Graeae Podcast: Disability and Performing

**Welcome to Disability And.. the Graeae and Disability Arts Online monthly Podcast, bringing together thoughtful discussion and debate. This month’s topic is on Disability and Performing. Graeae’s Associate Director Nickie Miles-Wildin talks with actress Sarah Gordy.**

Intro music starts.

Nickie:

Hello and welcome to this podcast. I'm Nickie Miles-Wildin and I am associate director here at Graeae Theatre Company. Today, here in the living room at Graeae, I am joined by the fantastic actor, the one and only Sarah Gordy.

Sarah:

Hi, Nickie. How are you?

Nickie:

I'm good. Are you well?

Sarah:

I'm good.

Nickie:

Now, me and Sarah, we were reminiscing a little bit because we both worked for Kazzum theatre company performing a show called Paper People.

Sarah:

That's right.

Nickie:

It was about ... We were two street vendors, weren't we? Selling newspapers?

Sarah:

Yeah.

Nickie:

Out of the newspapers, we made different stories such as animals coming to life. We were trying to think when that was. I think it must be about 2010, 2011?

Sarah:

I think so. Yeah.

Nickie:

That means we've known each other ... What? Nine years?

Sarah:

Yeah.

Nickie:

Wow. Doesn't time fly?

Sarah:

Yeah.

Nickie:

I must say, Sarah, since meeting you then, it's been a real joy to see your career develop and watching it on social media, hearing the fantastic work that you've been doing. So it's great that you can join us here today to talk about that work.

Sarah:

Yeah.

Nickie:

Let's start then with, you've done a lot of TV work. I'd forgotten about the A Word that you were in. I watched you on Upstairs, Downstairs. Brilliant work. Also recently, you've been in Jellyfish at the National Theatre. What's been your journey into acting? How did you get into it?

Sarah:

It all started when I did storytelling with my mother and sister.

Nickie:

What kind of storytelling did you do?

Sarah:

I think ... I can't remember the books that my mum read because it was ages ago when I was a little girl. Yeah.

Nickie:

Was it the way that your mum read the stories to you that you really enjoyed it?

Sarah:

I did really enjoy it because her mother read fairy tales to me and my sister in bed, so it's like a family ...

Nickie:

Family tradition?

Sarah:

Family tradition. Yeah.

Nickie:

Yeah. Did you kind of act the characters out then as she was reading them, or did she act them out for you?

Sarah:

My brain was going to a different part of the world.

Nickie:

In what way?

Sarah:

Because I love to play those characters.

Nickie:

Oh, really?

Sarah:

If I had the chance, yeah.

Nickie:

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. What would have been your favourite character to play in a fairy tale?

Sarah:

Maybe a fantasy character.

Nickie:

Okay. Yeah.

Sarah:

Yeah. Or maybe someone that's evil.

Nickie:

Oh, okay. I see you. Yeah. Evil character. Yeah. Brilliant. You started with storytelling with your mum and your sister, and then what happened? Did you go to any kind of drama school? Did you have any acting training?

Sarah:

It was very slow at the start when I was a kid, and I was not ready for a professional job. They found me.

Nickie:

Really? What was that job then? What was your first professional job?

Sarah:

My first big break was on television. It was on Peak Practice.

Nickie:

Peak Practise. Wow. I remember that one. That was the doctors in the peaks, wasn't it?

Sarah:

Yeah.

Nickie:

What was your role in that?

Sarah:

I was playing a daughter and I was working alongside Susan Brown.

Nickie:

Okay. How did you get that role? Did you have to audition?

Sarah:

I had an audio audition and I recorded my voice and they seemed to like my voice and they were very interested for me to be taking this part-time on Peak Practice.

Nickie:

Sure. Okay. So Peak Practise ... I always say no. Let me start again. Did you enjoy that role on Peak Practise?

Sarah:

I did, very much. It was great fun. It was lovely to work with Susan Brown.

Nickie:

From there, did you feel like ... Had you got the acting bug?

Sarah:

Yeah. It really kind of catched onto me. Yeah.

Nickie:

What happened after that to then lead on to other work?

Sarah:

I think that there's more work that I have done.

Nickie:

Did you get an agent after Peak Practise? Is that how you started getting more roles?

Sarah:

Well actually, it all started when I met Andy Hay and he introduced me to Conway Van Gelder and I got onto their books and they give me a well and give me more acting jobs, which is great at that time.

Nickie:

Yeah. It's brilliant. They're a big agent to be part of. Who's Andy Hay?

Sarah:

Andy Hay is a casting director.

Nickie:

Brilliant.

Sarah:

Yeah.

Nickie:

Cool. That was your route in then? It found you rather than you finding a career in that way? Can we talk a little bit about Jellyfish, which has been your recent acting job, which started at the Bush Theatre?

Sarah:

Yes.

Nickie:

Then, transferred to the National Theatre. It was written by Ben Weatherill. How did you get involved in the project?

Sarah:

Ben saw me in Crocodiles. He was on my TV work. Ben wanted to write a story about learning disabilities. He then started on Jellyfish after he saw me.

Nickie:

Oh, wow. That was Crocodiles that you were in at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester. Ben saw you on that and that inspired him to write Jellyfish?

Sarah:

Yes.

Nickie:

Can you tell us a little bit about the story of Jellyfish?

Sarah:

The story about Jellyfish is when Ben started to do Jellyfish, he saw what a real world was like and it can be very cruel. That's how he got to write Jellyfish, about people hurting other people and things like that. That's how he started to have a play with Jellyfish and he based it on real life really.

Nickie:

Who's your character in Jellyfish? What's the name of your character?

Sarah:

My character was Kelly.

Nickie:

What happens to Kelly in Jellyfish?

Sarah:

Kelly was ... She's sometimes sensitive and doesn’t get on with her mother because she really is eager to get her into trouble, get her into the police for murdering her baby basically.

Nickie:

Okay. Wow. What happens to Kelly? Did she meet someone?

Sarah:

She falls in love with a non-disabled man.

Nickie:

Right. What happens to their relationship?

Sarah:

She loves Neil very much and Neil loves her. It's based on a true story.

Nickie:

Oh, is it? Wow. Is it your true story?

Sarah:

No, it isn't.

Nickie:

Yeah. Meets Neil, they fall in love. Do they try and go away somewhere? Do they go to a hotel or something? I haven't seen it, but yeah.

Sarah:

Yeah. Well basically, they do go on holiday but it's ... I can't take anything away because I'm not contracted to say. It's still with them, but it's about adopting and testing.

Nickie:

Okay. Cool. What was it like going from the Bush Theatre that's quite a small theatre to then being on stage in the Dorfman at the National Theatre? Was it quite a big change?

Sarah:

Yeah, it's big change and I love doing it while at the National Theatre. It was like a dream come true to me. The other boy was so lovely, helpful and very, very useful. It was great.

Nickie Miles W.:

The Dorfman is quite a nice theatre, isn't it, to perform in and be in?

Sarah:

Yeah.

Nickie:

What was it like? See, on Jellyfish, you worked closely with Ben, the writer. He's a non-disabled writer. Was he open to listening to your thoughts and your ideas?

Sarah:

I don't speak that much really to him, but I was listening to him and my mother talk and that was helpful. I feel like I was in the conversation.

Nickie Miles W.:

You were in the conversation?

Sarah:

Yeah.

Nickie:

That's good. That's really good. He said he took things on board that you came up with?

Sarah:

Yeah. He really understood me, really.

Nickie:

Are you still friends with Ben? Do you think there's going to be Jellyfish 2?

Sarah:

I don't know if there's going to be Jellyfish 2, but I know he'll be listening to this. I don't know if he's coming back or not, but we'll see, so fingers crossed.

Nickie Miles W.:

Is the rumour right that it might be going to television? Are you allowed to say?

Sarah:

No, I'm not really allowed to say. Knowing Ben he doesn’t want to say anything, it’s the story of it. Yeah.

Nickie:

Would you love to do Jellyfish again?

Sarah:

I would love to do Jellyfish again and I'm hoping if they give me the green light.

Nickie:

Yeah. That would be great because I didn't get to see it and I want to see it.

Sarah:

Yeah.

Nickie:

Tell us a little bit about the TV work that you've done. We've mentioned Upstairs, Downstairs, The A Word, Holby City, Call the Midwife, Peak Practice. What's it been like working in television?

Sarah:

It's fantastic because I can play many roles on television as I can do. Because I have been known for my work and I did some readings for theatre plays as well with new theatre that I mentioned to you earlier in Newcastle.

Nickie:

Yeah.

Sarah:

I also did a reading for them and they saw it. They saw Jellyfish when I was in it, and another theatre who went to go and see Jellyfish saw me and they wanted to do another reading for me for another theatre.

Nickie:

Brilliant. Lots of theatre work rolling in from Jellyfish?

Sarah:

Yeah.

Nickie:

What was it like, because I know Jellyfish was new writing?

Sarah:

Yeah.

Nickie:

Was the script changing all the time?

Sarah:

Well, we always discuss it with the director, Tim Hall and Ben. We collaborate with the amount of words that comes into the script. That's why Ben has had to rejig the scripts a lot.

Nickie:

And to take into account not giving last minute changes?

Sarah:

Well, we did have last minute changes, yeah, I must admit, but ...

Nickie:

How was that?

Sarah:

It was good.

Nickie:

Was it okay or stressful?

Sarah:

No, it wasn't stressful. It was okay with me because I did it before, it was fine and it was great.

Nickie:

Because I know sometimes with some actors ... For me as a director working on new writing, that there is always that feeling of, "Oh, no. Not another script change." Also even up to like previews, writers are changing lines and things for people to say. I know sometimes that can feel quite stressful. Was it okay on Jellyfish?

Sarah:

It was okay.

Nickie:

Was it quite exciting?

Sarah:

Yeah. It was quite exciting. Yeah. I loved working with the team of Jellyfish and great actors and it was just fantastic because we had Nicky Priest who also did a supporting role in Jellyfish and he was so funny and bright.

Nickie:

What role did he play in Jellyfish?

Sarah:

He was a friend to kelly. Of course, it's really hard for him to get anymore acting jobs and he discussed it with me and my mum and I totally understand where he stands. Yeah.

Nickie:

Difficult in what way?

Sarah:

Because he has a disability. Yeah. But it's not about the disability, it's about the person.

Nickie:

Do you think it is harder for disabled people to get acting roles?

Sarah:

It is hard. I'm aware of the barriers but I'm determined to break those barriers.

Nickie:

Yeah. I think we all are, aren't we? It's that. How do you think that we can break those barriers? Is it about working with more people, having those collaborations like you had with Ben? Working with writers to get our stories centre stage? What do you think it is? How do you see yourself breaking down those barriers?

Sarah:

I'd like to break these barriers because I work with the government, of course, and disability government and there were ... These barriers does exist and we need to do something and we have to act now.

Nickie:

Yeah. We do, don't we? We have to make the change and make more opportunities available to deaf and disabled actors, directors, writers, creatives. Do you do that through part of your work with Mencap?

Sarah:

Yes. I do a lot of Mencap because I'm a celebrity ambassador of Mencap.

Nickie:

What kinds of things do you have to do as a celebrity ambassador?

Sarah:

Well, what I do is we did a video called Getting It Right for Mencap basically.

Nickie:

Just spreading the word of Mencap and trying to make changes?

Sarah:

Yeah. We're trying to get messages out from Mencap saying that we need to change values, we need to get learning disability people into work. Yeah.

Nickie:

I love the title being a celebrity ambassador. To me, I imagine you turning up in a flamboyant ball gown and having lots of brilliant dinners and lunches with loads of celebrities. Is that the case?

Sarah:

Not really. No. I don’t have the experience of that, but I was nominated for my performance in Jellyfish.

Nickie:

Oh, brilliant.

Sarah:

I met Mark Gatiss there who's a writer and actor.

Nickie:

Oh, really? Yeah? Mark Gatiss, as in League of Gentlemen? Yeah.

Sarah:

Yeah. League of Gentlemen and he does a fine work with Dracula with Steven Moffat.

Nickie:

I know you said you'd love to play like an evil character earlier.

Sarah:

Yeah.

Nickie:

Would you love to be in something that Mark Gatiss has written and Steven Moffat?

Sarah:

Yeah, I would love that.

Nickie:

Yeah?

Sarah:

Yeah.

Nickie:

Maybe is that something like a Dracula spinoff or maybe ...

Sarah:

Maybe. If I'm going to be a Dracula, yeah, I could do that.

Nickie:

Yeah. Exactly. Come on, Mark Gatiss. Come on, get and write the part for Sarah Gordy. Come on. Do it. With television work and you have done loads, I'm quite jealous that you did Peak Practise. I used to love the Peak Practise fleeces. Upstairs, Downstairs, what was that like? That was a kind of period drama to work on.

Sarah:

Yeah. Having worked period dramas, but I knew the writer, Heidi Thomas who wrote Upstairs, Downstairs and Call the Midwife and she's a lovely lady. I love working with her and she's great to be with. We read the story before we start the actual filming. Yeah.

Nickie:

Yeah. You get to understand your character and the storyline?

Sarah:

Yeah, I understand the storyline as I research disability history and how they're treated in 1930s. It was when Hitler put a firm grip on Britain and got the soldiers determined to kill people like me.

Nickie:

And me.

Sarah:

And many disabilities. Yeah, and you as well. That, to me, was quite upsetting.

Nickie:

Yeah. Do you find it difficult then to distance that feeling to then be in this character? Do you know what I mean?

Sarah:

Yeah.

Nickie:

Like doing all this research and you find out, "Wow. This is how people were treated," to then go and have to play a role at that time. Is that difficult? Does it feel quite emotional?

Sarah:

Well, when I started to research it, I feel like crying but I'm lucky I wasn't born that year. Thank God.

Nickie:

Yeah. Hopefully, it doesn't get that bad again with the present government. What about with Call the Midwife? That was a really big storyline, wasn't it?

Sarah:

It was. Yeah.

Nickie:

Tell us about that. What was the storyline for that one?

Sarah:

Well, I did research the history back in 1950s and people like us with the learning disabilities lives in institutions and they hide away. It was great working on set of Call the Midwife because it is similar to again, Heidi Thomas, which is just fantastic. Then, I get to meet Miranda Hart.

Nickie:

Oh Miranda, how was she?

Sarah:

She was great and we get on like a house on fire.

Nickie:

Brilliant.

Sarah:

I always call her twin sister and she calls me, "Hey, twin sister."

Nickie:

Oh, nice. That's good. Brilliant. What was your storyline in Call the Midwife?

Sarah:

She was pregnant at the time, because during the 1950s, it was a sin that ... Having sex with another learning disability man was a sin as well.

Nickie:

Wow. It's a big storyline.

Sarah:

It was a big storyline.

Nickie:

The research for that, did that feel quite emotional as well? Like being told it was a sin?

Sarah:

Yeah. It was back in that history. Because my mum always told me about her history because she was born after the war and she always tells me what love was like back then in 1950s, and she's a really good storyteller.

Nickie:

Your mum?

Sarah:

Yeah.

Nickie:

Yeah. Well, she told you those stories when you were younger. They got you into acting, so she must be an amazing storyteller.

Sarah:

Yeah.

Nickie:

What was love like then in the 50s?

Sarah:

Well, I wasn't born that year.

Nickie:

Yeah. But what your mum said?

Sarah:

What my mum said, she didn't have not much to eat. Only she had toast with spaghetti bolognaise and that’s all she ate, and they say it was tougher during those times in the 1950s.

Nickie:

It's tough times, isn't it? After the war. Which do you prefer? Would you say you prefer working in television or theatre?

Sarah:

Both really because I love to play a role, whatever my acting job entails.

Nickie:

Is there something different about for theatre, is it that feeling of it being live?

Sarah:

I love performing and I live audience, but on television, you only just read your lines really quick and then actually do it in 15 minutes.

Nickie:

Wow. You've got to be really on it, don't you?

Sarah:

Yeah.

Nickie:

Yeah. Is there something about television that you like working with camera?

Sarah:

I love being on camera because I can see my eyes and see my soul.

Nickie:

That's interesting, isn't it? The public like the characters that you're playing. Also, you talk quite fondly of the writer for Call the Midwife and Upstairs, Downstairs, also for Ben with Jellyfish. Do you think it's changing because writers are taking notice of different people's stories?

Sarah:

Yes. Absolutely. Yes, it does because with writers like Ben, they see the opportunity to work with somebody that is different and I find that really, really encouraging.

Nickie:

That's how that feeling that it should be really that stories for theatre or television or film need to involve everyone. They need to be representative of society.

Sarah:

Yeah.

Nickie:

Do you think there's more training available for learning disabled actors, actor training?

Sarah:

I don't know if that ever existed, but I do know that does exist now. Yeah.

Nickie:

You got Access All Areas?

Sarah:

You got Access All Areas. We have [inaudible 00:25:30] as well that helps learning disability actors to be onstage, onscreen.

Nickie:

Also yourself, you're showing people that it is possible and also for somebody that got on Peak Practise without any training or anything and then how your career was grown. It's just been fantastic to watch. Do you think hopefully in the next five to 10 years’ time, we'll see a lot more learning disabled actors on our stages on our screens?

Sarah:

Yes. Yeah. Because in theatres, I'm aware that there's barriers ... Going to be on stage, there's some barriers as well, but I'm trying to break those as well. I just need to know what the barriers are, what the destructive barriers are in theatres, so I can actually do my work and try to get people to say ... Look at us not the disability.

Nickie:

Would you welcome people ... Maybe they could get in touch with you via us if people are facing those barriers in theatre, that they could get in touch with us and we could put them in touch with you and you can have that conversation with them?

Sarah:

Yeah.

Nickie:

Yeah? Will that be a good idea?

Sarah:

Yeah. That'd be good. Yeah.

Nickie:

Okay. Because a lot of theatre companies as well like Mind the Gap and HiJinx, they do work with learning disabled actors. Hopefully, we'll start to see a lot more actors on our stages and our screens in the future. That would be great, wouldn't it?

Sarah:

Yeah.

Nickie:

To see proper deaf and disabled representation across the board, and maybe we might also meet disabled writers as well that start writing such successful series such as Call the Midwife anyway.

Nickie:

We've just been chatting here a little bit about Drag Syndrome. Were you part of Drag Syndrome then?

Sarah:

I was the start of Drag Syndrome.

Nickie:

Really?

Sarah:

Yes.

Nickie:

What was your character called? Did you have a character name?

Sarah:

I have. Yeah. It was Jessica Rabbit.

Nickie:

Wow. What was that character like to play?

Sarah:

It was fantastic to play that because I don't have any bunny ears. Thank God.

Nickie:

Brilliant. Tell us about Drag Syndrome. What are Drag Syndrome for people that don't know?

Sarah:

Drag Syndrome is about getting all Down Syndrome people to dress up as drag queens. Sometimes I can dress up as a man.

Nickie:

Yeah. Drag kings.

Sarah:

Drag kings. Yeah. Then, going to lots of gigs. I've been to Mexico already and doing a world tour with America as well and things like that. Yeah.

Nickie:

It's really taking off, isn't it?

Sarah:

It's really taking off. Yeah.

Nickie:

Do you wish you were still part of Drag Syndrome?

Sarah:

Not really. No, because I've got other things I should do.

Nickie:

Yeah. You got lots going on.

Sarah:

I've got lots going on in my life.

Nickie:

Yeah. Do you think Drag Syndrome is an important project?

Sarah:

Yeah. It is important project to Daniel Vais. Yeah, definitely.

Nickie:

Who's Daniel?

Sarah:

Daniel is the one who organise everything with Down syndrome. Basically, he does Radical Beauty and then ...

Nickie:

What's Radical Beauty?

Sarah:

Radical Beauty is getting lots of down syndrome people to model.

Nickie:

Have you done modelling?

Sarah:

Yes, I have. Okay. I was the start of it.

Nickie:

Okay. Brilliant. Who did you model for? Was it with different companies?

Sarah:

It was very high photographers from Vogue Italia. Then, I went up to Elle Magazine and I started to model with Elle. Yeah.

Nickie:

Cool. Did they have models all around the world?

Sarah:

Yeah. Daniel goes around the world to find more models for Radical Beauty. These images are very important because we've got a book out already for these images and it's very important to show it in public, to show everybody what they are capable of.

Nickie:

Yeah. Exactly. To break those barriers, like you were talking about before, isn't it?

Sarah:

Yeah.

Nickie:

And to show people what learning disabled people can do.

Sarah:

Yeah.

Nickie:

One final question. What would you like to be doing in five year’s time.

Sarah:

There's a lot of things I haven't done that I want to do.

Nickie:

What are they?

Sarah:

Like voiceovers. I've done voice overs before, but I would like to do some more voiceovers.

Nickie:

What about musical?

Sarah:

I can't sing. That's my weakness.

Nickie:

You can lip sync like they do on Ru Paul. You can mime it.

Sarah:

Well, I can dance.

Nickie:

There you go then.

Sarah:

I can model, but I can't sing, but ...

Nickie:

We could dab that over. It'd be fine.

Sarah:

Yeah.

Nickie:

Okay. Brilliant. Well, thank you for taking the time to come in and talking to us today. It's been great to see you again and to catch up.

Sarah:

Thank you..