**The Disability And…Podcast Episode 15. Disability And…Film with Oska Bright**

Welcome to the Graeae and Disability Arts Online podcast Disability And... bringing together thoughtful discussion and debate. This month, David Parker chats with Matthew Hellett, Matthew Kennedy and Hugo Carson, about the Oscar bright Film Festival for people with learning difficulties, Asperger's, and autism. This podcast contains some strong language.

**Matthew Hellet**

My name is Matthew Hellet. I'm a filmmaker and I'm the lead programmer for Oska Bright Film Festival.

**David Parker**

And my name is David Parker. I work for Carousel which is an learning-disability-led arts organisation. I work as the film and digital senior producer. And one of the big Carousel projects is the Oska Bright Film Festival. So Matthew, tell us more about Oska Bright Film Festival.

**Matthew Hellet**

Well, we are simply the best. We are Oska Bright we're the world's leading international film festival. We're based in the UK, made by and for people with learning disabilities, autism, and it's a creative platform too

**David Parker**

who else works on the film festival?

**Matthew Hellet**

Well, we have about seven other committee members apart from myself.

**David Parker**

How do you work together as a team?

**Matthew Hellet**

Well, we work creatively like when we have a festival, we split into genres about people strong points. And, and then we discuss things creatively. And then yeah, it depends what we have coming in creatively as a when we have a film festival coming up, submissions open at the start of spring, and we split into small groups to discuss it. And when we don't have a film festival, we we go on tour, or we discuss other creative ideas.

**David Parker**

How often does the festival happen?

**Matthew Hellet**

Oh, our festival is every two years. something in between? We go and tour with funding from BFI.

**David Parker**

And you said you're the lead programmer.

**Matthew Hellet**

Yeah.

**David Parker**

How are your responsibilities different from the other members of the team?

**Matthew Hellet**

I've been doing this for two festivals now. So I know what I'm talking about. And I have the knowledge and the understanding and the creative process, and I write a lot of notes as well. So I've got to understand about what I'm talking about as well. It means I have to make some hard decisions and it's not always easy. Make those hard decisions.

**David Parker**

What sort of things do you find difficult?

**Matthew Hellet**

Well, saying no to people. But then on the optimistic side, people can enter their film into a different Film Festival, or, look at it again and try and improve their work and enter it into our next festival.

**David Parker**

So you haven't always been the lead programmer for Oska Bright?

**Matthew Hellet**

No, no, I've been on the festival committee now for about 10 years.

**David Parker**

All right, so cast your mind back to 10 years ago. How did you get involved in the project?

**Matthew Hellet**

Well, I made my first film back in 2004, Cooking with Matthew. It's a bit of a comedy film. And then I was asked back in the day would I would like to join a film committee at Oska Bright. But before I submitted my film, I hadn't heard of the film festival. Back then it was only one-day festival. Yeah, and then I've been on it. 10 years. But it's only in the past two festivals that I've programmed all the films.

**David Parker**

So Cooking with Matthew is your first film that you've ever made. Yeah. And have you made a few more films since then?

**Matthew Hellet**

Yeah, I made in total, six. One for the council. One about my ultra drag act black and white. One with funding from South East Dance. And one from a musical band associated with Carousel called Saving Gator. And I was asked if I could play a small part and I said yes, that'd be great.

**David Parker**

So and you said Cooking with Matthew is like a comedy film?

**Matthew Hellet**

Yeah, it was, and it won best overall film. I forgot to mention that. That's just a small detail. Yeah, it's only a small detail matter of, yeah.

**David Parker**

So it won best overall film in Oska Bright 2007 was it?

**Matthew Hellet**

2007, Yeah.

**David Parker**

So that was your first contact with the festival. What was it like being part of it and winning that award?

**Matthew Hellet**

It felt really great. And, and surprisingly and unreal, because I just turned up as part of the audience and I didn't expect my film to win. And I just was there with my support worker in the audience. And it felt great to have to felt recognised for my creative work, because it was only the first film that I made.

**David Parker**

Was it really different then, the festival? To what it is now?

**Matthew Hellet**

Yeah, yeah, the first one I did. With Sarah, the first one I did. It was just like a two day yeah, two days at the Old market. And then, but since then, all these years later, six or 8 years later the quality of films, not just in the UK but the quality has got better and better when people make and go on to do great work.

**David Parker**

Why do you think the work is getting better and stronger?

**Matthew Hellet**

I think people got more time to sit creatively either on their own or with creative support. But with owning it, we've come up with ideas but I also think that technology has got much better.

**David Parker**

So then after you joined Oska Bright in 2007 you made another film.

**Matthew Hellet**

I made theNeutral Journey and then I made Sparkle which was a black and white one. And then I made Mrs. Sparkle with funding from South East Dance.

**David Parker**

Tell us a little bit about Mrs. Sparkle then.

**Matthew Hellet**

Oh, so Mrs. Sparkle. She was a bit sassy, even back then. So Mrs. Sparkle was sassy, but just ordinary, but I dressed up in drag, because I felt that back when I was doing my Mrs. Sparkle film. Um, I just wanted to forget about my anxiety and my worries. And this is me. I wanted to forget my [inaudible], and this is who I am. And it felt great.

**David Parker**

And did you ever done anything like that before?

**Matthew Hellet**

No. So we had a make up artist and just one filmmaker.

**David Parker**

So did Mrs Sparkle have a kind of a life outside of those films.

**Matthew Hellet**

Well, I'd only just started out back then, during a small bit of drag, at the Blue Camel club. And it was all a bit new, but it felt really great, too. It felt really great to do something creatively different.

**David Parker**

And then you had the film, the funding from South East Dance. And how did that feel to do? To make that film? Did you show it in other festivals?

**Matthew Hellet**

Yeah, I don't if you know this, but it won an award in Canada at Picture This. And I had to travel there with someone to pick it up. Yeah, it was only my second time being back there. And then it got it was a quite high budget film back then.

**David Parker**

And what was it like presenting that film at another festival?

**Matthew Hellet**

Oh, gosh, yeah, it felt really great. I wasn't aware until about a month later that it won an award. So suddenly, I got this invite, but more than an invite because I had to go to another country which felt great. And then got there. And then someone says, oh, you have to dress up smart Matthew. And so yeah, I had my picture taken. It won best overall film in 2009.

**David Parker**

That's getting a little bit closer to when I joined Carousel, which was

**Matthew Hellet**

Oh, yeah, it was just before you joined Carousel.

**David Parker**

Yeah. The year, before I joined you and Steven, and Simon and Mark were in Australia.

**Matthew Hellet**

Yeah, that's right. Oh, God. Yeah. Yeah.

**David Parker**

Any stories to tell about that?

**Matthew Hellet**

Um, I dressed up in drag with another person with learning disabilities. On the walk, I got a bit drunk. And then I accidentally hit Simon on the head.

**David Parker**

What were you [doing] in Australia?

**Matthew Hellet**

Oh, right. Yeah. So so it came about we were lucky to have the funding back then, um, yeah, in 2011. And we were asked to, to teach or to learn your skills for people in Adelaide. And with [inaudible] learning disabilities and the basics of film. And since we left and got back, they set up their own film festival now

**David Parker**

Ahh fantastic. And that's so that's Sit Down, Shut Up and Watch.

**Matthew Hellet**

Yeah, Sit Down, Shut Up and Watch. Yeah.

**David Parker**

And how long were you out in Australia for?

**Matthew Hellet**

Oh gosh, six weeks. And it felt quite surreal coming back because of, you know, the time zones.

**David Parker**

It's quite a long trip, isn't it?

**Matthew Hellet**

Yeah, it was quite a long trip. Yeah, I've got a lot out of it creatively a lot out of it. It was it was also doing something different and challenging because I've been on a festival now for about 10 years.

**David Parker**

So it was a new challenge.

**Matthew Hellet**

Yes, it's a new creative challenge and I got mentored my mentor from the BFI. It was Emma Smart she does the programming for the films for BFI Flare. She does other work but she, yeah.

**David Parker**

And what was that mentoring process like for you?

**Matthew Hellet**

Yeah, it was really good. Like initially, and we had four meetings, but I took loads of notes. And I had support from you, but I took loads of notes. Then on the second one, I took even more notes because I felt a bit more prepared. So yeah, on the train journey home I felt a bit more prepared. So what can I, ideas what can I say to her? Or you know, what can I find some themes? Yeah, what can I say to her and my team back and Brighton. It was the start of my becoming lead programmer. And still to this day, I really like it a lot, I enjoy what I do. I think without Emma I wouldn't know how to balance the themes. I wouldn't know how to say no to filmmakers and to my team back in Brighton, the Carousel team, and also the committee. It's also about learning new things. I asked the committee with, yeah, with the support my colleague, um, you know, maybe they can split into like genres of films like sci fi, documentary, comedy, music, dance, drama. And then I asked my mentor, can I have a strand please for queer freedom? Being a gay man with a learning disability. That's no, yeah, I had the idea. But I wanted to know what she creatively thought of it. And like if it will work, and she said: 'Well, yeah, you own it Matthew, you're going to be the programmer and just try and creatively make it happen.' So, five months down the line, it happens. So it's almost learning to delegate my work, not just to my committee but to the Oska Bright team in the office. Back in Brighton.

**David Parker**

So in 2017, the Queer Freedom strand was born. One of the films you programmed was versions by Matthew Kennedy. And then Mattie came down to the festival.

**Matthew Hellet**

Um, for the first time, he came down, he got the funding from Creative Scotland.

**David Parker**

And what was it like to meet him?

**Matthew Hellet**

It felt really creatively great because I've never met somebody like me that's got queer and has got a learning disability. And like when we had the chat in the evening, we had so much in common and the conversation just flowed.

**David Parker**

Well, should we contact Matty and get him involved in this conversation? And then maybe you and him...

**Matthew Hellet**

Yes, that would be fab. Yeah.

**David Parker**

Okay, let's Mattie on, on the call.

**Mattie Kennedy**

Hi, I'm Matt Kennedy. I'm a filmmaker, writer, kind of all around artist. I'm from Glasgow, Scotland. I've been working with Oska Bright since 2015. It's kind of because of them that I've actually kind of been introduced to the learning disability arts scene, particularly down in Brighton because there's such a big scene down there. Finding out Oscar Bright was where I've kind of really found about of learning disability arts. And it's kind of like, I think it's actually kind of how I kind of pronounced myself as a learning disability artist. So I'm Oh yeah, and I'm also LGBTQ plus as well from that community as well. So there's a slight overlap.

**David Parker**

Matthew and Matty started talking about a series of in-conversation events that they'd held across the UK in 2017 and 2018.

**Mattie Kennedy**

Basically, the events were events between myself and you know, Matthew Hellet, and it was basically film screenings of our films plus a selection of other films. And then we would go into discussions about what it means to be a learning disabled, slash queer artist. And how we navigate the sort of, I suppose the arts community in general. As queer learning disabled filmmakers and just, you know, expressing ourselves and our identities through that specific medium.

**Matthew Hellet**

I was talking about it the other day with Mattie, we've done about four. We've done Brighton, we done Bristol, we done Glasgow Mattie's home city, and then we done Canterbury.

**Mattie Kennedy**

Yeah. Because I think the first event that we that we did

**Matthew Hellet**

It was almost 4 years ago.

**Mattie Kennedy**

So, you know, I mean, I think that's another thing that we don't think about a lot. I think with events like this. It's important to kind of archive these events.

**Matthew Hellet**

Because you don't want anything get lost or forgotten about, especially in this pandemic we're in we've got to try and work creatively to the best of our ability, which I'm sure we're doing that anyway. But you're right it's good to keep archives of stuff.

**Mattie Kennedy**

I think. I mean, I know for me personally, I've got a responsibility to keep your history and my history from, like invisiblised.

**Matthew Hellet**

Creatively alive. Just to keep it going. I think Yeah, you're right, Matthew, because without the medium of film. I don't know about you but without, for me it was helpful my second or third films to a form of like expression, a form of like who I am and what I represent.

**Mattie Kennedy**

I think for me, my filmmaking journey has been quite, it's been kind of weird in some way because my first two films, they were done with no money at all. I didn't have an arts organisation in my corner, you know, doing it all on my own and my family were very, very supportive. And then obviously, I found out about you know, film festivals like Oska Bright, for example, and another festival which I'm sure you have heard me speak about, the Scottish Queer International Film Festival. They were supportive. They're a queer Film Festival here based in Glasgow. I mean they do they do a lot of film screenings here and in Scotland in general, but they've been they've been really supportive. But actually big shout to Project Ability who actually helped me make my third film, what was my third film called? Versions. And that was kind of like my breakout film. Because I hadn't really done anything kina like that up until then, because they were quite formative in my kinda breaking through.

**Matthew Hellet**

Um, yeah, like my first film Cooking with Matthew. Like I never heard of the arts organisation Carousel back in 2004. That was my first film I made just storyboarded it with a support worker and he did all the tech stuff, but I had no previous experience of making a film. No expression of art or drama through school or college.

**David Parker**

Yeah, well, I'm kinda the same with you, obviously going to special needs schools there weren't really any.

**Matthew Hellet**

No, no. There wasn't that facility there.

Aye, definitely it was kind of like, we don't do that sort of thing. And I think that can be quite discouraging sometimes.

**Matthew Hellet**

Yeah. And all I got to do was do a Christmas play, and got dressed up like a blinkin shepherd. Is this your best artform for the whole 12 bloody months? Anyway, C'est la vie.

**David Parker**

You both came to Oska Bright Film Festival as filmmakers first. Could you talk a little bit about your first experiences of connecting with the festival?

Well, my first connection with the festival was back in 2015.

**Matthew Hellet**

Yeah, it was. Yeah.

**Mattie Kennedy**

I had been granted funding from Creative Scotland. I mean, I was literally bricking it. I was just like, what if I don't get the funding, like, I really want to go down here and I'm really determined to get the funding. I was successful though. We managed to book all of our travel and our accommodation and I remember going down and just feeling really, really nervous because I wasn't, I didn't know what to expect. I was just thinking, right this is a new community. I'm coming into that I don't really know much about I mean, to be quite frank, for a very long time, I didn't realise that there was a learning disability arts community. It just kind of made me think, alright, there's, there's a community out there for people like me, who want to be artists who want to be in the community who want to make work. Because to be quite frank, for a very long time, I didn't realise that people with learning disabilities could even get a foot through. I just remember. Yeah, like sorta backstage area, that it was a really magical moment. I mean, it was just like, oh right there's someone here who's like yes, we have we have certain differences, but there are similarities. And I need to spend more time with this person. Because I know something great is going to happen from this friendship, not just friendship, but also this creative partnership too. I remember leaving on the first visit. And it was an 11-hour coach ride we were on. And I remember just getting on the coach and I didn't want to leave. I was just like I want to stay here, I don't want to go back home to Glasgow. And I just remember, like, literally, I don't know, I just got really emotional leaving the place. Because I really needed to be here. Like, I really needed to know that there was a place for me, a community of people that I could, I could just thrive with. And I think Oska Bright really showed me that and I immediately felt at home. Weirdly enough, even though you know, even though Brighton isn't my home. I say this to my mom all the time, like Brighton is kind of like my home away from home. It's like, my second home now really because I've been down to Brighton so much. I've lost count of how many times I've been to Brighton now. You know, due to my connection with you guys, you know what I mean, it's like, yeah, it's kind of like my second home now. What, about you, Matthew, what's your sort of first memories of Oska Bright?

**Matthew Hellet**

Um, just to be recognised for my first film and that inspired me to go on and to don't give up, not on the first film. I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for the creative work of Carousel because I didn't have the creative networks or platforms at school or further education. There just wasn't the opportunity back then. So without the input and the opportunity of Carousel I wouldn't be I wouldn't be here now to what I've achieved over the past like 12 years.

**David Parker**

How do you think we like hold on to like you were saying Mattie, like it's important to archive, the work that you've done and the work that you've done together. How do we get people to see that and recognise that more?

**Mattie Kennedy**

I don't actually, I don't know if I've told you this, Matthew, but I started up a project, I think it was about two, three years ago. And it was kind of like an online project that was kind of sharing all the material that I'd saved up from two Matthew and Matthew events that we did. The Brighton event and the Glasgow event, basically what I did was that I scanned all - I don't know if it was all the material don't quote me on that - but I think it was majority of the material. I basically scanned it and all the scans that I'd scanned, I'd posted up on to I think it was Tumblr. And I mean, to be quite frank, I don't know how much of an impact that's had because I don't know. I mean, it is still up there like people can view it. I mean, I suppose maybe I should post a link to the actual site. I actually called it the Matthew and Matthew archives project. I mean, that's one example that I can give. I mean, it's a bit of a ballsy move, but I think maybe I'd see maybe an exhibition. I've been thinking about that, like maybe an actual, like a physical exhibition where all the materials are shown. And people can look at it and people can judge for themselves, what these events kind of represent. I mean, I've been thinking about that a lot as well. I mean, I don't know about you Matthew, but personally for me, I would actually like to make, maybe a film based on the archives. But I don't know how I'd go about that. Maybe just, I mean, it's a weird one because I'm like how do you make a film using archive materials? It's been a thought in general for me, like, sort of making a film based around, not just the Matthew and Matthew archives, but just like making a film around learning disability archives in general. For me, like I was very influenced by sort of queer sort of feminist sort of cultural archives. I was kind of thinking, well, hold up, wait a minute here. Where are the Learning Disability Cultural archives? There's not a lot of conversation. That kind of made me angry a little bit, made me a bit frustrated. I'm well are our archives just I mean, are they are they are, you know, like, are they there? And if they are, why are by are the conversations not happening? Have they gone quiet? Have our histories gone quiet? And if so, how can we energise that conversation?

**Matthew Hellet**

Yeah, how can we energise it and keep it going? Especially in this Covid-19 pandemic that we're in. Yeah.

**Mattie Kennedy**

That being said, I do admit that the archives. It's a difficult one because I know archives have a bit of a, they have a bit of an academic context around them as well, which I think can be bit...you know, because not everyone knows what archives are. I think that's also another issue, the sort of accessibility around the language around archives as well. That's maybe another reason why there hasn't been a lot of conversation around it because archives and history are so grounded within academia.

**David Parker**

Matthew, you were talking about maybe making a documentary about your early days.

**Matthew Hellet**

Yeah, I was Yeah. I I still want to. I don't know how to go about it but I only started putting pencil to paper. About my coming out story when I was 27. It says in the book Made Possible, my mum says, I didn't know you come out in Malta. I said yeah mum, I was there for two weeks. And I told you both when I got back in the UK so hashtag that's how it is. I'd like to make a documentary. I don't think I've made one before and I would like to, yeah.

**Mattie Kennedy**

It's lovey to see you both and to catch up. This conversation was really really good. I really enjoyed it.

**Matthew Hellet**

Yeah, Yeah, me too.

**David Parker**

We said goodbye to Mattie. Now Matthew and I reflect a little bit on Oska Bright Film Festival 2019 and what the future holds. So we we just had a festival in November last year.

**Matthew Hellet**

Yeah, we do. Yes. But a very successful festival, yeah, over four days. 99 Films over 7 screenings. Yeah.

**David Parker**

Any highlights for you, any standout moments?

**Matthew Hellet**

Opening Night was just sheer, sheer great. You know I got told to move on with the guys from Drag Syndrome. So Drag Syndrome had entered their film in 19. They entered into the festival. It was a real success. And then we had the q&a with them on the opening night, before the night had to be wrapped up before day two, and we asked them loads of questions. And they're such lovely people. And I just wish I had the opportunity to chat to them a bit further. For people who haven't seen the film, it's about a group of four people and their artistic director. And they get into drag as drag artists and it follows them. They're all quite strong characters and also strong personalities, which we saw quite clearly from the film and and also from the q&a. I think they're the first in the country, who have a learning disability and are drag artists. I got told to wrap it up and I didn't bloody well want to, but I had to. So that went really well. On day 2 we did the meet and greet with European partners, and me and Mattie and San from Glasgow and yeah, that went really well that went really successful as well.

**David Parker**

So we're in this situation now we're in the middle of, or we're kind of towards the end of lockdown. I hope.

**Matthew Hellet**

Yeah. I'm hoping that too now, David, because I'm getting a bit restless I dunno about you...

**David Parker**

Maybe by the time this goes out, things will be much more open again.

**Matthew Hellet**

Yeah, I think you're right. By the time this goes out things will be much more open. Yeah. Then we can't take the film's on tour, now can we cos of COVID-19? So instead of going on tour what we're doing every month or every other month, we putting on our online festival and it's called Oska Bites. Each month or every other month there'll be a different screening up there. And then I've been charged about what it's called and what goes out there, as well as with creative help from our committee members as well.

**David Parker**

It's been really nice to make contact with the filmmakers again.

**Matthew Hellet**

Yes, it has especially Hugo.

**David Parker**

Hugo Carlson. So he won an award at the festival.

**Matthew Hellet**

Yeah, he did for his animation, You and I. And I totally associate with how we feel sometimes. We can even in this COVID-19 lockdown we can be our own worst critic. If we make a film and we think oh, it does that not look too good. I'm not too sure. So I totally get with what he was saying.

**David Parker**

Here' Hugo reflecting on his time at Oska Bright Film Festival in 2019.

**Hugo Carlson**

It felt surreal and amazing to me in a word. And I still feel very honoured by it. It's been a great thing for me mentally. Because during times when I feel down and have doubts about my art, like it's not good enough. I mean, it's not worth the effort. Then I can remind myself that the good people at Oska Bright Film Festival, thought my film was good enough for the award. So, yeah, that's been a pretty big thing for me.

**David Parker**

Where do you see the future of the festival then, what about Oska Bright 2021?

**Matthew Hellet**

Wow, it's our creative future. I'm hoping by next year, things would have moved on a lot on our site and that we can we can start planning our tenth birthday. 2021 will be Oska Bright's 10th birthday.

**David Parker**

Last year you were contacted by Saba Salman.

**Matthew Hellet**

Yeah.

**David Parker**

Tell us a little bit about that.

**Matthew Hellet**

Oh, well, she wanted initially and I agreed, to write a book about what people with learning disabilities can achieve. And the story behind it, because a lot people don't hear it. Well, particularly in the mainstream, they don't hear about it.

**David Parker**

When you were doing the research for that chapter, looking back over all of the things that you've done with Carousel, you know, there's a lot...

**Matthew Hellet**

Yeah, there was a lot of things.

**David Parker**

Including them like dance and performance on stage.

**Matthew Hellet**

Yeah, dance. And I taught the students creative, like a dance project. Back in the day. Yeah.

**David Parker**

And so, the books out now and it's, it's called Made Possible.

**Matthew Hellet**

Yes, it's called Made Possible. Yeah.

**David Parker**

So people should check that out available from all good bookstores. What are your ambitions now?

**Matthew Hellet**

What creatively or personally or just life in general? That's a big question, David. Well, I'd like to make a new film and I've storyboarded it. I'd like to write a documentary about when I came out as gay because it was really hard being Catholic back in the day. And then, and then creatively looking forward. I'd like to do more, like some theatre work in the future, but only if that's possible.

**David Parker**

All of your films have been character based.

**Matthew Hellet**

Yeah, you're right. You're absolutely right. They've all been character based. And I was looking through some old photos. And yeah, and I was 27 when a came out as gay in a Catholic country, Malta, though now it's more accepting. But yeah, I'd like to make a documentary about how hard it was and on my journey.

**David Parker**

What's the first thing you're going to do when lockdown ends?

**Matthew Hellet**

Oh, what's the first thing I'm going to do? Well, you know, I'd like to sit in a coffee shop and have a cup of coffee. I miss doing that. I'll just have a simple lunch out, I miss doing that.

**David Parker**

I found myself really missing the cinema the other day.

**Matthew Hellet**

Yeah, I know me too. Oh, god, you feel the same way about it is well, do you? I find it really hard not to go to the cinema. I've missed going to the cinema as well.

**David Parker**

Well, Matthew, it's been lovely chatting to you.

**Matthew Hellet**

Yes, and you. So where can people go to watch Oska Bites? Oska Bright's website and also check out our social media pages as well. I know this is hard but keep smiling, stay positive, that's what I'm trying to do myself.

**Ian Rattray**

The Second Oska Bites online Film Festival is on Thursday the sixth of August at 7pm to be screened live on Facebook, and later on oskabright.org/oskabites. Presented with support from the BFI Love Bites is a celebration of LGBTQ+ learning disability culture with three outstanding films, interviews with filmmakers and an introduction from queer freedom and Oscar brights Film Festival programmer Matthew Hellett.

Visit graeae.org and www.disabilityarts.online for details of productions events, interviews, opinions, reviews and learning opportunities.