**The Disability And…Podcast Episode 20**

**Disability And…Crip Tales with Mat Fraser**

Intro

Welcome to the Graeae and Disability Arts Online podcast disability and... bringing together thoughtful discussion and debate. This month, Colin Hambrook chats with actor and producer Mat Fraser, about Crip Tales, a series of six disability led monologues curated by Mat and recently broadcast on the BBC. This podcast contains strong language.

Colin Hambrook

So Mat Fraser, lovely to see you again, after all this time, and Crip Tales is a real watershed moment, I think, in British television, and very exciting to see so much press coverage as well.... 23 mentions in national press, that's got to be first, hasn't it?

Mat Fraser

Yeah, by the way, lovely to be here Colin talking to you again. I would agree with you there was a watershed on it, but I don't think it was all Crip Tales doing. And I think Crip Tales hold their own. They're good quality dramas, you know, surprise, surprise you, me and all the Disability Arts Online audience... we all know this shit anyway, right? But um, but you know, when you do allow a disabled person to write a thing. [Laughs] And you let the disabled actor do it. And then you get nice, what we might have call BBC high quality drama, treatment on it.... it looks really good because people expect stuff to do with disability to be awkward and embarrassing, and maybe a bit shit. Because the people who ham-fisted our treatment beforehand didn't know what they were talking about. So people come with these lower expectations. And then into that you put COVID and the reaction from the performing industry, which is to reinvent the monologue through zoom as a viable form of entertainment. Well, we've all got used to sort of slightly low quality recorded single person dramas that are clipped together like David Tennant and thingy did that pretending to rehearse for the National thing. And that's as good as they could get it. But then our thing came along having been filmed beforehand, in like i.e. inverted comma, 'proper' telly studios. And of course, it seemed like fantastically lush and lavish and high quality plus it was all the good stuff, you know, the authenticity. So I think the reason... some of the reasons we got those 23 Press mentions Collin, are because of circumstance due to the times we find ourselves in, plus the awesomeness that is Crip Tales, because I'm not going to take any sting away from them. They were brilliant, and I was the lucky guy who got to curate them. You know? It could have been you, Colin and I know the results would be very similar. Different Of course, but the same high quality. You know, and me have been around the block a bit. We're longish in the tooth.

Colin Hambrook

We are.

Mat Fraser

We know what's what, and we know what's shit. And we don't want to let that happen again. So all that was playing on me a bit.

Colin Hambrook

How did the whole Crip Tales thing come about?

Mat Fraser

Okay, well, it came from a legacy, which was Mark Gattis originally did a thing called Queers, which is a series of gay men's monologues set in a gay pub. BBC loved it went really well. Somebody obviously thought, what about women? So the following year, Vicky Featherstone, the artistic director of the Royal Court studio, got to do Snatches, which was an anthology of female stories. And they asked her because at the Royal Court there is a lot of new good women writers. And it does all come from the writing Colin, I do think... and so they got some fantastic writers... and they managed to get Jodie Comer, you know Villanelle from Killing Eve. ... to be in one of them. The one.. Bovril Pam, that's the one I would recommend to anyone to watch if they wanted to see some of Snatches. So the woman that produced that successfully was called Debbie Croosty. She works for ITV studios, and she approached me and said, If I can get the green light on the commission, will you curate a series of six monologues to deal with disability? And I was like, Yeah, sure. Thank you. Well, that's never gonna happen is it. You know? Sure. Love give us a ring....sure.. Give us a ring when it gets to the next level. A year goes by I get a call. She's like. We got green-lit. I'm right. You what. I couldn't believe it. But then of course, I was like gulp. And then she helped me. I knew loads of people but I also know that I'm in my 50s and there's a lot of people I don't know anymore, you know, and I went to Graeae's database and BBC Writers Room disability database, other databases, looking for new voices. Extra writers and writers pitched and we got a shortlist. And it was very difficult because there were some great writers that I wanted to employ, but I couldn't. I just want to give a big shout out to Rosaleen Mcdonagh - a seriously good writer with a disabled traveller woman point of view, voice. Who else has got that? No-one! Her pieces are extraordinary. Anyway, she didn't make the grade um, because ultimately I felt because of not because it was so niche and the audience wouldn't get what she was doing and it was going to America. And we went with Jackie Hagen instead. And in retrospect, I'm glad of that because Jackie's working class scouser disabled the state living northern voice is something that the BBC needed up 'em big style. And, but just as a coda to that Rosaleen just got commissioned by the Abbey Theatre in Dublin to write a play. I'm so thrilled about that. Anyway. And so, so we thought... so we got the writers, then we're going "urm, no". We've only got... what are we going to do? Are we going to do one Deaf one blind one wheelchair, you can't do that. It's a rubbish way of going about it. So we just said to all the writers: "look, it's got to be within the last 50 years. It's got to be something to do with disability, if possible the story will pivot on something to do with disability. Don't make it safe. Don't give me something boring that people are expecting to see. Otherwise, do your worst. And I was stunned with what they came back at. And most of them went and I want this actor to do it. And of course, being the nature of disabled actors, they were all available. Even Liz Carr and Ruth Madely were available which is a crime, but anyway and so we got we got the pick of the crop, you know.

Mat Fraser

And we only auditioned one which was Carly Houston auditioned and got Matilda Ibini's The Shed... it was for a black woman wheelchair user. And do you know how hard it was for me – a 50 year old white guy who really wants to do his best – to find ten black, wheelchair-using actors, women actors! That alone shocked me and made me realise, boy, you know, we've got some work to do here. However, as always with auditions, the best prepared actor got the job. And Carly Houston also... just the camera loves her. And you know, I know that sounds cheap and nasty. But when you're making telly, these things do count. You know, I'm not talking about pretty or conventional notions of cosmopolitan ideal, nothing like that. I'm just talking about sometimes the camera loves your face. And sometimes they don't... it's just the way it is. And so that's how we ended up doing that. And then all the team, the production... all of that stuff was basically between the directors, it was Ewan Marshall, Amit from Graeae, and Jenny Sealey from Graeae. I guess they were all from Graeae, originally. And the between them and production, which was Debbie Christie, they got the crew and team together. And then finally... long answer, but this is how we got together.... Debbie said we're all able bodied... you've got to do the talk from the beginning of day one. And I thought Oh, God, okay. And I found myself saying, you know, I had a prepared sheet. I just threw it away. And I just said, guys, I know all the disabled people involved on a personal level. So I could talk generically but I'm just going to talk how I know I can talk because it's quicker. None of these guys are going to be offended if you ask a stupid question. Please ask stupid questions. Don't.... the number one thing you mustn't do is second guess and then panic about what you've decided is going to happen. Just ask! It will all be fine. We'll all get on like a house on fire. And that's exactly what happened. It was fine. You know,

Colin Hambrook

it's always that fear of disability that gets in the way. You know, it was great to see so many of the press... I think it was Suzi Feay and Brian Donaldson, you know, saying, "why hasn't this happened before?" You know, that we've got disabled directors, writers and actors. And... you know, it still feels like we're still kind of trying to get on the bus in some ways.

Mat Fraser

We are. But and then the other thing that happened during COVID I don't know whether you noticed, but off the back of black lives matter which on the trajectory I'm talking about came off the back of Oscars so white, which came off the back of me too movement. You know, there was definitely like an awareness... the young people have got political again. Aint they, you know, it's good. And oh, thank God... Finally! And so of course, what happened was somebody went, Oh, fuck, disability is a diversity! What, it's a diversity! Well, we must apply all these diverse things to it. And suddenly we got upgraded. Did you notice? It was really weird? We always knew that of course, but then the mainstream decided that we had to be included in the lists. And then Crip Tales came out just at that time. So I really did benefit from the cultural Zeitgeist that the shift in perception around disability that's been happening given Crip Tales really benefited from that. And the other thing I wanted to say was, yes, the journalists are all so much more on message now. You know, the one illustration I have is that I got asked in America because they went out in America first, was to do an interview with something really scary for this old fella called Pop Sugar. Yeah, it's like a gossip website. I was like, Oh, God, okay, I'll do that. I was really scared. This lovely young, mixed race, gay man openned the zoom call. They said first of all, let me say, I've just watched all six of them back to back took notes. And I'm stunned. That was a bloody change, because normally they just skim through it, don't they. Then he goes, he looks at me really seriously... because he says "Do you know what? I don't think I've ever seen a black disabled woman in a wheelchair express love for another woman on television. I don't think that's ever happened before". And I was like, yeah, thinking okay "I wasn't expecting that for the first question. Yeah, wow." And then I just thought, these guys are really clued in now. We don't have to do all the explaining any more. We don’t have to say “Sorry, It's not handicapped, it's disabled.” We don't have to do that anymore.

Colin Hambrook

No. The one thing that I did notice was that two of the reviews in the times Jack Melvin and Carol Midgley both felt compelled to give the Latin names for impairments. Yet again, which was the one disappointment, I think, you know, apart from that, the critique of the format and some direction, it was all really constructive criticism.

Mat Fraser

Absolutely. Yeah. And very fair. I mean, we have to be criticised just along with everybody else, don't we? You know, um, yeah, I agree with you. It's definitely a watershed moment. We're, we are a part of a watershed moment, right now, as we speak, you know. The things that we've been banging on about for 30 years are about to happen… not how we imagined it, of course. But those things are going to happen. When I was young and even more full of ego. I did imagine how my Oscar acceptance speech will go… as a naive 29-year-old. I’m 58 now and I know I'm never gonna do it. But I think Ruth Madeley might.

Colin Hambrook

Ruth Madeley. Yeah, yeah. And Jackie Hagen, Jackie Hagen, so impressed me. And I'm kind of almost kind of reticent to talk about it. But of course, the one really sad. sad criticism of Crip Tales was what happened with the Disability News Service. And you know, why? Why does the disability movement always feel compelled to make a campaign out of, you know, angry of Twitter, sort of campaign out of … rather than in, you know, engaging in a much more honest and direct way with?

Mat Fraser

Well, first off, I do regret, the way I initially reacted to John was a bit of a knee jerk reaction. He's quite aggressive… the way he puts things is provocative because he's a journalist, and he wants, you know, action. I understand that. But when I explained that what I thought which was that the piece the Real Deal by Tom Wentworth, is a savage indictment of how ridiculous the benefit system has got whereby performing a cliched version of disability is more likely to get you your rights than actually being genuinely eligible. And he came back to me with an even longer email, which really just said roughly the same thing. So I said, “you know what… we'll have to agree to disagree John”, because I just did not want to talk about it any more with him because I could see I wasn't gonna change his mind and he wasn't gonna change mine. However. And it was a to and fro. You know, he did turn it into a bit of campaign and he did always cc Liz Carr and Tom and the producer and Debbie, the executive producer at the BBC. You know in a kind of stirring the furore kind of way. But I know that his heart, his intentions are good. As I hope he knows mine are. And if I will say one thing, I defend totally Tom Wentworth’s script. That's the kind of writer Tom is… you get cheeky little rights and wrongs in his stuff? And that's so delicious, and that's why I love his stuff. But, you know, next time if I was ever going to do a story or be involved with a story where there was benefits “is he or isn't he” “are they or aren't they?” I might look a little deeper into that and flesh that character out a little bit better. I might but Tom needn't because what's so sad is that the original version of that which was three pages longer as original versions are wont to be… perfectly explained the situation was a whole thing, savage on the DWP, like it really stated in its case, but unfortunately, it was the least dramatically successful part of the monologue. And so out with the water, a little bit of the baby got chucked out as well, so to speak…. with the bath water there,

Colin Hambrook

I still thought it really came across as a critique of the Kafkaesque nature of the PIP system and just the heinous fact that the DWP have got this page up on their website saying, you know, shop your neighbour shop them now. You know, if the Russians did the same thing, we would be down on them, like a ton of bricks for human rights issues. And yet in this country, it's perfectly acceptable. And, and that's that same realisation just doesn't occur to the British public.

Mat Fraser

I mean, I've spoken to older black people about this, who are in the business… in the arts, and they say, you know, we all recognise it, those of us who are political, which is that if you're never represented, and then suddenly you are represented, you want the representation to be like you want it to be. Because, you know, finally there you are being represented, but it's not what you want, and you get angry, and then you instead of having to go to the system that stopped any other representation happening for the last 20 years, you stab the person who did it. I mean, white, straight, able bodied heterosexual middle class men have had so many versions of them shown to us, in literature, that we as a nation will take any representation of that, because we've got all the other ones to counter it with. But when you haven't got anything else to counter it with, I can appreciate that if it's not how you see it, and how you passionately politically think it should be. It can get a bee in your bonnet. Yet, however, I wish they'd seen our point of view a bit better. You articulated it the best,

Colin Hambrook

I could see how it hit a nerve for a lot of disabled people who are in that position. And I kind of thought that the BBC should have done what they do with serious critical issues and give out a warning at the beginning… and also a list of places that you can go to for support if you're affected by the issues.

Mat Fraser

You know you're completely right Colin. That's exactly what should have happened. Then it might actually have tipped the balance the other way, I think. I cannot, you know, I have to… I was the curator, I got paid. I am responsible for some of that. And I I regret it and I do apologise for that aspect. But I do not apologise for Tom’s script, which I still think is really good.

Colin Hambrook

Yes absolutely. I thought the breadth of the monologues as well was just absolutely breathtaking. You know, that. And, you know, going, going back to going back to the reviews, I mean, there was some I think that the only one that was a bit kind of groaning was in The Guardian, Ewan Ferguson, where you know… where he said Crip Tales was “a space to remind viewers again, ‘sigh’, that a person in a wheelchair does not have to be addressed in hushpuppy tones.” That I think was the only one that I thought… but even he got the Real Deal and the way it exposes the Kafkaesque nature of the PIP assessment system.

Mat Fraser

Yeah, yeah.

Colin Hambrook

That was that was the one sort of unfair bit, but I mean they were all four or five star…

Mat Fraser

Yeah now the pull quotes list man… is nuts. I've got for my first bit of writing on TV I've got you know, witty, furious, heartfelt, ‘not a word is wasted’, ‘deliciously nuanced’. I've got all these things I could if I wanted to put at the bottom of my little email signature. Not that I'm going to. Yeah, I mean I'm pleased as punch with the attention it got but more of the knock-on and the doors that it has opened which really has surprised me Colin. Suffice to say, in a year's time, there's gonna be a lot of disability stuff on television, and actually a lot of it's going to be really good, because I've just read some of it. I mean, oh my god, have you read any of Annalise Dinella’s work? Do you know her?

Colin Hambrook

I don't know. No.

Mat Fraser

She’s a visually impaired writer, late 30s, mid 30s, who come out of the BBC writers room programme writes about visual impairment. I just read a pilot for a thing. And I cried five times, five separate times. She's such a good writer, and this is mainstream stuff now. You know, these are mainstream people grooming her to do a television series. You know, it's very exciting time coming. The writings great.

Colin Hambrook

Can you say more about what's coming next?

Mat Fraser

What I can say is that me, Ewan Marshall, who was the director of three of the monologues and the lovely Jack Thorne, the most famous disabled writer in the world – have got together and knocked up a pitch for a series of half hours. Because I felt that the industry don't still quite trust disabled writers, enough to commission them to do a series, but they're good enough and they're experienced enough. A monologue isn't going to give them people they trust. Ditto, a duologue isn’t, which might be the natural next step to a monologue. After all, drama, basically, is interaction between people. So one would think that two people talking great. Drama! Well, actually, yeah, but it's not going to convince the TV commissioners that the writer can do a full drama. They're still going to go “I don’t know you see”. And so I just said to Ewan and Jack, let's just pitch for half hours. Straight off, they both immediately agreed. Jack suggested another frame we put on it. It's getting to the point where I can't divulge too many details. Suffice to say, to our surprise, when we sent this pitch out, several people responded positively. And one company, a very well-known drama producing company at the commercial end of television, immediately just came on board. No caveats. Just said yes, we want to do it. Let's make this happen. So we're now… we're back at the looking for writers stage. There are specific writers we're looking for. We feel that whilst talent is the most important thing, at this point experience is going to start counting for stuff. We… it's not like we can mentor or co-write with the writers: they’ve really got to be able to hold their own. And so we just literally, I'm telling you this as it's happening, farming out, certain people – a sort of basic writer brief for pitches to come in by the end of Jan. So I've got no guarantee this is gonna work. But you know what? Because of the phone calls, and the people are going, “what are you doing? I know I'm interested in that. Will you tell us all about that?” I put on the posh voice when I say that to denote how how high up a floor it is in the building. But I'm like, Ah, okay, suddenly we’re the hot thing. Suddenly, it's all change. And they want it up ‘em.

Colin Hambrook

Great. So to quote your monologue, where you say “50, father, could be disabled.”

Mat Fraser

Yeah, we might start seeing that.

Colin Hambrook

We might start seeing that. I thought it was, you know, interesting that a couple of the press quotes kind of pulled that quote out. Yeah.

Mat Fraser

I found that was interesting, too, was that, you know, you never know what they're going to pull out. But that one, I suppose is a little poignant, I suppose.

Colin Hambrook

Yeah. How was it… because I kind of recognised so much of what you were talking about, in addition, in the interviews that you did with Allan Sutherland.

Mat Fraser

Yes, of course.

Colin Hambrook

How was it kind of performing your own story?

Mat Fraser

It's weird when you're an actor/ writer, because when you're a writer, you're writing. You don't think “oh, I’ll look great doing that bit. I’ll write a little bit more of that bit.” You don't just don't serve the actors ego when you're writing, you just write the good writing. And then when you approach it as an actor, I actually needed a director to, to tell me how to do it. I mean, I thought I knew how to do it. But because I had written it there was no real interrogation of how I was going to do it because I made some assumptions, because I'd written it. So of course, I knew best. But that wasn't the case. Because directors are always worth their weight in gold, and Ewan, who is a director I trust very much, you know, hauled me over a few coals, as he should have, made me look at things in a different way. A little bit of rewriting then happened. And we proceeded and got to a point where I was able to really give it my full performance. Um, but he discussed how he wanted me to do the front on wide shots; the close-ups with the asides. Now that's a friend you're talking to; that's this so-called audience ; over there is when it's the director or something. And you know,… because I had been given people I was talking to and I don't do big announcement segways; I just suddenly am talking to the other person. And so he felt that that would make it easy for people to get recognition and stuff.

So yeah. And Jackie Hagan… it's a shame you can't ask her the same question because she writes for herself as well. And what I loved about her performance, was that it was an actor's performance. What Jackie did though, and you know, again, Ewan directed her… and they really bonded, in part because they're both amputees but actually more personality-wise. I think that just him being an amputee meant she could relax and not think he was a tosser. You know… was that he eked out a proper acting performance from her, because she's a really good actor. You know, that shit was deep. And it wasn't that kind of breeze over it, performance poetry, performed on stage to a crowd, style. It was very intimate and here in the frame, you know. I was so impressed with her. I personally have great hopes for her. I think a lot… I know for a fact that a lot of the television people were very excited by her. And, you know, a new voice and all that, I really think she's an important voice…. Working Class woman who's rejected notions of, you know, the Cosmo stuff. very articulate. And, you know, a constant relationship with pain killing drugs that are also mood affectors. And do she's such a complicated entity, that one. I could sit and watch Jackie for forever.

Colin Hambrook

Yeah, Yeah, me too. Me too. And she’s got a great knack of just coming out with stuff that you wouldjust never expect. And I think she had probably throughout through the whole kind of crip tales series. She probably had some of the best lines.

Mat Fraser

Some of the lines, she's got that… the one that always sticks with me…. “those 12 year old boys who are holding the end of their sleeves in case their feelings fall out.” I mean, who says that… what a phrase. I love her. Yeah.

Colin Hambrook

Yeah. And “drugs are only good if you get not to be on them sometimes.”

Mat Fraser

Yes. God, yes.

Colin Hambrook

Colin Hambrook

Um, yeah, I mean, going back to… again… another line from your monologue…. “it seems that being disabled and difficult, is par for the course.” I mean, I think… we want to see more disabled baddies don't we… but disabled baddies that don't kind of fit that kind of stereotypical kind of Shakespearean framework of what a disabled baddy is like.

Mat Fraser

Yeah, I mean, I have two examples ever of playing disabled baddies. One was Richard the third. And you know, as an actor, you get there, you finally get there. Because you don't just land a Richard the third… you have to do some work to get one of them, you know? And you're like, ah, I mean, I'm finally here I’m finally playing the most famous disabled fictional character in the world. I, Mat Fraser am playing Richard the third, in Hull… and this is amazing… but then you’re like, it's not really is it because Shakespeare didn't really know he was fucking talking about… and here I am again, stuck in another able bodied blokes vision of what disability is, you know, and ultimately, I mean, I loved saying the lines, “behold, mine arm, this is the work of the devil” or whatever, it was super fun to do that. But ultimately, it was like, ‘ech’, this is just like any other non-disabled blokes version of stuff. And then the other baddy I got to play was Jim, the murderer in Silent Witness who was a nasty fella who went around suicide chat rooms, going “go on then, do it”, you know like… encouraging people…

Colin Hambrook

I thought that it was quite brave of Silent Witness to write that role

Mat Fraser

Bloody hell. Series 23 of Silent Witness went nuts. There was me. There was Garry Robson. It was like it was a Crip Fest… and talk about … it was what… it was great. But yeah, they did somewhat slash my part a bit. My part in the original script did have a lot more scenes, but it was enough.

What was great about it is being able to act a baddy. It's so much more enjoyable than being able to act a good person. It's so much more dramatic. And it really suited me because anyone could encourage someone to commit suicide… It wasn't like I had to wield a murder weapon, that reactionary from Bristol would say, “there was no way that man could have held that thing.” You know, no one could argue about any of them things. So we're just left with the evil intent.

And Julia Ford, the director was happy with what I did. And it was the best, you know, in many ways, the most fun I've had playing a role …, and I would love to play a baddie. I really, really would, you know, I'd say… but not for all the old reasons as in, “I'm evil, because I'm disabled, etc.” Or the apparently more sophisticated one, “I'm evil, because I understand the social model of disability. And I'm projecting that I'm only angry because of the way society has treated people, but when we get down to it, at the end of the film, I will bring out all the deformity shit again”. You know, that's the next level that we're experiencing. I'm like, “no, please let a disabled person play a disabled baddie.”

You know, I think it'd be really good. I would love to play a James Bond villain, because… and that's another thing I just want to quickly get into… some cliches of disability are okay, I think. It's just they've always done it the wrong way. So James Bond loves to have its ‘in-house’ lines. “That never happened to the other fella” or, and so on and so forth. You know, where they just basically turn to the camera and go, yeah, this is a James Bond film. When I'd be like… he'd be looking, he'd look at me and go “oh, it's you!”… you know, it's very traditional to be a disabled James Bond villain. Not to be a real one. But you know, all James Bond villains have a disability of some sort don’t they. Or most of them.

They're the old guard… they’re still like Le Chiffre bleeding from his evil disabled eye…. in Casino Royale… that was pretty special. And so I would do that. But that's the little devil in me that likes to flip the cliches. What I'm saying here is about a cliche. So I'm kind of a father, a middle aged man who's got nothing to live for. I don't know why. And suddenly, we see a five year old girl, I don't know what… she's a refugee. She's been dumped out the back of a truck by the nasty people, traffickers. There's a five year old girl, and she needs help. And he's there. And he sees the girl and he helps her to go and she needs to get back to her mum in Syria. And that's the story. He has no idea how to get to Syria, he has no money, and he needs to start eliciting the help of people. Some people don't want to help. They want to fuck him up. Some people want to help. It's a heavily dramatic story. He gets to Syria, and it's like way out of his league, real Syria. He's like, what was I thinking that I could we get into a whole other leadership? That's the story. Now, make the man disabled? How much better does the story immediately become? And the reason is, is because it's jeopardy and worry and fear about the father managing to do the task. Right? If you add impairment to that, it adds a delicious looking dongle or module. And it's not saying Oh, he won't be able to do it because the clunkiness of his will is what the films about.

But if you have disability people go of course, is disabled. They've always had to fight. Some bloke from Bristol. Oh, now he's got an East End accent will be like, Oh, yeah, I can see that. Do you know what I mean? And yeah, programme makes me very clever clockmakers and drama, because I'm missing out on flipping the cliche. I hate by saying it's okay to use some of the cliches you just got used in the clever way. Because you're not demeaning the man's right to full human ship by making him disabled. Good God. He's trying to get a little waif back to Syria. What's more fully human than that?

Colin Hambrook

Disability makes for drama.

Mat Fraser

Okay. And disability can be a barrier sometimes to things. So I think there's room for a lot more sophisticated subtle rain going forward, and it's going to come but yeah, I would love to play Abadi but I'm getting on a bit now Colin, and the sort of roles I will get other more character roles the Father, you know, the doctor, the lawyer or whatever, rather than the lead. I'm fine with actually it's nicer.

Colin Hambrook

What's next for you, Mat?

Mat Fraser

Well, what's next for me for the next couple of months is pushing this pitch to commission. So pitching for the for the next level Crip Tales vibe, basically, and also waiting for acting work. You know, here's another thing that's happened. Coz I hesitate to say this because I am aware there's a vast army of unemployed disabled actors who loathe me because in their mind, I get all the work. Of course if you could see it from my perspective, it's not like that. But I appreciate it might be for them. But I just got offered three lines in something for a Channel 4 drama. I told them to fuck off. I said No, you don't get to hang your diversity hat on the smallest of hooks like that. You've got to put your money where your mouth is. You could do that to some ingenue who has just come out of drama school, but you can't do it to me… and you shouldn't be doing it to any disabled actors.

What's great is that my new agent was the one that said all that and then reported back to me. Said oh yeah, we tore them off a strip. I said… you know, yeah, we told them, “what the hell did they think they were doing? It's outrageous. You can't go around doing that. They've got to treat disabled actors properly.” It's like, wow, I love my new agent. But then I got offered a six parter in the math cop in a bunch of cops, the untalented dick-head one, who does magic tricks, because he knows nobody likes him. And he's stupid.

And I thought deeply about it. And I thought, do I want to play that role? No, and this might be just my ego talking. But I feel I'm due for slightly edgier roles than that. Cooler people, nasty people sure… I don't mind playing a fucker. But um, I just didn't feel that this unpopular, uncharismatic and unsuccessful or social waste of space should be played by a disabled person at all.

Because what the able bodied writers and casters who are magnanimously trying to be open casting about hadn't realised, is that if you put a disabled person in a role like that people equate the disability with a being a loser. And we can't have that.

So I found myself turning that down as well, with real hesitancy because it was a Netflix show, and it would have meant I would have got my Sag points, which meant I would have got health care in America, which I've just lost.

Um, and so I kind of feel bad about that. But I know I… I asked a couple of other disabled people who I trust and they corroborated my opinion. So I went with it and gulped and said, “No, thank you.” And so I am hoping to get a bit of acting work, though Colin. I would love to get more acting work.

Colin Hambrook

I loved American Horror Story.

Mat Fraser

Me too. And I still get, I still get like a £10 cheque once every six months for that. I can't believe it's going on so long.

Colin Hambrook

I got a subscription to Netflix when I heard you were gonna be on that.

Mat Fraser

Oh, thank you. And I was disappointed not to be on subsequent series of that. But then so many other actors weren't either. And now that’s kind of lost its way a bit as an anthology series. But yeah, that was exponentially the biggest thing in my life, because suddenly American people knew who I was. And I still get stopped in the street… all the time, by people, because I'm so easy to recognise. And so I get a lot of shoutouts from younger kids, which is nice in America. And yeah, I will get something I know I will. I'm not worried. I'll pick up some acting work, but I must admit right now, I'm kind of like, “Oh, is this why I'm here then.”

was actually quick tails. The way I'm going? You sometimes you have to take a nod from God or whatever you believe in… for me, it's not God, I don't… I'm an atheist, but and sometimes you have to look at the signs that have been sent to you. And maybe the signs are no, Mat, you're not going to be just a lovely, lovely actor who picks up lovely work from time to time, swans into the awards and leaves again.

You're going to be the guy that gets the project going, that gets the disabled people the work. You know, and in fact, that's what it seems to be right now.

And hurrah for that, because I am an activist, you know, and it is probably the only way I can serve my deep activism… is by getting other disabled people jobs in telly and film, you know…

Colin Hambrook

You mentioned that you're writing…

Mat Fraser

Writing, writing, writing, writing, writing, I've had so many bloody ideas. I'm writing a deep history one, I'm writing a difficult transitionary tale set in 1977 in Florida and California, that's a bugger to write. So I've left that one for a bit.

I'm writing an 1850, street beggars and whores play set in a fake crippled begging pub called The Hospital that actually existed in New York. Where able bodied people would pretend to be disabled to elicit charity from people. And then the Ugly Laws came along, which is a little known group of laws, which basically prevented you from begging based on how unsightly you were.

Colin Hambrook

Whoa, when? What, how was that?

Mat Fraser

This is like hidden history, that so they were for about 30 years only in five states. And it incremented… so it started in Chicago. Then it went to San Francisco, then New Orleans, and finally ended up in New York where it was refined, but each time… like for example for some reason, inexplicably New Orleans they were particularly bothered by deformed people. Whereas in Chicago it was the war-wounded, they didn't want to see. Um, anyway, it literally had us swept off the streets.

The last fiscal, independent outlet for a disabled person is begging. And that was taken away from them as well. And it was because they were bunged into Christian homes for the charitable i.e. institutions to work houses. That was the beginning of proper American institutionalisation in the Victorian era. Like it was over here. But there was this period of history in the Lower East Side where I live. And I look around and I look at the building and think that is actually the building where this thing happened, you know, and I really want to write this… because I found out about this incredible woman called Mary Largo, who was a whore; a prostitute who ran a gang of fake crippled beggars. It was unheard of for a woman to run a gang in those days, let alone a gang of men.

And I just thought, what would it be like if a real disabled person, like turned up in their fold? And what would it be like if they had a relationship with one of these people? Then all my juices started flowing. And I’m like there's a play in this. So I'm writing that as well. But because this tele stuff just landed in my lap, I've cleared the decks and just concentrating on this for the next two months. Because if I can help this get to commission, you know, that will be a bloody watershed.

Because what I'm hoping is that the reason I want Ruth to get the award; the reason I want the writers to get writing is because I want ‘them’ to stop playing ‘us’. I want them to stop writing shit about us like ‘Come as you are’. We all want that to stop, don't we.

Colin Hambrook

Absolutely

Mat Fraser

We all want that to stop. And I honestly think that once the first heralded, awarded disabled actor stands there, or sits there and goes, “Hey, see, it's not so bad when we do it ourselves. Right? Could I ask one small favour? Could you all stop doing it if you're not disabled? That would be so nice.”

If Ruth did that, from the Oscars stage, no-one would ever play a cripple again. I'm saying ‘cripple’… I'm using it as a sort of in-house disability affectionate term. I'm sorry, I'll stop using it. Um, you know what I mean… And maybe I'm being naive, like I was when I was 28. But I honestly think that we're almost at the precipice of killing this shit stone dead. And if that's the only thing I'm going to see in my acting career, in my life, then I bloody well want to see it, because I can't take it any more.

When you know, and I was guilty of saying about those three non-white actors who played the three disabled people in ‘Come as you are’... I was guilty of thinking, “guys, you should have known better as non-white people, you know what the argument is?” And yet you still did it.” But I don't have a right as a white person to say that. But I found myself thinking it… a bit ashamed of it. But that's what anger does to a person isn't it? Makes it makes you have shameful thoughts.

Colin Hambrook

A big thank you to Mat Fraser, for your openness and frankness there in talking to us about Crip Tales and disability representation on the screen. Lovely to talk to you as always, and we really do hope that this is the beginning of something new in terms of disability representation.

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