. And obviously, that's not – we're not just talking tech, we're also talking directing, writing, and producing, this ties back into what I said earlier where I do think that it would be very worthwhile for directors and producers to try out various – maybe not actual shadowing if you can't manage that, but to get various skills for production and directing that are maybe not skills that you would use in acting. There's a unique set of skills that you need to be able to run something like that that you don't necessarily get to do through acting.

SNO: The stuff that you don't necessarily feel like you need to get taught, but when you get out there you realise that you really wish you'd been taught. Just how to talk to professionals and how to get yourself into the room with professionals, and kind of more stuff on how to get yourself noticed and how to really make sure that the things you're saying is selling yourself and selling yourself in ways that you are wanting people to perceive you. You know, it's not something you really think is a business skill that you need, but you really need it once you get out there.

Foxglove

VRC: Are you okay if we start?

FOX: Yeah, yeah; all good.

VRC: The first question I have for you is: what do think are the gaps in your training that would have helped you step into the industry?

FOX: Cool, I would say one of the ones – I think I've spoken to you briefly about this before – was directing. That was my big boo-boo at uni; or at least, retrospectively, because I was like 'meh, I'm not interested in directing, it's not something I'm ever going to need to worry about, it's not something I need to do', and obviously, the more – since graduating and stuff – I didn't regret it at uni at the time, but since graduating and the more I've moved into different freelance work and stuff, so much of it is workshop facilitation, and so much of that is being able to direct people, and look at written scripts or devised pieces, and know how to play with them; and from that, I was like: 'you know what would have been good? Taking that module at uni'. I wish I'd had a bit more experience of shadowing or being chucked in the deep end and giving it ago.

VRC: Are there any others?

FOX: I suppose – not specifically arts funding, because we got a module about that at uni, and I know we were quite unique in getting something like that, because we had an actual arts funding module; but, from that, generally applying for things. You know, in terms of how to really nail the wording of those kinds of applications and submit the proper accounts and things like that, because we just got left to it. It would have been nice to have actually been shown an example of a spreadsheet and how to deal with all that, especially in terms of freelance personal administration, like tax – someone speak to us about tax! – those kind of things, and keeping track of all your income and outgoings – income and expenses and whatnot. I think – I know we've got that – you know, the book, the Freelance book thing – the nice cartoon one⁵. I know we have that, and that's fantastic, but it's so nice just having someone who's been there and done it, just sitting you down and going: 'these are the things to do, the things not to do, these are the easiest ways of doing things', kind of,

yeah. Especially because, in this industry, so many people are self-employed in some capacity. It would have been real good to have been shown how to deal with that. It's insane to do a course basically [about freelancing], and no one explains that.

VRC: So, to follow on, how would you like a theatre company to support in filling those gaps?

FOX: Yeah, I suppose for directing, the ideal world would be to get in contact with a company and being like: 'Hi, I've seen you're doing this, may I please come in?' and either sitting and watching them or, equally, getting some kind of mentor through uni, or wherever you studied, or whatever your connections with the industry are – being able to have some kind of close contact with a pre-existing director or company would be lovely.

Arts applications and stuff; I suppose it would be lovely if you went to do an application, and there was just a little video at the side of every question going 'We say this, but we mean this; this is specifically what we are getting at'. Having a pool of people who you can turn to who have either applied for the same pot before, or have heaps of experience between them of successful applications being like: 'Cool, these are the mistakes that we've made, these are the correct things to be doing and saying, key words', all that jazz, or even just a contact within the company, whoever it is that you're applying to who is quite happy to be like: "yeah, I'll tell you how to do it."

Again, at uni, it would have been nice – or it would be nice to have either – where I was, we had a business gateway, I think most unis have some sort of embodiment of that, just someone chilling there who is a freelancer full-time, and to go to them and be like: 'Look, what am I doing with my tax return?' And they can sit through with you – or have some kind of giant tax party on the 5th of April on Zoom or in real life so that you can sit with a bunch of people and be like 'I'm stuck on this question, or oh my God I've lost a receipt' or something, and you can suffer together and ask questions – a safe space to ask stupid questions would be really good, like all year round.

VRC: Beyond the other things you've mentioned, is there anything else you

⁵ The Illustrated Freelancer's Guide

would like to ask from an organisation to support the gaps in your training?

FOX: Just give me £10,000 every month to disappear into a hovel and write lots of nice things to apply for. I think a total dream world would be if Vivid Roots have a nice pretty office in town that you could just rock up to and sit and have a conversation and either look over applications for awards or competitions, or whatever, or open calls even, and have a little room for dramaturgical support, or that kind of thing, and being able to draw on some kind of theatrical yellow pages and be like: 'Cool, this is the person that you need to be ideally speaking to, because they're an expert in this', or 'this is your next step', so then you can have a springboard to then go and speak to these people or get in contact with a company who is able to facilitate – or fill in the gaps, I suppose, in whatever is missing in your skill set.

VRC: The next question I have is: do you know how to contact emerging artist or professionals in the area?

FOX: My gut instinct would be to say no. I know I've got a decent network of am-dram folk at Florians and Starlight, and IMT⁶, so I know people who are skilled in choreography or performing or dancing, and that kind of thing, so I have contact in that way; but in terms of people who work professionally either full-time or part-time – no. Obviously there's Eden Court, and on the Eden Court website, there's a bunch of all the crew there, but it is mainly the facilitation or administrative staff, there's no contact – there's a contact for the head of the tech team and stuff like that – but if they miss your email or they can't be bothered with it, you'll miss – you know what I mean? Whereas if you get in contact with folk directly they might be a bit more willing or forgiving. And, I suppose, obviously, there's the likes of Dogstar, and although in my head he's AD⁷, he's also a performer, so I suppose he counts as an artist, so I always forget he performs; but yeah, so beyond that small pool, I have no idea.

VRC: What would you want from a space that was designed for emerging artists to get together and collaborate?

FOX: I suppose, in some kind of performance space, whether that's a big hall, or a studio, a black-box, come together as a big crowd – I say, ideally; in a dream world: a big crowd, we want big crowds – and just play games and stuff, and figure out what peoples' niches are or interests are, and from there, figure out if there can be either one giant company or ensemble created, or if people hit it off individually, I think that's equally valid – of having break-off strands. Yeah, I think ideally there would be some kind of creating as an ensemble or a collective, rather than folk coming in and being like 'I've written this play, and I want to put it on!'. That's my personal preference of a way of working – having creative, total shared ownership over that kind of stuff. Equally, if there are break-off strands of folk being like 'yeah, I've written this play, if you lot have read it' or if they come with their own pre-existing crowd of creative folk who have read it and have been like 'oh, this is class, I think it's a good idea,' just having the space for people to be able to pursue the ways of working that suits them and excites them most I think would be really nice.

Even if there's some kind of once-a-month scratch night where you get 15 minutes to put a piece forward, if you've been working on it outside the space, or if you've been working on it within the space, that would be nice – just having a pre-existing audience of people who know what they're talking about. I know that's what we realised was missing from the Work-In-Progress last year⁸, was it was all people who loved us and wanted to tell us that we did well, rather than people who wanted to critique it properly. I think that would be class.

VRC: The next question is, what would you like to see from a networking event or festival specifically about / for emerging artists?

FOX: So the immediate image in my head is like a big room full of stalls and different people and companies either having a table or a space where you can go over and have a chat about what they do, or if you've not heard about them, see flyers from their recent shows and stuff like that; maybe a big screen with different production footage by different people or general advertisement for people's skills and stuff; or a programme of talks from

⁶ Inverness Musical Theatre

⁷ Matthew Zajac, Artistic Director of Dogstar Theatre.

⁸ Vivid Roots Collective's #WIP1, performed to an online audience on the 26th September 2021.

folk who are at different stages of the industry, workshops with either writers, poets, directors; to just get a chance to work with them or play games or explore something that they are working on currently, and then equally help – because it's always nice to steal ideas from people and get an insight into peoples' different ways of working. Having a fun version of a lecture of skills expansion – like we've always said that no one teaches you how to be a producer, so a producer up on the stage like, 'this is how I started, this is how I *inaudible* stop thinking the you're not capable of it, these are the important resources', just like a weekend with a programme of events that you can drop in and out of; obviously pay for it and stuff. It's the best way of getting to know people who have the skills that you need, you know, advertising opportunities and getting to know who is in the area, and have the skills that you are missing. If you're looking for more teachers for your company, or specific performers for your project. Like I say, the Highlands is quite a small space, and the theatre industry is even smaller up here so you're only ever 2 or 3 people away from knowing someone that can do the thing that you're needing.

VRC: Are there any other kinds of workshops that you would like to benefit from?

FOX: Purely because I enjoy it, just physical theatre stuff would be really fun. Maybe personal finance-y boring-y, admin stuff would be nice. Just because it always feels a lot less painful when you do it with people that you like.

Iris and Daisy

VRC: The first question I have to ask is: what do you think are the gaps in your training – the skills or learning that you would have benefitted from to help you in the industry?

IRI: I think, for me, my immediate mindset would go to agents and things like that, primarily because I know a lot of folk who went through the college course – they went into it with the idea of going into acting and of course there was a lot of focus put on developing your own skillset as a writer, and things like that, but I found that once I was out, I had the knowledge of what the skillsets were meant to be but I had no idea how to begin to put them into practice. It wasn't until an agent came to the college and said, "we'd love to run a few short courses with your students to develop these skills with them," that I sort of went: 'oh yeah, these are necessary skills,' like how to speak to agents, how to develop those relationships, but they're kind of missed because you're meant to be an independent creator out of college, but I feel like that's going to leave a lot of folk just switched off from the industry entirely.

DAI: I think with school, because obviously applying to drama school is very different to university, there's so much more requirements and the audition practice, and it's like – I can't just go to my – not all schools even offer drama as a subject, so I can't even go to a specific teacher and be like, 'you know what to do, you've done this'. So that was kind of scary and is probably one of the reasons that I didn't get in last year, but to be honest, I'm really – well my journey started before the pandemic – just before that, so me not having access to things was kind of predicted. But I think, to be honest, I'm really grateful for the year off that I had, because I left school last year and my plan was to go straight to drama school, but I'm honestly – I've gotten so much life experience just from stuff that's been happening and my work – honestly, I'm really grateful for not just focusing on drama entirely, because it's not exactly healthy to make it your entire life. I think my – the thing I could have done with – was the support during school, because going to the conservatoire⁹ via UCAS was slightly different.

IRI: For me, something that has been missed going into acting and working with agents, something that has come up a lot is Spotlight, and Backstage is a similar product. Creating an online profile for that is something I have never really had much experience with. I mean, we've always talked about creating an actor CV but usually when I've experienced that, it's been an actual CV, where what I've been seeing from Backstage alone, it's a very different beast you're interacting with, so just a little more information on that would be a massive improvement.

VRC: Thank you, is there anything else that you would have really liked to have known about the industry, opportunities, or developing your practice?

DAI: I reached out to someone from *inaudible* who graduated from there, and I exhausted them with questions about the industry; but I think the main thing is not dealing with being employed, but dealing with being unemployed. It's such an unpredictable industry that you're never going to get a 9-5 job, it's just not concrete, and even if you do get a long-term job, it doesn't always last. So, I guess just having to – not just dealing with how to get a job, but how to deal with when you don't have one.

VRC: Great, so the next question I have is: how would you like an organisation or theatre company to fill those gaps or to help support you in those pathways into the industry?

DAI: There's a lot of stuff online, but you don't know what's really beneficial and what isn't, because everyone has different opinions about applying for stuff. One thing I think would be amazing is a workshop or a summer school for applying for UCAS conservatoires, because the process is so different; the personal statement has to be entirely different; it's not about everything you've done – it's about everything you're hoping to achieve, and the audition side of it, so I think something like that would be really useful because drama school is a very practical place rather than a writing place, so having a practical course like that for young people would be really beneficial.

⁹ The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS)

IRI: Piggy-backing off of the UCAS thing – it can be really difficult remembering what you need for UCAS when you’ve not used it for a while, because I went to reapply for the conservatoire a while ago and realised that I don’t have an academic reference, which is one of the big things. It does seem that when you are preparing for applying, it doesn’t always seem to give you that knowledge of, “this is what you need”. In a more broad sense, I’ve always said at every focus group, it’s a funding issue primarily. You have very little in terms of funding up in the Highlands in terms of organisations from what I’ve seen. Everything that I’ve seen is either in Glasgow or Edinburgh, which doesn’t take into account that there’s not the transport network up here to even get you as far as Inverness, so that’s really it. Funding and transport are the two key issues as far as being a creative here is concerned.

VRC: In terms of funding, what about funding would you like to have learned about, or how would you like to learn about it?

IRI: Pretty much anything – knowledge of how to go about getting funding is really – I suppose that will have to go back into the first question: what is lacking? There really is no real teaching what funding is and how to apply for it and what you would apply under because there are so many – I went to apply for one and there was so many sub-categories of what version of the funding do you need? ‘I don’t know, I’m a person asking for money to do a thing; I don’t know if I’m a charity organisation, or...’ I don’t remember all the layers of it.

VRC: Is there anything else about how organisations can support you?

DAI: Even what you’ve already offered; helping with my personal statement and my auditions – obviously Iris and I are at very different stages in our career, so our answers will be really different. That’s all I can really ask for – I guess there are more developed (if that’s the right word) groups like Eden Court, who offer classes weekly and all of that, that have the funding to be able to do that. That’s really helpful for me to have that experience to put on my applications and to develop my skills, so I guess what you’re offering just now is all I could really ask for – just guidance through all of this.

VRC: Do you know how to reach emerging artists in the area, and if so how? If not, how would you like to?

DAI: Honestly, no.

IRI: No. The closest – I don’t think I’ve met a single emerging artist in my area. I wound up on a Discord group, which is the closest I think I’ve come, but it works worldwide, so there are folks from Scotland, but there’s also folks down in England, America, and India. So, it can become very confusing as to who you’re talking to. And it goes the way that you would expect it to go; a lot of people join the group going, ‘I want to be an actor, if I join this group I will find people who will be able to help me become an actor’, but then all you find is you’ve got a lot of actors with no work. So, it comes down to a point that you do need to make your own work, but the complications of getting in touch with these folk and working with them... The big plus side of working with them is that they all know they’re starting out in the industry, and that we’re also starting out in the industry, so being paid initially isn’t really going to be happening on a large scale. It’s the one thing that I keep running into, when I’ve been creating work, is, ‘What would you be paying me to do this job?’ And I’m like, ‘I can’t even afford to pay myself to do this job, I doubt I’m even going to break even, I don’t know what sort of money you’re expecting’.

VRC: Thank you, I think there’s a lot to unpick there. How interested are you both in working with emerging artists in the Highlands?

DAI: My plan is, regardless of whether I get into RCS this year, is that I’m thinking of moving to Glasgow anyway because I’m just bursting with independence at this point. If I hate it, I hate it, I can always come back; I’m sort of open to any opportunity that comes along, but I think, primarily, right now, my hope is RCS, but if not, I’m going to do a foundation course elsewhere in Glasgow. Then continue on that journey down there, but I might end up not liking it and really miss home and come back. So, I have no preference, I’m not saying ‘I’m never coming back’, so I absolutely would be interested in that.

VRC: What would your interest be in a ‘hang out’ for emerging artists, and what would you like to see from this kind of group?

IRI: I would definitely be interested, and I think the main benefits coming out of that is going to end up being the networking, no matter what the other things are; because of course you’ll learn other things with new people

anyway, but just knowing who else is in the Highlands in those same particular shoes is a big benefit to pretty much all emerging artists. At this point you go from 'I'm doing this alone', to, 'well, I could ask some of these folk, because they're in the same boat as me'.

DAI: I agree. I think that's a really wholesome idea to be honest because there just aren't any – there are actually, there are just so many people who want to do the same things as us but it's just not – not that it's a stigma, it's just not talked about very much – especially in school. I think there is a view with – it's still there regardless of how much we say it isn't – there is this view of people that urge you not to go into performing arts because it's not a stable career, but I think having that group you know that it's non-judgemental and everyone gets one another and you're able to share each individual path. I think that's really great, not just for our drama side of things, but for your human connection, really.

IRI: I mean there's the diversifying strengths and weaknesses, because when it comes to – going back to college, my experience with it, and the way I view what I was being taught is: 'you need to learn how to do everything on your own', which is fundamentally at odds with the reality of theatre. On top of the networking – I'm working on a piece of theatre just now just to try and do something, and I've wound up connecting back with an old course mate to try and get it written. While he's not really into writing the stuff that I'm writing, he was always much better at writing than I ever was, so it's really helped me navigate the minefield of what punctuation do you use, and how does it sound natural? So it works the same way – networking can help build that communal feeling because you get people with different skill sets.

VRC: Thank you. My last questions are about the networking festival, and workshops – what would you like to see from these aspects of the company.

DAI: I guess drama workshops that we don't usually see – like most drama workshops are focused on a technique, but we don't normally see like the actual industry side of it, like focusing on unemployability (if that's a word), focusing on stuff that doesn't come to mind immediately, that would be really great because it shows that you're offering something really different.

IRI: I think in terms of workshops, they would be best suited at aiming towards gaps in the knowledge, so what we've already said –

producing your own work and things like that. Whereas a networking event should likely have things more geared towards the social aspects of the industry – team building events and things like that. You could always do some social workshops, as an autistic person, the networking is always a nightmare.

DAI: I totally agree with Iris, and with the networking, getting to hear people's stories and where they are in their journeys, because – take me and Iris for example, we're just in different stages of life in general, and it would be really wonderful to see different people and see what they've done on their journeys so far and how other people can help them and guide them through. I think for the networking side of it, just hearing everyone and making – having things available for everyone in their journey – what they need right now.

IRI: It might be good to take notes on other groups available in the Highlands, and being able to promote those groups at events, so that people might be aware that there are other groups they might not have been aware of.

DAI: I suppose it's also a possibility that if internet connection is really poor for some people that if they can't do workshops or something, and if in-person isn't an option. Maybe something like – like after one of those [events] putting up a little recap, like little booklets or something like that.

Ivy, Marigold, Myrtle, Poppy and Thistle

VRC: The first question I have for you is about your training, whether through school, uni, or other theatre work – what do you feel have been the gaps in your training that you would have benefitted from to help you emerge into the industry?

THI: One of the big ones that pops into my head, that I think we can all probably relate to, just due to the nature of the pandemic, has been just in general, anything to do with actually putting on a show, whether it's acting, directing, even behind the scenes; I feel like theory-wise, we are probably quite strong. Maybe it's quite egotistical, but I'd say we're almost stronger than other years, but experience-wise, it's the complete opposite. For me, the pandemic hit a week before my HNC show, and it got cancelled because of that, then the next year I was in Glasgow and there was an attempt to do a performance for the HND, and then because Glasgow couldn't behave itself, we had to do an online performance, which was okay, but it didn't feel professional. Even our final performance, which I think was really good, and it was the closest thing I had to experience, which was an outdoor Shakespeare performance – I've never actually performed on a stage for years now. So, I think that's a major gap.

MYR: Yeah, actually being able to physically do stuff hasn't been able to happen for about two years; you know we've got a lot more theory stuff, than what we previously had, but my HNC show was completely online.

IVY: And finding work. I always get stumped with this question, because I've not done anything in like 2 years, and I didn't do a lot before that because I was in school, so I haven't done a lot of productions, and I wish I could have, but finding work is hard because I've missed that chunk where I'd learn how to find work.

POP: From my point of view, as a mature-mature student, I feel that online gave me the opportunity to manage all my insecurities, and I've had a lifetime of gaining insecurity. I'm also what they call an extroverted introvert, so I can take people in very small doses, but I really struggle with ongoing social aspect of engaging with people – like the small talk – I get very bored very easily with small talk, so I feel that being able to study online has really given me the confidence to engage, because I don't have to manage a magnitude of my

social lacking; and with regards to work – and I had my first meeting with my work experience place yesterday, and that it was online I was able to really talk clearly my ideas without the social awkwardness of: how do you sit in front of people? What do you do with your hands? And all of that social politeness which really gets in the way because I get really tripped up with what I am doing. So, from my point of view, I feel that the online has really given me an opportunity to connect with my creative side and not be overwhelmed by my social awkward side. What I feel is lacking though is the other online people. So, when I worked in a group in our last semester, the module that we did group work with were online and that works so well, because we were all in the same mindset, we were all coming from the same point, and we all enjoyed being online, so it really was a sense of we could just get on with the work and we didn't have to worry about where we were going to sit at lunchtime or all of that kind of stuff, so I actually feel like I could be quite an advocate, not just for online, but also middle-age transformation; you know, I'm middle aged transforming my life by going back to study.

VRC: Thank you, is there anything anyone would like to add before we move on?

POP: One thing that struck me yesterday in my first meeting with my work experience, was that my mindset is very much – I'm a student, so to make that transition from: I'm receiving information and I'm putting out essays, and my mind is academic like: How do I write this essay? Versus what they're actually – like being in the work – and how would I charge for that? Like, if I was doing this work for money, I have no idea how I would charge per hour. So, I really have no – and maybe we'll cover that in this module, so I don't want to stress it too much, but there was a point like, I don't know how valuable my contribution is – like, I don't know what people charge per hour for what I'm offering.

VRC: Okay, so the next question I have for you is: how would you like an organisation to fill that gap?

IVY: I think maybe knowledge about the community and ways into the community, because that's normally where jobs sprout out from – if you're friends with everyone, the jobs kind of pop up out of nowhere. But just

starting out, it's hard to get into that community – because normally it comes from your first few shows – if you get to do those first few shows – so finding community is hard and I'm struggling with it.

VRC: So, in an ideal world, how would you like a theatre company to fix that for you?

POP: Actually, that raises a thought that I had – in the last 30 years, when I've worked as a nanny, and I had a nanny agency, so they would match, like interview me and interview the family and then match us; like, 'you want 5-year-old boys', and to work in this area. So, that would be so helpful. I'm learning now as a student what I have to offer and what I actually enjoy, but once I have developed a sense of what I actually liked and I'm having little tasters in all areas at university – for example I realised when I was doing my HND, because I came from West college in Paisley, so this is my first year at UHI, I hated the performance – I just wanted to sit with the lecturer because I just kept noticing, 'oh, that needs to happen' and 'have you got the teacup?', but when I had to learn my lines I was like 'this is so boring', so I'm learning so much about myself in who I am as a creative person, but I would really find it so much easier if there was an agency who interviewed me, realised all my skills, saw my CV, and went 'okay, they are needing you'. There might be something like that out there but I don't know where.

THI: I was going to jump off what Ivy was talking about in regards to, like, getting involved with the community network and I think tying that in with almost the experience, potentially one of the things – I think down in London they do this where you work on a production, a workshop over a small period of time resulting in a performance at the end of it, and that way you're getting in close with people, you're networking, but you're also learning a lot of skills in a very short period of time, and there's not really any time for downtime in terms of doing nothing – you're always doing something and always having to focus for a short deadline.

MYR: So, sort of what Thistle was saying, getting to do workshops and that, like the actual physical sides of it that we've not got to do for the past few years because of COVID.

VRC: Lovely, so my next question is: do you know how to connect with emerging artists in the area, and how would you like to be able to do that?

IVY: I don't know, but doing online would probably be a good idea, because then you can connect with people who are not as close to you or who aren't in Inverness but still have similar creative ideas to you, but doing it in person and having a little meet-and-greet would also be a fun way to do it – organising events is the best way to see who can
inaudible

THI: The only way that I've really found for connecting outside uni and college and that is Facebook groups. The issue that I seem to be finding is that they seem to be a lot more closed off and maybe – I don't want to say elitist – it doesn't seem to be open to new ideas. I might have just been looking at the wrong groups, but that's kind of what I've been coming across, but I think that's also what Facebook is, right now, and it's a bit annoying that that's one of the main ways that I've found to be able to connect with folk and nobody – I don't want to connect with any of them, in the nicest possible way.

POP: This reminds me, 15 years ago, so when MySpace was still a thing – but I absolutely fell in love with this band and back in the day, they would have boards, like a fan site, with all these threads where you could literally be like: did you see this drummer was wearing this outfit? And then the whole thread would be about that. I found it so easy to navigate because there were different sections – if you were interested in the drummer, if you were interested in the lead singer, or if you were interested in actually just sharing your experience of the show, so you could really – I literally travelled to 17 different countries meeting people from the boards to go to shows together, and it was such a lovely experience – again, I was online, every day I would come home from work and I would go on and see what someone else had said, and it was such an easy way to – I don't want to use the word network, because that's not what I was doing – but what came out of it was a connection with people all around the world that had similar interests to me.

And, another thing is that I didn't know the terminology for the industry, so if I had to Google if I thought I needed insight on something or if I need a person who does the – that part of the filming – I don't yet know that terminology, so I find it hard to networking – what do you need – but I don't know what the terminology is – but I do feel that's what university is teaching me – what the different roles are, but it does – if we could have an agency –

VRC: I understand, so the next question is: if we were to host a space for emerging theatre makers in the Highlands, where would you like to access that, and what would you like to see as part of it?

THI: I've been thinking, as a way that opens conversation for me in a creative sense is just talking about storytelling in any way – whether it's from films, TV shows, video games, books, anything like that, it's just a way to open conversation; because, for me whenever I start to approach talking about things like that the easiest way is, like for a lot of games that I play, my mind is not always on 'this is a great story' it's, 'how could I translate that into theatre or film?', and that's quite a nice springboard for me talking about other things, it's actually how I end up becoming good friends with some of my mates, because now I have mates that we're both quite passionate about the ideas that we have and more frequently check out ideas and he'll read my scripts, I'll read his scripts, and that's all from talking about stories. I'd say from online boards and stuff – because one of the things I've noticed as someone who engages in that sort of community, as I do it through YouTube and unfortunately Facebook – it's so toxic, so for me, I can't just enjoy it –

IVY: I'm kind of going off of what Poppy said earlier about the message board stuff; you could have a website of your own that would have a message board, and then you could mediate it and stuff. The other one I was thinking about is Discord, I recently joined a Discord group for one of my favourite artists and it was sections and there were loads of different chats with sections. And you would see stuff on to – like normal stuff about projects, a poster board for projects that are upcoming in local areas and stuff, opportunities, and people who are like 'hey, I want to make something, is anyone else interested in doing something with me? It would be along these lines'. I was in an Aberdeen Facebook group that was like that but it was very gatekeep-y; you know if you have a pitch it has to be paid, it has to have a budget and people have to know what's happening, and don't advertise something if it's not going to come to fruition, it was very gatekeep-y. It was very not letting creative people come up with ideas which is –

POP: Ivy really raises a good point, because there are a lot of creeps out there, so it needs to be moderated. And there's something about local talent being nurtured locally.

Lily

VRC: Do you have any questions before we get started?

LIL: Nope.

VRC: Okay, so my first question for you is: what does it mean to you to be an emerging artist in the Highlands?

LIL: My connection to arts in the Highlands really is just through community theatre and things like that, but it's hard to sometimes get into things like that. I've been doing the Florians for a couple of shows, but even trying to get into casting is hard a wee bit, because obviously they've got people that have been there longer and they want to use them, and that's understandable. I have done other community things and I am trying to get involved with – there's a thing at Eden Court just now with these media students looking for actors, so I've got an audition for that. It's nice just to have things like that in Inverness because when you look on – I'm on a few Facebook groups for if students need actors for things, but most of them are in Glasgow and Edinburgh, and it would be trying to find time to go down there – so, having things close to home is better for me because it's more manageable for me with my pets and my illness – it's easier to manage than sitting on a bus for four hours to go to Glasgow or Edinburgh, it can take its toll on my body. I just love that – how more people are extending opportunities to people – not just actors that they know, they're genuinely looking for people who are wanting to do this, maybe as just a hobby or wanting to extend it to professionals – but it's always nice to have someone in your own back garden that believes in the talent that we have here, because I've see it a lot – I've met so many people through the Florians and there's so many talented people here, and I think the Highlands just needs more focus for that, because I've seen a lot of talented kids and even older ones and – I just think 'how are some of these people still here?', because they're just incredibly talented. So, just to have that recognition that we know we have talent here is nice.

VRC: Great, so the next question I have is: what was missing from your training?

LIL: This is a while ago now. I think when I was here, because I did finish my course elsewhere, I think I found this as a consensus for most of my classmates, because we talked

about it, but when it was first at the Midmills campus up there – I think that what was missing was – they were trying to get us to merge with theatre here, which in hindsight was probably the better thing, but most of the people that I know were considering trying to do this as a full-time thing, getting into the professional industry and that, so we weren't being taught a lot about how to even get a step in – none of us really knew what agents were, how to find one, what audition material was better for our age ranges, things like that – it was just the basics of: 'if you want to get the foot in the door professionally, this is where you go'. So I think what we all would have liked would have been a sit-down with somebody who's in the industry and be like: 'this is how I found my agent', or 'this is how I built up my showreel', and things like that. We didn't really get taught about showreels either – I didn't know what a showreel was until I moved to Carlisle and they were talking about showreels, and I was like: 'what's that?'. So, I think for the Highlands, for that part, if people do want to do this, and want to put their foot in, it would help us to have one chat a week with someone like that to help us, who – all of those who wanted to be pushed forward, I think that's what some of us thought was missing from our training, because we got all of our basics, we got all of our training, it was just that one step further that we missed.

VRC: Yeah, that chimes with a lot of our other participants. Is there anything you would like to add?

LIL: I think also – this is a weird one – but I think people also need to teach the idea of rejection, because some of it was brought up a lot, but it was not in a way of saying, 'look, sometimes you won't get it, but this is what you do to bounce back', it was more: 'if you don't get it, that's it'. Surely that can't be it? They didn't even say that you could ask for feedback; even, I noticed further in my education, everyone – when you didn't get the role you wanted, there was always a bad atmosphere in the rehearsal room, and you could feel it, and it just made it worse, because you can see all the people looking up going, 'I should have been that part, why is it not mine?', and I feel that if people can touch on rejection earlier, people can handle it better, because if you don't – the more people go in like, 'Oh, I should have that part', the more they will fail because they'll have that big of an ego that it will block them at points

because they'll hear: 'they're difficult to work with, they can't handle this', and it will be more difficult. So, if they can touch on rejection earlier, I think actors will be more prepared to the industry of, 'yeah, you didn't get it, but this is what you do after'.

VRC: Thank you. So, you've touched on this already, but how would you like a theatre company to fill those gaps in your training?

LIL: I suppose a dream scenario would be maybe a workshop with a couple of people in the industry who can help us understand – for those of us who want to pursue it as a professional option, how to step a foot in, because obviously they've been through it – trying to get an agent, trying to get work, trying to fund themselves, having to work on the side while going for things like auditions. I think if we have a workshop with a couple of people who have maybe done little things and one who has done something like West End; they can come in and tell us: 'this is how I started, this is the process of trying to get an agent, you might have to go through a couple to get some more, and how to find auditions and get a foot in'. If they're in the professional industry, it's highly likely they'll know what they're talking about, if a teacher has gone through it, it's fine, but if they haven't it's easier to hear it from someone who has an idea, 'this is how it goes'.

VRC: Great, so this sounds like you're actually more interested in the dialogue, so I wonder: how interested would you be in mentorship or shadowing instead of a workshop?

LIL: Yeah, definitely, I think if it's your dream to go on and do it professionally, having someone who's done it as a mentor, who can give you a guide step-by-step to an individual, because you might have more of a connection with that mentor, and if they have a certain area of a production that they're more good at, you can have that one-on-one time going, 'this is how you impress someone at a Shakespeare audition', it would benefit more for that one person to have that one mentor to help them through it.

Also, so I mention showcasing because I went to go for one when I finished Carlisle, but we – it was going to be a showcase in London, it wasn't necessarily a showcase for all of us – we all had to audition in front of an agent, and he picked his favourite ones and took them. I think if a theatre company knows there's going to be a graduation, and then, 'why don't we take that talent and put on a showcase, and

we could all' – I don't want to say that people could audition for it because that seems quite harsh, but if there's only a certain amount of people you could fit, it would depend on how you want to structure it, because I'm one of those people that I wouldn't want anyone to feel left out, because if they're all talented, then just let them all do it. It would be great for a theatre company to reach out to agents and say 'we've got a showcase in the Highlands, if you're interested in coming along, please do, we've got some amazing talent', and then you could send the agencies the headshots, possibly a CV so they know what we've done, what they look like, they can see what their levels are; having it at Eden Court would probably be nice because you can do a lot with the stage and the lighting. Even if no one gets picked for something, it's still exposure for Highland talent, because we do have a lot of talented people, and something the Highlands does get overlooked because – some people if you say you're from Inverness, they count people out but even if agencies come up and no one got picked, they could still see what we do, and they would have us on record, so if something came up that they were like, 'actually I saw this one person at an exhibition in Inverness', that could be exposure for us.

VRC: Okay, so the next question is: do you know how to contact other emerging artists around you, and how would you like to do that?

LIL: So, I know how to contact you guys because I have worked with you, but when it comes to other emerging artists, I don't have a clue how to contact them, I'm not going to lie – but I think that's just through the fact that, everyone in the Highlands who does the performing arts loves what they do, but trying to get in contact with people – there just seems to be no way to do it. Obviously, because I've worked with Vivid Roots before, I know how to contact you because I've got your email, but when it comes to say like people coming out of the university, there's no way to do it. So I think there needs to be something where – even if it's just a group, like an email or a Facebook group, but to create something – a roster of everyone who'd graduated from things like that and who just want to get work out or meet up to share ideas, I think there needs to be something to happen so that we can get in contact with each other.

You could always have – on your website – a directory of artists who have worked with you,

and what projects they've worked on and if the artist has anything specific they want to do, like if they're interested in immersive theatre, or Shakespeare, at least if people come across it and go through it, at least it's something.

VRC: Thank you. The next question is: what would you like to see from a group that is set up for emerging artists?

LIL: In an ideal world where money is no object, it would be nice to have – like somewhere in Inverness, a permanent proper rehearsal space where we don't have to rent the Spectrum, and I know Eden Court is always helpful, but if it was a whole group collective, just to have your own workspace that you can have access to – even if it's 3 o'clock in the afternoon and you have an idea you can just go there and try it. And it's got a working sound system, you can play about with lighting, it has a decent-sized stage, having unlimited access to that; because it can also become a safe space for people to – even if they don't want to perform it for a huge amount of people and they just have an idea, they can feel safe in there because it's their own space. It could also be a learning space for someone who doesn't know what they're doing with lights and tech. So the idea of having a permanent location space that could just be our hub, that would be amazing.

I always like the idea of having a safe space, because as I was growing up here, I struggled with really bad anxiety and some other things, but it caused me to go in a bit, because growing up here I was always too scared to share ideas or do things out of the ordinary, like when I moved to Carlisle, there were so many things that they did differently that I just backed out. So, I think if there was a hub here that was a safe space and people got to know each other, that they could help pull more things out, and even if they just needed a minute to just have a little cry, that you feel safe to do that. I think that sometimes with actors they feel like they need to behave a certain way when they're in a rehearsal room but they're just people – if they have to cry then they have to cry – it needs to be a space where everyone can communicate, so that's why I feel like it being a safer space, because even if it just helps someone's mental health, it's nice.

I think also, that I don't think age should matter for joining the group or for showcases and things. Just even a consideration and seeing what they can do – I just don't think that age should be an issue.

VRC: Great, so my last question is, what would you like to see from a networking event or festival made for emerging artists?

LIL: Well I guess I'm thinking about everyone – not just actors – I guess, in an ideal world, I'd like to see a section for each type of thing, even makeup and things like that, because I think when people think about theatre, they think about acting first and forget everything else that goes into it, like sets and costumes, props, so having every inch of the community of that represented. Even in the costume bit, the idea of having a sewing machine so people can try it if that's what they want to do, and writing workshops for people who want to try writing, and they can take their own work in – not to have it judged but so that they can have it read out by some performers so they can see how the words flow. And for everyone to get an opportunity to showcase what they can do.

Maybe also having people on panels that have worked in the industry and know what they're doing, but maybe also everyone at the end, everyone that's done something like that, if people are more interested in it, they could hand out cards for people who might need to connect with them.

VRC: That would be really cool. The next question is: what kinds of skills would you like us to deliver through workshops, and how would you like us to reach you?

LIL: I suppose it would be nice if you're having workshops, and alongside groups like IMT and Florians, they always support each other when opening nights and stuff happen, they'll share things. So, I think if those groups could share your information, since we're all based in the Highlands, we all know the talent that we have here, and if those groups would be willing to share your information and let others know that there's a workshop going on, or that you're doing things for people in the Highlands, I think it would be helpful. Also, it will be good for like the Florians Juniors who are thinking of leaving that they might be able to go along to this workshop if they have questions and things like that.

And I think I've always had a trouble with improv; ever since I can remember, I think it was just over the fear of, I just panic and I think I'm going to get judged – because I've had a bad time in secondary school and I think one time in college where I was trying to improv and it didn't go well and everyone was just sat there looking at me, so the one thing I would like to learn is getting good at improv

and knowing that you can make yourself look like an idiot and if no one laughs, you're improvising, you're trying something new, so that's one thing for me is being more confident in improv.

Another thing like that is maybe like audition etiquette, so I think knowing how to prepare for an audition, knowing how to enter the room, knowing how to conduct yourself and even just waiting to go in. I didn't really know about it until my final year at Carlisle.

Sunflower

VRC: Do you have any questions before we get started?

SUN: No, I'm okay.

VRC: Okay, the first question I have is: what do you feel the gaps have been in your training that you would have benefitted from now?

SUN: So I'm – probably I'll go back to school time – if that's okay. Obviously, I didn't have drama as a qualification in school as did probably a lot of people in the Highlands – not sure about Scotland-wide, but I think it's quite popular to not have drama in school now. So I didn't have it at all in the academy, and I auditioned for Eden Court to do my National 5 and Higher drama there, which I feel was such a better experience than you would get at school, which is really annoying because school should have it, right? But it kind of opened the doors a bit more to like: “this is a theatre space, this is more people around the Highlands you can connect to from different schools who are all as passionate as you, but they actually took up all of their weekends to do it”, that was the start. I feel like, even now, if I go down to Edinburgh and Glasgow – most people who are originally from the Highlands, I know from the theatre industry because we all did Eden Court together, I think that was a big thing. Then I eventually wanted to study theatre, so I applied for courses – I think when you did your five UCAS, it wasn't all drama, I don't think, but most of it was – and then didn't get into a drama one, so I decided like, “okay, we'll just wait until next year, or wait until clearing, or something like that”, and I eventually found a media course that I really wanted, because it included stuff like writing, scriptwriting and stuff like that as well, and I thought, “that's perfect, it's like scriptwriting, but it's also video creating and more creative stuff that I enjoy as well”, so I went down that route, did two years at – it was an integrated degree, so the first two years were at a college in Stirling. I thought that was amazing, I don't know if other unis – I'd heard that Napier and stuff were similar, but the college was just really good at actually having an environment where you were so close to your lecturers, and you could really learn hands-on, rather than sitting in a lecture and...not? So I

found that really useful. I'm trying to think of something that was bad about that. No, I found that really useful. Then, the second two years, I went to RGU¹⁰, and that was very pandemic, and very online. But, I was talking yesterday to a producer who was saying that she wanted to do a workshop on producing for us, and I am – I don't know if I'd be any good at producing really, but she asked if there was anything we'd be interested in specifically, and I was like, “funding applications”, because why – I don't know about you, but – why do all these creative courses not teach it? Even my sister who is a piano player, in the Highlands, I was speaking to her about maybe doing a project, and the fact of a funding application just terrified her, but what do we do? It's like, “well, I think we have to find out for ourselves”, which is a shame. So, I think that's the main thing. I guess just more training opportunities here would be nicer – obviously I didn't do theatre degree or any sort of acting thing, but whenever there is any sort of workshop up here, usually hosted by Eden Court, but something not for young people, as in kids, but something for emerging theatre-makers, or professionals that I could also go to, I think that would be really cool.

VRC: It was really good hearing about the stages in your journey through education and training, and is there anything you would like to add?

SUN: Actually, UCAS, and just having a careers advisor bring the big book out and go: “so you want to do drama? Let's see how this is going to go.” And RCS¹¹ wasn't even in it, so... it was interesting.

VRC: So my next question is following on from this, what would you like to see from an organisation filling these gaps?

SUN: I think that I really like the idea of connecting with different emerging theatre makers in the Highlands, because – obviously the Highlands is a very big place, but – if the idea was that maybe, if we've got these people close by, it's really useful, if you do want to put on something, it's really nice to know who would be keen to do that. I think what I said about workshops as well, I think

¹⁰ Robert Gordons University, Aberdeen

¹¹ Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

that's great for learning, so it's not too late to get into theatre – and it's another good way to connect with people. And space; I guess just having the space to try something out and if it doesn't work, it doesn't work, there's no pressure, but just having the space and people to try it out.

I also think: someone just being your cheerleader, if that makes sense? Obviously don't do it if you don't like their work, because that would be kind of fake, and you don't want to hurt your brand, but if you think that – or if you get asked: “who in the Highlands would be good for this?”, actually be like, “I actually think they would be good for a connection”. In my experience, a lot of freelance is about that.

VRC: That's great, so I'm going to move onto the next question, which is: do you know how to contact emerging artists near you? And how might you go about it?

SUN: I'd like to say yes, but I don't think I've ever tried it. I think the main people I've got, I've always got through other things, so one connection I got through Wonderfools, your team was probably through them. I guess that that could be useful. I guess that's why I'm saying it would be nice to do something, so that I could meet people through something. I guess it's just about knowing people as well, knowing the people that I click with in the room because my first instinct would be to shoot them a message or something. Equally, FTConnect¹², if there's people in the Highlands from that, but I don't know if there is.

VRC: So, from what you were saying about a space where you can connect with people, what would you like to get from that experience?

SUN: I would absolutely love to go to that. I think just what I was saying about having connections with people that you haven't had to go out of your way to make, you just have to turn up to something and see if you've got similarities in how you work, I think would be great. And, equally, if I can help them in any way, that would be really nice, if they've got projects – it's not all about me – it's also about a collaborative experience, and that's very fun.

VRC: Is there anything else you would like to benefit from from this kind of group?

SUN: I suppose if it was a kind of in-person thing, I wonder if it would feel different. I don't know what that would look like and it wouldn't

have to be all the time. If there ever was this space to do that – not as I say every week, but every so often. And I understand if you're trying to reach all the Highlands, that's a very big – like, someone travelling from Thurso isn't going to be happy – but I wonder how that would look, I don't know if that would be better.

VRC: I wonder then what you think are the barriers in the way of attending these kinds of groups.

SUN: I think this is a very small thing, but my freelance work – the freelance work, like Eden Court that starts at a time and ends at a time – it's a lot of times at night, or that afternoon/evening kind of time, and that sometimes makes it harder to get other opportunities, and I think I was on the Nairn Book and Arts Festival committee for a while and I had to end it because I can't say goodbye to work for that sadly. So that was a bit – it seems like it's one of the other things if you're a creative here – I mean I'm a little outside of Inverness, so the train times are kind of annoying, like wanting to go and see theatre but having to drive home. I guess meeting people, like having connections, I can't think of many emerging theatre-makers in the Highlands. There are lots of people who enjoy theatre, but the people who are actually emerging, trying to make it their professional career is the people I'm struggling to find.

VRC: Is there anything else that you would like to see around productions, opportunities, and other aspects of our work?

SUN: I guess if you're having an idea stage – did you say something about a festival? Me knowing about that there makes me feel really special. I don't know how many people you told that, but just hearing an idea like that, I get really excited for. I think that's something – you know, keeping your members in the loop with ideas, even if you're not going ahead with them, even if your funding applications don't go through – just being positive about the state of the arts here. I think tickets to shows as well – I guess that's for me though, who can't really justify spending too much money on theatre tickets. I guess if you're saying there's an elderly member who's financially great, loves the arts, they might have a different viewpoint.

Also, if you were having rehearsals, or productions and stuff like that, just having an

¹² Framework Theatre membership platform

open rehearsal day, I think would be quite cool – for members.

VRC: Off the back of that, what is an idea ticket price that you might take a rest on if you see it in the programme?

SUN: I'd say £10. I've done that before. I usually will – if it's – £17 is a cut-off, that's the money I'll spend. It depends – if it's something that I think will be really good I might pay a lot for it, but if it's something I'm not so sure on, then, and it is expensive, I couldn't do that to myself. I'm a big fan of pay what you can, I think that's the way forward.

VRC: So the last couple of questions, I am going to bring together: firstly, what would you like to see from a festival marketed at emerging artists in the Highlands; secondly, what skills would you like to learn from workshops – not just at a festival but year-round?

SUN: Okay, so festival – I like the idea of scratch nights, just being able to do something and see how other people react to it. That's not to say that people – the whole audience need to be emerging theatre makers, but I think it would be quite cool to have an event, maybe... I was going to say a script swap, but I actually don't know if I like that, but maybe a script swap – but just small scripts, like monologues and stuff like that. Maybe – what I'm thinking in my head is – spaces that don't have to be theatre spaces, because that would obviously be relying on Eden Court a lot, but just different places that could host that. I guess having a panel or a talk or something about different things that you'd find useful.

VRC: What kinds of things would you find useful?

SUN: I think if there was something on funding applications, it would be quite interesting, because my sister could come along to that – even though she's not a theatre maker, she's definitely creative, and I think that opens the doors more to other people. And I think if you work in theatre, it's good to have people in music, or people – it's great to be able to swap over.

I think one of the best workshops I've been to was one on sound design, it was – I can't say I'm very good at it – but just having fun getting to see another part of it that you wouldn't usually go for, that was really cool. I mean, I always think it's fun to have acting workshops, because I think it's something fun and useful to have, especially not having training, and

writing workshops I like a lot; whenever I see a writing thing, I want to go along to it. I think that's something I'm missing from being in college and school, having someone be there and doing writing exercises with you and making it a fun experience, really forcing you – even if it's not good what comes out of it – just giving you some techniques and stuff, some ideas, little seeds.

VRC: Is there anything you would like to add about the festival or workshops?

SUN: Just to say that I think the festival is a really great idea, but making it more accessible to all of the creative industries I think is a good idea as well, hopefully honing in on theatre, because as you say it's not going to be another Xpo North, but the connections and crossovers are really cool.