

CHASE

ART THERAPY

Art is a great therapist and no-one knows that more than Liz Churton, who tells her emotional story to ROAR CEO Sharon Gill



LIZ Churton is not native to Rotherham. She was born and spent her formative years in Erdington, Birmingham.

The city was already diverse and full of different cultural influences as well as libraries and art galleries, free spaces to explore. The only child of an opera singer and a welder, Liz was faced with a challenging and traumatic upbringing, but throughout her career, both as an artist and educator, she has been able to turn diversity into opportunity and use limited resources creatively. Whether working as a community artist, classroom teacher, headteacher or a full time artist and animator, Liz has always strived to shine a light in places where there may be darkness, inequalities or injustice.

Liz's mother was one of the very few students from a working class background to attend the Royal College of Music on a scholarship in the 1940s. While this was undoubtedly a great opportunity, it does not facilitate social acceptance, and sometimes those differences can be too great to conquer. After studying and performing with some of the world's best opera singers, Liz's mum 'lost her nerve' and returned to Birmingham, where she felt at ease and at home. Here she was employed at telephone house as a shorthand typist where she stayed for many years.

Love took hold, followed by marriage and a child reasonably late in life at the age of 35.

For Liz, from the age of three years old, childhood took on a whole new dimension. Her grandfather on her father's side passed away which had a profound affect on her father. His latent schizophrenia came to the fore and led to him being institutionalised. Liz recalls visiting her father in different psychiatric hospitals as a childhood normality, setting a theme of grief and loss central to her life. He was also one of the last inpatients in the country to undergo invasive lobotomy surgery.

On the other hand, Liz's mum found an outlet locally for her stage dreams by joining amateur dramatic societies where she was always the star. Liz was encouraged to to take her place on the stage, but it was always in her mother's shadow. It is no surprise to hear Liz recalls being a little bit feral, bringing herself up and that her grandmother played a significant role in her life. There are not many young people who at the age of 16 years have sectioned both their parents after her mother suffered a breakdown. The arts became a vital survival tool. Such unique life experiences meant Liz was not at ease with social relationships and preferred to spend her time writing and drawing.

While attending Trent Polytechnic to study art, not only did Liz's father pass away soon after she left home, but her maternal grandmother also died. More loss and grief.

It was the 1980s and new media was emerging as a toll for creativity, however it was dominated by young men dressed in black, who monopolised the cameras and computers, meaning Liz spent her time in the painting studio, where she found more empathy among the staff who taught landscape painting.

It was after college, when Liz stayed in Nottingham and worked as a community artist and found her way to the Feminist Arts Movement, where she got her hands on a camera and was able to make films and animations with the Miners Wives group during the strike, at an International Community Centre. Driven to find acknowledgement and to be productive and successful, Liz enrolled on a teaching course. An educational film about the Aids crisis aimed at young people became her final submission for her PGCE qualification.

This became the start of her journey through the education system, where her experienced-based affinity with troubled children could be put to good use and her politically motivated need for a fair and just society could be made real. Initially securing a position in a challenging and diverse school in Nottingham, Liz stayed there for seven



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years and implemented a community arts and theatre group and a post-16 theatre company. Liz then became the head of department for English and Media in Scarborough, where she also completed an MA in Literacy.

Being at the top of your game, studying for qualifications and moving around for your career can be a lonely life. The hours are long and you become a negotiator and mediator rather than a confidant. You learn to listen and have great patience. These skills were further honed when Liz became a headteacher.

During all this time, Liz continued to turn to the arts for respite. She managed to make a successful career as a painter and was known for her colourful landscape paintings and drawings. Even so, like many leaders within public service, working hard can also be a convenient and acceptable addiction for blocking out past traumas. Unfortunately Liz faced burnout. She retired from the profession and spent the best part of the following year in serious recovery,

Liz talks at length about the importance of creativity and particularly the act of drawing in the process of her recovery. Exhausted both physically and mentally, for a long time even painting was difficult and so she gave herself art therapy by using her iPad to draw anything and everything. It gave her both therapy and purpose and, in her characteristic approach to turn adversity into opportunity, she started to see the potential of digital mark making for sequential art and animation for exploring subject matter connected with her childhood.

She worked so hard at literally 'drawing' herself out of burnout, that she was able to get together a portfolio to gain herself a place as a PhD research student with The Northern Film School at Leeds Beckett University.

"I now feel ready to face the monsters of my past and see how this informs the way I see the present," Liz explains, as she talks about making sense of her formative life experiences.

She is comfortable talking about how she is now mining difficult memories as subject matter for her work. "What I now realise is that, in order to survive my parents' regular psychodramas, was to find ways of relating to them and their world in a semi-detached way."

She goes on to explain how she is now trying to find ways of creatively harnessing what she has learnt about her experiences of estrangement and alienation. "Becoming an outsider, although it can take you to a negative, unhealthy, self-destructive place, can also be a place where creativity and reinvention can happen. "For some time now I've been depicting half-animal, half-human characters in my drawings ... they have become metaphors for aspects of my memories.... they are a type of auto-mythography," she continues.

The pandemic and lockdown has had a significant impact on the way Liz has approached her work. Her recent recovery felt like her own personal lockdown, so she has had plenty of time to interrogate what that means. It is no wonder this has become central to her studies, as it combines key themes present in her life; loss, grief, alienation and estrangement, social justice, anti-establishment, feminism, new technology etc.

She explains: "On Thursday March 12 2020 the British Government announced that it wanted the UK to develop what has since become commonly known as 'herd immunity'. This was the day that I made my first drawing as part of what I now refer to as my 'Herd Immunity' collection."

Recognising that drawing was helping her make sense of a new world order and manage the anxiety society as a whole was experiencing, true to her nature, she wanted to reach out beyond her isolation and find out what other people were thinking and feeling.

"I decided to collect audio recordings of people's experiences of lockdown. They would send them to me through social media and I would experiment with using them as a soundtrack for possible animation sequences."

There is a sense of humour about these 'herd immunity' drawings, but they are also essentially dark, dystopian, reminiscent of George Orwell's Animal Farm and Art Spiegelman's Maus in their political satire. They are forming part of the graphic novel she is writing which integrates her past and present experiences. Now that she has moved into a studio space at ROAR, she is busy consolidating all her ideas, drawings, sketch books and animations.

What was lovely about my interview with Liz, was learning that, after an emotionally intense childhood leading to always craving validation and acceptance manifesting through her totally driven career to date and artistic practice, she now embraces a sense of freedom and joyous play. She is very excited about this new journey. Liz works for her own satisfaction, there is no other agenda, no Board of Trustees or other governing body to be accountable to. There is time to explore each element, to go down the rabbit hole, and find the sense of wholeness that being creative is so very good at.

You can follow Liz on:

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