

Podcast: Kat François – communicating challenging topics

Transcript

SPEAKERS

Hannah Mason, Kat François, Jake Young

Kat François 00:01

Fix your crown.

Sometimes your crown will be not crooked or not right off your head.

Sometimes you will even forget who you are, you will forget that you are regal, beautiful, resilient.

Sometimes you will forget that you have endured so much worse.

Sometimes you will allow others to steal your beauty, your strength, your sunshine.

Sometimes you will cower rather than be bold. stay silent. Instead of shaking the world with your noise.

Sometimes you will believe the crap of others and allow them to coat your permeable skin in their rotten filth.

That's when you know that's when you know it's time to fix your crown, pick it up, dusted the hell off straight in it, straighten yourself and face all that has been thrown at you.

Just like the queen. You are.

Jake Young 01:08

Kat François there with her powerful poem, Fix your Crown. Kat who among other things is a performance artist, theatre director, producer, poet, actor, playwright and educator, joined Hannah Mason earlier this month, November 2020 to talk about communicating challenging topics, something that Kat has blogged about on www.culturehive.co.uk. They also talk about arts therapy, looking after your mental health and the power of joy, the power of vulnerability, as well as house rabbits and the benefits thereof. Here's Kat and Hannah.

Hannah Mason 01:45

That's wonderful. Thank you so much Kat.

Kat François 01:47

Thank you.

Hannah Mason 01:48

Can I just first kick off by asking you to sort of introduce yourself to everyone and let us know what you do and who you are.

Kat François 01:56

So my name is Kat François. And I guess I'm a performance artist. The main form of performance I use is spoken word poetry. I am also playwrights, so I create solo plays performances that I travel across the UK and beyond. And then I'm also facilitator, so I work teaching drama and poetry and creative writing to young people and adults as well. So yeah, in a nutshell.

Hannah Mason 02:22

Yeah, in a nutshell, I think that a poem that you've kicked off with there is really, really pertinent to how fragile people are feeling. And how, you know, quite sort of inspiring to make us get back up, Fix our Crowns, get it back on our heads. I'm gonna start with a question, which relates to a blog you wrote for CultureHive. And if anybody wants to know, they can go on the CultureHive website and have a look, you said, "My voice was a voice which had to fight to be heard, space was not automatically given." Can you tell us a bit about that personal fight Kat? How do you make space for your voice to be heard?

Kat François 03:05

I think it's about being a young black girl. While being a Yeah, it's all it's all about all those intersectionalities isn't it? So it's about being young, which a lot of people don't necessarily look at is, there's something I look at as adult privilege when you're a child, you know, you have to do what adults say, and go along with what adults want. So I think that's the thing about being young, not being in control of your life, being female, being a black female, coming from a working class background and all those intersectionalities that were just clashing as a young woman. And then even as a as an older woman.

And I think, I think I know, performance, the ability to write, but then the ability to perform as well, those two things was maybe when they came together the first time in my life. I felt like people really wanted to hear what I had to say. They didn't necessarily want to hear me saying it when I just said that, because I'm a compelling performer, I'm going to sometimes, you know, it's something I've shy away from, but I really love being on a stage and connecting with people. And I think the spoken word, and I've danced and done all kinds of things before drama acts in other people's words. But when I was able to put my own words into my own mouth and perform them, the impact on myself and my audiences was stunning. And I finally felt like I found my place. The stage was my play.

Hannah Mason 04:33

I think you also said something about I strongly believe as a performance artist's right, it's my duty to tackle challenging topics. So it's not just that you found your space, and that you're able to express your own feelings, but also how you sort of make space for other people to do that as well. I think that sounds really interesting. And obviously, as a facilitator, I guess that's something that you do how to do that make space for other people.

Kat François 04:58

I guess it's about trying to be fearless with my own work, because sometimes all it takes is one person to speak and then everybody else will start speaking. So the things that I have dealt with has been growing up in a house that there was domestic violence, I will talk about that. I will talk about my

experiences of racism and police brutality. At the moment, through lockdown, I have been working on some memoirs, around my struggles with infertility. And I have just learned on the way it's funny, like I'm not an oversharer. So people are sometimes quite shocked. And sometimes even some of my closest friends when they come and see my performances, or read my stuff they're like "Wow Kat".

But for me, that is my space to talk about those things and deal with them in a way that I can deal with culturally. You know, black people, we don't tap into counseling and things like that as much as we should. So for me, writing really was that space. So I'm not I'm not saying this easy all the time. But I'm not frightened as a performer to go into those spaces and to challenge people's opinions of what they think a woman should be like, or black woman should be like, or any opinions they might have about me.

And I think by me being fearless or trying to be fearless in that path. It gives others' permission, it gives other people permission to do the same. And I do truthfully believe as an artist, we have to poke and we have to push and we have to prod and we have to kick down those doors of our words and our performances. Like I said before, sometimes people might not be willing, if I want to just straight talk to someone about police brutality, they don't necessarily want to sit there and hear me but if I perform about it, oh, they'll be clapping me afterwards. You know, I mean, yeah. So yeah, I think it's it personally, was my duty to do that.

Hannah Mason 06:59

And do you think over the course of this year, the things have happened this year, people are a little bit more receptive to, to hearing those words to having those conversations? Or do you think it's kind of smoke and mirrors?

Kat François 07:14

I don't know, I think people were, I think there was funny, I put a video out called Black Rage. Around the time of the George Floyd, when that first kicked off, and that got about 22,000 views on FB, I mean, you know, in comparison to things that go viral, it's not that much, but it just shows that people are open to listening. And in that way, for me, it's nice, someone who's been battering the door about, you know, my incident with the police happened when I was 24 has a very long time ago now 28 years ago. And

I've been talking about this for a very, very long, long, long, long, long time. So in a way, it's nice, it's like, Yes, we should be able to talk about these things. I don't think it is smoking mirror, it will be for some, it will be for some but there's some of us who've been fighting the good fight for years, and we will continue, continue, continue. And actually, it's been nice to see the youngsters get fired up. They were the only ones that could go outside anyway, because as the older ones we will. So to see them younger ones take up the mantle, whereas you know, people that we were at, they were marching for the for the cause for a long time. So I'm hoping it's not all smoke and mirrors. And I think it's up to us to make sure it is and to keep, keep it, keep, keep pushing those boundaries and keeping these things in the forefront. Because we've seen already through COVID how these you know, I mean, these things have been playing out with ethnic minorities and more of us dying than anybody else.

And it's clear, it's clear to see if it wasn't clear to see before it's clear to see now. And there's a certain type of person that likes to statistics or statistics don't like more black woman died from in childbirth, more black people dying from COVID. And the statistics are there. So yeah, we just got to keep on pushing these, these these ideas and these facts.

Hannah Mason 09:06

I think that it's really interesting to hear you talk about that and to talk about the idea of pushing and the idea of being a bit uncomfortable or being a bit scared. You talking about being fearless, got any tips on how we can learn to be a bit more fearless

Kat François 09:25

It's not easy. It's not easy. I think one of the ways that I've coped lot of things, one of my coping mechanisms is to put things in a box and keep on moving forward. But I lost a friend in a suspected suicide about three years ago. And that shook my whole world. I mean, everything turned upside down.

And to be honest, it's never quite got back into sync since. But what I learned in that time is that there is strength in vulnerability. We have to be able to be vulnerable. Sometimes a lot of us can get into that strength means ignoring, no strength actually means accepting our vulnerabilities. And I had to learn to sit in my uncomfortable. Instead of pushing those feelings down instead of stamping on them, instead of ignoring them and pretending they weren't there, I couldn't pretend because they were in the forefront. It wasn't something it was so visceral it was so there and present, it wasn't something that I could ignore. And I had to work through it all. I had to work through the guilt. I had to work through the upset. I had to work through the shock. I had to work through the disbelief I just had to sit tight. And for the first time in my life, I did, I went and got like eight weeks of counseling, and I had the most amazing black woman counselor. And eight weeks, I was never late. I was there on time. Like because you know, NHS, you only get a certain amount of time. Because I was like, right, you don't be late, you're there before.

I went through everything with that woman, I went through things I didn't even know it was a problem. I'm telling you, I use those eight weeks well. But what she taught me was that you have to sit into the uncomfortable Kat. You can't push things down, push these things down. So I think it's about there is strength and vulnerability. Ignoring things is not what gives us strength, facing them head on and dealing with them, no matter how painful they are. No matter how awful they make you feel no matter how comfortable they make you or anybody else around us feel. Because sometimes we want to protect everybody else. We'd want to make them feel uncomfortable. So we hold. Now, I'm not going to talk about that. No, I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to push that I'm not going to push those boundaries. It's important to look after our own mental health. And I think losing my friend taught me that don't play around with your mental health.

Hannah Mason 11:43

Yeah. And I think it seems like art and creativity, having those channels to be able to express yourself and use those as a way to bring some of those things out. Is that is that something that you have done for yourself or something that you would suggest that people might get involved in to help them bring out some of those things?

Kat François 12:06

Everything you've said? Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. So without even realising it, I've kept diaries from very young, and 10,11, 12 always wrote. And without realising it, that was a way of me expressing myself and getting my inside out. And I've kept diaries on and off since. So that was my first, you know, foray with using expression and creativity as a way to just deal with life, young black, teenage life, whatever that anxiety that was going on. And also, there was some, some serious stuff as well. So and then obviously, I've got older and it has become my profession.

So for me, I will honestly say, I do not think I will be standing here, if it was not for art, because it's only a couple of years ago that I went, you know, last year, I went and got counseling. And, you know, I'm in my 40s. You know, so the way that I coped was through unmoving, I was a dancer, and you know, very much into exercise as well. So I was doing all those things, actually not realising that they were really helping me with my mental health.

So I would say to anybody, and, you know, I've been running this course, how to write the crap away on Thursday evening for women. And that is, I don't, I don't want no one to worry about Haiku. I don't know, to worry about how to spell we're purely using writing as a form of self-expression, to deal with everything that's going on at the moment. So yes, on a personal level, it has been life-saving. I cannot express that enough. It has truly been life-saving. And then anyone else. Yeah, get a pen, get a paper, just start diary writing every day. How'd you feel? It doesn't have to be for anybody else, do you know what I mean, for me, and many others who are artists, it's our profession. But it purely could just be something for you. That you use, you know, what about dance? What about art, drawing, even if you can't draw it don't matter just draw something. Just that is me. So some people sometimes say "Oh, Kat, you're so intense on stage".

Because for me, it's more than just a performance. It's more than just words. It's, it's life-saving. So when you see me on stage, I'm getting it all out.

Hannah Mason 14:31

I can't wait to we can see you on stage again.

Kat François 14:35

I do miss it. I miss it. I miss that feeling of a live audience.

Hannah Mason 14:41

That's really interesting what you're saying about being able to work with live audiences and be on the stage. I was wondering how the lockdown has affected you having to go onto digital platforms and how have you overcome any challenges with not having the audience in the room?

Kat François 14:57

Yeah, that was the world turned upside down for everyone didn't it and the bottom just fell out of all of that work. So that was very like, oh my gosh, like if I can't go into schools and youth clubs and the theatres, what am I supposed to do? But I just got on it like straight away. The other half is very

technical minded. So he was just like to me, come on, we've got to sort this out. Your laptop's about to fall down, you better go invest in a new one. It was falling about so I had to invest in a new laptop. And he's a photographer, so we had lights. He's quite good with tech. I was very lucky, I lived with someone who's very much a techie. And he understood he understood, right, come on, we can do this, and we can do at home.

Funny enough, I've been running online, one of my side hustles is a personal trainer and a fitness instructor. So I've been running fitness instructor lessons online anyway, for a while I have a Facebook fitness group. And I've been running sessions, usually for them once or twice a week. So we were just good to go really. So since March, we just started doing that. I started a kids club, but it really was just my little relatives. And across the country, I couldn't see my niece in Australia. And we ran that all the way through. So quite early on, I learned, you know, they're all under 10, five to 10.

So I learned how to just manifest that and work with that and being creative online. And I was running family quizzes and stuff as well. So quite quickly. I just basically got with it. So yes, it has got its challenges. Obviously, if you've got big personality online suits you. And I've just had to just really just think, Okay, how can I upskill? And what things do I basically have to offer. So I have been lucky. And between the Personal Training in between the teaching in schools online, Kat's Club, I ended up having a whole heap of kids all through the lockdown and their parents paid for them to be with me.

So yeah, but I've just been hustling and hustling. I have just been hustling. I ran a course yesterday for some young creatives, and they will you know, how can we cope? But I said you need to hustle. I said whatever you got you bring that to the table, what can you bring to the table? What workshops can you offer? You know, if you're a performer and you love working with kids start, you know, children's entertainer, all kinds of things. So yeah, I just mean hustling hard. And thank goodness, I'm in a position where I've been alright. And I mean, you know, obviously we're not spending as much now. I found that's been a big thing that's taking the pressure off when you think about traveling London is quite expensive, when you're always out and working. So me my partner to really sit down and budget. And yeah, we're all right, you know. I won't be going out to buying a Mercedes any day soon, but we're eating and the rent and the gas and electricity, and the council tax is paid.

Hannah Mason 17:47

That's brilliant. So we all need to find a side hustle.

Kat François 17:50

Yes, I've had a side hustle since young someone puts something on Twitter the other day about when you had your first job. You know, I had paper-round at 13, you know, baby-sitting, braiding hair, teaching dance. Saturday jobs, youth work, always had a side hustle. Always. Even as a creative I learned like no, like, I remember when I was like, Oh, yeah, I'm gonna stop doing any normal work and just do creative stuff. I soon learned it don't work like that. Them side hustles will keep you going through the hardest of times. 2015 I just got so much into fitness. I said, right. I'm gonna go and take a personal training course. I didn't even really want to go and teach with it. I just wanted to use it because I've just got so much into health and fitness. And then lo and behold, right now, to be honest, it's a bit of a saving grace. You know,

Hannah Mason 18:39

I love it. So you never know where your side hustle might take you. So side hustle may become your main hustle. One of the other things I also really liked on your CultureHive blogs, where you talk about learn to be a hoarder and learning to play. Because, yeah, I like the idea of hoarding is always associated with kind of difficult things negative, but in your blog it sounds, you know, you make it sound very positive. What? What is the thing about hoarding that we all need to sort of do?

Kat François 19:09

I think it's about saying, what, what do you really need and what don't you need? Like my partner, he's a photographer so we've been, you know, turning living room into a bit of a studio at times, and we do different shoots and what have we got around the house that we can use, and I'm like to invade, get out all those bits and pieces, the bits of material that we've had, the things that you've bought and you haven't used, my thing is just about don't waste money. Like, if we're going to buy something, we should use it and so now come now get out or get out all the stuff and we are going to use it.

And then also I'm a hoarder for books. I think books are good to have. I mean, obviously we've got the Kindles now, and the audio so we can do that. But definitely when it comes to writing, you know, I started working on the infertility memoirs, and at first I wasn't sure whether I had enough to write and then I went looking, and I found a diary that I forgotten I'd written in that time, I found all the medical notes and all that kind of information that somebody might say Oh Kat, why would you keep that? But I just find you forget so much. You know, that whole thing I said about putting things in a box and going forward. It's so easy just to forget so much stuff. I kept all the because when I had the incident with the police, I actually took them to the civil court and I won a case against them. And I have all the paperwork from that. I'm not sure what I will use that for. But I think there's some things you know, something's not living in absolute utter chaos. I don't necessarily think hoarding is a bad thing.

Hannah Mason 20:40

Yeah, I think that's great, because I think we have such a sort of a disposable society as well, don't we then get sometimes it's hard to hold on to things which spark those memories. So yeah, I like the idea of and how do we learn to play in the confinements of our houses.

Kat François 21:01

Listen, you know, one thing I did in lockdown I learned how to hula hoop. I couldn't even fling the thing around my waist. At the beginning of May, I found a class in Oxford. And Norwich, sorry. And it was just an online class. And I said you know what, I always wanted to learn how to hula hoop properly, which is the me now I am spinning four hula hoops at the same time like a hula hooping Queen – whip, whip whip - I absolutely love it. And I have not missed a class since May - Wednesday afternoons. So I think it is about going back and we've got spare time now. Get out that guitar. Get out that hula hoop, learn a skill, a fun skill like not I'm gonna write no book or do some math, do some. It's not about the big things. I think we have to find that joy in the small things right now. So it's, you know, I mean, go and put your foot in a bucket of water with some Epsom salts and some essential oils. Get a massage from your partner or self-massage, find some space, go to the bath. Put some candles relax.

I think right now we really have to find joy in small things because we can't find the joy in big things. And I think that's something that I have had to learn to do. During lockdown find joy in the little thing. So my big joy has definitely been the hula hooping. But I love the exercise that just gets the hormones going. A little Zoom with a friend, when, when, when needed to. But yeah, definitely silly things like painting my nails and soaking my feet and meditation. That's been a big thing. I haven't really been in it. I'm too hyper for meditation. But lockdown has taught me.

Remember I was saying earlier about we can't just rely on our mental health, we have to find things. And someone recently sent out like a 21 day meditation thing, and I've done it. And I've done it and it's felt so good to do that. So everyone's joy is different. Everyone's piece is different. Everyone's play is different. But some stuff we get too big as adults and we forget. And we can be bogged down with the trauma of life and the challenges in life. But one thing I have to say is I'm really glad I've always had a good sense of humor. And I think that has always pulled me through and I'm a Gemini so sometimes when people meet me depends what mood you meet me and they can think I'm really serious because I do have a very serious side.

But then I also have a very joyful and funny and playful side and that is the side I tried to tap into not so that she over clouds everything else. But just so no matter what happens, I still got sunshine in my life. So find your sunshine. What's your sunshine?

Hannah Mason 23:32

That's lovely. I love it. And I'm going to ask you what question have I forgotten to ask you what what what thing that would you want me to ask you that I've missed out? Is there anything burning desire for us to chat about something?

Kat François 23:49

Yeah, let's talk about pets for a minute. Why not? They've been such a big part of my life.

Hannah Mason 23:53

The house rabbits. Let's get introduced to the house rabbits.

Kat François 23:59

So I have, I'm not a pet person the only pets I had growing up were goldfish. And I was only allowed them when I was old enough to take care for myself. I come from your typical Caribbean family, no pets. Pets live outside. They do not live inside. And then when my friend got sick, the one who passed away. Originally I had her rabbits for a while one of her rabbits Jessica Rabbit. And I had her we looked after Jessica and Jessica was fine and Jessica was fine. But then when she did pass away about a year or so later, we ended up taking Jessica back and to be honest Jessica has been a joy. I've had her three years now and definitely at the beginning when I was struggling with my friend passing like Jessica was just amazing. And then we got another rabbit I love them rabbits, them rabbits got a little bed. Them rabbits got tunnel them rabbits have kale, they eat better grades than I'd eat. They got spring greens. They got tunnels, like them rabbit they could and I never thought. Listen so much so before I used to eat fish and I think it could be two years now. I stopped eating the fish. I don't know just having a little salad running around a living room I said how can I eat something that's alive? Like I just

couldn't work with that anymore do you know what I mean, like I stopped eating any meat na na na na I can't be eating meat when I've got two little creatures in my house so I think sometimes we don't realise how much joy pets can bring to our life and they have brought a lot of joy and lot of joy to me.

Hannah Mason 25:24

Doesn't everyone want to go out and get a house rabbit now? What's the other rabbit called?

Kat François 25:28

Hopsy, she was Hopsy when I adopted her, so I've got Jessica and Hopsy but they are very weird pets to have. They are a lot more difficult than people think that they are because they eat hay. And the hay definitely gets everywhere. And they are very delicate, very delicate stomach. So they're not very hardy animals. So you have to be very, very careful. So we had a few things we learned the hard way. But now it's just that right? That's it just hay and greens and that's it and they find out so yeah, please don't run and get rabbits and read up on them because they are very delicate, amazing, but delicate creatures.

Hannah Mason 26:02

So maybe one of your next books is going to be how to train your rabbit

Kat François 26:06

Or how your rabbit trains you the other way happening so yeah, they definitely got me wrapped around their paws.

Hannah Mason 26:14

I love it. Well. I just want to say thank you so much for talking to me and for bringing some joy into definitely joy into my life and my day. It's been wonderful to meet you and bringing joy, I hope to our listeners days as well and some really good tips on how to be more creative, artistic, fearless, brave, vulnerable, all of those things. It's wonderful.

Kat François 26:38

Thank you. Thank you very much.

Hannah Mason 26:51

So I do hula hoops, sometimes.

Kat François 26:52

I can do everything spin on my foot. Go up on my back. Spin on my hand, all kinds of foolishness.