

4. INCLUSIVITY 2

Dayo Koleyosho, Emma Selwyn,

Jo Machon & Nick Llewellyn

NICK: We're going to continue talking about *UnReal City* and specifically about your avatar character, so there were eight performers in *UnReal City* from Access All Areas on a rotating cast over ten hours a day and as part of our devising process and then for the final actual show at Battersea Arts Centre we got to see your avatar characters, every 15 minutes you had a different avatar character coming through. It would be good, Dayo, to tell us a little bit about your character, Charlie, who he is and how he's maybe a little bit different to you and kind of what you wanted to tell the audience or explain to the audience about your avatar character.

DAYO: Yeah, because Charlie, he's a bit of a chippy chappy, fun kind of guy. He's nice to people, yeah, he's got the swag, he's got the confidence, how to talk to people. From my experience I find it, as myself, I find it a bit difficult how to talk to people like what to say 'cause I always wonder if I said the wrong thing and stuff but with Charlie he's got the confidence. And he just wants to, you know, he just wants people to feel at home, feel free, just like chill out, do whatever you want so he's a relaxed kind of guy.

NICK: Yeah, he's quite relaxed, he knows what to say. And you said, Dayo, about you not always knowing the right words, why else did you want to create Charlie, do you want to expand a bit more about that, what do you feel when you created Charlie that you wanted to get across that you wouldn't be able to get across as Dayo?

DAYO: Yeah, like precise... 'cause like Charlie he knows what to say for every situation well, like... well, everything mostly but also it's the way how he's not afraid to approach people like myself and, yeah, 'cause like with myself I don't have everything as the Charlie character has because everything he says just goes down well.

NICK: Yeah, that's important, Dayo, isn't it, so it's also about actually making the move to start a conversation and meet other people and Charlie, he was sort of friends with everyone, wasn't he?

DAYO: Yeah.

NICK: He would make connections with people and say, hey, what about you, and come and chat to this person and all the improvisations we did, he was a real social kind of animal, wasn't he?

DAYO: Yeah, in all those ways... yeah. 'Cause he's... let's say he's got many friends in high places, if you want to call it that way.

NICK: So it's about being interconnected and knowing the right people and obviously having the money would be nice, wouldn't it and knowing what to say and knowing who to talk to and how to make connections with people.

DAYO: Yeah, absolutely, especially 'cause of what's happening now.

NICK: Yeah, we're going to come back to that, Dayo, hold that thought, we'll definitely come back to the lockdown and what's happened since *UnReal* City stopped, we got stopped in its tracks. Emma, do you want to tell us a little bit about Wanda Lisa and what her character is like and how your connection to that character...?

EMMA: My character that I'd initially had in mind was someone who was kind of similarish to Charlie, knew the right places, sort of knew the right people and basically had the freedom to express herself anyway she wanted. Like there'd be no slut shaming and no... and people wouldn't look at you and take the piss out of what you look like. She's someone that I used to be, I think, in a way. Someone that I'd like to try and be again. And when she does have a difficult moment she can just change shape and leave.

NICK: That's good, we call it shape shifting, wasn't it, that you could just be a shape shifter.

EMMA: Yeah, that's right and shape shifting matters to me as well because like... I don't know whether this is relevant or anything but I'm gender fluid so shape shifting is very appealing to me so I could be one thing one day another thing the next, if you get my drift.

NICK: Yeah, so there's the playing with gender which is really important to you as an artist and also I was thinking, Emma, in terms of we were looking with Wanda Lisa around social keys and you as Emma sometimes feel that you can't always quite engage how you're meant to react to a certain situation, do you want to expand a bit about that?

EMMA: And in conversations generally there are so many little subtexts that it's not always easy to pick up and with Wanda Lisa she gets it more and/or they don't matter as much, I'm not sure which it is yet.

NICK: Yeah, that's great, thanks, Emma. So for both of you, then, it was sort of creating a character that was... would you say someone you really liked to be, would you like to be that person all the time or do you just like to play with being that persona sometimes, or is it hard to say, or just take an element of that person and put them into you, how would you describe your relationship to those avatar characters?

DAYO: I think if I was to take a leaf out of Charlie's book, yeah, I would... you know, let's throw the book out the window and have some fun.

NICK: That would be your number one lesson to take from Charlie?

DAYO: Yeah.

NICK: What about you, Em, what would you take from Wanda Lisa, or would you want to be Wanda Lisa all the time or just shape shift or... there's so many options, aren't there?

EMMA: I think I'd like to take being able to... I think I'd like to take being able to wear... I think I'd like to be able to look how I want without being harangued for it and... the thing about Wanda Lisa is that she's not necessarily a party animal in the same way that Charlie is, like, yeah, she does like going out and meeting people and basically she makes the sort of connections... she's able to make the sort of connections I'd like to make with people.

NICK: So making connections, knowing the right words to say, knowing how to react to certain situations.

EMMA: Yeah.

NICK: For both of you... obviously in slightly different ways but there are some common themes, I know from talking to lots of audience members is that when they either met either of you or any of the other six avatar characters you all had your own very different unique characteristics.

DAYO: Yeah.

NICK: A lot of people would say, I feel like that sometimes too, I don't always know what to say at parties or... Jo, something you want to come in there...?

JO: This is an observation, not an opinion, and it actually relates to something that Nick and I were talking about earlier about allowing a work of art to exist for itself as a work of art irrespective of any wider political or social messages that might exist in it. And for me there's something here that's coming through about both the positives and potentials of VR specifically, virtual reality specifically, but also the power of theatre, the power of art that allows for shape shifting, trying out different characters, walking around in someone else's shoes, that old metaphor so that you actually understand alternatives and have access to different ways of thinking and being that is both empowering but also might be challenging the way you think and feel about things. It just feels like there is a broader theme that's coming through there in that respect specifically in relation to the power of accentuated character ideals and playing, trying that on and playing that out. Very specifically the power of shape shifting as a political statement ultimately and the ways in which the moment in art, but certainly this to me is the power of theatre, the moment you play across gender, you play across type. The moment that you draw attention to gender by playing with gender or you draw attention to your experience by accentuating it through its very form there is a beautiful artistic statement that is made but a very powerful political social message that lies underneath that as well. So, again, I want to stress that was an observation rather than a question.

NICK: Yeah, I think so, I think that's really clear, isn't it? And something that was very much at the forefront of us creating this performance from the beginning. The performance has, again, multiple influences and we were trying to do quite a lot

in quite a short space of time, I imagine... we were talking yesterday about the benefits of VR and I want to add a few more to that, Emma, because it's something we've been talking quite a bit about, the research around, for example, the cinema section and the use of spaces where you can cancel out noise, maybe there's something a little bit about inclusive spaces and how that was important as part of a political statement in that section in the cinema, I was thinking in terms of the incident that happened in the BFI.

EMMA: Oh, yeah.

NICK: And how that influenced our creation of that, do you want to just talk a little bit about that and why we created a VR cinema?

EMMA: Well, part of the reason for creating a VR cinema was to do with that story but we also...

NICK: Do you want to explain a tiny bit of the story of that, just for the people that don't know about it.

EMMA: I was wondering whether to do that actually...

NICK: Is that okay, yeah, thank you.

EMMA: I think her name was Eleanor or Ellie, she was autistic woman who went to see the Good, the Bad and the Ugly on her birthday, one of her favourite films. And she was laughing at a piece of dialogue that she thought was particularly clever and then the audience got hostile with her for laughing too much or too loudly and someone said, pretty much verbatim, shut that retard up. So Eleanor in self defence said something less than nice back and then it just escalated and escalated and she was dragged out and the audience were clapping afterwards.

NICK: Yeah, yeah. So we were very mindful of inclusive spaces and it's something we've done quite a lot of work on, Emma, hasn't it with relaxed performances or with doing some training with theatres to make sure that audiences are challenged when they are being ableist and that it shouldn't be the disabled person that gets dragged out it should be the person that called her a retard that should get dragged out and often it's the other way round because the vulnerable person is always in the minority. Just thinking about the VR, let's think about the positives of VR, so we were thinking then about... tell us a little bit more about our thinking then about the *UnReal City*, the arts cinema, and the benefits of that, what can you do for it?

EMMA: Basically some of the benefits of the virtual cinema would be that if you had a question about what you were watching or you were reacting to it vocally it wouldn't disturb anyone else and you could use a VR set to cancel out other people's noises and movements and actually although this isn't VR couldn't drive-in cinemas potentially do that in a way 'cause I know there's a real big talk about that happening. That'll be for another time and I don't know how genuinely inclusive that kind of thing will be.

NICK: Yeah, definitely. So it's a bigger conversation around inclusive design, wasn't it that we were also exploring in the piece and how VR could really help enable that and that was through a lot of research especially around... there's a project in Newcastle, the Blue Room, that sort of...

EMMA: Oh, yeah, I know... I want to visit that hotel and it's also got me thinking, Nick, when we went to Trondheim last year, not that they covered VR but architecture was a small part of that, it was definitely about accessibility and inclusive design on some levels.

NICK: Yeah, so just thinking about... for the people who don't know about this project in Newcastle, it's a VR research project that enables autistic young people to understand the world around them. It's a VR simulation where you get to train how to be out in public so what a busy high street might be like or what the airport... departures...

EMMA: Barrista training.

NICK: Yeah, so it's training autistic people to be normative. They were kind of one... which has its pros and cons, some people would say that's really useful and there are some people who would say, we're not monkeys, trained monkeys. And that conversation, Emma, we've had quite a lot, wasn't it, around the use of VR for that sort of reason. When it comes to the autism community some people might be for and against that. But also I was thinking then the other thing was some of the games we looked at which for some people with autism really engage with and kind of really connect to other realities and would prefer to play those games than sometimes to meet in real life.

EMMA: Yeah.

NICK: And we looked at a lot of those games. What's the name of the game that featured in our show on the computer?

EMMA: Avakin Life.

NICK: Avakin Life, yeah. Do you want to say a little bit about Avakin Life and your feeling 'cause you played all the characters in Avakin Life, didn't you, you went and went under cover.

EMMA: Yeah, I designed versions of all the characters in *UnReal City* via Avakin Life and there's other software like it, it's kind of like a cross between a social network and a game, I guess, 'cause you can level up through visiting different places, speaking to different people, you can get different hair styles and pets and costumes and stuff. And they've actually got a fair few places that are modelled on real life places as for how accurate those models are I'm not entirely sure.

NICK: Yeah, so it's been quite empowering for a lot of people, hasn't it, and I remember one person who works in the bar at Battersea Arts Centre who said to me he was also autistic and that he goes to, I think somewhere in Croydon actually, Em, but I think we chatted about it, he didn't know what it was but it was a work based

project and it's not Avakin Life, what's the name of that other online game that we looked at?

EMMA: There were a fair few of them.

NICK: Second Life.

R: Second Life, okay.

NICK: He goes on Second Life with this particular project and he gets to learn how to do interviews through Second Life so like interview life-based training through Second Life.

EMMA: Hmm.

NICK: And he told me about that and I said, well, that's one of the things we're looking at in *UnReal City* so VR can be useful for a newer diverging community to understand the world or to connect with other people that might feel safer or have clearer boundaries than in whatever this real world is meant to be.

But I suppose thinking, Jo, about theatre now exactly isn't it, so we've talked a lot about the pros and cons of VR as a method in itself but I was just thinking about VR in theatre because our piece was partly VR, partly live experience and VR has a clunky element to it, there's the whole on boarding process, it can have technical glitches, it doesn't necessarily have the immediacy of the live experience. I was wondering, Dayo or Emma, or maybe Jo, you might be able to frame this a bit better than me, but just thinking about VR within the theatrical realm itself rather than as a tool to enable people to be in the world, what we all think about in terms of the pros and cons of VR, because for me in my personal view was that the VR took a long time to be created. I've had so many conversations and all, right so, great conversations we had but I did miss working with the artists sometimes because I'd spend a whole week staring at a computer wondering how many windows to put in a building where sometimes I thought, oh, hang on a minute, I haven't rehearsed the actual real people yet. So for me there was the logistics of it all as well as the losing some of the immediacy of it. Both of you, just thinking about, or maybe, Jo, you'll frame this much better than me, but just thinking about that actual use of VR within a theatrical experience and what we all feel about that?

JO: Is it useful if I offer a comment as...

NICK: Please do, Jo, please help us out.

JO: I'm not helping you out at all! Thinking and moving along with you around, but for me in *UnReal City*, specifically, it's the interplay between the virtual and the physical, it's the... now I'm trying to describe this without giving anything away for those who haven't experienced it and hopefully will experience it at some point. It's the magical moment where rather than shape shifting it's a space shifting and your imagination as the audience member totally unexpectedly and it's the beauty of the surprise of what you require our imagination to do in that moment along with

our physical bodies, it makes this shift in space and that's where the power lies where you move from the virtual to the visceral. You move from the virtual into the physical and I was just... I was in a cafe with Charlie in a VR world and then suddenly I'm in Charlie's bedroom chatting with their IRL, Charlie, the real person. The real character. And for me it's something about the power of the artistic moment I suppose, the power of the imaginative moment which is inherently theatrical which plays across character, time and space and you're using all of those dimensions to take us into that story telling, you're using the VR and the physical as a story telling method that, again, enables access to the experiences of those characters in different ways that altogether as a consequence of that subsequent to the experience as an audience member you piece that together and interpret the work overall in terms of the themes and ideas that it communicates through that fusion of forms. I suppose what I'm saying there is that was the power of the experience, that's where the joy lay for me and I can understand what you're talking about in terms of VR and the benefits of it as a tool in general terms, equally as a tool in theatrical terms it's offering those things. I suppose that's it, I'm just repeating what I said before, for me it was about the fusion of the two and that's where the power lay and so maybe, Dayo, it would be interesting... well, both of you but, of course, Dayo's character was my character that I experienced as the audience member, I didn't experience yours, Emma, which in itself is interesting that I have that access to that experience because of the virtual and the visceral connection to Charlie. So, Dayo, would you like to talk about that from the performer's perspective, how that was for you and whether you noticed anything about your audience, guests, because I'm sure they all did what Gareth and I did which is to go... you know, to have this exclamation and this moment of wonder when we're suddenly in that bedroom space with you, what are your reflections on that moment?

DAYO: Yeah, it's like you're welcoming your audience into my world and I'm sharing my experience, what's happening in my world. Yeah, so like sharing stuff because there's something you know you want to know a bit more about this person, about this character like saying what it's like, what does he have, what sorts of surprises that he has that he wants to show us. And that's the good bit because sometimes it's happened that I don't always have that confidence of, you know, sharing stuff with the audience.

JO: Also, you're absolutely right, it's the welcoming in and literally we literally enter that physical world and we're with you. Both Gareth and I talked afterwards about the fact that there was... and you've touched on this, Nick, by referring to the clunkiness of the VR and that the problems of it aesthetically as much as digitally and in terms of the time it takes to create. But I remember both Gareth and I talked about the fact that it was the multifaceted quality of... the multifaceted knowing of Charlie, I'm doing inverted commas here, air quotation marks, became much more apparent and distinct in that physical context, and it proved the... because Charlie was describing his world to us and inviting us into that VR world but, again, it's something... thematically it's something to do with when you actually really enter the world, that's when you really get it and there's a genuine connection and there's a great... certainly for me and, like I say, Gareth and I had shared those

experiences that the power of it lay in that one to one connection there. And, again, I suppose what I'm doing there is idealising the physical realm and the sensory experience and I don't intend to do that although I hear it sounds like that because I do understand how VR and digital realms can be liberating. I suppose I'm saying very explicitly for me in that context, that's where that beautiful connection lay and that opening up of those layers of... opening up of those potential messages, those thematic ideas really existed in that moment, it existed literally in that transition moment, we're really in your world and we're really sharing with you.

NICK: Yeah, and I think that we really wanted... that was obviously very intentional but Tristan, who's the co-director of dreamthinkspeak, it's a collaboration between both companies, we both talked about it quite a lot, we went to go and see quite a few different VR experiences but often which were purely VR but within a theatrical sort of framework and sort of came away feeling quite cold sometimes and just didn't quite connect, or didn't... again, the clunkiness of it or I've seen better films than VR so why don't I just go and watch a film in the cinema, why spend all this money and have this experience... So we wanted to have that moment and because our work is about being with the artists, that's a really important moment and in a way it was sort of going, well, do we even need VR but then at the same time as we just discussed that VR is really important for lots of people so it's important to kind of see their perspective through VR but then also kind of like... then if we all get stuck in *UnReal City* then we won't be able to have this immediate experience anymore and how much are we going to lose if we don't have that but then some people don't like the real experience but we're having a great time and then you're sort of having this back and forth in your mind about it all!

JO: It's exactly that, it's that moment underlines that idea, there is something in that about that... the exchange between, the shifting between, it goes back to what Emma was saying about shape shifting as an ideal character-wise but there's something about that shifting, that space shifting... in fact you referred to it yesterday, Dayo, as a shifting, that's becoming the key word...

NICK: Brilliant, there, we're going to use that.

JO: It does relate to what Emma was saying about it's not being fixed on one idea of, or one way of being, or one... allowing for the fact that we're all constantly in this process of shifting about who we are, how we look, what we think, it's a constant shifting, isn't it, nothing is static. And I suppose what I'm saying there in simple terms is the form it's specifically in that moment communicated that in a physical way, in that ineffable way, that way that you can't put into words, it just did it, you are in it, you are doing it in that act of that transition.

NICK: That was a really good conversation that bit there, I think we got somewhere really key I think. Yeah.

NICK: I think the last question we were thinking about was how we view *UnReal City* now since the lockdown and thinking about... the themes of *UnReal City* were... it was

like we had a premonition about what was to come, again, I was at Battersea Arts Centre with audiences not turning up, the whole show was pretty much sold out especially the last few weeks, with people not turning up because they were scared of getting coronavirus and one person walking round with a mask pulled away from her face 'cause she was worried that she was going to get it and one person came out having a panic attack, not because of VR but because of thinking the mask was going to give her coronavirus even though we'd sterilised them like crazy. But then thinking, I was locked away at Battersea Arts Centre for ten hours as were Emma and Dayo doing a show about being locked into *UnReal* City whilst the world was starting to lock itself down as well. And then thinking, god, this show is just exactly what's happening, we've already shown it and then we all get locked in our bedrooms and we're on our laptops trying to navigate Zoom for the first time ever. And then thinking, there's benefits to it but there's also I miss people as well and so I feel that the world is sort of feeling how we've all been trying to get people to feel in the actual show. It's like the doors of Battersea Arts Centre opened and we said, okay, let's all be part of this experience. So is there anything either of you want to discuss around that, around how we as a society now are thinking about this show, not about when it's coming back but more about the themes of it and how it relates to what's happening with COVID?

EMMA: I think in some ways some people do say that COVID has been an equaliser because virtually everyone has been kept indoors and adjustments that disabled employers have been asking for for years and years have been implemented but I'm fairly convinced that a lot of those accessibility things were only put in place because the one percent were affected and if life ever does get back to normal, as much as I fucking loathe that phrase, disabled people are just going to be left behind again. In fact they're still being left behind now in a way and ironically it's because there's a lot of disabled people who don't have the ability or the knowledge and who aren't taught to use online spaces at all, it's like online spaces are discouraged a lot of the time for disabled people and you get those who've been shielding...

NICK: If you aren't actually allowed to leave the house?

EMMA: Yeah, but I also think that as someone who hasn't had Covid and I think people who may have caught the condition, if they have, like some of them have got acute chronic symptoms that fluctuate so that's giving them a new insight to disabled people's lives but... I was going to say something else about VR or online spaces...

NICK: That's really good, Emma, I remember when Sam Smith, you know, had only been locked away for a week or something and he came out of this mansion and started crying about how he just couldn't... you know, he was just going out of his mind and... a lot of disabled people said, well, I've been locked away for years and no one's given a shit about me and I don't have all the money you have. So what do you think about empathy because I think a lot of the work we do Access All Areas we're talking about empathy or we're talking about, as Jo said earlier, about walk a mile in my shoes, or being in somebody else's mind, what do you feel this lockdown is doing in terms of enabling people to understand some of the lived experiences, the Access All Areas artists have been living all their lives?

EMMA: Repeat that.

NICK: Just about people understanding the restrictions in their life and being stuck are themes we've often played with Access All Areas because that's how most of the artists feel, what do you feel this lockdown is doing to the general population around linking it to kind of the thematics that we often explore especially in *UnReal City*? Dayo, is there anything you want to say about lockdown and...?

DAYO: I was going to talk about, it's like when I was doing this improvisation piece I remember you mentioned something that was about, you know, 'cause of what's happening now, it's like we're locked in this box because of this... 'cause of the vulnerability about being in this lockdown and Emma just mentioned in some ways it could be like easier for people, in some people it can be like very frustrating for some people, but sometimes they want to play their computers, just to try and take their mind off in this lockdown. In some instances, a number of cities, sometimes we just want to like go into our own little world and just be free from all the stress that's happened because of this lockdown.

NICK: Do you think the people will, now that they've all experienced what Access All Areas artists have been saying for years about restrictions and lockdown and only accessing the world through computers, do you feel that there'll be a change in people's perceptions of what we're trying to say as a company, or do you think it will just go back to how it was before?

EMMA: I think it's going to be a bit of both personally, sorry Dayo...

DAYO: No, no, I was... it's okay, I was about to say what you guys said, like who knows what will happen after these restrictions have been lifted, I'm hoping that there's a few lessons that we could take in this lockdown because some things in this life you can't take for granted, like for someone... that's what I heard a lot people say but sometimes, like I said before, sometimes you just need to like... you just want to be in your own circle.

NICK: Yeah, I think that's it, isn't it, it's sort of thinking about what... yeah, your own situation, your own place and then how the people are kind of also in that place as well and, yeah... for some people that would be a good thing, Dayo, who like to have a bit more space as well.

DAYO: Yeah, that was something that I mentioned as well, remember I said about like having... 'cause I mentioned this about, like you can't use like physical touch, sometimes you could just like use your... all your armaments like if you wanted to touch, yeah, sometimes you need your own space like to breathe and to... just want to be inside your own box.

NICK: Yeah, I understand that, Dayo. I was just thinking, unless, Jo, you wanted to say something on this topic, the last question then was around... we've been involved in a campaign called We Shall Not be Removed and we're part of a big disability arts network about how once theatres do start to reopen again, are disabled people going to be back to square one again or are the theatres going to embrace diversity even more and I feel there's a bit of both happening at the moment, more and

more are people tweeting about us or messaging me personally and saying, it's theatres like Access All Areas that should be funded or prioritised with programming and funding, and then, of course, there's the economic argument which is, well, people aren't going to go back to theatre any time soon so it needs to make money and who the hell wants to come and see a group of people with learning disabilities and autism banging on about their problems! We're sort of in this very malleable future about how it's going to look. Just thinking about reaching new audiences so obviously we all want to go back to what we did before, hopefully better and hopefully people understanding our position more as we've just described with everyone having this *UnReal City* experience. My final thought was around audiences and a big part of our work is also to bring in new audiences especially audiences with learning disabilities and autism who for various reasons don't access the theatre because they don't feel like it's for them or they just didn't know about, all the barriers around booking a ticket or just being there and some of the abuse we've heard about from the news, the BFI incident we've heard that in theatres too. But I was thinking about the VR can work or an online interactive experience could work with bringing in people to the live event where they don't actually necessarily need to leave their house but they can still engage. Emma, have you got any thoughts about that in terms of our work because it was something we discussed with *UnReal City* but we didn't quite make it work.

EMMA: Yeah, I think what's important is that while I think it's imperative that we can get the whole of the UK connected up to virtual and online places as well there will still be pockets of people who don't have the financial ability and/or capacity to access online avenues so could it potentially be that there's a way to get certain online content, or certain content that's mainly focused online broadcast on television as well.

NICK: Yeah.

EMMA: Yes, there are smart TVs but not all TVs are smart as in technological.

NICK: That's a good point, Emma, I think that's something. Let's discuss it because BBC have this thing from Battersea Arts Centre where they show pieces of work and Jess Tom did a piece with Jess Mabel Jones...

EMMA: A little extract, it was kind of like...

NICK: Yes, but not just that documentary, she did *Biscuit Land*.

EMMA: Really?

NICK: From Television Centre...

EMMA: *Biscuit Land* on telly?

NICK: Yeah, a version of it, a different version.

EMMA: Oh!

DAYO: I think I remember watching the Jess Mabel Jones one at the BBC Centre, that was like a performance one. Yeah, it was a brilliant performance, and what's going around in the world of disability arts, in that diversity and especially now because of what's going on and also *Biscuit* was spreading the word to encourage the government so I think just try it and keep it going, make sure that voices are heard, make sure we put a marker down for the government.

NICK: Yeah, definitely and having impact, I think television, although a lot more people are watching online, television obviously is still watched by more people than probably goes to theatres so if we want to engage people who don't access our work then if there's a way of linking it to television then that would be a way forward. I was just thinking, Emma, we reference a lot of popular culture, don't we, mainstream culture in our work. I was just thinking about a lot of the artists we work with haven't had... even through Access All Areas and we go and see stuff together sometimes, still haven't had access to a cultural education although we've got our diploma programme and everybody has done that course and a part of the performance company but it's still a lack of access to a broad range of different theatrical experiences so often people's cultural references are more mainstream and we've often used those mainstream references in our work. But just thinking about in a way sometimes theatre can be a bit exclusionary and says, oh, we do this kind of work, if you don't understand it then it's not for you.

EMMA: Yeah.

NICK: What do you feel should be our strategy going forwards to maybe work with more televisual or mainstream approaches to kind of bring in people to our work, it's quite a big conversation I know but...

EMMA: Yeah... I think that's actually the beauty and the beast, not quite the right metaphor but that's the beauty and the beast of live arts because for all its elitism and wankery it's a weird beast, live art, because it's both more accepting of the really experimental out there stuff which can be covered in mainstream pop culture, I'm thinking Owen Parry right now who's taught a class or two with Access All Areas. Where was I going... live art it's like it's more experimental and inclusive of mainstream stuff and cabaret is like that to an extent as well, now I think of it, but at the same time there is a level of you need to get with the programme, as it were. I'm not wording this very well but...

NICK: No, it's deeply rooted in academia a lot of the time and so you might see something that looks popular cultural but then you feel like you're missing a trick because you haven't read the essay that goes with it.

EMMA: Hmm, hmm.

NICK: Nothing wrong with academia, Jo, just saying!

EMMA: No, and I'm talking as someone who has been in academia themselves, myself.

NICK: Yeah, it's a fine balance, isn't it, for all of us because we don't want to exclude people with overlaying stuff that's very cerebral and feels like you're not quite

getting it or you're not the right type of person. But at the same time you want to engage people with cultural references that feels accessible or understandable especially if you... we're working with people who haven't had that kind of cultural education and their only experience of the theatre on the whole is pantomime.

EMMA: And musicals.

NICK: Yeah, so it's a lack of knowing what else is out there which is why I think that we try and do as much work as we possibly can in outreach workshops, different events that kind of engage people, especially with *Madhouse* we did so much outreach work that we had loads of community groups that weren't theatre groups they were literally from the community. They'd be lucky if they'd even gone to one pantomime in their life, some of the people that came, and then they came to *Madhouse!* Amazed that there wasn't chairs, but still had a great time and still learnt a lot and still reflected on that experience and I still feel that as a company we've still got to do it all, we've still got to do the outreach, we've still got to engage online, engage maybe with television more, engage with popular culture because there are so many barriers to accessing theatre for lots of people.

EMMA: 'Cause actually thinking about it, some of the Access All Areas actors are involved in other theatre companies and one of them has worked on radio plays so perhaps that could be another approach that Access All Areas tries. Oh, my good, oh my goodness, I've just thought, Nick, could it be that if the act doesn't work out for the interrogation we make a radio play of it somehow? Couldn't that be worth a try?

NICK: I think that's what we'll end up doing, Emma, if this...

EMMA: It's podcasts.

NICK: Yeah, if the app developer comes back with a massive bill I'll be right, it's a podcast!

DAYO: Do you remember when we had this event, know when we did the see me on the... we did the see me on the...

NICK: Screen on Channel 4, yeah.

DAYO: Yeah, and that was happening to like encourage our actors who want to be on mainstream and stuff. Maybe we could try like writing a piece of a letter or like if you're trying to like email someone and, I know... I think if you've got videos and stuff like what artists have done, like certain Youtube clips, maybe they could just look at it.

NICK: Yeah, that's a really good point, Dayo, what we haven't talked about, and that's another conversation for another time, is the fact that a lot of the Access All Areas artists are not just making immersive work in this sort of way, you're all actually performing mainstream work as well and lots of you have been on television and have been in mainstream theatre productions as well and have done training and consultancy role play work for the NHS, for example. You're all kind of multi-

talented like a big octopus with lots of legs, and it does all feed each other, doesn't it, because I know that when we've gone and run work at the NHS that some of those people who were part of that training, like nurses, have come to see our shows. So it all feeds to each other because it does have a ripple effect, it really does, we've got one of our artists who's on a Holby City, as a regular on Holby City. And that gives us a little bit of glamour you might not necessarily always agree with Holby City and what it's about but it gives us something where people go, oh, you work with that guy, oh, okay, you're that kind of company. It kind of does challenge people's perceptions in lots of ways and we do get audiences that are now coming via different avenues and they might find out that we've got a diploma programme and then they might have somebody in their family that wants to apply and it does all sort of talk to each other. That's why we've got so many different fingers in so many pies.

JO: And how you've kind of all been talking there, there's something... and I'm going to be really inarticulate about it now 'cause I'm forming the thought as I'm saying it that that's what will be great about receiving the transcript and being able to clarify for me on paper. But it's something about when your focus is primarily on creating artworks, creating a performance event that is open to using any forms, styles, musical, cabaret, a bit of immersion, a bit of audio work, whatever it might be or focusing in on one of those very pure disciplines in order to communicate something. But where the approach is coming, primarily and fundamentally, from the mission of... the practical approach of access and inclusion that being at the heart of everything you do, you find the forms that best articulate that and you find new and exciting ways of doing. There are, as you said before, this mash up, this we could do it that way, we could do it this way, and wouldn't it be great if it's then shown here, it all works because it's about enabling everybody to be invited into the space. Everybody becomes... the moment that we think of someone who has a very particular need in that space and how we create access for them everyone is invited in necessarily because the moment this group of people are immediately given access to this we're all invited in. And I think that's the really exciting thing about what Access All Areas is doing, it's finding these... or rather it's testing these exciting, interactive, immersive, cabaret, physical, whatever it might be you're open to the interdisciplinary, you're testing all of those forms and formats in order to invite people in. And that's where it's beautiful and that's where this genuine interaction between audience and performance event create for important conversation as much as brilliant artwork.

NICK: Amazing, yeah, yeah.

JO: It's an observation, but that feels like what you're kind of talking around.

NICK: I think so. I think that's it. We get a theme and then we sort of say what form will that theme kind of help to explore and then, as you said, we then invite people in and it kind of manifests in lots of different other pockets.

JO: It's that idea of interactive practice has to come from that caretaking perspective and that access perspective of how do we invite this person, how is this person genuinely invited in and how are they genuinely enabled to pull out should they

choose. And if that's at the premise of everything that you're doing then by testing those forms and formats you're potentially opening up new ways of working with those forms and formats which is really, really useful for anyone who might be using those forms and formats.

NICK: That was a great summary there, Jo. Thank you.

JO: The point that you raised a moment ago, you said words to the effect of who wants to come and see and you were saying it in a frivolous kind of jokey ironic way but I think we all want to see work that no longer has the white middle class man centre stage. I think the white middle class man has had centre stage both literally and metaphorically for a long, long time and let's hope that we can push forward and I feel that if the arts can create new spaces and give new voices space to work maybe this is the point at which it will happen, let's see.

NICK: I really hope so and although I don't want any of the venues closing down because I've got lots of friends that work in theatre venues, I'm often making work that's not in those venues or if they are they're using a room in the basement or a room in the loft. There's a reason for that as well so it's a real difficult one because a lot of venues do feed a big money tree, sounds an awful thing to say, but they have been exclusionary to so many people for so long for so many different reasons so each group of people would feel that place is not for me a lot of the time. And so, in a way, post COVID we've got to come back to something slightly different and if we lose some venues that's really, really sad and I will be heartbroken, literally, but we do need to come up with something new as well and there needs to be other spaces where we can be free to experiment and create these new forms that are creating Access All Areas, allowing new communities to come in and have that conversation with us who've not felt that they're wanted there. And literally are told, you're retarded and screamed at and we've had personal experience in a theatre of that as well. There's a lot that the theatre world also has to look in the mirror as well about and say, okay, we haven't done everything right and maybe now is the time to revisit some of those things. Let's just hope that that is part of the conversation that it doesn't become about the financial, balancing the books at the end and you're back to the Shakespeares and the pantos and the musicals.

EMMA: One thing though, a lot of theatre, even the most out there stuff is based in London and there are way more places that exist, there are other places so it's got me thinking about hearing about how Nuffield has just closed and perhaps this is quite a pipedream, maybe a bit naive, but would there potentially... you know how certain towns and cities are twinned with towns and cities in other places, could there be potentially something like that where a smaller more community place, potentially, is twinned with a bigger one but then you've got to think about the power balance there.

JO: That's a fantastic idea, kind of social twinning, arts twinning.

EMMA: Yeah.

JO: I think there's something in this. Okay, that's the next meeting.

NICK: That's the next one, Em, but keep that for when we meet the Arts Council, you can talk to them about it then.

JO: Yeah, that's a nice idea.

NICK: But there is another conversation which is not for now which is about touring immersive work and how the complexities of that as well but that's another conversation.

EMMA: Of course.

NICK: We managed to do it in *Madhouse* and we literally took the whole set of ten rooms and plonked it somewhere else, I mean it was just a massive feat.

JO: Maybe a publishing project or something around the things we've learnt from... and offering to you the things we learnt about and what that proves about the artistic world, about people, about... don't know, there's something in that I think.

NICK: Are there things we've learnt about our experience doing this?

JO: Yeah, Access All Areas, the things we've learnt about and it could be any one thing, immersive... you know, touring immersive theatre, whatever, cabaret, the things we've learnt, things we could tell you.

NICK: Yeah 'cause that's the thing I think that... that's why I think it's so great that all of the Access All Areas artists are so articulate as well because you're able to kind of say about your own experience from various projects that we've done. And mainstream culture learns a lot from us even if they don't necessarily go and work with disabled actors but even taking some of the principles we've explored because we often have more barriers than anyone else so when you have more barriers in life you then can help people who've only got a few barriers.

JO: Exactly that's what I was really inarticulately trying to say that the moment you break down those barriers for the one person everybody wins it's easy...

NICK: It's like a visual guide isn't it, Emma, there's some people who don't have a diagnosis of autism, actually really like a visual guide.

EMMA: Yeah.

NICK: They say, oh, I didn't realise I needed it until I saw it I realised I needed it.

JO: The thing is, that idea of the moment you put a ramp in and have a wider door we can all get in the door, everybody can get in, it's not just that most people that have legs and can walk up and get into that door... do you know what I mean, it's people in wheelchairs, people from a wide variety of backgrounds.

NICK: Yeah, it's true actually.

JO: That's the point. I have to go now, I would love to keep talking with you, I genuinely would love to continue having creative conversations. Maybe we need to start up a

podcast, maybe it needs to be a podcast about these conversations or something. There is something in there, themed conversations around your practice.

NICK: Yeah, that would be really good actually, Jo, because we've been talking about that, Graeae did a whole podcast series and we've been talking about that. Do you mean across different types of projects, not just immersive, or do you just mean focusing on a specific theme.

JO: I don't know, you know, yeah, it needs talking about but it's something for me around... at the moment you start... 'cause I think the point is immersive work has opened up ideas around access and around sensory practice and around getting people out of theatres and creating a theatre audience for those people who never believed that theatre was for them and so on and so forth so the moment you start to push the boundaries and if you are explicitly doing that in a way... like I was saying that has access and inclusivity at its heart the moment... everybody's invited into that, everybody can access that in some... not everybody, that's a huge generalisation, but you are making it easier to enable people to be part of that world, part of that space, to feel invited in, to not feel excluded and there's an artistic conversation around that that I am not able to articulate...

NICK: No, I really like that, that's the reason why we're called Access All Areas. And I think there's something about unpicking that, why we came up with that name, it was a long time ago and I didn't know then what we'd end up achieving but I think you're right that you could just do one purely on access to higher education which is why we did the diploma programme. Access to, as you said, bringing in new audiences who would never go to the theatre normally access to audiences with access needs or access to theatre making, it just goes on and on and on. Access to casting.

EMMA: Access to audiences of different ages 'cause we actually had kids come in for *UnReal City* for the first time.

NICK: There's a whole range, it's true, Jo, actually what you're saying there.

JO: Let's think that one through. Anyway I'm going to think that through with you at a later point 'cause I really have to go now

NICK: I'll stop recording, thanks, Jo, appreciate it.