

HOW DO WE MAKE INCLUSIVE, CREATIVE DESIGNS WITH AND FOR D/DEAF AND DISABLED PRACTITIONERS?



Can we explore the aesthetics of access to make new theatrical languages

Transcript of talk held at the Staging Places Exhibition at the V&A Friday 17th January 2020.

Hosted by Dr Katharine Sandys

Speakers: Liz Ashcroft and Paul Burges & Larissa _____ (In absentia but communicated through SBTD Hon Secretary Fiona Watt)

Katharine: Welcome everybody this evening to the Victoria and Albert Museum where we were hosting this event at the Staging Places exhibit. We've got a series of talks going on, but we decided to talk but we decided to concentrate this evening on, 'As Designers, how do we make inclusive Creative Designs for D/deaf and disabled practitioners.' It's something that feels like a real hot conversation at the moment so really we are treating this very much as an initial discussion and we hope that it will carry on and we hope that these conversations will carry on afterwards, there's a lot of interest.

So, I want to introduce this evening two designers in particular (Fiona will also talk on behalf of Larissa who is going to contribute as well), **Liz Ashcroft** and **Paul Burgess** who have both worked with different companies in terms of Inclusive design within how audiences experience those shows, those productions in a way that doesn't create different communities of audiences, so that's really what we're going to be talking about, we also have Dee Simpson who's going to be interpreting for us as well. So really,

we'll open up the discussion first by having few examples but it's very much about then starting a conversation around the table and then opening that up wider.

Liz and Paul, if you want to talk about a couple of the productions that are in the exhibition of course, so you might want to use it as an example or as a starting point or just introduce us to your experience so far:

Paul: Who wants to go first?

Liz: Ok, I'll go first,

I designed "The House of Bernarda Alba" a Graeae production at the Royal Exchange in Manchester and one of the things I was aiming for was to try and equalize the experience that everyone in the audience had. I won't go into too much detail, but the main bulk of the design is 7 chairs, one for each member of the family, that are rooted to the floor. The space is in the round, it's a seven-sided building, there's seven chairs one for each member of the family but they are stuck to the floor. There's a light line that connects those chairs and goes up into the chair leg that it meets. There's lots more aspects to the design but as a kind of inclusive access element, I, we made the decision to make a second set of these chairs and they lived in the great hall (I'm just going to pass these round so that people can see a little bit) here is a kind of second set of the chairs that meant that any audience member could come and sit on his chairs in the hall and also access via a QR code the actor introducing themselves and their chair so as an audience member you can have a kind of touch touchy feely tour but you also get introduced to what each character looks like what they're wearing while you're sat on the chair and the chairs were chosen to be like the character so there's two chairs for instance for Maria Josefa because she looks like this when she's in company which is quite a low sturdy chair but actually in her head she's a showgirl with her legs crossed and a feather boa round it so that's two aspects of the same woman you can sit on that chair in the

great hall and they were in the same configuration as the set so I suppose that's one example of making that accessible. The second that's connected set wise with 'The House of Bernarda Alba' is when you went into the space Lorca's stage direction descriptions of the space were written on the floor, 'table' was written on the table, his stage directions of what the space looks like were written on the front of the balcony so if you are having the space described to you because you're blind you're in exactly the same position as someone reading them, in that you are equal in imagining that space and making it an image in your head so that was a device, I suppose, that equalized experience.

Katharine: And that idea of the devices that help equalize, how have you found that you've arrived at that? Is that something that you have an idea of before you start or is it something that you arrive at through the process of making the work?

Liz: I think the process of making the work and I think when you're working with someone like Graeae then it is in your head all the time so you're taking the seven chairs came first I think and then the writing of the set description I think maybe came after that but all the time because you've got inclusion running through your brain you're looking for places where you can do that.

Fiona: Were the company involved in co-designing what sort of chair the character had, or did that come from you?

Liz: Mainly from me but there was some exchange because their chairs were introduced to them quite early on and also they had lots of practical needs as well, so there's one that's got a tiny little drawer it because it needs the green shoes that Adele is going to escape in so, and also Adela commits suicide off stage but that didn't, to open up the accessibility to that again, I didn't mention earlier but above each chair was a piece of sackcloth, bound, and everybody's got used to those all evening and also got as frustrated as

the family members by the chairs being absolutely rooted to the spot and not moving and no one can get out. One of the chairs, Pippa's chair, she's an amputee, one of her legs is a crutch so she takes her leg off on stage and she can use the clutch to steady herself but she still can't go anywhere because she's trapped because it's the chair leg and the chair is stuck to the floor but at the point of the suicide, that chair falls over on its own without anybody being in which is kind of if you've used that chair to you hang yourself at the point where you kick it over and that cloth dropped like a stone and stayed there so it becomes visual as well, you're not waiting for a scream offstage that not everyone can access so on more senses I suppose that's what you're doing, you're checking through all of your senses and you're trying to hit as many of them as you can.

Katharine: So that idea of inclusion is important to always include every different member of the audience, in terms of how they access their kind of, as you say, sound information, visual information, all sorts of information that helps complete the picture of that story wherever possible.

Liz: Well, it may be a little bit further than that because you're also, there's one point where Adella is having a private conversation with Bernarda Alba and it's really tense. Adella is a deaf performer and she had her sister spoke for her but in this instance it's a conversation just between Adella and Bernarda Alba, so there is nobody to say the words so they're signing to each other so it's completely quiet, so that means it goes that step forward further on because everyone in the audience is trying to interpret the sign language so we've shifted it the other way and they've had a whole evening of signing performers on stage so that's going on, there's been seven captioning things around round the auditorium but they're all switched off so it's just gone completely still and two actors are signing to each other which was, you could cut the atmosphere with a knife, but then when we brought someone in who is completely blind to watch a run they went you can tell something is happening because everyone's gone completely quiet and it's so tense but we don't know what's happening because you can't see it! In

the end the kind of problem-solving thing was to give Adella some arm bangles so when she's signing, this little tinkling's going on and then that was fine, they were like ok I can hear the signing. Brilliant! So it's kind of once you start going down that route there's lots of levels and layers to it but you wouldn't know to do that until you did it and got it wrong, you know, and the blind audience is saying 'well I don't know what's happening, so you have to give me some more', you wouldn't think in the first place to go 'I think will give Adella bangles so as we can all hear her sign'.

Fiona: But it's about, that seems to be creating incredible creativity and drama not through trying to find access but to try to make a piece of work do what it is intending to do by being more creative than you would normally be perhaps.

Liz: You know I mentioned about the captioning around the side as well, that's normally operated say, from the box but the actors were operating it. So say for instance when Bernarda Alba's temper is high she might be pressing the button like this (aggressively) as the captions are coming up, so that's really aggressive but those shouty words are then visually connected to this shouting woman who is pressing the screen like this (angrily) so that's linking those things in a visual way as well but I think it's rich or richer than it just being captured coming up.

Katharine: Paul you talk in your video that accompanies your exhibit here in the Staging Places exhibition, you talk about a not too dissimilar experience of how that evolved, the idea of placing an entire audience in the same space of hearing and non-hearing, I don't know if you want to talk about that because I found that really interesting.

Paul: Yes, so that's a production of 448 Psychosis which if anyone tried to read it is a lot of words and it's not a terribly easy read and it's not a terribly easy subject matter as well but it's verbal density makes it a very difficult piece and we initially captioned almost the whole thing, and then when we

were in the theatre in tech week we realized that we didn't need captions and this very much relates to what you're saying and a lot of the sign was self-explanatory and there was this kind of theatrical language that some of you might know called visual vernacular which is a kind of mime that's informed by sign language and informed, I think also by the experience of being deaf and finding ways to communicate with people that aren't deaf - an experience I'm sure that all the people who are deaf have. There's a whole kind of amazing richness to this and we found with visual vernacular that we didn't really want to caption it in the end and so we had little fragments of text, just as little signposts but we got rid of most of it, so the sections - I mean 448 is a script that isn't assigned to characters but we had sections that we thought of as monologues - and those monologue sections ended up with barely any captions, and it seemed to work for people and a lot of people said they felt quite liberated and in a way they connected more to this famously difficult text because it was embodied.

Katharine: And that evolved through the making of the work and as you say, the nature of how that script is structured?

PAUL: And it came absolutely from doing it I'm looking at what we'd done and thinking about what worked and getting people in, like as you say (to Liz), to watch it and I think at beginning of that process you would never have imagined that we would have done so little captioning, I mean I could have saved myself a lot of time as well!

LIZ: Did the words go gradually or did you have a sit down and go OK what's the bare minimum that we need?

Paul: We had a moment of revelation and then we spent a fair bit of time, I mean this was only a few days before we opened! But yes we had quite a thoughtful session on what to cut but the moment we realized we didn't need so much captioning was quite abrupt.

Katharine: And that was with Deafinitely, and you've worked with Deafinitely for a few years. Have you found that every design with them has evolved in a similar way with the inclusive nature of the design has evolved or has it come at different stages throughout?

Paul: Yeah, so Definitely has a kind of agenda, I think it's fair to say, which is the idea that the productions are bilingual; that they are in BSL and English and so that's a quality of experience for audience members and also that deafness is a culture, a culture with its own language obviously and in a way all the productions I've worked on and previous Deafinitely productions have been different explanations of these ideas. The first thing I did with them I think we just doubled up so we had two signing performers (and the play was TWO, which was written for two people as the title suggests, by Jim Cartwright) but we did it with four people so we had two speaking actors. Another one we did, we tried to pretty much caption all of it but it was set in an office, and it was a site-specific production in an office and the captioning was site specific as well in the way that we used PowerPoint and we used writing with white whiteboard marker on perspex and things like that so in fact that's not all that was captioned because one of the actors was speaking so there's a mix of different things. And then 448 psychosis went furthest by a long way in actually not captioning everything and thinking that with visual vernacular, and to a lesser extent with BSL, non BSL audience members can get enough of the gist not to need anything so it does feel like an exploration going from production to production.

Katharine: Which must be exciting and nerve wracking with the pressure.

Fiona: Interesting with the reason why we wanted to initiate this conversation came out of really Paul submitting his work and having this revelation to creative language and another creative language tool because it feels like we're always being presented with this as a problem to solve rather than a creative exploration and experiment. Experiment is a really good word because we don't actually get that much opportunity to

experiment on a refined level like that of a kind of musical score almost, isn't it? With different elements playing in and out like lighting and sound might do or other transient mediums, so it was just really rich to see as this creative experimentation that actually pushes the work forward.

Liz: I think it's not a kind of tick box solution to all of them either, I think you've got to, it's good that it's on the table right from the beginning because you've got to take your feed and inspiration for the problem-solving opportunities from the piece, from the script. That's brilliant doing the PowerPoint and the flip charts because it's set in that place but they might be... I did an outdoor site-specific, which was about veterans coming back from the war so we set up a communications table, you know that had Morse code and headphones and all of that, and that was being... the audio description was coming from a group of people in different ways and you could choose to have the headphones or not. So it's finding the right way but taking your feed from the piece, from the play that you're studying in the same way you would find the walls and find the shoes, you have to find the right way of accessing the access and what style is it and coming from inside the piece, so you don't know what that is, you can't go 'oh, this is Shakespeare so we'll do it like this' there's 1000 ways to do that, so there's as many ways to open it up.

Katharine: The payphone in Reasons to be Cheerful is another good example of that.

Liz: But it's a device, but it just beautifully pitched for that piece which was Reasons to be Cheerful, a Graeae show about Ian Dury, but actually the piece is about... we're celebrating a man's life and one of his mates can't be there in the club or the pub so Pickles gets him on the pay phone so he's going to tell him what's happening all evening but it's a payphone in the club and in order to keep that line open they rob the 'Spastic' box, help me, you know the spastic boy with the box that you put money in, was in the lobby so they rob that at the beginning of the show, bring it on to stage, break into it,

take the coins to the phone box to keep it going so that Pickles can talk to his mate, Blind Derek, and let him know what's happening all evening. And but then Pickles is actually a character in the play so he has to keep getting up and being who he is so everybody has to keep filling in at the payphone and topping up what's happening and actually every time I saw it I chose to have headphones because it was hilarious listening to somebody telling you what's happening while you're watching it so you're doubling up on your senses, you're watching it but then you're hearing about it being told and from these particular characters in this set-up who were singing 'Spasticus Autisticus' is raw and crude and maybe more so on the headphones because it's kind of private that you felt like you were getting a whole nother secret level if you were in on the Blind Derek/Pickles phone call.

Katharine: And I think that's what's really interesting is two different layers that you've kind of talked about both there with one which is very open and using the device of making maybe having 2 people in the conversation, the other which becomes actually private or you can feel as an audience 'I'm missing out on something here' which is really juicy. So it starts to encourage an audience, you do, you want more you want that language that you don't understand as well you want more than you would ordinarily have, so you then stop feeling like there's a deprivation there because you feel deprived person at that point.

Fiona: It was interesting talking to Larissa, because she works purely in devised process with the companies she works with so there's not that script to push against and kind of mine in that kind of way so it was really interesting to go 'how does that work as a process?' And the first thing she said was 'it's exactly the same as the devising under any other circumstance. Don't let anyone get too attached to anything early on that isn't actually the thing that they want to use' so it was just a kind of extension out of any devising process where you go shopping for whatever and somebody's changed their mind by the time they come back and you took your mother's shoes on the first day because you hadn't decided on

what the shoes were and then the actor defends to the bitter end having that pair of shoes and it's got nothing to do with what you were thinking about all the way along. So that was really interesting in terms of what she said and maybe the thing that we haven't talked about a little bit yet, and again it's through experimenting and development they've been working together for 20 years all in all, so she co-designs with each performer quite often and through the process of sketchbooks, that she has in the exhibition. But one of the things that was very interesting to me that she talked about was venues and marketing and through their gradual experience of theatre venues have always had things missing in terms of performers being able to access the stage in the same way. Designing through a fourth wall is very difficult because it doesn't, it can't with everyone getting on and off stage etc. Tom and Larissa come from the street theatre background originally but hadn't really involved that in the work at all and then they started finding that libraries, public libraries, have had to keep up to speed with accessibility on a much more regular basis as had the public realm, and they found that working solely in theatre buildings that marketing didn't quite know what to do with their work so they largely marketed to friends and family who already know who the company are and what they do. Whereas if you go into the public realm of the library you're instantly exposing the work to a whole range of people who for whatever reason have not come through the doors of the theatre and so their work has kind of gone from building, to library, to public space, to book and film now, now they're going back to re-discover the spaces in a different way and to know what it is that they're demanding that happens were they to work in theatre buildings. But again it's just really really interesting that actually the barrier there was not through the work, it was through the perception of the work and who the audience was for the work and as soon as you put it in the accessible spaces that flattened out completely and the performers were so much freer to make the work they wanted to make because the spaces were appropriate. That was a really interesting point, where are the democratic spaces?

Katharine: We've talked quite a lot about the spaces and the audiences but I think you know this is where we are the Society of British Theatre Designers, and the thing that's quite interesting as well of course as a designer is 'what is that experience like for you?' because it's obviously nerve-wracking starting the process and finding your way through that. What other experiences have you had working where your considerations changed as a designer? What experiences have you had of how you maybe adapted the way you work, the processes, whether that may be through interpretation of possibly process images or even through costume fittings? Are there any examples of how you've seen that evolve and change or adapt?

Liz: Well I think when I first started at Graeae I was maybe a little bit (interruption). I was a bit scared I suppose of the mixed abilities I was going to meet and whether I would put my foot wrong, say the wrong words, do the wrong thing. I feel ok about it now but it's a bit scary going into, we usually operate in fitting room situations and establish the appropriate bedside manner to make that actor feel comfortable and at ease and to get the job of the fitting done but this was I suppose when I started on 'This is Not For You' maybe they weren't professional actors, it was a large group of ex-service men and women with a mixture of amputees, deaf, blind, PTSD, paralyzed, a mixture of conditions but because they were ex-service men and women their first language is to take the piss, is to use humour, is to be incredibly open, funny and it took a little while before I could join in with that out of feeling a little bit nervous and that I might really mess up here but I think at one stage we were trying to get these army boots on and they weren't real army boots because they had to be free for movement and climbing and everything but anyway, we just couldn't get them on so I said 'just take your legs off I'll put the boots on and then you can bob the legs back on that's going to be the easiest way' so that's what he did, he took his legs off, I put the boots on the legs, gave them him back 'right just take a little walk down there and let me have a look how you doing' so he walks

down the corridor and I said 'oh Terry, your limping a little bit are they pinching on the right?'.

And then it's established. It's ok, you've taken your lead from them in a fitting room about what is comfortable what language is comfortable, what level of openness is comfortable and then you can get over that scary barrier bridge of 'I'm going to mess up here undoubtedly' and that's how you move forward. It's the same as any other but I suppose what I'm saying is, the fear is normal so you just have to get in and do it and not worry.

Katharine: It's building the conversation, you develop that conversation that is actually honest and open and then that becomes the regular conversation and communication.

Liz: And then being really creative with it. 'How many bits come off? and what can you do with them and what can you do when you haven't got all those extra bits on', like a double amputee is the perfect person to put on stilts because there isn't a foot in the wrong place that's always in the wrong place when you put somebody on stilts, so you make the most of it and have a really skinny legged person on stilts because you're not holding a foot that's not there.

Katharine: I don't know if you've found a way that you've developed and evolved a form of communication?

Paul: I've been very lucky that we have interpreters all the time. So, on a practical level that's never been a problem. But it's kind of odd because I've learnt very little BSL as a result because there's always these amazing interpreters everywhere and I keep thinking that I really should do a course but the pressure hasn't been on me to do that I also work with the Youth Theatre group of Deafinitely Theatre and for that, where there's a lot less budget, I've operated some of the captioning for some of their things and I've had to do a crash course in some sign language for that, not that I can

use it myself but so I know so that I can understand what's going on the stage. I mean there are certain things to learn particularly with making sure that BSL is visible, just practical things so sightlines and visual clarity are a higher standard that needs to be achieved really, and just how much costume can disrupt signing and things like that. So there is learning all those things but I think a lot of deaf practitioners are used to explaining those things and they don't have any particular hesitations about explaining those things, so for me anyway I was nervous at first but actually none of those issues were anything I should have particularly worried about.

Katharine: It's about feeling comfortable without the obligation of having to be the authority, understanding actually that the very people that you're working with, regardless of the context, that you're working with them as designers, it's who you work with, you build up that relationship, you become the shared authority in that.

Paul: Because The reason I work with Deafinitely is not because I have any particular understanding of BSL, it's because my work is very much the integration of video and set, is very central to my practice and that's what interested Paula the director, the potential for her then to explore could be done with captioning and of course we've done other things other than that since then but initially it was to do with her thinking that I was the right Designer for this particular project and there is of course this question of 'it should really it be a Deaf designer' which is I think a really big question and, slightly changing the subject, but it's another part of my job with Deafinitely which is working with the Hub Outreach program which they do, which is effectively about trying to replace myself in the long term by trying to encourage deaf people to learn about design and get involved in design and also deaf directors and various different practices within theatre are encouraged through this scheme so there is at the back of my mind all this time the thought that yes we should really have deaf practitioners doing these jobs if possible.

Katharine: That, mentoring program, that encouraging and enabling people who otherwise wouldn't have the opportunity or consider themselves to have that opportunity. That's the thing, it's making opportunities I guess as well.

Fiona: It comes back to that thing of the common problem of design as a profession having largely migrated out of theatre buildings, we're all predominantly freelance, we're all predominantly working solely in studios so, number one, how would a company based in a theatre who is deaf and disabled, how would you encounter a designer at the process stage of designing and that's equally a problem for all early career designers actually and early-career directors of not encountering the process of design as it happens and it kind of arriving mysteriously at a particular stage without all of that kind of that background knowledge so that kind of getting design back into buildings is a big thing that we're trying to advocate for, not necessarily that we want permanent design posts, but that we see it somewhere and have access to it somewhere and have access from small-scale work so young designers particularly, not just young designers, get very very expert at small scale touring and studio work and then there's this big scary building in there that from the inside you don't consider it yourself a gatekeeper, but from the outside there are a lot of gatekeepers between you and accessing that stage and understanding how you might engage with all of those other areas of expertise. That's the scary thing for everybody and at the moment I think there's a real gap there of design being visible, constantly visible, at a process more than just an end product.

Katharine: So the idea of creating opportunity, and how we do that, obviously that's really important, it's something that comes back to what you were talking about, how we enable as well and you know, as a society as Fiona said, advocating for it, and enabling that opportunity. It feels like it might be a really nice place to actually open the conversation out wider because we've talked about making opportunities but also talked about the Hub enabling and making opportunities. It would be really interesting to

know more experiences that other people have had that everyone here maybe has brought their own experience and wants to hear more or share some of those experiences because sharing that is what obviously, hopefully opens up more opportunity as well.

Fiona: it would be really nice to know what's drawn everyone to the round table

Katharine: So shall we, you know who we are already so shall we carry on round?

Lucy Barnett: I'm one of the committee for the Society and Kathy and I created the talks together and I'm just here because I want to learn more. I don't have particular experiences except for I did have a deaf student who is studying to design so I learnt a lot more about inclusive teaching practices through teaching her and she was a great advocate for herself which was good, so that's really all.

Pip Nash: I'm design tutor at Rose Bruford college I've worked with Graeae young theatre makers group to lead design workshops with them and also to say that Rose Bruford are starting a Graeae young theatre makers project that's been going for a few years now, is being looked after a little bit by Rose Bruford in enabling those students to get a sort of qualification, so it just sort of legitimizes it a little bit more and so that is something that might be interesting because we run a design course at Rose Bruford with a group wherever we can and so there's talk about how we develop design skills within those groups rather than for those groups and I think that's kind of very valid.

Richard Delaney: I'm a theatre maker and I work a bit within the training sector and I'm just working with Central at the moment on an adaptation on the collaborative and devised theatre course and which Liz is designing and just looking at ways to increase access within performance so the axis is

integral to the performances and born from it so it's new territory for me, so it's a really important consideration and I get to find out already and keep listening.

Lucia Mionetto: I'm a theatre designer and I came because I have recently been designing for dementia at a dementia day care home, so I was interested in the subject. I was mostly curious to find out how set designers address blind audiences since design is mostly obviously visual, it's not only visual but it is mostly visual.

Fiona: There's a couple of things I'd like to add into the conversation. I've not worked in this context before, the large Museum like this, so in terms of access and the intimidating nature of the material that you are provided, with all with the things you should be doing, you get a written volume of paper that it's quite scary to look at, so that's been a learning experience in here but I guess my biggest challenge and my biggest concern was that somebody coming into the space in a wheelchair in particular could see inside the model boxes but at the same time we were serving the designers in terms of the eye line that they are working towards and the solution to that, we haven't managed to do with everything, was simply to tilt the boxes and that did two things, it gave me access but it also gave a movement to the space and it contributed to the sense of the space feeling live because everything is not flat and not horizontal so that was a really interesting process in terms of what that did. I'm also a design educator and a number of my students have been on the autistic spectrum and working with them it's been a fascinating process and a really interesting way of developing my teaching but also understanding how much the education system is set up to work towards producing written material for academic justification and certainly for one of my students who could talk and talk but couldn't write, he had to then work through his deadlines backwards, so he had to finish everything that had to be submitted as written work at least two weeks before everyone else had to go to somebody else to be written and come back and what we're writing down was every word that came out of his

mouth so it was transcribing when what we needed as designers and collaborators is to show it and make it visually.

Liz: Yes please

Fiona: So where we ended up on his final hand-in for that particular student was setting & animating his technical drawing and setting them to music and once we had that we then decided on how many words we needed, that were necessary to add to that and then, a bit like your captioning, the words were very few because it talked to everybody as a drawing and it animated in the same way with the pressing, he animated the drawings to the mood of the scene and we don't have to hand-in a written work. He would come down the corridor to me and he was 6ft and you couldn't see him behind a pile of documents and he was on a design course and there's something not very accessible, or about the system, or very joyous when you're having to, you do just do justice to someone who's had to work that hard to produce that number of words to try and explain what it is they are visually doing.

Emma Tompkins: I am a member of the committee of the Society of British Theatre Designers, and I'm working with Vital Xposure at the minute who are a disability-led theatre company, also, I'm very dyslexic and I recognize that frustration and also recognize how it transfers into the profession as well. I also volunteer with my local Dyslexia association and I've seen through working with young children essentially how bad neurodiversity (mainly though my experience) is prepared and structured in education and how little they see the benefits you get through certain neurodiverse qualities as much as the negative things and one of the things I do as part of my workshops is to do origami and crafts and I give them these challenges and these kids who don't necessarily think they are going to get jobs when they leave school and they make these things and go 'not everyone can do that'. So I'm interested in as much as how neurodiversity can affect designers and what we can do to help but also audiences that have those issues in addition to physical disabilities.

Lauren Patman: I'm a stage manager and I teach at Central. I'm deaf in one ear, I have been since I was born so I have a twofold interest; one is going to the theatre, when you're deaf in one ear some things are ok, I can generally hear but I lip read, I know a small amount of sign, I have to sit on a certain side of the theatre because I don't have stereo hearing and even if it's surround sound it aurally makes me feel sick almost to sit on the wrong side of the theatre, so there are things surrounding booking tickets like when you can't see a seating plan it's really hard because I can't say where I want to sit, so I guess as a theatre going punter for years, that sort of thing. And with sound effects that are done in stereo, I can't wear stereo headphones so I miss half the songs. As a stage manager I guess I was surprised initially, when I started doing it, the impact of things like if I've got my cans on and I'm quite open, I say to people 'don't come and whisper in my ear because I won't hear you, tap me on the shoulder and talk to me because I can lip read that's fine, but don't come and whisper' and they still do and I feel like having my black t-shirt saying 'don't whisper in my deaf ear' and also things like when I have my cans on as well if the theatre doesn't play the show relay down in the cans I can't actually hear the show so to call a show where you can't hear it, and then you go to Sound and ask them to put the show relay down the cans and they react to this grumpily. So I guess I came to listen in terms of accessibility for practitioners backstage as well because I don't generally consider myself as impaired but you adjust your own life and there are definitely things I can't do, very few and I'm very fortunate, but I have chosen a profession which involves me walking around with a headphone on my only functioning ear, and I go to Plaza every year and say 'I don't wear a hearing aid because it doesn't help my type of hearing loss' but I do have one and I've said that there must be a way that you can adapt my hearing aid so that I can wear that as my cans and there must be something, and it's baffled people and then in conjunction with another deaf stage manager, he told me what he did and I suddenly went 'why didn't I think of this? why doesn't the industry think of this?' And I guess

in case of terms of design from this for those people backstage I was interested to come and hear what was being said.

Sophie Lawson: I'm a costume designer and maker and I mainly work in dance and I just finished the production with dancers who all have autism or learning disabilities and we were trying to explore how the industry as a whole can adapt themselves so that they don't have to be part of an inclusion company, they can go into the wider industry, and how everyone else can adapt to make that happen. And I've got a show coming up this year with deaf performers and my dad was partially deaf so I've got some experience of that world but I just thought it would be really interesting to hear what other people have to say, and actually I used to work with a contemporary dance company and I think there were very good at working with students and inclusion and not having to do lots of paperwork and coming up with this idea of what is a reasonable adjustment and asking what that would be so that everyone feels equal as a positive side of this conversation.

Peter Wright: I'm a freelance sound designer and I lead the sound design course at Central School of Speech and Drama. I also am a founding and committee member for an organization called Stage Sight which looks to represent and to redress the representation of the off-stage workforce in all facets.

James: I'm very new to design, I've spent the last two years training to be a producer and I was actually inspired to join the Royal Exchange young company after I saw *The House of Bernarda Alba* which blew my mind so I spent a year training as a producer with the Royal Exchange and I was a producer with the mission that supports deaf and disabled artists around the UK and I have had the opportunity to train with Paul and Definitely Theatre. So I took the opportunity and I just have been really enjoying learning about design and thanks for having me.

Alex Pullinger: I'm a freelance singer and teacher working mainly in choral music and Opera and I'm also quite heavily dyspraxic so staging is a particular issue for me quite a lot of the time and I'm interested to see how everything we're discussing here can be applied to a lot of the performances that I do and I'm grateful to Christian here for introducing me to the talk.

Christian Hay: I'm a second year design student at Central and I just came along because I'm really interested in how I can make my practice more accessible and over the past year and a bit I've been putting together my own productions and, long story short, in the last term of last year I had some really serious eye problems and I nearly had a corneal transplant and it really made me think how, from a designer's point of view, what responsibility we have to make our performances more accessible. And then working with Alex as well on music performance, how on earth do we make opera and classical music performance accessible as well, that's something I'm really interested in.

Katharine: Great, well there's a whole range of reasons as to why everyone is here but we basically all want to find out more, I think that seems to be the kind of theme running through, we all have our own experiences to share and we want to find out more. We could spend hours and hours in conversation today easily and share those experiences, which in this time slot we don't have time for, but part of this discussion today is about opening up that discussion and sharing. It's about looking at how we build and how we grow and hopefully we will have a chance to keep that going but, you know, before we have a few examples of people who are sharing their experiences, I don't know if now having heard some other experiences I don't know whether maybe, Paul and Liz, whether you are interested in asking more questions that resonate with some of the experiences that you have of the group around the table, not to put you on the spot or anything.

Liz: I'm absolutely thrilled to hear you two talk about teaching practices and being aware of, I'm an Autist, so being aware and trying to make positive shifts into, you know, making reasonable adjustments so that the language doesn't all have to be written on paper. Yes, I would put a great big flag up for that!

Fiona: I think what's interesting about this for me and it occurring and having to kind of do that because it was like we had to get to a point with one another as teacher and student of going 'honestly neither of us can bear this anymore'.

Liz: But that's the same as what we were talking about earlier, the solution comes out of the situation rather than there being a written down way to deal with this in some manual.

Fiona: But what was also very interesting was then when we were able to present back that work in tutorials and final exhibitions and peer to peer presentations, we're all going 'why aren't we doing it this way' and therefore we shift it to become part of standard practice because actually every student in the cohort learns something from watching those drawings move to music because, even if you were hearing impaired, the pace of which the drawings were moving you're having to think about how people digest visual information moving too fast or moving too slow, when does it turn, don't spin it so fast, when do you put a caption in because actually we're all going 'we don't understand what that's doing now' but then hopefully it becomes a standard possibility for everybody.

Question: How did you do that technically? Did you have to work with the musician or the composer?

Fiona: No, he went and found the pieces of music that he felt were right (we were doing Threepenny Opera) so they could transpose the setting to anywhere they wanted to. He chose to transpose it into the future and, as

somebody in that spectrum, he then researched flood levels and all sorts of things so he went for serious fact finding, which you have to kind of point out to a number of other people that they didn't quite do research at the same level and the music was very much to do with how he wanted the production to be seen and therefore it was just a way then of helping the technical information be absorbed so it was a creative choice.

Liz: Creative, trial, playing, trying to find. There's one thing that I wanted to pass on which was a quote that I picked up from Michelle Taylor, who I think is from Ramps On The Moon. She said, and I kept this because it's encouraging, that 'you can't wait until you're confident about getting it right before you do, take risks and be prepared to get it wrong'. And I think it's good not to expect to have it all sorted and actually a more creative way is finding a solution through either the core of the play, or the person, or the abilities and that's how you work creatively with it.

Katharine: It's something that we talked about, you've talked about it in a way in relation to the Hub trying and testing that out, we've talked about it with what you're doing at the moment at Central. At Central we are currently piloting several different ways of inclusive (as Richard alluded to) performances and there's not a single point along the way at the moment where we are stating and claiming that we are getting this right. In the first instance, we're testing and trying things out and it is, it's only because you know we're absolutely kind of adamant that we are testing and trying these things that we hope will lead towards where you move to now, this isn't the end for you in terms of having everything right, that actually how you start to develop that confidence in enabling audiences and enabling practitioners and enabling learners and enabling those of us involved with learners as well to build a more inclusive environment that everyone can experience and everyone can enjoy and I think Michelle sums that up really well.

Fiona: I think we're also in a society that is completely risk-averse and we are regulated and we live in a very regulated environment so the language

around everything feels as though this is a problem to solve and this is a risk to minimize rather than finding the creative solution and that's what we have to fight against as practitioners, and that applies for early career practitioners of how you make these design opportunities on mainstage. Well most designers have been through a training where they've designed speculatively for the Olivier stage that's not essentially the issue, the essential issue is dealing with being, in effect, a freelance head of department who is then dealing with all of these other people and you mitigate the risk by perhaps that being a longer lead time, by being sure that you've been given extra staff time with the production manager to give a little bit more time to that new director and that new designer coming in together who have worked together up until this point. And I think that applies to all of this as well because there's that risk-averse culture that we need to constantly push against because it's about mitigating rather than it being too difficult. It's about finding another way to do it.

Katharine: I'm conscious of the time now and as I said we really could carry this on, and perhaps that's now a thing, we can carry this conversation on away from this space, over a drink, because there's a lot to talk about and I think this has been really exciting and hearing different experiences and thinking about what that journey can be as well. But I really want to say thank you very much to Liz, to Paul and to Dee (interpreter) as well for enabling us to hear more and share more, communicate more, and remotely to Larissa as well. Thank you very much indeed.

Organizations mentioned in the talk:

Graeae

Deafinitely Theatre

Ramps On The Moon

Stage Sight

Vital Xposure