

**Dyslexia-friendly Transcript for Discover Central, Series 3, Episode 3:**

***Dr Sylvan Baker***



**Host: Megan Hunter**

**Guest 1: Victoria Edwards**

**Guest 2: Dr Sylvan Baker**

**Guest 3: Isabelle Kirkham**

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**Article and podcast links:**

**<https://cssd.ac.uk/discover-central-podcast>**

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**[theme tune plays. MEGAN starts speaking]**

**HOST – MEGAN HUNTER:**

**Welcome to Discover Central, the podcast that gives you a behind the scenes look at the life of students, staff and alumni at London's Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.**

**[theme tune fades out]**

**MEGAN**

**I'm your host, Megan, and on this episode we'll be talking with Central's Dr Sylvan Baker about his recent appearance on the BBC'S Small Axe the Podcast, which focused on his experience of growing up in the British care system. We'll discuss how these experiences have shaped Sylvan's work and research, both inside and outside of Central, including his support for care leaver students. We'll also be hearing from Central students Isabelle and Sophie, who will be talking about their project My Time in Care. The series**

focuses on life in foster care as told by care leavers and is produced by Action for Children. But first, here's Central's Access and Participation Manager Victoria Edwards, who also acts as the lead for Central's Care Leavers Support Programme, to share more information about her work with students.

#### VICTORIA EDWARDS

Hi, I'm Victoria Edwards. I'm Central's Access and Participation Manager, and I also run Central's Care Leavers Support Scheme. This is a tailored programme of support that was created to ensure that all care leaver students would be fully supported through holistic and practical support, financial awards of £1000 a year, and academic guidance from the point of application all the way through to the completion of undergraduate study. The bespoke nature of the programme ensures that each care leaver student has control over the type of support they receive. At the heart of this programme is the ability to see each student as an individual, create a bespoke programme of support, identify early strategies for interventions, and most importantly, create a safe space to listen and where they can be heard. You can find out more information on our website, [www.cssd.ac.uk/care-leavers](http://www.cssd.ac.uk/care-leavers) or just email me on [Victoria.edwards@cssd.ac.uk](mailto:Victoria.edwards@cssd.ac.uk).

#### MEGAN

Thank you, Victoria. And now I'm delighted to welcome Dr Sylvan Baker. Sylvan is an artist and an academic, a practitioner and researcher working across the fields of applied theatre, socially engaged arts, and social justice for the past 30 years. At Central, he is a lecturer in community performance and applied theatre, teaching on both the undergraduate and postgraduate Applied Theatre courses. He also supports student care leavers as part of the school's Care Leavers Support Scheme. Beyond Central his practice has taken place across the UK and globally in sites in Brazil, the USA, in a diverse range of contexts and communities, and has a specific interest in

international interventions in sites of conflict and transitional justice. In 2015, Sylvan co founded the Verbatim Formula with Dr Maggie Inchley, a senior lecturer at Queen Mary University of London. The Verbatim Formula is a collaborative participatory arts project that has developed verbatim theatre techniques to share the voices of care experienced young people, care leavers and adults responsible for their care and education. The Verbatim Formula works with young people as co researchers, as they are experts in their own life experience and the systems they deal with. Using verbatim performances and firsthand testimonies, it raises awareness and provokes change to working practices and in care and education. Hi, Sylvan. Welcome, and thanks for talking with us today.

DR SYLVAN BAKER

Hi, Meg, thanks for the invitation to come and speak with you

MEGAN

Of course. So I think a good place for us to begin is if you can tell us about how you first got involved in the arts.

SYLVAN

What an interesting question. It's not, I'm not asked that very often. I think I first got in contact with the arts through my, my foster Mum, she would sort of get my attention on a Saturday afternoon, when in those days, well, before streaming television, there was often a really good film on BBC Two. And she would say to me, I think you might like this. And quite often I'll be like, 'Oh, no, really, you're gonna make me watch this, but it's sunny outside and want to go and do whatever'. And then she put a film on and it could be something like, I don't know, Seven Brides for Seven Brothers, The King and I, Cleopatra, or something like that one of those sort of MGM epic kind of movies. And I just got into them. And I got into them to the extent that she didn't have to ask me anymore. I'd be, I'd be going to her and saying what's

on Saturday, what are we going to watch together? And that's how I started. She had a massive interest in opera. So on a Sunday, while she was making the Sunday lunch, she would put lots of opera on, and even though it was all in Italian, or German, mainly Italian, I got used to the tunes. So later on in later life, when I heard them, I'd suddenly realise I'd heard them all before. And that pushed me towards doing some kind of performance myself. So I started doing the school show in my secondary school. And then I found out that the teacher who directed all the school school shows and was the history teacher in the school had been in the National Youth Theatre. And so because all of us that did, the school plays, absolutely idolised and looked up to this teacher. The fact that he had been in National Youth Theatre meant that it was a destination for us. So I was lucky and applied for membership and joined the National Youth Theatre for the next three or four years, then did plays and shows with them. One of my claims to fame is that I was in a National Youth Theatre devised show with one of the cast of Little Britain and the current James Bond before they were famous. So if you're ever in a team meeting, where we have to do that icebreaker about two truths and a lie, when I say I've worked with James Bond, I'm actually telling the truth. That's how I got into the arts.

**MEGAN**

That's amazing. So what was it then that led you from performing with James Bond into academia? [laughs]

**SYLVAN**

I think it's a natural progression, generally. [laughs] But I think what really happened was, I was working as a practitioner and researcher, I was working for an arts organisation, London Bubble Theatre Company, and I was their Associate Director for Community Projects at the time, just before the millennium, we were getting a number of unsolicited CVS from practitioners, freelance practitioners who wanted work, and lots of them had MAs. A

number of them had MAs from Central School of Speech and Drama. And it, it started to pique my interest. Having said I'll never go back into academia, having done, started a BA course, I suddenly realised that maybe there was some kind of benefit in doing an MA. So I was really lucky that I made an application. and then I had an interview with Dr Selina Busby and Dr. Catherine McNamara from Central. And it was at a time frame when I just done London Bubble's first piece of intergenerational work. It was a play called George. And it was really a cover to allow us to talk about what Britishness look like in the 21st century. So the play is about an adoptee and granddaughter, and a grandmother, who had been bereaved and lost both grandfather and mother, the granddaughter lost her mother, and her grandfather. And they are brought together by a discovery that the grandfather had won the George Medal, but for some reason, he never told his wife that he'd won this. So his granddaughter went on a journey to discover what had happened. This show was performed in South East London, by a very intergenerational cast, ranging in age from 13, to over 80, to that point, when it's indelicate to ask someone their age, and an article was written about it. And Catherine, I think it was, was showing me around the library at Central and showing how brilliant it was as a resource around drama, and performance. The magazine just happened to be out and open on the page to the article. So when she was asking me, 'so what have you done that might be relevant and legible for doing the MA course here', and then she saw the photograph of me doing something for the show, George, in the article, she looked at it, looked at me and said, 'I tell you what, let's just go back to my office'. And I started the course in 2006, graduated 2007, and by then I had the bug. I suddenly realised that there was stuff in the academy which was validating practice and ideas that I thought I kind of made up myself. And it was wonderful to read something that I thought I had thought that had been written in, like, 1950 or something. The study of the theory that was enabling me to make sense of what I was doing as a practitioner was totally rejuvenating and completely changed my practice. And that led me

to do work that sort of straddled the academy and communities more. And then I kind of fell into a PhD programme, because I was able to study a piece of long term work that I'd already been involved in, and then the rest, as they say, is history.

**MEGAN**

Thinking about some of that work that you've been doing as a researcher and a practitioner, what are the main areas of focus? What are the topics that you focus on?

**SYLVAN**

As a practitioner for many years, I had worked with young people. My first practitioner job had been as a community liaison officer at the National Youth Theatre, which was kind of highfalutin funding terms for a workshop leader who goes out into the community and tells young people about the National Theatre so that they might consider it as an option for them in the future. I realised that I really enjoyed working with teenagers, children, teenagers actually, and that I was able to create an environment where they felt held and valued and could sort of thrive creatively. And that working with young people specifically led me to join in with another former member of the National Youth Theatre and moving to Belfast in Northern Ireland to establish a theatre company. As a younger man, I had this this lofty dream that we could take theatre to parts of the then conflict riven Northern Ireland as a way to, I guess, look at their particular situations and perspective that were around the quote unquote 'troubles' at the time, but also as a form of relief and as an invitation to join in the arts, I guess. So that led me to working as an artistic director of an organisation called the Rainbow Factory, which is still operating in Northern Ireland some 25 years later, and is one of the biggest cross community they would call it youth arts projects that takes place. And I discovered that there was something else beneficial in terms of applied theatre working in sites of conflict, and that led me to working as you

mentioned in the beginning, in favelas, shantytowns, improvised communities, sometimes erroneously called slums, in Rio de Janeiro, that were subject to an inordinately high level of violence and deprivation, because those same improvised communities that sort of appear at the edges and in the centre of the city are also the home of massive narco trafficking gangs that are incredibly well armed and organised and violent. So the arts is being used in that context in the same way, I think, as it was in Northern Ireland, as a way to reflect on the challenges of conflict, and maybe take some respite or gain some nourishment from a world which could be very challenging, and take that nourishment back into that world after you've finished the work. So I started to see that there is a lot of benefit on focusing on the small things, focusing on the very direct personal relationships between one or two people, on asking them what they need, in a way that values the skills and abilities that they already have. For someone working in or living in a favela, just surviving is an act of high level practice in and of itself. So to be able to talk to those people and invite them to do something creative that might allow them to speak about that experience, or gain access to some of the things that being a favela resident excludes you from became part of a research interest.

**MEGAN**

So then, how did these areas of interest and research and work that you're doing as a practitioner feed into your work at Central with students? Do you bring this work that you're doing outside into your work with them? And does it influence your teaching?

**SYLVAN**

It does, absolutely it does. Yes, I'm able to contextualise some of the theoretical stuff that we teach on the CPP, which is the Contemporary Performance Practice course at Central by sharing some of my lived experience. In certain cases, particularly with cases like the Verbatim

Formula, I've been able to make an invitation to emerging artists that are on our courses to become members of the co-research team. Several current students and graduates of the CPP DATE programme at Central have directly collaborated with us, with Maggie Inchley and myself, as part of the Verbatim Formula. I think it's an extension of an aspiration that I have that applied theatre work needs to be done with people rather than to them or for them. Because if it's done to or for them, whoever they are, whatever cohort they come from, they automatically lose a sense of control and status and ownership to it, which I think is fundamental in terms of equality and social justice. So it's not about going into a locale and saying, 'we know what's wrong and we're here to fix it'. It's actually about maybe using practices that might come from that place and go into that context and establishing a rapport with the people in that context, and then beginning to say, 'What do you need?' And or 'have you considered this?' Or 'what would happen if you did that', and then sitting back and waiting to respond to whatever it is that they say. And so for the students at Central, it's really interesting to immediately be placed in that position. Yes, they're learners, but they arrive with us at Central with a whole raft of other skills. And so to draw on those skills immediately, and to invite them to step up into the role of facilitator, I think is productive for their learning.

**MEGAN**

You touched on it a bit there about your work with the Verbatim Formula. And you recently appeared on the BBC Small Axe the podcast, and you also wrote an article for the BBC discussing your time and care. Can you tell us a little bit more about the Verbatim Formula? What is what does it do, and how have your experiences helped to shape its formation?

**SYLVAN**

Yeah, sure. The Verbatim Formula is a piece of action research. And in that respect, it means that we began the Verbatim Formula with one set of



questions that then blossomed into a range of different avenues, which sometimes grew to an extent that meant we didn't have the capacity as researchers to examine all of them. But that means that there's still lots of really fertile ground for us to cover. It was created, because I was in a very fortunate position as an Associate Director of an arts and social justice research centre. The research centre is called People's Palace Projects, and it's based at Queen Mary University in East London. And the significance of being an Associate was that PPP - People's Palace Projects - is an NPO, a National Portfolio Organisation of the Arts Council of England, which means it gets some resources, some monies, funding, to do projects that use the arts to hopefully make a positive contribution to social justice. So in that guise as Associate Director, I was invited by the Artistic Director, who is a Professor of Drama, Paul Heritage, at Queen Mary, to devise two sets of project work that we thought, I thought, could make a really strong and short term contribution to social justice and wellbeing for young people in England first, but then Great Britain. And the first idea that I came up with, and it's significant it was an idea that I could just come up with because it wasn't having to speak to the particular agendas of an external Commissioner. At the time, we had the resources to set the project up on our own terms, which is a little bit of a luxury in applied theatre, and know that what we wanted to do, we had the ability to do without having to compromise its aims and outlooks. So the aims of the first project, which is not the Verbatim Formula, was to look at ways to create a platform for young people aged between 11 and 18, to talk about the issue of sexual consent. It's come right back onto the agenda of conversations in recent days and weeks. But there was research that had been done in that area that was revealing that there was a huge gap between how young people intellectually conceive of consent, and what happens when they are -sexual consent - and what happens when they are in an environment to behave sexually with one another. Consent, scarily, was not being sought within heterosexual sexual relations. Young women felt uncomfortable asking about it, and young men were not considering it. So

we thought using some kinds of art interventions, we could make space for young people to understand that consent isn't just a cognitive space, it's a behaviour and an attitude. And the other was wanting to look at the life experience and opportunities for young people who find themselves within the UK care system. And when we did initial research in that area, all of the statistics, to a certain extent, seemed to create a narrative which implies that care, being in care, will lead to a poor future life experience. The number of care experienced people who are in the criminal justice system, who find themselves homeless, who find themselves acting as sex workers, who find themselves experiencing poverty and deprivation is extremely high. And then when we looked at the number of young people with care experience who entered Higher Education, their percentages in relation to their more settled peers was very, very low. In 2015 6% of the 78,000 as it was young people who find themselves in care, made it into Higher Education. And so because the Research Centre was based in a University, Maggie and I thought that it would be interesting to bring care experience young people onto a University campus and do some work, and then implicitly show them that University campuses were not mysterious or exotic environments, and that they were open to all kinds of people. And by working with current students, the young people with care experience might consider University as a future trajectory, or take space in what can be a very chaotic and often multi changing experience of care. If you're in care, you can move placement overnight, you can go into care in one local authority in England, and end up living in another local authority 300 or 400 miles away from that first local authority without much say, or consultation. So one of the other initial aims of the Verbatim Formula was to do two things, one: to take the law around the support of care experienced children, that's the Children's Act, at its word. There's a statute in that law that says 'it is a legal requirement to seek the voice of young people in social care'. And, to give those young people in social care space to think about their futures. They were the two main aims of the Verbatim Formula. And we chose verbatim, which is a performance

practice where real people give testimonies and those testimonies are shared, in a lesser or greater degree, word for word with others, as a mode, a medium to do that. At the time, I hadn't actually told my colleagues in People's Palace Projects that I had to care experience. I hadn't told anybody on my MA course that had a care experience, it was just something that sat at the back of my mind, and helped me think about ways in which the intervention that we wanted to create might work.

#### MEGAN

And drawing on your work with the Verbatim Formula you also help to support Central's care leaver students. Can you tell us a little bit more about this work.

#### SYLVAN

Being in care is very complex and nuanced. The poet and broadcaster Lemn Sissay, who I've worked with on occasion, talks about his care experience and the fact that care is probably one of the biggest oxymorons for young people who find themselves in that situation. Because, in his opinion, care is one of the last things that they get. And drawing on my own experience, I was in care from when I was 11 days old until I was officially 18. I knew that I'd had a very lucky roll of the dice, I guess, I went to a foster placement and stayed there for most of my formative years. But even that, even though that was the case, and I experienced a high degree of stability, being in care marks you out as different from the children around you. You are othered as we would say to the students, and leaves you open to investigation and questions that are nothing to do with why you're in care. Children are very curious. And so if they find out that you're in care, they'll ask you why you're in care, and are your parents around, and was it your fault, and are your parents criminals, and questions of that kind of... ideas. Did you do something wrong that meant you were taken away? And in truth most young people, particularly the ones I'm talking to now through the Verbatim

Formula, and drawing on my own experience, these questions were not appropriate, boring, and not ones that you wanted to answer because they were so probing and an invasion of privacy. So I'm aware that should students with a care experience manage to make it to Central or to University, they've already had to deal with a myriad of challenges that most other students who will become their peers have no awareness of, and hopefully will never experience. A lot of those challenges are hugely dramatic and mean that care experienced young people have to develop skills that they shouldn't need to acquire and have to, quote unquote, 'grow up' really quickly, and often parent themselves as they travel through the massively unstable environment that is UK social care. So what that means is I have a different perspective on some of the needs and challenges that care experience students have. And as a member of faculty, it means I can speak to my academic colleagues about approaching the access needs of care experienced students differently. It might be - these things aren't a given, but there's a lot of potential reality that sits around care - Being in care can trigger challenges to your self esteem, amplify feelings of rejection. I know I can, I can speak to that from the degree of hindsight I have been in my 50s now and going into care as a baby. So sometimes, doing things like as a student asking for help, or noticing that there was a trend that was problematic and the wheels are starting to wobble or even fall off, it's possible that care experienced young people may not be proactive around that, they may not feel entitled to saying to a tutor, 'I need help' a personal tutor, 'I need help', or 'I'm struggling financially, can you help me apply to the hardship fund', they just may not feel able to do that. So some will, but not all. And so, as members of staff in whatever capacity we are in in a University, it is I believe, incumbent on us to adjust and adapt our systems for whomsoever comes in. Government is asking us to try and recruit more students from what they call underrepresented backgrounds. If we're going to do that, we have to change our systems and structures, because some of those systems and structures are the reason why they are unrepresented in the first place. So I

draw on the Verbatim Formula's practice to share those testimonies appropriately, without fetishizing, the real experience of a young person in care with the adults who have say on how care is run, and in this case that might be university staff, so that university staff can get some kind of appreciation that isn't sensational tourism, of what it feels like to be in care right now. A care experienced young person I spoke to last week said 'being in care and being a student means that you have to put out little fires everywhere, before you even go to University that often your colleagues and your tutors never hear about'. And I think allowing academics and colleagues within the University structure to have an awareness that that might be the case. The reason why you were late to a lecture on Zoom is because in the hostel where you're staying there was a fight and the police were called, and you didn't get any sleep, may not be the regular experience of a number of students who are on the course with you. It may not be something that you want to disclose. But if the staff and the University have an awareness that you might be experiencing a different kind of challenge, then there is a higher possibility that we can support you better understand you better, push you more, because you are as a care experienced student, possibly resistant to believing that you can do anything. So that's kind of how my research and my own experience allows me to offer different avenues of support for some care experienced students. Others don't need it and won't come to me and don't need to, they can navigate their own way through University in whatever manner, uh manner that they choose. But should they need the support and the awareness, then from understanding the system more from the inside, that support can be more appropriately directed to them.

**MEGAN**

Sylvan, thank you so much for generously sharing your experiences with us. And thank you for all the work that you do to support Central's students, care experienced or not. So before we finish, can you tell us what

else you're working on at the moment, and what do you have coming up next?

**SYLVAN**

So there's still some work to be done around the Verbatim Formula. One of the trends that we discovered from speaking to a large number of young people in the UK, in England, Scotland, was that trust is an issue. And so again, wanting to find a way to materialise that dilemma for others to understand, Maggie and the Verbatim Formula team and I are hoping to partner with a circus artist, a circus company, and make that trust manifest. What would happen if we ask a social worker to hold the rope while a young person in their care is performing, either literally or metaphorically? What would it reveal about the requirement for trust and rapport within the care system? So that's one thing that we're doing, and then something which is slightly further away but an interest of mine is the performance of trolling. What is it? And why do people take to transmedia to do it? What's it about, and are they aware of its harm Or is it just for the, I think it's the lulz is what they say. So my next major piece of research will be on the performance of trolling. But thanks for asking.

**MEGAN**

Sylvan, that's fantastic. Thank you so much for your time today, and thanks a lot for speaking to me. It's been a real pleasure.

**SYLVAN**

Thanks again, I've really enjoyed the opportunity to chat.

**MEGAN**

And now I'm excited to introduce Isabelle and Sophie, two of Sylvan's students who are in their final year of the Contemporary Performance

Practice course, to talk about their project 'My Time in Care', which has been produced with Action for Children.

### ISABELLE KIRKHAM

Hi, my name is Isabelle and I'm in my third year on Contemporary Performance Practice, the DATE pathway. My Time in Care is a project I worked with, alongside Action for Children, with eight other care experienced people. It's an online series that is made for children and young people currently in care. It is not only a platform that allows us to talk about our experiences, but it also allows us to give practical advice on things such as your rights as a care experience person, tips on settling into a new foster home, and how to speak out while you are in care. I got involved in the project as I felt that there was nothing like this currently in the care system, or outside of it. It is something I would have benefited from growing up in care. And my hope is that it helps at least one other person have a better time while they're in care.

### SOPHIE SCARLETT

Hi, my name is Sophie. I'm in my third year and I'm studying Contemporary Performance Practice. I was approached by Action for Children to take part in their My Time in Care project in 2020. There were some challenges as it was all done online. However, I think the outcome is pretty good. I was eager to get involved as it was a project that I not only hadn't seen being done before, but also it is something I personally would have benefited from during my time in care. I was asked some questions to which I gave honest answers, and I was glad to see that my answers weren't changed to fit a type of narrative, as everything you see in the videos is truthful. I'm so glad this project was made, as it answered questions that many care experience people may have but might be too nervous to answer. My work with Sylvan was the first time I had done any foster care related work. I was not only great, but eye opening, too. Being able to share

other care experience people's views, thoughts and feelings through the means of verbatim theatre not only produced an interesting piece of theatre, but I also feel like it really emphasised on the messages we were trying to get across to the viewers. The audio is relatable to myself in many ways, and so being able to be the voice for others but also myself felt quite empowering.

**MEGAN**

Thank you, Isabelle and Sophie. And thanks again to Victoria Edwards and Dr Sylvan Baker.

[theme tune starts, crescendo as Scott continues talking]

**MEGAN**

We'll be back again soon with another episode. So don't forget to subscribe to Discover Central wherever you normally get your podcasts. For now, take care and we'll see you next time.

[theme tune ends, diminuendo]