

Mik: Events like the Paralympic Games prove that disability is not a barrier to success, but another arena where disabled people have been excelling for years are the arts. Disabled people are now coming together on an international basis and working together to push the boundaries of their creative endeavours.

I'm here at Graeae Theatre Company to find out more about this phenomenon as disability arts goes global.

So, Jodi, tell me about the projects that you've been involved with internationally with Graeae.

Jodi: The main ones have been the project we did in Pakistan, in Karachi, in collaboration with British Council and other partners and some work we did also with British Council in Sri Lanka. A project in Pakistan was basically trying to develop a performing arts training programme for young D/deaf and disabled people, lots of partners involved across sort of four to five stages, and then our work in Sri Lanka was around not just young people, but whole communities, working with adults, working with young people, and also working with their parents, as well.

There is an organisation in Karachi called, I hope this is right, NOWPD. Which is an organisation, is actually for disabled people who are actually changing policy around quotas, around employment training, and we learned a lot from just having a half a day talking with them.

Then there's just brilliant, little arts companies happening, artists that have just come together, not actually getting paid. They might have to apply for funding, but they're doing it all for the love of it.

Mik: What from your experience, in each of the countries you've visited, what does it mean to be disabled?

Jenny: Every country is different, but I remember arriving in Bangladesh. Big group of wonderfully diverse people in physicality, communication, age, gender, beautiful mixed group of people.

My first job with my Bangladeshi lot is, be who you are, you're not going to change, but what you can change is your own attitude about yourself and your, this sounds a bit naff, but your acceptance of who you are, and start to use that as a theatrical and a political tool to make a statement.

It's those D/deaf and disabled people who've been through a whole series of long-term workshops and two plays with Graeae that sort of seed bedded them to think, we want to lead our own work, and so they are. And Slow Label, definitely, run by Kris, well set up by Kris, disabled woman. And Asako, Theatre of the Deaf. It's about confidence, so it doesn't really matter if someone who is

non-disabled starts it, but it's about at what point do they hand over the power and empowerment to D/deaf and disabled people to lead themselves.

Interpreter: 2009, that was when we first ... I flew over actually to Britain, and I was studying and learning over here in Britain, and then I got involved in Graeae whilst I was there.

The reason that that happened, the involvement with Graeae was because ... Let me just think. It's disabled people working in the arts and how to sort of encourage them and be creative within the arts, and I wanted to learn from Graeae and therefore, be able to take what I'd learned back to my own country in Japan and therefore, be able to teach and improve the lives of disabled people within the arts in Japan.

I got involved really to kind of like shadow Jenny and the people at Graeae to find out how they worked creatively, and I worked with them, and they worked with disabled people, obviously, as well, a variety of disabled people, D/deaf and disabled people, so I wanted to learn from them and use the Graeae really as a role model. It was a really good experience for me, definitely.

Amit: What's really interesting, I think, is they're not just arts organisations. They are disability rights organisations. I think that's really, really key because what it allows those organisations to do, like Vidya Sagar, who are out in India and Rasa, they use the arts for a force for change.

Mik: Tell me about the project that you're working on in India. What's that?

Amit: It's a project where it's a co-production with La Fura dels Baus, who Graeae worked with in 2012, Prometheus Awakes down at The Queen's House in Greenwich. So we are working with them again. The production is called 'Aruna and the Raging Sun', and it's based on an Indian myth about an Indian disabled boy who kind of saves the world. We're using that as an inspiration to tell this story. We've got about 100 disabled and non-disabled performers in it. There's lots of aerial work, 50 metres in the air. We've got a 28 metre puppet just chilling out around Chennai, the Marina Beach, walking around. Big large scale kind of projection.

Mik: Why is it so important to do this international work?

Jodi: I think more than anything, it's, again, going back to that connecting to artists beyond our bubbles. We support each other so brilliantly here in the UK in disability arts, but, it's like how do we reach out and connect to other D/deaf and disabled artists around the world. So, absolutely, when Graeae is working internationally, it's not about, hey, let's just swoop in there and do our thing and leave again. That would be a failure if that was what all that we did.

Amit: I think disabled people are problem solvers. We're constantly problem solving, so when we're presented with something, and I think that's why we're very, very fortunate to go and work in all these countries, but I think part of that reason, genuinely, is that we problem solve very, very quickly, and the response that we get with the artists that we're working with is just exactly the same.

Jenny: That very, very, very, very first meeting kept me going for four years with all my work in Bangladesh, and at the end, when we did Romeo and Juliet, we filmed our disabled street people, just talking about what does love mean to them or what were their hopes and their dreams. That message never really left me from that very first day. And it was just a start, a tiny little start for the film as a campaign to wake up people's understanding of what the situation is.

Mik: What was the response of the public in the countries that you visited to the work that you put on?

Jenny: Well Bangladesh, we had the National Theatre of Dhaka. The producer of the National Theatre, he was our producer, so he was someone very high up with a high status, huge respect. He's a freedom fighter, so he's part of a big political movement, it's his stage. And the Minister of Culture is a very, very famous Bangladeshi actor, we had his back up.

They smashed walls down so that we could build a ramp onto the stage and into the auditorium, and for the first time in history, disabled people were in the audience and on the stage. All 17 disabled people on stage, first ever in Bangladesh. It was extraordinary, and you could feel this ripple across the audience of just (claps) that it's all right. This is good.

Amit: I'm hoping what, with this production, non-disabled people who either have an experience of disability or don't can look at it and kind of go, wow, this is something we wouldn't have seen five years ago, but we're seeing now.

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