Disability And… Ensemble: Jodi-Alissa Bickerton & Ensemble Graduates

Welcome to the Graeae and Disability Arts Online podcast, Disability And, bringing together thoughtful discussion and debate. This month, Graeae's Creative Learning Director, Jodi-Alissa Bickerton chats with Ensemble graduates about their experience on Graeae's Ensemble training course. Applications are now open for this year's course commencing September 2021. If you'd like to find out more about Graeae's Ensemble training course, visit www.graeae.org.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

Hi, I'm Jodi. I'm Graeae's Creative Learning Director. I am a white woman in my early 40s with long red hair, and I'm wearing a black tee-shirt, and I've got a background of a forest behind me, but I'm not actually in the forest. On this podcast today, I'm talking with three young artists from Graeae's Ensemble alumni, Graeae's Ensemble. Graeae's Ensemble is a drama training programme for young actors and theatre-makers, providing world class drama training to support a new generation of Deaf and disabled talent to diversify and invigorate the UK theatre industry. Welcome, Ensemblies.

Vanessa Smith:

Whoo!

Awa Jagne:

Hello.

Josh King:

Hi.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

Do you know that I call you Ensemblies as an affectionate collective term. We have with us today - We have Vanessa Smith, who was with us on the first year of our Ensemble. Welcome, Vanessa.

Vanessa Smith:

Hello, everyone.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

Can you just give a brief audio description of yourself, Ness?

Vanessa Smith:

Sure, okay. I am a white woman in my 20s. I'm fairly tall-ish. I've got long, blond-brown hair, sort of to the middle of my back. In the background, I've just got my nice big living room.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

Thanks, Ness. On the same year as Ness was on Ensemble, Josh as well, Josh King. Welcome, Josh.

Josh King:

Thank you. My name's Josh. I'm a white male in my late 20s. I have long-ish brown hair, the longest it's ever been, and I have a grey hoodie on, and in the background is a white wall and a red wall, and you can see the corner of my blind.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

Thank you. And, lastly but not leastly, we have Awa Jagne who was on our 2017-18 programme. Welcome, Awa Jagne

Awa Jagne:

Hello. Welcome. I'm Awa Jagne in my early teens. Behind me, I've got a white wall with pictures on and I'm wearing my favourite top, saying, ‘You Are a Unique Person’.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

Thanks you Awa. I'm just going to go Vanessa to you first, because I'm not sure if you knew this and actually Josh, you too. I'm not sure if you both knew this but on the last day of Ensemble, Mette and I... Mette is the Ensemble Coordinator at Graeae. We both sat outside on the pavement, outside Graeae, and sobbed, absolutely sobbed in the rain.

Vanessa Smith:
Awww

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

Partly through exhaustion I think, because it was the first year that we had Ensemble and years of dreaming up Ensemble and it finally happened. We put our absolute heart into it. Also, I think we were just so proud of what you had achieved and that kind of blown away any expectations we had of what Ensemble could be in its first year and realised that you had flown off to do other things. We were devastated. Was that your experience too on your last day or was it completely different?

Josh King:

Speaking from my experience, it was a strange one. It was like a sadness of leaving but also, excitement of sort of figuring out what was next and taking in everything that I had learned from the time I was there and putting it into practice. And actually seeing what sort of opportunities were out there for me. I mean, I've never had training like that so, it was just interesting. I mean, I still miss sort of the atmosphere and the rehearsal room, things like that. Every time I've come back to do things, it just fills me with memories.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

Ness, what about you?

Vanessa Smith:

It felt like I've been part of a family, it really did. I was part of a family for six months who all shared the same passions as me, all shared the same interests as me. On my last day, it was just like... Yeah, I think, sort of similar to Josh. I just felt like part of me doesn't want to go, but then part of me thinks, well, I want to make the people that taught me proud of me.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

You were living in Liverpool, weren't you, and relocated down to London.

Vanessa Smith:

Yeah.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

What was that experience like.

Vanessa Smith:

Can I be honest or tactful?

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

(laughs) Be honest.

Vanessa Smith:

It was very challenging. I mean, I'd gone from... To be honest... living at home and having my mum and dad and sister who can do pretty much everything for me, if I want them to. Having a little bit of independence, but not that much. To suddenly going from that to right, you're in a hostel and you're going to have to do this pretty much on your own. There were nuns around to make sure that I didn't burn the place down, but I was pretty much independent and that was big because that was the first time for me.

Vanessa Smith:

As if the accommodation side of things wasn't difficult enough, I then find out that... hang on a minute... I have to travel somewhere that I've not been to very much before. I was so relieved when Helen... She was in charge of sorting out the access workers. She said, "Oh, it's fine because your access worker can go with you, can pick you up and then, will drop you back to your door again." That just made me feel really secure.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

Awa, and similar for you, wasn't it, because you were travelling... Where were you travelling from, Surrey, wasn't it?

Awa Jagne:

Yes. I was living at Orpheus in Surrey and I had to wake up early to get my train. And I had someone to meet me at the station as I never used to have to go to London.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

Josh, you were someone else who relocated to London as well didn't you, from Redditch, I think?

Josh King:

Yeah.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

I didn't actually mean to put all these three out of London to get them together, but we have. We've got these shared experiences.

Josh King:

Yeah, I was very lucky enough to find some digs and I travel every up week. I think that was just as important as the course itself, is that experience of being somewhere completely different, learning a different place, learning how to get around the place. At that point, that's where a lot of the industry was focused so, it was just good to know that sort of thing. I mean, I still remember the first day of Ensemble, arriving late, having all my luggage with me, and not knowing routes or anything. I remember, as I was leaving, I had this massive ruck sack on my back and it was Rich who showed me where the bus stop is. He walked me there and taught me which one to get on.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

Rich from our marketing team.

Josh King:

Yeah. That in itself was quite daunting but surprising also how quickly I began to love that, because again, its part of the challenge. It's something you have to learn to do.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

You mention your first day, Awa and Ness, do you remember the first day? What were the feelings around that first day of Ensemble?

Awa Jagne:

I was so nervous on that first day. I was in a room of people that I didn't know and I was so afraid. What if they don't understand the way I talk? That I was so nervous, that when I got to know them, I think that I fell in love with them.

Vanessa Smith:

Oh, you’re going to make me cry. I remember, my first day was, yeah- my first day, I remember relief, I guess, because we... I can't remember. I think the train stopped running or something. I actually got driven to Graeae in Lizzy's car. Lizzy was my access worker. I remember feeling relieved because back then, the underground used to slightly make me nervous. Then, when we got in, I remember feeling at home but then you've got so many things to think about.

Vanessa Smith:

I mean, I can remember, before I walked in the rehearsal room, I didn't understand the concept of a sign name, for instance. Then suddenly, I'm being asked to think about a sign name for myself. Okay. I thought, how on earth is this going to work, because I'm blind... I think I had met Jenny that day... and our director Jenny Sealey is pretty much Deaf. I'm thinking, how is this going to work? How are we going to communicate? But, Jenny is more than capable of making herself being heard.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

She is!

Vanessa Smith:

It was absolutely fine.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

What about, just thinking about when you're talking about your Ensemble experience to others, which I'm sure you're doing all the time, how do you describe it? What were some of the features that stand out for you, when you're thinking about you as an actor, trying as an actor in theatre maker. What were some of the training that stood out for you and experiences?

Josh King:

Probably one of the biggest things, because it came to me when I was thinking about this the other day, was working with Jennie Buckman on Shakespeare. When you look at Shakespeare, it's one of those things where you look at as a very daunting subject to even get into. The speech patterns are completely different and it's a lot to take in. People will say, oh, you can make Shakespeare fun but, I mean, that really stood out for me, just from the way that Jennie sort of taught the class. She was so light with the subject. She broke you into it very easily and honestly, the only person that’s taught me so far that genuinely can make working with Shakespeare an enjoyable experience.

Josh King:

That completely stood out to me as something that I'll always remember and I don't think without her influence I would have taken to Shakespeare the way I did. I mean, I remember working on a soliloquy from Hamlet with her and I still use that today as part of my repertoire when I'm auditioning if they ask for Shakespeare. I'm like, oh, this is something that I worked really hard on with someone who taught me so much about the text. So, I mean, it's still one of the things that I remember word for word, even though I haven't used it in about, I don't know, a year.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

Well, I know, what you just said about the late Jennie Buckman has resonated with others. I think Louis, who was in with you, Awa in Ensemble, had Jennie as a mentor and learned an incredible amount, because she was willing to pull Shakespeare apart and really re-examine what is it about actually making it truly accessible. Not only accessible in terms of access but also in terms of actually, here is something so classic, how do we get access to it. As young people, how do we make it relevant to today.

Josh King:

I think it was definitely her breaking it down. Well, why don't you word it in how you would say these words. Then, we'll discuss how to actually bring in the Shakespeare soliloquy. Because, I don't think you can truly understand the work until you put it into your own sort of speech patterns and things like that.

I feel like that is a very important way of looking at anything that could be as daunting as Shakespeare and yet, I remember standing in circles and she'd just teach us words. We'd say them in different poems and different things, because the meaning really didn't matter in the end if you understood the feeling.

Awa Jagne:

Really, I liked working with the voice man.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

He's coming back this year too so, that's good.

Awa Jagney:

In one of his training, I felt really relaxed and I still use his exercises to this day with my other actors, so he was the nicest teacher ever.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

He'd be thrilled to hear you say that. You raise an important thing there about just those things that stay with you as well. Because, that's the thing, isn't it? Through your training, we're not just thinking about what we can apply now, everything links together, doesn't it? Voice links to movement, links to improvisation, links to the collaboration later on when we're creating a piece together for performance. Then, it's about how you use that going forward into the next part of your careers. Josh, did you want to speak a little bit about when you left Ensemble, what were your expectations of what would happen versus…

Josh King:

I didn't really have expectations. I didn't know what I was going to do. It's this really strange thing. Before I started Ensemble, I'd just left college, had done a performing arts course. I didn't feel prepared for anything and I didn't know what was going to happen next. But, when I left Ensemble, I was very lucky with the sort of connections that I'd made within the Ensemble course and through Graeae. I think just having trained with Graeae opened doors that may have been closed to me.

Josh King:

If I hadn't trained with you and I think, another important aspect of the course which I'd be remiss if I didn't speak about, was the mentorship. I had Steven Lloyd as my mentor and he has literally gone above and beyond and he's still with me on my journey. I mean, even during the pandemic, we've spoken almost weekly and I'm meeting with him to work on something after the podcast.

Josh King:

You don't get that sort of thing with traditional training courses and I think that's something that I really want to emphasise is that when I left originally my first training course before I joined, I wasn't sure what was open to me. Whereas, the difference afterwards, I just grew in confidence and I thought I could at least knock on everyone's door and see what opportunities I could then get.

Josh King:

Luckily, for me, again through the connections that I had, I've worked with Steven at Amplified Theatre and other connections through Graeae like Tom Wentworth and with Amy Bethan Evans, I've done shows with them afterwards. Then, I just carried on training. I think you never really finish training. You can get this big amount of training done. But then, I think, probably one of the most important aspects of the Ensemble course that really stuck with me as well was it's not just the... You get exposed to a lot of different areas within the arts, devising and directing, all these things that when I first started I was like, oh, I want to be an actor.

Josh King:

But then you learn there are so many facets to the industry and it's important to learn, as well as what you like, what you don't like and what you don't want to follow, so that you can really latch onto the things that are important to you. I always knew that I wanted to act on TV and screen. So, I ended up following that path. I've been looking at training with a coach, Christina Chung, who has taught me techniques and I just finished filming a short film with her.

Josh King:

Then, I've also gone on to train with Mel Churcher, who specifically is training me for acting on TV and the screen. Again, this high calibre of people that I don't know if I'd have met them without doing the course and building the confidence to contact these people and just say, "Hey, I've seen your work or I've read your book. Is there any way I can train with you?" I think that's the importance. You have to make your own path. There are so many confusing avenues you can go down, but none of them are right and none of them are wrong. If you travel half way down one and you decide it's not right for you, try something else. There's so many things. I mean, if I'd said, even a year ago when the pandemic started, oh, I wasn't a writer then, but since you want to keep doing things, keep yourself busy, start writing. There is no wrong answer.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

That's similiar for you Awa and Ness as well, isn't it, that discovery of writing, starting out as training as actors and then going on. Actually, we can write our own stuff and perform in it. That is brilliant.

Vanessa Smith:

To come back to a previous question just for a second, because it highlights how I am today. Two things really, I guess. I mean, number one, was working with Chris and him teaching me essentially that having a stammer is okay. Struggling to speak is fine, because it might take me a minute to get the words out, but they'll come. He taught me that if I have a moment where I'm struggling to get a line out, just pass it off as a dramatic pause. It doesn't need to be a big thing. Then, I remember working with Amit, because he doesn't remember.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

Oh, he remembers.

Vanessa Smith:

Oh my God. I remember two things with him. I think it was on the same day actually. I remember he was working with me and a girl called Poppy.

Awa Jagne:

I know her.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

Shout out to Poppy.

Vanessa Smith:

Whew. One thing that we both struggled with was projection. Getting us to breathe and getting us to project and he just kept going and going .And I was like, if he doesn't shut up, I'm going to kill him. Then, I remember on the same day, I think you were there Jodi watching. I was rehearsing my monologue from Hamlet. I can't remember why, but I remember Amit saying the word grief over and over again. He was trying to really push me to feel like I’ve lost my dad, essentially. I can remember that I just started to cry and cry and cry, and I have never performed like that before or since. What it showed me was, I can get into a character. I didn't think that I could really get into a character like that, but oh, I can.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

That was during a really pivotal time wasn't it as well, because you were preparing for our showcase and I think you had said you were struggling to get there.

Vanessa Smith:

Yes.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

You were asking like, how do I get there to that moment.

Vanessa Smith:

On yeah, it was.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

It's crucial that we are being trained by artists who can untap that for us and who can actually respect that we deserve. I'm clarifying, I think, it wasn't on day one that Amit made you cry, it was on day six or so. So, let's just get that on the record. (laughs)

Vanessa Smith:

It wasn’t fine minutes in (laughs) But, it helped because, I mean, I'd gone from, I can't project to, on the day of the showcase, asking Lizzy to run up to the back of the room and just tap the back wall so I could hear how far I needed to project in the theatre.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

We were at the Soho weren’t we.

Vanessa Smith:

Oh yeah. Yeah. Just the confidence and I still have that confidence now. I mean, sometimes... She stopped doing it now, thank God. Sometimes my mother will tell me, if I'm really struggling to speak, and it's kind of a running joke, but she'll tell me, relax, breathe, then speak. It's so close to this little rhyme that he’d say, relax and prepare.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

If we're thinking about... And, you've kind of touched on this a little bit already, but do you have any regrets that you have in terms of... Not doing Ensemble. I know you don't regret that, that's very clear. But, are there any regrets within your experience that you think, oh, I wish I would have, or I wish something would have been different? And, you can't say me.

Vanessa Smith:

Oh.

Awa Jagne:

We would never say you Jodi. (laughs)

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

I'll pay you later, Awa. (laughs)

Awa Jagne:

For me, I have no regrets and it was so great to make a show and show people so yeah, I have no regrets.

Josh King:

I don't have any regrets from any specific time in there. I mean, I think probably taking more in and understanding the fact that there is an industry out there and you have different people who are going to direct you in different ways. I really sort of felt that when Jenny directed me or when Amit directed me. It is a different experience. It's a good way in because you've got this safety net to learn and understand how the industry works.

Josh King:

I had a better idea leaving than I did going in and you really want to prepare for that. I think that's, again, one of the examples of, it's not easy out there. It's not. Especially now, but you can prepare for it and you can understand the way the industry works. It's not sugar coated and I think sometimes you may get that at places, but you sort of get, this is what is expected from you. This is a job. Do your job. You learn while you're there your weakness and strengths and that is the time to work on your weaknesses while you're safe.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

That safe space, yeah.

Vanessa Smith:

The only thing that I can think that would sort of come as a regret, but it's more of a personal thing really. I wish that I hadn't needed to rely the BSL interpreters so much. Chiefly, I mean, one of the performers was Deaf. Obviously, when he did his monologues, for example, he would do performative sign. Of course, Lizzy and my access worker. She'd be over here describing for me and it's like, how do you describe sign language. She'd have to grab one of the interpreters who wasn't doing anything at the moment and they would just sit with me and explain it to me. But, I just wish there had been a way for me to sort of understand it better.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

But, Ness, that's access, isn't it? We all need different sorts of access support and we all use access in a different way. That was with Ensemble and we come together and sometimes-

Vanessa Smith:

True.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

... things aren't accessible and we need to go, okay, what do we do in this moment? How do we make this accessible for everyone, because we have time and space to figure it out. So, not to kind of say that what you said is invalid, Ness, but that shouldn't be a regret. That's how we want to work. We want to be able to help each other. That was a great solution that happened.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

If someone is out there listening who is thinking, I want some drama training. I don't know much about Graeae, or maybe I know a little bit, and have heard you talk today. What advice would you give to anyone, maybe just considering ever so slightly whether or not Ensemble might be something that could benefit their drama training goals?

Josh King:

Well, speaking from experience, I had no idea when I applied about Graeae or any of those sort of things. So, I can genuinely say from experience, just why not give it a try. I didn't think that I would be able to do any training or even be a working actor. I didn't think I'd be sat here talking about it. But, I think it's important just to give anything a go because if you don't, you just end up regretting it and I think it doesn't matter because you've just got to try.

Josh King:

There is nothing to gain from sitting back and hoping things will happen. I remember filling out the form and genuinely thinking, I'm not going to get this. These things aren't meant for me. But, obviously, they are, and you don't get anywhere if you don't try. Just give it a go.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

I think, Ness, when you on the course, I think it was different then. It's sort of developed since you went in that there is a week where everyone comes together, called the Discover Week. It's actually meeting lots of different people, having taster workshops and there's an audition at the end of it. A very supportive environment. It's a workshop and people perform their monologues in any way that's accessible for them in front of a supportive group.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

But then, that week is also as much about those participants on the programme going, is this for me? Do I want to take this forward and do I want to be part of Ensemble and do the course? Because, Ness, I think you were thrown in the deep end, weren't you. It was like audition, interview, and then you were straight in there.

Vanessa Smith:

Yeah, I remember when, I think it was Mette called me, to tell me I had been accepted, I think I had to ask her to repeat it because I was just like, no, Uh-uh. I did not hear you correctly. Uh-huh (affirmative). I remember it was just a mad. I think it was a few days because we had to organise everything really fast.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

Yes, we've learned from those days. (laughs)

Vanessa Smith:

I like that you've got the test week now, because then people have got time. My advice to anybody who is considering it, just jump in and do it. If you do the course and, especially after the taster week, you decide you want to do it, then just do it. But, if after the taster week, you decide, actually not for me, then that's okay as well.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

We're going to go now to... Hopefully the rest of the Ensemblies, as Mette and I affectionately call you as a collective noun. There may be some of them listening out there. So, this is your chance, Awa, Josh, and Ness, to just give a bit of a shout out, a bit of a tribute to some of your fellow Ensemblies. Thinking about your particular year groups, this is just quick fire answers. Don't over-think it. The funniest Ensemblie.

Josh King:

Jamal.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

Jamal from year one? Jamal Ajala. Shout out to Jamal. The rebel.

Awa Jagne:

Terry.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

Terry?

Awa Jagne:

She was just ready to do anything.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

What about the person who saw the most theatre?

Josh King:

Kellan.

Awa Jagne:

Terry.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

The best parties?

Vanessa Smith:

Graeae Christmas party.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

I thought you were going to say Dave Young. The most reliable Ensemblie in finding new food on Kingsland Road and coming back to gloat about it?

Our Zhigney:

Oh, Louis. It has to be Louis.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

Louis. I was thinking you Awa actually.

Awa Jagne:

Why me?

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

You'd come back with chicken wings and be like, look what I found. I found this new place on Kingsland Road and they're the best chicken wings ever. Then, people would say, can I have some, and you're like, no.

Vanessa Smith:

Wow.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

You would not share your chicken wings.

Awa Jagne:

I'm sorry. (laughs)

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

It was only chicken wings. Every other aspect, you were hugely generous, Awa. You just really hung onto your chicken wings. What about the person who was most consistently late?

Vanessa Smith:

Poppy, because it wasn't her fault.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

Sorry, Poppy. If Poppy was here I'm sure she would say you, Ness. But that's all right.

Vanessa Smith:

Ouch.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

Okay, who was the biggest talker?

Awa Jagne:

Ashton.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

Ashton. Shout out to Ashton. He always had a good story.

Josh King:

I want to say Ness.

Vanessa Smith:

Oh shut up.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

When you came in, usually a Wednesday, we had to start asking you to come in earlier because you'd spend the first 15 minutes having a cup of tea and talking about something funny that had happened on your way in. Someone had said something or you had seen something or whatever.

Josh King:

Yeah, I remember that.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

Well, thank you all for spending your... What day is it? It's a Thursday morning with us here today and it's lovely to see you all and I hope you'll continue to take care in these strange times that we have. But, yeah, I hope you all know that even though Ensemble for you is in the past, that you have big futures ahead of you as well. I hope that you come back and mentor our next Ensemblies and give them the encouragement that you had received as well.

Vanessa Smith:

Thank you.

Jodi-Alissa Bickerton:

Thank you everyone.

Josh King:

Thank you.

Awa Jagne:

Thank you.

Speaker 1:

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