24. Disability and…History with Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart

**Introduction**

Welcome to the Graeae and Disability Arts Online podcast 'Disability And…' - bringing together thoughtful discussion and debate. This month Disability Arts Online Assistant Editor Joe Turnbull chats with writer/filmmaker, Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart about their PhD research into the Royal Courts of a Renaissance Period. And the role that disability played during the era.

**Joe Turnbull**

Welcome to the 'Disability And…' podcast to Jessica. How are you doing today?

**Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart**

I'm good. I've had my first vaccine today.

**Joe Turnbull**

What was that like?

**Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart**

It was in a gymnasium, and was just getting told about 'Oh, you might feel worse tomorrow and stuff like that.' So I'm just happy it's done now.

**Joe Turnbull**

Feeling relieved?

**Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart**

Yeah.

**Joe Turnbull**

Jessica, do you want to tell us a bit of background about you and your research interests?

**Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart**

My name is Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart. I'm an autistic disabled writer, historian and filmmaker. I'm doing a History PhD currently at the University of St. Andrews on the topic of neurodiverse Court Fools, and bodilydiverse Court Wonders - people like dwarfs and giants - at Renaissance Courts in Scotland and England, so it's the Tudors and the Stuarts. I'm looking at the period of about 1500 to the 1600s. And I'm trying to shed light on these people's lives because it's not been studied much and because they've left a big impact on these Royal Courts and Rulers. I'm trying to use stuff like 'Tech Talk' and videos I do for 'BBC - The Social' to teach people my Age about Disabled History and engage people in history in new ways.

**Joe Turnbull**

It's kind of funny to use such up-to-date methods to talk about something that happened 600 years ago, but I think that's really important. Do you want to tell us a little bit more about the stuff you do at the BBC?

**Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart**

I'm a filmmaker but with 'BBC - The Social'. I get to do videos that I write and they cover a lot of topics. My new video that will be coming out is about Sia's 'Music' and my experiences as an autistic filmmaker - what's my views on it as both a disabled person (who she's writing about) and as a filmmaker. But in the past I've done stuff about things like 'fire arrows', which is a kind of random bit of history. I try and look at things about disabled people in the modern day but also in the past in my videos for them.

**Joe Turnbull**

Yeah, I've seen a few. They're really good. In fact, I think I saw the one that you'd done on the 'Anti Vax movement'.

**Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart**

It was a really important topic for me, quite close to me studying that and doing a piece on it for people. But it's something I feel we have to really demystify, and we have to expose people who are taking these beliefs and using it to hurt disabled people.

**Joe Turnbull**

Do you want to tell us a little bit more about why it was the particular period of the Renaissance and The Royal Courts specifically that interested you for your PhD research?

**Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart**

It's kind of peculiar. I was doing an English Lit degree and my disabilities kind of got in the way and I couldn't get into Honours level, so I had to take History again. I grew up with stuff like 'Horrible Histories' and 'Dead Famous' books, which are these kids History stuff, and a lot of the stuff it told you about was quite diverse History. They would talk about things like the British Empire, about slavery, and things like that in a way that didn't try and hide it from kids, but talked to them as human beings - so I learnt a lot from these books. At college I'd kind of fallen out of love in my first year because we were doing stuff like the 'Liberals' road to World War Two', and thankfully when I got this chance (because I didn't get those grades) I started doing History. Then I got the grades for that and I went on to Honours History. I did courses in Renaissance History with Dr Sarah Cockram, which made me become really interested in the period because it's this period of time where everything's changing, where there's a medieval period (things that came before) but also modernity coming together. So it was a combination of things like that that made me look further into Disabled History and into the History of The Court, and I realised there was these people who were like me that had these important positions in The Royal Court. They were called 'Natural Court Fools', but you can think of them as neurodiverse people today, 'Court Dwarfs' people who were bodilydiverse. They got these positions because they were believed to have talents and abilities that other people didn't. One of the most amazing people was Will Sommers - he was given consent by Henry VIII to tell him the truth, so he was one of the only people who was allowed to speak truths to Henry VIIIl (he would tell him that he had frauds that were taking money off him and things like that). And it's because in the period the people advanced that thought about how Natural Fools, who'd been born that way, that they were allowed to talk truths to the most powerful people in power. The Royal Court for me - what makes it stand out for looking at that History - is this treasure trove of sources and evidence for what disabled people's lives were like. If you're looking at legal cases or church documents, you will see disabled people crop up, but often you're not getting as much information about them. But for this period of time, The Royal Courts became a place where disabled people like this had important roles and living alongside people in the most accounts and records of that time. It's almost that The Courts are like that that sheds light on disabled people's lives of that period. It's this hidden history of disabled people at that time that you can find so much evidence of in sources, and how much they impacted Court entertainment and rituals and stuff like that. And I feel that it can also change our perspectives on Rulers. People like Mary Tudor who are called 'Bloody Mary', she was actually very close to her "Fool" Jane, and acted as a patron and protector of other people. So it kind of influences how we look at Royalty in the past as well.

**Joe Turnbull**

What kind of roles would they play within The Courts? You mentioned the Court Jester, was there other types of roles that they might play?

**Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart**

Initially they're there because, for instance with Natural Fools, they were believed to sometimes be more comedic because of that. So there's always a kind of a paradoxical thing with disability in the Renaissance, where there might be elements of ridicule but there's also a raising up of them. So Fools could be seen as funnier, they could sometimes be seen to be able to see into the future, to be clairvoyant. And also they spoke honestly, they didn't hide things, they didn't flatter like so many other Courtiers. So for a Ruler, this was a really great person to have at your Court. And them and people who were Court Dwarfs and Giants were also companions to Rulers, people who were different to those in that society. But because of that, because they weren't a threat like someone like an Nobleman might be to a Ruler, they could be closer to a Ruler than those people could be. And with Court Dwarfs and Giants they were viewed as "Wonders" - people who were different enough physically that they're wonderful and people to be in awe of, but not different enough that they're seen as monstrous. That's that kind of juxtaposition coming in again where they're kind of beautiful in their difference, but there's people who aren't like that and they are seen not as positively in that period.

**Joe Turnbull**

It kind of sounds like almost that they had the freedom to say things that perhaps others with a lot more positions of power might not be able to in some ways.

**Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart**

They definitely had agency. There's this with Natural Fools, but at the same time (especially in England) people who were called "Artificial Fools" (i.e. comedians or people who would make money from making people laugh), they were very looked down upon and distrusted because they were believed to be taking jobs from people like Natural Fools, from people who couldn't do another job. There was this view that you were born with this ability to provide this comedy, to provide these abilities at The Court, and Artificial Fools were people who are impinging on that and trying to take it over. Over time you get people like Archy Armstrong, who was James I's Court Fool. He was an Artificial Fool. So this is after Shakespeare and the rise of theatre starts to change things - you start getting more clowns and people who do comedy for living, and it becomes less looked down upon, but there's still a limit for people who aren't Natural Fools. Archy Armstrong continued to serve Charles I until he insulted the Archbishop at the time, and he was kicked out of Court with his coat over his head. So there was this element that that could happen to people who are Artificial Fools. One of the only cases I've found in England and Scotland when I looked at when that happens to an actual Fool, is Patch - an earlier Fool of Henry VIII. It was because he had called Anne Boleyn and Elizabeth some very very bad stuff and Henry VIII threatened to kill him. He had to be protected by Master of the Horse - the main man in the stables had to take him in and look after him because there was that limit for Henry, you don't insult Anne Boleyn.

**Joe Turnbull**

I'm interested in the idea of the Artificial Fool as being almost like a Renaissance "cripping up".

**Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart**

Robert Armin was a clown actor for Shakespeare and he wrote a book about Fools, called 'Foole Upon Foole', where it's him recording the lives of different Jesters and Fools who were Natural Fools. It's almost like he's showing you 'look, you could base your character on this guy or this guy'. It's him almost showing his inspiration for his roles, which is weird but it's also a really great source to read for that.

**Joe Turnbull**

Yeah, and so they were influential, in that way, on the early development of theatre as an artform, I guess. Going that far back, you can't underestimate the "butterfly effect" that could have had on our forms of entertainment that we see today.

**Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart**

Will Sommers is probably one of the most famous Court Fools in history. And he's someone who wasn't able to tame Henry VIII, but he was able to be a close ally to him and friend in a Court where people were always looking out for something, wanting something from him. There's stories of them joking together, of him trying to calm Will down when he had difficulties. Will Sommers is this really interesting figure because his agency's so obvious that there's been people in the past who've tried to claim he isn't an Natural Fool. He was very witty and intelligent. But at the same time, he had narcolepsy and needed to have a keeper look after him. And to me he comes across as someone who's obviously neurodiverse, but over the past few hundred years of history, people have been like, 'Oh, you must have been an Artificial Fool because of that'.

**Joe Turnbull**

Have you found that being a disabled researcher and doing that research from a disabled perspective, have you come up against barriers within the academic world taking that perspective? Or were they very open to that approach?

**Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart**

You mean coming at it with a disabled lens?

**Joe Turnbull**

Yeah. Is that welcomed within the academic space, would you say?

**Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart**

Definitely. I initially had Prof Robert Houston as my primary supervisor (he is retired now), and he had looked at things like mental illness and disability in the Early Modern period in Scotland - the 1600s-1700s). I now have Dr Amy Blakeway as my main supervisor and they've been so accommodating of my disabilities, but also accommodating and celebrating the kind of perspectives I bring to this. There has been histories of Court Fools or Court Dwarfs in the past, but there hasn't really been much crossover between Disabled History. People who are in looking at Royal History will talk about it, but people who have done Disabled History will often ignore it.

**Joe Turnbull**

You're in a Venn diagram in the middle there of those two things. And it's clearly an area that that needs more exploration. It's interesting, because obviously within Disability Studies there's been loads of really positive stuff like the Social Model and things like that have come from that area. But clearly it's still a place where disabled people are underrepresented, certainly within the kind of the broader research and within history, looking at how disabled people have been represented through history. I suppose it's just often hard to find that history, as you said, but The Royal Courts offer this goldmine for these stories.

**Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart**

Yeah.

**Joe Turnbull**

Do you think there's anything in those Renaissance attitudes towards disability that we can see mirrored today?

**Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart**

Yeah. Quite a big thing, I think, is how our changing views on how disabled people have contributed to society and how disabled people impact the world. Disabled Rights Movement happened a lot later than for other groups. People like the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation - their pamphlet 1976 changed so much, and since that we have been trying to get our voices heard. The idea of neurodiversity is just this fascinating thing to me, because it's about how human diversity is a positive. We should put aside the idea of "normal", "abnormal" - to me, they're hangovers from the early modern periods - we need to view human diversity as a good thing. Another thing I think we share with the period is just that humans, no matter how bad we can be, we're also deeply defined by our kindness and compassion as long as humanity has existed. If you look at burial sites of people in prehistory, there's cases of people who had the injury and lived another twenty years! We've always cared for each other, and in the Renaissance this was part of caring for people. They had these important roles, but they were also looked after because of that,

**Joe Turnbull**

I was curious if there's any other kind of historical periods that interest to you beyond the Renaissance? If you were to do further research, if you were to do a book in ten years’ time on something else, whether there's other historical periods that you'd really love to get your teeth stuck into?

**Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart**

My dream is to one day do something that is like the history of disabled people. There was an amazing documentary I saw recently which was about disabled people, but it was from (as often is) from the early modern period. I find it fascinating that even when we were hunting animals and living in caves, even back then we were looking after each other. People in the Egyptian period, there was a lot of Court Dwarfs in that period. Something I find fascinating is, no matter what period in time and what culture you look at, from an Icelandic Europe to an Emperor in China, most of these Ruler figures will have someone in a position that is something like a Fool or a Court Dwarf (especially during the Renaissance). And especially what I found fascinating when I was doing my undergrad was Ottoman Court disabled figures, because they had Court Fools and Court Dwarfs but they also had a group of non-verbal deaf servants at The Court, who would be like Pages. They helped develop a sign language at Court so that they could pass on secret messages for the Sultan, and occasionally they were used as assassins because there were so silent. I would have loved to have pursue that but the one thing that held me back was my terrible ability to learn languages. In fact, I would have had to have known Ottoman Turkish, Persian and Arabic to really study it properly. I think one thing with modern histories of disability, there's so much more of it. The good thing about that is there's so many more personal accounts of being disabled by disabled people. The one thing I've found is like a memoir for the Renaissance, it's the 'Cronica Burlesca' and it's by disabled Court Dwarf at Charles I's Court in Spain. And he was also Jewish at a time where many Jewish people had been kicked out of Spain. And his book is basically an account of The Court, and a jokey account of his own life. He says stuff like his Coat of Arms has a foreskin on it, he does jokes about being Jewish in this book, but also, he described himself as like the gossipmonger of The Court. So it's fascinating, his account, but it's one of the only ones I've ever found. And because I'm not looking at Spain and I don't speak Spanish I can't unlock it, but hope someone translates it properly one day because it's never been translated. But with the early modern period and on into modern history, you have so many more accounts by disabled people. One of the biggest is 18th century politician, MP and author William Hay - he did a book called 'On Deformity' about his life living with a disability. And there's obviously stuff like the diary of Frida Kahlo and accounts of people who had experienced things like freakshows and institutions. There's so many clearer voices the closer to today you get. And for me, in a lot of my research those voices are quite far away and I'm trying to get closer. So I do love that about modern disabled histories.

**Joe Turnbull**

When you mentioned it just there it occurred to me, was there parallels between the freakshows of the Victorian and early modern era and The Court, Court Fools, and that kind of thing?

**Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart**

A book I would recommend on that is Rosemarie Garland Thomson's book 'Freakery', where she discusses (and has contributions by other authors in Disabled Studies), talking about the idea of the "freak", and showing that a lot of people who were involved in that they did have agency to an extent; it was a job that you could succeed in if you had certain disabilities. But what she describes is something that my research looks at as well. In the Renaissance you have these positive views of neurodiversity, bodily diversity, no one's perfect, there's no idea of normal and abnormal in the way we have today. But in the early modern period, medicine and sciences start to change, The Royal Court starts to change. And disabilities - especially once Capitalism comes into play everywhere - that starts to define people by how much worth they have to the society, the economy, and things like that.

**Joe Turnbull**

In a productivity kind of sense, yeah.

**Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart**

Thomson frames it as: there's this move from "wonder" to "error", people start to be seen as defective, as imperfect. Things like intelligence during The Enlightenment are so important suddenly - to be the best human, the best bred or whatever. You have to be intelligent. Society starts to celebrate things that are different to what the celebrated in the Renaissance. So there's this massive change that still impacts us today. We're starting to overcome it, but a lot of the problems that we're going through now were started in 1600s/1700s - a change in how we viewed disability.

**Joe Turnbull**

Yeah, I think that's so important. It's such an important point, because I think there's a general misconception that a lot of these things have deeper roots than they actually do. And some of the notions about things like human nature are totally misguided and they're nothing to do with human nature, they're there to do with the Capitalist ethos of production and productivity and profit making, and viewing people in those units and those terms. And actually it's really enlightening and really refreshing to get those perspectives from a sort of pre-Capitalist era pre-Modern era that actually tell a completely different story.

**Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart**

It's not a golden age. People with certain things (especially like conjoined twins), certain other disabilities were seen as negatives and this always varies depending on the time you look at. But I feel something that's held back so much understanding of disability in the past is, even when we don't mean to, there's still there's still an element of Whiggism - this idea in history where humanity is always getting better, we're always becoming more advanced, more modern. That means that we think that people in the Renaissance must have been like, if you are disabled, you must have been left out to die, and things like that. Places like Sparta in the Classical period, yeah they did stuff like that. But it's this idea that we treat disability in our societies better, when we're letting people die without benefits in their homes with no heating and things like that in the modern day!

**Joe Turnbull**

I think that sort of self-congratulatory liberalism is so dangerous. Yeah, this idea of progress that you were talking about, it leads to complacency and it also then stops you from seeing the very real problems that are right in front of us.

**Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart**

I think it's liberating when we consider that it isn't this progression. We have went backwards over the last few centuries. Things are never this permanent movement, societies are just very different in how they viewed disability and hopefully we're learning more than we have in the past.

**Joe Turnbull**

That leads me on to the point I wanted to raise. When we're following the Social Model of Disability, it tells us that disability is a social construct, something that's always socially constructed, therefore it must always be constructed differently in different societies in different time periods, I guess. And so do you think that disability was just almost conceived in a completely different way in other periods?

**Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart**

Sometimes when we apply the Social Model of Disability to history it can sometimes guide our thinking of the period. I do feel that disabled people and disability has always existed but how we view it, how people experience being disabled, has changed over time and between cultures. And one of the biggest and our earliest figures in Disabled History, Henri-Jacques Stiker, he noted every society has precise social and cultural constructions of things like disability, we have to understand a society to know how they understood disability. It's so complicated trying to do that, but when you look at time-period's view on disability from their perspective it starts to make sense. Especially with the study of neurodiversity in the past, that's very changeable. In the Renaissance, people like Christopher Goody describe it as - you weren't viewed as different in kind, you weren't differently born as a different entity, like someone with autism is born autistic, you were seen as different in degree. So you're "foolish", but it's this kind of spectrum of humanity. I feel like one thing you see over time that different societies have very different views of it and the biggest change, as I've mentioned, is during the Early Modern period. What societies - in places like England and Scotland - saw as something to privilege changed. What things like being an Actual Fool or Dwarf or Giant, what they became was "undesired differentness” (in Goffman's words). And once you're not desired and seen as important in society, that's when stigmatisation... when people start to become objects of prejudice. Foucault isn't that good a historian, he's better at other things, but his work has still influences today in History. In his book 'Madness and Civilization' he talks about how in the Early Modern period, the voices which the Renaissance had liberated suddenly all those disabled people and mentally ill people began to be put into institutions. It's just tragic. It's this move from The Royal Court into positions in places where they had no power. And as someone who has had experience of that, it's a very personal history for me to study. I feel like I owe it to the people over those hundreds of years that were impacted by institutions and this change in view on disability.

**Joe Turnbull**

That feels like quite a good place to stop, but is there anything else that you haven't said that you'd like to say, or anything else you'd particularly like to talk about?

**Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart**

Just this study of how words change when it comes to disability are very intriguing. A recent example of how in Britain we view the "sp-word" as a terrible slur. The reason why that happened was a disabled man with cerebral palsy and writer, Joey Deacon, appeared on Blue Peter in 1981, and instead of inspiring kids it made him and the sp-word become a slur. And I find that really depressing, but it's why in places like American and Australia that word is used more like "fool" or "idiot" is. There's this movement of historical terms for disabled people over time, they become more specific and sometimes becomes slurs. So terms that were used as the medical and up-to-date term suddenly over time they become offensive. It's happening especially fast with (as an autistic person) there used to be terms like "Asperger's" that were used but that's been put aside now, partly because he was an awful guy but also because things like Autism Spectrum Disorder make more sense. So understanding disability a lot of the time also means understanding words. The thing I forgot to mention was, I'd pitched for this Disabled History article a week ago (it was a paid opportunity so I did that) and I got a knock-back and the person's reply was very interesting, they basically said they were gonna pass because they didn't think that Court Fools and Dwarfs had had any impact on history, even though they're interesting they had no impact. I think the person was probably seeing the terms used, maybe that impacted them, maybe they just think in terms of the stereotypes of these people that these figures were just figures of ridicule. But I feel that any Disabled History is incomplete if we don't consider pre-Modern Disabled History like The Renaissance.

**Joe Turnbull**

Yeah. Yeah, and that seems provably false to me given the the prominence of Fools in writing like Shakespeare's writing and things like that. It seems like a not-particularly-informed position for that person to have taken, but there we go. I suppose, what might also be nice to end on is what would you say to anyone who's maybe thinking about studying History or maybe isn't interested in History about why you think studying History is an important thing to do.

**Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart**

If you're thinking of doing History you should go for it because there's so many cases where you will be able to see people like yourself, also people who are very different. You will be able to see cultures that are incredible and experiences that are very much like ours today. And I feel especially with Disabled History it shows how disabled people have always impacted history, we've always had a place in society. No matter where you are in the world, disabled people have left a mark. And studying History it's incredible - you get to experience whole other worlds and time periods, and it's both alien and familiar, and it helps change your view on society today and how you can change things.

**Joe Turnbull**

Thank you, Jessica, that was absolutely amazing! I learned so much. What a really interesting conversation. So much to unpack and so many names and lots of further reading for us all to do, I think. So I'd just like to thank Jessica for joining us on the 'Disability And…' podcast. Thank you so much Jessica.

**Jessica Secmezsoy-Urquhart**

Thank you.

**Outro**

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