

## The Creative and Cultural Skills podcast: Build Back Fairer Episode two: In a sector under pressure, will freelancers suffer or thrive?

In a sector rocked by the pandemic, freelance workers have been hit hard without the structure or financial support of an organisation. This multiskilled, resourceful, creative, passionate, adaptable, and dynamic workforce represents a third of the creative industries, yet they have felt completely abandoned by the sector they have worked so hard to build.

So what happens now that the sector is starting to return to 'normal', is 'normal' good enough?

In episode two of our brand-new podcast, we hear from **Sarah Shead**, Director & Creative Producer, [Spin Arts Management](#) and **Prema Mehta**, Freelance Lighting Designer & founder of [Stage Sight](#), as they discuss their experiences as freelancers within the cultural sector and the impact the pandemic has had, with our host, Rob West.

### Transcript

- Prema Mehta** When we first got into the pandemic, as a freelancer, literally feeling as if I was in a boat by myself. I had never felt so isolated. As a freelancer, did I belong anywhere? Not at all.
- Sarah Shead** I feel like we feel fulfilled and we feel valued by the work that we're doing, and we feel valued by the audiences and the communities that we're able to reach... I just sometimes feel like we're not valued by the people that we actually stand beside.
- Prema Mehta** The dialogue's really opened up now, and perhaps people are asking, "why did we not ask for X, Y and Z?" Perhaps organisations may say "had we have known X, Y and Z was an issue for you, we would have wanted to have known about it."
- Sarah Shead** Freelancers are predominantly just trying to earn a comfortable living. We just want our basic needs met. And that, for me, is problematic if our sector doesn't find a way to rebalance that and refigure those resources in a different way.
- Posy Jowett** This is the Creative and Cultural Skills Podcast: Conversations and key questions about the future of our cultural sector. Here's our host, Rob West.

**Rob West** In a sector rocked by the pandemic, freelancer workers have been hit hard without the structure or financial support of an organisation. Freelancers are multi-skilled, adaptable individuals, but if they've been abandoned by the cultural sector during this time, then what will they return - should they return - as the industry rebuilds? Here to discuss the topic of freelancers, we have Prema Mehta, a freelance Theatre Designer who's worked on over 200 productions, and is also the founder of Stage Site, an organisation committed to creating an off-stage workforce that's more reflective of our society today. Hello, Prema.

**Prema Mehta** Hi Rob, thanks so much for having me.

**Rob West** And, Sarah Shead is founder of Spin Arts Management, who support artists and companies. Last year, Sarah joined over 100 freelancers to form a freelance task force. Hello, Sarah.

**Sarah Shead** Hello, and thanks for having me.

**Rob West** So let's start there with you, Sarah. It was about May last year that, in response to the pandemic, a group of performing arts organisations jointly signed a letter in support of freelancers, recognising them as a vital part of the performance sector. So why did you feel the need to do that?

**Sarah Shead** In general, even before the pandemic, I was always interested in how individuals could start to yield power. The infrastructure felt like it was built around buildings, as opposed to around individuals. So, the idea of having an opportunity to really challenge that, and to play with that: To explore, well, what does that look like if we start to place emphasis on individuals rather than on buildings? Especially at a time when they were closing during a pandemic anyway, it really felt like an ideal time for us to come together, to have some seats at the table, to be involved in those crucial conversations so that the grassroots are really represented in decision making. But also, for us to find a way of how we can exist non-hierarchically as well.

**Rob West** And as I understand it, each organisation committed to paying a freelancer for one day a week through... I think it was June, July and August 2020. What was the impact of that, and where is it now?

**Sarah Shead** The Freelance Task Force came about, it felt like, with such good intentions; the organisations wanted to support freelancers over this period of time when they were perhaps losing work. But actually, we were thrown together with very little infrastructure, very little understanding of what we were there to do. So suddenly you have such a large group of people that were representative of the sector having to figure all of that out. It feels like lots came out of it, and it's such a hard thing to tangibly put your fingers on, because everybody had a different approach to it. And I think what is wonderful is, rather than one specific campaign that came out of it, lots of different interpretations came out of it. So, some people have been able to generate more money and exist beyond that network; some people did, crucial pieces of research that are now influencing organisations' decisions; some that were prepared burn the entire infrastructure down, to reimagine what it would look like if we built it from scratch; and others that were quite protective of what already exists, and wanted to look at "actually, how can we contribute and add value to that?" It's a really great opportunity to say "this is actually what our sector can be." It doesn't have to be that one thing is a

measure of success - the fact that all of these different kinds of things happened is the measure of success. The fact that they were so diverse is actually what can make our sector so brilliant.

**Rob West** That's great, Sarah, thank you. Prema, can I come to you now? In a cultural sector where 38% of our workforce is self-employed, in many ways you're a typical freelancer in the role of a lighting designer. So, could you tell us about a freelancer's working life, and how that might differ from some of the other roles in the sector?

**Prema Mehta** I think the biggest thing to say is that it's so varied. Each day is very different, and the number of projects that you juggle at any one point, it just grows and grows. So I think it wasn't quite until you're forced to stop that you realise how much you were either doing or carrying - and that's a necessity in terms of earning a living. So, it was something that we had to do, freelancers have to juggle multiple roles and multiple projects at the same time. I think it's only when you take a moment to pause that you realise "perhaps this isn't the right way, perhaps this isn't sustainable." Did we just go on with it because there was no other way, there was no other route? And the industry didn't even begin to explore what else might be possible. I mean, it's lovely that it's varied, but at the same time you are carrying an awful lot all of the time.

**Rob West** A varied lifestyle, but carrying a lot. What are the other key advantages and disadvantages of being a freelancer?

**Prema Mehta** The fact that you get to work with a large number of people across the year: So you're in a really privileged position because you're getting to collaborate with numerous people, different artists, all the time. And there's a wealth of knowledge within a freelancer in that they fly between organisations; so what you're doing is you're picking up information, or you're learning about how organisations go about their day-to-day business, and you can get eyes on that. When you walk away by the end of the year, you've gathered what you like as a 'visitor', and what you disliked. I've been in the industry for 16 years, so that's 16 years of watching and observing what other people are doing. With that knowledge, if ever I have the opportunity to shape, lead, or influence, I know that these five things work really well, and these things five things work less so. And I think also it gives you an opportunity to be a bit more of a neutral eye; you're not involved in the day to day politics, but you're there long enough to know how you're being treated, and how the building and the organisation hold their values, and carry that into the arts.

**Sarah Shead** As freelancers, it's easy to think that we don't have power, but I think we're hugely empowered to do the work that we do. And I think with that, when you start to own that, actually you can start to levy quite a lot of power. And the freedom that comes with; the autonomy, the fact that we get to negotiate what roles we do want to play, and what we don't have to play... I think sometimes that idea of regular support or regular investment has its downsides as well. There's expectations that as freelancers we don't- we get to decide what that is. We get to move quickly. Sometimes it can take organisations longer to respond to situations because they're wrapped up in commitments - it can take longer to process decisions. Whereas for us; we can meet, make the decision, and action, all on the same day. And so, for me the idea that the sector came to a grinding halt during the pandemic doesn't feel reflective of what my situation was, or even

the artists that I work with. It feels like, if anything, the sector speeded up for us. We had to quickly learn how to work in a new world, and make sure our work was still going to reach audiences and communities, even though we didn't have the buildings to do that through. We had to quickly find new stakeholders and investors, and deliver - that just never stopped for us. That's the great thing, right? That when we think about arts and culture, actually, it doesn't sit in the buildings quite as much as what we've all led ourselves to believe. [LAUGHS].

**Prema Mehta**

I would really agree with Sarah around the point "empower". So when we talk about power, I think there's a narrative that's going on where people are talking about freelancers vs. organisations, and it feels like one can't work without the other. When we're at our best, it's because freelancers are working well with organisations, and organisations are working well with freelancers. Sometimes, a freelancer can feel like a visitor - and how comfortable would you feel as a visitor to provoke thought or to ask for more? I think that's where the dialogue's really opened up now. And perhaps people are asking; "why did we not ask for X, Y and Z?" If anything, I think it's more about opening a dialogue and a conversation between both parties. And, perhaps, I'm letting our sector off the hook, but perhaps we were just simply quite busy just churning out work; and here is a moment to pause and reflect.

**Sarah Shead**

For me, when we're thinking about organisations and freelancers, it's easy to assume that maybe an organisation has to give up something in order for freelancers to thrive - in the same way that you could make the argument that white people have to step back in order for people of other colours to step forward into our sector. And I don't think it's ever any of those things, it should always be more of, more of, and more. It always should be and, and. Can I exist as a freelancer, and can I have the stability, and security, and a pension, and all of those things that come with being an employee? Why am I less worthy of those things?

**Rob West**

To play devil's advocate for a while, there's a view that many people choose to work on a freelance basis because they welcome that freedom, flexibility, days and hours you choose, select the projects you want to work, be your own boss. What would you say to someone who just says, "well, you've made your own bed..."

**Sarah Shead**

I would say, "then you lie in it."

**Rob West**

(LAUGHS).

**Sarah Shead**

(LAUGHS) And you try it, and then you tell me whether you would choose to lie in this bed.

**Prema Mehta**

In March last year, I felt very alone. And I suppose the brilliance of being an employee would have meant that I would have belonged somewhere, or I could have had somebody to go to to say "what on earth is happening?" but instead, you had a group of freelancers concerned about their mortgages, concerned about childcare, concerned about their work, seeing contracts dissolve, disappear. I think I lost eight contracts in the space of 48 hours. All of my work gone, and all of my way of earning a living gone. So that fear... Looking back, would I have wanted a to have felt that fear together with someone, and not been on this journey by myself? I would have loved that support.

- Rob West** But it's interesting, isn't it, that the official description of a freelancer is a "self-employed contractor", and we've said that over a third of our sector is made up of freelancers or self-employed contractors, but there still seems to be a need to help employers understand best practice. Do you feel freelancers will suffer further as we emerge out of this, or will they thrive now?
- Prema Mehta** I think it's gonna be a really challenging couple of years, Rob. There are people that are back at work, but I think that we're going to have to be really careful about using our values in the right way over the next two years, because I do think there's a great risk of certain people being forgotten - whether that's people, for one reason or another, not quite breaking through whatever barrier. Maybe my observation is that people don't want to go back to whatever "normal" was; people are really keen to use this moment of forced change to "go back to better" - and to go back to better would mean to go back to something different. We had something that wasn't sustainable, and didn't work equally for everyone, so now would be a chance to really address those issues.
- Rob West** It's that question that's come up in our podcast before about "return or reform?" Here is a key moment; do we just imagine it never happened and just get back to the way it was as quickly as possible? Or do we see this as an opportunity to move forward? I'm wondering how the pandemic has affected the number of freelancers; the Office of National Statistics showed in June last year, across all sectors, there were 11,000 fewer self-employed people than there were the year before. Do you think we'll see more freelancers, or will there be less? And if there's less, that's going to cause a problem for some organisations reopening, isn't it?
- Sarah Shead** Yes, we might see less in the short term. But if I think about over the next few years, I think we will see more. And I think that's not just because people will choose that; I think that's because business is changing. Business models where you sort of hang on to four-year business plans are really quickly out of date. People are acknowledging that they need to be able to move much quicker. So, if you have smaller and more agile teams that are scalable - so organisations that can be small when they need to be, and can grow quite quickly when they need to... Because I think part of the problem is that if we end up with lots of people that are in positions that don't ever move, that rely on the same kinds of freelancers, you end up with a really stale, non-dynamic sector. And so, I think if we can get people in organisations moving more, perhaps if we were to say "you could only save a certain amount of term", they'd have to sort of move around those a little bit more. That would mean different freelancers coming in, which would perhaps make that more dynamic and vibrant. But fundamentally, I think change is only going to come if it comes from the system, unfortunately, in a system that doesn't work for us. And so, it feels to me like predominantly our government and our stakeholders are going to have to make some decisions about where their investment of resources is being put over the next few years, and that will determine what the shape of the sector will actually look like.
- Prema Mehta** I think there's certain areas where I feel, as a freelancer, we're not quite being looked after - and then my mind begins to investigate, "well who's responsibility would that be?" For me, there's areas around general wellbeing; who looks after our wellbeing? Because, again, we sit in that space of not being on any island, I think. Small but important things; compassionate leave (what on earth is that to a

freelancer?), maternity leave, professional development... If you were attached to an organisation, you would be offered training. What was the last time I was offered training? Probably university. So you can go through years of developing a career in this sector, and have no access to professional development. This is about creating a sustainable career - and as a freelancer, it feels like if you want to develop your career to the next stage, you have to work incredibly hard. And I have no problem around working hard, it's when you're juggling X number of shows at the same time, and you're dashing from tech to tech to tech: You're in transition all the time, because you're going from one place to the other place, and you're having to learn and grow and to develop yourself. You're in an area that's not supported, and you're having to support yourself... Those basic needs that anyone working, it's support that should be there for everybody that's working, and I don't think freelancers are getting access to that at all.

**Rob West**

The hospitality industry also relies heavily on non-permanent staff for much of its operation, and they've been struggling to attract back the talent they need - particularly at experienced levels - because freelancers they previously relied upon had to go elsewhere to pay the bills, and they're not coming back. Can you see that kind of scenario being repeated in the cultural sector, where people go to the freelancer they used for lighting design and find out, "well, no, actually, I'm a delivery driver now"?

**Prema Mehta**

We heard a lot of stories of people who were really highly skilled in their own professions working wherever they could find work just to pay their bills. We can look at the Cultural Recovery Fund, which was an absolute blessing for so many - and yet, as a freelancer, I could speak confidently on behalf of many freelancers, we felt quite neglected by this funding going to certain organisations, and really not reaching freelancers. When you see that happening, it's quite a moment of feeling unheard, like there's an imbalance in how government are responding to the issues, and who's up against the issues. And I think those memories may put people off returning. We feel a little bit, on occasion, quite hard done by, I think.

**Sarah Shead**

That will be there, and I think some will choose not to come back. For me, the thing that's missing in this conversation is that actually many of those artists would have other careers alongside their creative career. As a sector, actually, we just need to be more open to who we are including in this. So, yes, I think we're going to have lost people, that's really sad - I'm interested in how we can also pull in new people - because let's face it, the sector has looked the same for a very long time. That needs to change. (CHUCKLES). What we really need to get used to is thinking about entrance at other levels - where people have got experience of working in other sectors, other ways, other systems, other processes. We all went through formal training, we all came into this sector, we've done our dues to build our portfolios; but unless you've gone out and worked in a different sector, then how do you really know how it could be differently?

**Rob West**

It's interesting, isn't it, with the cultural sector and attracting new people into this area? And freelancers are responsible for managing and paying their own national insurance, any pension payments - but again, even within your training for that, that's an area that's never really covered (not not to my knowledge, anyway) - experience of HR areas. So, do you think there should be more training for potential freelancers on the businesses of being a self-employed contractor?

- Prema Mehta** I think these are things that just don't get taught - certainly I didn't get taught those skills at drama school. I think it's a really important thing that we do on a day-to-day basis that needs to be considered. What I was just thinking, Rob, was that as a lighting designer, how else could I have entered the sector? There wasn't another way in. You had to be a freelance lighting designer to be a lighting designer. So, it feels a little bit as if we're being encouraged to pursue a career, but there is no alternative employee status; so you have to go in as a freelancer to do the job that you want to do. And then, yes of course, it comes with doing your own accounts, and life admin, that perhaps if you did a 9-to-5, dare I say it, you might not have to endure those things on a weekend. The question I would ask is "how else could you enter an industry like ours, when the majority of the workforce is made up of freelancers?" And that comes with all these additional skills that you're not taught, you're not supported with, there is nobody to turn to to ask "help". You just end up paying your accountant more and more money to try and work out how to deal with the system.
- Sarah Shead** At the moment, our leadership training, or entrance routes, are often instigated and delivered by organisations; funders invest in organisations to deliver leadership training where they attempt to train them how to be freelancers. Whereas, one might argue that "shouldn't the freelancers just be training them to do that? What if you invested in freelancers to be developing the workforce?" And we've had two people that now work alongside me, at Spin Arts, that came in to try to learn the job and never left, essentially. That's been an interesting shift for me to have to navigate - because it's not only been about attracting people to work with me, who either have a similar skillset to me or a very diverse one, so that they offer something very different to the team - but it's actually about their dynamic. I can teach anybody how to fundraise, and tour book, and do basic administration; what you can't actually get is like personal dynamic from someone. But I think all in all, it feels like it's trial and error, isn't it? I treat my career as a piece of artistic research in itself, and I'm trying to interrogate better ways of doing things; holding stakeholders accountable, trying to contribute creative solutions, then trying to deliver them myself, and trying to encourage others that they can do the same for others. I don't think I have a fixed solution on "these are the people to talk to, these are the actions we should all be doing." I just feel quite empowered to be doing my own digging in my corner of the world, and feeling confident that that has ripple effects to others. And if we're all doing that, then together we're gonna dig a really big, brilliant hole (LAUGHS) we can lie in and enjoy! I don't know where I was going.
- Rob West** Not fall in!
- Sarah Shead** We'll be falling off the edge the cliff, we'll have purposely built it.
- Rob West** That's good. There'll be ladders and everything.
- Sarah Shead** (LAUGHS).
- Rob West** Very good. What would you suggest, Prema, in terms of the industry building back fairer for freelancers?
- Prema Mehta** Yeah, it's complicated, isn't it? Of course there's a desire, and I think it's right that people want to reform or return to better, but there's something about having space to do that. We have been in crisis mode for a extended period, and I

think that we're only just resurfacing, but I don't believe we're resurfacing confidently; we're perhaps still a bit nervous about opening up - and will we go to into down again, and what's the new variant going to do? So, I feel like for any sense of change to be made, we need to give ourselves space to reinvent. Now that the buildings are beginning to open, that's brilliant in some ways, but it doesn't actually give us the breathing room that we need to rethink. There's got to be space to come together - whether you're an organisation, or a freelancer - just review, and reassess. What are your priorities? And make joint priorities; get everyone on the same hymn sheet, stop everybody work in silos.

**Rob West** Sarah, how would you build back fairer?

**Sarah Shead** I would like to see that a lot of the labour is lifted from freelancers, because I feel like we have to do quite a lot of labour in even gaining the resources we need. They're quite lengthy processes, I think they could be really simplified and made easier.

**Rob West** Can you give me an example?

**Sarah Shead** Oh, yes, I can give you a lots.

**Rob West** (LAUGHS).

**Sarah Shead** How long have you got? Us trying to get resources for projects often requires lengthy processes to multiple funders that don't always make that the easiest process. So, if I take for an example, where an artist might be applying for funds around developing their practice - and I'm not pointing this to the Arts Council's 'Developing Your Creative Practice', just so we're clear - but it requires an artist to have to justify why they need to develop their practice in a certain way. I don't quite understand what the person assessing those applications... How they're actually able to assess them, how do they know? Could that system not just be a tick box exercise, which makes a decision of whether you are eligible or not, and you land in a lottery? There's no subjectiveness to that, then, it's actually just whoever a software picks out. That's a simple tick box exercise for us, so we don't have to spend days trying to make a case for sometimes what is £1,000 or £2,000 worth of support. Organisations taking back some of the labour as well - so if I give you an example, I've been contracted this week, and the organisation has asked me to write my own contract which feels very bizarre, because they don't have the capacity to do that inside, and I need to recruit the other speakers that sit alongside me. So there's this extra labour that is unpaid for. Now, I know that the organisations will say "but we're extremely stretched and we don't have capacity", so then the next bit, in order to make the labour fairer for freelancers, is that the stakeholders then need to change what their expectations are of organisations. And I think they've set it up in a way where they pitch every few years for their funding - it becomes extremely competitive, they have to put their best foot forward, which is often measured in the amount of outputs as opposed to the depth of outputs... And I think if we could rethink that, that would hopefully free up some capacity in organisations to shift some of that labour back. Then, it's not radically changing the sector - I'm yet to be convinced that we're going to see radical change as a result of this - but hopefully it's one step in the right direction for it to be fairer.



**Prema Mehta**

I think, Rob, I would just add to say; of course, everyone's really limited resources and capacity. I don't doubt that, I completely believe that, I've experienced it. But there's a need to really think about "where we want to put our resources?" At the beginning of the pandemic, I remember speaking to an artistic director and he said "we've ring-fenced money so that when we get out of the pandemic, we'll have money to address diversity and inclusion." That was one example. The opposite example I got was certainly at Stage Site we lost resources; at the start of the pandemic, resources were pooled, and effectively we were shut down. And we as a committee came together and we said "we've never known a pandemic to make inequalities better. So this would be the worst time to shut down." So I think there's something about just that example that I've given you - I feel very confident about that one organisation with that one artistic director ring-fencing money for diversity and inclusion, knowing that they've got money in the bank to really move this issue forwards - in comparison to those who put diversity and inclusion at the bottom of their list. I think that speaks volumes. Everyone's going to be really limited in resources, but where are we going to put them, what's our priority, and what do we believe in? And that's where the newness will come in; rather than put them into what we believed before the pandemic. I think that would suggest that we haven't changed or grown, and as a sector I hope that we have.

**Sarah Shead**

And I think to add to that, I would say that organisations could do a really simple thing, which is to ask us what we need to do this piece of work, or what we need to attend this piece of training, and understand that for some that will be a fee, and for others that might mean that there's some other kind of access barrier that's removed - and I think sometimes we often just fall into this trap that, when we're talking about resources, what we're talking about is money. And that's not always what the barrier is for everybody. For me, rather than sort of saying "we've got this fee, and we'd like to recruit you for this," I'm a bit more interested in saying "we've got this piece of work - what do you need to be able to deliver that?" The door's really open to say; "do you know what, I can take a smaller fee, but I need you to also do this for me" - it becomes much more a place to negotiate from.

**Rob West**

Hmmm. And I'd add to to space and resources... Knowledge. That combination of having space, resources in the widest sense, and knowledge, is all required, isn't it, to help things go forward?

**Sarah Shead**

There just has to be a greater sector awareness, and change around workforce development, and really thinking through how we are going to support freelancers: Because, we talk a lot about sustainability, and default to environmental sustainability, but actually, if we're really looking at sustainability of the sector, then sustainability of freelancers should be absolutely at the forefront of our sustainability plans.

**Prema Mehta**

I think what excites me most is the possibility that freelancers could help influence long-term change. That's something that we've not really explored prior to the pandemic. And for me, that's going to involve time, but it's going to involve building a relationship between at least two parties, and involving freelancers much more at various stages - whether that's having more freelancers on boards, or having freelancer advisory groups into organisations. That's where we can see a much more cohesive relationship that's built together, and I think that would readdress any power imbalance. Let the freelancers have

a seat at the table, but let them influence long-term change - and that for me feels very exciting. I see certain organisations putting together a manifesto, or a short statement, or a quick fix, actually. I watch them and I feel like, actually, they're quite dangerous because you're taking the attention away from what could be a real change (but we're going to have to go about it slow and steady, and the rewards will be clearer later on) - but you're coming up with this quick fix which is actually just a plaster. We need to be much more mindful of what's a plaster, and what's the steps to long term change. And naturally, I would of course fly the flag for an inclusive workforce, and returning to an inclusive workforce. That's a very delicate conversation for anybody, but I think for me that simply means what it's always meant, which is just to create a level playing field, so that everybody has the same opportunity to be part of our workforce.

**Sarah Shead** And there's something about "actually just give freelancers the resources, and let them decide if they want to invite you to the table" rather than just inviting freelancers to the table. Let us decide actually who are the people and the organisations that we need to support the work that we need to do? That sounded very aggressive. (LAUGHS).

**Rob West** That's great, that's great. At Creative and Cultural Skills, we want the industry to build back fairer. There will be growth, and new opportunities for the future workforce, and many of them will be entering the sector for the first time after an incredibly bumpy start. But we do need to support each other and not fall behind into bad recruitment habits that exploit self-employed workers, especially based on long sector traditions rather than using the full range of work arrangements that are available to us properly. Prema Mehta, Sarah Shead, thank you both very much for joining us on this episode of the Creative and Cultural Skills Podcast!

**Prema Mehta** Thanks Rob, thank you.

**Sarah Shead** Thank you.

**Rob West** And thanks to you for listening - we're particularly keen to hear from you. To join in the discussion, and share your thoughts with us, please get in touch. On Twitter, you can find us @CCSkills. So, until the next episode, bye for now.

**Prema Mehta** Bye!

**Posy Jowett** The Creative and Cultural Skills Podcast was hosted by Rob West, and produced by Jay Sykes. I'm Posy Jowett. To join in our discussion, and share your thoughts with us, please get in touch - on Facebook and Twitter, you can find us @CCSkills.

**Prema Mehta** Cor, that was exciting.

**Sarah Shead** It's exhausting, isn't it?

**Rob West** (LAUGHS).