**Digital Culture Podcast – Episode 12**

**Digital Culture Award Winners Cardboard Citizens**

**Host**: **James Akers**

**Guest**: **Chris Sonnex**

**James Akers:** This episode includes discussion of homelessness, poverty, and domestic violence. So we wanna give listeners a heads up in case these topics are sensitive for you.

Hello. We're continuing our series of episodes interviewing Digital Cultural Award winners. I'm James, one of the Tech Champions at the Digital Culture Network. I'm a white man with brown hair wearing a green T-shirt.

Today is the winner of the Digital Content category chosen by Megan Jones, the Digital Content Manager at National Museums Scotland.

Please welcome Chris Sonnex from Cardboard Citizens who won the award for their project, *More than one story*.

**Chris Sonnex:** How you doing? I'm the artistic director and joint CEO of Cardboard Citizens. I am a white man with a bald head and a beard, and, a cheeky glint in his eye.

**James Akers:** You do have a cheeky glint in your eye! So firstly, congratulations for winning the award for *More than one story*. Can you tell us what it is and what you hoped to achieve through that project?

Thanks for letting us win the award. That was exciting. Carboard Citizens as an organisation is a theatre company that works with, for and, about people with lived experience of homelessness, poverty, and inequity.

**Chris Sonnex:** And that whole, spiel, homelessness, poverty, inequity is relatively new from when I took over the reins at Cardboard Citizens, I've been there for four years. Before that it would've been, called, a theatre company that worked for the homeless or a homeless theatre company. And what I realised when I first started, 'cause I have, lived the experience of homelessness myself.

I knew this because I was evicted when I was a young kid, from the council house that I grew up in. So I knew I was homeless from sort of cerebrally academically. But then when I started to look into what actually the breadth of homelessness is, it's massive, right? It's an incredibly large breadth, but obviously in society most people are only, thinking about street sleeping, sofa, surfing at a push. So, I wanted to broaden that because I'd realised that I was actually homeless maybe 6, 7, 8 times, right? And so we put in poverty and we put in inequity just to start the conversation. But once we got to doing *More than one story*, we wanted to explain who we were, but also so that other people could see themselves in these films. And we did nine short films. There's two cuts of it actually.

There's one, that is just the nine short films that stand alone and there's a long form cut, which actually merges into one, which is really lovely. So each film is about a very particular point, but we could have made 20, 30, 40, 50 of them.

Right? But as it stood, we had, talking about homelessness through immigration point of view and from a black point of view. And we also had, overcrowding, trans homelessness and domestic abuse. And that's one of the big ones actually, I think is really, incredible that people don't know. But if you are at risk of domestic abuse, just at risk, you are legally homeless. So it's massive. We looked at loads of different things and every person that was writing on that film, had the lived experience of the thing that they was writing about. And everybody that acted in that film had lived experience just generally as part of our membership, people that come and work with us.

So our aim was to get that message across, really. *More than one story.*

**James Akers:** And why was film the medium that you chose to tell those stories?

**Chris Sonnex:** I think the important thing about film is the kind of equity of that situation, especially when it's on YouTube you can put it through social media because you don't have to pay to watch it, to engage with it. You can get it free. You can get engagement almost immediately. So if you are watching, hopefully in an ideal world, somebody that is watching that feeling alone, and thinks, oh, they're going through this particular situation. They watch it and they can feel seen at the very least, or at least feel like they're not alone. And if there was any barrier to that, we wouldn't have caught that person.

By and large, theatre, there's a couple of ways that act as barriers, right? Ticket prices, I think the culture of going to theatre, all of that. And also because they're quite short, quite straight to the point.

They're quite polemic, they lend themselves to short form film that I think they're very theatrical and they're using all of that, but easy to access, right? Which is the important part of that. And hopefully that will prove to be a gateway into going to more art and culture.

We have to meet people where they're at I think.

**James Akers:** And how did you, bring the project team together to deliver this? Was it just yourself? Was it a few different people at Cardboard Citizens?

**Chris Sonnex:** The whole of Cardboard Citizens as a team, really brilliant. Some incredible people working on it. Because actually when we are dealing with member actors, we audition members solely. So we have a membership, they're people that have lived experience. They don't pay anything it's just called a membership. And they'll all come and they'll get free workshops or training activities and stuff like that, and also just a sort of civic space, right? we've got quite a lot of people that would call themselves Cardboard Citizen members, but what we needed to do is audition them.

And we needed to do that in a trauma informed way, in a gentle way, in a way that, made sure that when they were getting a rejection, they weren't feeling, rejection sensitivity or they weren't feeling a particular way about it. And then of course, controlling. the reactions to the people that did get those roles as well.

So making sure that they could be paid doesn't interfere with their benefits, And all of that stuff behind the scenes, which isn't as fancy as the films I suppose or not as visible as the films. Those are the things that Cardboard Citizens are doing incredibly, and the people that work and all of them, the membership manager, the workshop assistants, all of those people that can bring everybody together. We couldn't do it without that. And then when it came to writers, I had a massive list of loads of writers that could have written a particular monologue or about a particular theme.

And that was the hard part, narrowing that down to get nine and also to have a mixture of brand new writers and BAFTA winners and Olivier nominees and stuff like that. So make sure that it wasn't just all stars, but actually some people were getting brought up by the fact that they were sitting next to BAFTA winners or whatever. And that was a tricky algorithm, but really fun to do. And then Black Apron were an incredible company that worked so brilliantly in digital and actually bridging the theatre/film gap, quite a lot. Gino and Daniel Bailey doing incredible work there.

We couldn't have really done it without obviously producers Holly Smith was incredible, just bringing it all together. And, it takes a village, right?

So I could name a million different people, like I'm doing my acceptance speech and forgetting a million different people, but there were so many people involved in it. And that is the sort of beauty of art, right? You just stand on the shoulders of so many people. But yeah, we needed everybody in that and our lived experience throughout the team is pretty high as well.

Lived experience of poverty, lived experience of homelessness, that was areal something.

**James Akers:** And was there a collaboration with Big Issue as well as part of the project?

**Chris Sonnex:** Yeah. Stunning collaboration with a Big Issue, which actually we wouldn't have been able to reach as many people as we did, I don't think, if we didn't have that base level. So the whole thing was every week we would release a film, Big Issue would release a film alongside, an article written by, the writer or somebody that was, adjacent to the writer. And that was incredible 'cause also it built a bit of a momentum as well. So each week, brand new film, we know it's gonna come out on whatever day it is, which was great. But the Big Issue with their base, there's hundreds of thousands of people and, 157,000 people engaged in the films all in all. Big Issue having that reach partnership was massive.

**James Akers:** So alongside the Big Issue collaboration, what other online and offline channels did you use?

**Chris Sonnex:** We got a micro site on our website, which is still active. So anybody can come if they missed it the first time. It's still there, *More than one story,* which gives us a really brilliant breakdown of each film, what it means, and also the whole project in general. So there's a microsite attachment that was on the Big Issue website, going through YouTube, which is amazing.

And then YouTube is still there, of course. I think the exciting thing about the use of digital is it's fluidity in that it can be live as well. When we did a couple of screenings, we did ,two screenings in the Curzon in Hoxton, which is very bougie, very brilliant. And we did a couple in the Barbican, in the cinema.

And then of course we had just general showings in Hoxton Hall, which was where it was filmed actually, which was really beautiful. 'cause you're watching a film about these people, but also realising that you're watching a film where that was also shot, This weird live moment, which is really beautiful.

And then I think, social media really helps as well, Instagram and, having those trailers and having little snippets I think can really pique people's interest. The whole spectrum as much as we could have.

And then we entered it into, film festivals. and it's, been nominated for a couple of other things as well, and won a couple of other things. But I think the beauty of the film festivals is that you know that sometimes it's gonna be shown there, so that's an extra sort of digital reach.

And then you're looking at like. Where you are actually reaching. The other thing is geographical, right? We've had this massive impact in America, in a way that we are looking at before and after, there's almost no relationship with America. But for whatever reason this project really rung true in America and in Australia and a couple of other different places, Russia as well, which is odd.

**James Akers:** I suppose that's one of the amazing things about digital. You're able to reach a global audience from something that's hyper-local.

It sounds like you've reached a lot of people with this project.

**Chris Sonnex:** What were the numbers and what did they mean for Cardboard Citizens? Well, there's obviously, there's a really brilliant reporting number that's really useful. You know, how many people we've reached with this project, and that's massive and really helpful for us. I think actually because it looks at how important we are.

But I also think that there's a kind of idealist version of this in me that's a little bit like 157,000 people watched it. Now that is us like planting the seeds of the tree and the shade that we won't sit in.. And I, think that's the really exciting fizzy moment.

We can never follow what the impact on 157,000 people is. Not in a way that we can in sort of theatre. I think there's loads of stories out there that we will never know, but that kind of excites me a little bit. And you know that sometimes it comes back and it plays forward and sometimes people won't like the project.

And that's interesting, but maybe that's inspired them to write their own project or write their own work. And that's even better for me because the more that we're talking about it and the more people that are seeing these stories, the more things like homelessness and poverty get.

Media and art has such an impact on these social issues. Just look at things like Mr. Bates versus the Post Office for instance, that has the ability to change certain things and Adolescent. Brilliant. Jack Vaughan. Like you get stuff out there, you can feel a little bit of a shift or a change.

But the other thing for me that is really important is it's just that people have this awareness, and the more people have that awareness, the more people will either not feel so isolated or go, oh, actually we need to do something.

And when you're looking at the UK right now, one in four people are in poverty in the country. Now, I sure as hell know that there's not one in four stories about poverty in art at the moment. And the more we start talking about it, the more maybe something will happen. And we have a responsibility as artists and we have a responsibility as activists to say, listen, there's a problem here and nobody seems to be engaging with it on the level that we should be engaging with it.

'cause that's a quarter of the country.

**James Akers:** That's wild. Looking at your numbers here, 88% of your post-event surveyed audience reported an increased awareness of homelessness. So it is clearly working.

How did you survey those audiences? Was it online? Was it offline?

**Chris Sonnex:** A little bit of both. That's the follow up, isn't it? That's the problem in general, I think, like whenever you do it, how do you get the truth and how do you get the people to fill it in? And I think quite a lot of the time it's badgering people to be like, can you fill it in?

But we had a good take up and I think we had a good take up on people feeding back ' cause they really felt something, they felt like there was an importance, to that. Going back to your point about people having a bigger awareness, this is something that I do almost every day. I'll meet another artist or I'll meet somebody and they'll be talking to me about maybe not having the agency to write something and then you've just spent like 10 minutes telling me how you were homeless on six different times, but you still haven't equated yourself to that.

And actually, a couple of people that were on the nine films, that was part of our conversation about having that lived experience of homelessness legally. And that's a really interesting thing. There's something revolutionary about that internally. It's very small, but it's like, it's saying, I know there was something wrong and yet I didn't have the words or the understanding of what was wrong. And now we have the understanding of what is wrong because of the films or because of that interaction. And now we can start to heal at least because at least we know what the issue is. But there's people out there that will go years or maybe all of their life without realising that they had a very particular trauma. And they haven't been able to do anything about it. So that's another important thing about the reach.

But also getting those statistics and seeing that people were having more of an understanding of what it is. That's exactly why we do it.

**James Akers:** That's amazing that you're helping people realise what they've been through and find ways to move forward.

Just going back to when we were talking about the audience feedback that you've received, was there anything in there that really stuck with you or was surprising?

**Chris Sonnex:** I think I don't stop getting surprised by people not knowing that they'd have these lived experiences. It's an interesting thing 'cause I'm so aware of it, I'm like, oh, this is still interesting. I'm still having this conversation. So we know that the work isn't done right. We still gotta keep going. But I think the thing that, I'm not surprised by it, but I think a lot of other people are surprised about how people are drawn to joy and, how heartbreaking it is to go on a fully emotional journey. And I think that is where people writing from their own lived experience have the freedom to take certain traumatic experiences and have a bit of lightness to it or a bit of joy in it.

I know that if you don't have that experience, it can feel gauche to write jokes in something when it's incredibly traumatic. But actually that's real life, and I think people are drawn to that joy. And then if they go up, then they can come down. And that gives you a little bit of space for the audience to play with.

Instead of it being completely dark and serious all the time, because that's just not the human condition and actually like laughter and joy and silliness are survival techniques a lot of the time in trauma. And so when people are watching stuff and go, oh, I didn't realise that you could laugh.

You wanna make a joke.

You want to bite that tension some way. It's innately in us. And so it's that sort of feeling that you try and get with these films as well, which is funny. I think almost all of them, have something where you can laugh at.

**James Akers:** And from the experience of this project, has it shaped anything about the way that you might do things differently for future projects or use digital in a different way?

**Chris Sonnex:** I'll tell you, it's difficult going back to theatre. It is a difficult thing, that's a question to be had about the importance of digital, right? Is that breadth and maybe there isn't that depth that you might get in theatre, I dunno.

But to reach 157,000 people, we would have to play the Olivier for 157 days That's a lot to really reach. So it does create a slight problem. But also I love loved making films. As a director it was the first time really I'd ever made film. And I was blown away by the collaboration of it actually. 'cause I felt maybe film wasn't as collaborative as theatre and it wasn't as live as theatre. And then both of those things were actually not true while making it liveness was apparent in the filmmaking process and, that we were all collaborating to the ninth of degree.

So it was a really brilliant. experience for me, which made me as an artist want to make more digital work. But I again, without portraying the fact that I feel that they were innately theatrical these films. So it's a nice kind of balance that you can do it, you can make something that is very digital, but also very theatrical and very live and they don't have to be opposite of each other, which is what I would've gone into thinking it. And I think actually we saw it a little bit, I think over the pandemic. That digital and theatre coming together in a kind of interesting way. But we lost it, I think, a little bit again.

And also how can you do it without money? It was still a significant, percentage of money, from our coffers to make this.

But the incredible thing is we've made it in three days, shot it. Three days of work, nine monologues. Obviously the editing process took forever, but actually we were very quick.

I'm rambling now, but really I loved it and I think we should embrace it more when the time comes and it should be horses for courses.

**James Akers:** And what's next? Is it developing ideas for a stage two?

**Chris Sonnex:** Glad you asked. So today, has been the final deadline of an anthology. Back when we first started it, I could have commissioned it 10 times over. Actually what we decided to do as a company was we couldn't do more films because obviously it's quite expensive and, you never want to do the difficult second album.

So how do you evolve? So we commissioned, six more writers to write, their own monologues, their own manifestos or poem. that have different lived experiences as well. And we're gonna publish those brand new six alongside the original nine. And we had just did an open call out nationally for people that have lived experience to submit their own monologues, which means that they will get paid if they end up getting into the anthology.

So *More than one story* should be reaching your shelves for your bookshops, in the next couple of months once we've decided who's making the cut. But for me, that feels like a real legacy of those original nine films to then put it into academia.

For me it feels, I mean it's entertainment as well, but there's something about holding it in that space and saying, look, this is really important and these are the stories of today.

Like I say, 2025 is kind of a Pepys-esque diary of what is going on right now up and down the country. And we've had lots and lots of submissions. So we've got a lot of reading to do. But that will be published and hopefully performed in some way. And then perhaps maybe we can look at, filming and creating another couple when we get to the point.

But also maybe we decide that there is some really brilliant pieces in that that need a feature length film or a feature length play. And that would be really exciting.

**James Akers:** And people that want to find out more about project and stuff that you do at Cardboard Citizens, where should people go?

**Chris Sonnex:** You can go to the website, Cardboard Citizens, just Google that, that will come up. and, because of the films actually our, output on Instagram and the social medias, they rose as well. So they're there depending on where your political alignments are.

Choose your social media, but we're on all of 'em,

It's been brilliant to speak to you today. Chris. Thanks so much for sharing your journey, and congrats again for winning the award!

Thanks James. Thanks for having me.