

GOOD NATURED EP 6

TOM BAILEY



**GOOD
NATURED**
A PODCAST SERIES FROM
CONSERVATION OPTIMISM

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INTRO

Julia: The Good Natured podcast comes to you from Conservation Optimism and its Founding Partners, Synchronicity Earth and the University of Oxford.

Sofia: Welcome to Good Natured, a podcast where you can join us for uplifting chats that shine a light on conservation challenges. In each episode, we interview an inspiring conservationist. Our fascinating guests come from many backgrounds: artists, scientists, activists, and many more. I'm Sofia, a PhD student focusing on marine conservation. I love doing science and telling stories through film, writing, improvised comedy and now podcasts.

Julia: And I'm Julia, a science communicator, and journalist. I'm passionate about sharing what people are doing to make the world a better place. We know these are quite hard times and that everyone needs to have a bit of a pick me up. So we're hoping that this conversation will inspire you.

Sofia: Hi Julia.

Julia: Hey Sofia!

Sofia: This week on the podcast, I am really excited to announce that we're going to be speaking to Tom Bailey. Tom is a theatre maker and director based in Bristol, and he started an award winning theatre company called Mechanimal, which is a very good pun, but also produces very innovative and cool theatre. A lot of their pieces are about nature.

Julia: And obviously we are super thrilled to have Tom also, because that's the first time we have an artist on the podcast and we're really keen on showcasing how everyone can be a conservationist. So we were really keen on showing how the approaches to conservation can be through different mediums and it's really cool that

we can talk to Tom about this. And I think Sophia mentioned already that Mechanical does lots of really cool, innovative theatre, and they do a big variety of nature themed pieces. So I'm sure Tom will tell us a bit more about each of them during the interview but just to give you an idea he's done some work on transformation of the Arctic. He also did some work on bird migration, but also human migration, which was obviously a very big theme a few years ago. So I'm really keen to hear more about his work in general.

Just to give you an idea of the type of reviews he's got for his work so far, The New Scientist has called his work "extraordinary" and The Guardian has called some of his pieces "remarkable and urgent".

Sofia: He also got quite an amusing review from somebody who said that she would never thought she would be so engrossed by watching a man pretending to be a marsh warbler, and a marsh warbler is a type of bird.

I came across Tom at the Edinburgh Fringe, which is a really big theatre festival when I was there last year. And I was doing this thing where I was going through the programme and just trying to watch every show that had to do with nature or conservation. And I came across his show called Vigil. And I was really stunned by it when I went to watch it. It was an incredibly impressive kind of performance art piece.

And that's not usually my kind of genre within theatre I would say but it was just a really incredible show. And the reason that I already liked it was that it was this combination of a scientific concept, which is the IUCN Red List, which is a list which is used by conservationists to understand the extinction risk to different species and he took the scientific concept and then combined it with performance art theatre. It really was not what I would have expected when I walked in but I just think it's one of the best things that theatre can do to maybe make us reflect and emotionally connect with something that is as simple as a list.

Julia: For me, one thing that is quite interesting is the fact that I've seen lots of art surrounding conservation but I've seen mostly artists such as photographers and filmmakers or illustrators. I've never really seen much theatre, well nature based theatre. And actually, I think my only experience of theatre and conservation was watching an improv show that Sofia produced last year. So I'm really curious to hear a bit more about what other types of theatre can be done.

Sofia: I can definitely confirm that it's a very rare combination. I mean, the Edinburgh Fringe has thousands and thousands of shows and I was able to go to most of the ones that seem to fit the bill of being about nature or conservation within a few days.

So generally, I think it isn't being done that much at the moment, but it is being done more and more. And I think that people are getting really excited about the ways that theatre and conservation can combine. And I just think it's an area that is so full of potential so I'm really excited to hear about how Tom approaches his projects.

Julia: So let's just talk to him.

THE INTERVIEW

Julia: Hi Tom! We're so excited to have you on the podcast today. We've been really keen on talking to artists on the podcast so that's really brilliant that we've got you. And I guess one way to start today's episode would be for you to tell us a bit more about, you know, were you always passionate about theatre and the natural world, or how did those interests emerge for you and how did you start to combine them?

Tom: For me, theatre probably came first. I started doing the kind of standard youth theatre/school theatre thing in your teenage years, but then I went and read English at university and then started reading, I remember very clearly it was one book that really got me involved in what's going on in nature today, and that was James Lovelock's *The Revenge of Gaia*, which was a huge wake up call for me in my second year university.

And basically, I wanted to shelve all kind of theatre plans and plans for maybe training further in literature or theatre to do something about or involved in climate change. And so I finished my degree and then I took a masters in looking at how climate science was communicated through language and reportage looking at how this very disturbing climate science meeting the public sphere in authors like James Lovelock, Tim Flannery, people like that. And so I did that and then I tried for a few years to get involved more strongly in climate activism and conservation roles. I found that with an English degree, I got pushed towards media related roles and writing related roles to do with conservation and sustainability and I got to a point where after a couple of years, I just felt that actually it wasn't really that fulfilling for me.

The best way that I felt that I could respond to this crisis of climate change was to go back to my first passion, which is theatre and start making theatre in response to climate change. And so I guess that's what I did. It took a little while to sort of retrain in theatre and then at some point in my mid-twenties, I started making theatre. I guess over the last eight or so years I have been creating theatre that more and more has explored aspects of climate change, not exclusively, but predominantly. And that's where the passion has come from really.

Julia: It's always interesting to see actually how different interests merge together or how the different routes you take before reaching what you want it to do. We had lots of

guests who talked about retraining so it's always really interesting to hear those backstories.

Tom: I certainly found that I felt that our education system here in the UK pushes you into making choices very early and limit possibilities. For example, quite early on, you're basically asked to choose between science and art. Maybe that's to do with our cultural or broader cultural division between science and art or maybe that has something to do with the education system and the choices that we're asked to make at a young age, when things aren't necessarily clear for us. I guess at some point you were asked to choose, are you going to be a scientist or are you going to be something else?

Sofia: Well, you're talking to the right people! I definitely bounced back and forth a lot between science and then different types of art. And I think that it's unacknowledged just how much they can inform each other. What inspires you when you're starting to develop a nature based show? What kinds of materials or practices do you draw on?

Tom: Good question! I guess it's very different for me in terms of each particular show. So nature and a nature based show can take many, many different forms and I think just to kind of give listeners an overview I've made work that explores genetics, I've made work that explores migration in both humans and birds. I made a show last year that explored mass extinction and species extinction, and I'm currently working on a project that's exploring the current transformation of the Arctic and another one that is looking at copper mining and mining and extraction more broadly.

So I guess the nature shows I make are very different. In terms of what inspires me, it can be a number of things. For instance, in the extinction show, it was the facts of the sixth mass extinction and that just stayed with me for a long time. I wanted to make a kind of response to that.

So in terms of the inspiration, it tends to be a fact or a happening that's going on. For instance, the mass migration movements of people more notably happening in Europe few years ago, that was really sort of playing in my mind. So it tends to be things I see happening now that I feel are really pressing issues around nature and the way that society and people understand and connect with what we call the natural world. I try to just tap into that area and see what work I want to make. It's very diverse.

Julia: You've worked on lots of different issues, but you mentioned topics such as the extinction crisis and mining. I'm just wondering if you could tell us a bit more about in what ways you consider yourself a conservationist, an activist, or an environmentalist? And to what extent do you want to elicit action in your audiences? Because these topics can be quite on the activism side of things.

Tom: Yeah, for sure. Again, a really good question in terms of what I want people to feel and do I want to inspire activism. I mean, I come from the kind of political orientation that says that urgent action needs to happen in regards to climate change. And not just climate change but the whole way that humans are going about viewing and treating and destroying the natural world!

So that underpins my work. I think I'm more exploring the artwork as not necessarily something that is trying to do the same thing as say an Extinction Rebellion protest. I think, I see the work of art doing something different or offering a different space to audiences or at least the work of theatre. Because I guess it's a classic thing that if you go to the theatre or go and see an experience, a work of art, and it's sort of message drum banging or it's political drum, banging, then that tends to turn audiences off. We tend to kind of switch off as audiences if we're not given that space, that freedom to interpret, that freedom of inquiry as audiences.

And so my approach is to generally invite people into more of a space of meditation and inquiry and hopefully curiosity and empathy. But I think I'm not ever trying to give any messages or say explicit things. My general focus is to get to ask people to offer a space to people, to look closer at what is happening. And when we do that, then I feel that it is perhaps most helpful in the context of what is happening today in terms of climate change.

Am I a conservationist? Yes. In that I want to help as much biodiversity continue to live and grow and proliferate as I can with the work that I do.

Julia: I really love the idea of giving people space and freedom, that's a brilliant concept.

Sofia: That makes a lot of sense. When I went to watch your show, I found that I was really struck by it because I'm a PhD student and I work in a lab where we deal with conservation issues in a scientific way a lot of the time. And for me the IUCN Red List, which you've featured in your show, is a concept that I hear about all the time, think about all the time, but maybe don't connect with emotionally very much. But when I went to your show and I was sitting there, I was really emotionally overwhelmed and struck by the force of it. So in this show, you embodied a series of endangered animals and plants. How did you decide how to present a given animal and how did it feel to impersonate them?

Tom: What's kind of struck me and the creative team - because I don't make stuff alone – is the fact that here is something very scientific that is used by conservationists and scientists every day but at its core are these animal names or species names. And many of these names we found, or at least the English versions of the names, were

very moving and poetic. The more that we looked at this constellations of names, the more we realised that you could make a story through those names.

And so very quickly, just out of the simplicity of like showing name after name, we created a sort of little game, a little story. Obviously the more and more names that come in, the more the tragedy of the situation of a species extinction starts to become clear. The show starts from a fun and inquisitive place towards a sense of trying to understand or comprehend the scale of species extinction. And for us it's more about realising a limit of impersonation very early on in the space of the show. So the guy on stage tries to embody a deer, a mantis, but there were all sorts of questions about anthropocentrism and even like the ethics of impersonating other species. And so for about 75% of that show the guy he's kind of almost given up on the game of truthful impersonation.

It becomes very quickly a game of almost like slapstick. Oh, here's a species name. Well, that sort of suggests this shape. Here's another name that sort of suggests this shape and bit by bit until about the last 20 minutes of the show, he uses less and less of his body. Until for the last quarter of the show, he doesn't use his body to respond to the species at all. It's just a case of watching.

So I won't claim to have gone on any amazing animal studies journey through my body, into embodying those species, because there is a really strong part of actor training in, physical theatre schools that is about animal studies and really closely observing a lemur or something, and then creating a character from that. And that's an amazing skill and process in itself but our show wanted to ask a question about the very gesture of impersonating or representing other species at a time like this.

Sofia: That makes a lot of sense. I remember sitting there and just one of the realisations that I had - I don't know how far into the show - but it was just like: 'Oh my God, conservation is not actually about the animals. Conservation is about our ideas of the animals and the things that we deem important or valuable or funny or charming, or even just vaguely interesting'.

Julia: I'll add plants as well. Plants are important, Sofia!

Sofia: Sorry. Yes, and plants. Obviously, everyone cares about plants too!

Tom: But I think you've hit the nail on the head there, in terms of it's all about what values we put on certain species and I guess in the world of conservation, well, how much effort is given towards conserving that particular animal. For instance, you know, it was often for us about picking out the exciting names in the IUCN Red List because it tends to be the charismatic species and then there's the whole lot of species going

extinct or that are extinct and that have had no media representation or no focus or no study whatsoever. And we wanted to try and not just focus on charismatic species but start to look at bringing in that question about what makes a species worth saving or caring about, or even connecting with.

So, you know, we just came in the ICN Red List across vast, vast lists of grasshoppers and so we wanted to go through all 81 grasshoppers in a single list, but then only a certain percentage of the names in the Red List have an English name given to it. Otherwise, it's just a Latin scientific name. At the very end of the show, we tried to present all the names of both Latin and English in one go like a sort of war Memorial list.

Julia: I'm just curious, Tom, about the fact that we're talking about extinction here, which can be quite a negative topic, obviously, because you're talking about species that are disappearing. But when you look at conservation in general, what would you say makes you optimistic about the future of nature?

Tom: Nature is pretty strong and no matter what happens in terms of this climate changing. If we take a very, very broad look, nature will find a way. Nature will find a way with or without us humans to create and proliferate whether that's in the immediate future or a long, long way into the future.

So that for me is well on one side, a pessimistic thought, but on the other side, a comforting thought. I mean, I think you guys are doing a great and bold thing because some of the conservationists I spoke to in the research for this it's almost like if there are virtually no positive stories in this topic of conservation or at least that was a message that came across to me.

It's very hard to see a really positive, good story that gives us real cause for hope, coming out, looking at conservation. It's really hard because there's so much species or so much territory loss and land loss. As an artist, it's really hard for me to say what are my thoughts about positivity or hope are.

I think it's about connecting to the small stories of people doing great things to try and protect species and protect spaces and in a way connecting to small narratives of hope. Because the grand narrative, the grand story is quite depressing and one that is currently going one way right now.

Sofia: Just speaking more generally about theatre and conservation, what opportunities does the union of theatre and conservation create and what makes the combination powerful?

Personally, I love to work with researchers in the work that I do. And that's been part of the process by which I work for quite a long time. I don't claim to be doing scientific research or to be a scientist and equally I don't claim to be communicating the science. I'm always quite clear about that in the work that I do and clear to the researchers that I work with, that I'm as coming as an artist in this project, not to communicate the science. The key thing is finding the right researchers who can help me make the piece so I don't tend to dig into scientific papers because I find that for me as a theatre maker, the best way that I connect with people in research is through conversation. Scientific papers, of course, are important and interesting but for me, it's partly about the research and the ideas themselves and as much about the research and the researchers' opinions and getting to know someone.

Theatre is an art form of community and liveness and empathy and so what theatre can maybe bring to the table is those things and if those things can help a wider public engage with the aims of conservation and engage more broadly with the natural world, then theatre can hopefully be a really exciting way of getting people involved and sharing stories about nature.

Julia: You've mentioned already that you collaborate with lots of people, be it, researchers, land managers, etc. We know that you also collaborate with choreographers, composers, so what do you learn from working with others in the process of creating a show?

Tom: Wow, I learn a lot from each different projects! Just to be clear again for the listeners, I make devised theatre work, which is very different to a lot of the kind of theatre that we normally go and see. So with my work, I basically don't have a script. I start from ideas and effectively, I improvise a lot with those ideas and make a lot of mistakes and make a lot of wrong turns and gradually bit by bit find out what the piece of theatre is.

I guess, in a nutshell, what I learned from working in this context from other people is that you've got to find your allies in terms of people who share my vision and my desire for a longer form process. And I think more and more, I learn to really try and listen to other people. And the more creative dialogue can go on between different ideas, the more fruitful and creative the process will be for everyone.

Julia: That's definitely something we've heard from other guests as well. The importance of learning from your mistakes. We could stay here all day talking to you because that's been super interesting so far, but we're going to have to wrap up. I think Sofia has a final question for you.

Sofia: This is a question that we ask everyone who comes on the podcast and it's a tough one. If you were to choose one organism to make a case for what would it be and why?

Tom: Oh how long have you got? I need to think about this one. In terms of the show itself, we all had our favorite species and our favorite animals. Some just for their stupid names, like a Darth Vader, giant pill, millipede, and arrogant shrew things like that. But I think a particular species that has stayed with me, just thinking in the immediate past, because it's the first thing that spring to my mind - for listeners, I have just been stuck out in Brazil during the pandemic I've just returned to quarantine in Wales- I guess I was struck by many things here, but actually I really connected with the lowly bramble, I think is a really beautiful plant.

So I would, I would make a case for the bramble but out in Brazil, I was really struck by this incredible little bird which is called, a beija flor or a flower kisser. It's like a little hummingbird but it has the agility and speed and precision of an insect and it basically shoots around and then with exact precision, just hovers exactly on the spot, then sticks its beak into the flower and extracts what it needs to extract. I never knew that a species could move like that, it is quite incredible, if not sublime, to see an animal moving like that with such agility, speed and beauty!

Julia: Hummingbirds are amazing. They are just incredible birds!

Sofia: Well, thank you so much for coming on the podcast and telling us all about the show and about your process and the way that you approach your work. I think it was a really amazing conversation.

Tom: Thanks so, so much for having me guys!

Julia: Bye Tom.

OUTRO

Sofia: That was really cool! I loved hearing from Tom about the ways that he devised these different theatre pieces and the way that he approaches thinking about nature and how to communicate about conservation in ways that I had never really thought about.

I was quite struck by the species he chose, this hummingbird, and just the way that he was so focused on the way that it moves and the way that it darts around. It just made me realise we each have our own filters for what we notice. So for example, he having then maybe embodied these species or thinking about how they move to personifying them and doing all of this like movement theater, that is one of the things that he

zoomed in on and noticed about a species. I wonder how much that applies to the rest of us, like what our filters would be.

Julia: For sure, and it was also interesting that the other thing he mentioned were species that had funny names. Then you realise that they do sound funny and then suddenly you're more interested in knowing about them, which is also quite curious by itself.

But I think another thing that I really enjoyed in this conversation is the concept of giving people freedom to really process information and just giving them that space to reflect on a thing without giving them a strong message or a call to action. I think that is something that we obviously do quite a lot in communication and in the conservation sector so it was a really interesting take from the more artsy way of doing things, which I thought was really interesting.

Sofia: And I think that having that space allows for maybe these stronger emotions to come out in some of the ways that we talked to Caroline about these big emotions that can emerge around conservation or eco-anxiety or things like that.

In some ways I think that these theatre spaces provide these kind of communal places where people can feel things or come into contact with certain emotions and process them in another way.

Julia: I think this personal connection was also quite evident in the way he talked about how he collaborates with researchers. We asked him if he reads scientific papers as source of inspiration, for example, but then he explained that actually rather than reading papers, he prefers talking with researchers directly and having stories heard from real people and having that direct connection I think gives you a really different take on an issue or a conservation topic in general. That's also something that I picked upon as quite interesting because you can learn so much more by talking to a person, instead of just reading a paper.

Sofia: You can get information out to them and you can also understand the context much more easily because they can maybe help you sort through what's important or what the background of something is and why it feels overwhelming.

I think the last thing for me is just acknowledging that good theater is really hard to do. And I think that combining it with conservation is also a real challenge. Julia mentioned earlier that I did this improvised comedy show earlier this year and it was about saving endangered species and conservation and through the process of making that so much thoughts had to go into it. I definitely found that when I was watching Tom's show, I was just really blown away by how clearly and effectively and emotionally he communicates

some of these issues that I tend to engage with intellectually quite often but maybe not as much in terms of acknowledging that full impact or the way that they're happening in the way that can impact all of us.

Julia: Sure, the last thing I wanted to touch on is also the dichotomy between science versus art when you're at school. I think that's something that is really across the board in different countries. I grew up in France and I also had this impression, and I think it's really reducing possibilities for children, having to pick so early on.

You're just burning these bridges. You could just nurture them instead, and having some art stuff on the side or just having a bit more flexibility in what you could add to your curriculum. I think would be really powerful.

Sofia: Historically, lots of great scientists were also great artists. And that has been lost in many ways and I feel very lucky because my schools didn't force me to make that choice. I didn't study in England for most of my school years and so that meant that I did have the flexibility to keep studying multiple things that I liked.

Julia: It's a really good point, actually, that you make about the fact that it used to be people who were scientists used to be really good at drawing as well. Because if we look at Banks and Darwin and Wallace, they were all naturalists so they had to make drawings of what they actually encountered on expeditions. It's interesting how it's then got divided in a way and we kind of lost that connection.

Sofia: Yeah, but not to worry Julia, we can, we can refind it!

Julia: So that's it for this episode! We hope that you really enjoyed it and we'd love to hear your thoughts, so if you want to send us voice notes, you can do so at podcast@conservationoptimism.org. And if you have anything you want to share, you can also use the [#conservationoptimism](#) on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.

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