Lenses on Leadership

Episode 2: Leader or Organiser? | Fundraising, Access & Agency in the Arts with Tom Ryalls

Kajsa Sundström (00:01): We would like to give a content warning for this episode. In this episode, we will be discussing epilepsy, seizures, and mentioning of death.

Tom Ryalls (00:12): think we've developed the language of emerging leader because actually institutions use it to say, actually you're still emerging, don't make too many decisions yet but but actually if we just let go of the emerging thing and went, this is just my practice, then, I would encourage people to let go of this idea of being too young or too early. Or there is something about having difficult experiences now.

And going, but I survived not breathing or I survived all of those seizures. When people ask those qu—, say things like, we can't afford the access, we can't afford to do this. I'm like, yeah, but that's not real. A budget's not a real thing. You can change that, you can shape that. This is not some force outside of you that has forced you to make these ableist decisions, you know, like take— you take some agency here and go, actually, yeah, I can shape this.

William Spencer (01:06): Welcome to Lenses on Leadership, a podcast exploring leadership, creativity, access and change across the dance and art sector. Presented by Stopgap's co-assistant artistic directors and Future Leaders, Will and Kajsa.

Kajsa Sundström (01:22): Through conversations with artists, leaders and change makers, we discuss, investigate and explore what diverse leadership looks like in the arts and beyond. I'm Kajsa, my pronouns are she/her. I am a white Swedish woman with curly blonde hair, green eyes. I am a standing dancer and today I'm wearing a sage green jumper and golden hoops.

William Spencer (01:48): And I'm Will, my pronouns are he / they. I am a white male presenting person, medium height with blonde highlights in my short mullet. I'm wearing red tinted sunglasses, a white shirt and a tie.

Kajsa Sundström (02:04): Today we are joined by Tom Ryalls, a freelance writer and director for BAP, who deliver consultancy strategy with a specialism in disabled led

projects within the arts. And he is also chair of the board, Graeae, who are a world-class disabled-led theatre company. Tom, welcome to the podcast.

Tom Ryalls (02:25): Thank you for having me. Hello.

Kajsa Sundström (02:27): Would you like to do a visual description for our audience and share your pronouns?

Tom Ryalls (02:32): Yeah, absolutely. I'm Tom. I use he or they pronouns. I'm a white guy in my thirties. I've got short to medium length dark blonde hair that flops over to the right hand side. Big plastic blue glasses that will often fall down my face, so I'll be constantly pushing them up my face. earrings in both ears, which are like little hoops with a pearl dangling from them. And then I'm wearing a t-shirt, which earlier I thought was like a greeny blue. But then you two let me know that it could be cream and I'm colour blind. So between us I'm wearing a t-shirt that could be at any point of a colour spectrum, I'm afraid. Who knows what it is accurately?

William Spencer (03:10): Well, welcome to you and your many colored shirts. For our listeners and for us, because we struggled on the research with this one, what does BAP stand for?

Tom Ryalls (03:20): Well, when I'm freelance I have two practices. One is a sort of writing theatre making practice and one is more about strategy and fundraising. And I wanted to like separate those two identities and give myself a hat for each so I would still be this creative, but then create an identity for myself to house my fundraising strategy practice.

Ultimately for me I think they're both very similar practices, but actually externally they're perceived very differently. So I needed a separate thing and I thought, the main work that that company is going to be doing at first is a lot more fundraising consultancy and those kinds of things.

And I, I guess I had two thoughts. One was that so many fundraising consultancies have got such serious names. And I just feel like it's not of me. You know, I take my work really seriously. I struggle to take myself particularly seriously. And so I wanted something that felt silly and kind of nonsensical. I also wanted something that when I formed BAP, the idea is not that it lasts forever, it's that it makes a difference and disappears at some point. And so actually I wanted a thing that felt like a really momentary kind of plosive sound of some kind. And when I was about effectively it doesn't stand for anything, it's just kind of a silly nonsensical thing that is about not not taking things too seriously.

But the way I got to it is that when I was about however old you are when you get Twitter, fourteen, fifteen. My Twitter handle was Boy and Pen for a long time. And so I took those letters and I like, that'll be BAP, and it'll just be BAP and that's fine. So it sort of doesn't mean anything intentionally, but sort of half came from a Twitter handle that I once had when I was a teenager.

William Spencer (05:05): That's so interesting. I guess talking about things which are unserious, I guess we're going to start by trying to get a sense of you, the of the person behind the artist and the leader.

And with that in mind, we're going to play a quick little game with some quick fire questions. We're going to play this or that. So don't overthink your answers, just have fun, choose wisely and no pressure. We're going to dive in with Kajsa's first question to you where you tell us which you'd prefer: this or that.

Kajsa Sundström (05:33): Do you prefer writing on a notebook or writing on a laptop?

Tom Ryalls (05:39): Notebook, but generally I have one of those little electronic notebooks now, and so because I don't like having to write in straight lines, I quite like writing as mind maps so, and you can't do that on a laptop.

William Spencer (05:51): Do you prefer books or plays? Like if you had to pick one.

Tom Ryalls (05:56): Reading them because I don't, I don't, I don't love reading plays. I love reading books and I love watching plays. To be honest, I still think I often go to books before I go to plays.

I and the way that I often explain that is that I can walk into a bookstore and there's like ten thousand different things I can access, like different stories I can access. I walk into a theatre and there's only one thing. And so as a person who is very responsive to I don't know, the ADHD manifests sometimes as wanting unpredictable kinds of stimulation. You know, a bookstore is it has an excitement for me in terms of the range of different kinds of things I could choose to pick up.

William Spencer (06:40): In this episode, we will be discussing your journey, your practice, advocacy and strategy within leadership. So we're going to ask you about your journey and looking back at your journey from creating the Black Hole Project to where you are now, the author of your book: 'This Book is Short - A Toolkit for ADHDers, and also being a Clore Fellow.

What have been some of the defining moments along the way and are there any leaders that you looked up to who helped shape that?

Tom Ryalls (07:07): Yeah, I think Black Hole when I started making that was a huge event in and of itself because I often think that artists have certain shows they have to make before they can make other shows. So Black Hole was a show about my experience of growing up with epilepsy. I made it collaboratively with my parents and it originally started— the intention was, I don't remember any of my seizures. So we were gonna try and recreate a sort of sound experience of my seizures by interviewing people that had experienced them.

And actually what happened is that I discovered a different story by interviewing my parents of this kind of thing that we'd never really had a proper conversation about. Epilepsy is so contained in the medical model, but nobody talks about the kind of psychological emotional impacts on families and those kind of things. And so that's where that show came from. And I don't think I could have made another show until I made that show because I needed to get it out of me, if that makes sense.

And so Black Hole was like a big thing, it's the first thing that I made that did any touring, it got ACE funding, it had a radio adaptation, it was published and it was a big moment for me.

The the kind of flip side of that is that for about five years after making it, it did cast me as Mr. Epilepsy in the theatre industry for a while. And that was lovely, but also restrictive in a way. I got really known for just that and I had to break beyond that a little bit.

Other moments that really stand out are one of my first jobs in subsidized theatre was for a company called Out of Joint that got renamed Stock Room. And their ED once said something along the lines of, and I'm probably paraphrasing this, some people need like development schemes and some people just need a job. And you're the kind of person who just needs a job. You just need the chance to like figure things out because you'll figure it out yourself.

I'm a bad student, but I'm quite studious. Like I love to study things, but I'm quite bad at being like lectured to or really kind of taught anything. My curiosity is too kind of forthright. And I'm like, I want to go down this avenue. So like my sign name that my first BSL teacher gave me is the sign for dream. She would always say that you kind of daydream away from your homework. So she'll give me homework and I'd come back the week after and I'd learnt like 10 new signs that were not the homework, but I hadn't done any of the homeworks. So she's like, You're learning loads of stuff, but you're kind of daydreaming off of it all. And so that moment of

going, let me at it, and I'm just gonna have a go at figuring it out is quite a big thing for me as well.

And then I think I've been quite lucky to be in quite a lot of really supportive environments. So the first one was I did something called the Arts Fundraising and Philanthropy Fellowship, which really was quite an interesting moment for me because I'd always articulated myself as a writer and a creative who had done some freelance fundraising, but it's like a year-long programme when you're on attachment and you do a lot of development and you get a mentor and things.

And I think that really unlocked a curiosity for fundraising in a different way. Fundraising became the act of organising and moving resources around for me during that fellowship. And there was a lot of influence and power in the ability to do that. And it also relied on a lot of storytelling. And I think that fellowship really unlocked what I now think as my passion and interest in how we move resources and money around the sector and in society.

William Spencer (10:38): Did you find any leaders that were influential in that or was that a fellowship in general or were there specific people that had a specific impact on you?

Tom Ryalls (10:46): Interesting, right? Because I'm somewhat unexpected in fundraising practice, especially in arts fundraising practice. I'm relatively overtly political. I am not from wealth or even really like a middle class background. So my social codes are sometimes slightly off. I don't really fit the mould of what people expect an arts fundraiser to be, or I'm drawing kind of a generalisation that's not fair on some people here, but a lot of leaders in arts fundraising are from different kinds of backgrounds to me and have different kinds of social codes and those kind of things.

So often, a lot of my inspiration in fundraising came from outside of the UK arts fundraising sector. So there's some really incredible organizations in America, movers like Solidaire. There's a man called Michael Gast, and he writes this substack, which has now become a book, called Organising the Rich. He kind of reframes this idea and says that wealthy people are being organised by the right. On the left we often just ignore wealthy people and try and not organise them. We go make a philanthropic donation and then disappear. But actually he's quite interested in the practice of fundraising and its ability to organise wealthy people in a way that it's not just Donald Trump and his mates organising wealthy people instead.

And so I think I found a lot of leaders and inspiration from outside the UK art scene a lot of the time.

In terms of other stuff, the first person really in the art sector that I, that I looked up to a lot was a guy called Alan Lane. He used to run a company called Slung Low in Leeds. They programmed Black Hole, they supported me to make that show when I first made it. And he has a way of articulating his values in a very human non-cerebral way.

Like, I've always been really inspired by people who have a sense of their politics and their values that doesn't come from a very intellectual place. I didn't have access to a lot of established political thinking as a kid and I just thought the world was a bit unfair and I kind of felt like people who grew up in places like me should have a different kind of life and things. And then people went, here's some political thinking and I went, that's describing what I'm already feeling. So a lot of my politics and values come from a very emotional place.

And I saw that in Alan Lane a lot of the time, of the belief that things should be different. He had this ability to articulate a complex idea in ten words and make it feel like it hadn't come from ten years of study or something. It was just like a given, right? And he did it really openly. I think Alan Lane was like the first leader that I would be like, that is a really interesting model for me of like how you lead in the arts.

William Spencer (13:36): Yeah.

Kajsa Sundström (13:36): Thank you so much. Previously as Future Leaders at Stopgap, we've had the opportunity to talk to you as a part of our career development. And in that conversation, you shared how growing up with epilepsy has made you very fearless.

And as a person myself with epilepsy, I actually found that really empowering and relatable. And I hadn't really heard that being put together before. So I was wondering if you wouldn't mind sharing that with the audience here?

Tom Ryalls (14:07): Yeah, I'll be a bit careful how I explain this just because I think I don't want to stray into a glamorisation of what I'm about to describe because there's some nuance there. But I had epileptic seizures between the ages of about eight and eighteen.

When I had my first seizure, I was in a place called Wetwang, which is a real place near Scarborough, and I just love that there's a real place called Wetwang. I was camping with my dad about four a.m. in the morning. I had my first epileptic seizure and I stopped breathing, I didn't wake up for a while, and so that was quite a lot and that came to define my life.

And so at first I would be much more unwell after a seizure or you know stop breathing and things like that. And eventually as I got older they became less severe, but there was sort of this constant risk that it would happen. And so actually I stopped breathing and I kind of got through that multiple times and I had all of these seizures and I kind of came out the other side.

And there is something about having difficult experiences now and going, Ooh, but you know, I survived not breathing or I survived all of those seizures that a lot of people have who have that— the kind of seizures that I have, have experienced something called SUDEP, which stands like sudden death in epilepsy. Where you often will pass away in your sleep because people won't have noticed the seizures happen and things like that.

It was just because of that quirk of I happened to be camping in a tent next to my dad when the first one happened, that somebody would have heard me and he knew it was happening. I don't know, I hold a kind of defiance of, that didn't take me out, so I'm sure so and so is gonna be mean to me. Really, it's small fry compared to anything else.

On the flip side, it makes me entertain a lot more personal risk than maybe I should. I'm very yeah, I'll do a bungee jump or I'll— I'm what's the worst that could happen? Which is maybe it doesn't thrill my parents, but it does give me a sense of fearlessness, which then applies to other parts of my life as well.

William Spencer (16:05): That's so interesting. Thank you for sharing that with us.

Kajsa Sundström (16:07): Thank you.

William Spencer (16:08): I think that's something so interesting about that in terms of— I look for that in the artists that I work with. I look for people who are defiant.

And I think a lot of deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people come to spaces having been defined because we're so often told you can't have access to that space. It is nuanced, but it's really interesting to listen to that, to hear the fearlessness.

Kajsa Sundström (16:29): Yeah, I just really related when you said that, you know, if I've survived this, then like I can survive other things. And for me, that also really helped me not take any time for granted, I think.

That being said, I also think there is a lot of nuance and I don't think, like you said, we shouldn't glamorise this experience because it's also really hard. It's really traumatic.

So there's both sides of that, but... I just want to say thank you so much for sharing that with us so generously.

William Spencer (17:01): So the next section we'd like to talk to you about is the relationships between privilege and leadership. So as Future Leaders, Kajsa and I are conscious that being in a position where we're seen and developed as a leader is in itself a huge, huge privilege. Whilst we both identify as disabled, we also hold other privileges, for example, being white, having invisible disabilities, being both standing dancers.

Our question to you is really, how do we acknowledge both the barriers we face and the privilege we hold at the same time? And as leaders, how do we use the access and opportunities we have to hold the door open for people who don't benefit from these same privileges?

Tom Ryalls (17:38): Sometimes I think the word leader is maybe an unhelpful word in this conversation because leader generates this idea of hierarchy, right? And often I think organiser might be a more useful term. Yeah. Because I think the way that we have to address these things is about understanding your role in a kind of movement of change. And that role might not be this kind of visible charismatic leadership, it might be organised in a different way.

The easiest way I find to explain how we look at these things is I'll tell a super quick story. I grew up in a kind of mining town near Doncaster, vaguely socialist, but with no real developed political articulation a lot of the time because of the fall of the union movement and all of those kinds of things. So like working class institutions have been eroded. And so my access to education was often largely through books that I would find. And so I picked up a lot of maybe beliefs in my childhood that I wouldn't share now.

When I got to university, suddenly I'm reading— I did English Lit at uni. And so reading all these books that were changing my perceptions of the world, got really interested in feminism and I was talking to my friend Emily, who I lived with at the time. She— I was saying to her, it's like, but in feminism as a guy, maybe it's not my job to talk about feminism because actually who am I to tell people how to do feminism as a guy? Like it's not really what I should be doing. And she would challenge me and she would say, but actually when you articulate those ideas to men, you're listened to in a way that I'm not listened to.

And for me, that was a really important part of going: Yes, there is a privilege I have, and actually that may play an important role in the movement. And my responsibility is to understand how I leverage that ethically without taking a kind of

classical hierarchical leadership position of the ideas, but maybe taking a position where actually I'm learning from feminist thinkers and doers and organizers, etc., and taking those ideas into places where it's much safer for me to articulate something that would for other people would be dangerous.

Don't be a naughty person with your privilege. But you know, part of our responsibility is that we need to quickly learn to go, yes, it exists. Let's not play through the guilt constantly with it. And actually use that as part of an organising strategy. And so that's the kind of lens a lot of the time that I look through.

And coming to the second part of your question, which is about holding the door open. I would say, you know, I as a disabled person get access to spaces in a way that a lot of other disabled people don't. I don't experience physical access barriers a lot of time. I can largely assimilate into non-disabled institutional cultures. And it's about using the safety that I have in those spaces to intentionally create tension which has no individualistic benefit to me, but actually in the long run creates the kind of space that somebody else could come in after me.

I have a lot of intersecting identities. I'm queer, but I am a white gay man. I'm disabled, but I don't have profound access barriers which stop me accessing a lot of spaces. So I often throw myself in there to go, actually who does come after me and how do I do this in a way that doesn't just benefit myself? Because part of privilege is that you have to take risks that other people shouldn't have to take.

William Spencer (20:57): Yeah completely understand.

Kajsa Sundström (20:58): Yeah, no, thank you so much and completely agree. And what feels true for me is who does it benefit if the only people who speak up against marginalisation are those who are being marginalised? Because that will benefit those who are benefiting from those power structures already.

William Spencer (21:16): It's like there's a really clear relationship between privilege and allyship. It's something I've learned through my time at Stopgap is, there is no perfect access. Like you can't perfectly cater for everyone's access, but that you should try, particularly if you hold privilege, you should definitely try and be brave and just do what you can and give it a go.

Kajsa Sundström (21:38): For me also, think of allyship, it's something that you do. It is also something that you practice.

William Spencer (21:45): I think in Stopgap we advocate for all deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people as best we can. And I think that's something key I've learned

is to look wider than my immediate circle because I feel like using my privilege as a leader to create better or as an organiser to create better access for everyone will benefit also my immediate circle. It can affect both.

Kajsa Sundström (22:07): Yeah. And I think if you also lead by example, and I'm really curious to hear what you think about this, Tom. If you lead by example, and maybe people will then, they will lead the way that you lead, or they will maybe take on the things that you've done and do those in other rooms that maybe you're not in. So I think it has this ripple effect as well, hopefully. And yeah, I just wanted to see what you think about that.

Tom Ryalls (22:33): Maybe there's at least two thoughts that are coming to me about that. I guess the first one is the role that I play in the movement, I don't need everybody to play that same role because if that happened, then the movement would be too focused on using one really focused tactic to make change.

You know, I'm often the person who lives in some sense of compromise in order to make space for other people. I learn from a lot more radical thinkers. I think I have very radical values, but I often compromise in order to get into spaces to bring other people in. But I need more radical people to exist and be doing their practice and not become like me because what is deemed acceptable, ultimately we're not successful until unless we have all of those kinds of movements.

So I'm rarely trying to get other people to lead in that same way, maybe with a sense of good values would be a thing. But I would very much encourage people to for their mission to be to understand their role in the movement and what they bring. You know, we, none of us can play all the different roles. Like we, we inherently rely on collaboration.

Often when organising fails, is because each individual is trying to do all the different things. And actually sometimes we have to go, I'm not good at that bit. Somebody else is, you know my role is often moving resources towards more radical work because I get access to institutional spaces where there's wealth and resources and I can move the resources.

I don't take the glory of doing the work a lot of the time, but actually I play an important role in the movement, I like to think. And so we all have to figure out where we fit a little bit as opposed to just going, this is the right way of doing things because actually we all need to do different stuff.

Kajsa Sundström (24:23): Yeah, no, thank you. And I think also maybe something to that is also maybe young leaders, emerging leaders, maybe there's also a responsibility for us to challenge maybe those leadership structures.

William Spencer (24:38): Yeah, redefine, you know, as you have reworded kind of what leadership is as more organisation. And I think there's something in unlearning what we know leadership to be like when it is in one of those hugely hierarchical structures and kind of I know I want to be a leader or an organiser, but actually having to rethink that and relook at kind of where my position is and kind of what my position is.

Kajsa Sundström (25:00): Yeah.

Tom Ryalls (25:01): Yeah, and we might draw on different sources of knowledge for that kind of work. There's this theory that capitalism is so overwhelming that anything that exists under capitalism feels like it's the only thing that ever will be and ever has been. So this idea of hierarchical leadership, which is quite dominant under capitalism, we think has like always been the thing and now we need to invent something after it. But there's actually huge bodies of knowledge from all parts of the globe and different parts of history with different kinds of models of leadership that were really dominant at other times and in other places.

And actually the perception that we have to invent something new now is not necessarily true. We as humanity do hold the knowledge. It has just been erased by this very dominant way of thinking a lot of the time.

I draw a lot from ideas in emergent strategies, so strategy which goes as a beginning and end, we'll do these things and this is when— this the project is done. Probably not that useful for most organising practice. Actually emergent strategy where you go, these are some tactics I'm going to use and I'm going to listen to feedback from the world and adjust from there. And it might never be done. It's just a constant practice. That is a thing that there's huge bodies of knowledge about.

And actually it's just been erased 'cause it's not very popular and it doesn't play into like productivity and making money as easily. And so I would encourage people to not think that yes, challenge the current norm, but you are— maybe have millions of people that have existed before or in other places that have that knowledge and have got your back as well.

Kajsa Sundström (26:32): Yeah, completely agree. Thank you so much.

William Spencer (26:35): So Tom, we're interested to see what you would like more of in the next stage of your work and what changes you'd like to see across the industry. I know we've already kind of touched on that. Is there anything specific or is a wider provocation?

Tom Ryalls (26:50): For me personally, I've had two strands to my practice, my kind of creative work and my fundraising strategy work. And I'm definitely now at a point where I think I'm mature and robust enough to bring those two things together and kind of diffuse the tension between them.

I've always thought of both things as my creative practice is often about changing who gets to imagine the future. I do that by kind of taking things that we believe are fundamental structures like money or the medical model and showing that they're actually just silly inventions in a quite camp way. In my fundraising practice, I'm kind of moving resources to similar kinds of projects. And so actually, to some extent they're kind of the same, but I'm quite interested in how we take more creative approaches to moving resources and not just how we organise resources towards art and culture, but I'm really interested in how art and culture will affect future wealth redistribution as well.

So we know we're about to have a massive, huge wealth redistribution between two generations from baby boomers to younger generations. I'm really interested in what is arts and culture doing in that organising space in a very materialist way of looking at things, how our material condition's changing, what is art and culture doing to change that as opposed to just the sector constantly going, we need more money.

So like, okay we do, but we might have to think a bit bigger than that, think about how we create the conditions so that resources are moving in a different way. I think that's what a lot of my work is gonna be about, what I'm talking to a lot of other people about at the moment.

William Spencer (28:22): I think it's really interesting that you use the word resources because I think a lot of people think about fundraising or that kind of thing as just money or just capital, but there's actually so much more to understanding how ableism works and how kind of suppression of people works because it is more than just the money, right? It's about having a studio that you can get into to create work in. It's about having texts that are in accessible formats. It's about so much more than just the money.

Kajsa Sundström (28:51): Yeah, and I also think it's also about audiences, it's about getting your work programmed, it's about being able to get your work out there in

whatever format it is. I'm not necessarily saying that I think it's an audience responsibility, but I think that we are all like an ecosystem. And I think when it comes to art and work, I think there's maybe also curators or programmers who are like, this is what people want to see.
And I think maybe a provocation for us is, that because what's always been available or have you asked them? How do we know what our future looks like? Like who are we asking that question?

Tom Ryalls (29:32): A lot of the time the way that creatives come into their practice, whether you go to drama school or dance school or do some training course or just start doing it yourself, etc. What you're taught is your practice, you're not taught how to affect the conditions that are deciding whether you get to do your practice or not.

So, how I got into fundraising is that— trying to make shows, I had to fundraise for them, got quite frustrated that the funding bodies didn't seem to have the imagination to support the shows. So I went into fundraising now instead to change those conditions. And then I was like, I'm getting to the limits of some areas of fundraising that I can achieve so I'm getting quite interested in policy and those kinds of things because I think some of that needs to shift to change the fundraising to change the art.

And actually I think seeing more creatives that are also equipped with the skills to organise the conditions in which they work, as opposed to just being subject to those conditions and having to accept that the world is like this and will adapt within it.

Some people are having this conversation in— with different language, but I think it's really important that we can encourage people to go, yes, be creative, do art, and also have those organising skills that influence your own conditions.

Kajsa Sundström (30:40): Yeah, no, I really, I really agree. So we have been on this journey with Stopgap as Future Leaders, being part of their program for almost a year. And we were wondering what advice you would have to other aspiring or emerging leaders. And if there's another one and leader that feels more right, then feel free to use that. Or if you have any questions for us.

Tom Ryalls (31:08): Yeah, I've got questions about the word leader, but I've also got questions about this idea of aspiring or emerging leaders, because you are a leader in different kinds of contexts at different points of your life. When I was in year eleven, my school burnt down. And so we were in like a temporary school and things, and I was— like I formed a student body and we tried to support getting the

school back up and running, et cetera. That wasn't me being an emerging leader, that was just me doing some kind of leadership or organising.

I think we've developed the language of emerging leader, because actually institutions use it to say, ‘oh actually you're still emerging, don't make too many decisions yet’. But, actually like if we just let go of the emerging thing and went, you know, this is just my practice, then, you know, I would encourage people to kind of let go of this idea of being too young or too early or whatever.

William Spencer (32:01): Yeah, I definitely found that being given the title of like Assistant Artistic Director at Stopgap, you know, having come from a completely freelance background. My reflection is that I had always been leading. I just— I hadn't had the title, you know, and one of the things that working with Stopgap has made me realise is actually some of the skills I definitely do have, think often, you know, confidence is really difficult for a lot of deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people. And I realised, no, actually, I can do this.

And a lot of my journey has been going through the skills that I thought I didn't have and recognising a lot of it is being told by your peers or by other leaders or organisers that you're kind of valid. I hadn't recognised how much of that validity in that journey of having the chance to practice in a safe or in a brave space and then being green lit for that.

Kajsa Sundström (32:51): Yeah, I also think it's really interesting this word emerging because you can be emerging when you've done something for 10 years. And who gives you the like stamp of approval or the badge that you are no longer emerging like you've made it?

William Spencer (33:08): Yeah, it sounds like Tom what you're saying is that you just you just were a leader there was there wasn't a point of emergence that you just took the lead did was there a time that you recognized that you were like I'm a leader

Tom Ryalls (33:20): I probably still wouldn't put it on my LinkedIn bio, being a cultural leader. I think maybe this is my controversial take of the podcast, but that's okay. I fully believe in the role of the leader, but I think sometimes people who describe themselves like their job is to be a cultural leader, for example. I'm like, but what are you leading? What's your vision? Leader being a job or leader being a role is a very individualistic idea.

And so I've always been an organiser. Whether I care to call myself a leader or not is normally probably dependent on whether I’m writing a job application or not. You

know, it's kind of a label I can choose to use or not, but in terms of what I know about what I do, I've always been doing the thing and whether it for me, whether I go I'm a leader or not, is kind of neither here nor there sometimes. Does that make sense?

William Spencer (34:11): Definitely. It's like a really interesting thought about language. Again, something that Stopgap's been really— that's really taught me is about like my use of language and like how important language is and how it can affect people and how it can have an impact and how we have to be really careful about the words, the words that we choose and how we choose to describe ourselves.

Kajsa Sundström (34:32): I really agree. Language is so important and I think there is also obviously hierarchy within language. If you call yourself a leader or a facilitator or a director, all of those words will mean different things to different people. I think it's really interesting because you are also, may also be in leadership positions, even though that's not what you've been tasked to do, but that's what, you know, that is what the practice is.

I really want to have collaborative leadership in whatever situation I'm in, I think that's what I'm really taking with me, is that I, maybe in the end of the day, you know, someone needs to make a decision, but the collaboration and working with other people is, for me, the point of what we do, what we do.

William Spencer (35:16): Yeah, sure. One of the main things I'm going to take away from this conversation specifically is that I see it as my role is to facilitate and advocate for people to be brave and to take risks, feel in a space where they're safe enough to be like, I'm going to take this artistic risk, you know, and see what happens and try.

Kajsa Sundström (35:36): I think that we are coming to our conclusion, but Tom, before, you know, we finish and we maybe hear more about where we can find you and your work. Is there a thought or question or idea that you would like listeners to take away from this?

Tom Ryalls (35:50): Yeah, I get a guiding thing that I've always found useful as a practice is one just inherently be curious, but I've focused that curiosity in understanding what is kind of real and fundamental and what isn't.

And by that when I talk to a lot of fundraisers, for example, where I start is, well, you know, money's not real. Money is a story we started telling and we all believe in it. And we have a sense of the some checks and balances that are kind of making it real, but nobody can, you know, on the street we can't really articulate what those

checks and balances are or how the global economy works. It's just a story. And but actually we understand money as this like one of the realest things in the world because it creates homelessness and it creates all of hunger and all of these kinds of things.

And so often I think in our leadership practice, what I encourage people to— or in your organising practice, is to really interrogate the way things are made and get curious about maybe how we unmake some of these things. And I think constructed can be deconstructed. And so like let's allow ourselves to be a bit silly and see how like these huge institutional, real foundational things are actually just not real.

Money's not as scary as soon as you go, we could stop believing it tomorrow and the global economy would collapse. Like we have the ability to do that if we wanted to, stop believing in money. It's what happens when there are economic crashes. People stop believing in the value of money. Ask yourself the idea of like, is this thing fundamental or not? And specifically in terms of disabled artists and access, you know, when people ask those quest— say things like we can't afford the access. We can't afford to do this. I'm like, yeah, but that's n— that's not real. A budget's not a real thing. You can change that. You can shape that. This is not some force outside of you that has forced you to make these ableist decisions. You know, like you take some agency here and go, actually, yeah, I can shape this. I can affect change here because it's not a given that it must be like this.

Hope comes from the belief that the actions you take will change something in the world. Optimism is the belief that everything goes really well. But hope is like I will take an action and a thing will change. And I think only by going, look, your actions can in fact change things like that i do we actually begin to make any kind of progress.

William Spencer (38:04): I think one thing that I learned— at a conference I did with Stopgap is that hope is discipline. I love that quote, hope is discipline. You can build hope. You construct it by putting things out into the universe by working in ways that can create change.

Kajsa Sundström (38:21): Before you go, Tom, where can people find out more about you and your work?

Tom Ryalls (38:27): Yeah, if you Google my name, I'm all over Google, but I have a website. You can have a look there about my personal website and BAP has a website as well. We're about to launch quite a few projects which are about creative approaches to art and wealth redistribution and those kinds of things.

I also released my book earlier this year. It's called This Book Is Short, published by Nick Kern Books. And so you can find that on my website. It's in bookshops, which still is a kind of strange thing to me to see out in the wild.

William Spencer (38:57): Thank you so much for joining us, for listening to us and for watching Lenses on Leadership, a Stopgap podcast.

Kajsa Sundström (39:03): You can find more about Tom Ryals through the links in the episode description. A quick reminder about Stopgap's work beyond the podcast. Lived fiction will be at Sadler's Wells East on 29th and 30th of January, 2027 with tickets on sale now. And Stopgap runs workshops, training and youth dance companies throughout the term. You can join Stopgap's mailing list to keep up to date with performances, opportunities and ways to get involved. And if you're interested in becoming a future leader at Stopgap, keep an eye out for Cohort 3, which we will be recruiting for in 2026, from September to November.

William Spencer (39:42): Join us next time for another conversation about leadership, creativity, access and change across the arts.

Kajsa Sundström (39:47): And a big thank you to our guest, Tom Ryalls for taking part in this. Thank you so much.

William Spencer (39:52): Thanks for joining us. This episode was recorded and produced by Creative Kin podcast studio. To find out more, visit creativekin.co.uk slash stopgap. A special thank you to our funders, Arts Council England and Abderreheim Crickmay Charitable Settlement, without which the Future Leaders Program and Lenses on Leadership would not have been possible.