

## 020 Wysing 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Podcast: Terry Podcast Transcript

Harold Offeh: Hello, my name is Harold Offeh and today I'm at Wysing Arts Centre, conducting a series of conversations with people who have deep connections with Wysing. We're still celebrating the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Wysing Arts Centre and today I have Terry Brooks with me. Hello Terry.

Terry Brooks: Hello Harold.

HO: How are you doing?

TB: I'm alright, thank you, despite having a microphone in front of me. I'm actually okay.

HO: So, we're sitting in Wysing's new recording studio, well fairly new, maybe it's a few years old now. It's still looking pretty fresh! Terry has kindly agreed to answer some questions really that hopefully will kind of elucidate some of his experiences as one of Wysing's founders. I'm just going to kick off with the first question. So, Terry, can you describe your first night at Wysing? Maybe this is also a bit of a kind of sort of Segway into maybe discussing some of your experiences of the early days of Wysing Arts Centre.

TB: I'm sure my first night was in the first few years but I don't really have much memory of it. And then we never really, Jenny and I, never really stayed here. Age and Annie, the other pair, partners, they lived here, they lived in the farmhouse and Jenny and I still lived in north London, it used to take us an hour to get here, so we very much came up and went back. Almost all the time. So, in fact the first night I remember is only a year or two ago when I came up from London so that I could be...we had an away day and the Fitzwilliam were very kindly hosting us and allowing us to use their room and facilities. Though in order to make it easier for me, I drove up to Wysing on the night before and spent the night there, along with, I can't remember how many people now, were you there Harold?

HO: I wasn't, but there were a few people.

TB: Yeah there were a few of us there and it was a really nice evening and around the kitchen table and then off to bed and because I've got lung problems now, I've got the best bedroom on the ground floor next to a loo. So that was good. But it's a lovely farmhouse. It's absolutely fantastic inside.

HO: Can I ask what it was like when you first...when the four of you first came across Wysing?

TB: Everything was fairly shabby really and dilapidated. Well, it was an old farmhouse which was probably let or occupied by somebody working on the farm, and then a whole bunch of what were working farm buildings, so there were cow barns and

stables and a great big woodpile where the window room now is. Just old wood. Very shabby, quite derelict, with 11 acres of land attached to it.

HO: Wow!

TB: Yeah really, we had no idea what we were taking on!

HO: \*laughs\* What was your initial impetus then, why had the four of you decided to set out...

TB: ...we were talking about how there was a lack of affordable space for artists to have studios and that was really...the kernel was the idea that well, perhaps there's a market for somebody to have a place which has artists' studios at a decent rent that are for people who make their living or regard their livelihood, they regard themselves as artists. Artists not doing something else but actually trying to live off their art. And that was...affordable space for practicing artists was the original sort of, I don't know what you call it these days, but anyway that was it.

HO: Ambition? Mission statement?

TB: Yeah mission statement. Yeah that's the word. Thank you, yeah. That was our mission statement, affordable space for practicing artists.

HO: But it's interesting that you...because I think there's sort of traditions often, particularly within urban spaces in cities, warehouses and old dockyards and things like that, but were you specifically looking in the countryside?

TB: Well that kind of place to make it...we felt that it was out of our range in London. You know, buying a property, a large property in London to convert it to art studios. I think we just regarded it as...whereas buying a derelict farm in Cambridgeshire was a different order of things so it became more doable. \*laughs\* Although we had obviously had no idea how much it was going to cost in the end really, nor how much work would go into it.

HO: So, it was very much a leap of faith then?

TB: Yes it was, if we'd had to have a business plan to present to people, we would never have got off the ground, but we had a sort of initial finance. It was a leap of faith, a leap in the dark. I remember Jenny and I saying that...if the light doesn't turn on at the end of the tunnel after 10 years, then we walk, no matter how much we've done, spent, whatever, we just leave it. Because otherwise you can be in the famous hole where you shouldn't be digging at all, you should be getting out of it but you're not, you just continue digging. So, we thought 10 years and if there's still no daylight at the end of the tunnel then that's it, we walk away. But actually, by the time the 10 years came up, the daylight was there. This was 19...

HO: That's a huge commitment of 10 years even!

TB: Yes, it is.

HO: We're just going to see what happens in 10 years!

TB: Yes, but we had to be realistic about it, if you say oh...well we both knew from sort of life experience from ours and from friends, that it's very easy to think – 'Oo yeah we'll start something up and then it'll all be great after 2 or 3 years'. It's not like that. I mean, maybe it is if you're lucky. But for a lot of people it's a real slog, getting something off the ground. So, you know, you have to... it is a long time.

HO: But maybe was that sort of sense that you were giving it enough time to let it. Because you're right, maybe there could be a desire to sort of see results in 3 years and for it to be like this really amazing sexy established thing. But actually, to say actually let's give it this really long gestation period to just...

TB: Yeah, I mean I think we realised that on the one hand it was a leap in the dark and really a pretty crazy thing to do. On the other hand, there was the knowledge that if it was going to work, it wasn't going to be overnight, but then on the other hand, looking at it now, three sets of 10 years we've had. The first 10, and then another 10, and now the third 10, thirty years.

HO: What did people say at the time? When you said, you know...the four of us have bought this place and we're doing it up and it's going to be...

TB: I think most people thought it was fairly crazy, I think. I think Cambridge planners did when we went to get planning permission, because we couldn't move on the property really, until we knew that we were going to be allowed to do what we wanted to do. We ended up the four of us going into Cambridge and sitting down in the planning office with the planners because they... I don't think they could believe that anyone would do what we said we'd be going to be doing which was creating an arts centre and studios and a gallery and you know. I think they thought we had some other plan up our sleeve, because they made us. They were really worried about traffic. They made us give a numbered parking place to every studio that was one of the conditions of getting permission. That every studio had to have a parking place and there would be a number on it, and it would be allocated to every studio.

HO: \*laughs\* Very detailed!

TB: Yes, it was. But I think once they saw that we actually were doing what we said we were going to do, then we became okay. I think people think something like that is pretty crazy really. I mean they're right too to be honest! It is. We've been very lucky with a lot of different things, what with the people who have worked here and the trustees we've had, who've just been amazing - professionals who give their time for free. It's lovely, and then there were our volunteers. And of course, all the artists and all the different members of staff we've gone through. Donna who's looked after the

place for 15 years now. All that we see now is very much her creation really, which you know...and it's great.

HO: We'll move on to the next question.

TB: We did wander about a bit there, didn't we? \*laughs\*

HO: \*laughs\* No, no, that's good!

TB: That's alright.

HO: Partly that question was a way of talking about some of the early days and those experiences. So, this question is, how would you describe Wysing to somebody who had never heard of it or who had never visited?

TB: It's a kind of artistic incubator I think actually. It's a place where art can get created, it can get thought of. It can get played with. It can...it's often a community of artists working together and that creates its own dynamic of things. So yeah, it's an artistic incubator. It's a great place of learning and development and creation. I think that kind of actually sums it up.

HO: Yeah! Totally, I mean...yeah!

TB: I think Wysing tries to think of artists, tries to be artist centred I think, rather than art centre centred.

HO: Yeah. That's an important distinction I think to make between the kind of objects or outcomes which often kind of museums and galleries are concerned with and actually the people behind that, the individuals, the communities, the conversations and dialogues that generate the stuff that's, you know, put front and centre in a sort of pristine gallery. Yeah, I think that's a very important distinction to make.

TB: Yeah. I mean, yeah, the galleries...the...I treat myself to a Financial Times every Sunday, because it's a stupidly expensive paper, but it does have a nice arts section and it occasionally has these ridiculous pull out sections of art collecting and the art fairs, you know, the global ones, the big ones. I look at them and think, god, it's just a completely different world to the one which we inhabit, although, you know, the people who pass through Wysing, are likely to end up selling through one of the galleries or could do one day. So, it's funny looking at that. Every time I look at the sections and look at all the pictures and read some of the...and quite honestly, it's PR. I read some of the PR about it I have to laugh because it's not Wysing, Wysing is art centred rather than art centre centred. Yeah, definitely.

HO: Yeah... this next question is based on an artist who has stayed here. The artist Ruth Biel instigated a project where she was asking artists who stay in the farmhouse to leave a book for other artists. A way on developing this ongoing library of people's references or things that they might want to kind of share. In the spirit of that, it

might be a book, or it might be something else that you would want to share with future artists who might benefit from being here at Wysing.

TB: I love the idea. I'm sure I've been told about it and forgotten about it, but I think it's an absolutely cracking idea, I really do. The idea of contributing a book or something similar, something that has a meaning to it when you stay which is great because it creates a kind of physical memory of people and it puts in something personal as well. If they've chosen it, if it's a personal book or a personal object or whatever. I'm not sure, there are so many lovely books. But I suppose one that would perhaps do quite well at Wysing. I'm trying to think what it's called now. It's about a German naturalist whose name escapes me too. He's got a currant named after him.

HO: Wow, like an electric current?

TB: No, no in the sea.

HO: \*laughs\*

TB: He was a kind of explorer...a real polymath. He brought together what we would consider all the subjects of ecology. He was a contemporary of Darwin's actually.

HO: Oh okay.

TB: And he went to South America, and also to Russia.

HO: Sort of like a Naturalist or Ecologist?

TB: Yes, he was a kind of naturalist.

HO: 19<sup>th</sup> century?

TB: Yeah.

HO: Oh yeah.

TB: The reason I'd leave it is because the whole idea of ecology is so important and it's so interesting to see it all...you know, he noticed how deforestation and the effects of deforestation on land...he could see it in South America in between various places he'd visited which had been inhabited differently by different peoples and different systems and he also noted the way vegetation changed as he went up mountains and all the precipitation differences and...he's not known in this country.

HO: It seems really...yeah...forward thinking in terms of the impact of, I guess, deforestation on landscapes and ecologies and stuff like that.

TB: Oh yeah, he was.

HO: If we think about the Amazon and what's happening now it's an acceleration of that.

TB: No that's one of the things that made this book, but it's a wonderful book. Written by...she really writes well about him, and...John Humboldt!

HO: Ahh!

TB: Oh, thank god for that! That's the problem with a 69-year-old memory, it kind of gets sticky!

HO: You got it. Wasn't there a university named after him?

TB: Oh yeah there would be. He's well known all over the world, just not in Britain because...and there's a Humboldt currant in the Pacific, or Atlantic down in the Southern hemisphere. I won't go into naming...

HO: No, no, we got the name.

TB: But at least I got the...god thank god for that.

HO: \*laughs\* You got the name!

TB: This huge great blank page sitting there in my brain going what's his name? Von...von...\*sigh\* I think I'd leave that recent biography of him for people to have a look at.

HO: Speaking of trees, there are lots of trees...I was asking Jenny rather anecdotally about the fruit trees and particularly, you know, just how bountiful it is here, well not now, we're still just in March but, you know, towards the end of the summer. But you planted a lot of those right?

TB: A lot of those we planted. Yeah, yeah, we planted a lot of fruit trees down in the farmhouse field and up at the back there, and then further back where the strawbale building is are there's more. Yeah, in fact, we planted lots and lots of trees here, because that area where the 'Treekeep' is, that's all...they had a special offer, I can't remember. Our director Tristian Hawkins he was tasked with spending as little money as possible and getting the most for it and when he took over as director, when we finally got ourselves to become professional. And he came across this offer, I can't remember whether it was the local council or the local forestry commission or something...anyway...if you bought a thousand trees or something you could have them for a quid or 50p each or something. So, all those trees in the field up there came from that. We planted a load in the other field and some in that field there, because all the fields were just open and the whole hedge we planted as well, that fronts on the road. If you look deep into the hedge, you'll find there's a wooden fence, or there probably isn't anymore, it's probably rotted away. But...so yeah, a lot of planting and there's never been any pesticides or anything like that...which explains all the nettles!

HO: \*laughs\* But some serious landscaping talking about ecology...

TB: Oh yeah, we've done serious things...

HO: ... if you think about wildlife and bird life.

TB: Well yeah, we did build a pond. That's why it's called the pond field but unfortunately, it's got a leak because we used puddling clay. We had loads of volunteers puddle the clay for the pond and then it was fine for years and then I think a drought dried it out too much and it got a crack in the clay and ever since then it's leaked. It's...what we need is a pond charity to give us a whole bunch of money so we can clear everything out, put it in a liner and then put everything back in again.

HO: So, the weeds stay behind...that's quite an ambition...

TB: Yeah it is. It's probably a five figure sum I would imagine. Something like that...

HO: Brilliant. Okay, thank you very much Terry...

TB: It's a pleasure.

HO: I really appreciate you giving time.

TB: That's alright I'm glad my memory finally made it!