**Making the Arts Accessible - Transcription**

Episode 2: Phillipa Cross from Talking Birds theatre company in Coventry

Interview recorded: Thursday 20 January, 2022

[music]

In this episode, I interviewed Philippa Cross from Talking Birds Theatre company in Coventry back in January 2022. In it we talk about how Talking Birds created The Difference Engine which sends captions to users’ phones, how it actually works, she talks about access in general and how important it is to embed it in an organisation and into the creative team from the start. She tells of how in Coventry they have a network where they discuss access and have come up with an artists’ manifesto that they will be sharing, and finally, how they have been working on a citizens assembly which has pulled together 50 citizens of Coventry to discuss arts and culture and how those outcomes will feed into the cultural strategy of the city. I hope you enjoy.

[music]

*AG: In this episode of Making the Arts Accessible, I am delighted to be talking to Philip Cross who is General Manager of Talking Birds theatre company in Coventry. It's the company that has created The Difference Engine, so Philippa thank you so much for coming and talking to me and welcome.*

PC: My pleasure.

*AG: So, given the nature of this podcast, to start us off can you just tell me a bit about The Difference Engine - how did it come about how does it work?*

PC: Sure, so it came about because Talking Birds is a company that makes a lot of work in unusual spaces, site specific or site responsive work, or outdoor work. And the company was frustrated that it was really difficult to make its work accessible to people who were Deaf or hard of hearing, or blind or partially sighted, because the kind of solutions that already existed just didn't work in those spaces - they were too big, too cumbersome and frankly too expensive and looked awful. And some of our work might be promenade -we've done shows in an underground car park, in a cattle market, round the corridors of a hospital - and it just didn't work for us.

The company has always looked at doing things in different ways and we tried quite a lot of analogue ways of doing things, like speaking into a microphone backstage and holding up bits of paper and that kind of thing, providing a script for someone to read through - all good things. But when smart phones came along there was a real opportunity - here was something that did text, that did sound, and did images and it was kind of a real light bulb moment for the company. We thought, “There must be some way we can use this!”.

So the company commissioned someone to do the original programming on it and we've had various bits of investment and support from the Arts Council, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, and Paul Hamlyn Foundation, which has enabled us to develop it into a system that's working really well.

It runs off a very simple setup - it's just a laptop and a router, and that router creates a local area network so you don't need to rely on the broadband in the space that you're in - it creates its own Wi-Fi network. And then the company that's putting on the show just preloads their script into it - they edit their script in a Word document into different screens - and then just put that into the system. And then the person running it just presses the down button to go to the next screen of captions. Then audiences receive those captions on their mobile phones that they have connected to The Difference Engine network - they can do that through an app which you can download from the usual places, or they can do it through a browser so they can just connect directly if they turn up and haven't got the app installed.

It can run multiple channels so you can have translation, and it's all running at the same time just off the same person pressing that button as long as you've got it all lined up properly. The audience member would just choose which channel they want to be on at the beginning according to whether that's the language. Although other people have played around with that as well and done some sort of fun creative things with that.

To run it you don't need any technical expertise. Like I said, it really is just follow the instructions, load it up, press the down button, run it. And a lot of companies have run that just using written instructions without any training. We made it for small companies like us who couldn't afford these existing solutions to be honest. By bringing it in house and being able to do it themselves they could make that more cost effective, and by using a preloaded script, they could run it again and again on different shows. Whilst it's brilliant to work with a captioner, actually sometimes you just can't afford to do that but you still want to provide that service. And the people making the show are actually really well positioned to decide how they want the captioning to come across, so it actually moves access into the hands of the creatives which is another thing we’re really excited about.

So yes, it's really portable - it all packs into a backpack. And we've got a mobile version. If you're doing something that is promenade and you need to actually move around a space with the audience, we've got a version that works well for Raspberry Pi in it with a little touch screen, and one of those big phone batteries and you can actually just put that in your pocket – it’s got a tiny router as well so you can literally walk around with the audience they might not even realise that you're running it! Ultimately we're trying to get it to run off a tablet to make that really simple.

You mentioned audio description earlier - we have been working on that. We have run that in a kind of beta mode and we had a few issues, quite challenging issues with time delays and things like that. We got that working pretty well but we are now just waiting to get another bit of funding to move that forward but hopefully that's coming.

*AG: That’s so interesting. What’s the size of the Wi-Fi range, how big a space can it work in?*

PC: It has worked in some quite big places. I think the biggest area it's been used in is probably outside the Baltic and The Sage in Gateshead. They used it on the Great North Star event as part of the Great North Run and connected to all of that. And Festival.org were running a big session there. They’ve used it a few times before - they've used it at Greenwich and Docklands Festival - so they used it there and that was an audience of about 2,000, well it wasn't 2,000 people using it, but it worked really well in that space.

And it’s worked in some quite large theatres as well. We didn't make it particularly for theatres but quite a few venues have been interested in using it. We have invested in a couple of slightly more powerful routers that we’ve sent out to work in slightly bigger venues, or where we're pretty sure there are going to be more people connecting to it.

*AG: Amazing - it's so exciting and so innovative and easy to use. I tried it myself on Mother Courage when you did it in Leeds and again that was promenade so I was so intrigued. I was thinking ‘how on earth are they doing this, we're all moving to a different space!’*

PC: Yes, Red Ladder [theatre company] have used it quite a lot - they've been really supportive of it and really proactive in using it and I think that, in a way is it’s niche. It works really well in venues and things but actually it we've kind of made it for that experimental work, that small scale work for those people that couldn't otherwise afford to do it. But also in those spaces where those other solutions just didn't work. We've used it on walking tours around neighbourhoods in Coventry; we've used it on a show that was a site specific piece at the Albany Theatre in Coventry called *Backstage at the Albany* - literally the audience went backstage into the green room, up onto the stage, into the changing rooms, up to the gods, you know and that was another really good way to use it. And like I said, the person that was operating it just kind of looked like one of the audience, just walking around with it in that way.

It's been used in the ruins of Coventry Cathedral, it's been used on the outside work at the RSC; like I said Greenwich and Docklands have used it, Manchester International Festival have used it, so it's been used in quite a lot of different settings as well as some really small settings as well.

*AG: What it does as well, it gets over that hurdle, I mean I know most audiences don't have a problem with captions these days but you get the odd person who doesn't want to be distracted by the text, so at least they don't even know it's going on. They just see a few people glancing at their phones.*

PC: Well it’s interesting because some people won't want to use it because they really like open captions in that way and that's what works for them. And other people really don't like that and actually much prefer to have it on their phone. We had some feedback from one event where we used it, and we had one of the strongest “I really don't like this because I don’t have like having to take my own device and I really like open captions” and then on the same show from somebody else “I really love this ‘cos I can use my own device and I know exactly what I'm doing”, so that was really interesting. It's never going to be the single solution for everybody, just as the existing solutions that you get in venues, the big screens, and LEDS, you know that's not going to be right for everybody either so I think it's about offering something into that collection of solutions so that people can choose the right thing.

You can connect The Difference Engine from a phone up to a projector for example, or to a TV screen so you can still run it in that more traditional way if you want to. But what it does allow is that sometimes people have to sit in particular places in order to benefit from the captions because of where they are displayed - with this you can sit pretty much anywhere you want to so that's interesting, that gives people a bit more choice. But for some people, because of the changing focal length between The Difference Engine and looking at the action, they might want to sit nearer. But people can choose that space, and venues can talk to their users and say ‘well this might be a good place if you like this, but this might be better if you like that’.

AG: And the big thing is explaining exactly *what* accessibility is on a specific production because if people really don't like a screen up at the side of the stage then they can wait for one that that has your technology excetera. I'm so impressed that this got going, and it's been going since, what year was it?

PC: It was before I was in the company, so I think it was about 2010. The company created a sort of initial version of it and created a bit of a scratch show really to try it out on - they repurposed an old bit of set for something and put together a show that used it – and actually we recreated that show in January 2020, just slipped it in before the lockdown but with a new kind of storyline but recreated to reuse it. And it's funny because I actually went to that show as an audience member and I remember seeing something about this great app and I was like ‘Ooh what’s that? That sounds interesting’, but it wasn't something I particularly needed so I didn't realise that what I was experiencing as a show – and it was a kind of multi-sensory show, it wasn't only about that, it was about exploring access in quite a broad way - and what I experienced as a show had benefited from the fact that the company was thinking about access, so the experience that I had was all the richer, even though I didn't need The Difference Engine. It was a richer experience because of that.

*AG: Amazing, I mean I don't think I'd even heard of an app 10 years ago!*

PC: Well at that point it was just through the browser and then as time moved on we've developed it a bit further and we’ve got more plans take it further still. It's never finished. And every time we've had some support to develop it in a particular way, you do all of that then you go, ‘but wouldn’t it be good if it could do that?’, and that's a good thing isn't it. And we get feedback from other people - sometimes people say ‘Could it do this?’ and we say ‘No, and actually we don't think we're going to explore that’.

For instance, people ask if it could do different fonts. And it could, but that might not be so good say if you put stuff in italics - that's actually not very good for somebody with dyslexia for example. Or people say ‘Can it do different colours?’. Well, it could but then we need to think about what’s the most successful thing for the most people. So we're not ruling any of these things out, but we're thinking carefully about what are the right things to take forward, and the most important things to explore.

*AG: It's interesting because I'm just thinking there are people talking about creative captioning. So I guess if you used it in projection mode that might allow people to explore some of those things?*

PC: Yes, I mean you can do that in a very straight forward ‘Here I am presenting the captions’ kind of way, but you could also integrate that into your show in lots of interesting ways and you can choose. You always make choices about your captions. We worked with a particular company that had a piece of work that was very dense in terms of its text - it was a single person speaking monologue but with really, really dense text and it was simply too much to read on captions in the time in which it was spoken. So somebody from the company, I think it was the assistant director, had the job of pairing that down to something that was still really meaningful and rich, and that still gave a comparable - not exactly the same - but a comparable experience to the non-hearing audience as it did to the hearing audience. So they had to make some choices, but you know that was really interesting in terms of ‘well what is the essence of this?’ and actually that's interesting in your creative process - you go ‘actually could I just strip some of this out anyway’!

*AG: That's so interesting. It’s like how the surtitles are done at Opera North. The surtitler really pairs it back so that you don't have too much text and it's as simple as possible. It’s all about supporting the plot and you don't want to steal focus from the stage. But there are lots of choices that the surtitler makes in conjunction with the director about say if it was originally set in a cigarette factory like Carmen but this production is set in a burlesque bar, then maybe a specific word, they might even change that word in the surtitles so that it doesn't lift the viewer out of the experience.*

PC: That's really interesting. Some people would say you shouldn't do that

*AG: I know I know, it’s not done lightly.*

PC: Yes, I'm sure. Some people might say ‘well just change it in the song then’? But then maybe you don’t have the right to do that.

*AG: Yes, it’s interesting.*

PC: I think I think the point is we’re always making choices, and it's about making the best choices to make your work as accessible as possible to as many people as possible, in the knowledge that you won't necessarily always be able to make it accessible to everybody. And being quite upfront about that, and actually sometimes you might need to have two versions of your show.

We made this show *Capsule* and we tried to fully integrate BSL into the performance so that somebody who needed British Sign Language could come to any performance and it would work. But because of the complexities of the show, there were certain elements to it, it kind of went on a rolling basis and there were two different parts to, it got very, very complex. And whilst we had put in quite a healthy budget for access, we worked out we would need at least three interpreters every day, possibly four, to make it work and to give those interpreters the breaks that they would need. And we thought we might be able to build that into the performance but it wasn't really going work. So we really explored it we had some really interesting conversations in the devising room with people who were experts in different aspects of access, and we had to make some choices. And because some of those access needs, by addressing those you might make it harder for some other people.

I think the important thing is to be really clear about that and consider whether for some of your performances you change something, in the way that you might have some Relaxed performances, although we think they should all be Relaxed!

*AG: I know!*

PC: But yes, I think it's all about choices.

*AG: It is. Can you tell me Philippa what's your background? How did you get interested in this?*

PC: Me personally? Fundraising and funding and project management. One of my early jobs was at Mind mental health charity. I had done a languages degree and I gone and had a lovely time teaching English in Paris, and came back and wanted to work in the arts and found it really hard to get in because I didn't have an arts degree. And there were lots of people, but I often looked and thought ‘I can do that’. But what was great at Mind was that they recruited on the basis of transferable skills. This was really important to them as a mental health charity. A lot of people who have had mental health experiences haven't necessarily always been able to get the kind of jobs that give him the kind of experience that they need to apply for the next job, because of the challenges they've been facing in terms of mental health. And so Mind really lived that that belief in transferable skills, so that's how I got that job and that really stuck with me - I wouldn't have got it if they haven't recruited in that way because I wouldn't have met certain criteria of two years’ experience or three years or whatever it would have been. So that's something I think I've always taken with me recognising that not everyone always has equal opportunities. But there are things you can do that make it fairer, so I think that that's one thing for me.

I went on after that and worked at West Midlands Arts. I was a Lottery Officer in the very early days of the Lottery, working on capital lottery programmes, and access was a really big part of that. So I obviously learned a lot, and then I was advising people on how they could address access, so that was a long time ago. And there was a bit of a gap and then I came along to Talking Birds and I was General Manager - my jobs are finance and contracts and all sorts of things like that, but fundraising as well. So I was fundraising for The Difference Engine. And then also, in a small company you do whatever needs to be done, and what needed to be done was The Difference Engine needed to be run on a show, so that was one of the things I did. I ran The Difference Engine on some shows and learned how to use it, and I had to talk about it for the fundraising, and so I became the project lead on it because other people were leading on other things.

But I think what's also interesting is how the company came to it. Obviously I wasn't there at that time but I love this story. Because what began Talking Birds’ access journey if you like, was that they were putting on a site-specific show in a really beautiful 14th century monastery in Coventry which is nestled under the infamous Coventry ring road. And there was an absolutely beautiful galleried area upstairs that was perfect for the performance, but although it had a lift, it had been condemned so it wasn't accessible in terms of physical accessibility. And the local access officer came in and really challenged the company on that and said ‘Well what are you going to do about that’ and we said what can we do and he said ‘Well you’re artists. If you can't solve that problem, who can?’ He really threw that gauntlet down, and to cut a long story short, basically there was also a cloister downstairs so the company at the time was dabbling in that that great new technology of video, so used that – used video links link to connect the two spaces. So when the performers weren't in the gallery space, they were going downstairs, and they created a different but equally rich experience for people who couldn't get to the gallery, but could but could easily get into the cloister. Some people actually chose to be in the cloister instead of the gallery because that was an interesting space to be.

*AG: How interesting. And did you get people coming to see it twice then?! That's really clever.*

PC: [laughs] Quite possibly! But what I do know is the company say that they made a better show. They were challenged to do that and it was a better show than it would have been had they not been challenged.

*AG: I love that. So there was one specific need for using a specific space, that fired them up...*

PC: Yes, and actually it was a kind of ‘legally you need to make this accessible’ - it was as bald as that in some ways. But also, it was a very supportive local authority access officer who wasn't doing that to be awkward or just to be jobs-worthy. But he was right - it was something the company should do morally, but also had to do legally.

*AG: And with your fundraising hat on as well Philippa, you know yourself that that there is normally access to funds if you have to make something accessible and you need help with that. It’s quite possible to raise money for specifically…*

PC: Yes, absolutely. Either it’s specifically an access project. But also, thinking about Arts Council funding which is what a lot of people will be thinking about, they're very clear that they expect you to meet the needs of your audience, but also of your creative team. So there are two different areas of access funding; if you need access support to enable members of your creative team to do their work, that has a separate budget attached to it. But also if you've got access needs put them in and the Arts Council will fund that – it’ll actually strengthen your application.

*AG: So I know that regarding Talking Birds, it says on your website you put accessibility at the heart of your work. So can you tell us other things that you're doing that it might be really useful to share?*

PC: Probably the most important thing is that you think of access right from the beginning. It's about where you position it so that everybody who's involved in the process is thinking about access. And in particular, it is very much the responsibility of the creative team, it's not an afterthought, it's not the access officer, everybody is thinking about it throughout. So that's the artistic director, the writers, the directors, technicians, all the people that we work with who are freelancers but are part of our extended team, all our collaborators.

And an access challenge can be a real opportunity - we see it as a creative opportunity and we know from experience that by addressing that, we make a better show for everybody. So you might be making it better for somebody who is Deaf by providing captioning, but in doing so you're also helping somebody whose native language is not English because although they might have a good understanding of most it, they might miss some of the words. That's one of the bits of feedback we've had on The Difference Engine. So for example you might be thinking of one particular audience but you find it helps other people that you haven't anticipated.

I think it's not just about how you how you provide access to come in to the show, and to hear it or to see it or whatever, but it's also about *how* you make the show, so where are you positioning access within that and how are you working with a whole range of different collaborators with different access needs themselves.

It's also *where* you present it so we have a venue access audit that we undertake when we look at if we're going to do something in a different space, and we will look at all those access needs within that. And we've turned down a lot of spaces in the past. Sometimes that’s been quite annoying for somebody we’re working with – ‘actually no that's not accessible’. But actually at a baseline level, anybody at any time could challenge any of us that we're not putting our work on in an accessible venue, so we’re actually protecting people in that way.

*AG: And is this audit something you've drawn up yourselves over a number of years?*

PC: Yes, we go into space and it's just about making sure of the physical access. It’s probably time for us to review that and look at other things as we've learned over the years things that make it more accessible. Things like ‘Is there somewhere that somebody can go for a quiet time if they need to just get away’? It's about toilets - how easy is it to get to the toilets? There’s no point having your completely accessible auditorium but you can't get to the disabled toilet from where you are, or the seats are so far away.

It then goes beyond that. You can get a really accessible place. but if you don't tell anyone about that, then that's not much use. You need to be telling people what is accessible about it and that's things like how do you get there? People might have never been to that space, particularly as we work in slightly different spaces often. For instance, our current new base is just slightly difficult to find so we've done videos showing people what it actually looks like as you go along and we publish information about the bus routes.

And telling people in a site-specific place where the toilets are is really important - I cannot stress how much knowing about the toilets is important because if you're going somewhere in the middle of nowhere, or somewhere along the canal, or if you've got young families or particular disabilities that have need for that, you just need to know those things. But they are really easy to do. It's really easy to tell people about these things.

*AG: And they should be upfront right at the start of any information because if people read that and then they feel secure that that's in place, then they will look at the rest of it.*

PC: And the other thing is always asking ‘If you need anything else let us know, tell us what you'll need and we will always try and do what we can accommodate that’. Tell people what you are providing, don’t say who it suitable for. It’s not up to us to decide what solves somebody's particular needs or provides what they need. If we are very clear about what we are providing, people can make that decision themselves. So a good example of that is we wouldn't say that this is accessible to people who are Deaf - we would say we're providing captions, because actually if your first language is British Sign Language, captions might not be very useful to you. Some people who use BSL as their first language are quite happy to use captions in English, but it's fundamentally a different language.

*AG: So Philippa, what makes you excited about the future particularly of access to the arts in general, what things are you looking forward to?*

PC: Well we’re based in Coventry which is UK City of Culture at the moment which is fantastic and I think we have a really great group of individual artists and small companies in the city who are really making big efforts on access, and I think in lots of ways leading the way. I think small companies can be more agile than big companies and venues, so they can quickly respond - maybe because they really see the impact that has. You tend to be a bit closer to the audience: quite literally, you’re liaising directly with your audience, you’re there front of house and you see them and you make those personal relationships. And you get that really direct feedback.

One of the companies that used The Difference Engine really early on was Milk Presents - they're not Coventry based but just a good example of that. So they took The Difference Engine to the Edinburgh Festival, and they were one of only four companies to caption every single performance of their run. They were tiny, well they were then, but they just made a real commitment to it, and they were able to do that because it was just three or four people in the company and they said ‘we're going to do this’ and so they did.

In Coventry, Paul O'Donnell who is a solo theatre maker, he has helped us trial the audio description in particular and a few years ago he was like ‘I don't really know how to make my work accessible as I'm just a solo theatre maker, I haven’t got loads of resources’. And then he had a go at it and tested it out, and now he makes everything really accessible and he's really pushing accessibility in the city. He's also part of Shoot Festival and they've built all of that into their work as a festival.

We have a network locally called F13 - it's a network of independent artists and small companies which Talking Birds convenes. It’s a networking, peer sharing support network, and we're having a lot of discussion in that group about access. We developed a training programme for artists and companies in the city called Access Coventry. Shoot Festival and Paul in particular, led that work.

We explore different aspects of access – there was an introductory panel session and then there were eight weeks of looking at different aspects of access, and then in a final session we developed an artist manifesto for access which will be launching quite soon. All the videos of all the speakers are on the Shoot Festival website. The manifesto is really exciting. What we'll be doing is looking to see how we embed that in Coventry and invite all sorts of organisations and artists in the city to sign up to it and make a pledge. But also, really specifically, we’re now looking at how we take that manifesto and change it into action, and how can we work together to make Coventry a city that embraces, encourages and promotes access.

So it is great because it's really being led by the small scale independent sector. But some of those big players are also really interested so it's having those conversations across the board that's really exciting. I think it is something we are really excited to be playing a part in.

*AG: That's fantastic and can we share links to things like the Shoot Festival?*

PC: Yes, all those videos on are on coventryshootfestival.com. The manifesto will be launched on there should quite soon – we’re just getting that nicely designed. So as I said, said it's a manifesto that came out of the people who were in those sessions, and it won't answer everything but it's a bit of a challenge you know. It's saying ‘give it a go’ - just start. You won't get it perfect to start with, but just start somewhere. It's about being curious, taking risks, accepting that you might get it wrong but learn from that and do it better next time. Start somewhere and get good at something, and then move on to something else. I think there can be a bit of a fear about it – ‘I might get it wrong, I might use the wrong words, it might not work so I won't do anything’. Whereas if you just try something you'll make progress. The manifesto also acknowledges that it takes a generation - it's not going to happen next week or next year, and in fact even in a generation it's not going to finish. Because we all need to be working at it all the time…

*AG: And there will be newer technologies all the time…*

PC: Absolutely! New things come along, new ideas, you see you see the way somebody does something that's much better than how you've been doing it. I think that was another thing in the manifesto that says, you may have done something and it may have worked brilliantly, that doesn't mean it's the solution for your next event or performance because that might be in a totally different place, or you might need to be addressing some different needs. So you need to think about it every time, it’s about choices.

*AG: I love the idea of coming together in networks of people because you can share so much, share equipment, share knowledge, it's just absolutely priceless.*

PC: Yes, and I think it builds people's confidence a lot to see people talk about what didn't work, or at least it didn't work for us this time, but also just knowing that there's someone you can talk to. We get quite a few calls or emails from people saying ‘I'm looking for a BSL interpreter and I don't know where to start’. So I think the more we can pool those resource in terms of knowledge as well as equipment and technology, the more it will help all of us. And we learn! Every time I have a conversation with somebody who phones up and wants to hire The Difference Engine, they talk about what they're going to do with it and I’m thinking ‘Oh that’s interesting!’, or they've got a question on it and I’m like ‘I know what you mean, nobody ever quite asked it like that!’. So we learn a lot just from having those conversations to be honest.

*AG: So I'll put links below this to The Difference Engine if people are interested in hiring it.*

PC: Yes, you can just go to [www.talkingbirds.co.uk](http://www.talkingbirds.co.uk). And the app is something that people could download from the play store in the App Store.

*AG: Thanks for this – it’s really interesting stuff. And I would like to end by asking you what's your most memorable experience in making the arts accessible.*

PC: Well, I think using it on our *Walk With Me* audio tours was really great. It was great because it was an audio tour, and we captioned it! And it was challenging. It was made as an audio experience, and the tour goes round a particular neighbourhood of the city, and it's listening into sounds from the past to explore its history and to give people a fresh perspective on what they might think is a very ordinary place or place they think they know everything about. And we had a number of different people coming using The Difference Engine, so we did some very specific testing on it and invited lots of different people.

And we had a couple who came along who we didn't know - they came all the way from Milton Keynes - and one of them had had a stroke a couple of years previously and lost their hearing completely. They've recovered in every other respect but didn't recover their hearing at all, so they were someone who had gone from being completely hearing to being completely deaf. They didn't use British Sign Language, or lipread - they were kind of learning, but they didn't have all of that at their fingertips at the time. But for them, having The Difference Engine made such a massive difference because they could fully engage in it. And it was not only great for them, it was really great for their partner too. We've had other people who’ve said ‘Oh I've been able to go to the theatre with my partner for the first time in 15 years’, because maybe the partner perhaps doesn't like going where it's captioned or doesn't like having to always explain things or whatever it is. But they were able to go to the same show together and both enjoy it fully in their own right.

And this couple have been to other things since and we've developed that personal relationship, and I know that if we needed to test it out, we could send them an email to ask if they would come up and give us a bit of feedback on how it works. And we've learned stuff from them - they gave us tips about ‘Well we’re using this app, so this is really useful’ so that’s something we’ve ended up using elsewhere in something we’re doing. So I think having those connections with the people that are using your access solutions is really important. But it's also really exciting because you see the excitement. When we said ‘How was that for you?’, his response was so brilliant. You can see what definite difference you've made.

*AG: I love that and that's The Difference Engine – it’s in the name.*

PC: Yes it is. That’s what it’s about. It's about making a difference.

*AG: That’s brilliant, and I love the fact that you have specified there that people might roll eyes at you captioning an audio tour, but it's so people can enjoy things together.*

PC: Yes exactly.

*AG: It makes so much sense. I really enjoyed that. Thank you so much for talking to me Philippa, it's been really interesting and you've shared so much useful information - I'm sure people will be really interested. If people want to find out more whether they are caption users or captioners or theatre programmers - we will put any links below in the notes - but do you have any other final advice on making your art accessible?*

PC: Just give it a go. Try something out. There is a lot of information available online. Do go and have a look at the Access Coventry videos on the Shoot Festival website. We had various different experts, both national and locally based, and we've got some really experienced people in the city talking about different aspects. I think if you're trying to make your work accessible, have a look at those and get some ideas and get some feedback from people who are experiencing those access needs themselves. Talk to people with the access needs and let people know you're doing it.

We have had cases where we know people have used The Difference Engine, and we've looked on their website and it doesn't mention it. So it's at the show but nobody knows! So *tell* people that you're doing it, tweet it, put it on Facebook, put it on your flyers, and put it on posters at the front outside your event. And make sure that if somebody turns up who didn't know you have it but maybe would benefit from it, can try it.

So I think another thing about making your work accessible is *who* you reach, and obviously you can do lots of that through marketing - you can go and talk to different groups etc - but sometimes finding a different way of doing that can be really exciting as well. So just before Christmas, Talking Birds ran a citizens assembly on arts and culture as part of our role in City of Culture this year. We brought together 50 residents of Coventry. We wrote to fifteen thousand households inviting them to put themselves forward to be part of this..

*AG: What hard copy? Letters in the post?*

PC: Hard copy, letters in the post! We worked with Sortition Foundation who used random stratification to help reach all of the demographics of the city and people could put themselves forward. So they selected 50 people according to the demographics of the city across age, gender, ethnicity, level of education and where they lived. So we had a *really* representative sample - we were delighted with it. And those 50 people debated the question ‘How will arts, culture and creativity create a better future for Coventry?’. And they came up with a set of recommendations.

It was quite a long process. They had some sessions online, they heard from expert witnesses both artists and non-artists who presented ideas and thoughts to them, they debated those, they asked them questions so that was a good learning process. They thought about Coventry, they thought about arts and culture, and other issues such as around climate change. And they identified the issues they thought we needed to look at.

Then they spent a full weekend at The Nest which is our base because we do love a bird pun! And they came together and debated and came up with some themes under which they wanted to make recommendations. Then they voted. To get to be a full recommendation, it had to be agreed on by 80% of the people present so nine of those got voted through. And another nine were created which didn't quite make it but none of them were below about 69%. Those recommendations are shortly going to be presented to the City Council into the Culture Compact in Coventry to feed into a refresh of the local cultural strategy that's happening right now. It's going to inform our work for the next four or five years at least. And we've got some funding as part of this project to then take some of those recommendations and look at ‘Well what does that mean in practise?’.

I can't tell you what the recommendations are as they haven't yet been formally announced but it’s happening quite soon. But we think it's a UK first, it might even be a world first, to have a citizen’s assembly on arts and culture. You quite often get them on things like climate change, but it is about shifting that power of who makes the decisions around arts and culture. So to put that in the hands of the citizens of Coventry is something that's really exciting for us.

And then it’s thinking about how do we, as artists, work with those communities to put into practise what they're recommending should happen. We’re really excited about it. It’s a real pivoting point. We’re just in coming into our 30th year now and this is about moving into our fourth decade and doing everything that we’ve learned through our work with communities over many years. This is putting it onto a new level.

*AG: That makes so much sense because on the most basic level, you’re making the arts accessible because you’re actually making art that people are interested in.*

PC: Yes, and responding to the needs they have they've identified for themselves, as participants and creators and artists, but also as consumers and audiences. And they were really good at thinking about not just themselves as individuals, but what other people need because it was such a diverse group. I can't tell you how exciting it was. It was just exhilarating when we were in that room together. They'd only met online but they developed that interest together. There were 50 people but they also went into smaller breakout groups all the time so that people were talking smaller groups, online and then in person when we could again.

It was challenging because originally we would have done all of this in person but obviously with Covid we couldn’t. But actually the fact that we went online probably made it more accessible for some people because it was three-hour sessions on a Thursday evening and some people probably wouldn't have come because they were looking after a child or had other work commitments or responsibilities - maybe they couldn't get back from work in time to get dinner to get to us, but because they could just stay at home they could.

But at the same time some people found that challenging so one or two people didn't stay engaged with it because they found it really difficult to do that. We also provided laptops and broadband to some people who didn't have that already and did a session on how to use Zoom so people came in physically and we showed them how to use it and how to get logged on and everything. But it was still very challenging for some people and some people pulled back from that. And some people weren't comfortable to come to the final weekend in person because they perhaps had health concerns at the time, so you were always juggling these things.

I think what a lot of us have learnt through the pandemic is how these online sessions can actually be really great, but also challenging. So how do we keep the really good things and how do we run those alongside what we're doing in the physical sphere. But how do we actually make that manageable? That that can be really challenging.

So it’s given us a whole new raft of insights into access.

*AG: Thanks for sharing, that's fascinating and we will look forward to catching up on what comes out of it.*

PC: Yes, it's going to be a really exciting year.

*AG: Fantastic. Thank you so much, it’s been really interesting - thank you so much for your time.*

PC: Thanks for having me.

[music]

**Links**

Talking Birds Theatre Company

<https://talkingbirds.co.uk/>

The Difference Engine

<https://differenceengine.talkingbirds.co.uk/>

Shoot Festival, Coventry

<https://www.coventryshootfestival.com/currentprogramme>

The Sortition Foundation

<https://www.sortitionfoundation.org/>