



📅 November 17, 2019 👤 Hannah Rooke

**High up in the Bulgarian mountains, I stood beside a stage coated head to toe in multicoloured splatters as a woman, adorning a mischief ridden smile, poured purple paint into my hands before nudging me back into the centre-stage battle of rainbow hued bodies.**

That was my very first interaction with Lost and [Aespia](#) founder & director Jodie Powell, and a very telling one at that! Following on from Manuel Isaac's fantastic [review](#) of Aespia's London Take Over we jumped at the opportunity to have a chat with the queen bee herself about the inspiration and vision behind her work so far, as well as a sneak peek into what the future may hold.



*Aespia's creator Jodie Powell having a well deserved sit down at the Grow Tottenham day party*

**So, it's been two years since you ran your last full festival, what have you and the team been up to in the meantime?**

Yes, two years! It was a much needed break but I'm delighted to be back at it. Since August 2017, we've been touring as Aespia School of Art at our favourite festivals in Europe, showcasing a taste of Aespia's soul and spreading our spirit.

We've all been working on our creative projects and passions; making a living; learning, growing, travelling, exploring; and conjuring up some fresh Aespia ideas. Personally, I've been fine-tuning the concept, focussing on what's important to me (and therefore Aespia) in terms of its values, and imagining how I can push it further.

2020 is going to be an important year.

**From LOST to Aespia, what inspired the change and how did you come up with the new name?**

A refresh and a little makeover was necessary. Though the renaming of LOST stemmed from something *not* so nice, with support I spun it into an opportunity for growth. Eventually I was excited and ready for it; silver lining thinking is a powerful practice!



In order to stand out from other small festivals and events – as we are spoiled for choice in this country – and focus on what makes us special, I decided to get creative with the name as well as the experience.

Aespia is a made up word that I plucked out of a late night thought bubble. On the outside, I wanted it to be as different from LOST as possible – this was important to me to move on. On the inside, I wanted to shed some features that no longer matched the meaning of its roots, and focus on the goodness.



I began with what's at our core: art and escapism. Then, by asking myself what Aespia is, I auditioned existing sounds and words I like that are related to both of those integral elements, which is how I came up with the beginning of the word: 'aes'. It reminds me of 'aesthetic', which was a word etched into my skin through four years of art school, so I thought I should at least *honour* it.

I wanted the name to feel fun to say, and look cute to write, which is how I got to it starting and ending with the same letter. To finish, I scrambled all the letters from the 'what are we?' finalists, with pastel felt tips, a glass of wine, and an A2 sketchbook on the floor, and settled on Aespia.

I'm aware that's a very long way of telling you it's made up, but I get asked about its meaning a lot and I quite like the story. It reflects me as an artist and also suits Aespia in how it runs – the end result is colourful, imaginative, playful and so evidently born from love, but there's not a drop of structure to it, thanks to me.

The name seems apt: creative; pleasing on the eyes and ears; it surely has a story; people pronounce it however they like, and it's always right.

#### **At the core of Aespia, what is the vision, what impact do you want to have on the world?**

Big question! It all began because after years of making and viewing art within quite a traditional (and sometimes rigid) environment, I wanted to make art more accessible and more appealing to a wider audience. I also wanted to *make* art that was more accessible and more appealing.

Throwing parties where people could slather the crisp white walls, and their friends' bodies, with brightly coloured paint felt naughty. All installations were interactive; they were *supposed* to be touched. DJs played until the early morning, while

spectators became participants, dancing and exploring as they sipped on their BYOB cans in a basement in Hoxton. There were no 'please do not touch' signs or ropes obstructing sculptures. It felt liberating and tongue in cheek.



While I deeply appreciate the role galleries play in our culture, and always respect the precious works within them, I often leave feeling a little underwhelmed. I can count the number of times I've felt completely immersed in a gallery on one hand; each time the work has been live, interactive, immersive, playful and unpretentious. From William Forsythe's 'The Fact of Matter' to Yayoi Kusama's 'I'm here, but Nothing', the times I've felt most alive and engaged in art have been when I'm overcome with a sense of unstoppable childlike wonder, *not* when I'm reminded of dragging my trainers around a museum, begging for the cafe.

It feels like such a shame that exhibitions in their basic form – the most common way of experiencing art – can put people off going in the first place or bore them if they do go. The art world, with all its champagne receptions, shouty auctions and fancy bouncers in suits, is very exclusive. Even the environment in which people study art is a bubble – a very fun one that I'm forever grateful for, but a bubble nonetheless.

The viewing of art, the purchasing of art, and the studying of art are all far from diverse realms. I want to continually educate myself, beyond how to produce art, and search for a way that art can heal. I understand how and why art is considered a luxury, but I don't believe it has to be.



I'm saving up to study Arts Psychotherapy and learn about how to make art accessible for those who have financial, cultural, personal, physical, psychological or societal factors that act as tiny or enormous hurdles in their ability to introduce art into their lives.

In the next few years, I aim to start an alternative, touring art school, which will combine my love for creativity and education, which is why I started hosting bespoke workshops at festivals under the name 'Aespia School of Art'. I've been teaching art, music and drama to toddlers right through to people in retirement for years now – I hope soon I'm able to create my own syllabus, with mental health, wellbeing, adventure and connection at its core.

That question doesn't feel so big now that I've written it down! These plans have been in the making for years and I've put a lot of energy, time, love and soul into them. Although I can feel frustrated and impatient when it comes to where I'd like Aespia to be – how we don't make money, how we all need to juggle other commitments, and that the process of applying for funding intimidates me – I know I'm spending every spare minute I have wondering how I can entertain people, educate people and soothe people through art. So, on a good day, I can safely say I'm trying my best and we're moving somewhere, albeit a little slowly – for that, I feel immeasurably lucky.

**Throughout your work there's a really strong theme of escapism, where did this come from and why's it so important to you?**

For a myriad of reasons and in varying extremes, life can be very sore. Touching on above, maybe one day I will be in a position where I can volunteer my time to causes that confront these challenges that so many people face. In the meantime, I want to curate experiences that encourage people to leave their lives behind for a while.

Art, music and theatre – like with so many people – are intrinsically interlaced with every moment and memory I own. The most euphoric highs and debilitating lows are remembered through colours, feelings, smells, sounds and sights.

At Aespia Festival, we ask you to leave your phones at home and jump on a coach for an hour in an unknown direction. The set times are a secret and the signs lead you deeper into the woods. Everyone wears art overalls and everything gets messy. We don't want egos or online updates – we want you to literally get lost. Not because we're mimicking escape rooms

– though they're quite fun – but because we want you to feel stripped of whatever is holding you back from connecting with people and art on an authentic level, in the trappings of your everyday life.



I believe one must be vulnerable to feel connected, and a little scared to feel alive. Art can be an adventure or a conversation. In the same way the best comedy can make you feel deeply uncomfortable, I want Aespia to set the tone for what it means to make and enjoy art: trust, open eyes, and a touch of mischief.

We may only have the pleasure of your presence in our playground for 24 hours, but we hope you leave with some Aespia tricks in your pockets, that'll seep into the way you go about your day in a lasting way.

**Were there any other notable events or moments that inspired you to take your work in this direction?**

The first ever Secret Cinema event I went to was 'The Third Man' in 2011, and it was exhilarating. There was a genuine sense of danger, as I crawled underneath the Farmiloe Building in Clerkenwell, and into what felt and smelled like a sewage tunnel, following an actor as we hopped over giant pipes towards a secret den.

He sent me on a mission – it was pretty clear that I was one of those sweaty audience members for whom a drinks token and a photo next to the entrance would *not* suffice – to reveal and essentially interrogate another actor into handing over some 'confidential paperwork'.

I ducked and dived through the crowds of well-behaved spectators, and rummaged through office cabinets, scanning for 'clues'. At one point I honestly considered decoding the names and birthplaces of characters, as though the budget would have covered inventing a language, so that a 21 year old painting student could feel special.



I did feel special, though. In that moment, I was amazed at the actors' abilities and totally bewitched by the set designers' attention to detail. I was raving about it for months afterwards and actually wrote about the experience in my dissertation. No lie.

There are many independent festivals, or hidden areas within festivals, that inspire me creatively. But in terms of the level of interaction, that has to be my favourite moment.

**What do you think it is about modern life that makes events like yours so appealing to so many people?**

We are obsessed with, and drowning in, cults and phenomena such as 'fake news' and social media. The internet is a black hole and our education system is becoming obsolete. We're murdering our planet and our working weeks are too long for us to care. People are exhausted. Everyone deserves a chance to shake it off in a safe space, bursting with creative surprises. With art, you can treat it as a distraction, or you can treat it as a cure. Aespia aims to do a bit of both.

**So, the big question, what's next?**

Yes! So glad you asked. We're delighted to announce 'Aespia presents: The Glass Theatre' on 23rd November at Stour Space, Hackney Wick; a 12-hour celebration of live art, performance art and theatre.

Full event details and tickets can be found [here](#).

