Disability And… Directing

Welcome to the Graeae and Disability Arts Online Podcast, Disability And... bringing together thoughtful discussion and debate. This month, Graeae’s young associate Ayzah Ahmed, chats to Graeae's current artistic director, Jenny Sealey, and past Graeae artistic director, Ewan Marshall, about their memories of the company and their experiences of directing.

Ayzah Ahmed:

Hello everyone, welcome to the Disability And...Podcast. I'm Ayzah, one of the young associates here at Graeae, and I'm very, very excited to be doing this episode. Today we'll be talking to Jenny Sealey, which is our current artistic director of Graeae and Ewan Marshall, which was the previous artistic director from 1991. We'll just be talking about the history of Graeae and everything that happened in between. So, let's talk about the journey that you took to becoming Graeae's artistic director Jenny and how did that happen? How was that? Where did you start?

Jenny Sealey:

I started off as an actor. First I did a dance course, but I wasn't good at dancing, all right, but acting was one of my passion, and I was lucky enough to audition for a company called Graeae. And when I auditioned it was for all women play, and I just remember so clearly going to this room in Borough, in London, an old church hall, and it was so full of disabled women. And I was like, oh wow. And I suddenly felt I'd come home, I've found my tribe, somewhere where I could belong as a Deaf person. It was awesome. And I got the job, not a great play, but a baptism of fire, in terms of the learning, being amongst the disabled people and Graeae become my home. I did audition for some other players, Ewan auditioned me and never gave me another job. Thanks Ewan. So that was my journey.

Ayzah Ahmed:

And how about Ewan?

Ewan Marshall:

Graeae was my first artistic directorship, so a big step for me artistically and publicly, and also a big step for me personally, as a disabled person, because previous to being in Graeae, I have been the lone disabled person at drama college and the lone disabled person in a couple of theatre companies beforehand. So it was a very, very seminal and important job for me.

Ayzah Ahmed:

That's actually really amazing how you can take that big risk and step into those shoes. And I just think like, that's really amazing. So, congratulations. And so, I just want us to talk about a few things. So, did you know each other before Graeae?

Ewan Marshall:

I can't remember. I don't think so. No, I don't think so. No.

Jenny Sealey:

No, I don't think so. I think, after I worked at Graeae, the women's company, I went off to work at Red Ladder, Theatre Centre, different small companies, really good political theatre companies, but not Graeae again. And the only time I've met Ewan at those auditions, Ewan. And then obviously when I started dipping my toe in the water about becoming a director and I finally got the job at Graeae, of course I contacted Ewan and went, help! Because same, I had never run a company before or had that real big public platform and having to do batches and business plans, it was like, oh my goodness. So Ewan was a really supportive mentor back in those early days.

Ewan Marshall:

When you look at Graeae now in its fantastic accessible home, with an enhanced and justly deserved global reputation. In 1991, the company was incredibly different. It wasn't core funded, so it had to raise money for any production it could do and the offices were in half a Porter Cabin in Camden. So, it was ... And I think artistically, the company had actually retreated from going in accessible theatre venues, which meant 99% of art centres and theatres then, were just not accessible. And I can really understand why they'd done that, but I felt it was really important that however hard it was in terms of physical access, that we had to established ourselves as a credible artistic force. So we had to swallow a lot of that in accessibility in the early years, to establish a reputation.

Ayzah Ahmed:

No, I can imagine. Even back in 1991, there wasn't much going on for people with disabilities, and even now like, we're still, okay, we might have made it half way there, but in terms of representation as a whole, we're nowhere close, so Graeae did a really good on that to work around. And in that day an age. So yeah, that's amazing.

Jenny Sealey:

I was very lucky when I took over from Ewan, that he had really established it as a company of artistic excellence. And also Ewan and Steve Mannix had managed to get proper funding, long-term funding from the Arts Council. So for me when I arrived, I didn't have to grapple around and try and find project money, I could just go, oh. I could just start creating some plays and plan, forward plan. So when you’re doing project funding, it's really difficult to plan, isn't it Ewan?

Ewan Marshall:

Oh, yeah.

Jenny Sealey:

But when you've got your national portfolio money, you can just go, oh right, I could plan for the future. But I never thought the Graeae future would go on and on and on and on. When Nabil set up the company 40 years ago, he just thought like, well, this will do it for a few years, just to educate and let people know about the skills of deaf and disabled artists, other people will know, the company will close down and we'll all be in mainstream world. And 40 years later, like you say Ayzah, things are still not fully equal, fully inclusive, we've still got a long way to go.

Ayzah Ahmed:

Yeah, and you would think like, if Nabil was thinking oh, definitely I’ll just do this for a few years but it took 40 years to where we are now and it's still not perfect and yeah, we still have a long road to go.

Ewan Marshall:

I was asked that question on a radio interview in Northern Ireland, quite early. They said, if you're totally successful as a company, would Graeae not exist, as in merged with the whole theatre, integrated, accessible world? And I actually said, "Yes. Yes, it would." And then I changed my mind quite quickly. I said, no, actually there'll always be a case for like-minded creative people to get together and make work. And we're sort of very familiar with the disability culture, artistic disability culture, that Graeae is at the forefront of doing, really. And I hope it exists for another 41 years.

Ayzah Ahmed:

Yeah. 100%. I think even if we are successful and it does integrate with the theatre industry, I think we'll still be around as an independent force, because at the end of the day, Graeae is where it all started. So even if it does work, I think people still need to know that we existed.

Ewan Marshall:

Yeah. Yeah. And even more importantly, just always pushing the artistic barriers and really exploring what we want to say as disabled and Deaf people and neurodiverse people, and that culture is always evolving.

Ayzah Ahmed:

Yeah.

Jenny Sealey:

I love what you say about, where everything starts. So many people started their career at Graeae, so many people, and of course they don't always want to hang around to do a Graeae show, they want to be working at Derby Theatre, or the National Theatre, The Globe, of course they do, that's great. So some of our responsibility is, build our young company like you, training you up to become the new artistic director of the future of Graeae, come on, but that's going to be up for grabs one day.

Ayzah Ahmed:

That is going to be really big shoes to fill, I am very nervous about that. I wouldn't go that far just yet. (laughs)

Jenny Sealey:

You've got time, you've got plenty of time.

Ayzah Ahmed:

I know, but I wouldn't want to let anyone down in that sense. And if I was to do that, I would love to make Graeae open, and obviously, as a company we are always learning new things and I'll be interested to see what happens in the next 10, 20 years or so, or what new things can await.

Ewan Marshall:

Yeah. I think Jenny made ... We had some training going on, patchy training going on, when I was working there because we just didn't have the kind of funds and resources for it. And really most people, you just have to learn on the job, which is harsh and sometimes it can be very harsh and unforgiving, but Jenny really has developed a very impressive training programme. The first opportunity to serve many people like yourself, and that's a really, really important part of the work I think, of what the Graeae company is now.

Jenny Sealey:

I’m very proud of Ensemble which we're running now, in association with Rose Bruford. And like you have just said, there's something, I can't even explain it, but when you're with a like-minded, Deaf, disabled and neurodiverse artists, something happens in that rehearsal room or that training room, and one thing is you come together because you understand difference and you respect each other. You might not fully understand each other's stuff, but that's all right, we're not scared to ask the questions. So there's no elephant in the room, and we can be ourselves and we know that the access will be there. So we can just concentrate on being the best artists we can be. And a bit like Ewan, all of my life I was just in the mainstream world, very good at nodding, smiling. I have no idea what people are talking about. That sense of relief when I found that finally I got to Graeae, I was like, oh, I could say pardon. I don't have to know everything I'm not on my own, It's just so important.

Ayzah Ahmed:

Yeah. I mean, like you said, Ensemble, I was lucky enough. This was like a year ago or two, while I was still in college. I applied for Ensemble, I got to the training week, the one-week trial week and I could easily tell you that was the best week of my life, because I have never met so many people with the same ambition as me. And with the same creativity, and it was just so fun to meet new people and explore different ways of theatre. So that is definitely a week, I'm going to carry for me for the rest of my life, because that changed most things for me.

Okay. I think we're going to swiftly move along and I want to know, what's your first ever show or performance you did with Graeae?

Ewan Marshall:

The first show I did was a play that I inherited when I started, luckily there was a play written and that was by Maria Oshodi called Hound. And it was based on her experiences of being at a Guide Dog Centre. That's where it was kind of set and her experiences as a blind black woman.

Ayzah Ahmed:

So, how was that when you did the play and stuff, or what type of experiences did you have, did you like the way you did it or was it not that good or?

Ewan Marshall:

Well, it was really difficult. And one of the things that helps evolve how we worked is, in the casting there were five actors, three who would be blind and two who had to either be non-disabled or look non disabled, and there was an ethnic mix within the cast as well and you are in those days, particularly, it meant an extremely small pool of people that you could work with. And it actually got to the point and I really shouldn't admit this on the podcast, but I actually started following this blind woman in the street because she looked so good and I thought, I wonder if she'll go into theatre or something like that and she actually went into the national centre, the RNIB, she went to their building, and actually to find out she worked there and I rang her at work. She was very flattered to be asked, but she said she couldn't act and she couldn't possibly leave her job.

Ewan Marshall:

But going back to it, I was actually really proud of the work that we did on it. And I liked the actors we ended up with and we did some very interesting things. One of the big challenges artistically was, how do you take a touring set around that is going to work for actors who are blind and things, and there were dance routines in it, the sort of military dance routines. And finally we came across something and I think it was suggested by one of the actors, Dave Kent, he said, try sash cord under thin carpet, and it worked totally. So, an audience will be looking at the play thinking, how are they getting around so well? So whichever venue we were in, as soon as they stepped on the carpet, there was a grid running under it, so they could always orientate themselves where they were on the set.

Ewan Marshall:

So, we were able to do these complex dance routines and all that, so I was very proud of it and I enjoyed working on it. How it affected me later was, I was interested in plays where we could have more open non-specific impairments.

Jenny Sealey:

Oh, I remember you telling me the story of following a blind woman, and it was at the same time I was reading, Year the king, and was Antony Sher was following, in commas ‘deformed’ people to go and do his research for playing Richard the 3rd. And I thought, the irony, we're finding their authenticity and employment, someone else's just mimicking, do you know what I mean. So politically you did the right thing.

Ewan Marshall:

I still feel I could have been arrested like I'm kind of a crazy stalker.

Ayzah Ahmed:

Yeah. I think if you did that today, that would be really creepy.

Ewan Marshall:

That would be me cancelled. (laughs)

Ayzah Ahmed:

You would, that's so true. How about you Jenny, what was the performance you did?

Jenny Sealey:

My first play for Graeae was a play called Two by Jim Cartwright, and I had been working with the fantastic Caroline Parker and Garry Robson at a theatre company in Leeds. So when I got my job at Graeae, I thought I need to work with actors I know and I trust, and are good for my first play. So I got both of them and because I wanted it to be bilingual in English and BSL, Vikki Gee Dare, who I had seen perform in my all-time favourite play, Ubu directed by Ewan, I knew she would be a perfect match to sign for Caro. I couldn't find anyone who looked like Gary, but I was at an art gallery, BSL guided tour and I saw this man signing, bald, a bit round, tall, a bit like Gary. A bit like you Ewan. I said are you an actor at all? He said no, I’m an interpreter, I said yeah but would you like to go on stage? Oh, I…maybe. I didn't give him a chance to say no and that was it, booked! And that was Rob Chalk.

Jenny Sealey:

So I had my four, and it's such a brilliant play for an actor because they play all the characters, and Caro of decided for one of the characters, she would just sign and Vikki would voice over. So it gave us a lot of material to play with. The one thing we got really wrong the most, is a real lack of access for blind or visually impaired people. We still only had a few older described performances by someone who came, a very good person came in, a quick a rehearsal, but it wasn't embedded in the production, in the same way that we learned how to do much later on. But I do think of that play fondly, it was such a gorgeous play to start with.

Ewan Marshall:

I really enjoyed it. Thought it was very good.

Ayzah Ahmed:

That sounds amazing, both of those plays, I will look them up definitely after this. Okay. So what's your favourite memory from Graeae?

Ewan Marshall:

I mean, as an artistic director, my favourite moments are in the rehearsal rooms. And I think, when it's going well, there's a really playful kind of atmosphere and it's concentrated and it's fun. Sometimes like in the case of Ubu, it's wicked and it's punky, and those are my favourite memories are usually in rehearsal rooms. And it's to do with the various actors and characters and material you're kind of working with. So that's the kind of general one I can think of. I think the Ubu rehearsal was when we finally got to express ourselves in a way that was more like we were in real life, like the culture offstage suddenly was going on stage. So all these fantastically, funny, intelligent, creative people who are really quite [inaudible 00:21:42] and passive aggressive to the non-disabled world, were able to put it all into the material. So, that was a defining moment for me artistically.

Jenny Sealey:

Yeah, the anarchy.

Ewan Marshall:

Yeah, yeah anarchy.

Jenny Sealey:

I think for me, it's like you were saying, a Graeae rehearsal is a rehearsal like no other. You find every single person contributes to the development of the play because of their specific communication or access needs of a ramp or whatever it is, and that suddenly informs the design, the concepts, the nitty-gritty of it all, so no Graeae play is ever the same. It’s impossible, because of the uniqueness of our cohort. And just remembering a moment in Reasons to be Cheerful which is our Ian Dury punk, which was pure anarchy, but when we had Max Runham in it, we were just rehearsing the kung fu moment, Ian Dury kung fu, there was a link I promise, but we played with this thing because, Max's prosthetic arm fell off and we were crying with laughter, because we thought only in this play, only with that, only with Max could we do that.

Jenny Sealey:

And when I was doing circus training with a whole group of military, army men and women, all of them with prosthetics, they would play hide the leg. Someone would hop off their aerial thing and go, oh, who's taken my legs? I mean you have fun, feel fun. And the wonderful Tim Gebbels, who is now long gone, there was a wonderful moment in rehearsals for the changeling when he and Corina Jones had to go to kiss and they missed each other, both blind, they missed each other. Of course we laughed. It was okay for us to laugh; do you know what I mean. And so, there's something really grounding. And the other best thing, I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing, but it's good actually for us. When you go to a pub when you're with a load of Graeae lot, you could always get a sit. People move, oh, all these disabled people and they go, so oh, we've got a table. Brilliant. (laughs)

Ewan Marshall:

We also find that touring, that we could always get in first class and we used to call it playing our joker. And I can remember with a group of disabled actors, who had been doing a week of empowering workshops with young disabled people, suddenly played their joker on the train. Oh sorry, we were in first class there aren't quite enough seats, we need to sit together to support each other. And oh no, stay where you are, stay where you are. So, that's the kind of typical Graeae experience. And we left behind, there was a riot going on at the national style centre or wherever we'd be in, and suddenly, if they could have seen us, hypothetically, we were playing our joker. Don't mind us, we're poor disabled people.

Ayzah Ahmed:

That's amazing. Yeah. I think every disabled person has done that before, I definitely have done that a few times. I’m not gonna lie. Yeah. Okay. So as you both have experience in directing, then what is it about directing that you love so much?

Jenny Sealey:

This is the second time I've been asked that question today. I've just done a panel with Orpheus Centre in Surrey and one of the young people asked me that question. There's something, I never set out to be a director, I didn't know it was something I could do. But when I was watching other directors directing, I started thinking, oh, well I wouldn't do it like that. I don't think, that's a wrong decision there. And that's when I start thinking, ooh, maybe I could do it. And it's hard because your actors are, they have to be vulnerable, they have to put their heart on the table, to find the character and the authenticity of the character, so you have a real responsibility to look after their heart and make sure that they're safe in the rehearsal room. And also, every actor gets more confident with their character at different times. So you've got one actor that's super confident go, yeah, got it. The other ones go, "Jenny I don't know what I'm doing."

Jenny Sealey:

So you've got to try and balance it to get everyone up to the same point, and it is that moment where the music's there, the steps are all in place, the costumes are working, the actors are confident and then they start to play with it. They start to give it their next layer that you couldn't possibly do with a director. You hand it to them, they own it and then you go, ah, it’s yours now. And it’ always hard, but there's something really wonderful when they actually take it, off they go and then they cause mayhem on tour. So this is an awesome job.

Ewan Marshall:

I had to do. I did a drama degree, it was mostly practical and I had to direct a play because it was just part of my degree. And previous to that, if I had any ambition I wanted to be an actor, but when I directed this piece, nothing interested me as much as that, nothing absorbed me as much as working as a director. And that was it from that moment. I just thought, that's something I'd like to do. And still it took a while because even as a director, as a disabled person, I didn't feel part of the theatre, I didn't think I would be an acceptable person in it. And I didn't go straight for the… as it were, because I was a little shy about it. I was a little nervous about joining the non-disabled theatre world. So path to becoming a director was a very cautious one, not a direct one.

Ayzah Ahmed:

Yeah. I can imagine. And even for me, like now when I'm at Graeae, before Graeae I didn't even think that I would be able to get into the theatre industry, although for a while, I've been thinking that, oh, I want to get into theatre, because I went to see a few performances on stage and they were just amazing to me. I was like, right, I want to do this, but how do I do it? So when I found out about Graeae I was very, very excited. But it was the same thing, where obviously, one of my dreams personally, I know this is a bit far-fetched, but I would love to get one of Graeae’s performances on the West End stage, which is one of the biggest theatres in London, I think that would be amazing, that's one of my goals. If I was to take over I would definitely get a show on the West End stage and then, because it's always been my dream to film there ever since I got interested in theatre. Yeah.

Jenny Sealey:

We tried really, really hard to get a Reasons to be Cheerful on at the West End, it just didn't happen. I mean, we are still a small company, I don't have those contacts with the West End world, but it would have been amazing to do that one, the theatre wouldn't do it. And it does make me realise what you've just been saying Ayzah, that we still have more boundaries to push, more stages that we want to grace. We've never done a play at the National, oh, we have we did Sugar Water, but that was in the Dorfman but we've never done one on the big stage. I mean Solid Life of Sugar Water at the National but we’ve haven’t done a big one. We haven't done the Globe, we haven't done the Royal Opera House. I've got a list, it's my bucket list, stages I want to access before I leave and let you take over, I've still got stuff to do.

Ayzah Ahmed:

Yeah. Yeah. It is a very long list and it's going to take a while, but hopefully we'll get there in the end. And so, I just wanted to ask, what makes a good director?

Jenny Sealey:

Oh, that's a very interesting question. I'm going to answer it in a roundabout way, at the moment I'm directing a play in Japan. Well, they are in Japan, in a rehearsal and I'm on Zoom, and I'm up at 5:00 in the morning, about 4:00 in the morning, so I could have a cup of coffee, start rehearsing at five, I have Chandu with me (Interpreter) with me and we have a fantastic Japanese to English translator. There's two Japanese sign language interpreters for the Deaf Japanese cast. All the UK elements of his production have been pre filmed, the Bangladesh aspects of this production are being pre filmed. I'm trying to put it all together. There’s two training directors in Japan, who are in the rehearsal room, thank goodness. And I suddenly thought, I don't think I know how to direct anymore. Seriously, I've got to lose a half an hour off the play. I realised my communication, I'm a messy director.

Jenny Sealey:

I think that's what I'm trying to get to the point, and Japanese people like facts, they like an outline and then you fill it in. And I'm the other way, I just get messy, messy, messy, and then I go, oh, now I know what to do. So I think possibly a better director's less messy than me, but I quite like mess, because after the mess comes clarity. So, but I think in a purer answer to your question, I think good communication and directors do not have all the answers and I think if you're going to own that and it's all right not to know everything, because that's why you have rehearsals. And that not knowing everything gives your actors space and confidence to go, well, I know. And then you go, ah. And then it becomes collaborative. Very long winded answer sorry!

Ewan Marshall:

I mean, I largely agree with Jenny, a good director has, Peter Brooke called it a hunch. He said, you have a creative hunch about how something should work. And I think you have to be excited by the material, whatever it is, scripted devices, the actors, you have to be excited about what is possible. You have to have a clear sense of where you might go, but you also have to be open to adapting and you're bringing out the best of a team that you're working with. And you have to be ready. I used to say as a joke quite early, well, not really a joke, best idea wins, but if you're an actor, you won't get any credit whatsoever. And so many good ideas have come from an actor or a choreographer, there are lots of people who contribute to a successful production, but you have to be quite clear as a director that people have confidence, that they're going somewhere that's going to be good with you, I think.

Ayzah Ahmed:

That's actually quite eye opening for me, because the reason why I wouldn't want to become the current Graeae artistic director is the fact that I'm very messy, so I come up with things as I go along, like Jenny said, and I just piece things together and I'm like, okay, that's going to work, but I don't know about that, and that's going to come here and I don't know about that. So, that's why it kind of scares me a little bit because although I tried to direct in one of my college performances, we were in a group and they put me up to director for some reason. And I was just the worst, I didn't know what I was doing and then someone had to take over and said, "Don't worry. I'll just do it." And then they directed the rest, and that was a lot easier, rather than tell me directing. So yeah.

Ewan Marshall:

That sounds about right. I like that, I do this, do that, that's about it really. I think you're making a very good director.

Ayzah Ahmed:

So, I guess I have one last question to ask, what advice would you give to any aspiring disabled people who are trying to get in to the theatre industry or trying to get into directing or anything like that, what's the main advice you would give?

Ewan Marshall:

I would say, just go for it and go for it with an expectation that you deserve it and are good enough and shouldn't be excluded, and to be very determined about it. That's what I would say.

Jenny Sealey:

I would always say, come and find Graeae. Of course, but I mean, absolutely, I think that Deaf and disabled and neurodiverse people have to just have that urghh, something to push through, because there are still so many barriers, so many students, students get a disability student allowance. It's a night mare trying to access that money. So often Deaf students run out of interpreter money, universities won't cover the cost, so they have to do the courses. We hear stories every week from students who are really struggling on the course they are on. And so there's a lot of work, political campaigning and lobbying to be done and around all of that, because the barriers are there and they've got to go, I'm fed up with it now, I really am, they've got to go.

Jenny Sealey:

But the other thing is, if you have a Youth Theatre locally, join it, because that's where you get really good practice, that's where you learn to be you. And know what sort of actor you want to be maybe. So Youth Theatres are fantastic, not always accessible, but you could campaign and fight for your youth there to become accessible. And that will benefit the youth theatre long term. Go see lots of plays, know what theatre you like and also be really clear about your access requirements or what works best for you, and learn to communicate that confidently and clearly, because people need to be told. And it's not about being embarrassed, well I need a bit of a… boom, say it as it is and be very, very mindful of your human rights. And there are people out there that can support that learning, help you find the information.

Jenny Sealey:

But the more people who have that clarity, we have to push more buttons to make sure that the world becomes more accessible for you as you carry on your journey Ayzah. And for the little ones, in our associate company, our young company, the younger ones, they're saying we want it all to be accessible Jenny, and I say I know. So me, Jodi, Mette and you, all of us have that responsibility to clear that path.

Ewan Marshall:

Beautifully said. Totally agree with all of that. I am a product of Youth Theatre as well from my teenage years, that changed my life.

Ayzah Ahmed:

Same here, I started Graeae when I was like 14, 15, and yeah, it's amazing. And I definitely think we still, especially for me, what you said, Jenny, about like feeling clear about what you need and what your access requirements are, because I think people need to be told that all right, stop being, pretending that you know everything because you don't know everything about people's lives or you don't know the way people live. So stop pretending like you know everything and just sit down and listen, in a way because it needs to be done and it needs to be said. And I myself, I will say when I was younger, I didn't really a lot. My secondary school was a nightmare, halfway through year nine, the government decided to cut the disability funding to 50%, which was a nightmare for not only me but for all the disabled students in my school.

Ayzah Ahmed:

I could just here the staff and the parents like, yeah, yelling and saying, what's going on? Why isn't my son or daughter getting support in this area? Or why isn't that class getting support? And it was just really frustrating time and it still is. And like Jenny said, it's very hard to even access that funding and whatever the government says they'll give, because it's just a nightmare. So I would hope to change that in some sort of way. I think that’s really important.

Ewan Marshall:

Sounds fantastic. That sounds like a really good plan and something that's exciting to be part of.

Ayzah Ahmed:

Yeah, definitely. I would love to live, to see the day where all of these restrictions are lifted, and I could go, yes, we did it.

Ewan Marshall:

Thank you.

Jenny Sealey:

Aww thank you.

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