

Charlotte Maxwell - Interview

Season Butler

Hello, and welcome. I'm very pleased to be joined by Charlotte Maxwell, who's going to be telling us a bit about her journey as part of radical structures, which is a project looking at the ways in which the creative sector in the UK can change to better support artists, as people, as workers, and the way that we can change our sector to be a more beneficial part of a thriving society in general.

So Charlotte, thank you so much for joining us. And just by way of an introduction to our listeners, could you tell us a little bit about your practice, and maybe about where it started and where you are with it now?

Charlotte Maxwell

So my practice has taken a bit of an odd route over the years. I started out in spoken word when I was about 16, but at the time, I had no plans to be an artist or be in the industry beyond doing the odd open mic night because I was getting ready to go and train to be a speech and language therapist. I did that training, I did it up in Newcastle, and whilst I was training continued on the spoken word circuit, but alongside that I'd started dabbling with writing monologues and plays, and I'd always been into Visual Art.

Got to the end of my speech and language therapy training, decided it wasn't for me, and at some point decided that I would train as a psychologist in the future, moved back to Manchester, had two job offers: one was working for an arts organisation, one was working for a big company and I was like, "Let me take that arts job." And over the course of the last six years, predominantly, I've worked in literature and theatre. So in theatre, I've been a playwright, a director, and an actor, and I sell little prints of my visual art, and spoken word, not so much anymore but I do edit bits of poetry here and there.

Season Butler

And at the moment, you are kind of finishing up - just finished - with your training as a clinical psychologist?

Charlotte Maxwell

So I'm just about to start in September. So I'm kind of wrapping up my current life to move to London and start afresh.

Season Butler

Ah. So there does seem to be a huge amount of variety and diversity in your endeavours over the years. But there's also this thread that runs through from an early intention to train in speech and language therapy, all the way into a field that's very much about expressing yourself through speech and language with the intention of bringing about healing through that.

Charlotte Maxwell

Yeah, definitely. I think for me, like, in the beginning, I never planned to be in the arts industry. I feel like I fell in and then just ended up staying in there unexpectedly. But I do feel like for me, art's a huge part of healing, particularly over the years I struggled a lot with my mental health in terms of PTSD, and artistic practice has helped with that in a sense, but the older I've got, the more I've come to a place where I'm like, it's better for me to do my artistic practice for me, and not in a public facing capacity. Because I feel like the way the industry is currently, it's actually become more harmful to my mental health to be part of it, whereas practising on my own gives me the benefits that I wanted in the first place.

Season Butler

I'm so glad you brought that up, because there seems to be a kind of standard convention, or a conventional thinking, that says that if you are making work that's public facing, and that's bringing in an income, then that's successful. And if you are making work in some other way, then that's somehow a failure, or you've given up. And I think that that's a really limiting way of thinking about the way that artistic practice can serve us as people in our lives, and how it can serve our communities and our ability to like, stay alive and be human.

Charlotte Maxwell

Absolutely. And I think there's really something about that perception of failure, if you like, disappear for a little while. So I've kind of gone in and out of the industry briefly at points for all sorts of different reasons. Even when I was doing my Masters, I kind of went off the grid a little bit. And I remember sort of reemerging from that, and people being like, oh, but you're not flavour of the month anymore. And it's almost like, whilst I want my work to be available to people in the sense that I feel that accessing art can have lots of different benefits and if someone comes into contact with my art and it benefits them in some way, I've done a good job as far as I'm concerned, there's a part of me that's like, I'm sort of in a place where I need to produce art that's not constantly for consumption and criticism. So doing visual art, which is what I've moved more towards now feels like a better place for me, because whilst I'm producing it, nobody else is involved in that process. It's only if I decide to put it out into the world for someone to buy, I'll put it up somewhere so people can look at it but other than that, it's just a process for me to experience.

I feel like in theatre in particular, there's a constant pressure to really be engaged in what's going on and network and mingle with people and constant interaction. And whilst there's some benefits to that, it got to a point for me, especially when I was really in theatre all the time, doing all kinds of things, I just constantly felt overwhelmed, and there was nothing about making theatre anymore that felt enjoyable. It got to a place where I was like, "This feels worse than nine to fives that I've had before." And it shouldn't do, I'm creating, there should feel some enjoyment out of it. But it got to a point I was like, "I don't know who I'm making this for, and I don't know why I'm going through this process, because it's not enjoyable for me." My lack of enjoyment and wanting to get away from it is showing in the work. So it's not a benefit to other people really either.

Season Butler

Yeah, I really hear that. And it's making me think about how much I welcome a change in the discourse around particularly performing and particularly the implications of performing for people of colour, women of colour, QTPOCs and so forth. I'm encouraged by the way that the discourse is starting to recognise the demands on people of colour performing, to relive their trauma and present it for the consumption of others. And so this like, constant, public reliving of sort of racialized and gendered trauma is not just being seen in the context of agency, expression, sort of metabolising and coming to terms with things, but also in terms of the way that it can feel exploitative and extractive, and there's a cost to it that we're beginning to recognise.

Charlotte Maxwell

I think there's definitely a cost and when you think about repackaging trauma, I think it's very much that there's something around packaging trauma in a way that people want to consume it. So I had a play that I wrote - I had a breakdown about six, seven years ago - and there was a play that I wrote in the space of a week, and I decided to just submit it to a prize, just for the sake of it, came in the top hundred entries, had loads of people wanting to read it, and they were all like, "Oh, this is amazing. But we can't stage this like this, because how's the audience going to manage it?" And then the suggestions of how to rewrite it, I was like, this is not my play. It's all fair enough if you don't think it's for your audience, that's fine, but you literally want me to rewrite something that's basically your idea with my writing style. That's not what I've given you. If you don't like my work, that's fine. When I've had conversations about this before people have gone "Oh, you know, do you think you can't take edits?" It's not that in the slightest, I can take edits, I just refuse to basically change my entire work to fit somebody else's ideology of what they think writing about trauma should look like, particularly when the person telling me has never experienced any form of trauma themselves. It's almost a very artificial, *this is what I think trauma should look like*.

The play in question, isn't even my own trauma that's exhibited in it, it's a different type of trauma in a related area, but I guess that's brought things into question over the years as well, because whenever people offer me work, they always say they really like the style of my writing but they want the content to be different. And they want the content to be different to the point that they basically want me to write their idea for them and that's not what I'm here to do. I would rather never have any of my work staged and be true to my own writing, than perform for other people what they want me to produce. For me, that's not - it creates a consumerism situation in art and whilst I understand that people are consuming art, I'm not here to produce something off a conveyor belt. My work is part of me, and so it needs to feel true and authentic and if it doesn't, I'm not willing to produce it. I've had people say over the years that I've sabotaged myself by doing this, and I've lost out on opportunities, and I'm like, but I don't want an opportunity that requires me to reduce my own integrity, I would rather just go without and do something else. Which I think in this industry, can go either way in terms of how that works out for you but in terms of the decision that I've made, I think I made the right one, because there's opportunities that I could have taken and didn't, and I just think if I would have taken them it probably would have made my mental health even worse.

Season Butler

Yeah, absolutely. It can be such a false economy. And it's great that more and more of us are standing up to the expectation of performing the model victim, the model survivor, performing resilience, and all of that. So I think these are challenges that need to be mounted and it's great when we say no.

You mentioned the flavour of the month phenomenon and I think that there can be a lot of fun to be had. I mean, it's a sort of giddy time when you feel like you're the flavour of the month. And so I was wondering if you could talk to us at all about some of these early high points or some early breakthrough moments, from your career, maybe from the spoken word days?

Charlotte Maxwell

Spoken word was an interesting one, I think particularly because in the beginning, like I was like, I write page poems, I want to write a book, I don't want to be on a stage, I have zero interest in being in front of people. And I think it was just over time being coaxed into it gradually. I think the first person that coached me, like, I had a great relationship with her and she really changed my perception of what it meant to be on the stage and what it meant to stand there as me and say what I wanted to say. And then I ended up joining a local poetry group, who perform here, there, and everywhere. And it was nice to meet other people my own age doing poetry at the time but I always felt like the way that I was writing didn't have the kind of sound and vibe that they had as a collective and so it kind of made me question my own work because when I'd kind of been by myself, I didn't have any doubts in my work, and I also didn't really care what anybody else thought about it. But being surrounded by other people all the time, doing poetry made me more conscious of, "Oh, I'm in this group, but I don't feel like my work quite fits here." But then because of the association, I feel that other people expect me to have a certain vibe when I perform, which I don't have. And like, I did performances in different places. So I've done performances in theatres, art galleries, did a performance at Parklife once, and this was when I was like, 16 to 19.

And then, that was when my mental health started going downhill in terms of PTSD. And so I spent a lot of time writing and would do the odd performance but, yeah, I would get very strange reactions to performances, like, I remember one that I did at a poetry slam and the poem itself was exploring kind of experience of sexual violence, but it was kind of written in a way that it wasn't obvious until the end. And then I went to the bar after I'd got off the stage. And a man walked up to me and decided to shout in my face about why he felt I was attacking men and I shouldn't be allowed on a stage to perform this, and this, that and the other. And at the time, I was about 21 and other people that observed this happening just stood there. And then I was like, "This is what your life is, when you've lived through something that other people around you haven't. And people decide to come over and act some sort of way. And other people are complacent by just standing back and watching." And so from that point, I really stepped back from the spoken word circuit.

I think that was the turning point for me, because I'd already been considering it, and that was like the final nail in the coffin. And from that point, I was like, if I write poetry, it's gonna go in a book, which is exactly what I said I wanted to do at 14, and everything that's happened up until now has kind of gone off track a bit. But ultimately, for me, being in environments where people think that's acceptable, and

other people cosign it by just standing there, and given how I felt at the time, I was like, I'm not doing this to myself, it's harmful at this point to continue engaging. And so I stepped away, and instead went into running poetry workshops, and just doing page poetry in terms of that part of my life.

Season Butler

I'm so sorry that happened to you. And I'm really glad that you made the choice to put your health first, rather than adhering to a heroic view of a sense of duty to go ahead and do this thing that does make us vulnerable to this sort of attention. I just think it's really, really valid for us to take the decision not to be in that position, and to protect ourselves first. So I can also relate to having periods of time when it just wasn't going to be conducive to my survival to be in front of people. So it's an interesting lesson to learn and to be able to really get into the true economy of what's going to be sustainable for you as a person going forward. And not just the economy of sacrifice that comes with being an artist.

Charlotte Maxwell

I think sacrifice is like something where I feel like a lot of people put the entirety of themselves into their art and in a sense, I think when I produce things I do put a lot of myself in. But I think I've got to a place where I'm like, I don't owe that to anybody. Nobody is automatically granted access to my work or to me, or to why I've created work the way that I have. And I feel like there is a lot of pressure to keep producing, to keep being vulnerable, to keep giving everything and I'm like, why do I need to give everything? I don't need to do that; this is a ridiculous expectation. No one should have to be that exposed in an industry where, whilst there's parts of the industry and elements where it's very supportive, there are parts that are the complete opposite to that, and no one should have to be exposed if they don't want to be. I don't even think it's about thinking through like where you're at and is this safe for you right now. That's obviously an aspect but it's like, do you actually want to do this? And if you don't, and it's more that you feel like you have to then for me, that's every reason to just step back and step out.

Season Butler

Absolutely. Keeping an eye on consent and agency as we're doing our work can feel like a revelation to some of us, especially as so many areas of the art world are about withstanding mistreatment of being overworked, having your body acted on in ways that you might not choose. So I'd love to see a good dose of enthusiastic consent-mindedness come in and I think that artistic practice that has consent at its foundation would be really revolutionary, and would be a really big change for a lot of people.

Season Butler

Thinking about moments where you felt like, maybe you were on a roll with your practice, and then really needed to stop, do you know what you might have needed in those moments in order to continue practicing? Not, of course, to sort of hyper valorise that straight-line trajectory, or that breaks aren't ever simply necessary, but sometimes there are moments when something knocks you, and so I'm wanting to think about what you might have needed or what could have been there but wasn't, that would have allowed you to continue doing what you were doing.

Charlotte Maxwell

For me, it's always the same thing. And it doesn't matter what the situation is: it's disability access. Disability access in the whole of the arts industry is actually a joke. It's completely ridiculous. And I feel like it doesn't even matter what environment you're in, what kind of companies you're working with, what they specialise in: access is a mess. I feel like people look at access as "Oh, we'll just put a ramp on the building and everybody sorted." And ultimately, that's where the problem is. People don't look at individuals and think, "How do I make this space accessible, so that everybody is able to work here, engage here and be part of this?"

I think I've spent years and years in every arts position that I've been in, everyone I've ever worked with, going on and on about chronic fatigue syndrome. And the response a lot of the time is, particularly when I've been in situations involving acting, "Well, everybody's tired, but we all need to keep going." Everybody's tired, is probably me on a very good day of the week. Once I'm fatigued, sometimes I cannot actually move. And having to constantly repeat this being told I need to keep going no matter what - I did some drama training with a very well-known company and the way I was treated there is probably the most ableist experience I've ever had in the arts sector, in terms of them basically saying to me that if I'm not going to do what everybody else is doing, ie. work constantly with two breaks all day, then maybe I need to go home, because clearly I'm not here for the right reasons. I'm not going to injure my body, in order to be considered to be as committed as everybody else. If spaces were accessible, it wouldn't even be a conversation. And I feel that over time I've gone on about this so much that I really got to a place where I was like, if I'm in this industry, I'm happy to be in it as an arts worker, helping other people develop their work, doing stuff in the community, or running workshops, but as a practising artist, I'm really not interested in this level of ableist violence, and that's before you even add on the racism, the mental health stigma, and just general things around class, accent, everything else. It just got to a point where I was like, I'm too old for this and **feeling too old for something in your mid 20s is very telling about how much of a drain it's been being part of that industry.**

Season Butler

Absolutely. I've noticed in the arts recently, there's been a popularisation of the access rider, and even some people who feel like we should just universalize access riders that there isn't this kind of clear medical model distinction between "You are disabled, and therefore have access needs," and "You are able bodied, and therefore you don't," but rather to get us all to think about what our access needs are, and get us to articulate them and to have that be a standard part of artists' communication with organisations and institutions. Do you have a feeling about the access rider?

Charlotte Maxwell

I feel like it's important to everyone to for everyone to communicate what their needs are, but there's a part of me that wonders, if that's a conversation that's normalised for everybody, will the industry continue to just ignore disability access needs that mean that someone's even not going to be able to take part at all, or it's actually going to cause somebody harm by taking part because the industry won't even get basic things right at this point. So whilst I think it's important to have a very global conversation about everybody's access, I do wonder if by doing that, we're still going to reinforce people with certain disabilities not getting access, because either their disability is misunderstood, their

disability is invisible, or people just generally having stigma and stereotypes around that disability, and they're therefore not providing the support for them.

Season Butler

Yeah, I agree that there's such potential for this to really go wrong and for sort of status quo malpractice to be bolstered by moves like this. And I find myself thinking a little bit about the relationship between institutions and audiences, as the story that you told a little earlier about that encounter with an audience member continues to echo. It seems abundantly clear that culture shifts have to include audience development and I'm just finding myself wondering if you have any thoughts about that? What are our responsibilities as a community to make those spaces less conducive to the kind of bystander violence that you experienced?

Charlotte Maxwell

I think there's a big issue with audience development, because for one, I'm like, who is doing it? And what is their perception of who their audience is? And then how does that impact who comes into the space. Like, theatre spaces on the most part, are still incredibly white.

It's a bit like once I went to - I can't remember which ballet I went to - but I went to a ballet at The Lowry. And a woman walked up to me and she said to me, "It's so nice to see another person of colour who's going to be in the audience." And usually I assume there won't be many people of colour there, but that day, I decided to actually look around before the show started, actively. And between me, her, and one other person, there was pretty much nobody in there. So in terms of thinking about audience development, I'm very much like, who's doing it? And also, who's coming in but also what's on the stage? Are there things on stage that a wide variety of people want to see? When people come to the theatre are they gonna see people that look like them or people with their experiences on the stage? Because if that's disjointed, then it's thinking about what is people's reasoning for coming in to see something?

I think there's a massive thing around the cost of accessing art and as much as lots of different organisations are operating these schemes have reduced ticket prices, community tickets, etc, etc, I feel like there's still that barrier because ultimately, access to arts isn't starting early enough. Like I think about when I was growing up, like I grew up on an estate and from a working class background, and the first time I ever went into a theatre was when I was about 15 and that was for - I'd been selected from an art project I'd done at school to like help make a prop for a show that was going to be at the Royal Exchange. So I was very excited, but I've never been to a theatre before and then when I walked in there, I felt like I didn't know what to do, I felt really out of place. It felt very peculiar because those spaces were never accessible to me when I was younger. And I feel like unless people then fall into the arts, in their teenage years, or whilst they're a young person, when a lot of stuff can be more freely accessible, then after that things become even less accessible.

It's almost that - when people talk about it online: in the arts, you turn 25, and then all the free stuff disappears. And all the, you know, "come be involved in this, come join this collective, come be part of this young company," disintegrates. And I think that's something that's not taken into consideration

enough when we think about who's in the theatre, and who's not because - or even other areas - because if we're engaging people from 16 to 25, and then we're removing a lot of those things that they've had access to, then you're assuming that they can afford to maintain continuing to engage at the level they have before. And I think that's why a lot of people end up in the situation where they've got to have a day job and be an artist, to make ends meet, when being an artist should be viable as a day job, for want of a better way of putting it, and the way the industry is currently set up there's just not enough support for that to happen. And especially looking at what's happened with COVID, with freelance artists being left behind, it's very clear that the support's just not there for this to be sustainable for people. And I do wonder, because I think people choose to leave a bit like I have, but I do wonder how many people just burn out and they don't leave as a, "I want to leave," they leave because they can't carry on.

Season Butler

Yeah, it breaks people. There's so much hidden support that undergirds the people who are really able to maintain a career. And there's so much hidden labour happening under the surface with the folks who somehow managed to keep going largely on their own steam.

What advice would you have given to yourself early in your career? Or what advice would you give to a 16-year-old in a similar position, knowing what you know about the way that the industry works?

Charlotte Maxwell

I think that's an interesting question. In a sense, it makes me laugh because I feel like I know exactly what I would have told myself. I would have told myself to just do what I have already said I want to do, not buy into these different suggestions of "Oh, why don't you try this? Oh, why don't you have a go with this?" I wanted to just write poetry and produce a book and as much as I've had some amazing experiences over the years, had I just made a decision to do what I planned to do, other things would have happened. But it would have meant that I didn't end up in a lot of situations I've ended up in where I've been made to feel so uncomfortable and devalued. The impact it's had on me and even my perception of my own work, there was a couple of years where I genuinely thought that my work was of such poor quality, nobody should see it. And I think that was definitely a result of being surrounded by people that wanted me to produce work in a way that just isn't the way that I work.

I would have told myself, You don't have to say yes to everything. You can say yes to one thing and not take anything else and that's perfectly fine. Like, making art is a passion for me and so making sure that that passion doesn't die out would have meant not agreeing to do things for the sake of becoming more visible and it opening up other opportunities. I think saying yes is actually like the worst decision I made whilst being in the arts. I should have learned to say no, which is often the opposite of advice that people give, but I should have said no, on many occasions. And I think for a young person - I mean, I used to teach Arts Award in sixth forms, and there'd be lots of young people that want to be writers and I feel like the advice that I offered differs depending on the person. Like, I like to get to know young people and see what they want to do, what their driving force is, like what they aspire for, what excites them, and then advise them based on what they've shared, but remind them that whatever their core driver is to keep hold of that throughout their journey. It may change and develop and become different

things, but always holding on to, why am I here? Why am I doing this? What does it mean for me? Am I feeling fulfilled? Am I feeling content? Do I feel happy with what I've chosen to do? And if you don't feel happy, and if it's got to a point where it makes you feel bad about yourself, then reassessing 1) Is this for me? If the answer is yes, because of your core driver, then thinking about how could the environment be different? So, could I work with different people? Could I approach this in a different way? Because I think it's reminding people that they've got a choice, and they don't just need to do things because it looks like what everybody else is doing. And because people say to them, this is a great opportunity.

Season Butler

I so agree with what you're saying. And I think that we have to diversify success, and that external validation has to get a little bit destabilised here in favour of happiness and health. So I'm so glad that you actually bring that into the conversation, because it's so seldom part of it.

Charlotte Maxwell

I think it's so important to bring that into the conversation. I think there's so much pressure to do well and to make something of yourself. I remember working with a young person a year or two ago and they said to me, they need to have made it by the time they're 25. And I said, "Okay, why 25? And what will that look like for you if you've made it?" And they were like, "Well, after 25 everything disappears," which I think is generally something that gets peddled on social media that you need to get all your ducks in a row by your mid 20s. But I feel like in arts, there is something about doing all the stuff as a young person, then you hit 25 or 27, depending on who you're working with, and then you need to have just made it, there's your career opportunities back-to-back. And I think I did fall into the trap of trying to do as much as possible before 25. And I did do a lot in that time, most of it I should not have done and when I think back now and I look through some of the stuff I did, it really didn't make me happy. Some of it made me feel terrible. It made me hate getting out of bed in the morning, the day would end and I would come home and go to sleep. That was all it was, it was basically just going through the motions.

And the stuff that I did that I loved, I think back on it very, very fondly. Especially the stuff I did probably around age 25, I started doing things that meant more to me, like I was in a show where they wanted a community cast. And it was with Hydrocracker and Blast Theory. And that show was probably one of the biggest highlights of the entire time I've been in the arts because I loved everyone I got to work with. It meant that I got to do improv comedy, which is probably my strong point. I had a great time every night. I wore an outfit that I wouldn't be seen dead in normally, but there was something liberating about being that character in that outfit. And everybody there was just so warm and genuine and supportive. It wasn't competitive, it was very much like we're all here to have a good time and make sure our audience have a great time too. And I think that's so, so important. And after I did that, I think over things I did afterwards that didn't feel great, they almost felt worse because I had such a big contrast of how it feels when it is going amazing. And not everything can be amazing but it's thinking through, like, what are those bad experiences? How many of them are you having? And ultimately, are you in arts for the reason that you wanted to be? Are you happy with your choice? If you could do something else tomorrow, would you take it?

And I think in my case, I always had plans to do something else like I always knew that I wanted to - well from doing speech and language therapy, I knew I wanted to go into psychology. And so I was ticking along through arts knowing at some point I will go and do this. And it kind of got to a point where I was like, practising as an artist is something that I want to do privately. Community arts work and running workshops and stuff, I'd be quite happy to continue with, because that's probably the thing that I really enjoy doing, especially working with people who've just started writing and they've just written their first poem, or they started writing a book. I love working in that way. But moving away from here's my work, here's me vulnerable and exposed, you will do whatever you want to do with it and then continuously going through that process for me got to a point where it wasn't working. And also there was the thing of, it got to the point with clinical psychology where I felt, "You know what I'm ready to train now." So now is the time to separate myself from some of this, and work out going into that route, but also thinking of what role is art going to play in my life, once I am training and once I'm qualified.

Season Butler

I've got to say that I find it really appealing. I find the idea of going to see a psychologist who has a real talent for improv comedy, and who understands trauma in the way that really only somebody who's been on stage and has had the implications of reliving and being witnessed in a very specific way. Yeah, I would definitely go and see that psychologist. And I would love it if you could talk to us a bit about what the move into psychology means for you, and how you anticipate your practice going forward.

Charlotte Maxwell

I'm very excited. There's a bit of me that keeps thinking like, how am I going to combine arts and clinical psychology together? Because for me, art is such a core part of who I am, I don't ever think it's going to go anywhere, I just think it evolves and looks very different. I think there's lots of areas that I'm keen to explore. So I'm really interested from a research perspective, in using arts-based methods rather than just using more standard interview techniques, and like, how can art be introduced as part of that research process, which is something I'm really keen to explore. I'm really excited as well - I'm going onto a course where community psychology is thought about, and thinking about how I can be a clinical psychologist in different contexts and work in a range of different ways. And I think to myself, there was a part of me before I got onto training, that was a little bit like, "Could I down the line be qualified for clinical psychologist and then do an art psychotherapy course, and do a little bit of both?" So that thought's not completely disintegrated. I've just put it on a shelf for a bit, I'm like let me do this first and I'll think about that after.

But I think I'm very keen to think about how I can work with my community, once I'm qualified in a way that makes psychology feel more accessible, and can bring people's creative interests into the equation in terms of how they explore their lived experiences, and really how they make sense of them. I think, as much as talking is incredible, sometimes you can't express what's happened or what you've gone through speech and sometimes over means can be far more helpful in terms of being able to get something out. I'm a very big advocate of drawing, if you can't verbalise something, or if you can't write something down, or using other means of expressing yourself. So I think for me, it's a point of excitement in terms of clinical practice, because I don't know what is going to look like.

In terms of me as an artist, I think I'm going to continue with visual art, but very much just for myself. The most it will probably be in terms of showing it to over people as might post it on Instagram and be like, "Oh, look I did this today." But I feel like that's gonna be it for a little bit, because I think I have to re-find my love for it. I don't think it's entirely extinguished. But I think probably the last three years or so I've started to really question being in the arts in ministry and being accessible to everybody else in that way. I feel like theatre, the door's not entirely shut but I've definitely put it on the jar and at the moment, I can't really see a way that I want to work in that area right now. And spoken word, I doubt it will ever happen again. I think you can never say never. But I cannot envisage a situation where I will get on a stage and do some spoken word at this point in my life.

Season Butler

Charlotte, do you consider yourself political?

Charlotte Maxwell

I would say so yeah. I think it's always an interesting question. I have a friend who's a politics lecturer and whenever we have conversations about politics, it's always interesting, but I think I am political, very much so. I think over time, politics has shifted around for me. So I used to be very, very actively engaged in the Labour Party. I was brought up in a family that was very much *you vote Labour until you die and that's the end of that*. And the way Labour's gone recently, I'm just like, I don't know what on earth is going on here, it's just a bit of a mess. But never in my life would I support a Tory government.

But then on another level, I'm very much like, society needs to move and shift in terms of social justice, like, the place that we are at, like, it's not okay that we're here at this point in time, like changes are happening, but there's not enough change happening. Feels like, especially in arts there's suddenly this "Oh, let's be anti-racist," but then it's like, are you being anti racist in practice? Or are you just saying that you're not racist? Because they're not the same thing. And that doesn't work.

I think there's still not enough shift in terms of disability access anywhere, to be honest with you. And I think there's so many ableist systems set up that continue to harm people. And I'm always increasingly angry at how many disabled people have died on the Tory watch, and how people still don't take that into consideration when they go out and vote Tory.

I think there's still so many issues around just people being accepted for who they are, and places being inclusive, and I think there's not enough consideration about intersectionality. I think I bang on about it all the time. But I think it needs to be banged-on about because trying to separate my experience of being Black, and being Jewish, and being disabled, and being working class, and being a cis woman, and so on - for me, those things aren't things that I can put into isolation, and just go let's look at this on its own because there's always an interaction with something else. So in arts, whilst a lot of the time the problem is primarily disability access, the racism is still ticking along, the classism is still ticking along, the sexism is still ticking along, these things are all still going on. It's just which one is in operation in an obvious sense, and how are they interacting with each other to make the situation much worse.

So, I guess I am quite political. I get myself into a lot of debates and discussions, but also I think there's always more to be learned, like, I'm always like, I need to read more, I need to listen more, I need to talk to more people, particularly people that have identities that are marginalised that I don't have, because I'm like - and I say it all the time and like it's been said before - none of us are free until we're all free. So you need to be about liberating everybody. If you're really about liberation, if you're only interested in liberating yourself, then I think sometimes that is part of the problem. Because ultimately, if other people are still oppressed, then what have you created for yourself by freeing yourself up? I think it's important for us to feel free individually but I think as a collective, we need to be trying to free everyone.

Season Butler

Yeah, hard agree. And I think that you just supplied one of the most elegant definitions of intersectionality that I've ever heard, and I'm a fan of the framework myself. So yeah, thank you for that. Do you feel like you're involved in subcultures or countercultures at all?

Charlotte Maxwell

That's a good question. Just trying to think.

Season Butler

And it is, of course, completely valid if the answer is just no, not really, or - but I mean, yes, please do think.

Charlotte Maxwell

I don't really - I'd say I don't feel that I am but I feel like the answer is I'm not sure. I think over the years like I've shifted in and out of lots of different areas and that's been to do with a lot of the time what's been going on in my life and where I'm at and how that shapes how I interact with things. But I guess as well, like, I also look at the experiences of people around me, and how sometimes my interactions with them put me on the peripheries of something. But I guess the answer is, I'm not sure, I would have to sit and think about that for a lot longer than we probably have today.

Season Butler

Cool, cool cool, no biggie. You've given us a lot of really thoughtful, and, in my opinion, correct critiques of the arts sector in the UK, and I'm wondering, do you think that the sector can change?

Charlotte Maxwell

I think it can change, I think there's a question about, does it actually want to change? I think there's a lot of noise about being more inclusive and being more accessible and this, that, and the other, but then there's a part of me that's like, in practice, what has changed? If we think about things from a perspective of experiences of people of colour, and racism, people are talking about things happening in the arts industry now that have been happening since the 70s and they're still going on. So how far have we actually come?

Whilst things are starting to change, and plenty of people have done that work to get us to where we are and absolute props to them for persevering through the climate, but we're still in a place where ultimately, institutions on the most part are still run by the same group of people. It's still white, middle class men who aren't disabled, and based on that, if you're running things, and it's your artistic vision, if you're an artistic director, unless those leadership positions shift to have other people in those spaces, then that's just going to continue to replicate itself. **People wonder why sometimes things don't shift that much, but if the leadership is still the same vision, then we're not really ever going to get anywhere.**

And I think, as well there's a problem of token representation in the arts, because you'll have somewhere go, you know, "Oh, look, we've got a person of colour now in this position. Oh, look, we've got a disabled person in this position." But then they don't have the power to do anything. They're still disempowered within that space, even though they're given a fancy title, and so very little change happens for everybody else, and I think there's so many structural issues and systemic issues around what goes on.

And I think as well, like, a lot of the arts is funded on public money and so I feel like as part of that public money, there should be a prerequisite that organisations need to do a particular level of engagement and need to be more inclusive, and not just kind of random figures of, "Oh, look, we've done this." There needs to be active engagement and if that's not there, it's really thinking about where is funding going? Because currently, I feel like funding is just reinforcing the problem. And I think then there's a problem of quotas that can come into that, and I don't agree with quotas, but there needs to be something in terms of the reason people carry on not really making any changes is because there's nothing going on that pushes them to need to do that. And it shouldn't take financial input for that to be a thing but if that was kind of "this will be withdrawn if x doesn't happen," then I think we actually would see a shift because people follow money. That's just an unfortunate reality.

And I think the other issue of the arts changing, really, is thinking about general cultures that go on within it. So often people offering opportunities to their friends or people that they know, and how people trying to make an in, it's difficult for them to make an in and make a start. And I think we really need to rethink, everybody that's in the industry, who are we supporting? Who are we offering advice to? What are we doing with our work? Who are we making it for? I think the answer to that in part should always be, in part, for yourself, but in terms of who you're trying to reach, are you reaching those people? Are the people that you're working with supporting what you're trying to do? I think it's very complicated, and I think it's easy to blame the institutions, but institutions are composed of individuals and everybody needs to take individual action. And I think sometimes the conversation about structural issues, I think some people use it as a get-out card to say, "Oh, well, it's the institution, it's not me." But everybody needs to do their bit to make that change as far as I'm concerned.

Season Butler

Yeah, absolutely. And I think that the violence of diversity can be so potent, and so invisible, so once an institution decides that they're going to sort of generously and benevolently take on a kind of diversity hire, often what they're doing is just putting a human into a space that is hostile to them, subjecting them to the violence that hitherto had excluded them. And it's so similar to the ways in which abusers

kind of isolate their victims, have them there by themselves within a toxic structure, and then somehow they're blamed when they can't cut it, or when they kind of choose to quietly pull back, or when they self-defensively have to toe the party line and get on board and be the brown person who ratifies the kind of violence that the institution was already doing. And so, yeah, diversity in itself is a troubled kind of strategy for the actual, like, institutional change that really needs to take place. Diversity is beyond not-enough; it can be a real tool of violence.

Is there anything else that you think it's essential for us to consider when we think about how artists can be supported in the long term, as workers, as kind of feeling animals, and as folks who might need to be able to do different things as their careers progress?

Charlotte Maxwell

What could be different? So I think there's something semi-outside the arts sector, but the arts sector would need to be involved in. I think there's a huge issue around careers education, in terms of people pursuing artistic careers when they leave school, college, whatever. And I think it would be really beneficial to have more of those conversations about what things can look like, but also allowing children and young people to meet actual practising artists, and ask them questions about what things are actually like. Like, I find it very interesting when I teach Arts Award, in terms of young people asking me about what it's like actually being a writer, what is it like day-to-day? How are you responded to? What happens? What do you do all day? And they don't get those opportunities to really ask those questions in other scenarios, because they can't get that type of answer. So I think that's something in terms of education and arts working together, that could be different.

I think as well, like, I think mental health in the arts needs greater consideration. I think there is a culture of people continuing to plough through, keep producing work, keep going, no matter what, take your vulnerability onto the stage and just expose yourself and there's very little consideration, support, of the impact that has on people's mental health before, during, and after. And I think there needs to be a huge cultural shift around that, in terms of how it's perceived. I feel like the arts, unlike some other sectors, has started to have a conversation about mental health that other sectors haven't and you see that in the work that people produce. But I think we're still in a place where we're talking about certain types of lived experience of mental health, and people that have slightly different experience, how that's perceived.

So I've worked with someone previously where they have experience of hearing voices and they were given a diagnosis of psychosis. And working in the arts, they found people's response to them, very stigmatising and alienating, and my own experience of mental health over time, particularly when I've been handed different diagnostic labels and the perception of those when I asked for access support, like, ultimately I have experienced multiple types of interpersonal trauma, but people respond to diagnostic labels in very strange ways and usually very stigmatising and judgmental ways. So, years ago, I had a personality disorder diagnosis and the response from people to that was – and people in the industry even saying to other people – “Just don't work with her because she has this.” And ultimately, I think that's a massive problem that continues to be perpetuated. Whereas if people just accept that people have lived through trauma, particularly when a lot of people make work about

trauma, you would think of all places that arts would be more accepting of that. And when my diagnostic label was changed to PTSD, and some people became aware of that, the response to me became very different. So I have a very odd relationship with diagnostic labels and I think going into the profession that I'm going into will prove quite interesting in terms of how I think through them, I think, based on how they can be perceived in very different contexts.

Season Butler

Are you aware of Guilaine Kinouani's work?

Charlotte Maxwell

Yes, I work with her.

Season Butler

Guilaine Kinouani is such a gift to all of us. And I'm so looking forward to cracking open my copy of [Living While Black](#). And it's been such a gift being able to read some of the work that's led into that book. But yeah, I'm just really curious to know what you think about this body of work.

Charlotte Maxwell

So *Living While Black*, I've read the book. The book, I've said many times, is the first time I've really felt seen. I feel like often I read stuff. And I experienced the peripheries of it and can relate to different things. But *Living While Black*, I've now read it twice. I know over my life, I'm going to read it over and over again because each time I read it, there's something different and it allows me to sit with things that I have lived through, which have been very hard to articulate. Particularly like when I lived up in Newcastle, it's probably those four years were the worst experience of racism, by far. I feel like sometimes I laugh now, because just the whole situation was so ridiculous, that when I try and tell people, people are like, "What?! What are you describing?" And I'm like, this is literally what my life was for four years, whilst I was trying to train as a speech and language therapist and basically just survived the trauma that I had experienced, the racism was just on top of the trauma that was separate, and how to get through that, and the book's been really helpful to read.

But working with Guilaine as well has just been a really amazing experience. Like being able to work with someone whose work you really admire and really feel and having someone take that time to say that they believe that you're going to do well and they believe that you've got lots to offer the world really helped with my confidence from experiences I've had before. And particularly with racism in the workplace, and that leading to imposter syndrome, and working with [Race Reflections](#) is just really given me the space to grow, to really think about what kind of practitioner I want to be when I'm a psychologist, and really being able to stand my ground of not going with the status quo, and really committing to what's important to me, and knowing that me making those choices for what I know is important in terms of social justice. Like they're going to benefit the people that I'm going to work with going forwards and also it means I can stay true to my authentic self.

Season Butler

Yeah, my heart leaps. I'm just really, really so glad that you're entering the field that you're entering, and I think that we're all gonna have something to gain from your practice and so I'm just feeling really grateful.

I have one last question for you. What would a world in which artists are truly supported and empowered look like?

Charlotte Maxwell

Oh, just gonna take a moment to think about that, I feel like loads of thoughts rush to me at the same time.

Season Butler

Yeah, totally take your time and be as blue skies or as down to earth as you please.

Charlotte Maxwell

I feel like I'm often like perceived as the Debbie Downer, but I always like to think about what could practically happen. I think ultimately, there just needs to be the biggest culture shift. I feel like being an artist needs to be considered a valid career path, and not considered as something that's not a real job, which was often what I ran into, particularly in my early 20s when I left the speech and language therapy field, and I was like, "Oh, yeah, I work in the arts," and people I went to uni with, were like, "Oh so you don't have a proper job then." And so I think that needs to change in terms of people - how that impacts you, every time you get that perception.

I think there needs to be space for people to really get to play and experiment. I feel like the arts sector and particularly theatre talks about play all the time but in reality, I'm like, how much of that actually happens? Do people really get to play and create, because when people just go wild and come up with something, sometimes it'll be well-received, and it'll be turned into something. But other times, it will be "Let's just rein this in a bit." And I think that comes down to who's leading, who's got the artistic overview of what's going on here? And of course, people can make their own work freelance and make that work but I think we are very much in a place of, there's a pattern of certain things being produced.

For a part of my career, which I forgot to mention, I was a theatre critic for quite some time. So I don't even know how many shows I've seen. We're definitely in the hundreds, we'll put it that way, in the time that I was active. And I would see a lot of shows that would follow with the same theme. I never say that two people's work is the same because it can't be, everybody creates an individual piece of work, but I feel like themes lead to some pieces of work being put on and other pieces of work being rejected. And I don't know if maybe themes in work become a flavour of the month, a bit like certain people can be, but I did definitely notice a pattern of that, particularly in situations where, like when I'd go to the fringe, and I'd see like ten, twelve things in one day. And I would do that every day. And it would start to become apparent when I was writing things up that sometimes I'd feel like I'd already written this sentence in somebody else's review. And then I'd be like, can't produce the same sentence twice, like,

I've seen two different shows but they're converging in my head. So I think giving people that space to make whatever they want to make, experience what they want to experience...

I think there's something about, I really like to break the fourth wall between the artist and the audience. And I think more of that could potentially be beneficial to artists, because it removes that dynamic that can happen in some situations of us, we're the artists and them, they're the audience, when really there's probably a lot of overlap between the two categories and I just think breaking that wall brings people together a little bit more. Like whenever I've made work, I like audience participation. I know a lot of people aren't a fan. But I just think it softens the environment. I've always felt significantly less anxious performing, when the audience is part of what's going on, as opposed to they sit in a chair and stare at me. And I think something else that could just be different is I feel like in arts we say be bold, but actually embodying that and being bold, making work where you come out of it and you think, "Oh my gosh, what was that?" The shows that have stuck with me are the ones that I don't forget and I remember so much of them even though years have passed, because I'm like, "This is unlike anything I've ever seen and you were bold." And even if I didn't quite like the show, if somebody is that bold, I just feel like I automatically love it even if I didn't actually like it - very complicated.

But yeah, for me, it's about giving people that space. And I think as well there's something about, in order for people to truly be empowered, I feel like arts needs to put social justice on its agenda and take it seriously. It's not enough to say the arts industry is full of diverse people making all kinds of things and we stage whatever. People need to be actively engaged, like, people need to be making their spaces fully accessible, people need to be doing anti-racist work, people need to be opening up those opportunities for people from marginalised groups to lead and change spaces and innovate things. Because at the end of the day, if you have different perspectives coming in, things become a lot more interesting, a lot more inclusive, and a lot more... I feel like then it truly embodies what art is. Art is expressive, art is freeing, so why are we in all these constraints of these people lead things, these people do this? Oh, we claim that, you know, we're inclusive, but ultimately, all the *isms* that exist in society exist here, because the arts is just a pocket of what goes on everywhere. And I think sometimes the arts industry doesn't want to accept or entertain that conversation. So I think in order to empower artists, that conversation needs to be had, but talking in itself is not enough, then there needs to be actual action taking place. And when that action is happening, and we start seeing change, I think people will really benefit from it.

Season Butler

That's gorgeous. Charlotte Maxwell, thank you so so much for talking with me. And I've so enjoyed all of your insights. Thank you.

Charlotte Maxwell

No, it's been really lovely to talk to you and as well to have this conversation because I feel like I've kind of semi-left the arts. And occasionally I tweet here and there about it. But I've never really just talked about what's actually going on, and why I've made this decision at length in this way. So it's been a really interesting and somewhat cathartic experience as well, it's helped me kind of put the lid on that box and get ready to open my next box.

Season Butler

Oh, god, I'm so happy to hear that. And yeah, in asking these questions about, you know how the sector can change and how artists can be better supported it like sometimes it has felt a little bit disingenuous to me because I'm like, pay people properly and treat them with respect, and this isn't like some kind of new idea or some like gem that I have to dig for but trying to look at it through the lens of people whose like, trajectory through the arts hasn't been, like, straightforward. I mean, I know that like, you know, nobody has every step is easy for them but not that path of like, I did a Fine Art Foundation, and then I did painting, and then I was a hot young painter, and now I'm a painter. People whose journey was different than that, those are the people who I want to ask, what are the problems with the sector? What are we doing that we should stop doing? And what are we not doing which we need to be doing? And yeah, I'm just so much more interested in hearing from folks like us.

Charlotte Maxwell

Yeah, I think it's always an interesting conversation. And sometimes I wonder if people avoid having it because there's so much pressure to look like you're having a great time.

Season Butler

Yeah.

Charlotte Maxwell

Like there's so much pressure for that. And there's a part of me that thinks like, I'll never have entirely left, but it'll be interesting to see what my relationship with the arts sector is when I'm more on the outside, and then how I engage with it slightly from the outside. I'm hoping it will be better than when I was in it.