

‘Not Getting Lost’

Transcription poems
by
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From the words of Vici Wreford-Sinnott

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First Memory

I grew up on a farm, a tiny farm,
just outside a coal-mining village
in the North-East of England.

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.

We were surrounded by horses,
horses weren't expensive things back in those days,
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.

It was very much a family moment,
kind of establishing that farming roots,
I feel very connected.

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 farmers grow things from the earth.

Roots

I feel really rooted in that North-East perspective.
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.

I had in lots of ways a wonderful exposure
to nature and the land.
We weren't a particularly wealthy family.
It was a tiny little farm and it subsidised the family.
My grandfather 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.
We all thought it was pretty miserable really
but they've 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.

I did okay at school

and quite liked school in lots of ways.
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 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 rock.

Life felt drab.
And then punk hit and gosh.
The costumes. The fashion.
The uniform of punk in a tiny pit village.
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 goth sort of look.

Me and my best friend,
who is my best friend to this day,
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.

The Sound of Silence

My grandfather, who had bought the farm,
developed quite serious mental health problems himself.
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 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.
The eating disorder was a secret thing.
It started quite gently as they usually do,
and then it progressed throughout my teens
and then throughout my life.

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.

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.

London

I thought the streets were paved with punk gold,
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.

I hadn't needed to be hospitalised
or had to have any interventions.

Metamorphosis

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
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.

And not long after that I
saw a piece of work by Adele Salem,
'Seven Seas',
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.

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.

I could see that it was going to be possible

to tell stories in that way for me.
And the other thing was,
I think parallel to my mental health,
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.

I realised that I felt
we had to tell stories this way.

The Shakespeare, the Dickens,
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 a 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.

Quite quickly I knew I wanted an opportunity
to make political work.
And I was thinking along feminist lines.

Between fifteen and punk
and seventeen and eighteen
and moving to London
I'd become really quite politicised.

A Levels

I would have been nineteen, twenty,
had a bit of a heady time in London.
I'd worked with kids to earn a living.
I'd 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 facilitator.

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,
make them live and breathe?
That's a life-long passion for me.

Because I think it's how we
as a disability community

can signify our identities.

So then I did really well in my A Level.

Unravelling

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.

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.

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.

I would describe myself as a system avoider.
Some people call themselves system survivors
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.

Residency

I 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.

I graduated in '92. And
the environment of Kent at that time
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 view,
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. .

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.

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 there, I mean
it was a revelation, but it was wonderful.
We were welcomed with open arms.

That residency
was my first introduction to disability arts.
I'd never heard of it at university,
disability theatre had never come up.

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 National Disability Arts Forum stuff,
but obviously I wasn't identifying
as a disabled person.

Moving On.

I began to work with Moving On,
a group of learning disabled women
who wanted to explore women's voices, which in '92
that was quite early days in learning disability,
looking at gender.

They were really quickly programmed,
cause they were amazing, these women,
very vocal, visual, funny.
And they were based
in both Hartlepool and Peterlee.

My first encounter with disability arts
was with a woman called Sue Vass.
She was on the cabaret scene.
She did a character called Mavis Dishcloth.
She was with National Disability Arts Forum.

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,
a stalwart of disability arts in the North-East,
part of Shoot Your Mouth Off film company to this day.

She 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.

‘Deadly Devotchka’

‘Deadly Devotchka’
was the show that I took to Edinburgh,
which looked at femmes fatales
and Film Noir and stereotypes of women.

I had sixteen mm film in that,
(this was pre-digital age),
that was actually quite thrilling.

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 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 happening.

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.

Very Special Arts

So then a job came up in Ireland.
I always describe this with great embarrassment,
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.

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 Rosaleen McDonagh, Donal Tolan,
Padraig Naughton, Steve Daunt,
Peter Kearns and Yvonne Lynch.

Donal was a figurehead
for the disability rights movement in Ireland,
himself, Martin Naughton, Hubert McCormack
and fortunately he was a brilliant actor.
He actually came and worked with Graeae.
He did 'Bent' with them.

Very early on I was connected
with phenomenal disabled artists.
And actually working with them,

I began to realise
that mental health was part of disability.
By this point in Ireland

I was engaging with the system.
I needed more help than I had before
and so I was getting treatment,
counselling, medication. And so
I was processing that in a way
alongside this amazing experience we all had.

I was appointed in '99
and I was in Dublin till 2003.
And initially there was no framework,
there was nothing,
there was Very Special Arts,
which had been set up
by Jean Kennedy-Smith, JFK's sister.

Jean Kennedy-Smith set up Very Special Arts.
She'd been the American ambassador in Ireland,
so this was her baby,
she'd set it up when she was there,
but it had a 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
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 was highly regarded and highly respected.

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 had been created
especially for this show.

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 characters.

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 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 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 Art and Disability Ireland.
And that is the name.
They wanted the name of the country in it
and they wanted it to have
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.
It's a less political organisation.
I admire it 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-led,
disabled-led organisation.
And then I mentored and directed
two of the first pieces of disability theatre
In the Republic of Ireland

‘The Baby Doll Project’

Rosaleen McDonagh wrote
‘The Baby Doll Project’.
She’s a traveller woman
who’s also disabled.

She wrote about the institutionalisation
of traveller women
and of disabled traveller women.
It was quite explosive,
because in the traveller community
women do not perform,
do not go on stage.
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.

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 were having to scrabble around the edges.
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 then lots of things
started to build for those artists
and people were commissioning them.

Rosaleen's gone on,
she's worked with the Abbey Theatre,
which is their National Theatre,
and with Fishamble Theatre Company.

She's had commissions
and work in development here
at the Royal Court
and at the National ,
nothing that's made the stage yet,
but nevertheless her career has grown.

Donal before he died
made many more appearances
in artistic contexts.

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 came home eventually,
because my little boy was going to start school.
So we came back home.
Back to the North-East of England.

When I was first appointed.

When I was first appointed at Art Disability Ireland,
some people were very disappointed that I was English.
Some people were very disappointed that I was a woman
and didn't hold back.

Some people were very disappointed
that I wasn't an identifying disabled person,
which I absolutely get now.

So it wasn't all plain sailing, there was resistance.
I genuinely had to forge relationships with people.
Peter Kearns and Yvonne Lynch
became really solid.

But at first they were the two people
that had the biggest question marks
and really distanced themselves.

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.
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.
It was unquestionable that they knew.
Whether they thought that mental health
was a category under disability or not, I don't know,
but it was a really awful, difficult conversation.

I was saying I think, that
I more and more identify as a disabled person
because of the barriers that I was experiencing.

(The boards that I'd worked for initially
were predominantly non-disabled people

from a very paternalistic perspective.)
They said: you know you don't have to do this?
You don't have to identify as a disabled person.
It was very odd,
it felt like a coming-out conversation
that I was moving from one place to another
and then I didn't feel supported.
But I get that, I understand why,
why that might have been.

I think there's a thing
with people who've been disabled from birth
and have been institutionalised
and who have 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.

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.

I didn't stride out saying I'm non-disabled
but clearly I was in that position in a disability organisation
that should have been disabled-led,
and then while I'm there
I come out as disabled.

It wasn't a good experience with the board,
there were some difficulties,
maybe that's what I'll say about it.

Arcadea

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,
you know, local conversation about that.

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.

And then the goal posts shifted, I think,
internally and policy-wise.
But the North-East wasn't as supportive
as the national picture.

Keep on Knockin'

I arrived full of positivity
and determination and fight.
The North-East of England actually had
a lot more disabled artists
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 took a long time
to get a way into Northern Stage, for example,
which is the regional theatre,
where you'd expect theatre work to be shared.
So we had a long-term campaign
with, 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 marvellous halls?'
They actually called us extremists,
because we wanted to challenge
the language that they were using
around disability. And, I wish I'd kept that email but
there was an angry, a terse email
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.

The right to fail

Why is there an expectation
that the work of disabled people
has got to be a hundred percent perfect?
It's got to hit many more targets
in terms of quality than anyone else.

A lot of 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.

I'd arrived with lots of fight,
my first article for NORDAF News
was 'Tearing Down the Temples',
looking at these institutions
who just were archaic in their attitudes.
Not just to disabled people,
but just preserving that ugly status quo.

Arcadea Ambassadors

And then we had an ambassadors scheme,
where we brought people
like Jo Verrent, Susie Balderston,
Julie McNamara was one of our ambassadors,
Caroline Bowditch was another ambassador,
actually she became our 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 at the time
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.

We had an excellent
two-year development programme
which was funded by Esmée 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 got to.

Wear and Tear

I was with Arcadea for just over six years.
We had the Mimosa Festival
a month-long festival across the North-East,
which felt like a massive achievement.
We brought artists
from all over the country to showcase,
as obviously LDAF's festivals in London had 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.

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 extra administrative things
for RFOs to do. And we were tiny,
so I was CEO but I was also delivering,
I was Artistic Director of the festival
and we had two staff, two full-time posts
that were kind of shared out a little bit.
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 magazines,
which were quarterly and then became monthly,
and they would contribute to those,
get information from those,
and 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.

Disinvested

By the sixth year
I was never gonna work in the arts again.
I'd had it. | went and baked cakes for a year.
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.
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 she oversaw it, she fought
for those artists, you know
that massive community of people.

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.

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 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.

You know we can turn it around
and ask them to look at content,
characters, stereotypes and tropes.
And it's useful to connect that
to the social model, the way
we historically view disability.
I still think that that's

invaluable to us at this time.

‘Cultural Shift’

I did a three-year project in ARC, in Stockton,
called ‘Cultural Shift’,
which is something I’m immensely proud of.

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 telling people
how to install a lift or a ramp or whatever,
it’s much bigger than that,
and it’s to change the misinformation
that’s gone on for two thousand years about disability,
how to try and get inside their hearts and heads
and really shift thinking and beliefs.

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 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 there to further somebody else's story
or to be the butt of jokes or whatever.

It was really interesting working that through
with the programming team at ARC,
literally you could see pennies dropping.
They believe, they want to see
really good-quality, interesting work
that's challenging the world today.
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
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.

Criteria

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 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.

I'm interested in 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,
we even 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?

So in that live situation
am I only ever gonna perform to the converted?
There's hundreds of questions there,
but that sort of thing nourishes me
and keeps me awake at night
and makes me keep making work.

'The Art of Not Getting Lost'

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,
but it was very much of a mental health perspective.

It was two characters
who were called Everyone and No-one
and they had holed themselves up
in a disused underground station
where they were collecting
objects and artefacts
from the history of disabled people.
And cataloguing them.

So some of them were very obvious things
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,

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 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.
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.
I approached Annabel
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?'

That is hugely nourishing for an artist,
to be supported in that way.
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.

'The Art of Not Getting Lost'
touched on the butterfly effect,
which in the most basic terms of chaos theory
is that one action can cause a major reaction,
and one person can effect the biggest change.

So I wanted to look more into
the mathematics of the butterfly effect
and the next play was a one-woman show
called 'Butterfly'.

'Butterfly'

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.

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.

By then I was feeling much more confident,
did a national tour, Annabel produced it
and it got best one person play

from the British Theatre Guide.

Full Circle Theatre Company

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.
When I first met them,
they were a day services project,
but they wanted freedom. So they got it
and Arts Council have supported us with that.

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.

'Occupation'

And then I've directed shows by Pauline Heath.
'Occupation' was four professional actors
and a community cast of fifteen,
which was quite a big production at ARC.

It was set on the day of a protest
around a self-built monument
in the middle of the town.
And it was about how austerity had affected
primarily disabled people,
but also, Pauline wanted to give voice
to the mother of a disabled child.

And that was a fantastic piece of work,
because the general community
got so involved with it.
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.

That's something that me and Pauline talk about.
We want people engaged and involved

and that's certainly one of the things I'm interested in:
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 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.

What is it about disability?

What is it about disability
that people are terrified of talking about, still?
That's one of the big questions for me.

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 disability is deficient,
as all groups who are regarded as other,
but I think particularly around disability,
and audiences are 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 we seem to have gone back
to human interest.
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 trauma.
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,
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 old structure and the form remain.

Whereas I think a lot of disability theatre
has really challenged that.
As has black theatre.
So that remains a source of frustration.

In or Out?

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.

It's funny the stage
we're at with the movement,
disability rights and disability arts
and the generational change.

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.

‘Another England’

‘Another England’ was the play
that I toured most recently.

It was a two-hander
and Andrew McLay was in it, and Phillipa Griffiths.
(Phillipa Cole is her stage name.)
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.

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 asked me to consider
assistant directing on a show next year.
But I can’t move to London for five months.

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.

I'd met them at this meeting
and we'd had probably just a half an hour
informal friendly meeting
and I thought maybe that was it.
I invited them to the show
and they came to the show.
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.

As an artist
you're always a campaigner.
And an educator as well.

'Useless Fucker'

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.

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.

I brought in a dramaturg
to support me to look at new ways of writing.

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.

My Dad at fifty-five, overnight
went from being a strapping farmer
to somebody who'd suffered a catastrophic stroke.
He changed overnight.

He was still the same him in there.
But obviously 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.
But his life wasn't about loss.

A few weeks into this recovery,
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.
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.

'Useless fucker'
is such a dismissive way
to describe another human being.
It totally relates to our status
in the national psyche.

And so what was a very derogatory term,
which I want to explore,
also the term fucker. Hmmm
could be a bit playful,
it's about fucking with people,
it's about becoming a bit of a fucker,
mischief maker.

And so that was the survival in reality
for my dad, but he didn't give a shit,
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.
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?

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. 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.

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,
has to address his new identity
and who his new friends become

and who is his confidant.

And, it's about 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 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.

Edge

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.
I have used a disabled voice,
a disabled woman's voice,
but this is a North-East voice particularly.

I'm interested in the notion of
violence around disability
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 are far from perfect,
to actual physical violence
there's an element of that,
because it's such a part of the language
of some people in the North East around difference.
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.

A Different Vehicle

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, it can't be an onslaught.

My dramaturg,
(I worked with Jonathan Meth,
who actually's got a lot of connections
with disabled playwrights over the years)
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,
it's a different vehicle for the messages.
I'm always seeking different vehicles for our message.

Q and A

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.
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.
There's a hunger, there's a need.