

Full blog: Keir Bust creative focus

Introduction:

Keir Bust has spent more of his life coming to South Hill Park than he hasn't, growing up on and off the stage of our performance spaces. We sat down with him to hear how a bursary when he was 10 opened up a world to him he could never have imagined, and why his personal, professional and performing education at South Hill Park have been the making of him.

How did you first get involved with South Hill Park?

I have been involved with South Hill Park since I was about ten or eleven, and the very first thing I did here was taking part in the technical summer school scheme that they run every year. I was lucky enough to get a bursary place through the Tom Cocklin Memorial Trust, created by the family of a young actor who was really involved at SHP and was sadly killed in a car accident in his 20s.

His family set up a bursary in his memory, because he cared so much about South Hill Park, and they wanted to enable young people like myself to have access to the arts if they couldn't afford it or it wasn't financially viable for their families. That made a huge difference to me, as it opened these doors to learn about all about the technical side of theatre and performance, and it just snowballed from there. It was absolutely brilliant, I just wanted to soak it all up, I'm a bit of a sponge, so I just loved it.

Getting that bursary place must have meant a lot to you?

Absolutely, it was instrumental in setting me up with the foundations. I wasn't from a background where we could really afford things like that. I'm from quite a big family, so to have that sort of money going spare was quite tough. I was lucky enough to secure it a few times, and it really was instrumental in my training and me growing up here. Without that bursary and the access it gave me, I don't think I'd have had the career in the arts or pathway that I've had at South Hill Park.

How did you first get involved with the performing side of the arts at South Hill Park?

The very first time I performed here was in the pantomime, when I auditioned for the Junior Ensemble in a production of Sleeping Beauty. Since then I've done the Easter schools, Easter productions, summer shows, autumn shows, the lot!

My earliest memory of performing here was a production of Oliver Twist with the Easter school about ten years ago, where I played one of the orphans. We had this incredible director who was very keen to have the kids as involved as possible the whole time. There was one tech rehearsal for a sequence we were in, where we sat on the set watching the scene, and honestly, I think he'd forgotten we were there, so we sat there for about four or five hours, just watching this whole incredible technical process. It was amazing to watch everyone work from the stage. From where I was standing, I could see the back of the theatre, the production desk figuring out lights and sound, balancing everything, working out transitions etc.

I've always been fascinated in how the technical side of theatre runs, and that definitely ignited a life-long love. It was just so interesting to see all these different departments coming together to make one overall product. Even now, whether I'm acting or directing, my favourite part of the production is the Tech Rehearsal, because I just love seeing everything come together.

Your roles have evolved since playing an orphan in the ensemble, tell us a bit more about how you've grown into different parts as you've grown up here?

I was desperate to be really good, so I soaked up anything that came my way. My roles have very varied over the years, and I've progressed quite dramatically! I started off in smaller roles like the ensemble and I've just grown up and developed through that. I've gone from smaller roles with no lines to more principal roles, and even working professionally with the pantomimes. Most recently I played Lumiere in Beauty and the Beast, the latest Easter production.

What's it like being involved in the high-end professional shows at South Hill Park?

It's absolutely amazing, because you feel like they've catered solely to that production, particularly with the pantomimes where you have big commercial producers doing a smaller-scale production but with the energy and care of the big commercial pantos. It's truly unique, original script, original set. That's very, very special. But then that ethos carries across to the in-house productions as well, which is something you rarely get at other venues. Everyone here has such a care and such a passion for what they create in-house, which is so lovely.

Do you have a favourite production you've been involved with?

It's so hard to pick just one! I remember doing our production of Madagascar in 2020, standing on the Wilde stage after months in lockdown, there was a moment during the first night where I just thought, this is it, we've done it, we've brought theatre back locally and we've managed to do a full production indoors. That was really special.

Musically my favourite role I've ever had has to be Lumiere in Beauty and the Beast. The scale of that production was a bit crazy, it just kept getting bigger and bigger. And being involved in a show that had the kind of reception it had from audiences was a bit dreamlike. We had standing ovations every show and then people would wait to do cast meet and greets afterwards. I'm not very good at receiving compliments, so the messages I got from people afterwards were quite overwhelming. It was a really special moment and something I won't forget.

My favourite production was probably where I played Tommo in Private Peaceful. That was such a perfect example of South Hill Park creating this amazing professional-scale production for its community with community performers, where everything was just thrown at it in terms of production value.

As well as the large-scale productions on the Wilde stage, you're also very involved with the Studio Theatre, tell us a bit more about this.

I love doing stuff in the studio. It's so intimate, you feel like you're properly immersed in the performance. You really can connect with an audience on that scale. I love performing there because you get to really feel like everyone is a part of that with you. And creating shows in there is such a big challenge because it is so small but you want it to have the impact of a show that could be performed at the Wilde. So I love it, I think it's a brilliant space.

Tell us about forming your own theatre company at South Hill Park?

I formed Three Dot Theatre back in 2020, because I was so passionate about directing and producing. I was only 19, so some people felt I was too young to direct, but I really had the itch! So I formed the company with the intention of just doing one show, and yet four years later we've done nine shows, toured two, written six original shows and done two musicals in a black box fringe venue. It's just amazing. It's been great to have the support from South Hill Park in order to do that.

What skills have you learned here that you've used in your career?

I've been really lucky to learn from loads of amazing people here at South Hill Park, particularly the different directors I've worked with in productions. But also, being part of the youth theatre here gave me a strong foundation in performing and just understanding different theatre styles. To grow up with these people and learn skills from such a young age has been incredible.

Through all these amazing people, I've learned all sorts of skills in producing, in directing, in working as an actor, while still keeping the creativity that you care about the most as your passion. I think that's the biggest thing that South Park has taught me.

What is it about South Hill Park that has kept you coming back for so long?

It's just like, my middle, my centre. I've met some wonderful people here, lifelong friends, new friends, old friends. And it's wonderful to connect with so many different people who are passionate about the same thing, particularly in different age groups. And then I've met other people through different groups here, the stage school that I went to growing up that I now work for. It's just a place that holds a lot of special memories for me.

Did you always know you wanted a career in the arts?

Yes, I think I always knew. There wasn't anything else that interested me as a child, nothing else left out at me as a possible career.

Why do you think it's important for people to have access to the arts in a place like South Hill Park?

Oh, for loads of different reasons. It's always buzzing, there's always something going on, whether with courses, the theatre, or just the building. Also for young people to have access to the arts in the way that South Park provided is so rare, particularly nowadays, given the financial restraints on it.

I think it creates such a big community within the wider community, having somewhere like South Park where people can come and connect to different people, that's so important. It's a wonderful resource and people just have to come and use it really.

Where do you think you'd be without South Hill Park?

I don't know! I think the arts would always have caught me somehow and dragged me in, but I am glad I found it so young in my life, at a place like South Hill Park, so I've been able to really utilise it.

It has been instrumental in my career and my training, and I'm so lucky that it was literally just across the road from where I grew up. It meant that I could do the training on my doorstep rather than having to go slightly further out to maybe places in London that would cost a lot more. South Park had setups here where they could support people from all kinds of backgrounds in order to do it.

So without South Park, I don't think my career would be as easy sailing as it is now. Because it gave me all the setup that I needed and the platforms that I needed in order to achieve what I wanted to. Because they just teach you so much, and they nourish you and look after you so well.

I think eventually I would have gotten there without it. But not having South Park would have made that 10 times harder.