

Dyslexia-friendly Transcript for Discover Central Series 3, Episode 1:

Dr Naomi Paxton



Host: Megan Hunter

Guest 1: Dr Naomi Paxton

Guest 2: Celeste da Palma

Guest 3: Lauryn Jackman

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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.

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MEGAN

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. I'm your host Megan, and welcome back for our third series. In series three, we'll be taking a closer look at some of the exciting new research and work being undertaken here at Central. We'll be catching up with our short courses team to find out more about their range of courses, including the Performance Making Diploma run in collaboration with

Access All Areas, and we'll be meeting some of the staff, students, alumni and industry partners who work together to deliver our outreach programme to young people across the country. But today, I'm very excited to be bringing you the first episode of our third series. And to mark International Women's Day we'll be joined by our very own Dr. Naomi Paxton. Later on, we'll also be hearing from our SU Women's Officers Lauryn and Celeste, who will tell us more about their work with the Student's Union. But first, I am so pleased to welcome Dr. Naomi Paxton. Naomi is Central's Knowledge Exchange Fellow, a Parliamentary Academic Fellow, and an Associate Fellow of the School of Advanced Study with the University of London. Her research focuses on feminist activism, the suffrage movement, and the cultural histories of political and feminist theatre. Naomi was an Arts and Humanities Research Council and BBC Radio Three New Generation Thinker, and she continues to speak regularly on BBC Radio and Television, as well as on other media and at festivals and events. In 2018, she was nominated for a Parliamentary Diversity and Inclusion Award for her work with the Vote 100 team, a collaborative project with the University of Lincoln and the University of Plymouth to commemorate the centenary of the 1918 Representation of the People Act. Naomi is also an award winning performer who's appeared on the West End, in national and international touring productions, cabaret, magic, physical theatre, radio, drama and comedy. Hi, Naomi. Welcome, and thank you so much for joining us today.

GUEST 1 – DR NAOMI PAXTON

Thank you. It's lovely to be here.

MEGAN

So to start us off, what was your journey like into the arts and what led you into academia?

NAOMI

So I originally started as a performer. I wanted to be a performer from when I was very young, I did a drama degree. And then I went to drama school, and then I worked professionally as a performer for a decade. And when I was in a play in the West End, in 2008, 2007/ 2008, I actually discovered that there was such a thing as suffrage plays, and the plays around the propaganda for votes for women and an organisation called the Actresses Franchise League. And this was brand new to me, because I never did the suffragettes at school. So it kind of ticked a lot of my boxes, it was theatre history, it was feminist history, history. And it was also so embedded in the history of the West End and of the theatre industry. But it was also so experimental. And this just really excited me. So I spent a couple of years, I was in plays and I was on tour, researching more and more into it. And I eventually plucked up courage to see if I could do a PhD, do some more research about it. So I started my PhD in 2011, at the University of Manchester, and I finished in 2015, and moved into a whole new, a whole new world. That was all a bit of an accident coming back into academia, but it was completely rooted in working in the industry, and my complete passion for the topic.

MEGAN

So then what was it that brought you to Central and what does your work here entail?

NAOMI

So one of the things I discovered that I was good at, or certainly really loved to do during my PhD studies, and after that was public engagement, and was really trying to engage not only the public, but also members of the theatre industry with that theatre history and to, to weave some of the issues that we were talking about today around representation and access through those histories of the suffrage movement. So I'd worked as a post doc, I'd

worked on a project about theatre and poverty at the University of Manchester, and then I'd worked in Parliament in 2018 on a project around the Centenary of 1918. I'd also worked on the Being Human Festival, which was a wider festival about arts and humanities. And I've been in touch with Maria Delgado about some of the public engagement work I was doing. And I thought it would be really interesting to come back into a drama school environment, I've been in sort of a wide arts and humanities environment, either working in drama or in history. So to come into a conservatoire environment and hopefully begin to thread some of those, some of my own experiences as a performer with some of those sort of live histories of theatre and activism. So it was it was a real, really interesting opportunity to kind of meld those worlds into one and really think about public engagement from a practising academic drama point of view. I'm Knowledge Exchange Fellow, so that has, well, it's been about thinking about the Knowledge Exchange policy of Central, working with others in the institution on the Knowledge Exchange framework, conversations that were happening with Research England on really bigging up the work that Central does, and the fantastic work that academics and practitioners and researchers do and really trying to kind of open that up to new audiences. So one of the really exciting things I've been able to do as KE Fellow at Central is to do a project funded by the British Academy in 2019, and the top of 2020, which was called Different Stages, exploring public engagement for drama and theatre Early Career Academics. And I organised workshops and showcases around the UK that brought together drama and theatre PhD students and early career researchers to really think and talk about how they can think about things and talk about their own research and share it with new audiences. It's something I feel really lucky to have done. And something that I think being at Central gave me a great platform to do.

MEGAN

And as you mentioned, one of the major parts of your research has focused on the role of women in the theatre. So the suffrage movement, political activism, feminist theatre, I'm wondering what shape does your personal research take, and what interests and inspires you as a researcher?

NAOMI

Well, most of my research is sort of digging up things that are really hidden in plain sight. So kind of drawing together stories, finding plays, researching particular aspects of particularly the performative propaganda of the suffrage movement. And that has often taken the form of what - there's a academic term for this called quirk historicism - where I've often been a person going 'Hey, did you know this?' and I've ended up talking about Punch and Judy or Jujitsu or roller skating or activism in swimming galas, things have kind of surprised people finding different hooks in the research. But I suppose what really inspires me as a researcher is looking at so many of the issues that we have today around access and representation in the industry and around a diversity of voices, the need for more marginalised voices to be given prominence and space and opportunities, and to open up the industry. And I look back at the research I'm doing in the theatre, the 1910s. And I see so many echoes down the century, so many of the same things being said, so many different experimental initiatives to try and give more access to those who have traditionally been underrepresented in theatre. So I'm coming at it very much from the perspective of a current performance, somebody who's trained in the industry, performed in industry, continues to perform, but also looking back and thinking about the systemic issues, the systemic inequalities that we're all trying to change. So I think it's providing a bit of perspective. So I love research in the past, I love finding interesting, quirky stories about activism. I love inspiring other people. But I also think it's important that we know that when we have conversations around action, and theatre and about opening up the industry that we know,

we have strong shoulders to stand on, but we know who those shoulders belong to. It's kind of a two fold approach. And I've just found that it's, easier to open up conversations about now, often if people have been defensive, by starting with conversations about the past.

MEGAN

And building on this, you've published a new book. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

NAOMI

Oh, absolutely. A pleasure. So this is actually a paperback version of my, my big book about everything I knew in 2015. It's called *Stage Rights, The Actresses Franchise League - Activism and Politics 1908 to 1958*. And it came out just last year with Manchester University Press. It's the third book I've done. So I did two collected editions of suffrage plays with Methuen Drama, both of which we launched at the National Theatre. So hopefully, if people are interested in the Actresses Franchise League, and in the performative propaganda for votes for women, it's an accessible and interesting book that really spans 50 years of the organisation.

MEGAN

You mentioned before that you lead on a wide range of public engagement work. And I understand this has grown out of your research, what does this work involve?

NAOMI

So I've really tried to make public engagement work really interesting, and fun, and unexpected, and to involve as many different creatives and as many collaborators as possible to reach across disciplinary boundaries and focus on key themes and key issues that can be expanded upon in multiple directions. So sometimes this has involved commissioning new material for

something like living literature walks, which I've done around the West End; at Parliament, we did a table cloth board game for their equaliTEAS initiatives, they wanted people to have tea and discuss issues around representation. And we made a tablecloth board game around the suffrage movement. I've made a card game called SuffraGreats, and I'm currently working on a cooperative board game for the Greenham Women Everywhere project which is a different, a different way of sort of thinking around how we share research, how we talk about research, how we discover things with people. So you don't just lay things out for people to then experience, don't just do a talk and then people attend it for the public engagement. What I find most stimulating is the work that is with people and in the room and in those spaces or in those virtual spaces or online. It is to do with discussion and development. So it's not about me telling you something or an academic telling. It's about finding the points of communication, sharing those and then, and then opening up things for discussion.

MEGAN

Speaking of virtual spaces, the past year has forced us all to adopt our ways of working. And I understand that you've been leading on a series of suffrage play readings and lockdown. Can you tell us a bit more about this?

NAOMI

Yes, I have. I don't really know what I'm doing with it. But I think that's often a good way to start just to start a project. I was involved with the Being Human Festival last year, we did a big project about Greenham Women Everywhere, and that was all online. And it really, it was really inspiring in terms of thinking about how we use a virtual space and how we paced virtual conversations and how we engage with online communities. The suffrage play reading started last August because so many of my performer friends were just thrown out of work and were feeling very unstimulated and uninspired. And suffrage play readings are something I've done for quite a

few years, inviting lots of people round to my house and making tea, tea and coffee, offering lots of different varieties of cake and just involving actors in bringing these plays to life, because suffrage plays are designed to be read and performed and discussed. They're not just designed to be on the page. So I thought I'd throw a few out there and it actually has become, Well, I mean, for a suffrage play reading, I think it's become really popular. So we've got a group of about 100 - 150 on Facebook, in my imaginatively titled Suffrage Plays Reading group on Facebook, and we've done 20... how many have we done now, 20 reading sessions. We've read over 27 suffrage plays, and we've had about 50 - 60 actors involved. And that's actors who normally do TV or radio, or theatre, or cabaret or comedy. And it's just been wonderful to discuss the plays, to find different connections, to think about what relevance they have to now and a great opportunity for me to dig out some of the weirder more obscure stuff, which plays that it might be harder to get people into a room to read. So this way, people don't have to pay for a ticket into London, they don't have to give up the time, particularly, they're just sight reading plays, we've had plays where every character is a puppet, for example, or plays written by teenagers that are full of amazing propaganda, or very figurative plays, or verbatim style plays that are site specific. So it's been it's been a really fun way to keep telling the story of, of the suffrage theatre of the Actresses Franchise League. And it's also coincided with all those conversations we were having in 2020 around, about representation and hidden histories and selective ways of thinking about history and education. So, hopefully it's been inspiring, it's definitely been fun. And what's wonderful is we now have another community of performers who work in the industry who are aware of this work, and also aware of the wider themes within it. So I'm really enjoying it. I haven't turned into anything spectacular yet. But it's been a total revelation.

MEGAN

And alongside your work as a researcher, you are also a performer. You've got an ongoing association with the Magic Circle, and you perform comedy and magic and variety shows. Aside from the play readings, what have you been working on recently, and what's next?

NAOMI

So I'm doing a live stream show from the Phoenix Arts Club on the 12th of March, that's going to be live streamed, so it'll just be myself and a pianist in the room. I've got a virtual Guest Actor and three camera people in the room. And the link will then be available for 48 hours afterwards, people you know, have caring responsibilities or aren't free or live in different time zones, you want to access it. So I'm really working on that at the moment. Because often when I was doing magic shows before 2020, I would get people up and get them to pick a card and all those kind of things. And the shows we were doing last year, the socially distanced physical shows, obviously you weren't able to, to get people up to touch things. And this is going to be another layer, because I won't even have anybody in the room to engage with. So at the moment, I'm researching different magic tricks and thinking about the structure of the show. I've written a new song for the show. And then I'm really trying to think about it positively and creatively. Rather than thinking about it as a bit of an anxiety dream for a performer, which it also is, which is when you're an event, nobody's there. But apart from that I've been doing, Magic Circle's been doing online seminars, there was a big event in January around the 100 years of the sawing in half illusion. So it's been an interesting time for performers, particularly cabaret performers. But I think we're really lucky in that we're able to sort of be a one person band, just sort of get our stuff and go and you know, be outside in a show or do a one person show we don't need the sort of, a lot of the paraphernalia that people do who are in more structured show environments. But it's definitely been an interesting time. So I think this summer is going to be many more socially distant shows, the

bookings coming back in. But the immediate issue is this live streaming show on the 12th, which I'm really looking forward to, I think it's kind of forced us all into a new space of, of not resting on our laurels without any material and growing and changing. So that's really positive. And then I'm also doing some entertainment for London Southbank University's event on the 8th of March for International Women's Day which is called challenging the menopause. So I'm going to be doing some opening entertainment to their session; singing a song and telling some jokes. So that'll be good fun.

MEGAN

If listeners want to find out more about your work, and if they want to come along to any of the events you've mentioned, how can they do that?

NAOMI

Yes, you can check out my work on my website, which is www.naomipaxton.co.uk. You can check out some videos, public engagement videos and other videos featuring central academics through my Different Stages project that's on my YouTube channel. So just look up Naomi Paxson on YouTube. And I'm on Twitter @NaomiPaxton and Instagram @naomi.paxton

MEGAN

Naomi, thank you so much for your time today and for such an interesting conversation. It was great to have you on.

NAOMI

Thank you for having me and Happy International Women's Day!

MEGAN

You too! I'm now pleased to introduce Lauryn and Celeste, our Student's Union Women's Officers to tell us more about their work with the SU.

GUEST 2 – CELESTE DA PALMA

Hi, my name is Celeste and I'm one part of the Student Union Women's Officer team. I'm currently in my third year studying CPP, DATE. And the current project I'm working on is a film, a digital based project which focuses on how we can feel at home within our bodies as women. So our role on SU involve supporting female and non binary students in any way that they need. Recently, in response to the pandemic and learning online, we've been particularly thinking about how we can support the students at home. And we're currently working with Central on a plan to make sanitary products accessible to students, even while they're still at home, via a postage system. Also, in January, we planned a series of anti-diet events which evolved talks, discussions, yoga and guided meditations. It was important for us to acknowledge how our bodies come under fire in January, particularly this year with all the discourse around losing weight coming out of lockdown, so it was a great chance to fill the students calendars with happy positive events at this time.

GUEST 3 – LAURYN JACKMAN

Hello, I'm Lauryn and I'm the other part of the SU Women's Officer role. I'm a third year Writing for Performance student and at this time I'm writing in residence at the Hampstead Theatre, just across the road. For this year's International Women's Day, we're planning loads of really exciting social media work. We've organised an Instagram takeover with a really exciting female performer and theatre maker that the students will have an opportunity to engage with. And we will be spending the whole week celebrating and sharing the work and achievements of female and non binary students. We love our role on the SU and the work we get to do and how it overlaps with our other work and passions. So Happy International Women's Day from your SU Women's Officers and keep an eye out on all Central SU social media channels for more things to get involved with and

details on how you can best support Central's female and non binary student population and the work that they're doing.

MEGAN

Thank you so much, Lauryn and Celeste. Thanks as well to Dr. Naomi Paxton.

[theme tune starts, crescendo as Scott continues talking]

MEGAN

And thank you for joining us for our third series of Discover Central. We'll be back again soon with more conversations like this one, so make sure to subscribe to Discover Central wherever you get your podcasts and so that you don't miss an episode. But, for now, take care and we'll see you next time.

[theme tune ends, diminuendo]