**Disability And… Social Change with Kate Lovell and Robyn Bowyer**

**Welcome to the Graeae and Disability Arts Online Podcast, Disability and ... Bringing together thoughtful discussion and debate.**

**This month. Graeaee's associate artist, Kate Lovell, chats with Graeae's trainee producer, Robin Bowyer, about art and theatre, and how informs social change.**

Kate Lovell:

Hello, and welcome to The Disability And ... Podcast. My name is Kate Lovell, and I am joined here by ...

Robin Bowyer:

Robin Bowyer.

Kate Lovell:

And we are both working at Graeae, and both recently joined last month. I am an associate artist, with a focus on new writing and artist development.

Robin Bowyer:

And I'm Graeae's new trainee producer.

Kate Lovell:

I am a white woman, short, messy, dyed purple hair. I wear black-rimmed round glasses, and I would normally be wearing something obnoxious brightly coloured and floral. But today, I'm actually just wearing a grey cardigan and black T-shirt, to throw everyone off guard.

Robin Bowyer:

Very out character for you. Yeah, I'm a white female, and I have brown hair, and it's tied up in a bun at the moment, and I'm wearing a grey hoodie, and ... Yeah.

Kate Lovell:

Me and Robin connected when we first joined Graeae, as we both have a big passion for art as a tool for social change. That's what we'd like to discuss today in this podcast. So if it's okay, Robin, I'll put you on the spot and ask you, what does art as a tool for social change mean, from your perspective?

Robin Bowyer:

For me, art is a way that we can connect with each other. I think by connecting, that creates social change, and makes us think about things differently, and have conversations about deeper topics that art can often facilitate.

And it's through that collaborative and opening up process, if you like, is where real change happens, because it allows us to think differently, and really see the world for what it is, and how we can support positive change. Often, when we see things that inspire us, it makes us think positively about our role within society, and also how we can support society to maybe be better, sometimes.

Kate Lovell:

Yes, definitely. I know that, when you're saying there, about being able to of see the world, and connect with others, I know that I'm often attracted to go and see work that is made by people who are different from me, or talking about something that I know very little or next to nothing about.

Because I hope that I'll be able to learn something, and see through somebody's eyes, who is very different from me. I find that exciting, and I hope that it broadens my own horizons.

Robin Bowyer:

Yeah, storytelling is such a underrated tool for us learning and developing. And like you say, seeking out work that isn't of your own voice, I think that's really important.

You, as a person, you can tell that when, especially from the role that you do at Graeae, you have to seek out different stories, because your role is to support that narrative. And yeah, it's an amazing tool, isn't it?

Kate Lovell:

Yeah. I think that's one thing that attracts me to new writing, is that you get to hear the voices that are telling the stories of now, and the stories of today. I think that storytelling can help us process the world, as well.

And particularly, we are living through a global pandemic and we're coming up to nearly two years of living with this, or, we're just about two years now, really. I think we've all sort of, are going through a collective trauma, really. And I think that art has been, and will continue to be really important in, helping us to understand what has happened, and process everything.

Robin Bowyer:

Yeah, and I think throughout this time, it's been quite inspiring to see how people have used art as their sanctuary. And it's not always about making huge political change when we're talking about social change.

It's also about art as a tool in helping people cope, in many ways, or find hope in the world, when it doesn't feel that way. And I think that's also really powerful, too.

Kate Lovell:

Absolutely. I mean, when you think about the times of lockdowns and the times we've had to spend shut away from most other people, but then, people have been turning on the TV, watching Netflix, watching BBC dramas and theatres streaming things, and Graeae creating content specifically for watching online.

Like you say, it has been people's real sanctuary, in a way, of something to hold onto, and something to talk to other people about. Because normally, you might talk to your friends and family about what you've been doing.

But obviously, sometimes during the pandemic, during the lockdowns, that that amounts to not very much to talk about, really. "Went for a walk, ordered some stuff from Tesco?" It's a point of connection.

Robin Bowyer:

Yeah, definitely. And the hope that it's now seen as that, a play is now seen where it should be, as a really important way of life. And also a way of, again, us finding connection.

Kate Lovell:

Yeah, because I sometimes think there's a bit of a disconnect, where people like to watch films or TV shows, and then, don't always connect the dots that that is the arts, that the arts needs funding, so that people can carry on hearing those stories and enjoying those stories.

Theatre feeds the film and TV industry. I'm not always sure, that unless you're working in the industry, that you know about those sort of mechanisms.

Robin Bowyer:

Yeah, exactly. It's like, Fleabag started off as a Fringe show, and ...

Kate Lovell:

Yeah, absolutely. Obviously I don't think there's a hierarchy. I mean, I love theatre, but I guess, you could probably say that more people watch TV than go to the theatre. So it's like, that's where people are more likely to know about things on TV.

But yeah, Fleabag: One-Woman Fringe Show was, and then I think it got picked up from the Fringe, and taken somewhere, maybe the National, I can't remember, before it was then turned into ...

Robin Bowyer:

Yeah. I think it was the National.

Kate Lovell:

Yeah.

Robin Bowyer:

But it's amazing, her story. She wrote that piece because she couldn't find her foot in the door. And I think that's what's amazing about theatre, is that people are writing, because maybe they're not feeling, there's no representation, or people are feeling, "I'm going to give myself the opportunity." And I think that, surely, that breeds great art, doesn't it?

Kate Lovell:

Yeah, that's it. I love that, that you've picked up on ... Although I'm not saying it's easy to write theatre, it isn't, but it's more, that if you write a script and you come and meet someone from a theatre company or organisation, or you raise some money and book a room, you can put it on.

Obviously there's a lot more gatekeeping when it comes to TV and film, but theatre has that kind of rawness, and I think you can get things out to an audience kind of more quickly. And it's maybe a more sort of urgent response to what's happening in the world. That's one of the reasons that I really love it.

You can't sort of replace, you can't sort of replicate that when you've got to book a whole film crew, and spend months and months making something. It creates a different kind of art.

Robin Bowyer:

Has there been a work that's inspired you in regards to social change, or just a work, a piece of art that, well, piece of theatre, that's made you go on the journey that you're on?

Kate Lovell:

Ooh, that's a good question. The answer's probably, maybe unexpected, in some ways, but I do remember that the show that made me think, "Wow, this is so amazing," was Guys and Dolls at the National Theatre. It would have been pretty much 20 years ago.

I joined a local amateur dramatic group in my hometown. It was really accessible, because it only cost six pounds for a whole year's membership.

Robin Bowyer:

Wow.

Kate Lovell:

They took us on this coach trip to see this play at the National. I mean, it was a great production, and I still regret that I only had four pounds to spend, and the cassette tape of the songs was five pound, I still regret that. I have to find that tape some time.

But it wasn't that the show was necessarily in itself trying to be a force for social change, or anything. But I think there was something about going to a drama group that didn't cost the earth to go, and that anyone could go to, and you didn't have to go through a rigorous audition selection process. It was just really open.

Then I did take that into, when I went off to university, and I didn't study theatre, in the first instance. But I did join the Drama Society, and they had a night there once a week where people could just try out stuff, and kind of experiment.

I took on a role with another person, of programming and organising those nights, and again, you didn't have to audition for that. You just sort of pitched ideas, and I just really loved doing that. I think that's what started to shape me into the kind of artist I knew I wanted to be, somebody who's giving that space for anyone who wants to engage in art to do it.

And not art, not all being about, you've got to have gone to drama school, and trained in a particular way, and do things in a particular way. It's more exciting to see how someone comes at it, who hasn't come from that background.

Robin Bowyer:

It's interesting to hear your journey. And I think, when you're talking about access, and the importance of access, or doesn't. Obviously, disabilities is something that we advocate here at Graeae, but also that classless thing, as well. So making sure that things are affordable is really important, because that's obviously how you got into this industry.

Kate Lovell:

Yeah, that's it, because everything kind of intersects. Is there a particular kind of work or moment, that propelled you into this world of theatre making, with social change at its heart?

Robin Bowyer:

I think there's lots of different pieces, when I look back at it, but I think, probably, and it wasn't the best piece in the world, but probably having Theatre in Education coming to school.

Kate Lovell:

Yeah.

Robin Bowyer:

I think that was the first time, really, and they were talking about big, heavy topics, like teenage pregnancy, I think, one of them was. And I just thought, "These people are talking about things that relate to what's going on now, and that's their job. That's a job?"

I just thought, "It's so amazing, they came into school," and I remember seeing hot seating for the first time and thinking, "Oh, this is incredible, you can actually ask these characters questions," and that engagement piece around it, and just feeling like you could engage. And I think that's something that really inspired me.

Then, while that was going on, I saw someone in the background dressed in black, obviously, and wearing a headset, and I thought, "Well, what's their job?" They were a stage manager, and I thought, "Oh, that's really ..." I didn't even know that existed.

Yeah, then I went to uni, studied drama and stagecraft, so I could learn all of the backstage stuff as well. Yeah, and then we did our own Theatre in Education piece, and that was interesting, being on the other side of it, and ...

Kate Lovell:

Yeah.

Robin Bowyer:

Yeah. I just think, I mean, again, it's about that accessibility, be it going into the environment of learning that's like, it feels like, in some ways, I feel like it makes the young people feel they're in control of the situation, which I think is really makes it about social change, in some ways, because you are representing a piece of work to them in their environment. I think there's something really beautiful about that, seeing both sides of it.

We decided to have one of the characters have dyslexia, and it was all about getting into university. And basically, that you can go to university, if you have neuro differences. I think that was really important for me, personally, to tell that story.

But yeah, I think there's something really special about Theatre in Education, and it's not always the perfect piece of theatre or art. But I like that it's in that environment.

Kate Lovell:

I think you've just hit on something that's so important, and that it is undervalued. Like you say, maybe it's not something that you're going go and see in the West End, isn't all that art is about.

And yeah, making art in people's environment, where they're comfortable, and where they don't have to take a train ride, a hundred miles or whatever, to go and go and see it. It's right there. It's for them.

I think it's a double-edged sword, because it is special, because it's only for those people. Then sometimes you think, "Oh, I wish more people knew about these things that happen on this small scale, that can be really profound," like that Theatre in Education show that came into your school, that started to a light bulb moment.

I was just thinking, then, I should say, it was the Barn Theatre in Welwyn Garden City that I went to, when I was a kid, I should give a name check. I should, because it's them that started me on this journey, and they're still going.

As far as I know, they still run new theatres. And that they are the sort of training ground, or the places where you're going to have those light bulb moments, just as important as seeing a show at the National.

Robin Bowyer:

Yeah, a big shout out to all the am drams, as they called it.

Kate Lovell:

Yeah, absolutely. Particularly ones that are managed to keep going on a shoestring.

Robin Bowyer:

So when we're talking about social change, and obviously Graeae are at the forefront, or they're trailblazers within access, and making sure that there's representation for disability onstage and offstage. What made you want to work for them? How did you come across Graeae?

Kate Lovell:

I came across Graeae while I was studying up at York University, and their production of Blasted was coming to York Theatre Royal. Actually, it was in the studio space, which then was very small. I don't know if it's been refurbed now, but I couldn't get a ticket, and I was really disappointed.

But I saw that they were doing a workshop, and they needed some volunteers to support, and I thought, "Oh, I'll volunteer, because then at least I'll get a little taste of what's happening."

I did that. So it was Jenny doing the workshop, and she had her interpreter there, and I supported a blind woman who wanted to do some writing.

And I just started, my awareness started opening up to this very inclusive, and yeah, type of theatre with access at its heart. And then, I kind of feel like our paths just kept meeting over the years.

I saw a show at Theatre Royal Stratford East, when I moved to London many years later, called Signs of a Star-Shaped Diva, with a deaf actress, Caroline Parker, performing. And I really fell in love with it, and I went to see it twice.

The second time, I brought a massive group of people I was studying with at Goldsmiths. Then I booked for Graeae to come and do a workshop, and yeah, I just, it felt like I just had this kind of concentric circle. It just kept getting sort of ever closer.

And yeah, I'm more and more passionate about championing deaf and disabled voices. And Graeae was the company that taught me about the social model of disability, and allowed me to understand that I am a disabled person, rather than a broken person, which is how I felt before, with, under the medical model sort of regime that I was used to.

So, to come now and be working in a role as associate artist, does feel like coming home, like, "Oh yeah, this was always meant to be, somehow, this sort of magnetic pull." What about you and Graeae? What brought you to Graeae?

Robin Bowyer:

I just want to say, it does sound like it was always meant to be.

Kate Lovell:

It does, doesn't it? But that might be just me being a storyteller and spinning a good yarn.

Robin Bowyer:

Maybe, maybe. Well, I'd seen some shows while I was studying in Liverpool, and I had never really come across, which is obviously why Graeae exists, and why we need to continue to advocate, and never really come across such a broad representation of disability onstage, before seeing any of their work.

Yeah, and then it sort of just sat in my head for a while. Then, during lockdown, they put out a training programme called Beyond, which is about supporting regional artists, and connecting them to venues, and trying to make work happen.

So I decided to join that programme, because I thought it was a good way of developing through lockdown, and I felt really like supported through. Yeah, it kept me going, really, through the pandemic, and made me feel like the arts weren't an unachievable goal.

Kate Lovell:

Yes.

Robin Bowyer:

And yeah, and then, basically I applied. I thought, "Oh, my gosh, imagine being a trainee producer but in that environment, it would be amazing, in supporting that mission."

Yeah, so I applied, and here I am. So yeah, I feel really lucky, to have got the position, but also really lucky to work with amazing people, who are really inspiring.

Kate Lovell:

Yeah, that's it. I mean, for listeners, I don't want to get too navel-gazey, but it is a great team to be a part of. What you said there, about them being trailblazers, I love the fact that Graeae says, "We're a human rights theatre company," and that was something that is so important to me.

I think it's part of that, isn't it, that they're, they're explicitly saying, "We're here to change the world, be part of that." Nothing is "just art."

Robin Bowyer:

Yeah, exactly. I think that we're going to be on an inspiring journey the next, well, there's a bit less than a year now, but I feel like we're on a journey of advocacy, and also development ourselves, which is exciting in this environment.

Kate Lovell:

So yes, definitely. Our first few weeks have been busy, busy, busy, especially for you, Robin, working across so many different projects.

Robin Bowyer:

Yeah, everybody's busy, aren't they?

Kate Lovell:

Yeah, that's true. That's true. But do you know that there are two other associate artists, who I think will be doing the next podcast, Britny and Sonny, and the four of us created a new writing showcase that we presented on the 3rd of December, and for the International Day of Disabled People.

Again, that sort of felt like we were trying to put ourselves on the map. "It's International Day of Disabled People, here's plays written by disabled people, directed by disabled people," the whole team, and showcasing that talent, and doing it on Zoom, even though theatres are still open.

But I think it's also a way of making sure that many people could be included, so that we were able to cast without worrying about location, including working with a writer who's from New York, and not also, people that might still not be feeling good about going out and about, and mixing. Obviously, now, that's got even more intense, that we are in mid-December.

But yeah, I just love that we made that happen, even though we've only met each other in person a handful times, but we did that together as a team. So it shows what can be done.

Robin Bowyer:

Yeah, and I think it helps us let go of our productionism.

Kate Lovell:

Yeah, that's true. I think that is, I know for me as a writer, if I don't have a deadline, it's a bit like, it could just go on forever, because you can always think, "Oh, it could be a bit better, this could change, that could change, it can sort of," you do have to draw a line somewhere.

But I think that is one other element, maybe, that attracts me to theatre, that you do usually a hard deadline. Although it might be a bit nerve wracking, it is a way of making sure that something happens.

Robin Bowyer:

Yeah, yeah. And like you said before, it's that quick turnaround, and it's about being responsive to the time. And I think that's really powerful, and that in itself is, it's about, art is about a moment in time. And I think that's why theatre is so powerful is, because it's about, it can be so responsive to a moment in time.

Kate Lovell:

Yeah, absolutely.

Robin Bowyer:

What about you? What do you want from this year?

Kate Lovell:

I think, well, something I've been thinking I was thinking about earlier on today, about how being a writer can be lonely. Then, I think, being a deaf, disabled or neurodivergent writer can sort of be a layer of lonely, and how maybe creating a community for writers could be something interesting to explore.

Obviously, there are communities out there, of writers, and I'm connected to other writers, but maybe something that has a kind of hub and a structure, and maybe some offers of things to do, spaces to be. I think, maybe writers, we don't connect enough, because it is a solitary, it can be a solitary occupation.

But it doesn't sort of have to be. Just maybe experimenting a bit, what would happen if three of us got together and wrote a piece? Just thinking about different ways of working.

Under the Graeae model, then we don't have to worry about, "Oh, but if I want to work with a deaf writer, and a writer who can't leave their home, how will we do it?"

Well, with the support of Graeae, we'd make it work. We'd get those access needs met, and we'd do it. So yeah, I'm kind of interested in trying to create more of a community connection between disabled writers.

Robin Bowyer:

That sounds really exciting. I think it'll be, it's a really positive thing. Because, as you say, writing can be quite a lonely process. And I think it sounds like a really lovely thing of bringing people together, and connecting again.

Kate Lovell:

Yeah. I think it's a something to try out, and see what happens. And then all the misanthropic writers would go, "Oh no, we don't like people," and hide in their rooms again. No, I'm joking, I'm joking.

I think, as well, to write, you have to spend time with people, you have to be out in the world, and that can be extra difficult during a pandemic. So finding new ways to connect and meet people is probably extra important.

Robin Bowyer:

Do you think you're looking at doing that in the new year, looking at how you can start that rolling?

Kate Lovell:

I hope so. Yeah. I mean, I probably need to have more of a plan, than structured thoughts, but that's just sort of my general splurge of thought about it.

Robin Bowyer:

You put it out into the universe now, so you've got too.

Kate Lovell:

I know, I know, I was just thinking that. But it's probably quite useful pressure, sort of gentle pressure, from myself to myself.

Robin Bowyer:

Yeah, accountability.

Kate Lovell:

And I can ask you to help me produce it, after you've done all the other million things that I'm sure you've got on your to-do list.

Robin Bowyer:

Yeah, as does everybody.

Kate Lovell:

Yeah.

Robin Bowyer:

Yeah, it's been really nice catching up. I don't know, I feel like we've come to a natural end.

Kate Lovell:

Yeah. No, it has been great, and great talking about something that we're both so passionate about, as well.

Robin Bowyer:

Yeah, definitely. I think we can only live in hope, and I think that's what art is, it does.

I know that it's a scary time right now. People are feeling, maybe a bit anxious, but we've just got to find it in us to find that creativity, and channel it in some way.

Kate Lovell:

Yeah. Isn't it about taking the energy? I know sometimes my anxiety does make me restless. I mean, even today, I've had a bit, quite difficult day with anxiety, so channeling it into this conversation is a useful sort of thing to be able to do. And hopefully, making art for people can provide that sort of place, to put some of the thoughts and feelings, and process everything.

Well, thank you very much, Robin, for taking time to have this lovely chat with me this afternoon. And yeah, hope you a lovely Christmas, and everyone listening does, too.

Robin Bowyer:

Oh, it's been an absolute pleasure, and merry Christmas to you, and I'm really looking forward to making some change happen in the new year.

Kate Lovell:

Absolutely. Watch this space, everybody.

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