Graeae Podcast: Disability and The Stories We Tell

**Welcome to the Graeae and Disability Arts Online Podcast, bringing together thoughtful discussion and debate. This month’s topic is on Disability and The Stories We Tell. Jodi-Alissa Bickerton talks to theatre maker and filmmaker Matilda Ibini.**

**Jodi**: Welcome to another podcast of "Disability And..." And today it's about the stories we tell. I'm Jodi-Alissa Bickerton and I'm here at Graeae HQ. I've got the heaters turned up because I've just got back from Australia and I'm acclimatising to this wonderful sunny London weather and I'm here today talking with a wonderful artist. Off the back of a successful run at Bunker Theatre late last year with her second full-length play, "Little Miss Burden", which was about personal experiences growing up with physical impairment, bionic theatre-maker and filmmaker, Matilda Ibini is kicking off the New Year with "Disability Monologues", which is a new BBC America series of short films curated by British actor and Graeae patron, Mat Fraser, who you would of seen recently in "His Dark Materials" Matilda's first play, "Muscovado" was about slavery and the sugar trade. It was produced by BurntOut Theatre and premiered in October 2014 and toured in the UK. "Muscovado" subsequently co-won the Alfred Fagon Audience Award in 2015 and Matilda has worked with Graeae on and off, particularly in her artistic residency at Graeae in the New Writing Department.

**Jodi**: Her work has been stage presented at the Old Vic Theatre, Bush Theatre, Hampstead Theatre, National Theatre Shed, Soho Theatre, Arcola Theatre, Bunker Theatre and Vault Festival and has also presented work on BBC Radio 3. Her awards include BAFTA and Warner Brothers scholarship from 2014 to 2016. And Matilda also won the Peggy Ramsay Foundation Grant in 2016. From radio plays, film, stage, Matilda always has something cooking and it's no wonder I can't get lunch dates with her anymore (laughs lightly). Welcome Matilda to Graeae.

**Matilda**: Hello Jodi.

**Jodi**: What'd you think of that intro?

**Matilda**: Yeah. That was incredibly generous.

**Jodi**: You are always so, so busy and you always have something... Whenever I see you or chat to you, you've always got a project, and not just one, there's usually about five on the go at the same time. It feels like everyone wants a piece of you. You're like the hot thing in town, Matilda.

**Matilda**: Am I?

**Jodi**: Yeah, you are.

**Matilda**: I mean, I feel like that's not reflected in my bank account (laughs)

**Jodi**: Oh, we might need to sort that out then. I sat down with you when..., when you first told me that you'd stopped acting and you'd started, in your words, "I've started to do a bit of writing" is what you said. (laughing) What do you write on your travel document when asked for your occupation now?

**Matilda**: Yeah, I do write playwright and screenwriter very proudly. (laughs lightly) Yeah, 'cause I got into writing, because I was a really shy kid growing up and I didn't really talk to people who weren't in my immediate family. And one random day, my mum got a leaflet in the post about youth drama classes. "Do you have a shy kid? "Do they need to build up their confidence? "Bring 'em down on Saturday." And my mum was like, "Do you wanna do this? "Do you wanna try?" And I was like, "No." (laughs) "I have no desire to talk to people." But she was like, "Oh, it could be good." And then, yeah, that's kind of how I fell into acting. And with most kind of youth drama things, you just assume you wanna be an actor, 'cause that's the only kind of main profession that you see. So you're like, "Yeah, I wanna be an actor." And I thought that for a while before it got a bit... Yeah, it got a bit complicated, that I didn't feel as confident doing it. But I knew I didn't want to leave this world entirely. So quite a number of people kind of pushed and suggested I thought about writing before.

**Jodi**: So that was gonna be my next question. Do you feel like you fell into writing or were you gloriously pushed into it?

**Matilda**: More like gently nudged (laughs lightly). I used to write poetry in school and things and now what we call fan fiction, I used to write a lot of fan fiction as a kid. Particularly around Scooby Doo. I was very-

**Jodi:** Okay, we can't let you go without talking about that. (laughing) Give us an example.

**Matilda**: Oh my God, so basically- -

**Jodi**: This could get picked up, Matilda, you never know.

**Matilda**: So basically... What was it? So I would rewrite Shaggy, so I was Shaggy, so I was Scooby Doo's best friend. And then the smartest person in my class was Velma and then her best friend was Daphne. And then our favourite school teacher was Freddie, 'cause he had... So the way I'd equated it, as a child, is that because our school teacher drove a motorbike, he could drive a van, so... (laughing) And then we used to go on school trips to all these haunted places that then one by one people would disappear and then it was up to me and Scooby to find them.

**Jodi**: That's brilliant.

**Jodi:** Fanfic, does that... No that doesn't include illustrations, does it?

**Matilda**: No, no. That's just I couldn't draw at all. But, yeah, no, I very vividly remember writing reams. So I used to kind of... You know, like your exercise book? I used to kind of steal them because I knew where the cupboard was in school. So I'd steal a couple of them to write my fan fiction.

**Jodi**: Matilda, what school did you go to?

**Matilda:** It doesn't exist anymore (laughs).

**Jodi:** Ahhh. (laughing)

**Jodi:** The thing's shut down. It's gone. 'cause you used the stationary budget. (laughing)

**Matilda**: Yeah. No, because I didn't know what to call it at the time. I said, "Oh yeah, I write stories "but they're based on other stories". And now we call them fan fiction (laughing).

**Jodi:** Matilda, you've got a really good eye for sort of what's going on in the industry and kind of finding, I guess, those new stories. Whenever I go to the theatre and I see you, and you always seem to be at the stuff that's fresh and new. And I always get this sense that, oh, if Matilda's there seeing this... You know, you know something, you're in on something and this is gonna be the next big thing. I get the sense that you always sort of have people's back as well, with your fellow artists and for support but also...Yeah, I think you have a really good instinct.

Matilda: I mean, I feel like you're giving me too much credit. (laughs)

Jodi: No, we've talked about this Matilda. It's adequate.

**Matilda**: I feel like... So, yeah, I definitely see a lot of friends' work and I listen to a lot of recommendations. There's a few people who, if they tell me to go see a show, then I know it's worth booking for. 'Cause that's the thing, I think, especially living with the kind of condition that I have. I've got very limited energy anyway and my resources are limited in terms of hours with my carer, how much money I have for taxis. So I do kind of have to be quite picky about what I go see. I don't just kind of... And I don't have the funds to just book for anything and everything. And there is a lot that I miss. I'm sure that there's a lot of incredible work that I don't get to see. But, yeah, I'm usually kind of rooting for the underdogs. I wanna see people who are still kind of starting out and who are trying new things and being experimental and not just kind of... Nothing against people who make traditional theatre or the well-made play but my taste wants to go beyond that. I want to see how else are we telling, in a way, more global stories. 'Cause people are made up of so many things, we're not just kind of one particular trait or personality or culture. And I kind of want to see that represented on stage. And I don't always get that sense from the really bigger theatres, so I'm always kind of going to the more subsidised theatre or smaller venues or even, at times, venues that aren't arts venues to go see stuff.

**Jodi**: Can you remember the first story that you ever wrote? The very first one? And where were you?

**Matilda**: I distinctly remember being in my bedroom that I shared with my older sister and I was supposed to be doing my physio. Because I always got sent to my room to do my physio but I wasn't (laughs). I was, instead, writing. And I think I was just writing about being able to, a bit like, which is probably why I like Dr. Who so much, kind of like time travel. So to be able to leave your familiar place, your familiar home and world, and travel to this just unknown world. But I was a lone traveller. So I was (laughs) very much on my own but going around exploring all these made up landscapes and meeting all these kinds of aliens and things, I think, was my very first story.

**Jodi**: How did you get from...'Cause I think it's different for everyone, so I'm just interested particularly in how you go from writing those stories in your room to then having a play on at the Bunker, that went through an R and D process as well and it was something you were incredibly proud of and it was just a fantastic play.

Matilda: Oh, thank you.

**Jodi**: And I think... Yeah, I just wondered how you kind of got to that stage, I suppose. Is it about someone who kind of believed in you or did you go into a competition? What was the...

**Matilda**: I'm trying to think of the summarised version because it was a very long process, I think. I definitely did have some early champions who were like, "You should try writing." And the little that I might have scribbled, they were very encouraging about writing again and doing it more. Like I wasn't put off, I wasn't like, "Oh, that's shit. Don't ever write again." It was more like, "Keep going. "I think there's something in there." So people seeing potential in me before I even saw it in myself. Because I just used to write... The only person I used to write for was myself. But I think it was through encouragement that I was encouraged to consider writing for others. Or telling stories in a way that was shareable. So everything from my old English teacher, Ms. Gallahoe, used to encourage me writing poetry, to a friend slash mentor who I'm working with now, Gabriel Bisset-Smith, who when I'd written my... Yeah, kind of like a really early attempt at a monologue and a duologue, was really encouraging. I felt kind of like when a lot of people are pointing out the same things, you listen. If they're all like, "You should try this." If it's one person, you can just ignore it, but, if it's a couple people, you're like, "Maybe. They can't all be wrong, surely." (laughing)

**Jodi**: Well, 'cause "Muscovado" was your first full-length play.

**Matilda**: So, the first one to be produced.

**Jodi**: So, what was the first time where you actually saw that writing where it actually made it to the stage? 'Cause that is such a daunting feeling, isn't it? Where it's like you've been in your room or you've been in this enclosed space, writing your heart out, and then suddenly it's in front of people and it's...

**Matilda**: So, the first time was... So the first time, I think, was many, many years ago, it was in secondary school, and there was this scheme in... And I only did it because I was going to the youth drama group. But Arcola Theatre, before, in it's old venue, used to run this scheme with schools where you'd write a monologue or a two-hander and then it would be performed in front of actors, like a little performance for the class at Arcola. And that was the first time I'd ever seen something I write make my class laugh. And it's gonna sound really weird, but something that wasn't me, 'cause I was horrifically bullied in secondary school, so it wasn't hard to make people laugh, but, for the first time, this was something that I'd written with intention and people in my class laughed.

**Jodi**: You had control over it.

**Matilda**: Yeah, yeah. And I was like, "Whoa, what is this?" And people were like, "Oh, yours was really funny." And I was like, "Thanks." That was, for me, probably my earliest experience with that. And then it happened again a couple of years later, when I was still acting and had written myself a monologue but had written for this kind of showcase but had written... The showcase was curated by Genevieve Barr.

**Jodi**: Ohhh.

**Matilda**: That's how we met. Through this week long workshop. So working with practitioners and writers and I'd written myself a monologue and these two other actors a duologue. And, again, a positive response from it being performed and I was like, "Oh, maybe there is something in this." And I think I truly developed a love for it was when I did the Soho young writers. The very first year that I and I was like, "Oh my God. "Yes, this is what I wanna be doing."

**Jodi**: So your mum pushed you into those Saturday morning...

**Matilda**: Yeah, yeah, she had to have. Whoever dropped that leaflet off, 'cause it wasn't the postman (laughs).

**Jodi**: Because it just shows that, with all the cuts happening with drama in schools and youth theatres, it is that thing of trying to say that it's not just about, "I'm wanting to be a performer." It opens up so much more and what you've said, what you've just articulated so beautifully, is the power of what it can open up for us in terms of our identities but also other career paths.

**Matilda**: And, absolutely, there's so many life skills to be developed through the arts that, had I not accessed those opportunities, or people who don't get those opportunities may not ever get a chance to develop. The shame is... Yeah, it's more than shame that we live under a government that couldn't, to be honest, give a shit. That actually if we don't develop those life skills, they can control us more, basically.

**Jodi**: We talk about, as artists, having an equal part, like a well of anger and sadness equal to the well of happiness that we draw on to make work. Is it an even thing for you? Where do you sort of draw some of your stories from? Does it come from those struggles sometimes and those fights? 'Cause, you know, we talk a lot about the government cuts and the effect and impact that's having on disabled people.

**Matilda**: Oh, absolutely. Yeah, I draw a lot from anger. I feel like the balance is... I'm probably more angry than people realise. I hold a lot of anger. But the way that I'd say it manifests itself is quite strange. So a lot of my starting points from things, a lot of the stories that I've told have usually derived from something that's pissed me off or something that I struggle to articulate. Because it just angers me so. The emotion attached to it is so overwhelming. I'm like, "I'll try and see if I can break this down into a story as to why this upsets me so much." Which is quite weird 'cause... Especially when people say I come across very calm and soft spoken. And you're like, "Cool." That's good that no one can feel the heat, 'cause I'm constantly, quite often, yeah, I'm quite often a ball of rage (laughs lightly).

**Jodi**: You have this real gift of humour in your work. And that's probably that thing of where it does come from anger. And like you were talking about when you made the class laugh, or the youth theatre laugh, when you'd do your play and you'd draw on that humour. And that's what you do with anger sometimes. You have to just like flip it, don't you? And just go, "This is so ridiculous that it's funny "but it's so funny that it's ridiculous."

**Matilda**: Yeah, I think humour is very soothing for anger, I think. Just because there's so much to be pissed off about.

**Jodi**: Let's list them all now, Matilda. (laughing)

**Matilda**: Where do I even start from this morning. Yeah, there's so much to be pissed off about. And I think a lot of the time it's like existing as a disabled person in this world, the daily injustices you face and encounter and how there is no justice for them. These are just injustices that you almost have to accept and it's really, really difficult to swallow. Especially when all you're trying to do is live your life. You're just trying to do your best and that still is not only good enough, but there are forces out there trying to stop you. Probably explains why I'm so angry a lot of the time. But what I'm very, I guess, aware of, is trying to not let that anger incinerate all my other emotions or incinerate my goals to actually how can this anger be useful to me. And, so far, at least in this career, it's been useful in being able to be a magnifying glass for things that, when I'm looking for stories or for characters that interest me, or when I'm going down a hole of thoughts, it can help me identify what is the trigger or the starting point for something that this needs investigation. And this is the thing you need to start picking apart kind of thing.

**Jodi**: Do you think theatre does enough to challenge the politics, all those struggles. We're obviously writing those stories and placing them centre stage but is it reaching people enough? Do we need to be thinking about it in a different way?

**Matilda**: Yeah, I'd say at least my experience of UK theatre, no, it is not doing nowhere near enough. That might be because of the cuts. Like having 100% funding from government cuts has decimated what could have been. 'Cause there's a parallel universe where those cuts didn't happen and I wonder what the experience would have been like as a disabled artist with that funding in place and the initiatives or schemes that were once available still being available kind of thing. There are so many theatre companies and people fighting to address that gap that the cuts have left. But without adequate, sustainable funding, no, we're still gonna always be trying to put a plaster on a gaping hole. And I think there is this weird thing that a lot of the funding has to be about... Almost that theatres have to be non-political spaces. They can't pick a side. And you're like, you do realise by not picking a side, even in saying not picking the quote/unquote bad side, is agreeing with them. Like not picking the immoral side. So not gonna pick this side but also not gonna pick this side. That makes us impartial. No. By not picking a side does not make you impartial. That is a side. It is a side to stand back and let chaos happen. Let disaster happen. And I think theatre cannot stand back and try and be impartial. I mean, the creation of theatre is political, so it has to be political. It can't not be impartial. And we won't see necessary change if theatre is still always trying to be... Is always trying to brand itself as an impartial space. So everyone is welcome. It's like, well, no. That is not the truth. The idea of denouncing someone who is racist, not denouncing them is not supporting anti-racism. You have to actively denounce something or stand by something.

**Jodi**: As disabled artists, maybe just from your experience, felt like actually those cuts have really directly affected you in terms of developing your career?

**Matilda**: Oh, without a doubt. Without a doubt.

**Jodi**: And over what period of time do you feel that this has happened. Is it over the ten years, last 5 years?

**Matilda**: I think probably overall, because when I got into...Also I think about writing as a career after the cuts that happened, so I was looking for resources that weren't there anymore. Or hearing about schemes that had closed or are no longer running anymore. So having to navigate this, having to figure out is this what I wanted to do with barely any resources or not knowing anyone involved in the industry. Especially earlier on in my career, one of the biggest supporters I had was IdeasTap. IdeasTap was what LinkedIn should be but isn't (laughs) in terms of funding and finding out information and understanding the industry. But, also, they had so many free workshops. I went to as many as I could. Every month, I would have gone to at least three Ideas workshops. From everything from journalism to writing plays to how to get a play on, how do you meet a director, how do you do this, how do you do that. As someone who had no connections to this industry, had I not gone to any of those workshops, I probably still wouldn't have had a play on yet. Or I still wouldn't have figured out, or altogether packed it in because of like I don't understand this industry, I don't know anyone in it and I can't seem to get a leg up, it's obviously not for me. But had it not been for those workshops where someone broke it down, someone sat down with you, a group of 30 of us sometimes, or a group of 10 of us. It's like, so this is what the industry is like. Yeah, no, it's not fair but that's the reality but here's how you can navigate it. Or these are different avenues you can try. They're not all guaranteed to work but you can give them a shot. Had I not been at those workshops, I get the sense I would've packed it in because, for me, I feel like there's only so many times I knock on a door before I just walk away. I'm not someone who's, yeah let's keep knocking at that door Let's try and break down the door or, you know.

**Jodi**: It's exhausting.

**Matilda**: Yeah, exactly. Let's put this at the door on fire. I would've just been like, nah, I guess this just isn't for me.

**Matilda**: It's almost accepted discrimination, that it's okay to discriminate against disabled people. That is somehow an unwritten, unsaid, but definitely enforced belief, that it is okay for the person not to be able to access, whether it's a physical space or any kind of space, or having to make any kind of requirement or address any kind of need. It's just this accepted thing that, yeah, we're allowed to do that and there won't be any repercussions.

**Jodi**: Yeah, 'cause there's no money. We're gonna have venue and we're gonna have a director and we're gonna have a creative team, and we're gonna have all these other things, 'cause that's what you do in theatre. But when it comes to the other access, no.

**Matilda**: I think people understanding that access or access needs is a human right and it's not a luxury, it's not a choice.

**Jodi**: Not an add-on.

**Matilda**: Yeah, exactly. That it's a human right and it's a shame law hasn't caught up to that yet. Because it's not written down and because there are no kind of financial or any kind of criminal penalties, which is why it feels almost like the discrimination is acceptable. That it's okay to just kind of, "Yeah sorry, just, you know, we can't afford a ramp." It's the idea the onus is then on us to change or bring our own. "Yeah, I'll come with my own ramp, it's fine. "Don't worry, I'll come with my own accessible car, "it's fine." And it's like, well, no, it isn't. But it's because it's still seen as a kind of like the environment that you live in has to bend over backwards for you, as opposed to no, it's a human right.

**Jodi**: And that's kind of, I guess, what we mean also about theatre not doing enough because... Yeah, and sometimes it's about the spaces in which we inhabit, as well, to tell those stories. They're not reaching where they need to reach.

**Jodi**: Well, I just wanted to tell you, while you're here, that I've been in workshops with you, where you've saved me so many times (laughs).

**Matilda**: Ah, stop it Jodi.

**Jodi**: Well, we've been a good double act.

Matilda: Yeah.

**Jodi**: But I do feel like I've watched people, when you have dished out these golden nuggets of advice, or given people that comfort and assurance that it's okay that things didn't turn out the way they envisaged them and giving them really practical advice about those things and then seeing the penny drop and their eyes locking with you going, "Oh my gosh, yes, this is a revelation."

**Jodi**: You wouldn't see it, 'cause you're busy saying it, but it's absolutely what I've observed more than once. And you've talked about some of the influential people in your life. What is the most precious advice you think you've ever received?

**Matilda**: I think…it's really hard to, is to not compare your career. That everyone's on a different path and however long it takes you to get to where you need to get to or want to get to, it definitely isn't a competition. Because I think very early on, especially when it feels like writing itself, or this career is like a marathon, but one that there isn't a finishing line. The finishing line is when you decide to stop. So you're allowed to run it in however long you need to. There isn't prize money for coming first or last. Like actually. As long as you get past the goal post that you wanted to, then you've won, kind of thing. And especially when no one else is living your life except you are. So no one lives the way I live except me. Yes, there are similarities in other people’s lives who live with carers but however long it takes me to write the next play or whatever, that's how long it takes. I don't need to be writing plays in six weeks, I won't be writing plays in six weeks. And especially, in six weeks it wouldn't be good. That's not my process, that's not my journey, that's not my path. But I always have to remind myself, 'cause when you see friends or peers doing incredibly well and one play after the next kind of thing, it's hard not to think, "Oh, why is my career not going like that?" It's like, well I'm not living their life and they're not living mine.

**Jodi:** Absolutely.

**Matilda**: I wanna just make sure I have fun on this journey that I'm on, however long it takes me or however long it lasts as well. 'Cause I don't know if tomorrow, all of a sudden, I decide to pack it all in and become a psychologist or whatever. But I want to know that I did it on my own terms.

**Jodi**: I can't imagine new writing without you, Matilda, (laughs) and thinking about all the deaf and disabled artists that we're working with. And thinking about what you were talking about with the schemes and the cuts and all the barriers that are faced. I always feel, every day, really so lucky to know so many brilliant people. And, yes, there absolutely does need to be more deaf and disabled artists who are given that leg up.

**Matilda**: Yeah, absolutely.

**Jodi**: Because the creativity and the stories that people in this industry and the world are missing out on is tremendous. And, of course, not just deaf and disabled artists, but those barriers do still exist and we need to continue to smash them down. And the fact that you're going along and kind of routing for the underdog is such a generous way of being able to support people as well, as they kind of continue their journey.

**Jodi**: And I have this segment that I've developed, well, this is only the second time actually, and it's called "Care Package".

**Matilda**: Oh, love it.

Jodi: And so, with all these fights and these struggles that we have, if we could send you one thing as your care package, what is it? Tanni Grey-Thompson had Haribo. (laughing) And someone left a sandwich on her doorstep. And I think Mandy Colleran said it was about having her fellow disabled women next to her in those moments. Yeah, what's your care package?

**Matilda**: As in?

**Jodi**: Like not your actual care package. (laughing).

**Jodi**: In the spirit of this segment (laughs).

**Matilda**: Ooh, so, in my care package there's definitely music playing. I always like... Yeah, I like music a lot more than I'd like to admit. (laughs) Like I'm envious that I can't write songs. But there's music playing. I like to listen to other people's stories. I think usually when, if my reality gets difficult or hard, I wanna get lost in someone else's story for a little bit. 'Cause there's something about kind of drawing on the power of stories as inspiration, coping, realising that you're not alone. And just understanding life is difficult for everyone in a variety of ways. Sometimes in ways that you just can't imagine. So I kind of, yeah, I like listening to lots of people's stories. Like I can remember when my mum used to sit us down and she'd tell us stories of her growing up in Nigeria. And I loved that, 'cause I just... At the time, I'd never been to Nigeria, and I just loved hearing about this place I've never heard of but I know exists and is real. I just like, yeah, sometimes I just wanna listen to other people's stories. And, for me, music does tell stories, just really compactly. So I love getting lost in other people's stories.

**Jodi**: Beautiful. Well, Matilda, you're fantastic, I love you. And please can we have lunch soon? (laughs)

**Matilda**: I love you too, yeah.

**Jodi**: I always get such brilliant energy from you when we sit and chat and, yeah, I feel really energised. So, thank you. And I'm gonna write your story now.

**Matilda**: Oh, thank you (laughs)