**Disability Arts Online and Graeae present The Disability And…Podcast. Episode 16 Disability and…The Mainstream with Robert Softley Gale**

**Welcome to the Graeae and Disability Arts Online podcast Disability And... bringing together thoughtful discussion and debate. This month Joe Turnbull, assistant editor of Disability Arts Online chats with Robert Softley Gale, writer, actor, activist, and Artistic Director of Birds of Paradise Theatre Company, about Disability And...the Mainstream. This podcast contains strong language.**

**Joe Turnbull**

I'm here with actor, writer, activist and artistic director of Birds of Paradise. Robert Softley Gale, welcome to the Disability And podcast, Robert. How are you doing?

**Robert Softley Gale**

Yeah, good, thanks.

**Joe Turnbull**

Basically today we're gonna be talking about disability and mainstream. I mean, mainstream is one of those terms I feel like means something slightly different depending on what your position is to the mainstream.

**Robert Softley Gale**

Completely.

**Joe Turnbull**

What do you think? What do you mean by the mainstream when you're talking about the mainstream?

**Robert Softley Gale**

I mean, I think often the meaning of it has changed over the years. We have been working in arts and disability for oh, 19 years and feel what it meant back then is quite different from what it that means now. I think back then, it was a euphemistic way of saying the people who make good work. They all spoke of making disability work, becoming more mainstream. And what they meant was it being a little bit less crap. I think in some ways we had to call that out and say, actually that is what you mean, let's say that. Whereas now I think it means something different now I think we recognise that. That work by disabled artists had something to say that non-disabled artists can't say that we are something distinct, we have something outside of the mainstream. Problem with that is every artist is saying something different, so you end up with so many differnt pockets, so actually, is there a mainstream left?

**Joe Turnbull**

It becomes quite diffuse.

**Robert Softley Gale**

Yeah, completely. Yeah, basically I hope we've moved away from it being a euphamistic way of saying, of talking about quality, because quality is quality, whatever you are in relation to the mainstream. You can be crap and still be part of the mainstream.

**Joe Turnbull**

There's plenty of mainstream crap!

**Robert Softley Gale**

Arguably, you're more crap if you're part of the mainstream. All of that doesn't really answer your question but...

**Joe Turnbull**

No, that's good. I just I wonder if the the sort of push towards professionalisation was a little bit behind that as well. I feel like there was a big push in the last 10-15 years about professionalising, in inverted commas,

**Robert Softley Gale**

I think also, funding properly. Like 2012 was only 8 years ago and all of the Unlimited stuff that happened then, all of that money that investment that happened was massive. I think we're still seeing the impact of that, we're still seeing artists who were given substantial investment and are still benefitting from that now. I think yeah, that had a massive impact.

**Joe Turnbull**

I mean, for me when I think of the mainstream, just as a concept, to me, it usually speaks of something about mass appeal or appealing to lots of people or even lowest common denominator if you take that to its logical conclusion. But when I looked up, just out of interest, I looked up the definition of mainstream. I thought it was worth looking because that's just my conception in my head. But it's quite interesting in a disability perspective, because the definition of mainstream is something that's generally considered normal (inverted commas), or conventional, which I think...

**Robert Softley Gale**

How boring!

**Joe Turnbull**

That is so interesting, in a way if we think about disability arts often defining itself in relation or opposition to the mainstream. But no wonder if the definition of mainstream is what's generally considered 'normal' or 'conventional'.

**Robert Softley Gale**

Thing is we're never going to be that you know, find me a disabled artists who wants to be normal or conventional. I haven't met one yet. So, yeah completely. I think it's a really loaded term as well because it can be used by funders and and by people with power to judge, but also to seperate people. To say well you're closer to the mainstream than you are and therefore we're making a value judgement about what you do. That's something to be very wary off.

**Joe Turnbull**

Also I think in terms of defining the mainstream. Again when I think of it, it's almost easier to think about what it's not than what it is.

**Robert Softley Gale**

Yeah, I think like the idea that disabled artists will ever be part of the mainstream. Really sort of bothers me I think it's not something to aspire to. But also when you talk about normal or perceived to be conventional. I think back to things like the affirmative model of disability that says well, disability is normal. We all in society unless we get hit by a bus are going to become disabled. So, I think this is quite important because as disabled people we're walking this line between actually being the norm and being the state that we're all going to end up at some point. But also rejecting the norm so powerfully and in some cases violently, I want to say. Not violent. But there's a real.... amongst the disabled artists I know, work with and love with the real rejection of this mainstream. Where we go no that's not who we are. We're over here and this is who we are. And I guess that's something as well is that so much of our work, certainly my work, comes from defining myself and saying this is who I am as a disabled artist as a man etc. etc. Once you start defining yourself as an artist how can you be part of the mainstream? We can. To give something a definition is to describe it as what it is, rather than seeing it as the norm. Does that make sense?

**Joe Turnbull**

Yeah. Have you had any first hand brushes with the mainstream? Have you ever had any experiences where you feel like oh, I'm in a mainstream context here. This feels weird, or maybe not?

**Robert Softley Gale**

I mean, most recently, My Left (Right) Foot the show that we did at the Fringe in 2018 with the National Theatre of Scotland. And it was a big musical, singing, dancing. It was a very mainstream piece of theatre, we packed out to like 400 people every night, who were all loving songs about spastics, you know. For me, that was a thing of taking a very mainstream form but then subverting it in ways that people were not expecting. And from that we were getting awards and going to ceremonies and stuff. We very much became part of the mainstream establishment with that show. And that was a weird. That was a weird experience because in a way you realise that we're all pretending to be part of something we're all pretending that we really know what we're doing but we're also pretending that we're part of this mainstream establishment when actually you just got a bunch of artists, producers, other people, trying to make work, trying to get on with it. And that's all we are.

**Joe Turnbull**

Quite interesting that you described My Left (Right) Foot as quite a mainstream show, in some ways that it's like a traditional musical and Purposeless Movements is probably not a particularly mainstream show in its content. And yet, that's the piece that was on the main stage. You know, it was at Edinburgh International Festival and sold out every night, as I know that you're saying My Left (Right) Foot was also sold out. But in a way, Edinburgh International Festival, in theatre terms that's quite a mainstream setting but it's not necessarily a mainstream show, I don't think, is it?

**Robert Softley Gale**

Yeah, completely. You can't get much more establishment than the Edinburgh International Festival, but I guess the form of that piece was still quite, still quite distinct from what people were exepcting. And that is one of the reasons that I wouldn't describe it as being as mainstream but again, we're talking about gradients of mainstreamness, and that all becomes a bit weird. My Left (right) Foot had more mass appeal, whereas Purposeless Movements as a dance, movement and theatre piece, has has a little bit less mass appeal, but was still pretty much part of the establishment.

**Joe Turnbull**

It's interesting. Yeah. Do you think either of those pieces were made with more mainstream audiences in mind when you conceived them?

**Robert Softley Gale**

Definitely My Left (Right) Foot was, because it was made for Birds of Paradise's 25th anniversary year, we decided to make it as a piece that had to have quite a big impact on the sector and on Scottish Theatre. So a musical became the obvious thing to go for. I'm a long-time fan of musicals. I keep that quiet because, it's not cool and it's a bit too mainstream. As a theatremaker if you say you like musical people will say 'well you're not really a theatre maker are you?' I kept that vaguely quiet for quite a while. But when it came to making a piece for the 25th year coproduction with the National Theatre of Scotland it had to be big and it had to have mass appeal, so a musical became the obvious choice.

**Joe Turnbull**

Although I haven't seen that piece, from what I gather about it though, even though maybe it's a slightly more mainstream presentation. It seems like there's quite a lot of in jokes that are really for the disability community in there.

**Robert Softley Gale**

Yeah.

**Joe Turnbull**

And so you're subverting it in that way.

**Robert Softley Gale**

And also the in-jokes are almost exclusively about non-disabled people, and this is what I think a lot of people don't always get about my work. yes, I'm taking the piss but I'm taking the piss, either of myself or of non-disabled people. Because they're ripe to be taking the piss out of. And so yeah, again, it's that thing of taking a form and taking a structure and a format that people are very familiar with. And then subverting so they get something that they're not expecting. It' what we try to keep doing.

**Joe Turnbull**

Yeah, that's interesting. Do you think I think there's a tendency - I don't know, I go to a lot of conferences and talking shops aimed at the disability arts sector or certainly, with a good representation of that - And it does almost feel like there's something of an obsession with this idea of the mainstream. Do you think we're a bit obsessed with them mainstream in the disability arts world?

**Robert Softley Gale**

yeah, I think we are still. A lot of sectors go through periods of maturity and of becoming more established, but they're not necessarily more mainstream. I think part of that is about comparing yourself to others, to the establishment and to the mainstream. I think the disability arts movement still, I think we're beginning to come out of that phase, or hope we are, but I think we're still quite obsessed with how we postion ourselves in relation to this mainstream audience and what we can give to them and what they want from us, and all of those questions. They're all great questions. As a theatremaker I'm always asking the questions of what my audience want. But I think there comes a point where you you go bugger it, you know they're going to get what they're going to get.

**Joe Turnbull**

Do you think, I get a sense that some of the younger generation of disabled artists coming through are actually slightly more obsessed with this idea of the mainstream. Because it seems like a lot of them aren't as connected to the rights movement that has come before and a lot of them aren't actually versed in the social model and things. And so all that they've seen, the culture that they consume is they kind of come from a context of consuming mainstream culture and engaging in mainstream culture. And, and it seems like a lot of the younger artist coming through are kind of maybe more obsessed with this wanting to make it in the mainstream world. Whereas those, those who've kind of been through that longer journey are a bit more like 'well fuck the mainstream two fingers to it.' We don't need it.

**Robert Softley Gale**

Does that mean I'm part of the older generation now?

**Joe Turnbull**

That's not to say it's the old gaurd or whether it's the vanguard, I'm not sure.

**Robert Softley Gale**

That's a sad reality that I'm having to deal with. I very quickly went from the young face, to the old granddad. But absolutely I think younger disabled people now are growing up around non-disabled peers. And that's fantastic,it's what we were all fighting for, for decades, so it's great. But I think there's definitely less of a disability identity, amongst those young people. I'm doing a bit of work just now making a show for 7-12-year-olds part fo that is asking what it is to be a young disabled person, in 2020 because I'm 40 this year. So I'm definitely not a young disabled person. The problem with asking that question is they don't always see themselves as disabled people. And for me as an older disabled person that's a difficult thing to pickand go well what does that mean? Is that a good thing or is that a bad thing, or is it a bit of both. Probably. I think there's definitely a sense that for young disabled people because they've been part of that mainstream from birth why would they want to not be. It's completely understandable they've always been part of that why would they now step outside of that to develop their identity.

**Joe Turnbull**

But it definitely sort of gives us an insight into what we would lose if you don't have spaces that are disability specific and places where the disability community can come together. And if we're all mainstream, or it becomes so integrated that you don't have that, then you definitely lose something as well. So of course, you know, inclusion and integration and things like that, that they have their upsides, but they definitely have their downsides, right?

**Robert Softley Gale**

Completely, but it's not either or, we need to hold onto that. The worry is that one becomes easier or cheaper than the other so you end up with an either or. But I think as long as we hold onto our spaces. But also as I'm saying that I'm thinking well these things grow and develop organically. We haven't got a lot of control over how we all gather. If we do start to lose our disability spaces then either people will recognise that and fight to keep them, or they won't and they'll go. For all we like to believe we've got control over everything. We haven't really. So you have to go with the flow.

**Joe Turnbull**

And in terms of listening to those young voices like through projects that you're talking about. You know, we have to reconfigure for each generation kind of needs to make its own way and forge its own path, doesn't it?

**Robert Softley Gale**

Also in making this piece I'm making with young people I can only write from my perspective. But I can also recognise that's different from theirs. I can help to give them a bit of a voice and start to reflect on how that's changed. But yeah, I am a 39-year-old disabled guy, so that's all I can really speak about. But there's quite a lot to that, that I can speak about.

**Joe Turnbull**

Do you think is there any sort of mainstream organisations, initiatives or things that you think are doing good work either with disabled people or around inclusion? I'm thinking Liz Carr on Silent Witnesses is quite a good example.

**Robert Softley Gale**

TV has made a massive step forward in the last 5-7 years. You every soap, now has or has had like a regular disabled character that's pretty big, you know. When I started that felt like a pipe dream. We have made big steps forward and yes we have to watch that doesn't get back. I know that Liz is about to leave Silent Witness, you know. So where's our next role model on primetime TV so we need to keep poking away at that. But I think were now in a less perilous position. Before it was one or two people that were holding it up for the whole disabled community. Now that there's more, we can relax a little bit and go they're there we're visible. And I think if tomorrow all disabled characters disappeared from soaps and TV people would go wait a minute, that's a bit weird. Whereas 10 years ago they weren't there and that wasn't weird. So in that way we've won a bit of an argument, I hope we have anyway. I think we've definitely moved forward. But we need to keep poking away at it and keep having that conversation.

**Joe Turnbull**

Yeah, I mean if we think of sort of the most, I try and think of the most mainstream institutions or mainstream things. Things like Hollywood and the Oscars always spring to mind. And year after year, the Oscars has this big diversity conversation. And disability is always left out of the diversity conversation, which it certainly feels like there's a big Rubicon to cross there. We're still not seeing that at that very top mainstream table.

**Robert Softley Gale**

That's why I felt like My Left Right Foot felt appropriate because it was commenting on a film that happened over 30 years ago, where a guy was cripping up and we still get that now, we haven't move beyond non-disabled actors playing disabled characters in Hollywood. One of the things that I always try to focus on is it's about the story that we're telling and the reason that I make work is because the stories of the disabled people haven't been told nearly enough. So they're not part of our culture nearly enough yet. And if mainstream stages, if hollywood or TV were telling these stories, then I could go back to bed and have a rest. But they're not, or when they are they're doing it from a very non-disabled perspective and that makes me go what right have they got to try to hijack my story and use it to their own ends. My Left Foot is the one I can speak about for years and years. At some level that was a story about Christy Brown, a guy with cerebral palsy in Ireland in the 30s and 40s. That was hijacked by Daniel Day Lewis. Because whenever you talk about My Left Foot cyou talk about Daniel Day Lewis you don't talk about Christy Brown. So that's the bit that hurts me, because it was his story. It wasn't Daniel Day Lewis'. We always talk about great acting being about being invisible but the character becoming visible and the actor somehow disappears. Now, you can debate whether that's real? But when it comes to non-disabled actors playing disabled actors, they're never tryong to be invisible, they're trying the opposite. They're trying to be recognised for how skillfull they are at imitating a cerebral palsy voice or movement or whatever. So, yeah, that's not acting.

**Joe Turnbull**

It feels even more problematic when it's I mean, it's problematic enough but when it's based on as you say, a real person in a real life story it feels something even more problematic about that.

**Robert Softley Gale**

Completely. So yeah, looking at the mainstream argument about film and Hollywood and going no, cripping up just has to stop. There's no valid basis for it. Yes you always hear that argument of acting is acting.

**Joe Turnbull**

So should a murderer play a murderer? And all that nonsense.

**Robert Softley Gale**

Yeah. There's a clear difference there because we don't see men playing women unless there's a reason for that. We don't see white people playing black people. So somehow we recognise that gender and race aren't something that you can just imitate the other. And somehow that's fine, but we don't see disability in that same category. We still see disability as this add-on and also twe see disability as not being able to do something, So if a non-disabled person can pretend that they can't do that thing then they're disabled. Now we, all your listeners know that disability is a cultural experience, it's a lived experience etc. etc. but we still haven't quite got that over to the mainstream.

**Joe Turnbull**

I mean it is definitely based on a medical model of disability because it's true also, obviously it happens all the time, a non-disabled person acquires an impairment. So an actor can say, 'Well, I might acquire that impairment,' but it doesn't mean you understand. It doesn't mean you have the experience of disability as a social construct and as the experience of barriers.

**Robert Softley Gale**

Also that experience of acquiring an impairment is something that I've never experienced. Yes, you can look at that from an acting perspective and go, what would that be like? But it's a different thing to be born disabled. Again, these are all parts of the disability narratives parts of their stories, taht we need to be telling people so that they're understanding of disability becomes more nuanced and more complex more interesting, rather than the victim and the poor little cripple in the corner. If we can get to a point where our culture has thousands of stories of disabled people that are all different and contradictory and interesting. Then we can start having more interesting conversations about whose story it is to tell.

**Joe Turnbull**

Do you think that's the best way we can challenge and change the mainstream? Is just by telling more disabled stories?

**Robert Softley Gale**

It's all I know what to do. Someone said to me a few years ago, but do you think it works? If it doesn't, I'm fucked. It's all I've got. And I think there's no one way to do this. For some people it's about getting angry and protesting and yelling at people. I absolutely respect that. That's not really my way of doing it. My way is much more, try to engage people and one or the other aren't right or wrong, we have come at this from a whole variety of angles and over time we will get there. We are getting it. We have to believe that we are getting there. It can sometimes be hard though.

**Joe Turnbull**

Yeah. Too right. Do you think there's a danger that being in that mainstream position actually changes them rather than them changing the mainstream?

**Robert Softley Gale**

I think that can happen and that does happen. But I think that again, we think we've got more control over this than we actually have. Disabled people are a wide variety of people, and we all come at this from different angles. And if you angle is to be fairly mainstream politician who doesn't really wave the disability flag and just gets on with it then that's still a valid way to do it you know. But equally I've still got a right to say you should be doing more. We all have to do what we do. And we all have to stand up to the scrutiny that we stand up to. I'm not saying we can't criticise people for what they do and some people do become so mainstream that they almost forget their disability roots. Then I think we've absolutely got a right to call that out and to question it. But we can't control that, it's gonna happen.

**Joe Turnbull**

Yeah, I mean, I suppose what I'm saying by that as well, is I'm not saying bcause I don't I think it's fair. That just Because you're a disabled person in any position that you have to at all times, fly the disability flag, or be politically engaged all the time or fight for that community and be an expert and all those things, because it's an unfair expectation. And it's exhausting. But also, I think it's a bit like liberal feminism. The approach to it is just add more women and stir like put more women in positions of power and that will change things. And I think, actually, there's so much more to it than that. I don't think we just put disabled people in top positions, or represent them on stage that will change everything. I think there's, I think there's a whole undertone that needs to be changed and an absolute cultural change that needs to happen.

**Robert Softley Gale**

Absolutely, but all of these things are part of that cultural change. They're not the be all and end all but they are part of moving it forward. A part of normalising disability to go back to your definition of mainstream. The idea of the norm. Well, there is something to be said for if we walked around and we could see one in five people being actively disabled, then we will see disability in a different way, we would know that it's not some other experience. It's everywhere it's us, our family, our friends etc. So visibility has a very important part to play. But it's not the be all and end all, you know it's not disability at any cost, it's not about assimilation because that isn't actually visibility or it's not real visibility. So, yeah, there's no one answer to this. We we have to be okay with that.

**Joe Turnbull**

Yeah, I think I think a lot of these initiatives where they fall flat is they place disabled people in mainstream positions. And that's good. But if the culture of that place is set up in an ableist way, then you know it's impossible to expect that that will that will change it just by putting them there.

**Robert Softley Gale**

Because it all becomes about the individual and then the individual moves on nothing actually changes. But we're playing a very long game here, it's not happening quickly. I started as an actor in 2002. That's what 18 years ago. The changes in the last 18 years have been huge. We can't underestimate how far we've come in those 18 years. We've still got a fucking long way to go. Both of those things can be true at the same time, you know. We need to allow for nuance, need to allow for a bit of complexity in this, and for contradiction.

**Joe Turnbull**

Just a bit of a fun one. What's your biggest mainstream guilty pleasure?

**Robert Softley Gale**

[Laughs] Probably something like Great British Bake Off. There's something so bland about it. But you just can't help but love how mass appeal it is. My uncle lives in America. He grew up in England. He loves the fact that nobody argues, nobody fights, it's just so bland. But you have to love that. Yeah, I think we all need to start embracing mainstream guilty pleasure a bit more. Because, again the mainstream is not evil, it's not the enemy and maybe we should start to see that we're not in opposition to it. Then we'll be okay. But we're also not, almost by seeing it in opposition, we're holding it up on a pedastal as this thing that we aspire to and I think the more mature we get as disabled artists, the less that becomes a thing. That we go it's great and it's there and it's all fun and stuff and we can do that we can stick our toe into that pond. but it's not the be all and end all. I realise I've taken your fun questiona nd made it very philosophical.

**Joe Turnbull**

So if Bakeoff come calling will you be up for presenting it?

**Robert Softley Gale**

Absolutely! Yeah I mean me and Paul Hollywood would get on like a house on fire. iN fact, me and Sandi Toksvig would get on.

**Joe Turnbull**

Do you think you'd spice it up a bit?

**Robert Softley Gale**

I'd give it a go. There's already quite a lot of inuendo but I think I could get a bit more of it in there. I've got the great advantage of, I can make a joke and people can go 'was that cock joke or did we just not understand his speech? I've always got that game that I can play.

**Joe Turnbull**

And they wouldn't have to bleep it out!

**Robert Softley Gale**

Exactly, they'd say, oh we didn't know it was a cock joke. And then anyone who complains becomes disableist.

**Joe Turnbull**

Anything else you want to say on the mainstream?

**Robert Softley Gale**

We'll need to keep having this conversation for a long time, and that's fine. And I know there are people who see the work that I make and go 'Oh, you're just a bit too mainstream.' But then mainstream folk see what I do and go who the hell are you and what are you doing? It's a subject that I'll always be interested in. But I also try to ignore and forget.

**Joe Turnbull**

It's always a bit of a tight rope. I know that a lot of disabled artists who kind of get to a certain level in their careers as well often feel that they have these two careers they have a mainstream career and a disability arts career. And they have to play to two different sides and they might make work that's more geared towards one and then and then they feel they've got to go back to their roots.

**Robert Softley Gale**

I think if you can manage it, I try to manage it where the work that make says something to non-disabled people that they're surprised by and they go wow, I never thought of that before. But also says something to disabled people they recognise and they feel represented by and recognise themselves in that story. And if you can do those 2 things at the same time, then hopefully you can speak to both. Because the disabled people are bringing their non-disabled pals with them or non-disabled parents so these two groups do not turn up separately. They turn up together. And they want to enjoy the same stuff together, for different reasons. We need to make work that speaks to everyone. Or speaks to as many people as you can whilst still being authentic.

**Joe Turnbull**

When you've said that let's just making me think of like, Disney Pixar films that are always for two audiences. Right? There's things that are there for the parents and things that are there for the kids. And, there's definitely elements that speak to both and there's definitely elements that speak to one or the other. That's really interesting. You can definitely tread that line.

**Robert Softley Gale**

You can do that in disability work as well. They are two different groups but also they're not. Disabled people don't only laugh at disabled jokes. I know that's obvious. But it's worth saying we also watch Bakeoff.

**Joe Turnbull**

But it's fun to throw in a few in-jokes.

**Robert Softley Gale**

In doing that you're also letting non-disabled people in on something. That they didn't already know. If you do in jokes in a way that excludes people that's not, it's not fair and it doesn't really help. There's a time and a place for your own circles in-jokes you. I remember at the first Unlimited and we had all sorts of cabarets and stuff, and there was a lot of that because we were finally in the Southbank Centre. We were all going 'yeah, we're here'. But we need to know that in-jokes just exclude people. And that's we're fighting against that you know. But if you do in-jokes in a certain way you can make it so everyone's laughing together and then we can move forward.

**Joe Turnbull**

Yeah. And if the mainstream is just mass appeal and as you say if one in five people is disabled and many more experienced disability in some way, I think almost one in three apparently experience mental health in their life. Then in a way if it's just about mass appeal then even just that audience is a huge mass appeal is a huge audience, even just for those people, even if you're not making it for a non-disabled audience.

**Robert Softley Gale**

Yes, you always think about your audience and people that say they're not are just talking crap. If you don't want to think about audience, go home and do it in your bedroom. I think about the audience, but you're also telling a story. That has to have a bit of truth about it, a bit of authenticity and humour and pathos and all that stuff mixed in together. Because I think the more we can focus just telling a story and telling our stories in different ways, the more we can move things forward and have conversations and engage people in conversations. Because that's what will make progress happen. It's not the yelling at people, I don't think. It's about talking to people.

**Joe Turnbull**

That's a very nice way to end it. On a conciliatory note. A positive note, for these terrible times. Thank you so much for your time and for being on the Disability And...Podcast.

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