

A: So, what I really want is for you to tell me your life story.

V: (Laughs) Okay.

A: What's your first memory? Let's start from the very beginning.

V. First memory. First real, vivid memory. I grew up on a farm, a tiny farm, just outside a coal-mining village in the North-East of England. So my first vivid memory is of a foal being born in a stable, and being very tiny I probably was eighteen months old, two years old and taken in to see that and um we were surrounded by horses, horses weren't expensive things back in those days, they were, you know surrounded by all sorts of animals. So actually a pattern of seeing animals born became a regular thing. I think for it to have had an impact it must have been quite a moment. And there were a few of us in this tiny stable. So my grandfather, who had a massive impact on my life, and my dad was there and my mum was there. So yeah it was very much a family, family moment, kind of establishing that farming roots, I feel very connected. Although, you know in adulthood I've never lived on a farm. But I kind of secretly would have liked to. In another parallel universe. I love the seasons, I love the fact that, you know, farmers grow things from the earth. But yeah, no, first memory seeing a foal born and how quickly it was up on its feet and..pretty magical, yeah.

But family's a big, you know a big part of..of everybody's life but I feel really rooted in that North-East perspective as well. So half of my family were farmers and the other half of the family were miners. So they were very, very connected, I suppose, to the land and what was under it in one way or another. So yeah, not quite the punk rock roots. I ended up as a punk in London somehow. But that's an interesting journey.

A: Tell me about it.

V: Yeah, so um, okay so I had in lots of ways a wonderful exposure to nature and the land um we weren't a particularly wealthy family. I think there's a bit of a myth around.. It was a tiny little farm and it subsidised the family. My

grandfather had bought, had bought it so it was a, you know, first and second generation farm, it wasn't like land inherited or anything like that.

Went to a local comprehensive school in Peterlee, which is one of the 1960s new towns. Recently in the news for 1960s sculptural architecture. I think they're claiming it as heritage architecture these days. We used to smoke cigarettes and eat fish and chips. On a lunchtime, you know at school. But we all thought it was pretty miserable really but um yeah, they'd got artists in doing amazing things, illuminating it and creating work in response to it. That all seems very strange and bizarre to the old, you know the teenager in me.

But um yeah so did okay at school and quite liked schools in lots of ways. But in terms of artistically, I didn't, it was other cool kids who did drama. I ultimately became a theatre director. But at that time it was much cooler people than me that did drama, I didn't think that was, that I was, that was part of my life, really. And certainly, growing up in a mining area in East Durham, the arts weren't really a feature, we might get an annual pantomime where we'd all cheer and boo. The biggest artistic impact for me was punk. Punk rock. And boy did it liven my life up. So from a tiny village punk had, yeah so I'm not as old as I look. I was around, not at the beginnings of punk but five years in maybe.

A: I won't say for the tape how old she looks.

V: Yeah, don't. I've had a long day. But yeah, in what felt like, but I think, typical of many teenagers, life felt drab. And then punk hit and gosh. The costumes. The fashion. The uniform of punk in a tiny pit village. So at sixteen I started designing clothes for a punk shop in Durham and sold them under the label of 'Spider', which I thought was very punk rock at the time. I had a trademark little spider that I would draw on my face. Quite kind of goth sort of look. So me and my best friend, who is my best friend to this day, we would, yeah we'd parade these fashions through the pit village and people would shout things like 'the freaks are out tonight'. And yeah we'd quite like that really I think. That was something about feeling a bit different. So at this age, I'm not identifying as disabled, that didn't come till later in my life, you know that I would identify around mental health. But I do know that my mental health problems started for certain, I can trace them back to when I was about seven.

Things started to manifest themselves.

A: Tell me about that.

V: Um. So unfortunately my grandfather, who had bought the farm, developed quite serious mental health problems himself. And he'd had a compulsory purchase order from a local council, been kicked off his farm, you know it wasn't good, it wasn't good and sadly he took his life in a psychiatric hospital. And as kids we weren't told that that was what had happened. We were told he had died. But everybody else in the village knew what had happened because it was reported in the newspapers, so we'd get versions of it as kids from school bullies and.. And actually that had quite an impact, that there was this bizarre silence and secret but that everybody else knew something. It was a very strange position to be in. So I definitely developed anxiety and an eating disorder at that age. At that time those words probably weren't even, so I'm talking about the mid seventies. So the eating disorder was a secret thing. And um, yeah it started quite gently as they usually do, and then it progressed throughout my teens and then throughout my life and so, I think at seven I knew there was something different happening with me, but I couldn't have begun to label it or articulate it. In teenage years I did the thing that teenage girls do and worry about their bodies. But I also had a very serious period of anxiety and mental health distress which it wasn't something that you'd reach out, or I didn't reach out for help. It was something that I very much internalised. And so that in some ways that played itself out through punk, drinking quite a lot, which lots of teenagers do so it's not, it's not detected if you know what I mean, it's kind of disguised and you self-medicate and try to get through it. But as soon as I could move to London, because I thought the streets were paved with punk gold, that's what I did, so me and my best friend, we moved to London and lived a furious year on about two hours sleep a night. Every punk event that we could go to or find and we'd spend all Saturday on the King's Road and Carnaby Street and we'd be in underground clubs like the Catacomb or Jean-Pierre's. We loved Jean-Pierre's cause you could take your own booze. So it was neat Bacardi. For maximum effect. So that's, so I hadn't needed to be hospitalised or had to have any interventions, you know around mental health or as it was all playing out at the same time as big punk stuff and.. When, I think we'd been in London for about a year. Then I saw a play called 'Metamorphosis' by Steven Berkoff,

with Tim Roth in the lead. And it blew my mind. You know now, this me, I know there's lots of problems with the work of Steven Berkoff and we can, you know we could critique it and all of that but then, to somebody who'd come from a pit village and a little farm, I'd experimented with the theatre of punk and then this piece of work, my goodness me. I'd no idea that you could tell a story visually, poetically, so at school my exposure to drama was Shakespeare and, I'm trying to think what else did we do, I don't think we touched any other plays. I think we did the usual Dickens, Shakespeare, and maybe there was bit of Thomas Hardy in there. It wasn't particularly inspiring, you know the literature that we did. Yeah so, and not long after that I saw a piece of work by Adele Saleem which is a two-hander feminist piece of work and it equally blew my mind in terms of identity, politics, similarly with the Berkoff piece, it felt edgy and political and you know it was at the beginnings of his quite political work. So I quickly, I couldn't eat enough theatre, went to see Timothy Spall, early *Complicité* stuff, big visual stylised theatre was really saying something to me. And I could see that it was going to be possible to tell stories in that way for me, that my, and the other thing was, I think parallel to my mental health, and I had begun to write by the time I was in London so I was writing mainly poetry at that time, quite awkward, teenage political stuff, but I've great affection for it. But I realised that I felt we had to tell stories this way, the Shakespeare, the Dickens, the madding crowd of whoever, you know and Thomas Hardy, in a pretty Aristotelian structure. My mind definitely didn't think in that way, I didn't experience life in that way, very staccato, episodic and well probably like many of us but you know, I don't write in linear, linear way.

And so to see pieces of work that I thought aaah, actually it's fine to challenge form and to challenge what the status quo has been presenting us with for such a long time. So actually quite quickly I knew I wanted an opportunity to make quite, you know, political work. And I was thinking along feminist lines. That's another thing actually, I hadn't grown up in a particularly political environment. I mean, it was, it was weighted with politics in the way that people lived. But it wasn't something that my parents talked about, they didn't have any passions politically necessarily. I'm trying to think back, because obviously come the eighties and timing, you know we hit disaster, I'm trying to think, seventies, you know what was happening, but there's nothing remarkably

political in my past that I would relate to. And I knew that I had a conventional way of thinking about people's experiences. I'm flitting back to a school experience actually. And we studied economics and it was a new subject, I mean in the comprehensive system it was a relatively new subject. And I had this brilliant teacher. And he'd asked us all what we thought it was like to live in Russia. And of course we all bought the party line, what we'd been fed about what we thought Russia was. And he had this brilliant way of questioning. How do you know that? Who's told you that? And he introduced the critical questioning into my world at fifteen. Between fifteen and punk and seventeen and eighteen and moving to London I'd become really quite politicised. And I realise I haven't stopped talking. You might have wanted me to stop talking!

A: No, no. I should have said to you if you need a break at any time, if you wanna stop, whatever. Don't feel under any pressure. We'll do this however suits you.

V: Thank you.

V: So yeah, so then I thought, so I would have been nineteen, twenty, had a bit of a heady time in London. I'd worked with kids to earn a living. And it was also the way that me and my best friend got a flat actually. So I've worked as a nanny, survived on the two hours sleep a night. And then I thought actually I really want to try theatre, I think there's something there for me. And so I put myself through A Levels, English Literature and Drama and Theatre Studies. And fortunately I got a lecturer called Christine Harmar-Brown, who was also a brilliant director. And again, she was pretty in tune with that Berkovian, you know all the new stuff that was happening and new interpretations of Brecht's theories, which have gone on to inform my own work, how do we make those what I think are really amazing theatrical theories and practices, how do we make them contemporary and relevant. That's a life-long passion for me. Because I think it's how we as a disability community can signify our identities and.. I'll talk about that a bit more maybe later. So then I did really well in my A Level and so. I think I got into Kent University by a bit of a fluke. I'd done my A Level, I'd done my first two A Levels and I thought I was gonna need another two. But I applied, and they gave me an interview. And I had been to see Ian

McKellen, he was doing a one-man show, he was at the height of his self-absorbedness. And it was called 'Ian McKellen acting Shakespeare'. I can't begin to tell you why I went to see it, really, I can't remember. But the fact that I did and I was able to critique and pick it apart. And we had a few jokes about it, he's somebody I have tremendous respect for now. But you know, there was a period there that he was just a little bit... up himself. (*ROARS OF LAUGHTER.*)

And I think it's that, I think that was the thing that actually got me into Kent, was that conversation, because they offered me an unconditional offer. I didn't need to do the other two A Levels. Thanks Ian, that's great. So university was a brilliant adventure. It was a four-year degree. It was a time that my mental health started to unravel a little bit. I spent a lot of time dissociating but concealing it. So it wasn't getting to crisis level. And the other thing..

A: Can we say what caused that?

V: I think it had gently been building. I also think I felt a bit of a fraud-pants. If I'm honest. There's a thing lots of us experience. So mine would be that, well I'm from a tiny pit village in the North-East of England, what am I doing, who do I think I am, to go and do a four-year experimental drama degree. I don't mean I articulated that in that way but I think inside there was just, yeah an inferiority thing, a self-esteem thing, which probably stemmed back and related to the eating disorder and you know the early crises that I'd gone through with my grandfather's death and things. So I think there was a build and it combined with not feeling really part of anything. And then the other side of that is, I don't really know chemically what was happening, I still don't fully understand that, how that all works. Excuse me. So I would describe myself as a system-avoider. So some people call themselves system survivors or, you know, and I did lots of things to avoid contact, connection, help. I realise that that means that I was luckier than lots of people because I hadn't hit the complete trauma point. I had a couple of those in later life but I was somehow getting through it. And the other thing was that my Mum was a psychiatric nurse. So em yeah, I managed quite often in roundabout ways to get help. She never ever recognised anything in me and she often said that she was a psychiatric

nurse because it was the only thing that kept her out of the hospital. She knew she needed to be in there! But she was going to wear a uniform if you don't mind. And there's a lot of truth in that. I mean, there's a lot of truth in that in terms of her own mental health, which I realised as an adult, but you don't see it as a kid or a teenager, you see it as parental fights and, anyway yeah. So I also wonder if there is a familial genetic whatever connection. And they're always areas of interest for an artist to dig around in. Now I don't write autobiographical stuff, I'm always quite careful to step three steps away from anything. So there might be a trigger, a personal story there, but I'll always fictionalise it for myself. Usually because I want to politicise it in some way. Yeah so..

A: You were at Kent.

V: I was at Kent, yeah, at Canterbury in Kent, managed yeah I got through, got through the degree. For three years of it I probably wasn't terribly well. But I loved what I was having the opportunity to do. So we did acting, we did set design, stage technology. And then I specialised in directing in my final year. And the environment of Kent at that time, so I graduated in '92, so that's quite some time ago. But it was quite experimental, contemporary and political. So I was introduced to feminist theatre. And that was the real way in to understanding about the construction of identity. So I looked at how gender was constructed before I looked at how disability was constructed. But I think because I'd been able to do that, once you know those things or once you've seen those things or explored them, then you realise oh wow, there's a whole world of you know, depending on whether you believe in it or not, but I firmly do, you know societally we're constructing identity all the time. And we are fortunate enough to have inherited two thousand years of crap. And more than that.

So even then I wasn't entering the mental health world or a disability world. I came home to the North-East. And set up a theatre company, feminist theatre company in East Durham, so I actually went back to my home area. Now this must have been, I think I set up the company in '93 and people were, who I went to university with, like 'what are you doing, why are you going to the North-East to do feminist theatre, and why in County Durham'. And within three months

we had a year-long residency in the local college. So actually we were, I mean it was a revelation, but it was wonderful. We were really welcomed with open arms. And actually that, because of that residency, that was my first introduction to disability arts. I'd never heard of it at university, disability theatre had never come up. To be fair, I'm trying to think, when was Graeae set up. Although Nabil had been making work.

A: About '81. Maybe a little bit earlier.

V: I think it was '80s.

A: Late seventies, early, I'm not..

V: It didn't hit our syllabus anyway at university, so.. And that's not uncommon as you know. So my first encounter with disability arts was when with a woman called Sue Vass, who..

A: I've heard of her.

V: She was with National Disability Arts Forum. Geof was, she did a character called Mavis Dishcloth.

A: Yes, I remember.

V: She was on the cabaret scene. And so I began to work with a group of learning disabled women who wanted to explore women's voices, which in '92 that was quite early days of learning disability, even looking at gender. And so..

A: In '92.

V: That would have been ninety-two and ninety-three I started to work with, yeah sorry..

A: Bit of a jump. Before we were in 198..

V: Sorry. I graduated in '92.

A: Ah right.

V: '92 I graduated. And I went back to the North-East and then set up the company in '93.

A: Gotcha.

V: And then '93/'94 I started to work with learning disabled women but also they then, they were really quickly programmed, cause they were amazing, these women, very vocal, visual, funny.

A: Can I know the name?

V: Moving On. And they were based in both Hartlepool and Peterlee. I'm just remembering it with great affection. And so Sue Vass, as part of her remit, she covered County Durham. And so she would programme some of these events, which is the first time that I saw Ian Stanton. And he was playing in Spennymoor in County Durham. And The Fugertivs were on the bill, so that was Karen Sheader, Karen Rafferty she probably was called then, or Raftery. Karen Sheader she became. A stalwart of disability arts in the North-East. And as part of Shoot Your Mouth Off film company in the North-East to this day. And became chair of Arcadea, which was the Northern Disability Arts Forum. So I had a close working relationship with her eventually, but that came later.

And then I did. The company was doing really well, the feminist piece of theatre, we took it to Edinburgh and broke even, so we thought we were really rich. We didn't make a massive loss! But we were making really quite, yeah, visual and actually 'The Deadly Devotchka' was the show that I took to Edinburgh, which looked at Femmes Fatales and Film Noir and stereotypes of women. But I had sixteen mm film in that, so this was pre-digital age.

A: I remember it well.

V: But that was actually quite thrilling, to shoot that in, we shot elements of it in

County Durham and then sent it off to be developed, it was quite exciting when it came back. And um so the old projector was going in Edinburgh. And then, and then I wasn't very well. When we came back from Edinburgh, I started to think, I mean I internalised it and thought there was something really wrong with me, I didn't understand what was, what was happening. And then, now another thing that I didn't mention was that I met my lifelong partner when I was in London. I've been with my partner from the age of nineteen. So he trundled down to Kent with me. We did have a little year off. He went back to London for a while. He's kind of been an amazing, he's an artist himself but he's been an amazing support. So I think, because I've had amazing support, I was able to hide the mental health stuff for quite a long time. And it's funny 'cause as I think about it now, even though my mum was a psychiatric nurse, I don't know if that's what made me think it happened to other people and not me. I don't know, I really don't know. But anyway.

So then a job came up in Ireland. The theatre company went for about seven years in the North-East of England, I worked with learning disabled women for a lot of that time. We'd get invited in and out of some of the NDAF stuff, but obviously I wasn't identifying as a disabled person. And then the job in Ireland, I always describe this with great embarrassment, but which I hope I can come back from later, tell you the rest of the story, but it was Very Special Arts in Dublin. And I think because I wasn't politicised in a disability context, I didn't know the language, I didn't you know. It's not that I thought that I was great, please don't think that I did because I didn't. And one of the first jobs I did was change the name. But it was the beginning then. So I went to Dublin and met artists like Yvonne Lynch and Peter Kearns, Rosaleen McDonagh, Donal Tolan, Padraig Naughton.

A: Give me that list again (V dictates.)

V: Now Donal, Donal was, I suppose he was a figurehead for the disability rights movement in Ireland, himself, Martin McDonagh, Hubert McCormick and fortunately he was a brilliant actor, Donal. And he actually came and worked with Graeae. I think he did 'Bent' with them. Now I don't remember the timescales of that. But very early on I was connected with phenomenal

disabled artists. And actually working with them, and there were a couple of other people in this small cohort we became. Steven Daunt was another person. I began to realise that mental health was part of disability. What I was, at this point, by this point in Ireland I was engaging with the system. I needed, you know I needed more help than I had before and so I was getting treatment, counselling, medication. And so I was processing that with them in a way alongside this amazing experience we all had. So I'm just trying to think. I was appointed in '99 and I was in Dublin till 2004. And initially we just, there was no framework, there was nothing, there was Very Special Arts, which had been set up by Jean Kennedy-Smith, JFK's sister. So where, Shriver, I can't remember her first name, set up the Special Olympics, Jean Kennedy-Smith set up Special Arts, Very Special Arts. And um a lot of people had said that was their way of easing their guilt about what had happened to their sister Rose Kennedy, who was given a lobotomy.

And so (..) It was catastrophic to her and her identity. Jean Kennedy-Smith, my experience of her was that she was a very controlling person, you're not a Kennedy, you know you're at the top of the tree. And in Ireland, she'd been the ambassador, the American ambassador in Ireland, so this was her baby, she'd set it up when she was there, but obviously very paternalistic model of practice. It was based at the City Arts Centre, I remember, when I first rolled up in my job as CEO, but anyway the um, these artists were clearly activists, there was no legislation protecting disabled people at that time in Ireland. Donal was a very visible advocate, he was quite often on television, he often had audiences with the president of Ireland and, he's highly regarded and you know highly respected. I think they've just recently done a massive piece of research on the status of disabled people and the cost of disability which was quite a turning point in Ireland. We decided as a group of activists and artists that cabaret was our way forward. But what we did was we devised, it was a whole show. So it wasn't that a series of acts would turn up, not that there's anything wrong with that, and do their bit. The whole thing was written so that every act there was an element that it had been created especially for this show. Now unfortunately the amazing titles we had have gone out of my head at this moment. They'll come back. It's cause I'm old. I am as old as I look.

The amazing thing was that so many doors were open to us artistically. The Arts Council of Ireland wanted to fund it. And mainstream venues wanted to programme it. We did one in City Arts Centre, it sold out. And it was a raucous night. It was brilliant. And the thing I can liken it to is LGBT cabarets that have a, they have a feel to them, that have a community sense of everybody's in on it, pulling for it, and they get these caricatures. We'd achieved that around disability so it was a completely fresh way of looking at disability. In an Irish context. That had already started here, obviously. But um, we were booked into places like City Arts Centre, into Project Arts Centre. And quite quickly artists were then getting commissions from mainstream venues. And we tried to wrestle Very Special Arts from Jean Kennedy-Smith in a very uncomfortable meeting in a hotel in Dublin. And she really did try to treat me like a child. Which didn't go down very well. And she said to my, I had an assistant with me, and she said to her at one point run along dear. And I said, she's not going anywhere. And you know, you can imagine she um, she wasn't comfortable with the self-advocacy element and self-determination of disability, because of where she was coming from. But what did happen was we were able to change the name and what the artists decided on was that they wanted something, it's Art and Disability Ireland now. And that is the name.. They wanted the name of the country in it and they wanted it to have like a certain gravitas around the name rather than a creative name. It was to give it a status of influence and to let people know that this group of people were serious about making change. Obviously Arts and Disability is quite a different thing here. But I note even now that that's the name they've stuck with and that tends to be, it's a less political organisation. I admire Pdraig hugely but I don't think it's a very political organisation, to me it appears to be more about access and making established mainstream work accessible to disabled audiences. So it's quite different to where we were back then. There was a real buzz around it, we felt we'd taken ownership of the organisation and the artists became the board. So they replaced the great and the good. And so it became a self-, you know, self-led, disabled-led organisation. And then I mentored and directed the first, I prefer to say two of the first pieces of disability theatre in the Republic of Ireland. Because Nabil was in a show that Robert Rae from Theatre Workshop in Edinburgh, I think it was called Dare, Nabil's picked me up on it a couple of times. They brought that and toured that in Ireland. The only other work that had

been made, theatre work that had been made by disabled artists at that time was from established texts written by non-disabled people. So Rosaleen McDonagh wrote 'The Baby Doll Project'. And she's a traveller woman who's also disabled. And she wrote about the institutionalisation of traveller women and of disabled traveller women. And it was quite explosive, because in the traveller community women do not perform, do not go on stage, are not, there is a hierarchy there so Rosaleen's been a figurehead in Ireland for the last twenty years now, both as a playwright and as somebody campaigning for traveller women's rights. She's a phenomenal woman. But her play was well-received, it toured Ireland, it was the first of its kind and it won a Met Éireann award. I think that was quite something. We didn't feel like we was having to scrabble around the edges, you know. We'd like to do this, yes you can here's some money. Dunno if it's just because it's a small country and, I suppose they knew something had to happen. And then I also devised a piece with Donal called 'Broadcast' which was commissioned as part of the Dublin fringe. Again another unheard of scenario. And it was a one-man show for him, great vehicle for him and it was a genuinely multi-media piece, not a 16mm, we did digital by this time.

So that was, so then lots of things started to build for those artists and people were, you know, commissioning them. Rosaleen's gone on, she's worked with the Abbey Theatre, which is their National Theatre, with Fishamble. She's had commissions and work in development here at the Royal Court and at the National here, nothing that's made the stage yet, but nevertheless her career has grown. Donal before he died made many more appearances in, you know in artistic contexts. I came home because my little boy was gonna start school and I knew that I didn't want him to start school there because I didn't see the rest of my life being there. So we came back to the North-East of England. But there was some incredible, incredibly fierce activists, brilliant forward-thinking people like Mary Duffy, you know another legend, who really were forces for change.

I think that period in my life was my acceptance of my mental, you know I was starting to name it and I was, I'd describe myself as a disabled person for the first time and owned it and felt it was a political decision. So then by the time I came home it was Arcadea time. It was NORDAF, I couldn't believe it, because that

was a pure coincidence.

A: Before we move on to Arcadea, I have a question.

V: Okay.

A: When you started out identifying your own mental health issues, and looking to fit in with disability were there any problems there, because I know there have been sometimes?

V: For me, or for other people or..?

A: I know that sometimes there have been issues of 'oh they're not disabled'.

V: Yeah. Oh yes because.. I remember actually when I was first appointed at Art Disability Ireland, people were very disappointed that I was English. Some people were very disappointed that I was a women! And didn't hold back. Some people were very disappointed that I wasn't an identifying disabled person, which I absolutely get now. And so it wasn't all plain sailing, there was resistance. I had to build, you know I genuinely had to forge relationships with people. I mean Peter Kearns and Yvonne Lynch are the first two people that I mentioned because they became really solid.. But they were the two people that had the biggest question marks and really distanced themselves and, you know there was a lot of mistrust, absolutely because I have the same, you know I experience the same things myself now. And I can remember the first time that I came out to one of this group of people, I won't name them, but it was a really difficult conversation. And we'd had lots of conversations, we talked about my mental health, we talked about suicidal ideations that I'd had, we talked about attempts that I'd made. You know this person, it was unquestionable that they knew. Whether they thought that mental health was a category under disability or not, I don't know, but they, it was a really awful, difficult conversation. They said, and I was saying I think, you know, that I, more and more I identify as a disabled person because of the barriers that I was experiencing. There were a, you know, my, the boards that I'd worked for initially were predominantly non-disabled people from a very paternalistic perspective. Then as my

employers were not supportive around my mental health so it was a hugely ironic situation but, there was a lot of definite stuff, it wasn't, I've described it as glory days really because we had such a brilliant artistic..

A: Did you get to the end of telling about that difficult conversation?

V: Sorry, the difficult conversation and she, and the person that I told said you know you don't have to do this don't you? You don't have to identify as a disabled person. So it was a very odd, it felt like a coming-out conversation that I was moving from one place to another and then it, I didn't feel supported. But I get that, I understand why, you know why that might have been. I think there's a thing and, there is definitely that when people who are disabled, people who've been disabled from birth and have been institutionalised and who have been atrocious, had an atrocious experience which is not the experience that I've had obviously, I haven't come from an institutionalised background. And so there is a different experience that we had. And I'm, I suppose I'm aware of some of the tensions around that and that's cropped up a few times about whether you're really, are you really disabled. This happens in our community, in the disability community. Our decades-long conversations about the hierarchy of disability and are you bona fide or not and to have gone from identifying as a non-disabled person, not that, I didn't stride out saying I'm non-disabled but clearly in that position in a disability organisation that should have been disabled-led, and then while I'm there I come out as you know as disabled, although that was more towards the end. Because it was, it wasn't a good experience with the board, there was quite a lot of mm there were some difficulties, maybe that's what I'll say about it. Challenging personalities, yeah I think that's what I'll say about it for now. I dunno if I've answered your question. Was that the sort of thing you were wondering about? Becoming a disabled person and then how accepted.

A: Yeah, I think so, because I think the definition of who's part of our group has widened as different people have pushed their way in.

V: Oh gosh absolutely.

A: When I first started thinking about disability, I did it in terms of I think I face the same oppression as disabled people, but wasn't defining myself..

V: Ah yes.

A: As disabled.

V: That's interesting. Yeah.

A: I know there have been times, like for example when Joe Bidder wanted to set up Survivors Poetry, I discovered relatively recently that he brought it to LDAF, London Disability Arts Forum and they said no, no, doesn't belong here. It's conceivable that that happened while I was chair of LDAF and I wasn't even told about it. Sian and Elspeth said fuck off we don't want you, you're not disabled people. There's definitely been an issue, particularly around mental health issues.

V: Yeah definitely.

A: I think it's really important always for the movement to have kind of fuzzy edges, to, this is where UPIAS went wrong, I think they defined everything so firmly that it was like building walls. You've got to have room for people to say this applies to us too, because there's things you don't expect to know, there've been tensions and that's a thing that I find very interesting. It's come up, Tony Heaton talked about who's in our gang.

V: Well that is interesting because sometimes you feel part of the gang and at other times not, and there are lots of reasons for that which might be geographic, they might be impairment specific, they might be how long you've been connected to the movement. There are, it's funny the stage we're at with the movement, disability rights and disability arts and the generational change, which obviously you're interested in because that's the very conversations you've been having. I'm fascinated by that. This younger generation of disabled artists who might not describe themselves in that way and might not want to be described in that way, but are making work about impairment or..

A: Maybe come to that later. You'd just come back to the North-East.

V: Right, where am I?

A: Arcadea

V: That's right. So I came back and it's funny, in Ireland I'd had a really good relationship with the Arts Council there, so this is obviously Arts Council Ireland, the republic. And they had wanted to see change happening. They wanted to invest in disabled artists. And then I came back to England, the North-East, by a complete fluke they were looking for a director for NORDAF as they were at that time. And so I was interviewed by members of the board, some of whom were disabled people and some of whom weren't. Got the job, I had to see out a bit of maternity leave and there was a bit of disquiet about that. Although I actually went back to work really early after my daughter was born. Yeah, there was a bit of, yeah, you know local conversation about that. Anyway, so obviously NORDAF um Veronica was there, her name's gone out of my head, that's because I'm an old person again. Who was amazing. Geof was the Director of NDAF, Geof Armstrong, but was in the same office, we were in the same office in the North-East. Before I got there, things had got a bit tense between NORDAF and NDAF and I was delighted to discover that my first job, given to me by the board, was to kick Geof out of the office. It was like 'am I in another joke job here'. I'd gone to Ireland, woman, English (..) That time not disabled. And then here just, oh could you kick Geof Armstrong out of the office. But actually Geof and I did become great allies. In the end after a 'does she know who I am? She'll pay for this'. Oh God! Anyway, so yeah there was an opportunity, the Arts Council in the North-East was a rocky relationship. It was at a time that diversity was well and truly on the agenda. It was a time that Sue Williams and Tony Panayiotou were at national office, were bringing disabled people in to conversations, was a time we all wrote lots of papers for them. They seemed quite genuine about.. And then the goal posts shifted, I think, internally and policy-wise. But the North-East wasn't as supportive as the national picture. And so it was, I arrived full of positivity and determination and fight. The North-East of England actually had a lot more, well it's more highly

populated probably even than the whole of Ireland is, there were a lot more venues, it was quite a big job to support artists and create platforms for them to be supported and to create work, and then to do the persuading, you know the campaigning, the knocking on doors, the outrage at inaccessibility. And there weren't many open doors at all, there really weren't. It was before the Arts Council were enforcing anything with you know ideas of Creative Case, whatever you think of that (*WHISPERS* I don't think much). But, yeah, who we were working with, four hundred disabled people in the North-East. Many more than that would come to events across the year and places like, it took a long time to get a way into Northern Stage, for example, which is the regional, you know the regional theatre, where you'd expect theatre work to be shared. So we had a long-term campaign with em, well relationship building but it was a campaign from our point of view. The Sage, Gateshead at that time, brand-new building and I can remember being invited as director of Arcadea to go and, you know, and they showed me about twenty-seven toilets, accessible toilets, that's what they wanted to show me. I thought they wanted to say, 'Can you suggest some disabled musicians who could come and play in our marvelous halls?' They actually, the former CEO of the Sage called us extremists, because we wanted to challenge him on the language that they were using around disability. And, I wish I'd kept that email but there was an angry, a terse email from the CEO of the Sage at that time saying, we're not going to engage with the language of extremists. And the Arts Council weren't there for us in those kind of conversations. We had to constantly be accountable, well obviously we had to be accountable but for our validity and why should we be funded and that, you know we talk about it to this day, why is there an expectation that the work of disabled people has to to be a hundred percent perfect? It's got to hit many more targets in terms of quality than anyone else. And a lot of the art is about the right to fail. And many artists are allowed to fail, but when it comes to disability or other groups within diversity, sorry, you've gotta hit those heady heights or your validity's called into question. So, I'd arrived with lots of fight, I, my first article for NORDAF News was 'Tearing Down the Temples', was the title of it. You know, looking at these institutions who just were archaic in their attitudes. Not just to disabled people, but just preserving that ugly status quo.

And then we had an ambassadors scheme, where we brought people like Jo

Verrant, Susie Balderston, Julie Mac was one of our ambassadors, Caroline Bowditch was another ambassador, actually she became out ambassador to Northern Stage. And what we'd created and what we had the funding for was nine luxurious days of consultation in the venues. The ambassadors would go into, I think it was New Writing North, a printworks, Northern Stage, and you know observe, look at their policies, look at their programmes. And it was quite shocking, what the research discovered in terms of just, there was nothing, there was no awareness of accessibility even though it had been enshrined in law for about ten years by that point I think.

We had an excellent two-year development programme which was funded by Esme Fairbairn and that supported lots of artists to make work, we partnered artists with mentors in venues and so it was the building blocks I suppose of where we've got to.

So I was with Arcadea for six years, just over six years. And we did lots of firsts, and we had the Mimosa Festival which was a month-long festival across the North-East, which felt like a massive achievement. And we brought artists from all over the country to show, just to showcase similarly as obviously LDAF's festivals in London have done and DaDaFest was doing, but the fight with the Arts Council got harder and harder. I think after about three years I felt quite worn down by that. And people, you know you sort of level off for a while, and there wasn't a lot of space for them to support us to do new things. And internally they were coming up with lots of administrative, extra administrative things for RFOs to do. And we were tiny, you know we were a tiny, so I was CEO but I was also delivering, I was Artistic Director of certain things or of the festival and we had about two or three staff, well two staff, two full-time posts that were kind of shared out a little bit. So it was quite hard going, but we did have a massive community of people and a massive group of artists who would benefit from the, obviously from the magazines, which were quarterly and then became monthly, and they would contribute to those, get information from those, but there were lots of artistic activities, you know all of the time. We had an active network so people didn't feel isolated.

And I left Arcadea about a year and a half before they were disinvested. So

Geof Armstrong, who by that time NDAF had been disinvested. I'm jumping ahead a little bit now. Yeah, so they appointed Geof as Director of Arcadia. I don't think the Arts Council probably were very happy about that appointment if I'm honest. Cause I think their internal policy was clear to them that it was a national disinvestment of the DAFs really.

A: When you say they appointed Geof..

V: The Board, yeah. The board of Arcadia appointed Geof. And he was, I really do think he was the best person for that job at that time. And he'd come in refreshed because he'd obviously had a nightmare with the disinvestment, the redundancy and I think I probably told you this in the previous meeting, he was told by the Arts Council in the North-East that the stuff he wanted to archive had no public value and that they wouldn't, they wouldn't even pay for it to be shipped to Holton Lee. And you're like what? That's a senior executive at the Arts Council, this body of work, I mean they wouldn't dare say that now.

A: I arranged that.

V: It was saved.

A: I can't remember where we found the funding from. There wasn't support from NDAF's board either, Sian Vasey was unhelpful.

V: That was a bit of an eye-opener, yeah. I think the board just wanted it wrapped up for whatever reason.

A: May have been animosity to me, partly.

V: I don't know. I think they wanted just to, once.

A: But there was great stuff there.

V: There was such great stuff.

A: An amazing poster collection for a start. All the stuff from Shelf Life.

V: Amazing project.

A: All those unsold books. Geof set it up as a project that produced these wonderful books.

V: Shelf Life.

A: Shelf Life.

V: Oh they were beautiful books, yeah.

A: And then didn't think about selling them. Bit like you take it to the stage that will please the funder... All the illustrations were by professional disabled artists. There's a whole load of stuff which is now in the archive. But that could so easily have ended in a skip.

V: That was the attitude. And that brought me to burnout, really. By the sixth year I was never gonna work in the arts again. I'd had it. I went and baked cakes for a year. Cup cakes. Yeah, I was totally, totally burnt out. And it was, you know you'd get to the stage where your stomach would just drop at an email, another email from the Arts Council. So yeah, I left in 2010. I think Geof was probably there till the middle of 2011. Because I was so unwell, I didn't really keep in touch with what was happening very much. Karen Sheader who I mentioned before, part of the Fugertivs, was the chair of Arcadea at that time, a brilliant chair and, yeah she oversaw it, she fought but those artists, you know that massive community of people, having come back in to the arts I lasted about a year baking cakes. And then I knew I wanted to go back to my own practice of making theatre.

By then Arcadea had gone and that whole network of artists had largely disappeared and you can count, there's a bigger community now but when I came back in about 2011/12 you could probably count on both hands how many artists, disabled artists were still practising. In the North East. Their sole

support system was gone. No network, no. People did have these valiant attempts at keeping things together but if the money's not there to pay for access, to pay travel support for people, they're just not gonna get together. And that's pretty much the picture, we've lost people along the way, as we do inevitably, but it feels, I'm not defeated by it and there's a lot of new artists coming up and realising they can have voices about this stuff and they're coming from very different perspectives. And that's really interesting and inspiring, and they are, what they're saying is thought-provoking and making me think I might be stuck in a rut here or should I be thinking about this differently. You know, I have got some pretty strongly-held beliefs around the social model and how useful it is still, even in terms of thinking about the content of work, of helping venues to understand about the con.. You know we can turn it around and ask then to look at content, characters, stereotypes and tropes. And it's useful to connect that to the social model, the way we view, historically view disability, I know that you know all this. But I, you know I still think that that's..

A (...)

V: Still think that that's invaluable to us at this time.

A: Is there a specific example you can quote?

V: In terms of pieces of work, or the social model, how I use the social model, or..?

A: How it's come up, I dunno.

V: With any authority I can only talk about my own experience.

A: For making a poem, if you talk about particular stuff. It works better.

V: Yeah. Absolutely. I think, I did a three-year project in Arc, in Stockton, called Cultural Shift, which is something I'm immensely proud of. And that was from 2015-18. And it was a very, it was a strategic artistic project. It had the

social model at its heart, and it had art at its heart. So first and foremost it was an artistic project and Arc were totally up for that. They didn't see disability as an add-on, they didn't see access as an add-on, they wanted to look at how they could embed it in their own work. And so in terms of getting them to understand the history, the cultural experience, the cultural representation of disabled people, the social model was a brilliant way to explain that. We'd probably call it disability equality training but I think, I think those sessions are so much more than training, because we're not, we're not telling people how to install a lift or a ramp or whatever, it's much bigger than that, and it's to get the misinformation that's gone on for two thousand years about disability, how to try and get inside their heads and twist that around and really shift it. I think once we do start talking with organisations about the type of work they're programming and the stories they're happy to tell, and we can relate that then back to the stereotypes it's been possible to identify in part through, you know the thinking of the social model and the tropes that re-tell and re-hash these shadows of people's lives, we're always a secondary character, we're always a device, we're always um there to further somebody else's story or to be the butt of jokes or whatever.

But.. It was really interesting cause working that through with the programming team at Arc, they said, literally you could see pennies dropping. They believe, they want to see really good-quality, interesting work that's challenging the world today and.. Once you start to point out well that's an amazing piece of contemporary work, but what do you think about this take on it. Once you see the pennies dropping, and they said something really brilliant, which was, and they say this to this day, oh my god, once you know this, you can't not know it. In terms of what you're happy to then commission, programme, and that needs to be across the arts, that starts, you know that um, the model that we developed I'd love to see that, it would have so much more impact than the things like the Creative Case. I would say that, wouldn't I! So I think from that point of view it has informed and influenced. And then Arc are brilliant, because they're part of lots of networks of other arts centres. And they are very influential. And I think, actually, in the disability arts community they've become a bit of a beacon of hope. Certainly for theatre makers because they support so many. And now lots of disabled artists are applying to Arc to come

and do a residency. Which is fantastic. Arc are programming at least three pieces of disabled-led work every season. A lot of disability theatre and performance is being programmed there. And so they are a role model who I'm, you know I'm really proud of them. And then in terms of my own work, so I'm the best police force for my own work. As an artist I don't know what it's like for other artists but I um, there's a bit of a wrestling match goes on in the producing of a play, the writing of a play for me. And so there are a number of criteria that I want to see in my own work. And they would be, I'm interested in what a disability aesthetic, if such a thing exists, whether it's one thing, variable things or multiple things and I obviously am very conscious of not perpetuating any of the old myths. And I worry about that because I think it's so ingrained in our culture, even we have to be really careful that we're not falling into the trap of telling the old stories. And so that's why, actually that's why I'm doing my PhD now. I'm not interested in the PhD, I want the testing ground, I want the space to really think about these things and whether we have got an aesthetic. And also if it's actually possible to change the way people think about disability. How possible is that? With a piece of theatre, I'm thinking, you know, obviously that's my... So in that live situation am I only ever gonna perform to the converted. There's hundreds of questions there, but that, that sort of thing nourishes me and keeps me awake at night and makes me keep making work. Anyway I've talked for ages, haven't I?

Okay, d'you need to stop?

A: No, no, no, no, no..haven't talked for very long.

You've talked about the.., what you think about when you make your work. You haven't told me about the work itself very much.

V: Okay. So..

A: Tell me about the individual...

V: So the first piece of theatre I made coming back to my practice when I set up Little Cog was called 'The Art of Not Getting Lost'. And it was in a way that

typical, almost like going back to the beginning, you know the first piece of work an artist makes, looking very much at their own world. It wasn't autobiographical, I've said that before, but it was very much of a mental health perspective. And um. So it was two characters who were called Everyone and No-one and they had holed themselves up in an underground, a disused underground station where they were collecting objects and artefacts from the history of disabled people. And cataloguing them and .. So some of them were very obvious things like um, that would relate to disabled people who were used as Hitler's first experiments for the Final Solution. And that, yeah, it's been used a lot and I think people are a bit cynical about how much it gets used but for me, we're so close to that, we're so close to that eugenic, in fact we're probably closer in our thinking to that now as a nation, not as individual people, in some ways, and certainly some European countries are, you know, they tried to eradicate Down's syndrome in Iceland, was it?

A: Yes.

V: And so it's a story that still needs to be told and explored and explained and correlations made. But what I do is dip in and out of history, so I'm quite interested in reclaiming historical characters. Now I didn't do that in 'The Art of Not Getting Lost', there weren't specific characters that they re-embodied. But it did look at the development of stigma around mental health. And obviously a lot of what Churchill said in the 1920s was hugely influential on legislation here. And so, I did, you know I looked at that and how that's informed our attitudes around mental health and institutionalisation.

But these two characters, Everyone and No-one were. I hope, phenomenally lively vibrant, funny, moving characters. And they constantly, so all of the set was on wheels and they constantly shifted the space and moved and they had a desk and they had filing cabinets full of objects, they had shelving units full of things and they'd constantly reconfigure the space to make new rooms or to tell new stories. I was really pleased with it as a piece of work and it did catch people's imaginations. Because it was my first show back and because I was recovering, I was in a period of recovery, I didn't then do a lot with it. It was in two venues and that was it.

But I felt like Arc then became a partner and became my producer. And I couldn't believe that. First of all I couldn't believe that, they, I approached Annabelle who's the Director at Arc and said will you give me support to make this piece of work. I thought there'd be all sorts of conditions attached to it. I'd have to prove myself. And she said yeah, what can I give you? And I was like me? And that is hugely nourishing for an artist, I think, to be supported in that way. And then the support became much bigger and we developed a mutual relationship where I and what I did was obviously as beneficial to them in lots of ways as they were to me. And I think we did develop a hugely kind of unique relationship

But then in terms of my work the next piece, 'The Art of Not Getting Lost', touched on the butterfly effect, which in the most basic terms and you know this is that one reaction can cause a major reaction, you know, and one person can effect the big exchange or.. So I wanted to look more into the mathematics of the butterfly effect and I, the next play was a one-woman show called Butterfly. And um it looked further into mental health, it reclaimed specific characters from history, so we had Boudicca, the only thing we know about Boudicca, or Boadicea as some people call her was written by Roman men, so we never ever heard anything in her voice. So part of it was giving her a voice. We know she had mental health problems and we know she died of dementia. Not in the moulds that we are, but she was a disabled woman in history who was really really interesting. So I reclaimed her, good bit of fight, and then had a character called Beatrice, who was a modern-day character who was waiting for a mental health assessment. And she basically played out all these other characters. So I had a character called Barbara from Ancient Rome, Mary, who was from the witch hunts. There's another one in there a who I can't, that's gone out of my head at the moment. But it was constantly between Beatrice going between these characters. And then we had Butterfly who was another character, who traced the story basically, made all the connections. And that, by then I was feeling much more confident, did a national tour, Annabelle produced it and it got best one person play from the British Theatre Guide. Which is a tiny thing but it was a big thing to me.

And so all these little seals of approval, you know just, oh and it was invited to be the headline show at MouthPieces at Salisbury International Arts Festival, which Viv Gordon, I don't know if you've come across Viv, she's a mental health artist. She was curating that as part of that festival. So quite a few good things came out of that and er yeah so then I think I felt like I was a playwright, a writer/director is what I usually call myself. So I felt like I was that, I felt like I'd earned that. That title! The work's always still informed by punk, there's always a thumping sound track. Which then you think, well, is it dated?

The other thing I do, another part of my practice which has an equal weighting is that I work with a company of learning-disabled adults two days a week, who are based at Arc, who are now a professional independent theatre company, they weren't when I first met them, they were a day services product, but they wanted freedom. So they got it and Arts Council have supported us with that.

A: What are they called?

V: Full Circle Theatre Company. They've been making work for ten years. We've made five pieces of work together. Big visual non-verbal pieces usually, although we find ways to thread a narrative through it. They sell out when they're on at Arc. And where we are now is we just, they wanted to tour, obviously. With the constraints of day services previously that was a no-no. But now they're free, oh yeah, we're touring. So we built relationships with different venues in the North and we're gonna do that first. And then take over the world after that. That's as interesting to me as making my own work, is working with other people. And then I've directed shows by Pauline Heath, we did 'Occupation' together, which was four professional actors and a cast, a community cast of fifteen, which was quite a big production at Arc. Very political, it's about, it was set on the day of a protest around a self-built monument in the middle of the town. And it was how austerity had affected, primarily disabled people, but there was also, Pauline wanted to give voice to the mother of a disabled child. And that was a fantastic piece of work, because the community, general community got so involved with it. And um, that went down a storm and it was on the main stage. So yeah, it's good to be able to make quite political work but find ways to make it feel really juicy and

community-orientated and like it's a good night out. I think that's another aspect of the work is you want people to feel they've come and experienced something. I think that's something that me and Pauline talk about actually is that we make theatre experience which isn't, it's not immersive theatre, that's a different art form I think, but we want people engaged and involved and that's certainly one of the things I'm interested in is how do we give audiences agency over the stuff we're telling them. It's not enough to just give them the information around disability, we have to somehow find ways to give them agency. That's you know that's a lifelong mission again. Other playwrights have done it, other playwrights have brought about social change.

I'm constantly looking at how other people do that. And it interests me that there are big political causes that are adopted as, I'm gonna say the word fashionable, but what I mean by that is they're important causes but they're saleable, or they're, there's something you can sell about it to people that em. So Belarus Theatre Company, who obviously were based in Belarus but are now exiled and they're here, make enormous productions about just what's going on in Belarus, in their country and it's programmed around the world. And it's exquisite theatre. It's really brilliant physical theatre. I have questions about how impactful it is, but I have total respect for them because I think physical, visceral theatre can be exhausting for an audience if it's relentless and painful and, you know consistently, which I find their work to be. And there's obviously a reason that they're doing that. Sometimes there isn't any space to breathe or ask questions, cause it's coming at you!

And I met them in Canada and I had a chat with them in Toronto where I had been fortunate enough to get a grant to go and do a directors' lab over there. And we met some amazing practitioners. And fortunately the lab I went to the whole thing of it was activism. So we got to see some phenomenal pieces of work. The Belarus Free Theatre were there with the show that they developed after Pussy Riot. And so I'm interested in how that becomes a world sell-out. It's 'cause it's Pussy Riot and its Belarus Free Theatre, it's about a journalist who's on hunger strike. Why is all of that more attractive than what's going on here? Or anywhere else in the world with disabled people. And the oppression and the, the treatment of disabled people, especially the deaths that,

you know, we're experiencing now. Why is the world not outraged at that? And the minute you bring disability, the minute I brought disability into the conversation with Belarus Free Theatre, their suggestion, because I'm asking all these artists around the world about how do you sell that idea? What are the words you use? Artspeak? How do you get around it? How do you, you know how do you sell the work to people to fund it, to programme it. There's an art form in that in itself. And I think lots of other cultural communities have cracked that in a way and I think we haven't yet. That is not all of our fault, largely because of our disabilities perceived, but Belarus Free Theatre's answer, real answer to my question was let us make it for you, let us make the theatre for you. You need us. So that was kind of disappointing really, that, yeah, so I haven't found the secret yet, haven't found the key but I'm very interested in the language that's used to sell.. What is it about disability that people are terrified of talking about, still? But anyway, so that's one of my big, the big questions for me.

A: I wonder if it's a British thing particularly.

V: Yeah.

A: Cause I remember Steve Dwoskin once said to me about when Julie was doing the Disability Film Festival at the NFT, some of Steve's films were being programmed and there was. I've known Steve, he's dead now, I had known Steve for a long time. We'd programed a season of films at the NFT in 1981, 'Carry on Cripple'.

V: Brilliant!

A: it was feature films about disability, but the first season of films, particularly at the NFT, the first season of films about disability you know in this country.

V: Wow!

A: Ever.

V: Gosh.

A: But Steve said I go to disability film things in Germany and elsewhere on the continent and there's two groups of people come to it. Disabled people come to it, but film people come to it as well, because they're interested in film. Here you get disabled people, but you don't get the film people.

V: Yeah. Absolutely.

A: That's the thing.

V: Similar in theatre. And I do think it's, I think we know it's connected to that deficit perception, the model of thinking that is disability is deficient and so therefore, as all groups who are regarded as other, but I think particularly around disability, so that they're not expecting to see anything that relates to them, they're not expecting to see anything that relates to humanity or how people relate to each other. And it's funny, there's a real shift in new writing particularly, which I'm so frustrated by, because it seems to be, we seem to have gone back to human interest stories which are, Channel Five documentaries do them absolutely perfectly, it's tabloid telly, it's tabloid theatre. I feel sad that young artists particularly are being encouraged to make that sort of work, so they're sort of selling tickets to their drama. And not really being supported or knowing what the context, or the possible bigger context is, that they're making their work in. That thing about human interest and, it's like we can't tell very big stories unless we're David Hare at the National Theatre, yeah, and it seems to be that there's a real move back to, I could be wrong about this and it's based on what I get to see, but real move back to those old three act plays, they might be told in a very modern way, but the structure and the form remain. Whereas I think a lot of disability theatre has really challenged that. As have black theatre. Yeah, so that remains a source of frustration.

With 'Another England', which was the play that I toured most recently, it was a two-hander and Andrew McLay was in it, which might be a name you recognise from your past, and Philipa Griffiths, Philipa Cole is her stage name. And she's somebody who's worked with Graeae a lot and she was in Bernada Alba at the

Royal Exchange. Two brilliant, brilliant actors. And I'd decided with that piece, it's very political but it was powerful and beautiful, and I'm saying that in an embarrassed way, I wouldn't talk about my work, but I aimed for those things and audiences seemed to respond really well to it. I really was pushing for the National Theatre to come and see it. And they did. I couldn't believe it. By quirk, somebody had recommended me as a director, a regional director to the National. So they, ironically, had asked to meet me before the show toured. So it's just like serendipity. In fact, they offered me, they'd asked me to consider assistant directing on a show next year. But I can't move to London for five months. But I'd said to them that really wasn't what I was looking for. But that was a major, that felt like a major breakthrough. But anyway, I'd met them at this meeting and we'd had, probably just a half an hour informal friendly meeting and, you know, and I thought maybe that was it. I invited them to the show and they came to the show and it was a completely different person that I met, who was straight over giving me hugs. And what she'd taken from the show was quite genuine and she chatted for ages and that's when I was offered this other thing. And now I've been invited to make a proposal. Which could be a tiny thing. Might come to nothing, it might be an acorn, it might blossom, you never know. Ever hopeful! But the other thing is I'm talking to the Royal Court, and not just about myself as a writer, I think they really need to do something around disabled playwrights and not just another initiative where we get to go and have a course for a year and there's nothing at the end of it, we're always learning, we must be masters at everything because we're always on courses.

Anyway, I'm hoping that we might do something a bit more tangible, but we shall see. We shall see. You'll know this yourself, as an artist you're always a campaigner. And an educator as well.

A: Have we covered the whole of what you're doing at the moment, or is there other stuff going on? Or coming up for that matter.

V: There's other stuff coming up, yes. I'm writing my new play at the moment, called 'Useless Fucker'. Which is its working title. We don't know if any theatres'll take it. But it represents a departure in a way from some of the work

I've been making and I've got much bigger plans for it. Who hasn't? But you know, I'm really, I brought in a dramaturg to support me to look at new ways of writing and this is what I'm talking to the Royal Court about, actually, who knows. Someone will give me some support somewhere along the line, I'm sure.

A: What's it about?

V: So it's not finished yet. Whoops, sorry, technical equipment is everything okay?

A: I think so.

V: Um. Hello, hi, is everything okay, right.

V Yeah, um, so I 'll tell you where the story comes from. Which is personal. And so obviously it's going to have to morph into something else. But anyway. My Dad at fifty-five, overnight went from being a strapping farmer to somebody who'd suffered a catastrophic stroke.

A: Right.

VC: And he changed overnight. He was still the same him in there. But obviously he'd had a , it changed his life. And he was determined to forge on with the life he'd had before. Who wouldn't? He was still the same person. But had lost the use of his left hand side and excuse me, anyway, a few weeks into this recovery, he's trying to soldier on, obviously he couldn't drive and so, but he needed a part for the combine harvester and my partner drove him to somewhere that he could get the part. Where he'd been going to buy parts for forty years. Somebody who recognised him six weeks previously did not now recognise him, didn't see him as the same person or.. And um so my partner was there , my dad was there. And this guy asked my dad a question that he couldn't instantly answer. And obviously his speech was affected and the guy was really frustrated, turned away and said 'useless fucker!'. Which is a description that has probably been applied to lots of us behind our backs.

That's a really painful memory and how dare that fucker say that. There's on that family level but also useless..fucker is such a dismissive way to describe another human being but it totally relates to our status in the national psyche. And so what was a derogatory, very derogatory term, which I want to explore, also the term fucker. Hmmm could be a bit playful, it's gonna fuck about with people, it's gonna become a bit of a fucker, mischief maker. And so that was the survival in reality for me dad, but he didn't give a shit, he drove, he drove with one hand before he got his licence back, he was out in the tractor with a big digger on the front of it, he was out on the combine harvester driving it with one hand. Now some people might say that's denial, who cares, he was doing what he wanted to do. But there were all sorts of things that happened. He was in danger of losing the farm, he was half a million quid in debt, you know there was all sorts of stuff that then, so then I fictionalise all this.

And there's a really interesting story about the North of England. There's an interesting story about what happens when you are one thing one day and something else the next. What happens when you become a useless fucker. And so for me dad in the real version, in our village, when I was growing up, there were four visible disabled people. Three learning disabled people and one man who used an Invacar. You know the little turquoise three-wheelers?

A: I've ridden in one. Illegal passenger.

V: Brilliant! And the three learning disabled people, the reason that they were visible was because they would walk the perimeter of the village and they would hang out at the newsagent's. As a kid growing up, they were never known by their real names. So there was mad Judith, Eggy and Oggogg. They're the name the village gave those people. And I'm sure, we've all got stories like that. From that generation at that time. So my Dad's perception of what disability was, cause he, he was a farmer, he got on with his life, the only visible disabled people were the, they went on a special bus somewhere and did something else or they were called, they were two-dimensional and were given funny names. Or there was Mr Brunton in his Invacar who was obviously very isolated and different in that way. So he had no idea what to make of, so that for me there's loads of questions there about the fact that they became two-dimensional

people, the isolation, the othering, going to special places in special buses and special transport and then the fact that this could be any one of us, I mean it is us, but the general population at any time and we know the figures, at least seventy percent of people will become disabled in their lifetimes. So why are we terrified to discuss it. And so this piece is looking at that and what happens to somebody, not the tragedy of it, cause my dad never saw it as a tragedy, my mum did .

A: Yeah.

V: But my dad didn't. He preserved his sense of self. He mucked about, he got pissed, he told fart jokes, he, you know he was still his same self. And, yeah, so I won't, but it's his story, or the story of a person that that happens to. Sorry, I've gone on a bit really.

A: No, no, it's interesting.

V: I haven't got to the art of log lines or synopses, I'm not very good at that. I've been told you don't have to be as the writer, you just have to have the ideas and write them.

A: Is there more about the play you wanna tell me?

V: I don't...

A: Cause I can edit it, I can always cut down.

V: Anything more to say about it. There is an unravelling in the play that it's not the story of the family, and it won't become that trope where oh my goodness there's been a disaster, this is how the family fall apart. But there is an unravelling of the roles and identity in the same way that Frank, fictional name, had to address his new identity and who his new friends become and who his confidant. It is set in a rural setting and it turns out that mad Judith's dad is the eggman who'd been delivering eggs to the farm all these years. So he's never acknowledged that mad Judith is his daughter, it's never discussed. And so he actually becomes a person. And Frank discovers that he and mad Judith have a

shared interest in Elvis impersonation. And, it's about you know common threads and removing the two dimensions that we see, it's about taking ownership of the so-called recovery, you know, that's what it is described as in occupational health, there's no occupational therapy terms but that is, it's not that that I'm interested in, it's how, how Frank adapted, his sense of self. And it wasn't a tragedy. He did have to adjust. But not the way that Hollywood films, you know that he would ultimately have to take his own life or something because his life wasn't worth living. It's still there, his wife in the piece wonders if his life is worth living, she finds it really hard to deal with, she didn't buy into this, she bought into the farm, the supposed, she says something like, yeah she thought he had money but she spend thirty years looking for it. (He didn't have any? *DROWNED BY ALLAN'S LAUGHS.*) So there is the family stuff but it is, there is quite a brutal edge to the story, it is set in the North-East of England, so it's a North-Eastern voice, I have to be true to that voice, which I haven't always used. Used a disabled voice, a disabled woman's voice, um but this is a North-East voice particularly. And there is some, I'm interested in the notion of violence around disability and I don't just mean that in a sensible fight, you know, it's about the cruelty and the brutality that we see every day now, unfortunately. Whether it's a casual insult on the street which cuts so deep to family relationships that aren't, are far from perfect, to actual physical violence as well, that, there's an element of that, because that's such a part of the language of some people in the North East around difference, and so there is quite an exploration of what that violence, with a very small 'v' initially, means around disability which is very much of our times I think, pertinent.

It's a comedy. My dramaturg, I worked with Jonathan Meth, who actually's got a lot of connections with disabled playwrights over the years. He's done work with Kaite O'Reilly, with several I think of the Right to Play, Graeae's Right to Play, and he looks at alternative dramaturgies in the same way that Kaite O'Reilly does, he's not a disabled person himself, but he has a disabled dad, had a disabled dad and a disabled son. And so quite a lot of my work is inevitably quite dark. I find humour at times and I think an audience needs moments of levity and you know, can't be an onslaught. He said I had to write this as a comedy somehow. And I know what he meant by that in the sense that it's not a laugh out loud uproarious farce or anything but it's a different way to talk about, yeah it's a

different vehicle for the messages, I suppose, yeah.

How you doing?

A: Okay.

V: Flaggin' a little bit.

A: Have we covered everything?

V: I think we might have.

A Let's stop there.

V: When I toured 'Another England', we had a Q and A after every performance. And at least eighty per cent of the audience would stay. And we'd have a really informal chat. It wasn't, we weren't sitting on a panel on a stage, we'd all go into the bar or somewhere. And one of the ones in London lasted longer than the show. It was such a hunger for people, and it wasn't exclusively disabled people who'd come to see it. But for disabled people particularly to see their own stories or the experiences they were having, or an artistic take on it, and they just wanted to, loved being together. And talking, you know talking and different perspectives. And we experienced that everywhere we went. But I just remember that London one was about, it was about an hour and a quarter, Stratford Circus were ready to kick us out, I think. There's a hunger, there's a need.

ENDS