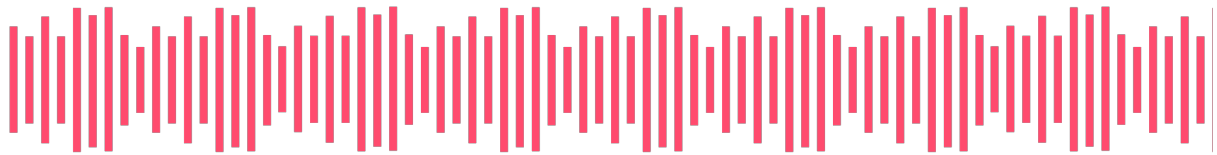


TALKING MOVES



A PODCAST ABOUT DANCE

Making Accessible Work **S05 / E04**

Episode Description:

In this episode, we talk to **Rosie Heafford** and **Neus Gil Cortés** about making accessible work.

Today, there probably isn't a company or organisation that would say they didn't want to make accessible work, and yet there are still people excluded from it: be they performers, collaborators or audiences. We talk to two artists about their approaches to making work accessible and get some tips about how we as a sector might do this better.

We begin by asking our guests to talk a bit more about the work that they do before jumping right in to discuss the almost 'buzzword' accessibility. What does the word accessible really mean within our art form?

We acknowledge that it is really difficult, if not impossible to create work that's accessible for everybody and hear about two very different approaches and pieces of work that Rosie and Neus have made as artistic directors and choreographers.

We move on to discuss the audience experience – how do you remove barriers and make the work exciting for all? We talk about different approaches of making with audience members being part of the process from the start, and how creating different versions of the same work gives audiences choices in what, and how they would like to experience it.

Naturally, the conversation reflects on the pandemic and how practices for creating had to change in the studio. We discuss how this allowed for a more collaborative process and even opened new doors to creating work for the digital stage.

We speak about the importance of describing what the experience is going to be like for audiences, listening to what people need and the importance of taking the onus to make needs clear away from disabled people.

And finally, we talk about what it means to be a disabled leader, what it means to the work and how it affects fellow collaborators and audiences.

Talking Moves is a Greenwich Dance production

Presented by Melanie Precious

Production by Carmel Smith, Kajsa Sundström, Lucy White and Melanie Precious

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Intro:

Melanie:

Hello, and welcome to Talking Moves a podcast from Greenwich Dance where dance artists come together to talk about their work and practice, the things that matter and the issues which move them. I'm Melanie Precious and in this episode, I'm talking with two artists about making accessible work. I don't know that there's a company or organisation that would say that they didn't want to make accessible work. And yet, there are still people excluded from it, be they performers, collaborators, or audiences. We talk to two artists about their approaches to making work accessible and get some tips about how we as a sector might do this better. We have with us, Rosie Heafford, artistic director of Second Hand Dance and Neus Gil Cortés, choreographer and dramaturg.

Neus:

Hello.

Melanie:

Welcome both of you. And actually, why don't we say this? We're calling from lots of different parts of the world here, which I always find so exciting. We've got Argentina on the call, and where are you calling in from Rosie?

Rosie:

Just outside London in Epsom.

Melanie:

Lovely. So before we jump in, I wondered first, if you'd give us an introduction to you and your work. Just tell us a little bit about the kind of work you make. And perhaps why. Rosie, would you kick us off?

Rosie:

Yeah, of course. So I'm the artistic director of Second Hand Dance. We're a company that's been running since about 2013. And I work with executive producer, Claire Summerfield, and we create touring shows, and now digital dance experiences as well for children and adults.

Melanie:

Thank you. Thank you, and Neus how about you?

Neus:

I am the artistic director of Nua Dance a company I created in 2015. And our most recent work has been very focused about engaging D/Deaf audiences. And it's called NOISE. And it's now an interactive film on the BBC, and also an immersive performance.

Melanie:

Lovely, we're gonna dig into that a little bit later. Well, actually, throughout, there's loads of things I want to ask you about that. But today's episode is about making accessible work. And as ever I always sense that there's an importance of vocabulary and language in the conversation. So before we really dig down deep, shall we just have a quick chat about what the word accessible means? It's so all encompassing, isn't it? And I suppose more importantly, what does it mean to you, as you make your work as you use it within the context of your work? Rosie, you say on your website, that Second Hand Dance create beautiful sensory dance experiences that are accessible and welcoming to all bodies. Just unpick that for us. Tell us a little bit more about what you're meaning there.

Rosie:

Yeah, so I'm a disabled artist, I guess. Well no I am. I'll say that again. I'm a disabled artist and Second Hand Dancer is disabled led, by me. And that's an identity that I started using in about 2017. And I mention it because it did change how I work, but also the aesthetics that we use, and the way that we make work and who we're making work for. So I think the word sensory is perhaps interesting

there. I think, in the world of children's theatre and dance sensory is often equated with accessible, which I would dispute. I think there's quite a few audiences that are often excluded from sensory work. But I guess our aim in both making the work is to make the process accessible for me to participate in as much as possible and sort of constraints within the system, as well as finding ways to adapt and make the work that we produce accessible. And I think most disabled artists and companies would say that you can't make a work accessible to everyone, but you can try to make it accessible to more people.

Melanie:

And can I track you back there a minute, you said something really interesting about sensory and that excluding people? Could you tell us more about what you meant there.

Rosie:

In children and young people's theatre and dance, often people use the word sensory to think about audiences with disabilities. And I'm trying to reclaim the audience's with disabilities language as opposed to special needs or special educational needs, which I think is still really prevalent with younger audiences. And sensory work often means that artists will have considered not just the visual. I think dance is such a visual language, that that's often our first point. But how else can you build in the other senses, so sight, smell, sound? Which does make it more accessible to some people, but not to everyone. And I think there's really been a lack of interest maybe in making work that specifically accessible for visually impaired or d/Deaf child audiences, and the parents or adults that will accompany them.

Melanie:

Thank you. Thank you for explaining that. And Neus, that's interesting. I think as we jump over to you and think about NOISE, what does accessible mean to you in the approach that you're taking to making your work?

Neus:

Yeah, again, accessibility is huge, right? Like as a topic. I come from a very mainstream dance world, as it were. I was a dancer in mainstream companies for a long time, but I felt there was a lack of representation of different bodies and different life experiences. And I think that's what drew me to increase that diversity pool in the dancers that I work with, and that naturally led to then have a focus that really involves more types of audiences. I completely agree with Rosie that it's really difficult, perhaps impossible, I don't know, maybe to create art that's accessible for everybody. In our case, specifically, I was thinking, Oh, we're focusing so much on D/Deaf audiences. But we don't have anything for visually impaired people. But at the same time, the size of my company, and the model of funding that we have with like small grants from the Arts Council didn't allow us at this time, hopefully, in the future, but at this time, it didn't allow us to create the necessary work that would be

needed for making it accessible for visually impaired people. So yeah, I think, for us, accessibility definitely means including more people, including more people in the making as a collaborator, as a dancer, and also thinking about how can you make the experience really rich? Something that was important for me was not just removing barriers, but also how to make it exciting. It's not about you know, if you have a bit of text and have a BSL interpreter, that's not enough. I don't think that's necessarily any different from a big percentage of people are doing but that doesn't necessarily engage a D/Deaf audience. So we just took a lot of time really trying to figure out what would make it exciting.

Melanie:

So as I prepared for this conversation, I wondered if there might be two angles to approach this question of accessibility. One is the making of the work. And the other is the experience of it as audiences. And then I found myself thinking that actually, in many ways, they are two aspects of the same coin, because the making and the experience often come together largely for a work to be effective, they need to be thought about in tandem. And this was brought home in a very recent podcast conversation where one of our artists was talking about the framework and how they were thinking about the whole experience wanting to have the audience in a circle, for example, as the action was taking place in the middle. So you're constantly thinking about the action in the middle, and also the experience that the audience are having as well. And so I realised that actually, it's not the right way to think about it as these two separate things. And I felt as I looked more closely at NOISE that that was particularly true for you Neus, because your website said that accessibility is at the heart of NOISE. And the experience has been designed from the ground up to cater for a variety of audience needs. And I noticed that at the start of the experience, viewers were even asked to select what view they might want to have of that film, whether there were a different number of accessibility options that they could select. And I wondered if you could tell us a little bit more about how you approached that crafting of not just the work, but the experience you might have of being an audience for that work?

Neus:

Yeah, absolutely. I think like I was saying before, it's not just about removing barriers, but it's about the possibility of people making it their own experience and allowing for their own taste, their own needs to come into play into the experience, which means they cannot be just a passive receiver. So in terms of the film, we had three pathways, one was with the introduction and all the choices, they were given by BSL actress with captions at the bottom, the other pathway was a description of the sound. So it was a very, very well written, crafted, almost poetic way of looking at sound and how through synaesthesia, you can kind of understand a sound through a means of other senses, perhaps, and then the third one didn't have any specific accessibility options. And then for the live performance, again, it's an immersive piece the audience chooses where they are watching from, how close or how far they want to be from the dancers who they follow. And likewise, if they want to step out from it, you know, it's absolutely relaxed, like they don't need to feel like they have to be bombarded. If it does too much from them, they can just go a little bit further, or if they really are

enjoying the groove and the vibrations of the sound, they could be right next to the speaker. So in that sense, that to me, that also made it a bit more accessible.

Melanie:

So those extra flexibilities. Rosie, can you tell us a little bit about how that plays out for you in the making of your work?

Rosie:

Yeah, I'd actually say that I think they probably are quite different. If I was working with disabled performers or how I think about access for myself and how I think about access for the audience. And I think the difference is about the individuality. I can be really highly individualised about the access needs that I need and any performers that I work with, but I can't for an audience, I do have to make generalisations

Melanie:

Yeah, that's a good point.

Rosie:

You're not going to meet everyone's access needs spot on. But you can try and I think like Neus was saying is having that creativity to make any sort of access method as integral to the performance and a creative aspect of it, I think is really important.

Neus:

Absolutely.

Melanie:

And you've done that in particular with one of your pieces where you've had children help create the audio transcriptions. Do you want to tell us a bit more about that, because I love the way you've taken an accessibility tool and then turned that into part of your performance aesthetic is about.

Rosie:

Yeah, so with any show or digital work that we're making, we work with children, you know, they are part of our audience. And it's really important to include them in the process. And we've done that in lots of different ways. And so I've taken that approach into integrating access tools as well, and similar to NOISE, often developing different options for you to choose. So with our Getting Dressed films that we made and released quite recently, there's actually four versions of the films, which in

some ways is a little overwhelming as a producer of the work, but it means that you can choose whether you want to listen to audio description alongside or you would like to view the films with a plain background rather than an animated background. So you can slightly tailor it to what your needs are. But yeah, with the audio description for that project, it started off as a sort of r&d project that was unrelated to these films where I'd become interested in the fact that there really wasn't audio description that was tailored for children, there wasn't research into what we'll do description should be for children. There are some big family shows that are audio described, and there are some audio describers out there working with that, but not in consultation with children. And so we gathered together a group of six or seven children and an audio describer and a visually impaired writer and a visually impaired dancer to start looking at what that language would be, what did the children who were all sighted need to understand about who their audience was going to be. How could they write about dance? And sort of lots of things included in their learning, that meant that they could develop audio description for our films.

Melanie:

And what was different about that? What do you think is markedly different about what those children created with you as to what you might have done if you just transcribed it or audio described it yourselves? What did the children bring that surprised you, maybe?

Rosie:

That's a good question. I think that you're able to see the films through their eyes. I think what's nice about the audio description for an adult audience, as well as the child audience is that you're seeing it through the lens of nine to 11 year olds. So it's not me pulling out what I think is important from the films, it's them pulling out what they think is important. And it was a hard job for them. I mean, they're five short films, but they pack quite a lot of choreography into that because it's screen dance. And I think you always shorten things as opposed to the live experience. So they had a really hard job, like deciding what to pull out and what they wanted to describe as part of the films. But yeah, they did do an amazing job of it. And you hear it through their voice as well. You know, it's not an adult actor's voice, it's their voices that do the description.

Melanie:

I love it.

Neus:

I love the idea, actually, Rosie. And I think it's also related to this thing that we were talking about for, like we will talk about, about including the users in the conversation, right? So if the children have a different way of looking at it, so if it's done for children, then by all means they are the best ones to kind of know what's important, right? And what stands out to them.

Rosie:

Yeah. And I think it's the next step for us is the group of children who worked with what will sighted and so the next part of the research for me is to work with visually impaired and sighted children together so that the visually impaired children have a say in what's being said, but also how they're hearing it. What's useful for them, you know, what is it that they want to hear? Do they want to hear that there are 13 yellow socks? Or is yellow socks enough?

Melanie:

Yes. What do they need to know to enrich the experience for them? So I suppose I should have asked this right at the beginning, in a way. But as we sort of delve into this, I'm interested in flipping the question and thinking about who is often excluded from the mainstream work if we want to use that phrase. For whom is work often not accessible? And think of me as someone completely ignorant as if it's if you're just trying to tell somebody who just really does not understand. Who are we trying to make this work for who we feel has not been able to access work? Ordinarily, who's been excluded from this. Rosie, would you tell us more from your perspective there may be?

Rosie:

Yeah, so I think like I was talking about sensory work earlier, I think the work that I have made for children and adult audiences previously has always been quite gentle and soft. There's not usually flashing lights, we've made what you call relaxed versions. So versions that might be suitable for anyone who is neurodivergent, or needs softer sounds or a more relaxed atmosphere. And that's sort of always been an integral to the work that I make. So I think my work prior to that was excluding visually impaired audiences children and adults and d/Deaf audiences. Some of my work had text in not huge amounts, and we did have BSL interpreters at some sort of festivals or venues but that's not fully including a d/Deaf audience that's giving them a bit of an add on but rather than acknowledging how they might experience the whole work as a whole.

Melanie:

Right, right. And how about you Neus? What was it that led you into the making of NOISE? Can you tell us about the journey of embarking on that project?

Neus:

So, perhaps interestingly, I started more about the curiosity of diversifying, like I said, before diversifying the life experiences that we see on stage. That was, for me the starting point of this thought process, and I had studied BSL. And I was in contact with some people from the d/Deaf community. And I was like, How strange that they are these amazing d/Deaf dancers, and we don't see them in so many performances. So that was my starting point. So I really wanted to use a d/Deaf dancer. And when I met Chris Fonseca, I was like, wow, he's absolutely the right person for it.

Because in his dancing, he comes from hip hop. So he has all these nice textures and dynamics and qualities that I love for my work. So that was the starting point, when we did the first r&d. And then through talking with Chris, then he was like, Well, you know, there are so many things that you can do to make it more attractive for D/Deaf audiences. And one of them is sound, reactive visuals. And I was like, wow, that's such a great idea. It hadn't even crossed my mind before. Because dance is such a visual art form, you think naively, you think, Oh, you can watch it without sound. And it's still interesting. But of course, you are missing information, you are missing part of the experience. So how can you include other means to enrich that experience. So we use technology, and we use the sound description, which by the way, connecting to what Rosie was saying before, was written by a D/Deaf writer who specialises in creating descriptions of music, because she's a musician herself. So yeah, it started almost from the representation on stage. And then it went into actually, let's be a bit more mindful about the audiences and how to engage them.

Melanie:

That's lovely. And Rosie clearly batted back and forwards here. But I'm really interested in your approach of co creation within this context, but also, just within the current landscape. We've had a number of conversations with artists about co-creating with their communities with their audiences. Of course, it's absolutely up front in Let's Create so if anyone else is going through that process right now, there'll be talking about this a lot. And it feels like it's really integral actually, in your approach to making accessible work cos you're drawing those users, as you said Neus earlier, right into the process of making. Now you've given us one example of how you've done that with children and that audio transcription. But I wondered if there was anything more you can tell us about your process of doing that? How are you recruiting? How are you finding those people to come in and be part of your making process?

Rosie:

Yeah, we have done it in lots of different ways. And I've had to really experiment across the last two years, particularly because,

Melanie:

Digitally!

Rosie:

prior to that, yeah, we went into schools, we went

Melanie:

Yeah.

Rosie:

into nurseries, that was our route in. And obviously, that's not been able to happen. So when lockdown happened, I'd just come back from maternity leave. So I was sort of in a bit of a process of not really knowing what I was supposed to do, whilst everyone else didn't really know what was happening as well. But it started a train of thought around what screen dance could be what was a digital dance experience for children and young people? So we did some research around, are there any examples? And there wasn't, we didn't find any screen dance that was specifically made with young audiences in mind. So that seed started us to start to think about how we could adapt some of our shows into digital experiences. And at that point, I went into a park with my camera phone and a dancer and a thought, but I don't have those co-creators, who are the children that I can draw on? Because I can make a screen dance. But is that what they want to watch? Is it going to be in the format that they would like? What information do they need to know to engage with this work? So we created an expert panel of children and families that were across the UK. So we had 16 families that were in a Facebook group and became our child experts who fed back to us in a variety of ways. And that was through questionnaires, or we had watch parties, or sometimes I got them to film themselves watching because if I'm making a live work, a lot of it is about their feedback on the work, it is and talking to them. But it's also about watching their bodies. You know, what are the points where I see them disengage physically, where are they reaching forward? Where are they turning to their friend and chatting about the work or about something else. So being able to see how their reaction was to a digital work was really important to me. So that was one way that we started to engage with children through the creation of digital works. But then in terms of access tools, as well, again, going back to the Getting Dressed films, we worked with Frank Barnes School for D/Deaf Children which is in Kings Cross because the films were filmed in a green screen studio. So we had this amazing opportunity to put anything we wanted in the background and through having discussions with some d/Deaf artists and some d/Deaf families. I started to think about the way that we could make these films more accessible to d/Deaf audiences and that sort of sound reactive visuals, which we're calling animations is one of the routes that we went down along with BSL introductions or sort of descriptions of the music alongside it. So the children of Frank Barnes school, we did workshops with, and we tested out different animation styles and would ask them questions around what did the animation give you? You know, is it overwhelming? Because you're watching dance at the same time as animation? And does it feel about right? So we use them as a guide to support the developing of that access film.

Melanie:

And how long does that process usually take for you, Rosie, when you're working with those young people? It doesn't sound to me like that's just a one off workshop. It sounds to me like you're working with them over a period of time are you?

Rosie:

It really depends. So with the audio description, we worked with that group for four weeks initially as just part of r&d. And then to make the audio description, I think they had seven sessions in total. So that was quite a long process. With creating the animations, working with Frank Barnes School, that was a one off workshop, because we were also working with two d/Deaf consultants, Deepa Shastri and Ruth Montgomery, who were supporting the development of the animations as well. And we worked with Frank Barnes as sort of a testing point.

Melanie:

Okay.

Neus:

Ruth Montgomery is the writer of the description of our sound as well.

Rosie:

Brilliant.

Neus:

Yeah.

Melanie:

I also wondered for a moment, then if you have something else in common. Have you both got little ones about the same time, because it sounded to me like you both may be coming off maternity leave around about the same time. All these things that connect us in the ether. So Neus, I wanted to ask you about your process in the rehearsal room with your dancers. What changed for you, as a hearing choreographer, working with the dancers that you were working with there on NOISE? Or did anything change for you? What adjustments did you have to make to your own approach to ensure that that was an accessible experience in the studio?

Neus:

That's an interesting question. So I think what I observed was that everybody in the room had more patience. And that was beautiful, because it just takes longer, communication takes longer. I mean, the obvious one is, of course, you have to wait for the interpreter to pass on the information that you just said, and for the d/Deaf person to be able to reply. And very often, with conversations, even more, so between our days, we tend to kind of like overlap and get excited and talk over each other. So that was one. But there was also something about looking at each other in the eyes and being like, Are we all in the same page, you know, which was actually really beautiful. I think it really took the best out of everybody. For myself, I mean, very practical things like understanding how much

information is needed, and not bombard with information. Choosing when to give that information. Giving time for people to develop their own movement, their own thoughts about what we were creating. So yeah, I think it's definitely much more collaborative than any other piece I've created. And it just brought in much more of each dancers' personal experience.

Melanie:

And is that something that you think that you would carry throughout?

Neus:

Definitely. Yeah, definitely, definitely. I think the people that I work with are amazing, intelligent artists. And it's such a luxury to be able to be in a room discussing things with them. And I think it just makes a much better piece, for sure, to create together and discuss. And also, I mean, you can't think of everything. And nobody, I mean, even a group of four people cannot really know what everybody in the audience is going to experience. But then you just have more points of view, more tastes more ways of thinking about the piece, which makes it richer.

Melanie:

What I've noticed quite recently, there was a timely tweet by artist Dan Daw where he pleaded for people to stop using the words fully accessible when they meant step free access. I don't know if any of you saw that. And it was just as I was putting together the questions for this and I thought Oh, that's what we should be talking about here. I wondered what other considerations need to be made when you're curating a performance experience? We've been talking about all those different layers, accessibility for the performers, accessibility for the audience within the work but also the physical location that surrounds it. What other things need to be accommodated when we're thinking about putting this work on as produces? Rosie, have you got any tips for us there?

Rosie:

It's not necessarily in terms of disability, but we did perform at a festival quite recently. It was a show that's for naught to three year olds. So there's a lot of parents with buggies you know, you're still taking a buggy round, and the space that we were in was downstairs. There were lifts, but they didn't let anyone use the lifts. They wanted the buggies to stay upstairs. And for me that was just so bizarre, because if you take a buggy away from a parent, you're just like taking away their life. And we did we discussed it and they wouldn't let it go. But it did just feel like that was making the work really inaccessible. And not necessarily in terms of adults or children with disabilities just, you know, sort of the primary audience

Melanie:

Yeah, yeah. You've just ruled them out completely.

Rosie:

Yeah, but I think other things for me that we consider in terms of accessibility, we very often do introductions which are outside the performance area. And I think that's partly about settling parents. I think it's such a big deal to take a child to the theatre. I underestimated that before I had my own child. There's so much to think about. And so having that introduction, either getting rid of the sort of theatre etiquette that they might have expected, you know, talking about it as a relaxed space, I think helps with accessibility, as well as making sure that you've got to step free access. So I think as much as possible, describing what the experience is going to be like,

Melanie:

Yeah.

Rosie:

to audiences before they come along. And that's not necessarily, you know, revealing the whole show. But for me, I'd like to know what the chairs are going to feel like, you know, how comfortable are they because if I've got to sit for two hours, you know, if it's a two hour long show, then a comfortable chair is really needed.

Melanie:

Yeah, these feel such basic things, and yet, they are really so easily forgotten, aren't they? And I say that nodding as if that's okay, and it's not okay. But I can understand that if you're not putting yourself in somebody else's shoes, that idea about the buggy is particularly relatable having children of my own too, then you miss those crucial elements. You're just like, that's fine, there's a really nice buggy park there, that's where the buggies can go. And the performance is going to be over here. And not just connecting those dots. So there's something here a lesson to be learned, really, I suppose about taking that care to think through that process. And I really like that point you make there about describing the experience that we might take for granted as we put these different events on, but thinking that for some people, they might just need to know a little bit more information. I'll go back to being a parent again. And refreshments. I know this has nothing to do with disability. But I took my little one to one of those big shows, Tiger That Came to Tea or something like that, that was on in the West End, and it was at 10 o'clock, and they wouldn't serve us coffee just because we might burn our children because he couldn't have a hot drink. So they've obviously done a risk assessment and gone, you know, there's children in the building, we therefore can't have any hot water. And as a mum who's just done that journey, all I needed was caffeine. I'm about to watch an hour of The Tiger That Came to Tea I've read that book 65 times, I'm not particularly excited about that. I'm doing it for the kids, I need coffee. Wasn't given it. So someone hasn't really thought through my particular needs.

Neus:

Yeah, but I think it's also I mean, you're gonna make mistakes, right, as a producer, as a company that puts on a show, but it's about being open to listen to the people that are telling you, you know, I do need to bring my buggy down, or I need a coffee or I need something different. I also saw a tweet about somebody that went into a gallery and requested aluminium chair, it was a promenade but she said I can't walk for that long. I need an aluminium chair, because it's lighter,

Melanie:

I can carry it with me

Neus:

exactly. And they built a whole issue around it. I was like, just get an aluminium chair, like, you know, she's telling you what she needs. Obviously, I mean, the people that are kind of like the frontline, they are just obeying orders. But I think one thing is just listen to what people are telling you, right, and try to make it better. And in that sense, I think just give them the opportunity to ask any questions in advance as well. So we got an email before the Noise performance, because the Noise performance is quite overwhelming. And it's kind of designed to be like this, because it's the subject matter. So we got a question about photo sensitivities, and how much protection there was and how strong it was. So I just send them little clips, and I tried to describe how often it would be. And we had passed a Harding test, and of course, that it was up to them. But you know, trying to describe as much as possible, what the experience might look like for them. And just being open for that conversation. I think it just really helps people and also having, sorry, just the only other thing was to have an interpreter that was there for the audience so that any questions, any requests they had, they could speak to that person.

Melanie:

That's a really good point too. Rosie, you were about to say something.

Rosie:

Yeah, I think there's also something about taking the labour away from disabled people about having to ask those questions. I'm really trying to advocate for venues finding out that information at the point of booking. So when you're booking, ask if there are any access needs, provide the box for people to say, and then you contact them to see what provisions you can provide that are maybe extra than what you already have, or have the description of the show or anything else that you can provide. I visit quite a lot of festivals and something that we're always having to ask is do you have cobbled streets because if I can I'll travel on a mobility scooter but we're going up to Scotland soon so you know cobbled streets are really hard for me to travel around on a mobility scooter. So

description of your location, as much information as you can put ahead of time so that I don't have to do the labour of phoning you. Maybe I don't get through the first time and having to ask the questions I think is really important.

Neus:

For sure.

Melanie:

This is so crucial, I think and like you say the onus shouldn't be on the disabled person to have to find out all of that stuff. But if they have then asked for something, the weight of doing that it takes some guts, doesn't it to just walk up to a stranger and say I need this or could you get me that. Regardless of disability, but I imagine even more so. And then to get somebody say, No, you can't have this aluminium chair or whatever it might be. Again, I'm just trying to draw lessons from this as we try and think about how we can do better in what we're doing. It feels to me like one of those lessons is to perhaps be briefing all of those front facing staff. The answer is always yes. Let's say yes to everything. And we'll do our best. So leapfrogging around here, I just wanted to pull up this gorgeous line on your website, Rosie, and I wanted you to talk about it a little bit. You say on your website where dance is reclaimed from awkwardness into a gift, an exchange between viewer and performer, a shared experience of movement. And I loved this awkwardness into a gift. And I think what drew me to that is I'm always astounded by the similarities as I go from podcast conversation to podcast conversation, and we were doing one about audiences and trying to demystify dance for the audiences and just thinking about dance as being awkward and repackaged into a gift felt like a really interesting concept. And I wondered if you'd tell me more about how that came about.

Rosie:

I think it came from a project I did quite a few years ago called Dad Dancing alongside Helena Webb and Alexandrina Hemsley. And dad dancing is always perceived as awkward. And I think through the project, we were reclaiming the words dads dancing and viewing it as a gift, these really beautiful precious moments of connection. And I think that I've carried that forward into other work into any sort of moments of participation, really. So the current work that we're touring, We Touch, We Play, We Dance, the audience are invited into the space from the first moment that they come in, in different ways. And the audience is naught to three year olds, and their adults. And I guess what I really didn't want is for it to be sort of, well, let's push the babies in, they're not embarrassed. But for the adults to be involved in that performance as well. There's something really special about sharing a moment of theatre with someone else, or with your children. So it's not a moment where you as a parent can just sit and watch your phone, it's a moment where you are fully engaged alongside your child.

Melanie:

So not a Tiger That Came to Tea experience.

Rosie:

And so it does become this gift. You know, it's a beautiful moment of interaction with dancers up close. And how amazing is it for naught to three year olds to see these professional dancers moving so close to them, you know, be present, be there with your child.

Melanie:

I absolutely love that and going to performances where you are drawn in and you see the magic of the performance. But also, I think that comes back to my question that I put to you both right at the beginning about thinking about the framework of that performance experience and who it's for. And rather than playing just to the child thinking about how it takes the adult in as well. And I think to kind of link to Pixar movies, they do that brilliantly, don't they, they know that the parents are having to come and so there's a whole layer of the movie that is just for you as an adult that passes the child by completely. And I'm not saying it has to have that two layered thing. But there's something about thinking through who's going to be in that space, perhaps and who you're entertaining.

Rosie:

And I think that's one of the reasons that I struggle with being pigeon holed as someone that makes work for children. And I do say children and adults, because that comes back to access tools as well, because a naught to three year old is probably not going to engage with audio description, if they are visually impaired. Their language is not going to be developed enough to engage with that, but they might have visually impaired parents, or there might be a non disabled child with a visually impaired parent coming to watch. And so it's important to think about all of the audience members that are going to come and what access needs they might have.

Melanie:

And I know this isn't your line Neus, but I wondered whether awkwardness and gift were anything that did resonate with you as you make your work and how you think about the kind of presentation of your work. Was NOISE a gift in any way? How does that feel to you? How does that resonate?

Neus:

Well, I absolutely adore the phrase also, because culturally, I'm Spanish, but I was living in Holland before. And when I moved to the UK, I was like, Oh, I love that in this culture, awkwardness is seen as something special and something interesting. Because all of us are a little bit awkward. You know, everybody, and I love that there's a celebration of that, because yeah, it's unique, and it's beautiful. And it's what makes us different. And that's what makes us interesting. So I absolutely relate to that. And in terms of NOISE, the narrative that we were very interested in is what you don't expect. So the

things that come out of the preconceptions that you might have about something. So with sound, you need to recognise what it is in order to be like, Oh, that's the sound of... but noise is whatever you discard as non important or something that because you don't understand it, you know, you want it removed. And we thought that was really interesting in terms of life experiences as well, you know, just because you don't have the experience of it, or perhaps you don't understand it doesn't mean that it's noise. You know, it's beautiful by itself. I don't know if I'm making any sense. But it's this idea of including narratives that are not the one unique, one artificial that we have been fed through years and years of art and being like, there's so much more, you know.

Melanie:

So I wanted to move us on to thinking about how we get our work to audiences. And I suppose, again, trying to draw some threads from the other conversations we're having within this series. So is there anything that you do differently, do you think, in terms of disseminating the work that you're making to make sure that it's reaching the kind of people you're making it for? Is there anything that you're doing that perhaps we've been missing? If we're not thinking about how we're drawing people that are often excluded from our work into it. Rosie, how do you make sure that the people that you're making your work for know that it's there?

Rosie:

I think that probably comes as part of the co creation so the making the work with children from Frank Barnes School meant that Frank Barnes School knew about the work.

Melanie:

Yeah.

Rosie:

That sort of thing? I guess, with digital, with the films that we've made, you kind of don't know, because so with the audio described version of our Grass films, we know that one in six people watched those films, which I think is quite high.

Melanie:

Yeah.

Rosie:

But I have no idea whether that's curiosity or need, and I never will. So

Melanie:

Yeah.

Rosie:

I think it's about reaching out through networks, tracking things like analytics, if you can, particularly for digital work, and for live work, there's audience surveys, there is audience tracking that you can do, but to know whether it's reaching the people that you would like it to be. But I think for us as a company, there's a lot more work to do to get our accessible work to reach the audiences that might need it. And it's a historical thing as well in that dance that is accessible for visually impaired people has not been made. Visually impaired people are not going to be looking for dance to watch, because it's not there. So there is a lot of audience development, I think that needs to be done. And I hope that with the research that we're doing around audio description, and children being involved in that process, I hope that we can sort of start to build more audiences for it.

Melanie:

And do your marketing materials look different? And I probably shouldn't say this, because I'm just going to make myself look pretty stupid. But in the spirit of transparency, I was much younger, I'll use that as my defence. And I was creating a project for visually impaired children. And I was sat next to an esteemed colleague, and I was saying to her, what do you think of this poster? Do you think it'd be nice? And she's like, what? It's a poster? Do you think the people that you're trying to reach are going to see that? And because when we make a show, when we do a project, we create a poster, it was just this is the trajectory we're going down. And again, exactly what I was saying to you before not putting myself into the shoes of anybody else. So are there other kinds of marketing materials that you are making? Are you making audio described trailers? I'm sure you are, like. What can you tell us about what we should be thinking about if we really truly are going to turn not just our work into an accessible experience, but also the way that we're telling people about it into an accessible experience.

Rosie:

So we are making audio described trailers. We haven't adapted our imagery, which is probably something that we could or should think about. I think so much of the marketing that we do is digital, that things like putting image captions, alt text on social media, or sort of any video descriptions on social media alongside so that in a small way, you're including that audience and showing that you've thought about how they can access the work, I think is important.

Melanie:

Neus, how did you promote NOISE? And did you do that any differently than you would have done any other show?

Neus:

Yeah, I think what's really important is to go to look for the people where they are, where they hang out in social media, or in life. What we did a lot was to reach out to D/Deaf organisations to ask other d/Deaf artists or influencers to share what we were doing, because I can't assume that people are looking at my social media that are my target audience, right? I need to just really go out there and look for them. Obviously, we did have BSL invites, that was definitely important. And something that I think it was also important as well is to watch other artists from the d/Deaf community, what they are doing, how are they talking about what they do and promoting? And also because some of the people that we were with are very kind of famous, d/Deaf artists, then also mentioning them and being like we're working with these people are these people, these people which by themselves kind of attract their own audiences.

Melanie:

That's fascinating. I remember at Sadler's Wells we were putting on an audio described opera and BSL and I remember one of the interpreters just saying the d/Deaf community are not going to come just because this is the one thing in your programme you've put a BSL interpreter to and it's kind of like you're saying, I've got to come because it's here for you. And that might not be what my interest is. And again, I think that's about putting ourselves in other people's shoes. So I'm conscious, I've had you here with me for an hour having a fascinating discussion that as ever, I always wish was longer. I'm going to steal one last question from your website, Rosie, because I know that you undertake quite a lot of research alongside all of this work you're doing. So I just really want to ask you what you found out about this. You've asked the question, how important is being disabled or disabled led, mean to the work and how it's experienced with fellow collaborators and audiences? Where is your research taking you and the Neus perhaps just what your kind of final words on what that experience has been like for you?

Rosie:

Yeah, it's still very much in process I think. The last few years has been a lot about understanding what my access needs are, and then how the company can support that. But then also how me being disabled informs how we work as a company. So I don't feel like we've got this down at all. But how can we work slower. Part of my disability is chronic pain and fatigue. So I work with a deputy director and a support worker when I'm in the rehearsal room, and the deputy director will carry on rehearsals if I need to step out. You know, are there ways in the future where I don't have to step out where rehearsals can just stop for a moment and finances at the moment really limit that but what would it mean to be truly disabled led to work in a completely accessible way for me, but also for other people that we're working with? And how do we do that? As well through the producing of it? How do we nourish and take care of the staff that we work with? You know, my producer and executive producer? Neither of them identify as disabled, but how can we make sure that we take care of them? I think something about disabled led is about meeting people where they are and nourishing and making sure that they have what they need to do their best work. And that's for

audiences as well, isn't it? How can you enjoy this to the max without feeling like this cushion is really irritating? Or, you know, that's going to take you away from the show experience. So yeah, that I think that's an ongoing quest.

Melanie:

I love that I'm going to take that away. Meeting people where they are. I think that's a really lovely quote, perhaps to keep close and test ourselves as we think through things. Neus, have you got any reflections on the experience for you as a choreographer work on that project you'd like to share?

Neus:

Yeah, so I was thinking that definitely this meeting people where they are, it's so important to really kind of acknowledge and try every day to do it a bit better because I come from a culture of really like pa pa pa pa, you know, you totally have to ignore your needs, your tiredness, your pain, you know, the dancer that I was like, the companies that I was in, I'm saying it perhaps exaggerated but you know, it's that culture of creating is the focus of everything, and then everybody's needs have to be second. So I think that's, yeah, something very important. Also, I thought about how important it is to get disabled artist's voices being in leadership. I'm absolutely advocating for that. But also, I think non disabled artists working with a variety of disabled and non disabled, it just creates more understanding and better cultures as well. And I think of it also like with feminism, you know, you cannot just have women that are feminists, you need everybody on board to really create change. And I think if we are able to speak to each other and understand each other and take each other's needs into account, then the working space will be better and the art will be better.

Rosie:

I agree with you, though Neus. The no pain, no gain mantra needs to be lost from dance. It feels like one of the most inaccessible mantras to me personally, but if we could lose that from training, from performances, it would be great.

Neus:

Yeah.

Rosie:

Oh, no, I think Melanie's frozen.

Neus:

Oh right.

Melanie:

Ah, sorry. Can you hear me now?

Neus:

Yes

Rosie:

Yes

Melanie:

But it feels like my internet is telling me it's time to stop. If you'd like to hear more episodes about subjects moving artists of today, search for Talking Moves wherever you get your podcasts. Don't forget to subscribe, leave a review and spread the word. If you'd like to be part of the ArtsUnboxed family and do dance differently with us at Greenwich Dance, email us at info@greenwichdance.org.uk, with the podcast in the title and we'll get in touch. But for today, that's it from us and join us next time for more Talking Moves.

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