

## Curve in Conversation – Episode One

### Transcript

**[Fiona Moore]** Hello and welcome to Curve in Conversation, our very first podcast. My name is Fiona, Press and Digital Manager here, and in these podcasts we'll be speaking with the people who make Curve, Curve: from the staff behind-the-scenes, to the actors on our stages, our Associate and Breakthrough artists and everyone in between. I hope you enjoy.

**[Fiona]** So hello and welcome and thank you so much for joining me today. We've got Chris Stafford, Chief Executive at Curve

**[Chris Stafford]** Hello

**[Fiona]** And Nikolai Foster, Artistic Director

**[Nikolai Foster]** Hello

**[Fiona]** Hello, thank you so much for being here. So if we start, I think a lot of people know that you are Chief Executive and you are Artistic Director, but what does that actually mean? I wonder if these are titles that people don't really understand the full spectrum of. What does a day in the life of an Artistic Director look like? Is there a typical day even?

**[Nikolai]** I think the short answer is absolutely no, there is no typical day. I think the titles are very disorientating to the outside world and I don't think they reflect fully the magnitude, the variety, the demands of either role. Also I think that Chief Executive sounds very business and money-orientated and all that side of things but I think Chris is as clued up and as switched in and is as passionate about the artistic side as certainly I am. I think Artistic Director is also slightly misleading because it's sort of like the theatre is an artistic institution, so your job is artistic, the cleaners' jobs are artistic because they're engaging with our work and they're talking about it and they're working in this environment which is artistic. So it feels a bit odd that I'm exclusively labelled as the Artistic person when all of us in the theatre come here because we're really passionate about the work that we're creating and connecting with our communities. Sometimes it's got nothing to do with 'art', like today we've been looking at the bar and making sure that the access for wheelchairs at the bar that space is always kept clear. That was the first thing we were talking about when we came in the building this morning and I don't think you would necessarily consider that that fits into either of our remits when you think of our job descriptions or our job titles rather.

**[Fiona]** And Chris, what about you, because you do work very closely together but Chief Executive, your role really encompasses everything that happens at the theatre, artistically and on the business side of things.

**[Chris]** Yeah but it's interesting, I would repeat what Nikolai just said. I did an interview about 18 months ago and I was talking about the relationship that we have here and every organisation or theatre all works differently and different roles work in different ways and my job in other theatres is Executive Director or whatever. I would always say that Nikolai and I, our roles, aside from the fact I don't direct (no one ever wants to see me direct anything!) but aside from that our roles are interchangeable. Nikolai is as involved in the "business" as the art, because the art is the business. So

for me I guess where we are very different is that obviously by default Nikolai will be in a rehearsal room quite a lot of the day so between rehearsals you'll be in meetings and you'll start early and at the end of the day there'll be meetings and there'll be emails across various things, there's a lot of meetings of course, but I'm not taken into a rehearsal room during the day. I will always go into a rehearsal room every day when we're producing a show, but my job is all encompassing, it's making sure that the theatre is running. Actually the joy and excitement about these jobs is no one day is ever the same! Sometimes you'll have really quite difficult days, sometimes you have days where it's like 'wow'. It's all encompassing in the way in which you're zapped, but actually alongside all that is great joy. The fact that you then walk in the theatre and you see kids going into our Curve Young Company classes, you see audiences coming in – some of which have never been in the theatre before –and ultimately making great work, all that makes up for it. The way I will always describe my job as a Chief Executive is I'm surrounded, and I think I can speak for both of us, we're both surrounded by brilliant people and people who can do things I can't do. I work with a brilliant Director of Human Resources, brilliant Finance Director, Technical Director, Comms Director (I'm going to miss people now), everyone can do stuff I can't. My job is to make sure everyone is working together and everyone has got a shared sense of where we're going. When things are a little bit tricky and hard, my job is to lift people up a little bit and keep us on a pathway. That pathway gets called strategy, gets called all sorts of fancy words, it's about a pathway to where we're going and what our vision is, and that's my job. My job is truthfully surround myself with brilliant people who can do stuff I can't do, and make sure they can do it well with each other.

**[Fiona]** And this very close partnership that you've made over the last few years, is that something you always intended to do, is that normal for a Chief Executive and an Artistic Director to work so closely together?

**[Chris]** It depends. You can see where the partnerships are. You can see Nick (Hytner) and Nick (Starr) who ran the National, they were very much a partnership. Gemma (Bodinetz) and Deborah (Aydon) in Liverpool (Everyman), Tom (Morris) and Emma (Stenning) in Bristol (Old Vic) and I've worked with Tom and Emma, so you can see when those partnerships are a real team, they are equals, and first amongst equals in different parts of what the business is. I can only talk for myself personally, I always knew I wanted to run a building. I always knew I wanted to find a running-mate and you're never guaranteed that unless you know someone directly and you've worked with them lots of times before, you might bring them in. But for me I always knew I wanted to have that person to lead with and to bounce off and go through the good times and wade through some of the not so good times with.

**[Nikolai]** ...and sadly that person wasn't available so... I'm here \*laughs\*

**[Chris]** So we've got Nikolai instead \*laughs\* but you know

**[Nikolai]** There's a peaks and troughs to all professions

**[Fiona]** And how does that work for you Nikolai, this close partnership?

**[Nikolai]** Well I think it's exactly as Chris has just described, neither of us could do our jobs without the other and the rest of the team. They're such mountainous roles that you couldn't do one without the other. I mean as Chris said, when we're rehearsing a play as you know, my day 10-6 will be in the rehearsal room so that

means that I'm not available or not as readily accessible as I would be on a day like today when it's more around the building type stuff rather than when you're locked away in the rehearsal room so you need that close partnership and you know from when you email us independently you'll get the same answer from both of us completely independently – it's very rarely we'll contradict each other. That's because the vision and the idea of where the theatre's going is completely shared and born out of a naturally organic democratic process.

**[Chris]** And we quite like each other...

**[Nikolai]** Oh yes!

**[Chris]** You know, we get on

\*all laugh\*

**[Chris]** But actually that's what does make it, that's something that you can't put in any job spec, but it makes it a hell of a lot easier. I think respect is a given, you have to respect what everyone brings to the party. Nikolai and I always need to be a team – doesn't mean we always agree on everything but what we need to be is united, especially on the big decisions that we're making in the theatre. So respect is a given. I think the great thing is that we have a brilliant relationship, we get on really well, and we laugh. There's not one day, even when it's hard going, that we don't actually manage to find – it might be hysterical laughter...

**[Nikolai]** Laughter through tears

**[Chris]** ...but we do laugh.

\*both laugh\*

**[Chris]** I like you anyway

**[Nikolai]** I like you too

**[Chris]** Good just checking

**[Nikolai]** This is taking a slightly bizarre course now

**[Fiona]** Well Nikolai you recently described the relationship as being naughty brothers and I know that your ideas are sort of very very ambitious, and you do work together and you balance those things out. I'm wondering when you come up with an idea and you want to put a show on, how does that process work? If you want to put a show on, you've either got a new production or you've got a production you'd really like to bring to Curve, what happens there at those very early stages?

**[Nikolai]** It's very difficult to describe really. I don't think you really talk about, like, 'we'd like to do this play' or 'we'd like to do this musical', we talk a lot about what's going on in the world. So this morning we were talking about Brexit and the state of the economy and we were saying there are these new world powers coming to the fore when you look at the axis with Trump and with Putin and possibly North Korea and we were thinking about what that might mean for the United Kingdom – what Brexit will mean, how that will trickle down to, on a very basic level, the money that people have in their pockets and their ability to buy theatre tickets. We've been talking a lot about the civil rights movement in America and that sort of led us to receiving – it's not our production but we were very keen that – *The Mountaintop* comes and plays in the new season. We've been talking about the significance of what Martin Luther King was doing in the 1950s until the point of his assassination in the 60s and how that seems screamingly and alarmingly relevant to today when you look at not just American society but how nationalism and how when you start to

polarise communities, how race relations and the ignition of tension within societies can start to ignite when you've got leaders who suggest that these things are acceptable. I mean obviously there are titles where we just go well look the rights to such and such (like next Christmas the musical that we're doing at Christmas) suddenly the rights are available, well, let's snap it up, let's do it, it's a once in a lifetime opportunity. But a lot of the time it just comes out of discussion about the world and a shared taste...

**[Chris]** ...and audiences.

**[Nikolai]** And audiences yeah

**[Chris]** One of the things that will move us forward artistically as an organisation and that idea of the balanced programme, one of the things I really live and breathe by is the idea that there should be something for everyone. There is no formal process to it. We talk a lot and we text a lot when an idea comes in and sometimes it will be a title we've never thought about doing so shall we see if it's available, but it is a very organic process. And actually we have – and I think this is a good thing – more ideas than capacity. So when something goes by the wayside and we were looking at this film from the late 90s early 2000s that we were really keen to adapt that wasn't an obvious adaptation and it probably wasn't going to be a musical, it would be a big stage play, and it's been in our business plan, we now know that we've not got it. We know we won't be able to get the stage rights to do it. But that's fine, that's one off the radar now, we've got so many things lined up but everything keeps changing in a good way because we've got to and we've got to be responsive. The thing that we don't do – and we're very good with each other – is we do challenge as well, it isn't that one of us said something and the other one goes 'absolutely', we will have really honest conversations. The one thing we're always very careful is we've got to be excited about it – the work we make, or bring to the theatre and programme – but actually it can't be about what we want to see. This isn't our theatre. This is the theatre in which we work in, and so there will sometimes be work that we will be producing which wouldn't necessarily be the top of my list of my favourite shows in the world, but actually it's a brilliant show we're going to do a terrific job by it and audiences will love it. I think that's where we are always really clear, that it can never be about 'what do I want to make or what Nikolai wants to make', what is right for this theatre and our audiences.

**[Nikolai]** And I think sometimes that's quite tough because when you're putting your audience and your communities first, when you're sort of in the 'milieu' of British theatre and the established practice, we're not vying for reviews or vying for position or trying to top such and such a theatre that's just put on the latest edgy new thing that's played to very few people but is about an Artistic Director's personal idea of what they want to see, it's about putting the audience first and sometimes that means doing things that are really populist and really unashamedly puts bums on seats.

**[Chris]** But also popular, that's it, popular for me, the idea that popular and commercial is not deemed creative and artistic and that's what I think is so dated.

**[Nikolai]** Yeah

**[Chris]** As long as we create great work, as long as we do it with integrity, with brilliant artists...

**[Nikolai]** ...it's like if you look at all the great artists, like Mozart and Andy Warhol and Lady Gaga, they're all creating great art, but it's great art which speaks to a mass audience crossing class, crossing cultural backgrounds, crossing any possible background you could think about. That's what we really like to do here and I think all of us agreed that. We don't want to produce something that's playing to like 5 people but is seen as the most exclusive epitome of artistic endeavour because I think if you're doing great art or producing great art then it will speak to a mass audience.

**[Chris]** And if you're going to do that, if you're going to do the endeavour which is for 5 people, I think it has to either massively push or drive forward art forms in whatever way, context or being, or it needs to be something self-funded. The way I see it is that we are funded...

**[Nikolai]** Spending other people's money

**[Chris]** ...by the tax-payer, 22% of the income of this theatre is through public-funding. Our job and the roles in which we have is very much about making sure, that whole idea of our brochure, everyone can find something. Everything may not be to everyone's taste, but my job as well is not to be a taste-maker. My job is to curate something which feels exciting and can serve a really diverse and interesting community. That's where we're lucky here, we've got terrific audiences and such diversity within our city and county, that actually we have options to more or less do whatever feels right and that is a real opportunity that we have.

**[Fiona]** So taking it right back then, you've spoken quite often about being working-class leaders and this industry I think to a lot of people can feel quite elitist. The fact that you have made these strides to now be Chief Executive and Artistic Director – how did that process work? Did you think that you would end up, when you were growing up, at the top of an organisation like Curve?

**[Chris]** Um, no, well no. I mean I was the first person in my family to actually complete all my GCSEs and I was the first person to do anything beyond GCSE education. It wasn't that there was expectation that I wouldn't do well, you know, my mum and dad are brilliant brilliant supportive people, the expectation was that I'll get a job and even when I was applying for university places and drama school places they were really proud that I was doing my a-levels but they didn't quite take it seriously when I said I am going to London, I've got a place, and they didn't quite take me seriously with it. So I've always had a bit of drive and across my career I've decided quite early on I want to run a building because I believe in what buildings can do and I think it's really exciting and a building brings people together. I've worked in non-building-based arts organisations and for me a building fits. It certainly fits for my career where it is at the moment.

**[Fiona]** Where did that desire come from?

**[Chris]** My first career in theatre was at the Globe theatre in London and the Globe is in the middle of central London, Southbank, and actually we were there to serve Southwark and I worked in the Learning Department there and 'The Globe Education' it's called. So I could see the role that theatres could have to a local community, I could see the roles of bringing people together – I can't remember the number of languages in Southwark but it was something like 34 – and I would go out and work in schools and things like that. I could see the role and impact our arts

education and theatre can have within a community and how it really matters. I worked with kids who were at risk of knife crime, you know in really difficult settings, and would work with those kids for 10 months and see massive journeys they go on working with me on Shakespeare. They felt confidence, they felt they had a great sense of worth, so all of that meant that if I then have one day I'm in a position where I can run an organisation then I'm able to really stretch open doors of the building or art and make art accessible and theatre accessible in particular. So that was very much in the back of my mind. I think when you come from a working-class background – or I can only talk for me obviously – is the routes aren't as clear because sometimes you don't feel like you've got the right language. My accent is quite diluted now but I was very Northern and I go very much Scouse when I'm with my family and when I say Scouse it goes Scouse. And that isn't that I've put on, it's more that I've lived in London 15 years and I went to Drama school so you're doing voice work quite often. But you don't feel like you have the right language and often a lot of arts and cultural leaders, certainly when I was entering the profession, were Oxbridge – so Oxford or Cambridge, in particular Cambridge – not that there's a problem with that, we need those leaders absolutely but there were very few people who I could identify with. I think when you do come from that working-class background – I think for me personally and I'm very grateful and recognise where I'm at – I think you deal with probably more than most Imposter Syndrome that you will get found out, not that you're working-class, but that you will get found out that you're not part of an establishment. But actually I'm now 3 years off 40, and I kind of think to myself now more and more I'm starting to think 'well sod it'. I'm here. This is my job. I own where I've got to and I feel proud of that. But it wasn't easy, it certainly wasn't, but I think I was my biggest barrier in the end – it wasn't others. I think I created the barriers myself because I was very self-conscious and didn't quite know the rules and hadn't grown up with theatre. It's a very long response to that.

**[Nikolai]** I think it's quite a complicated question to answer nowadays because I think Chris and I were...we are from a generation where, perversely, there were more opportunities than there are now I think. That's principally to do with funding. So that like going to drama school was the only thing I could think to do. I knew I was interested in theatre and I thought 'oh I must want to be an actor' because that's all I really understood even though I went to the theatre all the time you just saw really actors, I certainly didn't have much of an understanding like there was a set designer or there was a lighting designer or there was certainly a thing called a director. I obviously appreciated all that stuff but I never, I really never thought, it never even came to my head, that I might be able to do something like that. I just thought 'oh I'm really passionate about theatre so I must want to be an actor'. The process of going to drama school then was so much easier which sounds ridiculous because I think part of the challenge is now that everything genuinely at Curve we are so accessible, there is so much going on so you can really come here and take part in stuff and you know that if you want to learn about a director you can come and sit in our rehearsal room or you want to learn what Chris is doing you can join his leadership course and anything you can do here so it is really accessible and it's really out there and people can log on and see all these different drama schools, but for me the reason it is more challenging today is that the

financial barriers are much greater. So even though we both come from backgrounds where our parents had very ordinary jobs and there wasn't much money, well there wasn't any sloshing around to go space, you could go to drama school for £1000 a year. So that immediately meant we could apply to the student loans company, we could apply for emergency funding from the drama school, get a credit card, and through all those sort of botching things together you could actually go for three years and you come out with 30 grands worth of debt but there is actually a way through to navigate. Whereas I think today, even to audition for a drama school – I'm thinking specifically about drama training but I think it's more or less the same for all universities when going for an open day – you have to pay for the petrol and get there and they have all sorts of costs incurred themselves. I'm not explain this very well but the point is that it's 10 grand a year and then the accommodation in somewhere like London where a lot of the drama training is for example, is so, even in the 20 years I've been working in the programme, it's just gone through the roof. So I just think the barriers are much greater today, you've got this weird irony where everything is much more visible and all of these opportunities from directing to lighting designer to costume supervisor, they're all out there now. You can see what they all are but then suddenly unless you really have cash in the bank there is this immediate barrier that stops you getting through. So I don't think I've really answered your question!

**[Fiona]** No that sounds quite sad really that it's such an exciting industry to be involved in and it's such a brilliant thing. I think we've all seen how it can affect people and be really beneficial and so positive, but then to have those barriers for multiple sets of people wherever you're coming from, just seems really sad.

**[Nikolai]** Yeah

**[Chris]** Yeah, yeah well it is. I think it's that one where I think there's now understandable the volume of debt that you might get into for, you know the three of us are sat in here we have all got careers in the arts. I always say, I will always say for self-reflect 'I chose this', I chose a career where my starting salary I was working another job even though I had a full-time salaried job to remain living in London. But those were my choices at the time and I feel very fortunate that I have a career in the arts but I think there is that overwhelming fear that you end up with a lot of debt. I think it's higher education full stop – there's a lot of debt and are there jobs out there? Is there employment out there? Especially in the business like theatre, the statistics for acting has always been the statistics – more people unemployed than employed – but I would always say that people will still need to be employed, so that shouldn't deter people. Drama school training I think is the best, you know, that is where you learn, they learn their craft, they learn the different practitioners and explore more plays than they might do in the first god-knows-how many years of leaving. So there's so much value there but it's really really difficult. It's the economy and it's today but that's my fear is that it's higher ed, it's bigger than the conversation that we're talking about in arts and culture, it's higher education...

**[Nikolai]** It's become big business

**[Chris]** Yeah

**[Nikolai]** It's so complicated and we were just talking with Chris this morning I was absolutely heart-broken, yesterday I got news that a writer that we've worked with a

lot here at Curve and who's an incredible talent – a real talent – I mean not someone who's having to really work at it but just has a natural great ability, they said you know I'm packing it in, I can't do this anymore, I can't support my family, I can't keep awake at night just sort of guessing, hoping, hustling, praying, that the next job's going to come and you think 'this is crazy'. It's such a tough business, it's so ruthless... anyway we're sort of going down quite a negative track now, but I mean it's things we're thinking about all the time and how everyone rattles on about diversity and the reason we want to hear and see and experience diverse theatres, diverse voices in our theatres and in the arts, is because a diverse ecology we know is exciting and eclectic – that's what creates great work, great art, great theatre. I think we grow more and more anxious every day that young folk are not always being given an equal footing to sort of flourish and find their way through. It's a sort of constant preoccupation – how do we keep supporting and nurturing talent. It's complicated, because there's only so much we can do. As we all know, working here every day, it's epic. There's no day where we think 'uhh wonder what we'll do today', we're all held to metal every single day and we want to do more but it's difficult because there's only so much time and we want to do things well.

**[Fiona]** Is there one thing that you think 'oh if we change that, we could do so many things about the industry'? If there was a dream of 'I'd love to do this, but...'?

**[Chris]** Yeah I think it's really hard because you can say funding...

**[Nikolai]** It's society isn't it

**[Chris]** ...but actually you know that could be any, funding could apply to everything and anything and the more funding you get the more projects you want to do and the more staff you need to have so I think it becomes, there is no quick fix, there is no magical solution I don't think. What I'm, keen about is that we safeguard the arts, and I think what we could change and I think organisations like us and our roles (this is not just for the Arts Council and local authorities but organisations too) but about how we lobby and protect funding for the arts and our arts organisations and those that may not even be funded and protect them because actually what has potential to happen is as funding gets chipped away, it's the stuff that joe public may not notice is no longer happening so the new writing work or the artist development work or the learning work that gets cut or slimmed down in arts organisations to cope with and have a model that is viable that we're only going to know in about 5 – 10 years after that when 'oh wow there's no new writers', or 'there's no new composers out there', or 'wow the drama schools now are really... it is now becoming a very very middle-class' and I know that's already been spoken about quite a lot, but that's where I think, it's not the fix but it is that idea that we as a sector have to continue that lobbying and getting the most powerful voice to help lobby and protect and they are our audiences and participants and our communities. Because we're paid to lobby fundamentally and of course we're going to because we live and breathe it, this is so important to us, but it's the tax-payer. That will be the one that, because what you want it to be is that should there be a threat to public funding to the arts, all your community would be in uproar – because it's so important to them. Because we won't know what we've lost until it's gone, and we'd have to rebuild so many programmes and so much progress if some of that really valuable investment in arts and culture gets lost.



**[Nikolai]** Yeah and I think it's such a travesty what's going on with the curriculum and what's happening in schools that the arts and dance and theatre is going off the syllabus and is being erased in some cases from the syllabus and it goes back to what we sort of touched on at the beginning about this sort of idea about a grammar school and a comprehensive school – well my comprehensive school you could do everything from rugby to fell running to Latin to theatre to dance to fine arts to design technology, nowadays that great comprehensive school now is focused, all of the arts stuff is gone, and it's focused purely on sciences. Which I'm sure that's great if you're interested in sciences in that community but I think it's giving young people a broad education and it has to start when they're really young, it has to start in those primary schools that they start to get a real full 360 experience of what the world can offer and what they can offer it through the choices they make, but if it's very narrow where it's all to do with academic studies, then you start to lose a lot of great leaders and inventors and creators for the future and then it doesn't really matter how many opportunities we're offering because if there aren't people who know that there are these things called theatres or libraries then you're in trouble really. Again it's like Chris said, it will be a generation that will suddenly go 'blimey', there are no set designers coming through or there are no directors or actors because kids at school haven't been taken to the theatre or done a workshop with a TIE company in their class and it's so important so really for me I think it's trying to petition the authorities to really get the arts back on the curriculum.

**[Fiona]** So I think we can leave that slightly bleak future for a moment \*laughs\*

**[Nikolai]** Sorry, I don't want to be bleak...

**[Fiona]** No, no, actually in the present day, this year Curve is celebrating its 10<sup>th</sup> Birthday. So there's a lot for us to be happy about, and you have both led this theatre into its 10<sup>th</sup> year so that must be a sense of enormous pride to do that, to see everything coming together and all of the programmes that we have on, the productions, what does that feel like and what are we doing at the moment?

**[Chris]** Well, it's great, it's so exciting. I started at Curve, in fact it's almost 5 years ago to the day when I was appointed as Executive Producer and they were celebrating doing the 5<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations and the theatre had gone through quite a few major changes in the kind of 18 months leading up to that, and what's great is to look back then at an organisation that I was so excited to joining and to be here now in an organisation which I'm leading with Nikolai, and to see just how it's continued to move forward and evolve and change and go in new directions. We're going to announce all the stats and figures from our latest annual report soon, but you know it's great to think of the number of people who can engage with this theatre in the last year alone, the number of members that feel very much part of a family, the artists who keep coming back joyously to be part of our 10<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations – we had a gala a few weeks ago and it was genuinely like a lot of people coming home. The real joy is seeing Ria Jones, Danny Mac, Emma Williams coming back into the building and you could see, there was no performance or pretence there, they were coming to a building they loved so much. I feel very proud of that. I look at the team of people that we've got now here and I think we've got the best team that we've had in 10 years at Curve. I really Feel that – or at least in the 5 years I've been here! So I think there's so much to be excited – you know we're at a theatre that is

doing good business, making great work, and we're continuing to challenge ourselves and we're continuing to kind of say where might we go in the future? So it feels very exciting...for me, and you!

**[Nikolai]** Yeah

**[Chris]** As you smile

**[Nikolai]** Yeah

**[Fiona]** And that was the very first episode of Curve in Conversation. Thank you so much for listening, and I hope that you join me next time.