



Ep 5: Opportunity, agility, and resilience

Sanjoy K. Roy in conversation with Adrian Ellis

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Adrian Ellis: Hello and welcome to The Three Bells. This podcast is one of a series for the Global Cultural Districts Network, brought to you by AEA Consulting and The Binnacle Foundation. It's where we explore what's happening around the world on those busy and sometimes congested intersections of cultural and urban life.

I'm Adrian Ellis, the Chair of the network, and this podcast is an interview I had with Sanjoy Roy, the Founder and Managing Director for Teamwork Arts, the international producing and presenting company. Sanjoy tells a fascinating multidimensional story of his own life, the genesis and growth of Teamwork into an international festival producer and culminating with the COVID pivot that Teamwork has made.

Sanjoy is based in Delhi and we recorded in early April. So it doesn't address the implications of the current COVID wave, but it's no less relevant or interesting for that. Sanjoy is a hyper articulate commentator on our cultural moment and what has led to it.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

Adrian Ellis: Sanjoy, it's a pleasure to have you on this podcast. And it's a privilege too.

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Sanjoy K. Roy: Thank you, Adrian. Happy to be here. And like I said, if you ask for something, I doubt anybody in the world can say no to you, so we'll go for it.

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Adrian Ellis: (laughs) So I thought I, I would love to have a conversation with you in three broad overlapping parts. You've had a remarkable career, you're a successful producer, director of film and theatre.

You have won enumerable awards. You are the advisor to many government initiatives of national significance and international significance, and you have created and led a remarkable company Teamwork about which I would like you to say more. Who is Sanjoy Roy? And how did you get to be Sanjoy Roy as it were? What was the trajectory? I think people are always interested in the lives that people have forged for themselves, particularly younger listeners who are trying to figure out their own lives in tumultuous times.



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Sanjoy K. Roy: So Adrian, much of my life has been by accident, as opposed to what Harvard Business School teaches, that you know, one had a plan and a plot, which was, you know, five, 10, 15 years to take over the world. None of that really was in any way a reckoning when I first started off. I've always been in, in theatre and always got into trouble.

Not necessarily because I've been in theatre, but there has been a sort of overlap in university. I used to do a lot of street theatre, set up my own theatre company, got, got entangled with problems with the law because I was protesting about something or the other against the government of the time, used theatre to bring about social change, started a street children's organisation roughly when I was whatever, 22 or 23.

When I was running, when I left university, I was already part of this theatre company, Theatre Action Group, which was a preeminent theatre company based in Delhi and its Creative Director was Barry John. I was as Executive Director, first it's Manager and then I was kicked upstairs as its Executive Director. And it was roughly at that time in India, what happened is that television started opening up from being completely in the domain of the public broadcaster, which was called Doordarshan – which is the government terrestrial channel in those days, in the mid-eighties, early eighties. And they started opening up and a number of producers who got slots or time slots on the main channel, started looking around to create interesting serials and soap operas and game shows and blah, blah, blah.

And there wasn't really any television professionals in the country outside of those already engaged with Doordarshan. So people like that then came to people like us who were, you know, in a relatively sort of engaged part of the arts. So, uh, Bobby Baidy, the, who had then already produced a number of award-winning films, et cetera, kept coming to me a number of times and say, you have to come and direct.

I then went into my first job and directed a game show. I did that for a couple of years, helped him do a couple of films and uh, thereafter my partner and I, who – I mean, he was part of the advertising company, which was part of this larger umbrella company that I was working in video graphics, and Mohit said to me, listen, why don't we just set up something ourselves, because I know you want to do something that you want to do, not necessarily just commercial rubbish. So I was game.

So in 1987, as part of the theatre company, we set up a, what then was called TAG TV. TAG was the name of the theatre company. And our primary motivation was to provide jobs for our colleagues in theatre, so that during the day they would have a way to earn a living and in the evening we would all go and merrily rehearse in rehearsal rooms somewhere in the city and stage our plays and, and live out our passion. That sort of changed at some point.

And then in 1989 we set up a Teamwork Films at that point of time. Initially, we did films primarily for NGOs and people like UNICEF and World Bank, et cetera. And purely by accident, by which time we've done this wonderful film for KLM Cargo which we shot in Jaipur or with uh, with a slew of elephants and camels in the forests of Jaipur.

But as it happened, this film really won every award there was at that point of time in advertising and therefore, some interesting work came our way, which allowed us to pick and choose what we wanted to do.



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Sanjoy K. Roy: I think this was 89, 90. Television went completely private, and because we were already sort of in the mix, naturally most of these television channels came to us to say, what will you create for us? Uh, we not knowing any better, said, you know, we'll create this and we'll do that show and this show and so on and so forth. Then by 1994, 95, we had about 15 daily, weekly, uh, soap operas, game shows, food programmes, news programmes, puppet shows, theatre projects, all on television, uh, which were either on a daily basis or a weekly basis or a bi-weekly basis.

And in many ways we were a factory, Adrian. And two of our colleagues – two of our Senior Producer/Directors, Monica Barry and Cheruppa Data they came to me one day and said, we are brain dead. We can't do this anymore. And in a moment of foolishness – and I'm, you know, fairly foolish as you know, Adrian. I said, okay, if nobody wants to do this, that's fine. Let's shut it down. And, you know, we calculated the math and we said, okay, the television channels owe us money for X number of months. We'll be fine. Let's rethink, let's go back to our roots of the arts... except that we didn't calculate that the television channels would have nothing of the sort.

And they were really upset that we were going to shut down and they withheld our money, they threatened us, it, it went completely pear-shaped. And we realised in 1995, 96, we were pretty out on a limb having literally sold off the branch which we were sitting on. So we started losing people, people started leaving – obviously, because we weren't being able to pay salaries.

And in this reinvention, what had happened is, my partner Mohit, his sister, and this great friend of ours had created something called Friends of Music, which was a platform for people to come together once a month in Delhi in an interesting place – be it somebody's house, a heritage monument, whatever, and do music which wasn't popular. So no Bollywood, no rock, but something that was experimental.

And so that became our focus even as we started going downhill and out of television. And that became very successful, Adrian, and it became the sort of go-to place. And, because it was very successful, we thought of doing the same thing in dance. We commissioned a lot of new dance. And we did the same in theatre. We, we commissioned new writing. And as I said, till then, much of English theatre in India, Adrian, was either rip offs of off-Broadway, or off Western shows and there was no real original writing coming out in English, in India.

So we started commissioning new writing and we did it across Hindi and English. And then we realised we had all of this content, Adrian, but there were no platforms in India really to showcase this. And we're now talking about 1999. I got invited by university, especially in the UK because they thought, Oh, he speaks our language, he looks artistic, he's got long hair. And diversity, if you remember, was the big flavour of the season at that point. So I could, I used to go out and teach for British council and lecture at all sorts of places.

And that led to a network being created, which led to my going to the Edinburgh Festival in 1999, 2000. And I was absolutely besotted and fascinated to see this incredible mix of energy, of creativity, of the world, the centre of the universe, the thousands of shows – a lot of them rubbish, but some amazing. And I was like, Oh wow, this is the place that we need to bring some of our work.



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Sanjoy K. Roy: So in 2001, we set up our first platform at the Edinburgh Festivals, and we were able to network with Australia, and New Zealand, and the United States, and Canada, and all of these places that led us to set up our first international office in 2001, 2002 in Singapore because Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay was about to be launched. They took us on board to advise them. We helped them with the launch. We then set up a festival with them – Kalaa Utsavam, which we ran for many, many years over a decade and a half.

And we expanded our work to Australia, Western Australia, and New Zealand. And as I say, the rest is history. And then we started working our way back down Western. As I said, all of it was in many ways, really accidental, Adrian.

And my life, and the life of our company, and all my colleagues is pretty entwined. Uh, you know, so if you're looking at work-life balance, yes, that would be a question, but I don't see my work very different from my life or my hobbies, which is reading, watching theatre, listening to music.

I mean, it's, it's a dream job.

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Adrian Ellis: What a wonderful story of both luck and the opportunity, and the bravura capacity to take advantage of that luck – which is as important as the luck itself. So, let's take 2019, rather than 2020 or 2021. How many countries, uh, is Teamwork programming in, for a year like 2019?

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Sanjoy K. Roy: I think we were in 42 cities, in 16 or 17 countries. It keeps changing. So I'm not entirely sure.

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Adrian Ellis: There are people who talk about festivalisation in a slightly pejorative tone. And I think that they mean two things: They mean the ascendancy of presentation over production, and I think they mean the, a certain sort of indifference to place, programmatically. I wonder what your disposition is to that sort of, criticism of festivals as overly commodifying the artistic process.

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Sanjoy K. Roy: Any, any process, you know – forget the festival for a second, any process, if it doesn't have a soul and raison d'être to exist, which should, I mean, in our case, we're very clear about why we do something. We do it because we like to look at the association between the arts to bring value to a built heritage.

So that's one of the pillars that we look at. The second area that we work with – and that's really an area that has found attraction, is where we look at the social need of the moment. Whether it's Jaipur or Hong Kong or Singapore, or whatever, Indonesia, et cetera, I give you, Doha, as an example. We were told you can't bring in Sufi music, you can't talk about the environment or fossil fuels... I mean, yeah, and so forth. But we managed to do all of that. And we explained to the, the authorities who were funding it, we said, if you, as a library, don't push the boundaries, who will? If you want society to evolve well, this is the place to be able to do so.



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Sanjoy K. Roy: So as long as you're programming with a clear intent and ensuring that what you're doing is not just about bringing the great and the good together for this fantastic, operatic, you know, brilliant show – of course, you can do that too, but there has to be outreach.

There has to be work in the community. It has to work through the year to be able to create that. And we look at festivals primarily as the end product of a long process and to highlight and celebrate a year full of activities, where the community themselves come together to give their best of themselves, to celebrate the best across the world, and jointly, work to collaborate and showcase the arts of the region.

So when you do that, then it's not just about cookie cutter festivals stuff, where you – you know, every festival you have whatever Coldplay or, or whoever, but you really do it with an understanding of the need of the moment. And the moment changes. Places change. Histories change. Narrative change. Reality changes. Governments change. And the need of the moment changes completely. And if you do not address that need of the moment, of course you're going to lose it. And of course, you're going to create something that does not have deep roots in that particular society.

I mean, in Egypt when we started, it was when, when the Arab Spring swept through that part of the world. 80% of Egypt depended on tourism. They were completely devastated.

So we said to the Egyptian authorities, we will begin our festival in your Terminal One where aircrafts arrive, to show that it's safe. And that then caught the attention and the fancy of the entire world, CNN and BBC, and everybody captured it. And the Boston bombings happened just at that point of time, just after that, and Logan Airport authorities reached out to us and said, will you consider doing a festival for us in the airport?

And I said, well, no, I won't, because Homeland Security is quite different from Egyptian security and the Egyptian airlines. So thank you, but no thank you. So you also have to learn when to say no and when something won't work, you know, and for every time that we've said a yes, I think we've said nine no's before that.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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Adrian Ellis: One of the remarkable things that you have done and do is to create in, I suspect, clients who don't necessarily always understand the full import of what you're saying about the importance of process and the festival being as a result of process, persuading them, taking them on a journey too. I suspect that maybe some of your clients particularly repeat clients may understand that, but I'm sure you go into many discussions where, what they think they want is something off the shelf. A franchise, if you like. And the reality of what you're offering them is a process that culminates in a festival that is bespoke and responds to what you described as the needs of the moment and the needs of the place. Any tips on doing that?

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Sanjoy K. Roy: Absolutely. Um, let me, let me qualify that by saying that it's never been easy sailing.



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Sanjoy K. Roy: So everything that I've said, you know, it may sound easy and accidental and we've been so successful. Not entirely, you know, we've gone bankrupt and belly-up many times over – it's just that one has had the belief that we will always emerge stronger as long as we can learn from what's happened. Yes, many clients want something that they've heard of, or they think that they want. I'll give you an example of a particular city that came to us with a big bid recently, uh, in the heart of Europe.

I went for lunch that the speaker of the parliament hosted for me and in the course of the conversation and I kept asking, so why would you want us to come here to a country, which is very, very conservative. It's very white. It's not necessarily welcoming of uh, immigrants or refugees.

They had recently taken in a few thousand refugees. And they kept saying to me, no, that's the reason we need to understand from you how to, how to tackle diversity, because if we don't, we will be destined to become a failed society. So we need you to do this. And I was very impressed by the argument. As the lunch continued into the early evening and I probe some more, I realised that they had little interest in actuality of these refugees who had come in, and their interest was really to take the box and to say to the European union, see, we have addressed the issue of diversity. These guys who represent diversity have come in and, blah, blah, blah.

So I walked away from the table. On the other hand, fast forward to Boulder or rewind to Boulder, Boulder Colorado police, I didn't even know existed. And when I got this impassioned email bid from three people in Boulder, Colorado who had met with their mayor, then mayor and the universities, et cetera, and send me an email, an impassioned email as why they thought Boulder Colorado was the place for us to set down our first stop for JLF America. I was like, okay, I'm not sure where Boulder is. So I opened up the map and I realised it was near Denver. And as it happened, I was in Chicago. I was on my way to the Bay area and I said, okay, I'll stop by, pick me up. Let's go and have a look and have a chat. And I just fell in love with Colorado.

And in the six months that it took to make that decision on why Colorado – knowing that we may not find enough sponsorship, I kept asking the city, I said, why are you putting money into this? And the mayor, they said the same thing. That we are a white alone town, a place of high net worth, trust fund people.

If we don't understand how to do deal with diversity, this town will die. And I believe them. Because of the way they said it. And we set down JLF Boulder, Colorado. So it's really about, never take what you hear or see necessarily only at face value. Yes. Go by your instinct, which is what I do. And where it comes to governments, Adrian, I'm not a shy boy, as you know, and I've always been happy to speak truth to governments. They may not all love to hear what I say or what we say or what we dole out, but until unless they're able to buy into what is their vision of what they should understand to be their vision for the greater good, you're doomed, because otherwise the goalpost will always keep moving.

So you need to be very clear about your intent, your vision, are the governments or your clients, or your sponsors or whoever, have they bought into your vision, and are they aware of what your vision is? Because a lot of people, when I walk into the room have already said, of course, thank you so much. Great. We believe everything that you say, till it comes to the minutiae and they say, Oh, but we didn't mean that.



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Sanjoy K. Roy: Oh my god, is that what you're going to do? So you have to get your – you said client, I would say partner, to buy into what is it that you are hoping –

Adrian Ellis: Sure.

Sanjoy K. Roy: Or envisioning to, to create. Not to achieve – because achieve is too big a word, you know, but to create. And really if they, if they engage in that, if they buy into that, you're home and dry. And yes, you can then continue to change your own goalpost, taking everybody together.

Not easy, but certainly something that, you know, we've lived with. And a, a lot of our colleagues occasionally have said, you work in a way that, you know, it's impossible. I mean, how can you do this? But you have to do what you have to do, and you have to do because it's your, whatever, intent, it's your desire.

It's your love, it's your way of doing it. So, yeah!

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Adrian Ellis: So, let's come to this moment. Many colleagues I've spoken to have described the current chapter they're in, in their professional lives as the most difficult that they've experienced. And it's difficult, partly because their business models have collapsed, but it's also partly because the expectations of them are more demanding.

They in their institutions are being held to account to a standard that perhaps they should always have been held to, but haven't always been held to. And so at the very time at which their audiences have been locked out or locked down, they're also going through profound internal reorganisation, or demands for internal reorganisation.

Tell me your experience or rather distil if you like, your experience of these extraordinary pressures that we are currently feeling.

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Sanjoy K. Roy: So Adrian, I came screeching back home from the UK while I was in Morocco on the 3rd of March. By the time I got to Morocco and I got to Morocco because I had to go and attend our press conference announcing our festival, which was going to happen at the end of March. And then made my way home on the third or the 4th of March. You could see, that everything was coming to a standstill.

We just about finished Egypt on the 6th of March and we cancelled Turkey, came back, and in March, I think we cancelled \$3 million worth of our festivals. So we cancelled Hong Kong, we cancelled Morocco, Turkey, our META – our big theatre festival. That was a lot of money.

And I kept wondering, how are we going to do this? 23rd of March Sunday, the lockdown happened. And that morning, my colleague, you know, my long hair – because my long hair is, you know, I sit on many of these organisations. I used to be the president of the Events and Entertainment Management Association, EEMA, and one of my colleagues from there, our Vice President - North came to me and he said, Sir, it's the lockdown, why can't we do a 12 hour music program starting tomorrow at six o'clock and ending it. And I said, are you serious? How can we pull this off? We have no technology. How will we get?



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Sanjoy K. Roy: He said, Sir, we are the biggest organisation associates and we can't do it, who will? So I reluctantly, let me tell you, reluctantly said okay – thinking that he would fail and he would call me the next couple of hours and say, this is not going to get off the ground.

We did it. Thousands of people came online to view it. And that inspired me. It wasn't my idea, but it inspired me, Adrian. And therefore when the formal lockdown happened from the Monday, which was the 24th, I went back to my colleagues and I said, Hey, what are we going to do? We are going into lockdown. Are we going to just disappear and go into the woodwork?

I said, we have resources. I promise you your salaries for this month. We have resources for the next three months. I will not let anybody go. If we have to swim together, we will. If we have to sink together, we shall. But let's think of what we can do. And what happened, Adrian, it really became an opportunity.

One is that, because we were all forcefully here in our homes on Zoom, or wherever it was, and we weren't busy being busy, as all of us typically are. We sat down and we ideated and we thought and we reinvented. And the 4th of April, we got JLF Brave New World up and running and we didn't have an ambition.

My thing was, as condominiums and gated communities and cities and towns were ceding from the countries that they were part of, countries were closing their borders, I said, For this, or any kind of solution to happen for COVID, what is the need of the moment but the free flow of knowledge and information? Which is something that we've always supported.

I said, can we work together with all our university partners in Chicago and New York and Harvard and Australia and you know, wherever else? I said, let's work together. Let's get the medical guys on board and get them to start talking about what does this mean? Can we get the first discoveries out? And that's what we did.

We had Sharad Paul from New Zealand talking about the early day discoveries. We had people talking about how they walk to the market where the pangolins were and what they discovered. We had Dr. Siddhartha Mukherjee come out of the post-mortem, whatever they call it and say, we've discovered that the first problem are the clots. The clots is what in the lower capillaries, smaller capillaries is what's killing of people. We spoke to all kinds of the good and the great across. And in that first month, Adrian, I didn't know who was listening or watching us. When the results first came in and we realised thousands of people had logged on to watch our sessions, we said, Wow, okay, now what's next? So we started looking at programming some of the best names from across the world who otherwise wouldn't have come to Jaipur because it's too far or whatever, or they were too infirm.

And we had everybody from the Dalai Lama and Margaret Atwood and Orhan Pamuk and so on and so forth. And Brave New World in the first few months garnered 4.8 million views, and we realised that we were sitting on a gold mine, but we weren't being able to realise the potential. And it was roughly then that we then started looking – our next festival was supposed to be JLF London and remember, Adrian, in JLF London, which we host at The British Library, our capacity is 1200 people across three venues.



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Sanjoy K. Roy: When we finished the weekend festival of JLF British library, we had 410,000 people having viewed it. So it just again, blew our mind. We did the same thing for, for META, our theatre festival, you know, which had the capacity of, again, a thousand people a night in the theatre. And here we had, we did it over four weekends, as we've started doing right now again, for 2021. And again, we had thousands of people logging on to listen to us, attend this first virtual award ceremony, which was incredible, amazing, didn't have a glitch unlike the Golden Globes, et cetera. And it really gave the artists and artisans a platform to come back and feel alive.

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Adrian Ellis: So, so, clearly a combination of your ingenuity, your reach, brand is important. Content is also, I would say, incredibly important.

You managed to get a big digital footprint. Um, what are your thoughts about turning that into a business model?

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Sanjoy K. Roy: Uh, much more difficult, Adrian. So when we started Brave New World, this was obviously the million dollar question: Were we going to be able to sustain ourselves off it? The good news is that there is money in digital. No, it isn't anywhere near what we would do in the physical space to the extent that for every hundred dollars that we used to raise, we now raise \$7, but it's not that we haven't raised fairly substantial, uh, resources during this period of time. Not a lot of money, but certainly a couple of million is what we raised by all of our digital products. So I see really a combination of the two to be able to continue to stay afloat. I have divested a further 5%. We're in the process in fact, as we speak, Adrian, I'm doing a small divestment to a, you know, second group of investors.

Because as I said, I haven't let anybody go. So we have salary bills and we have a lot of development. A lot of the money has gone back into creating the digital experience as we did with the Jaipur Literature Festival.

So it wasn't just about design anymore. It was creating 3D microsities which provided an experience. So we need money to reinvest in that. And we've rolled out actually six new projects. We're starting a big arts education platform called artGyan which has been in testing for the last three months. And I think it'll finally go live in a month and a half. We've started a new platform for craft because when we realised that artisans were finding it very difficult to get to market, we said, why don't we do that for them?

So we started the Craft Maestros or Earth Fables the platform where artisans could put their wares on and we would then help access different markets for them, which has kicked off. We've started a new ideas exchange platform, which will be up and running in a couple of whatevers. And of course we've taken everything else online.

So we've used the opportunity to reinvent ourselves to some extent, but I see our first physical festival or what we are planning our first physical festival to happen a hundred percent confirmed will be in the first week of September, Adrian, in the Maldives. And thereafter we are planning live, with a digital version, not digital live. We have realised that we have to post produce everything that we shoot. And that's what we did, even with the Jaipur Literature Festival. It was our learning. How do you get people to get a sense of outside of, you know, your Zoom box?



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Sanjoy K. Roy: Uh, you know, so everything we would post produce with our television experience and then do the digital festivals. So we'll do a live festival. We'll not digitally broadcast live. Those will be exclusive for those people who pay or come to us or come free. And then a version of that will be put on, on broadcast so I really see now growing a niche, niche festivals. And I do believe that you have to create different kinds of experience, much more niche, much more sophisticated, much more tailored to key audiences, key demographics.

And that could be one of many models forward because COVID ain't going any place in the world anytime soon, so I don't see the situation really changing.

But it's allowed everybody to reinvent. I think we, we've been so precious about the arts, and we've been so closeted about it and, so exclusive, not allowing people in, looking down at those who don't wear their tuxedos in a particular way. That we've forgotten that the arts is actually about humanity. It's about expression. It's about, you, me, and the person next door, and the person on the street, and everybody else. And, and we are at a very interesting point.

I don't see us going back. I mean, everybody keeps thinking, Oh, we'll go back. We're going to open up. Open up? COVID is here to stay. A hundred years after the Spanish flu, the flu is still around. May not be a pandemic in the same way when enough people die. In the same way, even if COVID-19 disappeared, something will come about. So are we going back? No. Can we move forward with some kind of experience? Which of course allows you to come together in a safe way and have that niche, incredible location, which creates memories because the digital format and the box doesn't necessarily create a memory.

And I'm hoping that by – not necessarily, I won't use the word reinventing, but I'll certainly use the word evolving, evolve the form, evolve the form in a way that sits and explores and makes possible the impossible. And that's really what the arts is about, right.

And finally, I think the arts addresses the core need of the hour, Adrian, as the world becomes even more and more divisive. Look around you, in every country and you will see that this is the time that we have to look to the arts. More importantly, to be able to say that there isn't just one way or one truth. It's not about my way or the highway, but it is the arts that can show that many truths can sit together. Not one greater than the other. Many realities can co-exist at the same time. And expression, which is the need of the moment and the need for society is an absolute imperative. That's what has got us the vaccine, that is what has got us to space, that's what will get us into the deepest oceans.

And that is what will create the evolution of the human being. And it's about the arts. No time has it been more important today than now, for the arts to stand up and to be celebrated and to be given that kind of freedom of expression and being.

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Adrian Ellis: Sanjoy, that was utterly inspirational and I feel privileged to have been listening to it. And I think that our listeners will feel exactly the same. I think that what you have said is profound, and the deep thread of optimism that runs through what you are saying is profoundly valuable.



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Adrian Ellis: I just wanted to end by saying that, last time we met, we met in the flesh. It was in New York, I think. You introduced me to a concept that, uh, in retrospect has been, um, quite transformational in my life. And it is the mid-afternoon expressive martini.

Sanjoy K. Roy: Martini. Absolutely. (laughs)

Adrian Ellis: Sanjoy, thank you.

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Sanjoy K. Roy: Thank you, Adrian. More strength to you, GCDN and of course, AEA and look forward to doing many things together. This is the need of the hour, and we all need to stand together in different parts of the world and just work. I mean, the problem is we've all been so fractured doing our own little incredible things.

This is the time for us to come together, with one voice.

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MUSIC TRANSITION

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Adrian Ellis: Thank you, Sanjoy. It's a remarkable story.

And even as an avid observer, much of that was new to me. I invite listeners to check <https://www.thethreebells.net/> for additional material, including some additional segments from the long interview that I had with Sanjoy. But first stick around for a brief discussion between myself and Stephanie Fortunato, my co-host on this podcast and Director of the Department of Art, Culture + Tourism for the City of Providence.

We explore the themes and actionable ideas from my conversation with Sanjoy.

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THEME MUSIC

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Adrian Ellis: Stephanie, thank you so much for joining me. It's always a pleasure. And I happily am enjoying listening to this podcast as much as you are, because there is so little of me in it because Sanjoy was such an eloquent and fluent storyteller and narrator of his ideas. I did ask a few questions, but basically this was Sanjoy's show. So, what are your principle takeaways?

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Stephanie Fortunato: Oh, Adrian, thank you so much for inviting me to talk to you about this interview. I so enjoyed listening to Sanjoy. What an enjoyable tale of this remarkable individual and the wonderful stories that he shared. Some of my takeaways were the way in which he's really a principle generalist. So I think his career path really demonstrates the blurry lines between art and entertainment. And I think the way he shared his journey, um, talk about the relational power of opportunity and circumstance, and just being so aware of, of who he is that he knew which opportunities were right, and which ones, you know, just weren't gonna work out. I thought those lessons were, were really interesting.



[00:38:05]

Adrian Ellis: I totally agree. I felt like I was reading a chapter in Gurdjieff, you know, *Meetings with Remarkable Men*. Do you know that book? About a guy who, you know, moves from one fascinating situation and makes make sense of it to another fascinating situation.

[00:38:19]

Stephanie Fortunato: You know what, and Adrian, to that point, I just want to say like a practical takeaway that I had was that sometimes when we set out to take on a project, you know, rather than a multi-year initiative, but when there's a discreet task, we're going to do this project, the potential for that to lead to just a wide variety of, of next opportunities and conversations, and to continue some of the threads that get started in a project, and you'll never have any idea of where they might show up again.

But it's something I tell often grad students and others who are starting out in their career, that sometimes if you have the opportunity to work on a project, rather than spending your time and energies just looking for, you know, a full-time employment with benefits and a salary and the opportunity to move an institution. But that projects are often wonderful gateways to new networks and new ideas and long-term to those future possibilities and opportunities that you can't even dream of in the moment.

And so I think his career and his stories that he was telling you, are as much about him and his, you know, what he's done and seen as the lessons that it can offer to all of us about being open to possibilities and sort of, open to radical joy. That's a value that my team certainly talks about and is trying to hone in in all that we do.

And he certainly is a demonstration of what can be possible when you allow for joy to lead the way.

[00:39:49]

Adrian Ellis: I entirely agree. And if there is a theme coming out of some of these interviews, it is that very few of the people we're interviewing had any idea that they would end up doing the jobs that for which they are known. And that serendipity, luck, and the disposition towards risk, clearly was important in leading them to where they have, where they have gone.

So far, I don't think we've interviewed anybody who has admitted to saying, When I was 12, I wanted to be an X. I think we should keep on asking people those questions and see whether the pattern obtains into the future.

[00:40:26]

Stephanie Fortunato: I love that. Because I feel like, this conversation about whether cultures and cities intersect, right, it's people. And so, yeah, I look forward to following this story through these podcast interviews.

[00:40:38]

Adrian Ellis: I suppose there is a, there's a darker element to that story too, though, because you need a certain amount of self-confidence, but you also probably need to feel that you have something of a safety net. In order to, uh, make those, those switches. And Sanjoy was very clear and I think it may have uh, ended up on the cutting room floor, where he said that his father-in-law had asked him, how are you going to um, how are you going to support yourself, young man?



[00:41:09]

Adrian Ellis: And he said well, I'm – I'm paraphrasing slightly, but basically I'm going to marry your daughter and that's my strategy. And so, the underlying point, I think is that if you grew up without any resources, then you are more likely all of the things being equal to look for security in your early years, And that security is going to be at odds with following your heart.

[00:41:32]

Stephanie Fortunato: Absolutely. And I think as all of us begin to examine privilege uh, with a more critical eye, you know, thinking about access to opportunity and access to power and the resources that make it possible. There are a series of pragmatic concerns that, that can't be ignored. And so the balance of thinking about, you know, what might be a passion project and what might be actually relevant to audiences and, and interest to the market. They're not always the same. And so I often talk to artists about the difference between commercial success and critical success. And how different works might meet different measures, and that you sort of have to find a balance and a rhythm to be able to sustain your career over the long haul.

And, you know, I think you're right. That is something that we can't ignore in this conversation, or any of these conversations about how people ended up in the places where they have the opportunity to pursue their passions.

[00:42:33]

Adrian Ellis: So, yeah, I, I agree. I mean, I think, you know, he set up Teamworks at about the same time I set up a AEA. And um, and so, um, I'm sitting there sort of, thinking of comparisons. And the way in which he got international resonance with the proposition that he was bringing to bear is absolutely incredible, because in a relatively brief time he was basically programming, planning, complex logistical, and artistic events right around the world. You know, he had, he had a, basically an entrepreneurial flair of an old school impresario and Teamworks is a for-profit, not a not-for-profit.

So I do ask myself whether that would have been possible, whether he could have had that sort of agility and pace if he had been in a not-for-profit structure. What do you think?

[00:43:26]

Stephanie Fortunato: That's actually a great question. I do think that the non-profit form does sometimes lead to stagnation in ways that you know, what his, what his shop is doing is like, it's about reinventing every time in some ways to meet the place in time. So, um, I thought, you know, your conversation about festivalisation. I think there, there's something about the ephemeral and the risks that are required to make an investment in, in a festival that cultural institutions can and should learn from, because the stakes are different. But what I appreciated about the conversation that you had with him was the way that he talked about the trust that is required to actually really successfully engage communities in the process of creating a festival that may only, be a brief interaction in some ways, but it's the, it's the culminating process. That is the interesting part.

[00:44:24]

Adrian Ellis: Yeah, absolutely. And he sees the festival as the end of a process. His philosophy is that the festival has got deep community roots and is the culmination of a process. And that is the opposite of what people understand as festivalisation.



[00:44:42]

Adrian Ellis: The other thing that I thought he was fascinating on is the current pivot, because his current pivot has been absolutely just as can do-ish and entrepreneurial as his previous ones. He had festivals all around the world that were cancelled within days.

His entire business was, is really around those live events. And over this year, he has developed digital programs that by all accounts are extremely popular, have traction with audiences globally, and he believes that when he, when, and as we emerged from COVID, we are emerging into a fundamentally different world. And he has, you know, doesn't believe that he will ever revert to that, the earlier model. That the model will now be truly hybrid with different forms of live events, recorded and then post produced. So that in fact, um, he has reinvented Teamworks, you know, another time.

And uh, he, he mentioned this and it's on the, on the podcast so I'm not betraying commercial confidences. He, you know, has recapitalised the firm for this new model and he's off to the races again. So I, I find it totally remarkable. A serial entrepreneur using the same basic, you know, assets that he developed in theatre, whatever it is, 30, 40 years ago, theatre and then television and then movies.

And then it's the same basic repertoire of production. And I think that's why in a way he can be as agile as he has been because he is ultimately a producer of content. And all the stuff that we see as the manifestation of it is different ways of distributing that content. So, the way I was thinking about him is he's actually sort of got a contingent commitment to the mechanism of distribution. It could be festivals, it could be films, it could be theatre, it could be, you know, online streaming, but what the constant is throughout that is acting as a producer of content.

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Stephanie Fortunato: You know, it's the attention to the structures, right? That allow him to really highlight what I think was the most important thing that he said, perhaps, was that the arts allow us to come together in ways that most other things do not. And that's the greatest need of the day to address divisiveness that we see, you know, playing out around the world, Adrian.

So it occurs to me that the forms that he's creating, the structures that he's creating, it's really to highlight this: the potential for the arts to be the bridge that can bring people together. And, and so it doesn't almost matter what the platform is, you know, whether it is a social experience in which we are all in one place together, or if it is a digital experience, he's found ways to make them both interactive because he is centring the art. And he is really highlighting the freedom of expression that comes from creating solid structures. You know, artists can then be themselves. And I, and I really appreciate that about the work, even though it is kind of hard to imagine for me as a, as an individual finding the digital platform to be as engaging as some of those in-person experiences.

[00:48:04]

Adrian Ellis: That's true. But if we think about music, I keep thinking about it the way we think about music. So we love the live experience, but that doesn't mean that we don't listen to recorded music. And we know that the process of recording music is a – in this language of post-production exercise, not all the music we listened to was recorded live. Most of it was a studio recording, but the same, the same basic intent manifests itself in a live performance and in a recorded performance.



[00:48:33]

Adrian Ellis: The organisation in this case – the band, thinks about them as having the same origin, but different processes and different destinations. And isn't that how most producing arts organisations, they're going to have to think about their, their work.

[00:48:49]

Stephanie Fortunato: I think, you know, one of the challenges then is going to be around resources, actually, and expertise because that, you know, that does require a different set of expertise than I think many cultural institutions are set up to facilitate at this point, you know, and I guess I further question, I think music is a good analogy for this conversation, but is the post-production reinterpreting what happens in the live experience or is it just recontextualising it?

[00:49:20]

Adrian Ellis: I think it can be both. You know, I had the occasion to talk to Robert Battle a couple of months ago about what Alvin Ailey were doing during lockdown in terms of choreography. And what he was saying was the choreography filmed, is and should be totally different from choreography scene from, you know, the other side of the proscenium arch and that the camera could do things and be in places, obviously the single position of your seat cannot, and that in turn changes the choreography.

So although there is a piece that is both part of a live performance and recording, it's a fundamentally different process and therefore, yes, there are all sorts of implications. There are cost implications. There are artistic implications. There are legal and contractual implications. Uh, easier to work through in some countries than others.

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Stephanie Fortunato: And I think like whatever is created through these processes, you know, one of the things that Sanjoy said that sticks out is that many truths can sit together. And while he wasn't necessarily speaking about this form in particular, it occurs to me, Adrian, that's what we're talking about, that we can have the art form happen in the moment and people can experience it there, but that there are then opportunities to create different access points for other audiences and, and there could be multiple forms that come out of that in, in post-production that are actually kind of exciting and can allow us to understand the craft in new ways, which is that's a real opportunity, I think, of this moment.

And to get back to what something, what we were talking about a little bit earlier, this idea that because Teamworks is a for-profit organisation and not a non-profit organisation in some ways, because it's market driven, there is both an imperative to continue to experiment with that and to see what's possible and to see what audiences respond to and, and what makes great art, I think. You know, probably most interestingly. But there's also going to be the same decision if it doesn't work, right.

They can abandon it and try something new. And that's something that I'm not sure all non-profit organisations and cultural institutions are able to take on because they're bound to business models that put them in service to a different set of concerns sometimes.

[00:51:47]

Adrian Ellis: I tend, I tend to agree, but there's no, there's no perfect world.



Stephanie Fortunato: There's not?! (laughs)

Adrian Ellis: No, what I mean is, we once did an exercise for the Getty. I can't remember all the details, but basically it was people from the not-for-profit and the for-profit cultural industries. And the not-for-profits looked at the for-profits with deep envy and they said, Wow, how wonderful, you know, you've got all this access to capital and you can take risks. Gosh, we would like to be more like you.

And the for-profits were looking at the not-for-profits saying, Oh my god, you don't have shareholders breathing down your neck. You're not always trying to screw the maximum, you know, rate of return out of everything. What a wonderful position to be in.

So they were both envious of each other. The entity that they were most envious of, however, both of them, were the for-profit company that still owned all its own capital because a for-profit company that's still owns its own capital can decide not to profit maximize, but to profit satisfies. So you've got all the sort of freedom of the private sector, the lack of, you know, sclerotic boards and all the rest of it.

But at the same time, you are your own shareholders, so you don't have to be constantly pleasing your shareholders. And I think that in a way Sanjoy and his colleagues, I think they have some external capital, but they reminded me of that, they don't always have to be profit maximisers. They need to make enough money uh, to stay in business and then they can follow their hearts.

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Stephanie Fortunato: It's sort of like social impact organisations, is what I was thinking about when he was, when he was speaking. You know, that comes back around to this idea of him as an individual who has pursued different opportunities through his career. Sometimes more on the – I would say esoteric art side, um, and some that are more commercial, right?

Did television uh, it doesn't get more commercial than that. But it seems like for an individual, there are these blurry lines. There's a lot of fluidity between opportunities and where they sit. So it doesn't really matter as much what the structure is, what matters, I do think you're right, is about who retains control of the content.

And I know that there are organisations like the Centre for Cultural Innovation that are looking at this in terms of, you know, wealth generation – particularly among communities of colour, and who at the end of the day is responsible for not just generating the content, but then who is responsible for its distribution and gets those rights.

So I think, you know, what we see with Sanjoy's career is that he has been able to retain control over the intellectual property. And that's what he's bringing to communities in some ways around the, around the world. And so he's able to develop some principles across those different cities that can be preserved in a way that wouldn't if, if he was presenting that on behalf of somebody else right.

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Adrian Ellis: The growth of the international business was in the wake of a profound globalisation of, of the international economy. We're now in a period when that globalisation is certainly tempered.



[00:55:54]

Adrian Ellis: And it's being tempered by rise in nationalism. Things like Brexit, things like tariff barriers, trade wars between China and America, all the rest of it. We're in a period in which, whether it's a minor eddy or whether it's a major backwash, we're not quite clear.

But it's certainly making it difficult for people who operate internationally and international markets. And um, I, I'd be curious to know whether the sort of open markets that made his model possible, and indeed makes, you know, a lot of sort of international cultural touring possible is likely to be in, in abeyance.

[00:55:29]

Stephanie Fortunato: You know what, I also wonder if the effectiveness with which Sanjoy and his team are using online platforms, doesn't come from that same experience and sort of the globalisation in practice that they've had to embody over these years of making festivals with communities of artists around the world, right?

So I think in centring artists in those conversations, as much as engaging with local governments and the audiences who are coming to those events, they've learned an awful lot about people. And so, that's an interesting thing to think about is the relationship between global systems of cultural form and norms and how they can be applied to these new platforms. But I think you're right, as communities are looking more locally and engaging with sort of the civic realm in new ways, I wonder how, and if there is a place for those big transnational spectacles such as Teamworks has put forward there.

It's not just the complications, the pragmatic complications of the moment, you know, visas and vaccines, and even the carbon footprint that is required to put together those, those tours, but more ethically and morally, you know, where do we want to invest our energies and our thinking.

[00:56:54]

Adrian Ellis: Thank you, Stephanie. And thank you, Sanjoy. The Three Bells is produced by AEA Consulting and supported by The Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network. The podcast and supporting materials can be found at <https://www.thethreebells.net/>.

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