Ian bits in blue

Story Conference script

Hi I’m Anna, Co-Artistic Director of Stories in the Dust. Stories in the Dust is a musical, family eco-fable that was first created in 2022 and has since toured nationally, receiving Arts Council funding three times and also funding from the Sustainability and Resilience Institute of Southampton University. I’m here today alongside Ian Williams, Professor of Applied Environmental Science at Southampton University, who we’ve been working closely with since 2023.

In this hour we’ll talk about how we came to work together, you’ll hear from both of us about our work, there’s a practical element where we’ll all get up and move a bit and there’ll be time for questions and discussion at the end.

To give you a brief idea of the show; Stories in the Dust tells the story of two travellers, journeying across a dry and barren landscape, wishing that it would rain. They sing, play games and tell stories inspired by a collection of things they’ve gathered from a time gone by. I’d like to show you a short trailer now, so you can get a sense of what the show is like.

TRAILER

Stories in the Dust began in 2022 when several things happened within a few weeks of each other.

1. JULY Iona (the other half of Stories in the Dust) and I, having worked in similar circles for years, had a chance meeting in a theatre where we had a short, sparky conversation about making a show together (truth be told, we were both a bit jaded by the industry, auditioning, and post covid rebuilding that we’d been doing alone).
2. This was quickly followed by a cuppa at Iona’s house where we had another chat and wrote up the basic concept of the show. When preparing for this event today I excitedly tried to find a photo that I remembered we’d taken of those very first notes that we made. I found it. Ready to be totally underwhelmed?

PHOTO OF NOTES

The fishing never happened. The tomato seeds did etc…..

Although this is a disappointing waste of paper it is a sign of how we’d continue to work together because we tend not to do too much devising or thinking until we’re in a room together and on our feet.

1. At the same time as this, Wiltshire Creative approached us to ask if we had a show, or knew of any, going out, because they needed to fill a small run, in non theatre spaces, specifically in areas of deprivation. We said we’d do it with the new show that we were making.

They offered free rehearsal space and booked us for 4 shows.

1. At the same time that this was all happening, we had another chance chat with the team at MAST Mayflower Studios, who offered us a residency, a small seed fund and the opportunity to share a scratch version of the show at their Emergency Festival. It was on! We decided on the show name Stories in the Dust. Which is now our Company Name as well. And we took this marketing image on a phone.

MARKETING IMAGE

It wasn’t until that scratch sharing at MAST that we realised just how much we had hit on the theme of climate change. We had a post sharing Q&A with our peers and they raised it. It hadn’t been our intention to make a show about that. We started the devising process with a basic concept of two post-apocalyptic characters, they’re isolated but thriving in their own way, their reality is familiar, steeped in tradition and ritual somehow different.

We devised it in the very hot summer of 2022, so presumably that crept into the process. We knew the landscape of our story was dry, barren and things didn’t grow. We saw a video online about what happens when the ground gets too dry and hard – and that’s when we decided that our story would have an epic flood.

After sharing it with its first audience we finally recognised that our cool, bold, funny post-apocalyptic story was hitting on something very real and we immediately felt out of our depth.

This was when we were motivated to do two things.

1. Work with young people to finish making the show, in order to ensure its relevance, and to ensure their voices and concerns were included. To ease climate anxiety not fuel it.
2. Find a proper professional to support us to make the show responsibly, both in content and carbon footprint. And to help us to create the wraparound content for our audiences.

YALI IMAGE

In 2023 we were successful in securing Arts Council funding for a 3 week R&D to do these things. We worked with a local school, employed a creative team, had some proper photos taken and put out a call for a climate change consultant – at least that’s what the job call out said. Honestly, we didn’t really know what or who we needed but we started with that. We shared it about, including sending it to Southampton Uni. We had some good applications. One really stood out – Ian Williams, Professor of Applied Environmental Science at Southampton University was keen to chat. Prior to the interview he sent us a massive CV, which we did not understand at all. It was pages and pages long and had words on it like ‘NASA’. He agreed to an interview. Afterwards Iona and I closed down Zoom, turned to look at each other and couldn’t believe our luck. We had stumbled upon a whopping big scientist who was keen to work with us. We felt nervous about collaborating with someone like Ian. He was clever and from another world, plus we didn’t always know what he was talking about because we have such entirely different practices and languages around our individual work.

I’m going to bring Ian in now, to tell you more about his work and his journey into working with us.

Ian talks about his journey into working with us and why he wanted to. His background and what motivates him.

HI, I’m Ian, and I’ve been a professional environmental scientist since the 1980s. I suppose I’m a “veteran” now, covered in lichens, grey hair and chalk dust. I chose this career because I was youthfully determined to help end pollution from terrible events such as the Bhopal (1984) and Chernobyl (1986) disasters, the Exxon Valdez (1989) oil spill, depletion of the ozone layer and urban air pollution from road traffic.

When I started out, I was mocked by practically everyone I know (except my close family). “Tree hugger”, “lentil-eater”, “eco-nut” and “green-freak” are the few I can mention in a family friendly environment! Throughout my career, I have been told that I am idealistic, unrealistic, reactionary, naïve, anti-progress, sanctimonious, hypocritical, full of cognitive dissonance, liberal, angry, and so on. They don’t affect me at all and never have, but they do adversely impact many colleagues and sadly, they have seeped into the public’s consciousness. For some people, these labels have become accepted wisdom. I think they are easy slurs, designed to be both dismissive of my skills and to continue the narrative that environmental scientists operate to a lower standard than other scientists. And I’m not alone of course; my experiences pale into insignificance compared to the astonishing abuse thrown daily at people like Greta Thunberg and Chris Packham simply because they argue we should use hard-won, peer-reviewed, objective evidence to promote an environmentally-friendly world.

In reality, despite working like a Trojan and with a fierce passion, I sometimes feel I’ve made practically zero impact. I often describe myself as a “professional failure” due to my inability to persuade people that we should live evidence-based, more environmentally friendly lives. I should be depressed by this. And sometimes I do get a bit down about society’s general direction of travel, with style often preferred over substance, “looks” preferred to capabilities, and over-consumption damaging every aspect of our world. But depressed – never. Why not?

Well, because “my truth” is that I have spent a lifetime gaining expertise by studying a subject in detail and working hard to produce evidence-based research that only has the best interests of society at its heart. Think about this – as a “member of the public”: when we want fruit, we trust the greengrocer. When we want a haircut, we trust the hairdresser. When we have heartburn, we trust the pharmacist. If we want a car fixed, we trust the mechanic. So when advice is needed on climate change or water pollution, why don’t people trust environmental scientists and engineers?

There are theories that people acknowledge the expertise of scientists but will only “trust” them if they feel that their interests coincide. Thus if environmental scientists are presenting evidence that is perceived to require a change in lifestyle, or is perceived to threaten job security or economic interests, then they must be untrustworthy or not very good. People being dismissive or being rude about my work has been my life-long experience as a professional environmental scientist!

We all know that modern society faces many persistent problems, including the urgent development and realization of technological and social approaches to addressing dangerous climate change. Accelerating effective large-scale carbon management requires active public engagement and motivation and this is hugely challenging. Many political, environmental, social, technological, legal, and economic approaches have been trialled, but only slow progress has been achieved. This is partly because environmental scientists commonly encounter substantial difficulties in communicating research findings to the public in an effective manner for the reasons I’ve just mentioned.

*Scientific communication* is the practice of communicating science-related topics - science, technology, engineering, and maths - to non-experts. Traditional methods of public communication tend to have narrow, predominantly short-term impacts. Even very high-profile campaigns – for example, the use of children’s TV characters The Wombles to highlight the problem of littering – did not stop litter.

There has been a historical tendency to assume that any divergence between scientific and public views are caused by incomplete/flawed public knowledge and so communication efforts have focused on public education and raising awareness - think the “Nudge” campaigns. However, more recently we have understood that ideology, not knowledge, best predicts environment-related attitudes and behaviour. Thus, people like me have moved towards investigating the effectiveness of emotion-based approaches.

And this is why I love working with creative artists such as Anna and Iona. They take inspiration from children and scientists and bring environmental science to life with drama, and music, and songs.

R&D image

The first R&D was when our collaboration with Ian was launched and it enabled us to work with a local school. We ran workshops to gauge young people’s understanding of climate, to inform the content of the show and to educate and inspire the young people to learn more about the climate crisis.

EDUCATION PACK SLIDES

Together we created an education pack to accompany the show. Ian brought on board fellow scientist and illustrator Toby Roberts for this. You can download this for free from the resources page on our website. The show itself doesn’t have any climate change facts in it, it’s totally fictional, set in a fictional world but this resource enables our audience to facilitate post show conversations, and teachers to weave the show into the curriculum.

We went on to tour the show, unfunded, in Autumn 2023.

During this time Ian spearheaded a co-authored paper about the project and the concept of this collaborative approach. The paper, entitled Stories in the Dust: the arts as a medium to communicate climate science was published in the Key Cities Innovation Network Journal called Civic Partners in Net Zero and launched at the House of Commons in April 2023. Iona and I got all dressed up and went along. This put us in a room that we would never have imagined even existed. We chatted to academics, scientists and politicians about our work. We of course felt out of our depth and out of place but on the way out we saw one of the top scientists shoving the posh chocolates from the table into her pockets. Turns out we’re all the same.

Ian is now going to tell you more about the paper and what we were trying to do with it. Maybe you could talk about science and arts colliding here, the whole objective, subjective theory – or something else entirely!

I reckon my main expertise is in blagging. Hence, I managed to blag my way, at very short notice, onto an academic conference held at Wrexham University in November 2023. The conference was hosted by the Key Cities Innovation Network and its intention was to discuss innovative approaches that universities could use in towns and cities to achieve net zero targets. By the way, I had to pay for myself to go, my university wanted me to attend on its behalf but would not pay my expenses. I was given a whole 5 minutes towards the end of the conference to outline the work I’d been doing with Anna and Iona. It was very well received, so well received in fact, that the university’s vice-chancellor invited me to turn our experience into a research paper that would be published in a special journal and launched at the House of Commons. I nonchalantly said yes whilst surreptitiously stealing the posh chocolates from the tables behind me.

Anna and Iona were initially disbelieving but then very excited about this news, especially when they realised they were going to the House of Commons and not me. I drafted the paper, got feedback and inputs from Anna and Iona and sent it off for copywriting and publication.

So what was the paper about? My work has centred on enabling young people to make a positive contribution to society via active learning, inter-generational influence and partnership, with a focus on environmental improvement. I would regard myself as a bit of a pioneer in intergenerational influence, where one generation has a positive influence on the behaviour of another.

Almost 20 years ago, I worked with the now defunct environmental charity Waste Watch, on the “Taking Home Action on Waste” (THAW) project, which was the first ever attempt to measure the intergenerational influence of an education programme on (recycling) behaviour at home. Focusing on primary-age children, the project showed that the school-based education programme led to improved household participation in recycling as well as decreasing amounts of residual waste. The THAW study inspired American researchers to show that teaching in this way significantly increased parents’ concern over the issue. The fact is that children tend to explain things simply and understandably whilst adults over-complicate. This is really helpful when you are trying to communicate complex messages.

But I didn’t think it was enough. I thought there was something missing. And I thought that the missing “X Factor” was a combination of enhanced emotional connection and entertainment. That is how I ended up recruiting musicians, theatre and art professionals to work with me to reach the public more effectively; to raise awareness, educate and change attitudes through evoking emotional responses. There is a long history of art and theatre being used to communicate problems within society. Creative artists have an ability to convey issues in a highly emotional way, which can raise awareness, promote reflection, and encourage behavioural change. So Anna and Iona reaching out for a discussion with an environmental scientist was an opportunity I couldn’t walk away from.

The paper provides an overview of techniques used for scientific communication and makes the case that new, more impactful methods are necessary. We outline an interdisciplinary approach that combines science and theatre to generate a show that applies intergenerational influence combined with emotional responses and personification to help promote pro environmental attitudes and behaviours. The concept that underpins Stories in the Dust that *combining intergenerational influence and the skills of creative artists enables enhanced public communication of scientific/engineering principles and that this can facilitate behaviour change.* We call it COM-ART.

SLOW TOURING IMAGE

Armed with COMARTS and the momentum it gave us, we were able to secure further Arts Council funding in 2024, this time to tour the show and workshop programme extensively, across the UK in what we call Slow Touring. Slow touring serves to embed our work into the communities that we visit by delivering bespoke workshops in schools and community groups in the lead up to the show being performed in venues. Or in non theatre spaces. It prevents us from simply flying in and out of an area with a show and enables us to make our work more relevant and more impactful for our audiences.

We worked with Ian to develop the workshop programme, which we started to deliver independently of Ian as we toured the show. The workshops combine drama activities and science to offer a gentle, fun and accessible introduction to waste, plastics and climate change. Each Slow Touring week is different.

We focussed the delivery of our Slow Touring weeks into areas identified by Arts Council England as Priority Places, to levelling up areas and to areas identified as top 10% deprived across the country. The weeks are designed to enable us to work with hard to reach participants and to ensure our work is accessible to all, equally. The young people involved are then given the opportunity to see the show, either in school or a professional venue. Our favourite way to do this is to work in schools during the week and then coach the young people over to see the show in their local venue at the end of that week. I’d like to give us the chance to move around now and have a go at one of the games we deliver in schools - it’s called The Decomposition Game.

WORKSHOP EXAMPLE – deliver decomposition game

At the end of the workshops we set the young people a challenge to research one of the topics we’ve covered and present it back to us in the afternoon - as a presentation, song, drama scene. Anything that works for them. This is when we create our audio installations. This gives a platform to young people’s thoughts and feelings about the climate crisis. We’d like to share some of these now by taking you to our website.

AUDIO CLIPS.

A good success story to share with you is that the installation created with young people from Woodlands Primary School is being played at the Wiltshire Council full council meeting while the climate strategy is being ratified. We’re so excited that young people’s voices are being heard in this setting, by these very influential grown-ups.

In autumn 2024, we applied for funding from the Sustainability and Resilience Institute at Southampton Uni. We were successful and could use this to secure further funding from ACE for our most ambitious project yet. The one we’re in the middle of right now. We’re working across the UK To deliver the show and accompanying outreach programme, to create audio installation and we’re taking the show into Hospitals and other non theatre settings. We’re working with many schemes, venues and projects to deliver our work accessibly, across the UK, again prioritising those who don’t typically have access to high quality culture.

I’m going to bring Ian back in now to talk about the work we’re doing with the funding from the Sustainability and Resilience Institute.

Ian talks about the SRI fund, what it is and what we’re doing with the money

The sustainability aspect/carbon calculator.

Quantitative proof that it works – quotes etc.

The University of Southampton’s interdisciplinary Sustainability and Resilience Institute aims to tackle the most critical challenges facing society and our environment. It has access to small pots of money to fund activities via a competitive bidding process. We were successful in securing funding to evaluate the success of the Stories in the Dust activities.

Our work started in August 2024 and extends to the end of July 2025. We are evaluating the impact of the show and its wraparound content/workshops on knowledge/behavioural change on children, families, and audiences. I’m happy to report that we’ve met all of our objectives and that we will be producing a report by the end of July. We will be happy to share this with anyone who is interested.

It is exceptionally difficult to secure quantitative evidence for this sort of activity, so we’ve focused on a qualitative approach. Here are some quotes from teachers whose students saw a performance and were involved in workshops:

*“I thought it was thoughtful and well designed for both education and entertainment. I think it really was very imaginative and definitely made the students think about … the topic”.*

*“I would really recommend this to you know, other schools. I think it's left a lasting impression on the kids, whether that’s educational or in a more emotional sense and you know that's not easy to do with kids of this age”.*

*“The atmosphere was like brilliant …….. Everyone was just so excited to be there, and everyone was giving it their full attention”.*

*“Even like the quiet students were getting involved. I think they really liked how creative some of it was, you know, especially when they used the puppets and the storytelling”.*

*“I think it was extremely effective. You know, I think it found that balance between like delivering a serious message about a real current issue, but then also making it child friendly and approachable where it didn't seem like big and scary, or overwhelming to watch”.*

*“One of my students even came to me and said this is the best workshop we've ever done”.*

*“It wasn't just a passive sit and watch. They were really engaged in what was happening”.*

This one is my favourite:

*“We've set up our own little experiment outside where we put an Apple, a ruler, a piece of paper and a little plastic bag outside to watch what happened to them over time. So we've done that within the classroom and I think it's also highlighted to the whole school about the lack of knowledge that the children have. We've kind of highlighted it with little opportunities now and then really. And then this summer term coming up, we're doing what we call our ‘explore term’. In that we're going to be exploring climate and global and sustainability and things like that”.*

We have successfully built and tested an easy to use tool that can estimate the environmental footprint of a small touring company pre, during and post tour. It estimates the carbon emissions associated with rehearsals, lighting, sound, climate control, props and costumes, promotional materials, administration, transport and waste. We are thinking of recommending it to the whole sector for widespread use and we are going to try and secure funding to convert it into a mobile phone app.

IMAGE OF THE SET - 90% reclaimed and recycled

Early on in the process we committed to creating our show out of 90% recycled and reclaimed materials. We’re currently estimating this percentage but we now have the carbon calculator that will enable us to measure properly and the aim is to share this with our peers and make it widely available. We’re on the Theatre Green Book Touring Committee and there’s lots of exciting work happening for small scale touring companies, to enable them to better measure their impact.

To end, we’d like to address some of the challenges that we’ve found, colliding our two worlds together. We had quite a lot of miscommunications, especially in the early days – we have both been entrenched in our own worlds, where everyone speaks the same shorthand, and everyone has the same objectives. It’s taken time to meet each other in the middle, to build trust and to work out how we can serve each other without one side leading too strongly. I often feel like I’m a good few steps behind Ian and I don’t understand what it is he’s suggesting straight away. That gap is getting smaller. So the challenge now is to continue this relationship with our next show, and find the balancing act between making work with a message but not letting that message impact the creative process negatively. We want to sort of re-create the journey we’ve been on with Stories in the Dust - but of course we have so much more knowledge now and an existing collaboration. We feel it’s entirely possible and are excited about the next show.

Ian speaks about his experiences with the collaboration.

I will speak “off the cuff” here. I will mention:

● I think the COM-ART concept works really well and that the qualitative evidence provides strong support for this.

● I think the SiTD activities are very powerful in terms of communicating environmental messages in a way that is more effective than standard approaches.

● The collaboration has been fun, creative, energising and has opened my eyes to new ways of researching and educating that provide multiple simultaneous benefits beyond just learning about science. The whole is way, way more than the sum of the parts.

● I have learned how to be better at working across disciplines, about how to respect disciplinary norms and language, and about how to navigate cross-disciplinary cultural barriers.

● I have learned that the skills of theatre professionals are hugely under-rated and under-valued.

● One “negative” - I have learned that it is exceptionally difficult to get work of this nature published in peer-reviewed journals - it “falls down the cracks.”

Open to questions.