

Supporting, developing and promoting artists from conflict zones: podcast transcript

INTRO: [00:00:00] You're listening to a podcast from The University of Manchester.

In this podcast series hear The University of Manchester's Dr Nic Gowland interview some of our leading experts about how their research is helping to deliver the UN Sustainable Development Goals for global health, equality and sustainably.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:00:25] Today I'm speaking with Professor James Thompson, Professor of Applied Theatre, and one of the founders of the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute, and former Vice President for Social Responsibility at The University of Manchester. James, thank you so much for speaking with me today.

Professor James Thompson: [00:00:40] Hello. Yes. Delighted to be here.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:00:42] So, as with all of these podcasts, before we get into the detail of your research, I'm trying to understand the kind of path our academics have taken to the roles they're now in.

They're always fascinating in my opinion and I think yours is definitely no exception. You've got an incredible backstory, as to how you became involved with research in arts, in the conflict zones and in war zones.

Professor James Thompson: [00:01:04] Yeah. I mean, there's sort of the official story and then there's, sort of, the personal backstory, I suppose.

I've always studied a combination of social and political affairs and the arts, that was... My first degree at The University of Manchester was in combined studies, where I did politics and theatre, so that's in my DNA to mix political, social, humanitarian concerns and the arts, and that's what I've always been interested in.

And I suppose personally, you know, I come from a family... My father was a Japanese prisoner of war, and so I have always had an interest in his history, and him being a soldier who was caught in Singapore and was taken up the railway, the famous Thai-Burma Railway, during the Second World War.

And, you know, he was in the prison just near the bridge over the River Kwai and so I was brought up with an interest in both conflict, my father's experience, and the idea of prisoners of war. And I think that, sort of subconsciously, fed through to a sort of wider interest in concerns of conflict, war and those sorts of issues.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:02:22] So, looking at your research with artists and conflict zones, what came first then, or is it..., kind of, are they in parallel - the interest in the arts and..., I mean, from a, kind of, academic point of view, or was it the interest in conflict zones?

Professor James Thompson: [00:02:32] I would say definitely the arts. So, I think, first and foremost I'm in the Drama Department at the University. I see myself as a drama theatre researcher, so, absolutely, at my core, I start with the arts.

You know, as a child, as a teenager, I was in the National Youth Theatre. I thought I might become an actor, so I come from that tradition, and it's very much as I developed my academic interests that I became interested in the applications of theatre and the arts to issues of social concern.

So the idea of Applied Theatre, in the title of my Professor of Applied Theatre, is that idea that I'm interested in how theatre can be applied to some of the pressing issues of the day.

First of all, I used to do a lot of work in prisons, working with young people in prisons, women in prisons, adult prisoners and that led to me being invited to go and work in war zones.

But it was the arts first, always.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:03:37] Was there a moment or was there any inspiration as to someone who, kind of said, you know, you could use your interest in arts to help people beyond, I suppose, training and drama? Because it seems a jump to make, that many people don't make, from arts and drama to social change.

Professor James Thompson: [00:03:53] It's a good question. I think I was very much inspired by an academic here at the University. So my tutor in my second and third years was a man called Paul Heritage, so he was a lecturer in the Drama Department at the time. He went on to be a Professor of Theatre at Queen Mary in London and currently lives and works in Brazil.

So he inspired me to that idea that theatre isn't something that just belongs in the black box in the Drama Department, but it should be out there in the world, looking at what the issues are that we are currently struggling with. And it's him who first encouraged me to go and do some work in a prison when I was just out of..., sort of, <an> undergraduate, and we worked together.

In fact, we both set up something called the Theatre in Prisons and Probation Centre, which is still going in the Drama Department today. So it's a charity that was born in 1991- 92. I sort of stepped back from it in the late nineties, but it's a vehicle that both teaches students..., takes students out into criminal justice settings, right now, still today. There's also an independent charity working to look at the whole range of projects to do with arts and criminal justice. So I suppose that's always been part and parcel of what I've been interested in.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:05:13] Yeah, that's fascinating. And when did you find yourself at Manchester University then?

Professor James Thompson: [00:05:15] I'm a bit of a company boy at The University of Manchester. So, I did my undergraduate here, I did one post-graduate, I've had a year away in a fellowship for a different university, and then I ran the TiPP Centre, but it was based in

the Drama Department from 92 to 99. I've pretty much been at the University all my academic and practical life.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:05:42] The University holds on to our, kind of, our best, I suppose.

Professor James Thompson: [00:05:47] I mean, I've always found that a university that has supported the work that I've been interested in and given me the space to develop, what on paper is often seen as unusual aspects of theatre and performance, has actually sort of captivated a lot of our students... A lot of students have always loved this sense of engagement between their art form and the wider world.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:06:09] I mean, I suppose your research kind of embodies the whole point of universities delivering impact. Isn't it? It's all about impact. I suppose that leads us onto to the research we're discussing today.

So, before the kind of research that's covered the last, sort of, five or 10 years, I suppose it is..., this all started with a program called *In Place of War*. Is that right? Can you give us a, kind of, background to where that initial research project came from, or initial project came from?

Professor James Thompson: [00:06:34] Yeah. *In Place of War* started as the name of a research project, and that emerged from a piece of practice. I was invited to Sri Lanka, in the Northern area of Sri Lanka, in the middle of what was a quite intense civil war. And around 2000... when I was asked to go and run some theatre workshops for young people who'd been affected by violence. It was an invitation from UNICEF and I'd been working on violence with violent offenders in prisons and it seemed a sort of reasonable step to go and do some work in that context.

I then did a few more years of work in Sri Lanka and got more and more interested in why artists in that context were continuing to prioritise their work. And that led to an application to what used to be the Arts and Humanities Research Board, later the Arts Humanities Research Council.

And we got a grant to develop the project that became called *In Place of War* in 2004. And that was a project to document, and then support, the work of artists in contemporary war zones... to ask why they were doing this incredible work. It was founded on a very simple question, but there is a real surprise, in many ones eyes, about, you know, why are people continuing to be involved in the arts in what are very, very difficult situations. And we sought to answer that question.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:08:02] And so, on that question, what sort of things did you see there in these wars? I mean, what were those war zones like? And what arts did you see carrying on there?

Professor James Thompson: [00:08:12] The first place I visited was Northern Sri Lanka, in 2000, and through the years, Jaffna. It was an intensely difficult conflict zone at that time, so the first place I went to had shells going overhead at night. I was staying in the UN compound. I was delivering workshops where you could hear the sound of blasts. I would

jump and everyone would laugh at me because they knew that it was about four miles in the other direction, <which> from my point of view is far too close. So they were quite intense.

I mean, in the years after that, some of them..., we did a lot of work in refugee camps, so more in places where people had been displaced from wars. So that was in Sri Lanka, in Rwanda, Eastern Congo, Kosovo, a whole range of different contexts. And the thing that was always surprising, is that there is this strange combination of ordinary, everyday life - people get up, go to work, get married, have birthday parties, go to bed - but then, this sort of extraordinary sense of the uncertain things that are going on around them.

So it could be disturbed suddenly. But a lot of the war zones were relatively, I'm trying to think of the best way to say it, relatively normal in the day-to-day, but in somewhat quite extraordinary... Because you're in a refugee camp or things could be disturbed at any moment, or people were suffering great loss, people have experienced quite terrible things.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:09:55] And so did you see that their kind of passion for arts, for music, for theatre, was just like anyone that we meet in the UK. Is that a global thing you saw, that passion?

Professor James Thompson: [00:10:05] I think it was the surprise of the continued passion, and the surprise of the continued prioritisation. One of my anecdotes from the beginning of the project was I read a book about Sri Lankan theatre. It was about the Southern Sri Lankan theatre, not really about what was happening in the war zones, and it had a small paragraph that said there's no theatre or art happening in the North because of the war. And I went to the North and there was a huge range of theatre and the arts happening in the middle of this quite intense war zone.

And it made me want to go, well, just a second... Why do people assume there isn't?! And then the second question is... why is that?

And I suppose, you know, yes, people just..., people continue to put on plays, people continue to sing, people continue to write poetry..., but often there's something really acutely more important or heightened about the fact that they're doing it, because it's in a sense, it's a sort of statement of... it's almost a statement of resistance to the context they're in.

It's an amazing human bloody mindedness that, you know, they're going to bomb me, but I'm going to still go to a party and sing. You, sort of, mean there's something incredible about the human spirit.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:11:27] Yeah. Did that, kind of, humble you in any way? Obviously you're interested in arts to see these people who would continue the arts when it puts their life at risk, I imagine that's quite powerful for you.

Professor James Thompson: [00:11:37] Powerful! And I suppose the inspiration for me is, and why I continued with this project for so many years, is it always teaches us, teaches or taught me, something about the arts in themselves.

So it taught me about why I was interested in theatre. I think, you know, in some contexts you think 'well it's not that important', and then you go to a place where people are going, no, this is really important because this is something we want to assert - that we're still human, that we can still enjoy ourselves, that we can still do really positive things.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:12:13] Your second question was why they're still doing it? Is that the answer then? Or is there a more complex reason why?

Professor James Thompson: [00:12:18] I mean, I think there was a whole range of reasons and I suppose that was the, sort of, some of the outcomes of the project. We start to realise that there isn't just one rationale for why artists continue to do work. And part of the process and the outcomes of the project was to start to document a range of different types of work that people were doing. That you might have work that was commemorative... So there were quite a lot of arts projects that were about particular incidents, terrible events. So they were about sort of memorialisation, or commemorating things that had happened.

But then there was a whole bunch of other events, projects, that were about forgetting exactly what had happened. It's like, we're no..., we don't want to remember the terrible events... We're going to create a performance piece of music that is just about forgetting all that and enjoying ourselves now.

So we started to document and, sort of, give shape, or categories, to these different types of work that people were doing.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:13:18] So the purpose of that was to, I suppose, look and see what is going on. The following research then... was this to share what's going on and to, kind of, put in frameworks, and then, I suppose, this project then morphed into a charity.

Professor James Thompson: [00:13:34] Yeah, I think the first stage, as you were just saying, was the documentation, the shaping, in terms of looking at the different types of projects that were happening and then starting to give a platform to it. So we brought people together, we shared information from one war zone with people in another. We brought artists from different wars zones together so that they could learn from each other.

Always, the point was that they had the expertise, <but> they didn't have the platform from which to learn from other people or share their expertise.

And this is probably what spurred the idea of creating the arts organization, that still exists to this day, is that those organisations needed ways of networking, they needed a platform and they also needed support in terms of development, training and exercises in how you develop arts organisations, or how you sustain the sort of project that you're doing, in quite difficult situations.

And those are the seeds of *In Place of War*, which now exists as a charity.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:14:38] So, what's the ultimate, kind of, purpose of you doing this? Is it to, kind of, preserve these things, that are not preserved, but you know, is it just to promote them to help them, kind of, grow and do better things? Or there are the objectives here?

Professor James Thompson: [00:14:50] I think absolutely to grow and help them sustain themselves. There is a lot of amazing artwork, which sadly, because they have little support, little infrastructure, that fizzles out after some enthusiasm. So some of the work of *In Place of War* is linking people, networking, in order <that> they then have a platform to sustain their work. And the, sort of, earlier course of what *In Place of War* now is doing is creating educational programs to support younger artists so that they can actually build their work.

So it's about platforming. It's also about then reflecting back and allowing the work to grow, because there is incredible artwork in conflict zones and different places of quite, sort of, difficult circumstances. But it rarely has that chance of just being sustained or developing systematically.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:15:51] So how many arts organisations did you work with then? Or did this project connect with?

Professor James Thompson: [00:15:56] Over the time we worked with many hundreds of arts organisations. In the first phases, one of the first things we did was we had this sort of hypothesis that, you know, I'd done some work in Sri Lanka and I've met tens and tens of arts organisations and the hypothesis was, I bet if there's loads here in Northern Sri Lanka, I bet there's loads in other places. So that led to us to visit, document, contact a network <across> war zones, all over the place, and then we did come in contact with hundreds and hundreds of different arts organisations.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:16:38] That's huge impact isn't it? You must be quite proud to see the number of people and organisations that have been affected by this?

Professor James Thompson: [00:16:45] I'm really proud, and I think it is humbling, and it's really important, that the work started not from a University of Manchester academic who had something that he knew, going to a war zone to teach people who didn't know it, it's done metrically the opposite of that.

It's... I went somewhere and it shocked me out of my own assumptions and ignorance. And the project starts from the perspective of... There is an expertise and there's an incredible rich artistic practice in many, many places, but we don't know about it and therefore we can learn from it.

So I'm proud of that sense that this is, in terms of impact, it's a knowledge that was there, and the project has sort of brought that out, networked it and helped sustain it.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:17:39] Is there an economic side of this as well? You know, I know a lot of what you did was kind of encouraging entrepreneurship around arts... Was that a kind of outcome and factor as well?

Professor James Thompson: [00:17:51] Yes, it was, I think, particularly for *In Place of War* as a charity today, what they've realised is that the economic model in each different setting is very different. So this isn't, you know, you need to set up as a charity and you need to have a business plan and you need to have these sort of accounting procedures.

In each context, in order to sustain and grow an arts organisation, so that the artists are supported and their work can be valued, they need some sort of organisational models.

What *In Place of War* has done is collect really innovative, different organisational and development models, across multiple international settings, and then share these between different organisations.

So they can say... we're working in..., currently in a place in South Africa in a very difficult environment in South Africa and they're learning models about how to set up cultural organisations in that context. But they're drawing on the experience of other places in South Africa, other places in Southern Africa, colleagues we have in Zimbabwe, so there is a sense that *In Place of War* is facilitating an exchange of knowledge about these models and the economics of it are important. People have to eat and, in fact, you know, there is an opportunity when you give platform to artists, they should, and they often do, get paid for their work.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:19:23] Yeah. There was one example I came across, when I was doing the research for this interview, was, is it pronounced 'girl'? GRRRL. So they did a number of festivals, or performances, one of which was at the Freedom Festival in Hull, which is where I'm from, so I may have seen them, I did go to the Freedom Festival in 2016, but maybe you can explain what that kind of..., particular example of how that came together and what happened there?

Professor James Thompson: [00:19:46] Wow. I love this project because I don't think there's many university research projects that say that we got Research Council funding and we created an all-women super group that performed at the closing of the Australia Commonwealth Games. I mean, what fun in terms of where university research can go!

But, there's a really serious... I think this is absolutely Ruth Daniel's work, and Ruth is the current Director of *In Place of War*. I mean... The seed of this project was <that> we started bringing artists from different contexts together to perform at UK festivals.

So it happened at a number of festivals and we would adopt a stage or perform at different stages. What we realised, and this is again Ruth's inspiration, is that it's often more easy, or easier, for men to travel than women. And men in the music industry get profiled more often than women, but there are amazing, of course, women musicians. And therefore we made it a real deliberate policy to work with a whole select group of women musicians. And this programme then brought those women musicians together from multiple different contexts and countries. They rehearsed together and then they performed <at> a whole number of venues. Again, it was this idea of creating a platform for the individual artists and bringing them together as a sort of sense of cultural exchange and also sharing that work with audiences internationally.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:21:30] Yeah, just to, kind of, put a tricky question to you, because obviously, you know, I think this hugely important, I'm sure there are sceptics who think, you know, why are we spending money or time helping groups form? And I think there's a historical story in the UK about why we're spending foreign aid on girl bands and things. I'm

sure that cheapens and simplifies it, but maybe to those sceptics, you could just maybe get across, you know, why this is important to these places and to these people.

Professor James Thompson: [00:21:55] I think the first thing to say is this work is happening already without any money. Many of the contexts we went to, we were not either funding arts projects or seeing arts projects that were externally funded.

You'd arrive in a place and people say... 'Oh, there's a kid's theatre group down the road. They've got a band here. We've got a poetry group here...' And none of this work is funded by external..., by DFID or British... No, people are creating this work already.

So, the first thing is... This isn't us bringing art to these poor people who have no art. That's not the model. And so that's the first thing. And, I think the second thing is that, if you are asking about what human need is, you know, as you were suggesting, is that people go, well., in this circumstance, it's probably latrines, houses, food... And art really must be way down the agenda in terms of what is the priority.

The paradoxical thing we kept finding was that people in those situations don't articulate their needs in quite that way. One very small example is that when I was working in, again, Sri Lanka and there was a recently-formed refugee camp, and the international people who were helping support the the creation of that camp started talking to predominately the women and saying it's so right, first of all we need to dig the latrines, we need to build your houses and the women were going 'No', 'The first thing we want you to do is build a playground for our kids to go and do some play. When our kids are happy in that circumstance, we'll then think about putting down the latrines'.

So they saw the latrines as secondary to the welfare of their children and the welfare of their children was through a sort of creative play activity. So where we mistake the way that people make their decisions about what is their immediate need. I'm not saying of course people <don't> need, food, clothing, safety..., I mean, in war zones, you need to feel safe. But, one of the ways of feeling safe is also being with your friends and singing, in a circumstance, because you suddenly think, okay things are okay. And if you're living with a sense of fear, and that is the overriding concern that you have, the arts are one of the sure-fire ways to overcome fear.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:24:37] Yeah. That's very powerful. I mean, I suppose it's not that it's not that difficult to think, is it, when you think of us? You know, separated by the world and by war zones the idea of looking after your children first and making them happy, it's not too much of a different idea is it then, to what you and I would have?

Professor James Thompson: [00:24:54] I think, absolutely true. I think I reflect..., recently obviously in light of the COVID situation we're all in, is what have people's priorities been during COVID and yeah, we're all worried about the welfare of our friends, family, elderly relatives. But some of the ways, you know, and the innovative ways that people have been keeping in touch, people have been keeping contact and maintaining their mental wellbeing through the arts.

And that might be singing songs on the doorsteps or, you know, and clapping for carers. But these are the arts. One of the first things we all saw from Italy, when Italy was in lockdown, was people standing on their balconies and singing. And so, that was number one. It wasn't necessarily..., it probably was epidemiological studies were happening as well..., but people were also singing on their balconies.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:25:52] Yeah, no, that's a good example. It shows it's not too far away is it? So where is *In Place of War* now? What sort of activities are going on with, with what is now a charity?

Professor James Thompson: [00:26:01] So *In Place of War* is going from strength-to-strength. It has *In Place of War UK*. It's set up *In Place of War* in the US, it has major music industry supporters, major figures in the music industry are starting to support the work.

One small example is, the keyboard manufacturer Roland is now giving equipment from their charitable arm to the partners that we have *In Place of War*. So keyboards, mixing desks and so forth.

But still, some of the principles of the work are exactly the same. There's platforming artists, so that they can actually reach beyond the situation they're in. There is the whole educational side of the work. So, there is this creative entrepreneurial educational program which is to support new creative individuals in the projects they seek and develop. And then there's the networking - developing, sort of, strong networks of creative organisations so that they can share the knowledge between them. And it now employs four or five people pretty regularly. It has a board, I'm on the board, it has quite a major turnover and it's going from strength-to-strength.

COVID obviously changed it radically because we couldn't travel. That's fairly obvious. One of the remarkable things they did during COVID was that they looked at their network of support organisations, they immediately created a sort of COVID response network, they raised a huge amount of money, in the tens and tens of thousands, and they distributed that money to those organisations who in themselves became humanitarian aid organisations. So many of them turned their work over to giving out food, a whole range of different services. So in a sense *In Place of War* became COVID response during that particular period.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:28:10] And I suppose the sad reality is that *In Place of War*, is never done, it goes on and on as long as there are, kind of, conflict zones, I guess, and people performing. Is that right?

Professor James Thompson: [00:28:19] Yeah. I think what's interesting is that you can place a broad spread, in terms of the types of environments that it works in. It works a lot in Brazil, for example, which many people would say isn't a war zone, but if you look at the deaths from armed violence in Brazil it's pretty comparable to most international war zones. So there's a whole range of contexts that *In Place of War* is now working in, where conflict is rife and sadly, as you were saying, this continues.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:28:52] Yeah. And from a personal point of view, what is next for you in terms of research ambitions or things you'd like to work on in future?

Professor James Thompson: [00:29:00] Great question. I've obviously handed *In Place of War* on, largely, to the team that are running it now, and very happy to have done so. My current work is actually slightly flipped on its head. I realised I'd been working on, you know, prisons, war zones and all these, sort of, in a sense negative circumstances, for many years. And I'm now working on projects on care... On how people look out for each other and look after each other.

So it's..., in a sense the positive spin on the war zone work is that I'm now interested in how people use the arts, how you use craft, use a whole range of personal relations, to ensure the welfare of each other. So it's a new project called *On the Art of Care*, basically.

I've started doing that for now a couple of years, and I'm hoping that that will lead to maybe another organisation down the line one day, which is focused on care. And it's become very, very pertinent and relevant in the current crisis in care, which we're facing because of the pandemic.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:30:14] And do you think that has the potential to, kind of, lead to impact again, socially?

Professor James Thompson: [00:30:18] I really hope so. I've actually, just this week, we pressed the submit button on a large AHRC research grant application, which I've done in partnership with Professor John Keady, who's a Professor of Mental Health, specialising in dementia here at the University, and other colleagues.

So this is about the art, what we're calling 'care aesthetics', the idea that care has a certain craft and art form that needs to be developed and celebrated. And so, yeah, maybe that will become..., that will probably be my next impact project.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:30:57] Yeah. That was brilliant. I think we've reached the end of the interview there.

So that for me was a really fascinating topic. My background is biology, so to hear about the, kind of, the way theatre is applied for social change and in conflict zones, I found fascinating discussing it with you, but also researching it as well. I think it has been fascinating, and also to hear some of your background as well, where this came from, I think brings to life the kind of drive as an inspirational academic.

Professor James Thompson: [00:31:20] Great. Thanks Nic.

Dr Nic Gowland: [00:31:22] Yeah. So thanks very much for your time. Congratulations on your work as well, all the best for the future James.

Professor James Thompson: [00:31:27] Thanks, Nic. That's wonderful. Good to speak to you.

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