



The Paper Birds

Session 1:

Introduction to 'Ask Me Anything'

Who are The Paper Birds?

- The Paper Birds are a devising theatre company that explores social issues happening in the world today.
- They use real interviews to inform their devised work. Often this means spending time listening to people and collecting stories within communities across the UK.
- Their style of theatre is often called 'Verbatim Theatre' as it places real testimonies directly into the script. 'Verbatim' literally means 'word for word'.
- Their style incorporates movement and visual imagery to tell stories; without relying solely on voice and language.



Click video above to meet Jemma & Kylie!

History

- The company was founded in 2003 by a group of 6 women who trained together at Bretton Hall, Leeds University.
- Two of the original founding members remain; Co-Artistic Directors Jemma McDonnell and Kylie Perry.
- They have made 13 professional productions that have toured across the globe.
- They are a company run by women, (although they collaborate with many male artists on different projects).



Verbatim Theatre

- Verbatim Theatre is a form of ‘documentary’ style performance where real people’s exact words form the content of the script.
- The playwright or theatremaker conducts interviews around the given theme with real people.
- Famous examples of verbatim plays include The Laramie Project; Black Watch and London Road.
- The Paper Birds pick and choose when to insert verbatim; their scripts are a patchwork of verbatim interviews, research and original material.
- They try to signpost to an audience when verbatim is being used by clearly staging it in a specific convention.



Welcome to 'Ask Me Anything'



From the Director

'Ask Me Anything' is based on a series of letters exchanged between The Paper Birds and a group of teenagers from around the UK. We worked with 3 schools and 3 youth theatres from a range of locations and economic backgrounds. The young people involved were sent a letter explaining the project and asked to write back to us and to ask us ANYTHING.

As the letters came in, we started to read them out in rehearsals and devise the show in response to them. We worked closely with Live Youth Theatre to test scenes from the show, receive feedback and develop the show accordingly.

'Ask Me Anything' is about being a teenager (or an adult) and not having all the answers, not having it all figured out. The show celebrates messiness, imperfection, growth, mistakes, trials, experiments and risking it all.

We have not figured it all out and we are OK with that. We are all a work in progress.

Jemma McDonnell

Dear young people

Have you ever had a question you really wanted to ask but it just felt too embarrassing or private or mundane?

What have you not figured out? What do you worry about? What are your problems or challenges?

My name is Jemma, I am a theatre director and I am making a show with my friends Kylie, Georgie and Rosie. The show is called 'Ask Me Anything' and it is about comparing what life was like for us growing up back in 1990's/ early noughties to what life is like for you growing up now in 2019.

So, for a bit of context, when me and my friends grew up, we didn't own mobile phones. They were invented, but to begin with they were something only rich adults owned. I only got one when I was 18 years old. This meant when I was growing up, I used pay phones if I was out and I had to use the landline house phone (which was not cordless) to ring my friends if I was in.

Letter continued...

If there was someone I fancied I would have to ring their house phone and sometimes had to speak to their mum or dad. It was savage! We had dial up internet at home (and the internet was nothing compared to what it is now), back then it felt like a very simple Wikipedia and some chat rooms. Oh, and we had pen pals, so for example if we made friends on holiday, we would write to them to stay in touch.

When we were growing up, we learnt about the world (and all the things we didn't know and were too scared to ask), by reading problem pages in magazines. The problems were normally from teenagers and the agony aunts that replied to the letters were usually older women offering their advice.

It just occurred to us recently that this world that we grew up in is totally different to what you are now experiencing. To begin with, if you have a question about anything and you need advice or an answer you have the internet to give you infinite answers but... why not ask us?

Letter continued...

We are asking YOU, the young people of today to write to us and to ask us ANYTHING. Yes, the internet exists and has lots of answers, but what about old-fashioned advice? Handing down wisdom, generation to generation as people who are now slightly older and have lived it?

You might have one question; you might have twenty. We are going to make a theatre show where we answer as many questions as we can. We are going to give you our advice and if we are not the right person to advise you because we have no experience in this area, then we will find the right person to answer your question.

We are collecting letters NOW and would love it if you would write to us.

Thank you so much for taking part. We will do our very best to be great agony aunts.

Jemma, Kylie, Georgie & Rosie xx

Our research...

Sample some of the research we did to learn about the history of Agony Aunts in this BBC documentary *'Sex , Lies, & Love Bites – The Agony Aunt Story'*.

(The whole programme is available to watch here on YouTube, but if you just fancy a snippet, watch from 50.44 - 54.54 minutes)



Agony Aunts through the ages...

We also collected lots of real problem page letters from magazines since the 1970's...

WHAT'S YOUR WORRY?

A trouble shared is a trouble halved, so if there's something on your mind - anything at all - why not tell us about it and our experts will see what they can do to help. Just write to: GIRL, 18 Furnival St., London E.C.4, and mark your letter WHAT'S YOUR WORRY? No names will be printed - but let us have a stamped, addressed envelope if you would like a reply from us by letter.

She hates nicknames

Q. My real name is Barbara but people call me Babsie and Baa-baa, not to mention things like Ping-pong, Baa-lamb, Babs, Spindle Legs and Spider. What can I do to stop them?

A. There's no harm in nicknames, but as you get called so many names it means people are 'taking a rise' out of you because they have found their teasing upsets you. Try not to rise to their bait. Just don't answer to the names you don't like - and don't show any signs of being irritated. People will soon get tired of calling you silly names if you do.

* * *

She's so shy

Q. I am an only child and when I appear in public places I feel very shy. What can I do?

A. You must try to forget yourself more. When you are out ask yourself "What can I take an interest in?" and "How can I help?" People who are keen and helpful soon find themselves mixing in - and losing their shyness.

WHAT'S YOUR WORRY?

Unkindness

Q. People are mean to me at school. I do nothing to hurt them. Why do they want to hurt me?

A. You may be sure that there is something in your bearing or attitude which accounts for the behaviour of the other girls. Perhaps you are striving too hard to make friends. Join in activities that are going on, but don't try to force yourself upon others. Try to be friendly in a simple way without being tense or trying to impress people.

Reading

Q. I am 9½ and still can't read very well. What should I do?

A. Keep it up. Do some reading every day. You will get there.

If you have a worry with which you feel our experts can help, just write to: GIRL, 161/166 Fleet Street, London, E.C.4, and mark your letter 'WHAT'S YOUR WORRY?'. No names will be printed, but let us have a stamped, self-addressed envelope if you would like a personal reply by letter. A published reply will always involve some delay. It is of help if the age of the reader is included in the letter.



Friendship

Q. A family have come to live in our street and they have dark skins. How should we treat them?

A. With the friendliness due to strangers. Help them to feel welcome and you will find friendliness in return.



Am I being silly?

Q. My friends say I am silly because I don't kiss boys as often as they do. What do you think?

A. We think you should have confidence in your own feelings and self-respect. If you think that a kiss is a rather special thing that should be reserved for rather special people, then act on that feeling.

Too slim

Q. I am very underweight. There are no end of slimming diets, but nobody tells you how to put on weight.

A. Some people are underweight and perfectly healthy. But if you seem to have less energy than your friends, as well as being light in weight, you should see your family doctor. In any case, we think it would be a good idea for you to ask him for a diet that would help to build you up.

A crush

Q. I have a crush on my doctor. You may think it silly, but I'm afraid I can't help it. I would like to know what you think. Please advise me.

A. To like and admire your family doctor can only be helpful to you in working out for yourself what qualities you would like to have when you are grown up. Warmth of feeling for another person is never silly.

More than one

Q. Can a boy really like two girls at the same time?

A. Yes.

SHOULD I GIVE IN TO HIM?



My boyfriend is handsome, loving, caring and protective — all of which makes it very hard for me to face the fact that he's after only one thing. He doesn't just want to kiss and cuddle and, from things he's been saying lately, it's clear that he would like a more physical relationship. I don't want to rush into anything and I'm scared that, if he bullies me into giving into him, he'll then finish with me. I'm 14 and he's 15.

He's hardly loving, caring and protective if he's only after one thing! Since you're under 16, your boyfriend would be breaking the law if he were to sleep with you. In any case, entering a physical relationship because you feel under pressure to do so usually has disastrous results. So think again.

If you're really clear in your mind, and firm about not having a physical relationship, he'll realise that he could lose you if he tries to push you into one. If, however, he does want to finish with you over this, then you're better off without him!

WEIGHTY PROBLEM

Although I'm not very overweight, my thighs and stomach are really flabby. I've tried to cut down on greasy, fatty foods, but I get no support at home. I asked my mum to buy semi-skimmed milk, make salads for my lunch and buy fruit instead of biscuits, but she refused. She said other people in the house like biscuits. In fact, she seems to be making more chips, fry-ups and cakes — which I don't understand because she herself is supposed to be dieting! An exercise class has started nearby, but I can't go without Mum — and she won't go because she thinks she looks too fat in trousers or shorts! But that's the whole point of the class, isn't it? Sometimes my parents agree that I eat more than average, but if I mention dieting, they laugh and tell me not to be stupid. I think it would help if I got encouragement from you.

Copies of our diet and exercise sheets are on the way! Now sit your mum down in a comfy chair and ask her to read this.

First, you should both go along to your doctor and find out how much weight you should lose — if any. If you do need to shed a bit, it needn't be too difficult if you work together and give each other moral support. Honestly, that can be half the battle. If your general weight is acceptable, try regular exercises at home first of all. Again, it's usually easier to stick to a routine if someone else does it with you. That's why, really, the class would be great. Let's face it, most people going would be in the same boat as yourselves. So come on, Mum, set a good example!

IT WAS JUST A GAME

Please help me because I

Discussion topics . . .

- What challenges do you face growing up in this era?
- What are the positive things about being a young person now?
- How different do you think life is for you now compared to young people growing up 10, 20, 30 years ago?
- How does social media and tech make you feel or affect your mood?
- Are the problems girls face different to boys?
- What are the positives of the internet and phones?
- If you could teach an adult to be better/ more understanding with young people what would you tell them?
- What do you think were the types of problems or questions that The Paper Birds received in the letters?

The Letters

We received over 100 letters that asked us about all sorts of different things.

Here are some of the issues the letters dealt with:

Sex & relationships

Self-esteem

Disability

Parents

Social Media

Identity

School

Mental Health

Grief

Growing up

Self-harming

Race

Becoming an adult

Youth Suicide

Friendships

Having received such open, honest, and important letters, we felt it was imperative that we not only try to answer as many as we could in the show, but that we also find ways to encourage young people to talk to others about these problems. A big part of the show became about how different generations can begin to talk to each other and better understand each other.

Sometimes it can be difficult for different generations to understand each other. Why do you think this is?

Creative Writing Task

Work on a piece of creative writing in which you write about your generation seen through the eyes of a fictional character from an older generation.

Your fictional character is watching a teenager/ group of teenagers - share their internal monologue as they watch.

Think about:

Who is your character?

How old are they?

Where are they and what are they watching?

What is their point of view?

What do they misunderstand about young people today?

What wisdom might they have to share?

