

**Colin Hambrook gobscure**

Disability and…Psychiatry: gobscure and Colin Hambrook

Colin: Welcome to the Graeae and Disability Arts Online podcast, bringing together thoughtful discussion and debate. This month's topic is on disability and psychiatry. This podcast contains strong language.

I'm Colin Hambrook, editor of Disability Arts Online and in this issue I'll be talking to writer, visual and performance artist, gobscure. His work has featured on the pages of Disability Arts Online over many years and his plays have been staged by a number of companies across Europe and in the UK. He was a Jessie Kesson literary fellow at Moniak Mhor, Scotland's writing center, in 2016. His play, “Collector of Tears”, was awarded the Best Northeast New Play of 2014 by the British Theater Guide. Described as a theatrical Orlando for our times, it's a warm-hearted play about history, oppression, and loss in which its protagonist Tonya Sealt tells stories of love and resistance, packing over 300 years of history into an hour's monologue.

Colin: I first reviewed “Wings are Giving Out”, his third poetry collection published by Skrev Press back in 2009. Gobscure's writing spins around a joy of playing with words, manipulating language in clever and beautiful ways, and telling stories of the cruelties of modern day life and psychiatric oppression within a context of the voices of historical artists from Lorca, to Voltaire and Eva Švankmajerová to name a few.

Colin: In this podcast we'll be discussing psychiatry through the lens of the social model of disability. We'll be talking about language, the languages around mental health and how gobscure's writing has been influenced by that of historical writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Jessie Kesson, and poet John Clare, whose asylum breakout and five day walk to freedom in 1841 was a starting point for his show, “Bastilles Englan”. First off, we talk about the name gobscure and how it came to be.

gobscure: We do stuff with words and sometimes without words, but kind of comes from words, language, languages, sometimes make language, since sometimes reframing narratives and turning things around. And a whole bunch of stuff was this thing about colliding two words together, two real words that exist – and gob and obscure and so gobscure stuck, 'cause it's gobby but obscure. So Together! in London for their Disability Arts Festival a couple of years back, we exhibited 54 of these pieces. And so there was a ‘prisong’, so prison and song, so there's a whole bunch of real English language words and of course the English language isn't the English language, it's German and Icelandic and trans-Caucasian, and the rest of it, it's come from everywhere. But in prisong – so it's turning things round, so it's turning ‘prison’ into ‘song’ it is being ‘gobby’ and ‘obscure’. It was just a whole bunch of different words and the word kind of stuck and things have gone out under that name and it seems useful or easy. It (laughs), it sums up what we do I think.

Colin: Gobscure, you're a performance artist, a writer, a visual artist. You've been very prolific for the last couple of decades and--

gobscure: Mostly thanks to caffeine and obscurity (laughs) and not having enough friends, and not sleeping enough. So yeah, we just try and do stuff. You know when you're well you just try and put something out there in some way, shape, or form. Starts probably from words but sometimes you know there are fewer and fewer words and more, more visuals or more, more sound or more, more performance, but it's not- I just hate being boxed-in. I think we're all boxed-in and labelled and pigeonholed and often categorized and often mislabelled. (laughs)

gobscure: I think we're going to come on to the diagnostic and the sadistic, and the DSM of psychiatry and I hate being boxed-in, it's just, you can't confine people, we're messy. The governmentals currently, they're not a believer in friction. They like friction-less. They like less friction and humans are about friction, we're about messiness and about all those issues and problems and whatever but friction also lights fires, so just trying to do stuff, you know, trying to make sense of the nonsense out there. The world's insane, the world's mad. We're not mad. We are made. You know, we're driven over the edge by that and just trying-

gobscure: The only thing though is that I think we've all... I think we're born with a voice and I think basically we're silenced as soon as possible, so different bits silence whichever bit of us. It may be church, it may be state, it may be education. Sometimes it's family, sometimes it's the various medical things and that includes psychiatry. Sometimes it's life or class, gender, you know, basically there is this battle we're born, we're born screaming and the rest of it, we're told to shut up, we're silenced, and I think the battle is to regain our voice.

gobscure: We've all lived, we've all got stories to tell. How do you tell that story? Arts, creativities, creative resistances, whichever one, whichever bit of it. Sometimes it's more, oh, it's more theatre, it's more this, it's more that... They tend to merge. It's really just let's try and have more friction, not less. Let's try and have a voice. It's messiness and it's complex and it's not being boxed in, but is about what the hell's going on and trying to have a voice but not, “Oh, that is the mental distress bit,” or, “Oh, that is the sexuality bit,” or “Oh, that is the environmental bit.” It is like Mary Wollstonecraft. She was mad, bad, rad, bi, European, an internationalist, a mother, a writer, a rioter, you know, you can't compartmentalize and it's really unhealthy isn't it? It's really unhealthy to stick any of us. You Colin, into a box, “Oh, are you this, or are you that or are you that?” We're all these things. We are multiple, we are plural, we have all these bits, all these facets of us that make us fascinating and which - and complex and maddening and (laughs) all the rest of it. And when you try to boil it down to labels and pigeonholes and boxes and the rest of it, it doesn't work. (laughs)

Colin: Gobscure's work has been influenced by writers from the 18th through to the 20th century who were survivors of early psychiatric medical interventions. Notably Mary Wollstonecraft, who lived from 1759 to 1797.

gobscure: So Mary Wollstonecraft, she was a writer and some of that was fiction, but based on lived experiences, as you say, people being locked up and all the rest of it, and in all kinds of oppressions and violences and so on. She was also a campaigner, a feminist before the word even existed. She was an internationalist, so she travelled around Europe. She was in France, she was in Portugal, she around northern Europe. So she was an international. She was a mother. She gave birth to Mary Shelley who wrote many things, including “Frankenstein” and so Mary Wollstonecraft was many things. She was also written off as a hyena in petticoats.

Colin: A hyena in petticoats.

gobscure: A hyena in petticoats. So this was the way to silence her. This woman that just, she was bisexual, she was mad, she was rad. She tried to kill herself. She was all these things, struggling and glorious and amazing, in an incredibly hard life. And she was erased. She was rubbed out. She was, you know, tried to destroy all these things, all this messiness and call her a hyena in petticoats. And I don't know how--

Colin: Where did that accolade, accusation come from?

gobscure: (laughs) It was the politicians, it was the males on the hardest right, writing her off and, I can't remember, I'm also suffering a lot of memory loss, so I literally can't remember who said it, but basically they did say it in print. They called her a hyena in petticoats. Here in 2019 common era Britain, I think Europe's a bit of a thing just now. (laughs) I think, you know, madness, badness, radness, bisexualities, writing, rioting, all these sorts of things. And I am celebrating being a hyena in petticoats. I am a daughter of Mary and I think we should all celebrate these days being a hyena in petticoats and also if you like the near future, 'cause her whole life she kind of lived outside of conventions. So those boxes, those pigeonholes that she's put in, the mental distresses, the sexualities, the gender, the pro-European-ness and the rest of it. And it was messy and glorious and complex and difficult.

gobscure: So, she was born into a very, very violent family. So she, not just patriarchal times and the rest of it, but it also individual violence, threat, abuse, alcoholism, gambling, the whole rest of it. So she was moved around the country. She ended up just outside Beverley. So 12 miles north of Hull. And that was where she met a friend and a friend's family, they gave her a library. So they had a library of books. This is 200 and however many years ago, she read, she was given words which gave her the world, which gave her asking questions, which gave her the whole... her oppositional defiance way back then.

gobscure: So I went through hell, and a couple of years after that, so I'm probably 15 or something like this, a whole bunch of mostly accidental, and miraculous things, you know, amazing, incredible things happen. And one of them just coming across people like Tom Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft. And this person written off, erased; these things totally different to us, but you know, tried to kill herself, all this kind of stuff, bisexual, whatever and just go, “Wow, this person was but also is amazing.” And also just that image, hyena in petticoats. How beautiful, brilliant, fantastic is that. Let's be hyenas in petticoats. And I've held onto that for 30 odd years.

Colin: I asked gobscure about his play “Collector of Tears.”

gobscure: So your question was actually about the last play, “Collector of Tears,” which is published, which went on tour, and I think you saw in Brighton. It was Northeast Play of the Year.

gobscure: And so that play, it's really about the radical history of the north, radical history actually out of Sunderland. So one of these things, you know, we tend to attack places, slag them off, and Sunderland, incredible, beautiful place. So sometimes this reclaiming or turning things round or finding the bigger, wider truths. So wrote this play about someone who's never cried, so they've never aged, and they've travelled across the course of hundreds of years of England. So this whole thing of radical England. They haven't gone to Ireland, they've had a love for- they have gone into Wales. So this whole geographic territories and borders, boundaries, they are playing with that. But it is the radical histories, amazing people, especially coming out of the northeast, especially out Sunderland. Also about bisexualities, including Mary Wollstonecraft. Mary Wollstonecraft did attempt to end her life and my fictitious character did help rescue her.

gobscure: So, you're absolutely right. This person, the collector of tears, she went through history, collecting tears and we commissioned a set of tear bottles, and one of them was for Mary Wollstonecraft, this amazing, incredible, brilliant, beautiful, maddening person who gave us so much and is giving, I think, Britain and Europe and the world so much stuff right now. And the play, this person finally starts to cry and that allows them to age. And that is the 22nd of the 11th, 1990. The day that Maggie or Maggie 1.0, because today, Maggie, 2.0 (laughs), Theresa, has just resigned.

gobscure: So there you go, so yeah, a play, epic time, 300 plus years, a person's never cried, bisexualities, radical histories, poetry and myth and love. And those true moments in time that have happened, founding of the NHS, the Levellers – these different real things, but a mythical person, if you like, who could then experience all those things. Yes.

Colin: Gobscure cited Wollstonecraft's unfinished novel “Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman” as an early example of the medicalization of madness, expressing an aspect of the social model of disability.

gobscure: But again, so we're talking about this construct, this conspiracy theory called psychiatry (laughs) this pseudo-medicalism; this pretend, this fake (laughs) that pretends it's an illness, that there's a medical, you know, it's a disease. It's this medical model. And so again, you're absolutely right, but in this novel Mary is talking about her heroin, Maria, and the other people. They are locked up, and one of, a great English value is creating the trade in lunacy. We learnt all those centuries ago how to make money out of people's misery and suffering, out of their madnesses. So yeah--

Colin: By medicalizing madness, effectively.

gobscure: Yes. Oh yes, yes. And locking people up and charging them for being locked up (laughs). And yeah, so she's locked up and she is talking about the social circumstances that brought her to it. Pregnancy, and wedlock, and grief, and the other people locked up. So this is this whole thing, it's not mad, it's made. So here is the social model of disability. Here are people, oppressors, locking people up x hundred years ago to earn money out of it. Pretending there's something wrong with, in terms of, “There's something wrong inside you,” and the rest of it. These are people who have lived, these are people who have been hurt, these are people suffering. And she talks about some of these things and so some of them are autobiographical things that we know that she went through this stuff. So she is talking about violence, domestic violence. She is talking about grieving, sort of people dying and the rest of it. Talking about childbirth, talking about poverty, talking about abuse, all those sorts of things.

gobscure: So yeah, she went through it, lived experience, for real. She knew that those sufferings, those pains, those sorrows, those hurts, those... whether individual ones or societal ones, they drive you mad, they drive you insane, they drive you over the edge and yet you get locked up and then mis-labelled and abused further, and money, good money made off you. So yes, that is what that unfinished novel is about and it is beautiful and haunting and harrowing and one of the phrases that is used then is the Bastille. John Clare used the exact same phrase. Of course, the French Revolution around that point in time, and this, whether we imprison people for quote unquote madness or quote unquote badness, locking people up, chaining them up, locking them in, taking away their human rights, taking away freedom, stigmatize, the whole lot of it. She went through it, she knew it and she wrote about it and these things. Yeah, she was feminist way before the word. Social model, disability, way before the phrase (laughs) or the rest of it.

Colin: He went on to read an extract from the performance piece, “Hyenas in Petticoats.”

gobscure: “Hyenas in petticoats,” from a daughter of Mary.

gobscure: In the last year of her life she travelled around North Europe with her daughter, the brat, Mary Shelley. And she wrote her most successful book there, “25 letters”. We've re-mixed them. We'll start with number 18. Sounds remarkably like now. Tense on a wide plane. Bricks, the fallen stacks of allure. Ravages suckle many of the poor. Artists’ book, sound-piece, soundscape. Bye. Bye-bye. Bye-bye. Bye? Would you buy? Or are we bi? Made by, or bisexual? Bisexualities. She was a demonstrator. Here are a range of demo placards updated to now. I think we should frock up with petticoats. I think we should rock up. Put on our hyena masks.

I think we should ask more. I think we should demand more. I think we should be carrying placards like leaves. Rich now stay in boutique hotels, a.k.a. ex-prisons and asylums. I think we should ask the lanyard wearers not to unite, but to untie their lanyards. I think we need to ask more coppers, “Can you be arrested for impersonating a police officer?” Impersonating a police office is a crime. I reckon a lot of them are impersonating police officers. I think they should get nicked.

gobscure: You keep asking, “Why are you crying?”, when you've broken our writing hand so many times? But. But. But. Here's Mary. Her response. (sings) Mary, Mary, quite contrary. How does your garden grow? With silver bells and cockle shells and (normal speech) cowslips all in a row. Different version of the nursery rhyme. There are multiple versions, multiple narratives, multiple realities. The dreams are made of, that dreams are made by.

gobscure: Mary wants beds to lie down in, in public and live-in libraries and rubbish bins growing demonstrational placards and soundscapes and artists' books. She wants to give everyone a voice. Mary frocks up and rocks up in petticoat and hyena's mask, in Birmingham and Manchester. She wants outings elsewhere. Because this is mad Mary, rad Mary, bi Mary, lover Mary, traveller Mary, revolutionary, campaigner, writer, rioter, feminist Mary. European. Mother. Barely.

gobscure: Mad Mary, rad Mary, bi Mary.

gobscure: No selling, no selling out. A hoyden, a tomboy, a feist. Throwing back those screams of, “Hyena in petticoats,” dreams are made by. Spitalfields, Beverley, Laugharne, Newington Green, Lisbon, County Cork, Paris, Putney Bridge, Hamburg, Oslo to be Elsinore. Your skein tying up. And the cons again scream, “Petticoats, hyenas...” Thanks to your mad, bad, rad, bi, mother Mary internationalist, insurrectionist writer. Us, staying still remembering dreams made by.

gobscure: Let's keep dreaming.

Colin: Our conversation turned to cognitive linguistics and the reframing of the language around mental wellbeing, in a way the anti-psychiatry failed to do despite R.D. Laing's best efforts to humanize psychiatry.

gobscure: Those people with that power, they have never felt the price of failure, so they have never, they never know what it's like to hurt. So right now we're talking about disabilities. So you were born disabled – or impaired, or whatever it is, or it came along at some point in time. There's a kind of a, before and after, you feel the hurt, the pain, the difference or the trauma or the wounding or the whatever it is, or there are certain things that you can't do, certain things you're barred from, excluded from whatever it is. Yeah, there is that.

gobscure: But one of the things, this thing about how do we change stuff? How do we rewrite the future and the rest of it, you're absolutely right. So, I'm not an academic, but out there a whole bunch of people, some of them who are academics and/or activists and/or writers, thinkers, whatever, this whole thing about all the different strands, strains of how to design this stuff out. One of these thing is humans, we make sense of the world through languages. So this thing that, as you say, about reframing mental and then, yes, convention uses the word illness.

gobscure: So a whole bunch of research under the category of what's called ‘essentialist thinking’. And this is part of this whole cognitive linguistics territory, this area. So basically, if we use the phrase “mental illness”, we see it medically. And this is research across I think 60 or 70 different countries, so some of these are low income countries, medium income countries, high income countries, some of these are new, innovative, technologically driven, some of are very traditionalist, first nation. So you know, across a broad spectrum of countries, ways of thinking out there. And it's not inevitable, but it is just this thing, we're born and we're born into certain ways of thinking and this “illness” thing. So you catch a cold or worse or whatever it is. So you understand illness that way. So when we phrase that the distresses up here, the distresses in our mind because of the stuff that is happening out there, the stuff that is done to you as an individual, once off, throughout your whole life, the stuff that is done kind of collectively to you as a group of people, whatever it happens to be, the traumas, the woundings, the grievings, the failures, the before and after, all that stuff, when you put that label “mental” and “illness” on it, we have been trained from birth but also then going back generation on generation on generation. (laughs)

gobscure: So we're talking about Mary Wollstonecraft, she saw this 225 years ago, and people before her would have done. She was saying it back then, other people are saying this right now. We need to nuke that thinking, blow it out the water, get rid of it. Because we then see illness, dirt, disease, otherness. And you can't get away from this. I will be seeing you, Colin, as, “Oh, you are? I might catch it off you. I must retreat from you.”

gobscure: So we need to throw that out. And this is just one part of this territory. So why do we frame it like that? Why do--

Colin: It also becomes something to be cured.

gobscure: (laughs)

Colin: Which is where the pharmaceutical industry comes in--

gobscure: Yes, yes.

Colin: To make it's killing, literally.

gobscure: Well, yes. I'm not quite dead yet, but two heart attacks in... I don't know how much longer I've got.

Colin: Gobscure's current play, “Joey,” is a story about reclaiming language. Set in the early 1980s, it's the story of playgrounds and care homes, DMs and red laces, punk and cassette tapes. It's a story of a kid who, a day after Joey Deacon goes on Blue Peter, arrives in the playground and declares that from now on they are to be called Joey.

gobscure: I tried for real to talk about some of the stuff in the play in the late 1980s to child protection officers, which got nowhere. I tried to write about it in total fictitious form in the 1990s, got rejected. Before my first heart attack, I was on Graeae's Write to Play scheme and Selma Dimitrijevic of Greyscale Theatre Company, she was our mentor at Graeae, we're talking about stuff and she hoped that maybe I could do a little bit more writing, outside after that scheme ended back up here, and the play kind of happened.

gobscure: Joey Deacon who lived with cerebral palsy, with CP, it was the last year of his life, he'd reached age, I think it was 60 by the time of this. In about that last year of his life he'd also been examined by a psychologist who had found, I think that the findings were, and I quote, “He is of normal intelligence.” So he'd been born before World War Two obviously difficult times, difficult life if you have CP and quite limited mobility, hard to understand speech patterns and all the rest of it.

gobscure: But by the time he went on Blue Peter, he had written a book. He lived with his mates in a bungalow, he travelled. He had within the limits, at the time, and the rest of, he'd got to a pretty good place, you know. Again, it was done for all the best reasons, good intent and so on. Put this person on television to show someone very different. And we are talking about decades ago, sort of incredibly different ways of thinking and all the rest of it, so within the limits of the time, kind of a positive thing, a positive attempt. Put this person on television. And it was good, and it was positive.

gobscure: And again, and there's this thing, I think we were talking before the tapes were rolling about, if you like, cock-up versus conspiracy. Most stuff frankly is cock-up. You know, (laughs), most stuff is kind of accident. It's not even people trying to do harm or be evil. The playground chant of Joey, and obviously it’s said in a certain way with certain movements, sound and all the rest of it, I'm not going to do that. But if you like, in inverted commas, “innocent”, so people weren't even trying to cause harm. It's just this mindless sort of, it's funny to do that. And people still remember it, still people do that today.

gobscure: So there is this BBC high up attempt to do this positive, people just doing some - but, and these are these moments, these incredible, amazing moments – I had a mate and they came in the next day into school shouting their head off. They shouted the old terms of abuse and then they shouted, “Joey,” and “Fuck the lot of you's. I'm a Joey, I'm Joey.” They had read the future. This nobody, in inverted commas, this “nothing”, this person written off by the system, school, state, the whole lot. They had read the future, just that little tiny bit. They knew what was coming, they knew that was going to be the next term of abuse for them and, and for us too, because it was just a generic term, you may, it doesn't matter whether you have a physical difficulty or health issues (laughs), learning disability, whatever, it's just the generic thing.

gobscure: They got in first, they reclaimed it before it even became a term of abuse. And it was like, fuck, you can do that with words. You can get in there. You can do that with words. You can reclaim things, you can turn them around, you can take them back, you can deny them, you can defy them, you can question it, you can do anything with that. And you get your power back and you can't have it taken, ever. You can have it diminished, you can be threatened and the rest of it, but you can keep hold of that.

gobscure: And that was that. Just one, like Mary and all these other- these books, all these people. Jessie Kesson, Gwyneth Lewis and so on, those moments in time, coming across that and you can do that. That little bit of power. Yeah, we're powerless in so many ways, but that moment of that hope, that respect, that dignity, that thing, that reclamation, taking it back. And this is this thing about “the narrative.” We are fed one narrative. There are so many others. Let's rewrite it, let's turn it round. Let's take it somewhere else.

gobscure: Keep hold of your Joeys, your Mary Wollstonecrafts, your whoever it is. They may be incredibly famous people, they may be just someone who, if you like, had nothing and they still kept going, they still kept fighting. Who are those people? What were those fixed moments in time and space despite it all that your life turns on, that keeps going, that gives you genuine strength. Genuine. You are shown a different way, a different possibility, a different direction. It's not the binary. It's not like that. We can take it over there. We can go somewhere else. We can do something different. Keep hold of that.

Colin: With reference to language and the labels we imbibe gobscure moved on to talk about another of his literary role models, Jessie Kesson, who lived from 1916 to 1994, whose life he coincidentally shares some connections to.

gobscure: Jessie Kesson. The labels that she applied to her life were slum child, orphan, kitchen worker, asylum mad, farmed oot [farmed out], cottar wife, mother, life model, social worker, writer and ootlin--

Colin: Ootlin.

gobscure: Ootlin. Which is sort of north of Scotland for “outsider”. So Jessie Kesson was born into a slum in Elgin so just along from Inverness, in I think it was 1916, so 103 years ago. And in 2016 we had the poshest job title ever, we were Jessie Kesson Literary Fellow at Moniack Mhor, so that's Scotland's new writing centre. And you get given a space to live for a month, some food, a bit of money, and in return you're supposed to do some work, you know, do a little something.

gobscure: But yeah, so Jessie Kesson, born into a life of disadvantage and that was 100 years before we were the literary fellow for her. So all these issues, all these problems, all these negativities, all the rest of it, very hard life. All she wanted to do was dream and write and get an education. She was denied it. Despite that she fought through, she did. And she wrote nature writing and she wrote poetry and she wrote radio and she wrote novels. And she wrote about all kinds of topics, all kinds of subjects and later on in life she got honorary doctorates.

gobscure: Basically she was slave labor as a child and she was kept in this hostel. And that hostel in Scotland in Aberdeen then became the community arts centre and then became The Lemon Tree theatre. And that was where I first encountered the term disability arts and being disabled, and the rest of it, thanks to Candoco Dance Company. I was in the same space where Jessie Kesson kind of, if you like, formally flipped over the edge, attacked the matron and then whether it was self harm, suicide attempt, whatever. But she got locked up in what was the then asylum. I was treated, or mistreated, or what have you in the same hospital but many decades later. So all these weird, wonderful crossovers.

gobscure: But one of the pieces of writing is a radio play called “Somewhere Beyond.” So she wrote this in the mid to late 50s talking about her experiences locked up in an asylum 20 years before. It got broadcast on the BBC in about, I think, the early 1960s. This is “the Beeb” decades ago. (laughs) And questions were asked about, “Yes, this subject matter is important, but is it really fit? Is it really suitable for broadcast?” Because here was a survivor- I'm putting that word on it- she called herself “asylum mad”, but so I'm saying survivor or lived experience, whatever you want to call it.

gobscure: So she was the real deal. She went through it and the rest. She wrote this radio play, slightly fictionalized. Some of it was before that and then going through a year locked up in this place through to the moment when she realized she was getting out again. Because it was also that voice and voice hearing and you have the old woman in the bed next to her talking about being covered in beetles and, sort of feeling those sensations. So she wasn't just writing her story, she was writing this kind of collective radio, almost like experimental, experience of these different people. And also the work, because a huge agenda, the work men repairing things outside.

gobscure: So it was, decades ago, writing this incredible piece from lived experience for real, in an asylum for real 20 years before, before World War Two, really hard- incredibly harsh times. And so again, this through line, there's Mary Wollstonecraft talking about these things, here's her talking about her version of it and going through that for real. The BBC, “Do we dare broadcast this? Yes or no?” It got broadcast. It is revolutionary. Here is this person fighting against all the odds, fighting through, winning through, putting out radio and nature writing and poetry and novels and all kinds of stuff. Actually arriving there like Joey Deacon, a hard life, but actually getting somewhere and making something of it for herself and inspiring other people elsewhere.

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