

3. INCLUSIVITY

Jo Machon & Nick Llewellyn

JO: Okay Nick, Can you talk to me a bit about how Access all Areas emerged, the mission but how that mission directly relates to the lived experiences of the artists, the people that you work with?

NICK: Yeah, of course. I would say, you know, talking to the artists from Access all Areas, I'd fundamentally say they'd all agree on the same fundamental issues, . But I'd say that all of the artists feel that society hasn't quite understood their needs or, maybe the word 'quite' shouldn't be in there, just hasn't understood their specific needs. And, I'd say that t The artists have grouped themselves as a group of people with mild to moderate learning disabilities or autism, and that they just totally slip within the next of support from society.

So, often what would happen is, a group of people with this particular label of a mild to moderate learning disability autism who need some support with independent living, some kind of communication support, some support with getting a job, or even a part time job, and often what people would go to a tertiary college, they might do a couple of courses and then by about 21 they'd end up leaving. And, then by about 24, they've pretty much disappeared out of any kind of young people services.

If they're lucky, and I'm saying lucky, they might get a social worker that would then intervene and get some kind of care plan, which may mean that you might get access to a day centre two days a week, or some kind of voluntary experience. But from all of the artist they've all pretty much fallen through that net, and I'd say that's the vast majority of people in that particular category that I've met in various other projects or programmes that are affiliated to ours...

And, it then becomes this really directionless life, it's a life there seems to be no hope. There's no access to any kind of community provision, education provision, a lack of meeting friends, a lack of staying in touch with friends you've met before. Just the whole nature of what it means to be a citizen in our community, it's just not there, and often they don't understand why it's not there. When people are in special need schools, there's a whole wrap around process that goes on, with say speech and language therapy, occupational health, like a whole range of interlocking government agencies and it all just disappears basically at the age of 21 to 24... and, parent and carers are also like really perplexed about why that's happened.

So, I'd say that's the kind of place where we often meet people, is at that journey... and often they want to become performers or facilitators, or they want to work in theatre or they just want to be part of a bigger, you know, family really and feel

connected to the community. So, that kind of initial coming out of college feeling, is something that stays with all of the artists, and I think then that manifests into what is my place in the world and do I have a place in the world, and does the world actually even know that I exist, and if they do know I exist, how are they feeling about me existing, am I an annoyance... am I someone to be laughed, ridiculed? Am I someone to be excluded? Am I someone to be feel sorry for? Am I someone to shrug your shoulders and hope for the best for?

When you start peeling back the layers of people's experiences living in the world, it's so multifaceted, that I could make a performance every week because there's a specific issue that kind of crops. So I'd say that using all of that really rich resource, but try not to come across as if you're pointing the finger all the time, or as if you are really angry or as if you are, you know, doing theatre education work...

We often are kind of in that realm, but we're trying to find ways of kind of having a creative framing device within that, and that's where I think you know, this sort of immersive, interactive work really, really helps to explore those political issues, but through a framing device.

JO: Talk to me a bit more about that, so what ways specifically? Does it provide a framing device, that actually I would argue surely enables you to be angry, and creates a discipline and artistic form for that anger, because why shouldn't you be fucking angry?

NICK: Oh, yeah, no, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I think... what I meant was, there's been quite a lot in there, I suppose in the 1980s, in the Rights movement initially, where people were really, really angry with people's situations. People were still living in really poor, either institutions or in really poor care settings, there's a lot of abuse that went on and... you know we didn't have Disability Rights Movement that we didn't have all the equality acts that we have now, Human Rights Act, that sort of thing – so there was a lot of anger there.

So, any kind of performance that came out of it, was sort of quite, sort of reactionary and quite obvious, like "You're doing this and you shouldn't do this" you know, and I think I'm trying to layer the work in, not in poetry, or in metaphor or playing with, as Dayo mentions, the shifting between the them and the us, other ways of exploring, you know, these sort of multifaceted issues as I explained... Which then actually creates a whole range other really exciting, new, innovative performance styles, or we borrow other performance styles and mash them up and create a third style for example.

JO: And, is that what you're alighting on here, it's that idea that the immersive, interactive, mashed up forms that you're exploring here allow for that more kind of multi-dimensional, that layered intersectional approach to the lived experiences, that you are portraying, and specifically I suppose what I'm thinking of here, in terms of immersion, interaction, those aesthetics that are being

deployed here, it's something about audience access to that as well... Could you give some specifics and perhaps talk about in that respect?

NICK: Yeah, of course. Yeah, so with *IQ Hear*, that was our audio walking show, that we started rich mix in East London. We did a walk, we created a sound scape, an hour long sound scape with seven of the artists... and that was looking at the architecture of certain spaces around Brick Lane, and that area of East London, but much more than that, it was a series of capture improvisations based on the IQ test, which through our research was actually created to enable children with special needs to get the right level of education. And, actually became a really controlling device to stop people getting the right level of education in the end, and actually in the learning disabled community, it's often seen as something that's, well as I said, quite controlling, and it doesn't actually factor in people's emotional intelligence, of which I'd say, I personally feel emotional intelligence is at a higher level of intelligence than IQ personally.

But I would say a lot of the artists have a very deep, philosophical view of the world, which I'd say is more through emotional intelligence than just remembering facts and figures from a book, but... that was our opinion.

So, we did a whole range of improvisations with a sound designer, out on the streets, about how, what they see in the world, what they feel the world, how the world is seeing them and philosophy around being out, out in public as a learning disabled person. And, then the audience, we edited the sound scape together and then we matched certain elements of the sound to certain architectural parts around Brick Lane and the surrounding areas. So, it had different feelings.

There were 10 sections, and every architectural area had a different sound quality. It's quite hard to explain without hearing it, but you then follow the seven performers on a journey and the journey was that you were presented with these whole range of quite peculiar IQ questions, which are real questions from an IQ test, and the seven performers then go out on a journey to try and find the answers to these questions. But as they go out on this journey, you then start to hear their thoughts about the outside world, and how they feel and how the outside world sees them, and that was based on a layered approach with sort of architectural moments.

Like we were at a bus stop for one point, and then we were walking very slowly down Brick Lane, and then we were at a shop window looking at their reflections through the window, and then they were going to a blank wall, and there was a very sort of vulnerable moment when you heard from each of the seven people quirky things that they think about. So, they were kind of layered sort of moments really.

It wasn't a narrative as such, but there was a kind of a journey of each, you heard of a journey of each of the seven artists coming through.

I think that as you were hearing people's voices constantly, you were seeing them perform and they were doing kind of a series of movements or pieces of live art with various fabric or bits of objects that kind of metaphorical sense in the situation. And again it wasn't pointing the finger, it wasn't saying, "Look, you're treating us really badly" because it wasn't really about that.

It was about perception and about how people see the world, and how you often might walk past these seven people or you might see them at the bus stop and just think, "Oh", you might have an assumption that they worked part time in Sainsburys and stacks shelves or something, or you might think... they just go to like a day centre and go to a little disco once a week on a Tuesday. You might have, or you might not... you might not have that assumption there's a whole range of different thoughts and feelings and emotions that are happening...

Laughing as well, it was, there was really funny moments, and we had a little bit of a song and a dance at one point, and the audience all danced together on the street, to a Jimmy Cliff song. So, it was about sort of celebrating, connecting together as well, prodding certain things, philosophising about the meaning, you know, the meaning of life basically. Yeah, it was sort of, it was political with a small 'p' but it was sort of getting inside the mind of somebody else.

JO: And I can really, yeah how that, that would enable that access to there is something around the intimacy and intensity of audio instruction-based work, that requires in the very moment of engaging with it, it's demanding that you attend to the moment and that you look and look again, and hear and listen deeply...

NICK: Yeah.

JO: And, so I really understand how that immediately relates to those things, those ideas and allows access to lived experience, and just to be really clear there, so that I'm understanding you correctly, were you actually following the live performer as they...

NICK: Yeah.

JO: Yeah, so you were engaging?

NICK: Yeah.

JO: Did they ever engage with you; did you ever take the headphones off and engage with them in any way? You saw them literally, and you were hearing the generation that as requiring you to attend to the details of that movement?

NICK: Exactly. So, the physical performance was quite light touch. It might be a series of movements or, at one point they all walked, followed each other in a line, and they all followed like a yellow line, you know, like double yellow lines, followed that as if they were walking on a tightrope, they all just walked, as if they're

walking on a tightrope, and you just followed that for a while... Or, like I said, they stood by a wall and they sort of smiled and did a few little cheeky movements as you heard from each individual.

So, it wasn't, it was a piece of performance of course, but it was more of a poetic or physical response to the sound scape and the locations that they were in. So, yeah, yeah, no I agree, I think in terms of access it was accessing people's minds, and going, "Oh, oh okay". And also, people often then would say, "Oh, I feel like that too" or "That's a bit like me" you know.

And again, I think that it's... we do a mixture, we often in all our shows, we often sort of say, "Well, I feel like this, because of my disability", but then there's also a moment of going, "But we all feel like this, we just don't talk about it" you know.

JO: Yeah, and again that surely relates to representation and who is giving voice and space and so on, and just that idea, you know, that there is something about human experience, that then comes through, that this work is allowing access to.

Are there, that gives a really nice example of how audio interaction, instruction based work, immersive work, has proven really useful as a, as an aesthetic and as a dramaturgical structure. Are there other methods that you would think that you would offer here that are specifically immersive, interactive, that you have found really useful to you as a company, that are helping you to access? Again, this idea of lives as they are lived, and marrying the politics, the lived experience, the ongoing struggles and challenges that in general terms, societally we just don't know enough about?

NICK: Yeah, we've done a few one on one performances, which they've all kind of had a different turn. Like DJ, who is performing in *Madhouse* and *unReal City*, he created a piece, which we worked on for the Unlimited Festival in, it was a conference, two day conference at the Unicorn, and...

It was literally for the breaks, so as people came out of the conference hall, there were these sort of little stage one on one performances around the foyer, and with DJ, because he's an incredible dancer, there was a whole series of dances that you could have with DJ as a one on one. So, again, there was another audio piece, but however you felt, if you felt like there's been too much talking in that conference, I just need to like relax and chill, you know, there was like a dance for that, and so a piece of music and DJ would dance with you.

Or if you were like, kind of really, kind of like fiery, "Yeah, this conference really fired me up" you could press this fiery button and DJ would do it. So, there was that sort of connection, and that wasn't, it wasn't really political I suppose but it had that kind of connection.

I suppose it was political, because it was a conference about disability art, so in a way it kind of, it kind of either gave people an extra level of energy that they might

have needed to, either process the information or kind of send them on their journey to the next event or something...

But more on the politics, I'd say, Imogen's piece, so for *Madhouse*, they had a series of one-on-one performances that happened as part of a marketing project, to advertise the show, but there also were performances of themselves.

So, Imogen who was a character in Madhouse played this goddess character, that danced and encouraged the audience to dance with her as part of 1990s rave track, that we created.

Paradise Fields is our corporate care agency, that was the premise of coming to this modern day madhouse, very pink and quite grotesque, and we all these Paradise Field flyers, and big sort of palm trees, little palm tree leaves on this table, like a corporate marketing table that you would get at like an event or something... and we created this, basically this like shoe box thing, and it was comments and compliments about Paradise Fields and... the care, the modern day care basically. And, you could put them, write them, and as you put them into the shoe box, it actually was a paper shredder, and it just shredded in front of you... and then below the table, it was a big table cloth, and she'd grab your leg [laughing].

And, she'd pull you, under the table, and when you went under the table, she was there with a torch, and all of these medical notes... that were really medical notes that we'd photocopied about how people with learning disabilities were in these institutions and then a whole series of letters... that we'd found where patients were desperately wanted to get out of the institution...

And, you'd sit there with her, really close and intimate, and she'd get the torch and you'd point at a letter, and she'd just read the letter out to you... and then she'd send you on your way sort of thing, or she'd give you a little note basically, which was like "Help me" or something.

But it was just a little moment, and it was part of an arts admin event, we did it there, so there were lots of performances happening and people thought this looked like some kind of real corporate table, and ...

Again, it was sort of playing with the modern Paradise Fields, and then the sort of, the history coming through, and then Imogen is this sort of really weak, vulnerable, Down Syndrome, you know, kind of orphan from the institutions, and just so much historical medical records, and letters there that she's surrounded in, and she's sort of overwhelmed with all of this... stuff that people are either talking about her in quite medical terms or people like her, and then also these letters of just wanting to escape... you know.

It was sort of, people would come away from it going

JO: It feels like, one of those things that, because there are a couple of things that emerge out of that as well, is going back to that idea of when you mentioned there with DJ's piece, it wasn't so much political, but actually it really brings home that idea of that old feminist ideology of the person is political and actually things, when it, and particularly when this is framed through your art, and makes others aware of that, then it becomes a political act... and it could become a collective act if we do something.

And, it just makes me think that, this forms, enable, invite, encourage the possibility of you, of them being handed a letter that is actually to your Member of Parliament, your MP that actually asks for, you know, that could be directly related to a bill that might be being passed, you know I don't know?

NICK: Of course, yeah, of course, of course.

JO: Because often I kind of feel, well this, it's great this work is kind of preaching to the converted or whatever, and where does it, what do we actually do with these thoughts and feelings and happens that we might want to perform, and I think there is something in this work that allows for that, that allows for that... direct action if you want to do that, that offers that up for you as an invitation for you to go out and act on that, that kind of relates to the form...

NICK: Yeah, no it's true, it's true. And actually there was a call to arms at the end of the full Madhouse show, which was that sort of thing, and linked, and it was quite a political, you know, we launched the actual whole project at the Houses of Parliament, and it was multifaceted, it was linked to something called the Belong Manifesto, which is something that I worked on with Baroness Sheila Hollins who is a big advocate for learning and disabled people's rights...

JO: Yeah.

NICK: So there was that interlinked political incline, but I do feel like sometimes companies like ours are always like, "What's it about" but I just think what's most theatre about, and why do I always have to be the one that does everything, because...

JO: Yeah, it's a bit like the Black Lives Matter movement, but it's that idea of, it shouldn't be on you, to do...

NICK: And it is, it's a lot, I feel that...

JO: It needs to be collectively...

NICK: I felt like that when we did course at Central. We had an event at Central, and we had all these graduates, and some of them have gone on to do amazing things, and we had this event and people kept saying, "What are you doing about this?"

and I'm like, "Well, what's all these universities doing about learning disability, autism, training anyway. I'm doing my best here..."

But I am very aware of our political mission and I'll always try and find ways of making sure that it is rooted into something that does have an outreach strategy attached to it, that it isn't just a piece of art in itself. But I also want to, also make sure that our work isn't just that, that it doesn't just become the 1980s political disability rights work, because I think it needs to also be seen as a piece of art in itself...

JO: Sure, yeah.

NICK: And, I want to stick with that, because I see so much theatre that I just think, "What was that about?" and I just [laughing], and yeah, but of course we have a mission that is, you know, it is about empowering people and it is about change, and it is about change of perspectives as well, so we're just trying to keep all the balls in the air.

JO: You know, and there's something, and perhaps that's something that we'll think through a little bit more and certainly in relation to *unReal City* and the fusion of the physical and the virtual in that, the visceral and the virtual, but there's something in there about allowing a work of art to be a work of art and what that is offering us... in that moment... that we can muse on further I think.

NICK: Look forward to it, look forward to it.