

# Shop Front Theatre

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## Transcript of Radio CWR interview

Chris O'Connell and Julia Negus of Theatre Absolute with Trish Adudu  
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- Trish Adudu** BBC CWR, now at 5.37, the Shop Front Theatre is set to be no more, after more than a decade in Coventry, the project will close in November 2022, later of course this year. But don't worry, don't worry, it's not the end, the shop itself will be demolished in 2023 as part of the City Centre South Redevelopment, but that is not the end of the story Julia Negus and Chris O'Connell have formed the theatre and they join me now, afternoon.
- Julia Negus** Hello Trish.
- Chris O'Connell** Hi Trish.
- Trish** So these are not voices of people who are down and out and upset, these are upbeat voices, let's start with you Julia, for those that don't, they've been living on Mars for the last 13 years, what's the Shop Front Theatre?
- Julia** Well we – the Shop Front Theatre is a beautiful little space opposite Argos down City Arcade, and in 2008, we took it over in partnership with the City Council, and we created an informal theatre space that just was only supposed to be for 18 months, and 13 years later we're just about to close the doors.
- Trish** See that's incredible, isn't it Chris, you think it was just going to be a temporary thing, which lasted – well more than a decade.
- Chris** Yeah, well I mean, and it was, like Julia just said, it was 18 months trial, but the key thing about it was that for us originally it was the idea of it would be an interesting place for us to make our work, we mainly played in more traditional spaces for years and years. But actually, what happened is lots of people who were artists in their own right doing other things started knocking on the door and saying, "What do you do here, is there any way I could use it?" And so, well it became about saying yes to people, and that's how it grew and evolved into something much more than just a theatre space.

- Trish** Because I think both of you were ahead of your time really, if you don't mind me saying, because your production so involved the audience, we talk about digital now, and everyone being interactive, but Julia some of the things that you did, a blank canvass it was so creative.
- Julia** Absolutely, I mean and that was really what the shop was about, we stripped everything out, well basically we had no money, so it had to be empty, but we had actors, writers, imagination and text, and experience. We've had plays in the cupboard, we've had plays on the pelican crossing opposite, we've had plays in the arcade, we just used what we had around us, and I think that excited other theatre makers, and other artists too.
- Chris** And that was the provocation to the city as well, not just the fact that we could occupy that space and play some part in regenerating that area because this was 2008, the big crash. But it was also an artistic provocation to say we can be a civic theatre in a different way, and we will look very different to other theatres.
- Trish** And just my personal opinion, I thought that more could have been made of you in City of Culture Year, because in terms of innovation, and all sorts of stuff, I mean you played a part didn't you?
- Julia** Yeah, I mean we certainly – we were across the bid, we both – I was on the steering committee for the actual bid programme, but it was really interesting, the City of Culture, they listened to us, and they supported us in developing the work of other writers in the city. So a programme that we did in partnership with them has seen writers to go on to get commissions with the RSC, with the BBC, so that's been brilliant because that's been another thing that came out of the shop is our mentoring and support for others. Because we talk about legacy, but actually for the future it's like well who are the new writers, who are the new artists as well.
- Trish** I mean there's still a lot of life in you –
- Julia** Oh yeah, we're not finished yet Trish.
- Trish** I was about to say, I was about to say, so the shop is closing in November Chris, of course everything is going isn't it in that area of the city with this big city centre south redevelopment, so what will happen to Theatre Absolute, to you both, what are the plans?
- Chris** Well I mean for us it's a question of taking stock of what we've done, at the moment we're seeing out through this year creating a really, what we hope will be a really interesting and good archive that people can access both digitally and through a published publication as well. But then when we leave the space we'll take some time to think about where we want to go because at the end of the day, we're artists as much as people who run what became a venue, so we want to return very much to thinking about our practise, take some time –

**Trish** So are you going to be performing again?

**Chris** Well, this is it's period of –

**Julia** Well yeah, yeah we're theatre makers and artists, as Chris said, yeah so it's about us also working with others in co-partnership for other projects, so yeah.

**Trish** All right, lovely because I've not seen you before this, it will be great.

**Julia** Well I'm in Nuneaton next Wednesday with Marius, a breaker, and I'm performing textiles and performance, I'm actually weaving as he does breaking, so you can check me out then.

**Trish** Oh my goodness, see look at this, she's at it already, what about you Chris?

**Chris** I think I'm in Norfolk next week on my bike –

**Trish** You're not breakdancing?

**Chris** No.

**Trish** But I've known you for many years, you've got some very talented sons I'm telling you, really talented, so you're going to take stock, and then are we going to see you in another part of the city, or is it going to be all online what you do?

**Chris** No, it's going to be a mixture of all of that, through the pandemic we learnt a lot about working digitally, and we did a lot of our work online because we had no choice, so that's something we want to take into future work. But equally, it's like, we were saying it's like a research and development for us really, and finding ways to work – we might still work in empty spaces again, but not for 13 years, you know that's the point is that that was a project, and it's come to an end - a natural end because of the redevelopment, but we're still very positive about the things that we'll go on to do.

**Trish** OK, so 2020 – November it's upping sticks, when will we see you again in terms of here's a production, here's Theatre Absolute?

**Julia** Yeah, well like Chris said, we're doing some research after November, and then we'll come back with a new piece called Project:Public, and that is around the whole of the city, and that will be in spaces and places, and little surprises. So that's what we're working towards, but it really is again, like with the shop, about having conversations with people in their areas about creating a work together that's relevant.

**Trish** So you're looking for colabs on Project:Public?

**Chris** Yes certainly, we want to work with –

**Julia** People.

**Chris** But at the same time –

**Julia** Other people and artists –

**Chris** We all know that's quite a glib thing to say, but at the same time that's why it could take a long time to make that work as well.

**Trish** OK, so Project:Public, what will it be, a theatre, a performance, dance, anything?

**Chris** It could be – I know this is a constant politicians answers, but it could –

**Trish** Yes, you're ignoring my answers.

**Chris** It could be –

**Trish** To your question –

**Julia** Do you know what –

**Chris** It could be anything –

**Julia** Do you know what, it is genuinely – sorry Chris, it is about that thing about listening, and you think about the times that we've all been through, what's coming next and stuff, we have to listen, we have to engage, and we have to create work that is relevant to the people that live and reside in our area, and that makes vibrant work, that's why the shops been great because it creates an energy.

**Chris** Yeah, but the work will carry on very much theme of the work we've done at the shop, which is always about exploring the absence of, or the presence of, and the importance of things like justice, hope, equality, compassion, those things about how does a society work, how does it function, and investigating that through a range of different disciplines.

**Trish** Well, to be honest we're all heading towards a cost of living crisis in terms of people who want to be creative about that, whether it's dancing, performing, how do they get in contact with you?

**Julia** I think through our website, which is [Theatreabsolute.co.uk](http://Theatreabsolute.co.uk), and just the same as the door, we don't have a physical door after November, but they can drop us a line, and let's start a conversation, and that's how we go, and we would say that to all partners, people who may not have engaged in theatre, or artwork before, but also people who might have other organisations, who like might be community organisations, or charities. We've done work with the Citizens Advice Bureau, with Grapevine and stuff like that, so our doors are kind of always open in terms of conversations.

**Chris** And on the website is our, [info@theatreabsolute](mailto:info@theatreabsolute), email address.

**Trish** Brilliant, brilliant, well honestly, you've been innovative – I remember the once where I walked past and obviously the black curtain is there, but the audience were just – you couldn't tell where the audience was because it mixed in with the artists, I was like, "This is great," just because it makes you want to be and do things differently, let's be honest, sitting there and being a passive watcher it could be really boring.

**Julia** Yeah, and so with ours you're literally knee to knee with the artists and you had like box office staff who'd then turn into the actors, and that was brilliant, yeah.

**Trish** Really good, really, really good, well there's tons of creativity still oozing out of Julia and Chris, you've heard them, if you want to do something creative, get in touch with, they haven't finished by a long way, just think outside the box, I think that's what it is with you two.

**Julia** Yeah, think outside the box.

**Trish** Think outside the box, and those contact details again please?

**Chris** It's [info@theatreabsolute.co.uk](mailto:info@theatreabsolute.co.uk) that's the email.

**Trish** Wonderful, I'm going to give you one of these for 13 years – 13 years of innovation and wonderful creativity, thank you Julia, thank you Chris.

**Julia** Thanks Trish, thanks for your support everybody.

**Chris** Cheers, thanks Trish.

**Trish** No worries.