34 Disability and…the last three years with Colin Hambrook and Nickie Miles-Wildin

**Intro**

Welcome to the last of the Graeae and Disability Arts Online podcast: Disability and ... before we welcome Mind the Gap theatre. This month, Disability Arts Online's Senior Editor, Colin Hambrook, chats with Graeae's former Associate Director, Nickie Miles-Wildin, about the last three years. This podcast contains some strong language.

**Colin Hambrook**

Hi, and welcome to the Disability and .... podcast number 34. Which I'm guessing will be 'Disability and Podcasting' because I'm here with the wonderful Nickie Miles-Wildin, who has been the chief podcaster from the Graeae side. Hi Nickie it's great to meet up with you on the podcast at last!

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

It is Colin, it's fantastic! I can't believe there's been 34 of them. It's just epic and yeah, I don't think it should stop. I think it should keep going.

**Colin Hambrook**

Disability Arts Online, certainly we intend to keep the podcast going and we're about to enter into a podcasting partnership with Mind the Gap Theatre in Bradford.

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

Fantastic!

**Colin Hambrook**

I'm really, really pleased about that. You know, it's been my kind of... I've been very passionate ever since the beginning of Disability Arts Online, to try and find a space to be more inclusive of the learning disability arts community and so I'm really, really pleased they've picked up the mantle. So, Nickie, how has it been for you? It's been 3 years and I've loved hearing your voice on the podcast.

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

Oh, thank you Colin and the same goes. Yeah, 3 years. Gosh, time flies doesn't it when you're in a pandemic?! And to think that's... yeah, I suppose it kind of marks the start of my journey with Graeae as Associate Director and now I've moved on and so it's kind of like a big part of my Graeae time as well. It's been fantastic over the 3 years, like the range of guests that we both had on and other people have come on and presented the podcast as well, and kind of just really reminded me of the disabled community, the disabled arts community as well, and the importance of it, the relevance of it and particularly during times when none of us were really going outside and some of us still aren't, it's just been really valid to have our voices still there.

**Colin Hambrook**

And I've really enjoyed hearing voices of disabled artists that I respect and admire and love, who've been such a huge part of my life. I've loved the range, everything from kind of deep philosophical topics to the, obviously, a lot of the arts through to the Paralympics, and all aspects of life that we're part of as disabled people.

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

Definitely, and I think is that it is just that thing of having the opportunity to share our stories, our perspectives on the world and on art as well and it is quite rare, isn't it, where there's that feeling that we can all get together and share work. And I think this podcast has enabled us to still have that feeling of being, you know, down the pub with each other or those times when there are those big disability arts festivals, like Unlimited at the Southbank, DadaFest and Liberty, where there was that feeling that you could go along to that and you felt that you'd see loads of people you knew and that sense of being able to meet up and I suppose at a time when we haven't had that, and even before that actually, this podcast has felt like that way of remembering we're there and because the podcasts have been that element like you're having a chat, it's enabled you to feel like you are there, you're hearing about other people's work and it's been really enlightening and really exciting.

**Colin Hambrook**

Absolutely. Well, I was very nervous going into the whole kind of arena and I didn't know how I'd be up for the challenge, you know, having the sort of brain that kind of is very stop/start and doesn't really work very well at the best of times. The kind of stress of being in the moment being recorded on a podcast, I thought I'd be... I'd find it really hard. But actually, I've really enjoyed it and you know, it doesn't really matter, does it?

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

No, I think one thing I found, I don't know about you, was I was always worried like, are we going to have enough material? Like, am I going to be able to ask the right questions? Steer the conversation? And then feeling sorry for Ian sometimes, who was editing them. Like, I think there was one that kind of went on for quite a while, over an hour, an hour and a half. But it was just such a joy, kind of getting over that nervousness to just sit and have conversations and listen, and talk about people's work. Do you think that you're more comfortable with it now? And have really gained skills?

**Colin Hambrook**

Yeah, yeah. I think I've grown into it and am far less nervous than I was at the beginning, and I think it's really kind of valuable way of kind of introducing other accessible ways of telling the story of disability arts. You know, Disability Arts Online kind of started as a journal with a sort of a magazine ethic to it, that was very much about writing and print. So this broadcasting has really taken us in another direction and I think it opens up issues around disability arts and beyond disability arts for a much broader range of listeners.

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

Yeah, definitely. And I think there's something interesting there about it being like Disability Arts Online and Graeae, this kind of partnership, how did that come about Colin? Because you probably know more about that than I do.

**Colin Hambrook**

The whole idea of the podcast had been something that we'd talked about at Disability Arts Online for quite a long time, at least a couple of years before we sort of launched ourselves into doing it. That connection with Graeae has been there from the start, you know, there's always been a strong connection between Graeae and Disability Arts Online. They felt very much like a natural partner for us. Yeah, I'm very sad to see that partnership coming to an end but I'm hoping that there'll be other ways that we can partner in the future. I'm hoping that we can do more Deaf led work with Graeae, I think that will be great.

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

Yeah, it's been a fantastic partnership and kind of allowing a real intersectionality of artists as well to come through. That feels like it's been quite key to these podcasts. I think it's exciting that you're going on to work with Mind the Gap, they're just a brilliant company and of course, up in the North as well, which is what we like! But yeah, I just think it's brilliant. I know Graeae have got a lot out of it as well. It's been a real sort of eclectic intersectional mix and also a sense of honesty with all of them. I don't know whether that's the art of a podcast, because you know, you are talking into the ether really, aren't you? But they have all felt really conversational, rather than like a formal interview, and that's been quite engaging.

**Colin Hambrook**

Absolutely, yeah. And the range of subjects has been terrific. You know, we had the Disability and Race podcast with Alexandrina Hemsley and Deborah Williams, who has been an intellectual heavyweight and an enormously important part of my life since since the 90s, actually. I've always had a huge amount of respect and admiration for Deborah, and their podcast really kind of opened up issues around whiteness that I think we don't often think about or talk about, and actually they're really, really important to understand culturally, what that means. You know, we don't usually even consider our skin colour in that context. And other areas that the podcasts have covered the working class and LGBTQIA podcast that we did with Sandra Alland and Shafiq Ghafoor and Mattie Kennedy and Cate Lauder, talking about the parallels with disability and queerness and how that often intersects with class. You know, these have been really meaty subjects.

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

And I think that's really key as well isn't it? The fact that as disabled people we can talk about meaty subjects, like you know, particularly the one with Deborah and Alexandrina that is such a massive discussion and so much more to do there. That exclusion of black people from disability arts and the wider art sector, and like you say, challenging us on what is meant by whiteness, to understand it. It really made me reflect in my work and also in looking at disability arts as a whole. It has been very white, you know, and this is our chance to change that

**Colin Hambrook**

Not before time. This is the sort of conversation that should have been happening 20 years ago and that we've kind of consistently shied away from.

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

Which ones have you really enjoyed? Or ones that really stand out for you?

**Colin Hambrook**

I've enjoyed them right from the very start when I interviewed gobscure, who is an amazing artist, I love him intensely.

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

Yeah, brilliant gobscure! And what I've loved over the pandemic is having zooms with them and them talking around their little garden out the back and the birds that come and visit, and the beautiful kind of tree they've got in their lounge. They are just... they're an amazing artist as well. The work that I've done with them at Graeae is just phenomenal.

**Colin Hambrook**

Yeah, yeah. I really enjoyed the more recent podcast on Sci-Fi and race with Zuleika Lebow and Kyla Harris, and that kind of opened up thoughts about disability and reclaiming science fiction that I had never considered before. I'd always thought of that as a bit of a negative, if I'm honest. That sort of superpower, relating it to the super crip. But I think they opened up a much more nuanced conversation about the kind of positive parallels that can exist there.

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

Yeah, I think that's the thing isn't it? It's around the different perspectives on things, that's been really important to hear.

**Colin Hambrook**

Yeah, yeah. And I loved interviewing Letty McHugh, who I know you interviewed for Dadafest towards the end of last year. She's such a fantastic artist, she thinks so deeply and yet, clearly and positively. She really challenges a lot of the barriers that society kind of puts in front of us as disabled people. She does it in such a kind of gentle and nuanced and beautiful way actually.

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

Also from a working class perspective, recently when I went up to visit her gallery up in Keighley, she had these brilliant banners that she'd made with the prints on of all the different pieces of equipment that women have used through time or that women have played a massive part in, -in women's lives in homemaking as well. It's just brilliant, and then all these little paper boats that she'd made relating to her granddad in the Navy and how she'd started doing origami to kind of exercise her hands and it's turned into this wonderful piece of art. Then the work that she has with us at Dadafest: Scratch -her Anchorage exhibition, and then also the one that she talked around with on the podcast about the mediaeval Christian manuscripts and I think that's the Book of Hours, isn't it? There's potential for us to expand on that with Letty as well and make that a bigger piece of work. What is so interesting about Letty is that the work that she does in kind of solitude and makes solitude look and feel... I want to say sexy, but that feels the wrong word! But like that real connection to it, and that she draws a lot on her own experiences and really brings that out in art and take solitude onto a public platform. Letty is definitely, I say this about every artist I work with, but definitely one to keep an eye on.

**Colin Hambrook**

And for you, Nickie, what have been some of your highlights?

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

I love talking to Jess Thom and that moment where Matthew Pountney said to her 'use your ticks as a creative language generating machine'. And that being a moment for Jess of just going 'Oh, yeah!' Not hiding them away and having that kind of creative value in her ticks. I think with Jess there's always that reminder for us to examine disability oppression, and the real impact of it on our lives. She's somebody that I've admired from a distance, and I always love those moments when we do get the opportunity to sit and chat. It's brilliant. And I think you know, Jess is really making change and that's important. Her blogs that have been coming out during lockdown as well, have been really incredible and still challenging society and those attitudes.

**Colin Hambrook**

Yeah, she's magical really, in just how articulate about the barriers that we've faced she can be. I've loved watching her at Unlimited in conversation. She's just so clever and so funny, so naturally funny and engaging.

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

And it's brilliant to see the work that she's been doing with Battersea Arts Centre, in making them a more accessible venue throughout from the work that she does with young people as well. That was a definite highlight for me. And of course, we had to talk about the lamppost as well, outside Jess's house! I think it got damaged, hadn't it and someone had managed to save it for her and she had it in her flat.

**Colin Hambrook**

Yes, yeah. I wonder if it has a name other than lamppost now?

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

I don't know, we'll put it out there. Jess is bound to be listening. What's the name of your lamppost? Sarah Gordy was another favourite. We went back years, we used to work together at Kazoom where we did Paper People. Hearing you know, the kind of barriers that Sarah has faced in her work, like she was on Upstairs Downstairs...

**Colin Hambrook**

She did Jellyish at the National didn't she?

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

Yeah! Working with Ben Wetherall and all the work she does with learning disabled models as well. It's just again, just brilliant and incredible to hear her journey and the journey of her family as well, and the impact that kind of theatre work and the arts has had on her life. It brings back so many memories doesn't it, when you start talking about them, of where you were when you were recording them? Like for me with Jess and Sarah, it was in the living room area at Graeae and then I think quite a lot of them then became online.

**Colin Hambrook**

Yeah, we went into lockdown, didn't we? And it all turned into kind of Zoom recording. Were there are other highlights for you?

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

It was great to have a chat with Jack, and he's always a brilliant voice for kind of championing the work of disabled artists and particularly disabled writers. I think I got a bit starstruck talking to Jack and also Ruth Madaeley as well, is another one. Particularly even more so when you're doing it on Zoom as well, it's like they're here in your house now! It feels more kind of personal.

**Colin Hambrook**

I found it really interesting listening to Jack talking about his struggles with identifying as a disabled person and what that meant to him and how he had that moment with, I think it was during Castoffs...

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

 With Alex Bulmer wasn't it?

**Colin Hambrook**

Yeah, with Alex Bulmer that's right. It was her encouragement that led to him sort of realising that he'd found his people, as he put it. And I think that's something that's common for a lot of disabled people that we kind of, you know, especially people like myself with invisible impairments, that we kind of struggle with 'Am I? Aren't I? What does it mean? Am I a fraud?' and then there's that kind of light bulb moment when you connect with the idea of disabilities, the lived experience of barriers, and you realise 'Fuck!' you know? Yeah, I've been facing barrier since I was a kid. It's been a constant plethora of barriers all my life, society and just throwing everything at me.

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

It is that sort of that light bulb moment and the understanding of the Social Model and the impact that has on you, and how you choose to identify. For me, I didn't come across that until I was 21, and even then the irony was that I was on a disability equality awareness training weekend. It's not something you get taught at school is it? But as soon as I learned about it, for me, it was like 'Yeah, I am disabled -own it'. Like Jack was saying, he finds his people, I think that is key, isn't it? We have got a community and for me, that's what's this podcast shows, there's so many disabled artists. We need to keep getting our stories out there, and our work out there, and having these brilliant discussions, like Deborah and Alexandrina. Art is all about change isn't it? And artists having a conversation can make change as well, and that's really important. It's something that I really hope has helped a lot of people on their own sort of journey of discovery of disability as well.

**Colin Hambrook**

There have been some great conversations about definitions of disability art and what that means. Claire Cunningham's podcast on aesthetics kind of stood out for me. I've always loved Claire's work, just beautiful to watch. Also, you know, whether she's kind of incorporating issues around religion or belief or identity into her work, the creative angle that she comes from, and the idea of a disability aesthetic that kind of challenges barriers that society puts in front of us and and understands how important the body is, as a foundation for a disability aesthetic. What a creative idea that can be, and what a tool.

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

Yeah, it's really key, and a big fan of Claire's work as well. It's such a interesting conversation and dialogue to have, isn't it? She said something around how society has dictated that women with long hair are more aesthetically pleasing than those who have short hair, and then you start to look at everything in society and you're like 'Yeah! Where has that come from? And what is disability aesthetic?' What's been really enlightening about these podcasts is us learning about our history as well. How the roles of disabled people played kind of caught fuel... were... Argh! My words! The roles of disabled people played they were those of kind of court foo... Ah, why I can't say the word! They were kind of curiosities or fools. Why can't I say the word fools today?! But how the fools were like some of the people who could actually speak truth to power and say what they really thought to royalty. Like, how brilliant would that be today? I think the Queen would be hearing quite a lot from some of us. And how then the perception of disability went from kind of being this one of wonder to one of error in the Victorian and early Modern Capitalist era. Then out of that grew that the medical model, the medical conception. I think that idea of how things improving through history is sometimes false, isn't it? That I thought was really, really interesting from that podcast. That starts to happen, the more you unpack history, that disability wasn't such a a bad thing or such a powerless thing, but it has definitely become through to how it's going. I've been talking to one of the Dada fellows around her Arabic background and her saying, in Arabic history again, the disabled people just fitted into society, there was no levels of hierarchy. But suddenly as we move through, it's starting to become that.

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

I'm really glad that a Disability Arts Online we can continue to challenge that societal idea that everything's fine. We have to just keep on I think, that struggle isn't going to go away.

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

Yeah, we're kind of stronger together, aren't we? Can support each other and amplify our voices. It's funny, isn't it, when you look at it to history where it gets better than it drops down, gets better, gets driven back. That is very much what I think the kind of disabled narrative is for stories really, it should be that thing of... because every day you can be not disabled till I leave my house and I get to the tram stop and the lifts aren't working. Do you know what I mean? It's like my life is okay, then it hits a barrier. Then it's okay again once the lifts are working, or I'm on the tram, but then somebody says something, and that's another barrier. Not necessarily the hero's journey, are they let's put it that way.

**Colin Hambrook**

On a on a less serious side. I loved hearing Jackie Hagen talking about comedy and Out the Sprouts!

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

Oh, the brilliant Jackie Hagen! Dare I say it, I'd forgotten I had done that with them. That was my first ever one I think. Me and Jackie had worked together, hadn't we on The Forest of Forgotten Discos up here in Manchester and we had great fun having a bear that farted loads, and then having an interactive game with the young people called Out the Sprout. Jackie's just phenomenon as she is a writer, a poet, a playwright and even her Facebook status every day, it's just pure comedy. Like it gives you know... she's going through it. She's gone through quite a lot of stuff recently but she still entertains us all on Facebook with her Facebook status and she's just brilliant. Again, just somebody from you know... she says from a working class background. She's so articulate, she just is and she's so honest with her work. Creatively playful and just an absolute, absolute joy. Didn't we have a weird discussion about oversized hats?

**Colin Hambrook**

I think it started off with that, and what hat would describe her and she talked about wearing a dame's hat I think.

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

That was it. Sometimes I think, where did I come up with these questions and why?!

**Colin Hambrook**

It's great, when it enters that kind of surreal world. I think Jackie's a great example of art breaking the rules and the importance of art to break the rules. There was quite a serious message in that as well, around how good oppressed people are at comedy, in ways that the straight world just just doesn't embrace at all.

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

No, and I think it's that sense of speaking the truth, isn't it? And I think that's what Jackie does so well. Is there any more Colin that you would say you've really enjoyed listening to or being part of?

**Colin Hambrook**

I found the interview that I did with Mike Faulkner about Neurodiversity, I found that absolutely fascinating because he's someone who has like 20 or 30 conversations going on in his head, all at the same time. Talking to him, you get all of those conversations coming out and just taking you in myriad different directions. I thought actually, just in the way that he spoke, you really got a sense of the inside of Mike Faulkner's brain and just what an incredible place it is. And of course, how he's been able to challenge that to educate people about climate change, and to kind of use his art as a form of climate activism.

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

And that, you know, that's particularly important, isn't it? When you feel... Having done some work with Mind The Gap recently, that thing of actually, throughout climate change and the conversation around it, how a lot of disabled people are left out of those conversations due to the kind of inaccessibility of the material or the language used around it. So it's great that Mike's exploring that and using his voice in there.

**Colin Hambrook**

Are there any other subjects that kind of struck you, that kind of raised a note with you?

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

I think what's really important is to remember like, the cross- art form of all of them, as well. Aiden Moseby, Jennifer L. Gilbert talking around the definition of Curator and how that's more than just selecting a bunch of artworks and putting them on the wall or wherever and thinking 'Oh, that looks nice.' And to thinking about it as a kind of world of storytelling and around that feeling of 'to care for the artists, the work and the audience'. That's really important actually, to think about all the work we do and what are people getting out of it? What do we hope that they get out of it? What's the story we're all trying to tell with the work that we're making? And I remember they made quite a valid point around how visual art by disabled artists is still perceived as a lesser quality. And I thought that really stood out for me, actually, because it's very much like, is that a perception of all disability art? or more so visual art? And why is that? Because there's also something linked here isn't there, of what if people didn't know who the artist was? Would people necessarily still have that assumption? And I think when you look back through time, a lot of artists were disabled, they had hidden impairments, but it's only now that that's coming to light, isn't it?

**Colin Hambrook**

That hiding of disability, especially within the visual arts, has been part of the kind of discrimination that we face since the year dot really. Since the whole kind of Greek ideal of the perfect human body, you know. I think in the visual arts, it is harder than I think the performing arts and the whole sort of idea of the disability aesthetic. The stuff that has been so close to Jenny Sealey's heart has been really, really important in pushing the language and creating a depth of understanding and I think, within the visual arts, that hasn't happened so much, because the visual arts are so dependent on the patrons who are the ones who decide who is and who isn't an artist. There's such a kind of a history within the visual arts, especially of language being used to just completely discombobulate and make utter nonsense of creativity, and using that as a way of creating a hierarchy and creating a whole system of exclusion really. I think within the visual arts, especially, that idea of curation as storytelling is so important, and there's this thing in the visual arts, -the artwork has to speak for itself. Which is... you know, back in the 16th century, when you had hours to ponder an image and it was very much about the narrative. But now, it's so important that we use art as a vehicle for storytelling and not for just complete nonsense, that abstract kind of ... up its own arsehole really.

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

Yeah, I completely agree. Mine's a theatre background but I think that still says a lot to theatre, of putting our stories out there. I think it is, isn't it? It always comes down to money, capitalism, like who's got the money and also the gatekeepers in these places and what do they value as art. I think I talked about this the other day with someone, around that... the importance of art to a disabled artist feels even more important than potentially it could do to a non disabled artist, because it's us really putting ourselves out there aren't we? With this is who we are, this is the impact that society has on us. So there's quite a lot of, and I know we all don't really like this word, but there is a lot of vulnerability there with what we're doing. Which with that then comes a lot of care and a lot of passion. So when art, visual art, whatever can be... feel disregarded, it feels like quite an a personal attack. We're using art to challenge and change aren't we, at the moment? We might get to a point where we don't need to challenge and change, but I think that's definitely where we are.

**Colin Hambrook**

Definitely. I really like the term socially engaged practice, you know. It's a bit of art speak that kind of says something quite important for me. I'm not usually a fan of that kind of jargon, but sometimes it makes sense. And I think you've summed up perfectly the importance of disability art in creating change in the world and in challenging society to understand that, at the end of the day disability is something that everyone is going to experience. And it'd be so much better for the non disabled communities to understand it earlier in their lives than later actually. It won't be such a shock.

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

Yeah, yeah. I think me and Jack Thorne discussed around that kind thing that everybody's pre-disabled. Which is true, isn't it? It's like, yeah, kind of get your heads around it now, and then you won't feel such a shock or whatever, when it happens, because it's going to. That sounds really... It's going to happen kids! Argh!

**Colin Hambrook**

It's just around the corner!

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

Exactly!

**Colin Hambrook**

That feels like a good note to bring our conversation to a close.

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

You're all gonna become disabled! Love it! Embrace it. Be the change.

**Colin Hambrook**

It's a creative opportunity.

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

Yes, see! Well, thank you, Colin. It's been fantastic to do this and go through the podcast archive and remind ourselves of the brilliant work that's gone on. Well done.

**Colin Hambrook**

I've been looking forward to having this chat with you for ages.

**Nickie Miles-Wildin**

And it's just been fantastic to chat with you Colin, and you know the work that you've been doing with disability arts, it's just brilliant. So thank you.

**Outro**

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