

## **Transcript: 'Access in Practice'**

Presentation by Jackie Hagan at The Open Road Carnival Conference (North), 12th March 2022. Hosted by Callaloo Carnival Arts

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[Isabella]

And our next presenter is Jackie Hagan who will talk us through 'Access in Practice'. I believe that she's joining us virtually. Hey there Jackie! Over to you love.

[Jackie]

Oh! Hello, has everybody had a good day?

[laughs at silence from audience]

I think I can hear the noise of people going "umm-hmm, yeah, a little bit". Okay so I am, my name is Jackie Hagan and I'm resisting the urge of saying I used to be a performer because it's been so long now but no, I am a performer.

I've been a disabled performer for 10 years and it's taken me, I've, I've been to like so many different types of events and types of venues but I've also had lots of different types of disabilities as well, so I thought I'd talk you through some of the process

and I'm going to do lots of lots of eye contact now because in a minute I'm going to do not very much for quite a while but I'll look up at any point and if you're not paying attention we'll all have detention later but right, okay, and now I'm going down here. (looks down at paper)

So yeah I've been a disabled performer for 10 years and to begin with I was just a and a poet with bipolar and everyone knew that I had bipolar because I never shut up about it and at this point I never expected to become an artist full-time, you know, it was a hobby like I worked in a pub and I couldn't imagine not being entirely honest about my disability.

I was young, I was radical but as I began to rely on my performance work like more full-time to pay the bills I got sicker. I got diagnosed with a visual disturbance that is genuinely called, and this is the pronunciation, 'Fuchs' syndrome - you can look it up, I'm not being rude,

and also a rare auto immune disorder so I had like fatigue and pain and what have you and this was really early on in my, when it started to be called, my career and I found myself considering holding these things back, you know lying about it or, you know, down playing them in case there was an employer who was choosing between two artists

and you know they were gonna choose like the the less disabled person because they will presume that they're the more reliable and I wasn't trying to be, I wasn't like trying to lie on purpose it felt like - you know when you're on a date and you're not sure, like a first date, and you're not sure at which point to tell them that you've got kids? Like, you know, you don't want to lead with that but you also, you know, you've got to tell them at some point

and then everything changed when I had my leg amputated and I was in hospital for three months and I was using social media to keep in contact with my audience and I was dead honest about the stuff that was going on but I did feel like I had to make it,

I felt like I had to be funny about it and maybe to make it more palatable but it was also helping me to cope, you know, but I had artists tell me specifically that no one was wanting to hear the depressing stuff that there isn't an audience for that and so I started touring a show called 'Some People Have Too Many Legs' soon after I came out of hospital

and like and it was honest, like it was honest about things like having maggots on me stump to eat away all the bacteria. Which is, you know, that's not palatable, is it? And also things like, you know, facing my own mortality and forcing me to grieve for my dad who died when I was a kid and you know that's some that's some hard stuff

you know and so and I was still feeling this urge that I needed to make things, you know, 'nice' for audiences like kind of package them for audiences so I did it using puppets.

Puppets with really bad welsh accents and also you know I found having one leg is really disarming and it was the first tour I did so I was working in like prisons for the first time - which I loved - and a lot of schools and stuff like that

so I'd get the head teacher or the head warden to wear a unicorn head and dance to a rave version of 'One Foot in the Grave' for the amputation scene

and you think that disabled people are gonna, you know, automatically be good at access - are we heck! We don't know what we're doing. I gave one fella a panic attack from being inside this, this sweaty unicorn head you know like it really made me realise that I really need to try.

But even though you're not going to get things perfect you do need to try, you absolutely need to try with access. So yeah, so I've done loads and loads that's in the past that now and we've done loads more stuff and I found actually there is there's a huge audience for really depressing stuff. Like not in a like 'inspiration porn' sort of way you know like, "Oh god, tell me how horrible your life is!"

I don't mean that but because people relate to it, you know, there's a lot of disabled people in the world. There's a lot of depressed people in the world and what it is is that performing in a room in real life like if I was in the room with you now it's a really awkward and weird position that we put ourselves in, isn't it?

And so what the audience needs, it's not that you need, you need, us to be funny or you need us to make it palatable, it's that you need the performer to make it so that you don't feel like you've got to look after us.

So you can be vulnerable you know you can be in loads of pain you know you can be an emotional pain, you can be in physical pain but it's just that you've got to be in control of the room like being a teacher and especially with being in pain there's always like everyone always wants to help you.

When you go "Ow!" in a pub everyone wants to help you and wherever you are there's always a 'Maureen' who's got you know a fluffy aspirin in the bottom of a bag that she demands that you take and you know you're on your off your head on morphine!

You don't need this little aspirin but it's not about your pain, you know, it's like Maureen's been looking after people for her entire life you know take the aspirin - but watch your aspirin intake, you know - so yeah back to the paper!

Yeah, so I found having one leg made people have like weird presumptions about you so you'd think that people would, you'd think that they'd think this - my you know stairs might be a bit tricky, walking far might hurt that's what you'd think people would think, but no it was I had my leg off in the year that

everyone, when the paralympics happened and took the country by storm and the the glory of the paralympics like leaked onto me.

I hadn't done nothing, you know, all I'd done is have my leg off and everyone thought I was dead brave and I had not done a thing. I was just continuing to live my life you know and so I started to you know people were presuming I was a hero so I wanted to be one and I wanted to be hardy and so I was trying extra hard to be, you know, if there was a load of stairs then I'd do them instead of saying, "actually if I do these stairs later on I'm not gonna have any energy for anything".

And I was trying too hard to be to be like that, I wasn't really standing up for myself and being an amputee was like the only disability people thought I had because it's really visual isn't it? And mine was because that's all little LEDs on it and you know it was it couldn't have been more like attention-seeking my leg, you know,

and my mental health it wasn't talked about at all and I made the mistake of acting like my mental health wasn't a problem you know when really I'd just had my leg off and gone on tour and got involved in this really middle class industry when I'm like 'under' class if anything like and my self-esteem got really shaky like,

on one hand, I was really impressed with myself but on the other hand I had no support, you know, I was doing too much 'fake it till you make it' and I hadn't realised that there was that's actually loads of people in the Arts who are nowhere near as posh as you think they are! Like they've just got like a neutral accent and a Fitbit but they're not, you know, they're almost like council estate and all

- the same with disability as well, like in society there's so many people who, you know, are disabled but want to distance themselves from that words because it's not sexy, it's not fun or because they think you know other people have got it worse than me so I can't call myself disabled - rubbish!

Or because they're not on the disabled you know not on the 'disabled register'. Like, I'm telling you now - there's no register! What's this register? There is none!

You know, we don't do one but anyway, right, so I wanted to be like an 'easy' artist to work with, I didn't want to make things 'difficult' so you know I was just

I was pretending that everything was fine because I had to pay the rent, that was the crux of it, and obviously now I regret that and I wish that I could have a word with that version of me

but I can also see how the industry encourages it, you know, and we need to make that change. I think it's the perfect time now, you know, we're all nuts from the last two years have been horrific haven't they?

And now's the time when we can be more understanding and more flexible, being more flexible is the key and understanding, listening to people and trying to let people be honest about their needs and try to make sure when we have listened that we've understood properly you know when we're not making presumptions. I think that's the direction we need to go in and I feel like I've, I'm gonna, anyway, I need to tell you this bit - this is important!

So a big change came when I met 'Graeae Theatre' and I started working with them and, for them, this became part of my practice as well, that accessibility is at the core of the pieces that they make. It's not something just tacked on at the end.

You know, it's not just like, oh, tack a wheelchair on it's often the version of the show that non-disabled people or pre-disabled people see, it's the exact same show that the disabled people experience.

So, for instance, I did a show for them called 'Cosmic Scallys' and the dialogue was projected onto the set in different places. The set has been designed for that so it means that no matter what disability you've got you're still getting the same information

and also I hate the thing where, oh god, if you've done it in your place god love you - it's brilliant - I didn't mean to say hate it, but I try to avoid having the BSL person, the signing person, like in the -

[audience laughs]

in the corner there and, you know, and the action going on right over here so the person's got to keep looking that way in that way. So when I did, I did have a show that had a signer I had us both together like that and we'd talk to each other and we'd sort of laugh at each other's signs, the different ways that we did like naughty signs mainly you know a bit,

just making it a bit, yeah, integrated so it's that - it's where the the accessibility is integrated and a there's a really cool artist, 'Emilio Cavello', a blind aerialist - he's dead cool - who calls integrated access a radical act.

And it is! And that really, that really helps me calling it a radical act to sort of get rid of any last little bits of ableism that's inside myself because, I mean, for one it shouldn't matter but it does make it sound sexy and I quite like that but most importantly and makes it powerful

and you know as a disabled person society is always trying to take away that power and they succeed a lot which is dreadful so by being radical and flexible I hope that we can, you know, all work together to find a way of making it work in the future and people can follow disabled people in the way that we've done it.

Okay, nice one - done!

[Isabella]

Thank you Jackie for a lovely presentation!

