**Making the Arts Accessible - Transcription**

Episode 9

Ben Wilson, actor, theatre-maker, audio-description consultant and trainee Artistic Director at Extant theatre.

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*Alice Gilmour: So in this episode of the podcast I’m talking to Ben Wilson, and we recorded this back in February 2023. Ben has recently been appointed Extant’s first trainee Artistic Director, and it’s a great conversation looking back at his work as Agent for Change at Sheffield Theatres, how he navigates the arts world as a blind actor and theatre maker, his thoughts on audio description and his thoughts on arts organisations in general regarding access, or lack of access. I hope you enjoy it.*

*So Ben, thank you very much for coming to talk to me today.*

Ben Wilson: Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure.

*AG: Can you start by outlining a bit about your career to date which has led to all these different roles?*

BW: Sure. I am, like many people in the arts, someone who wears lots of different hats. So, I originally went to drama school, trained as an actor and started my career as an actor and was making my own work, when in my early 20s I was treated for an eye condition. And so I lost my eyesight and became registered blind. And then the terrible pun that I always use is that it was a real eye-opening moment because it introduced me to this wonderful world of accessible theatre, and all the amazing artists and brilliant work there is, and how many disabled artists there are making work in general as actors, directors, writers and theatre-makers. And I felt like I’d found my home, I’d found my purpose. Because it's a big world, the arts world, the theatre world, particularly for me, and so before that I was a bit lost... Where exactly is my place? Where do I belong? What's my role in this big scary industry? Where can I have a voice and make an impact. And then when I opened up the world of accessible theatre, I thought this is where I belong, these are my people, this is my tribe.

And then I also experienced going to the theatre for the first time as a blind person experiencing theatre audio description for the first time, and I had some thoughts on it, some frustrations with it, some things I really liked. And also I got really excited about the possibilities of what you could do creatively if you embraced audio description as a creative tool. And so I started bringing that into my own practise, into the work I was making. And then off the back of that, other people started seeking my advice and picking my brains on how they could do that too within their work. So I started doing more and more of that consultancy work and that training work and I found I really enjoyed it.

And that became more and more a central part of my practise. And then six years ago in May 2017, I started working as the Ramps on the Moon Agent for Change at Sheffield Theatres, which essentially was a job where I was charged with being a disabled voice in that big organisation to try and implement change when it comes to disability and access and representation and all those sorts of things. And that was a brilliant job which was really great for me. It opened up lots of doors for me and taught me a lot about how a big building works and gave me the opportunity to put some of my ideas, my thoughts and theories into practise in a big building.

And for the last few years alongside that job, I’ve had the pleasure of working for lots of other theatres as an audio description consultant, as a Creative working on shows and as an actor, and even training and that sort of stuff. So the things I do are acting first and foremost and then directing, being a creative and making my own work. But then also all of the work that I want to make, whether that's as an actor or director, is always doing interesting things with audio description and making the work accessible to people like me and to my community. And so I also do that work on other people’s work as well on shows that are big huge mainstage shows and tiny little shows above a pub, and everything in between.

*AG: And what’s interesting when I hear you talk about all these different things is how each of those roles kind of helps the others doesn't it? Which is great when you have a portfolio career, that they complement each other. But do you ever find that there's a bit of a problem that you're hired for one thing, but they're expecting you to also do another thing as well, free of charge*

BW: Yes, that’s interesting. I mean lots of us including both of us, are these multi-hyphenates and wear lots of different hats and do lots of different things. And some people put pressure on you to pick one and specialise. Don’t be a jack of all trades, be a master of one. But I think no, that’s not how it works. Being an actor and director makes me a far better audio description consultant because I know how to talk to directors and to actors. And having been an audio description consultant and part of a creative team on a show means I’m a far better actor because now I can see those really frustrating things that actors do that really annoy creative teams, so I’m like ‘Oh I’m not doing that again’. So I’m a really proud multi-hyphenate.

But yes, sometimes people get a little confused about exactly who you are and what you’re there to do. And sometimes if I’m a cast member, they might go ‘Oh you do disability equality training - maybe you could do a little training for the rest of the cast?’. And I’m like ‘Well technically you should be paying me a lot more money!’ And also actually it's good for that role to be an outside voice as well and not be one of the team because you don’t want to be confusing what your relationship is - whether you’re there to train people or be one of the team.

I have combined roles though – I’ve combined being an Audio Description Consultant and an actor, and I really enjoyed that challenge. And actually one of the joys about it is that if you’re integrating audio description into a show, it's probably not useful for you to be there every day of rehearsals, *but* you never know when it is going to be useful to be there. You never know when something’s going to come up in a scene where it’s actually really vitally important you’re there for that conversation. So if you’re an actor on the show, you're there for that conversation, all the time.

Or if you’re an AD consultant coming in say once a week, that can be really good because you can use that focus time to really be proactive, but then also you end up then getting a little text or e-mail that's going ‘Oh this came up in rehearsal today. We don't know what to do’ and I feel like if I’d been there. I could have fixed that. So I’m sometimes an Associate Director so I’m there to share the thoughts and feelings on the show itself and also to have my audio description hat on as well – I really enjoyed that model. I did that on *Macbeth* at Leeds Playhouse, and then also for *Guys and Dolls* in 2019. And then on *Much Ado About Nothing*, I combined acting with an audio description role as well, and that's really good, because of course you're there all the time, and you can quickly switch hats and dive out and become a consultant. I can do that, I can do those dual roles in a rehearsal room. But then when you get into the theatre for tech and for previews, as an actor I just need to then focus on my acting and let the audio description part of my job go and hand over to someone else. Yeah, that's what I've learned from combining roles.

*AG: Oh, that's really interesting and really useful. And did you know, by the way, that the phrase ‘Jack of all trades, master of none’ was originally created about Shakespeare. People used to get annoyed that he had so many opinions on the costumes, on the staging, and so they accused him of trying to be a jack of all trades, master of none. But as we know, he is in fact master of everything!*

BW: Oh I didn’t know that – that’s great – I’m stealing that! If it’s good enough for Shakespeare…

*AG: And that's a really interesting insight into how you can combine different roles because they're all very new aren’t they? Did the audio description consultant job really exist more than say, what, seven or eight years ago or something like that?*

BW: Well I think of companies like Extant and Graeae who have been making work with creative Audio Description for decades. I'm sure they've had people with that job of audio description consultant on shows for a long time. And what’s interesting about that job is it's so different from show to show. But I think you’re right, on main-stream or major non-disabled-led work and shows that aren’t specifically designed to be accessible, it’s a relatively new thing.

*AG: And I'm sure part of the reason you're very much someone that people look towards is because you have been responsible for a really interesting progression, which is the whole Hear The Picture idea, the company who use actors to do the audio description.*

BW. Well I can’t take the credit for that. But yes they are brilliant really. And yes, I was around at the creation of that company and was part of the show where that company sparked off and now I’m part of it in a consulting fashion and supporting them and teaming up with them whenever I can, 'cause they're just brilliant. Really great brilliant creative allies doing exciting things.

*AG: But wasn’t it your kind of initial idea like ‘Wouldn’t it be great if the actors did the audio description in character’?*

BW: Well that's one of the sort of creative ways I've explored over various shows and *Hear The Picture* came off the back of a production of Jim Cartwright’s *Road* directed by the brilliant Amy Leach. So I talk to Amy lots about different ways of being creative with audio description, how we might do it whether it be integrating it, or using actors, or using actors from the show, or using other actors from outside the show. Or to perform it with artists, poets or whatever it might be. And so she's like, ‘Great. For this show, we're going to use the cast of the show to audio describe it’. And I was like great, but then I remember having a slight anxiety like ‘Will the cast be up for it, or might they be a bit annoyed by having this other job to do?’, and then I was so wrong about that. And five years later four of them are still doing it!

*AG: Well, giving actors another chance to act I think is always going to be popular! And as Dan [Parr] says, because I interviewed him on this podcast, his learning of audio description has informed his work as an actor and vice versa. They go hand in hand.*

BW: Yes, it's all just telling stories.

*AG: So just going back to what you were saying before, were you doing this kind of work before you got the Agent for Change role?*

BW: Yes, absolutely. I remember my first steps into this world, well my MA was about my life as a visually impaired or blind actor. But that also then lead on to questions and thoughts about access for blind and visually impaired audiences as well. And off the back of that I started making work and getting work and sort of discussing that sort of stuff. And then a few years later, I saw the advert for the Agent for Change job, and coincidentally was wanting to move back up north and so I was like this is perfect. This is the dream job – working at a brilliant theatre like the Crucible and also being able to feel confident that my expertise and my area of knowledge that I felt like I’d become a real expert on in the few years previous to starting that job, so I thought I’d be able to make change and have some impact.

*AG: Yes, and you did that. And all that Agent for Change work, I mean, I know it was a three-year project and then today six years, where is it at now? Because I'm so interested and fascinated about how successful it's been because it's really embedded that work in all those theatres and everyone else is learning from it. So just from a perspective of Opera North being based in Leeds, I’ve learnt so much from what Leeds Playhouse have done to share their knowledge. Where is it going now? Are they looking for new agents for change, for the next five years?*

BW: Yeah, absolutely. So my Agent for Change job was part of the Ramps on the Moon project which was a consortium of seven theatre organisations in England, all with the goal of embedding change in those organisations and the industry more broadly. And so as part of that they all got funding at first to have an agent for change to support that change. And the idea was that those agents would support and lead on embedding change within that organisation. So the idea was that Ramps would fund that role, but then their funding would slowly decrease so that hopefully the budgets of the organisations would shift so then they just had it in their budget that they paid for an Agent for Change. And that is continuing. I know that in Sheffield my replacement is being recruited as we speak. And that’s really exciting - I’m really intrigued to see the next person who goes into that role, and how they approach things different to how I did, and how they can have an impact on the organisation that I couldn't, how their strengths align with the organisation different to how mine did. I know that Leeds Playhouse are doing the same and advertising for an Agent for Change so a lot of theatres are doing it themselves – they’ve recognised how that job role can be a vitally important one to the life of the building, the progress of a building, the progress of an organisation and how that work is made, how that organisation develops and grows this sort of work. So I'm really excited by that, that that could be a job in a building, a disabled voice with a really broad job description to go right across the a brief, to go right across the organisation and run projects and make change happen. It's a really potentially great job. It can be a strange job and a difficult one. I always said that sometimes I would skip home from work feeling like I'm changing the world and doing amazing work and other times I’d feel I was banging my head against the wall, and everything in between! But it's a great job and a great opportunity for organisations to learn from people who have real expertise and lived experience of being a disabled person in the arts.

*AG: Yes, and what I love about it is that there are some really simple things you can do straight away. You can just look on the website for Agents for Change if you’re theatre or an arts organisation wanting to do better in this way. And just one of the things was always have access and inclusion as a bullet point in every meeting. That's so simple, so many people could just start doing this stuff. But then it's assigning an actual job role to someone with lived experience. I personally think it would be amazing if say the opera world could do something similar.*

BW: Absolutely, sometimes I think my job as Agent for Change was to sit in meetings, and like you said, putting the bullet point on the agenda, but also me just being at the meeting meant that I was a living breathing reminder to keep access on the agenda of that meeting. Just having person in that room whos responsibility is to keep that conversation going and keep that priority high up the agenda and brings with it lived experience but also expertise and knowledge and experience of working in the industry. It's such a useful resource having that person right there, on staff.

*AG: Yeah, let's hope it continues to spread and I'll campaign for it to the opera world.*

*Going back to your Audio Description Consultant work then Ben, I'm really interested in it. And you gave an outline of how you might go along to rehearsals at different points during the process. But can you explain how it works. I guess it's very different obviously on every show that you work on?*

BW: Yes, and that’s what’s exciting about it. In a broad sense, you might get a credit as an audio description consultant or an audio description director. And I prefer that one because it puts you in the same category as say a movement director or a musical director or fight director or whatever it might be. I think we need to think of the access jobs in the same way that we think about those jobs. This is part of your story-telling, this is an element of your storytelling that is just as creative and just as important to the finished product of your show as any other. And so broadly, what that job is is that you are the person overseeing the audio description on the show and the blind and visually impaired audience experience of that show. So if you're integrating audio description into the show, you can be there in the room sort of saying ‘Right, I'm not getting this bit. Let's all now think’ and then make suggestions like, if we add this line, or if we added this sound effect or whatever it might be then that makes the story that really clear to blind audience members. If you're doing more traditional headset audio description, you can be there working with the audio describer, listening in, giving notes, or working with the describer to write the actual text and also being that link between the rest of the creative team and the cast and the producers and the people providing the access.

And I think it’s vital to think about it as a creative role. So taking charge of that element of the show and bringing creative flair and also making sure it's in the same world of the show, in the same way that a movement director, musical director or fight director might be. They are given a brief by the director to say this is an element of the show that you are responsible for delivering. This is what the show is. This is how I want the show to look and feel. Now you, in collaboration with me and the cast and the rest of the creative team, let's deliver this show together and this is the element you’re responsible for.

And then it depends on the style of delivery. The type of show and how that works, and what your relationship is with the director and cast. But yeah, I find it a really fulfilling job because you get to work on all kinds of shows and get yourself into lots of different rehearsal rooms and be parts of lots of different teams and that's my favourite part of the job. Being in a rehearsal room with great creatives all pouring your heart and soul into making the show, whether that’s as an actor, director or AD consultant.

*AG: Yes, I love it. I totally agree with you. And I love the fact that you've really pushed this idea that it is a creative role. You know, I've learnt a lot from things that you have been putting in place and one of our shows recently we employed an actor who was more in keeping with the show. And the feedback from the audience was that his delivery was incredible because it was emotionally in sync with what they were hearing.*

BW: Well actors are brilliant, they work very hard, they train for years to do that. So to expect other people to be able to do it, it’s just a great resource to tap into.

*AG: So do you see progress with audio description, do you feel that it's getting a bit of momentum and change?*

BW: Yeah, I think so. I mean that comes with the caveat that we’ve still got a long way to go. But there are certain organisations, certain individuals who are really listening to blind and visually impaired artists and blind and visually impaired audiences and finding out what we want and what need which is really exciting. And what I find as well, maybe this is a sweeping generalisation, but I find there is a new young generation coming through who really get it. And they’re starting their careers with this going on around them so for them it’ll just be the norm. Whereas sometimes, occasionally you get people who've been doing their job for years who are like ‘What’s this? I’ve never done this before’. Which can be a bit frustrating. In my experience the current generation of actors, of directors, of writers and producers coming through and getting really excited by this, and are just having this as a normal part of their process. And that’s true of a lot of changes. We know that, you know, there's a younger generation that are very interested in progressive ideas, diversity and inclusion. And that’s really exciting.

And we're seeing changes from both ends. You sort of need change from the top down and the bottom up. So we're seeing people at the top of the industry in the big fancy buildings with big fancy stages and huge budgets starting to do really exciting different things and also people at fringe level challenging and pushing the growth there as well. So that's what we need is change from both ends.

I think we need two things: we need people in positions of power, established artists, established organisations at the top of the industry, we need those people, those non-disabled people to educate themselves on this and listen and learn and get better it. But the other thing that we need is the artists, whether they’re disabled or non-disabled who have been doing this type of work for years and have *all* this experience in doing this work, who are at the more independent level or more fringe level, we need those people to be lifted up and to be given a bigger platform to do that as well. Because I sometimes get frustrated in my audio description consultancy work, and I think ‘Why am I being employed by these big fancy people to hold their hands and teach them how to do this? Just cut out the middle man and put me in charge! Wouldn’t that be easier?’ That’s what I think in my more arrogant and more frustrated moments!

I think that it's all very well for these people who are already in positions of power to be educating themselves on this now. But actually, those of us that are experts in this and have done this work for years and who for us it is our lived experience, we also need to be given a bigger platform to do this ourselves. And I feel very passionate about this. I mean although I love my AD consultant work, my role in the industry cannot just be to serve the work of non-disabled artists to make their work accessible. We also need a platform to do this work ourselves as well. I mean both of those things.

Some people get very obsessed and polarised, ‘No, we just need disabled people to be given the work’, or ‘No, that’ll take a long time, let’s just give lots of money to non-disabled artists to learn how to do this’. But what we need is both of those things in sync, and that's when we'll see real change. When there are disabled people in positions of power and also non-disabled people in positions of power who are really enthused and excited and have the knowledge to do this stuff.

*AG: Yeah. And do you see any sort of routes that are helping disabled artists move into positions of power and director roles and higher up in arts organisations?*

BW: Yeah, I think one example of that is the Agent for Change job interestingly. I think that all of us who have done that job have had this amazing learning experience of working every day in a major building and seeing how it works and seeing what running a building like that actually looks and feels like. We’ve seen with projects like Ramps on the Moon, and some of the other theatres that are doing it off their own back, we're seeing more disabled actors on our stages, we’re seeing more artists engage with creative access and that is all really wonderful and exciting.

I’m not sure yet where the routes are for disabled directors, or creatives to find their way to be say an artistic director of a building, to be the chief executive, or a senior producer at a big building. We know in general there's a lack of diversity in those roles in theatre and that is very true for disability as well as other under-represented groups as well. Where are the disabled directors getting the opportunities to direct for those big main-stream stages? Where are the disabled writers getting commissions to write for those stages?

I think we need to see a real push from that because that's when we will see big change, when those real influential positions of power will be filled by a more diverse range of people.

*AG: Yeah, exactly. Very eloquently said. Just going back say to audio description, do you see any areas in the arts landscape where audio description is missing, where there needs to be a focus? I mean, museums are doing a lot, theatres are too. What about the West End?*

BW: Yes, the West End is lagging behind. And even when there is audio description, it’s not the creative or the more interesting stuff, it’s the traditional audio description with very little support from the creative team. And one of the things that always really frustrates me is that on these big commercial tours of shows that have been on the West End and then tour around the country or vice versa, every city they go to there will be a new audio describer writing audio description, there’ll be a new BSL interpreter writing an interpretation, there’ll be a new captioner learning the show. And it just doesn't make financial sense. It also doesn't make artistic sense because you can't do your best work if you’re hurriedly writing your description or hurriedly translating a show into BSL. If there was an audio describer, a BSL interpreter and a captioner who toured with that show, went to every city with that show, who had access to the rehearsal room to make their work more creatively integrated into the show and then could follow the show around, the audience experience would improve, the financial cost for the producers of that show and the venues would be far better. And it's just a win win for everyone. That would be a simple, easy win.

Because we often hear from receiving houses that the big shows tour to, ‘Well we just don't have the time to do anything more creative with the access provision. The show is only there for a week and it’s impossible to do anything more’, and that's completely right. It needs to come from the producer of those shows, from the artists making those shows to make space and make room for access creatives to be part of that show at the earliest opportunity and then tour with it. It’s a very basic idea. And I mean say with streaming services on Netflix, and Amazon Prime, only about 40% of the content has audio description, and Amazon’s owned by the richest man in the world. That's ridiculous, it’s embarrassing and shameful. They need to up their game – I mean I pay my £9.99 a month like everyone else and I don’t have access to all that content.

*AG: That's why they have the title Ramps on the Moon. I love that the idea that you just can't build a building without them now. And the same for when making a TV show, you should automatically always have to create the audio description and subtitles to go with it.*

BW: Yes, it’s not hard.

*AG: But to your point about touring shows, I’m so with you on that. It’s just ridiculous. I think it's to do with funding because I think it's the venues that shoulder the cost of making the show accessible in their own theatre. So the producing company don't have a financial incentive, but I think there should be.*

BW: They also just don’t seem to have the knowledge too, they seem unaware.

*AG: And it would be so much higher quality like you say. I mean imagine if the audio describer had done it over forty times, imagine how incredible it would be. It’s such a good point. I don't know what we do about that. We need to get lobbying or something…*

BW: Yeah, definitely – we need to bang on some doors.

*AG: And just going back to your acting work as well, do you feel that, obviously more can be done? But where do you get your work? Is it your agent?*

BW: Well like many actors, I just think I’ve been very fortunate. And that's one bit of advice I always give to actors who are just starting out and it's just be a pleasure to work with, be professional, be polite and then, all of my best acting jobs come from people who have worked with me before in a smaller role and they’ve liked working with me so they’ve given me another bigger role further down the line.

Yes, you need a good relationship with a brilliant agent, yes you need to be on Spotlight be applying for those jobs. And yes, you need to be networking and making links and seeing work and being engaged with what's happening in the industry, but also when you do get work, however big, however small, be professional, be polite, be friendly be a good member of the team and then you’ll quickly get a reputation of being a pleasure to work with. And that director will recommend you to all their other friends and say ‘Oh this person was great’. Because I've been a director, I’ve worked in creative teams, on shows in a building, and I know for a fact that directors will look at someone’s CV and look at who they’ve worked with, and if there’s someone there they know, they’ll give that person a call and say ‘How was this person to work with, were they good to work with?’ And if the answer’s yes, they’ll get the job.

Yeah, I think it's interesting when I look at my career, the best acting jobs have always been offered to me by directors I’ve worked with previously in a smaller capacity and they’ve enjoyed working with me and wanted to do so again.

And on opportunities for disabled actors, we are seeing a vast improvement in theatre and that’s really exciting, it's really wonderful. People are still working things out, there are some frustrations you know, so again, the diversity within diversity there's a real push towards representation of BSL in theatre and rightfully people are using deaf actors in order to do that. I think us blind actors are lagging behind a little bit there, as well as learning disabled actors and neurodivergent actors. There are certain types of diversity that get their moment in the sun and I’m just waiting for us blindies to have that moment! To be the cool tickbox, which is a rather negative and pessimistic way of looking at it!

But yeah, I think it's interesting looking at the industry in terms of making processes accessible to blind actors, to disabled actors. I would say in the last two years I have witnessed the best version of that I've ever witnessed. And I’ve witnessed the worst version of that. I mean you look at the biggest theatres in the country, the biggest producing houses and there’s never been a disabled actor on those stages. There are some of the biggest most high-profile directors who have never cast a disabled actor. Or when they have, those actors have had a terrible time.

There are some organisations, and individuals making wonderfully accessible processes to help disabled actors do great work, but there are also people who have a lot of work to do. If I could make one change to the industry, if you put me in complete control of theatre industry right now, I would take every director who's been directing for at least ten years and every theatre building that has been open for at least ten years, and if any have less than say two percent of actors that they worked with that are disabled, then I’d say right that’s it, you’re done, you’ve had ten years to learn, you haven’t done it, you’re out, give someone else a chance. You’ve clearly failed. On my more brutal days, that’s what I’d say. ‘Right if this theatre has never had a disabled actor on this stage, it’s closed, you’re done. And we’ll give that money to a theatre that cares and is willing to change and willing to learn’. I just think we need to be that brutal sometimes. And there are casting directors that never bring disabled actors in when they’re casting a show, there are directors who have never cast a disabled actor. It’s not good enough, it’s shameful and embarrassing. And I’ve got no interest in giving those people more time. If you’re not going to do it now, then when.

*AG: Yes, and I think people should put their money where their mouth is, you know, don't go and support a theatre or show if you know anything about whether they have cast diverse or disabled artists. Yes, that’s very honest and useful.*

BW: And you can do the research. You can google all these directors and theatres and work it out.

*AG: And you're highlighting the fact that there's been so much learning put out there, and there's so many easy ways to find it. Just google ‘how do I cast more diverse or disabled actors and what support would they need in place’. And as you know, it's all about communication and not being afraid to ask. You can just ask ‘I haven't cast a blind actor before. What can I do to help support you even in the casting process or in the rehearsal process’.*

BW: Exactly. I would say that there's sort of two types of access requirements or things that need to happen in the workplace. One is the practical, physical, tangible things that need to be in place. In a rehearsal room instead of just the tape on the floor can there be something tactile as well as visual. And I always ask for time alone in the room and on the set to learn where everything is. And once I know where it is, I’m more than happy to bounce around the place as energetically and confidently as anyone else. So there are physical, tangible things.

But then there's also sort of cultural and attitudinal ones – that everyones attitude is right, it’s a welcoming, friendly, warm, welcoming place to work as a disabled person. And that one is more important because I can forgive, you know, physical, practical, technical things not being in place if the culture and the attitude is right. I can't forgive the culture and the attitude being toxic and unwelcoming – that’s impossible to work in. So for me that would be far more important for me and far more vital to making a workplace work. Because if the attitude is right, you can fix that practical stuff, but you can never fix that practical stuff if the attitude is toxic and unwelcoming.

*AG: What strikes me is how difficult that conversation must be for you to have before you can think of accepting a role. And if you don't know much about that organisation, how do you go about having that conversation and say ‘I need these tangible things, but I also need the culture to be this’. Do you actually say that?*

BW: Yeah, I'm getting better at it sometimes. I’ve always been drawn to work with people that I’ve worked with before and I know it’s going to be a welcoming place. Which sometimes can be frustrating as it feels like you're not breaking new ground. You can often tell based on your encounters like with the way you are offered the job and how you’re interviewed. Then there are questions I ask like ‘How regularly has your organisation been through disability and equality training and if it's been a while have you considered getting that updated?’. I have an access rider that I've written that I send out to everyone I do a job with saying this is what I need and I will chase up particular things on that list to make sure they’re in place before rehearsals start. But the frustrating thing is often it’s too late – you only know it’s going to be inaccessible and violent when you’re there and it’s too late – you’ve signed the contract, you’re already there. But I’m a passionate believer in the social model of disability, in the radical model of disability and actually if they’re failing to meet my access requirements, that’s not me failing as an actor, that’s them failing as an employer. I used to beat myself up about things like if I was tripping over things on set and all those sort of things, and I felt I wasn’t good enough, and then I learnt to make the shift in my brain into ‘No, this is on them. I’m here to do my job and they’re not allowing me to do my job’. That was such a fundamental shift in my attitude and very liberating. We have to be very good for fighting for access, for the basic requirements to be able to do our job. And it's frustrating to be the guinea pig. People say ‘Well we’re learning, it’s the first time we’ve done this’ and I’m like ‘Great, learn faster so I can do my job’! Yeah, so it's frustrating. It's tiring, it's exhausting. But it's also great when it works.

*AG: And then when you can take those jobs when it's all in place and they've done loads of this before and you can have a wonderful time, that must be such relief as a kind of beacon of joy.*

BW: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. I cannot say how wonderful is. Yeah

*AG: I know. I've heard you speak very eloquently about some of the experiences working at Leeds Playhouse, and with Amy Leach. She pops up in my podcast I think in every episode.*

BW: Yeah. Absolute hero. I mean sometimes my advice to the theatre industry is just ‘Be more like Amy Leach!’

*AG: Yes, I’m with you on that, I’m in the fan club! So I always like to finish with what's your most memorable or favourite experience in terms of making the arts accessible. I mean either from your experience as an actor or helping make a show accessible through your consultancy or just listening to a show?*

BW: It's so difficult to choose. But I have a couple. When we made *Oliver Twist*, which was the Leeds Playhouse and Ramps on the Moon co-production that first happened at the start of the 2020. It was due to tour through to summer 2020, so we opened in Leeds and then the world ended. So we ended up filming it in 2021 and it’s on the NT At Home platform. And I remember one of the best scenes in that show was the scene where Oliver first meets the Artful Dodger, Oliver being played by the brilliant Deaf actor Brooklyn Melvin and the Artful Dodger being played by the amazing Deaf actor Nadeem Islam. And it was a complicated scene, and very visual, very BSL heavy scene. And we spent a whole afternoon really getting into the granular detail of working out the AD on that scene, and how it was going to work and what lines are needed to tell the story aurally as well as visually. And it was being in a room full of brilliant creatives, writers, and actors, brilliant stage management.. You know, everyone in that room and every single person in that room was pouring their heart and soul of coming up with great creative ideas about how to do the audio description on that scene. And it was just a really moving experience for me because as a blind person, that is really, really rare. Most people take it for granted that when they go to the theatre the people making the show have worked really hard to tell the story and make a show for them. But for me, I can honestly count on one hand when I’ve felt like that. And so to be in the room, to witness that first hand all these brilliant people working really hard and pouring their heart and soul, putting all their energy into making the show work for me and for people like me, was so moving. And at the end of that day, I just had to take myself off and have a moment. I was really emotional about it. Because this is what I’d been asking the industry to do for all these years. And to see this in action and see the brilliant results was just like so satisfying and so powerful. It's a depressingly rare feeling but when it happens it’s very very special.

*AG: Amazing. Any others?*

BW: Well, yes there was an experience at the Edinburgh festival I mean I have loads of frustrations with the Fringe Festival, which is on the organisers of the festival but it’s also on the artists taking work up there - I think everyone is currently failing disabled audiences and I could talk about that at length.

But anyway, shortly after I lost my sight I went up there and saw a load of work by disabled artists and I was just so excited because when I lost my sight, I thought that's my career over with, I’ll never be able to work in theatre any more. So going up there, and seeing brilliant artists making brilliant work I was like ‘Oh wow! This is incredible. This is not just possible, this is probable. This is amazing. There are so many opportunities open to me and people like me!’. And it was quite a mind-blowing experience.

But one of my favourite shows I saw a couple of years after that was the great visually impaired actor and comedian Georgie Morrell. And she’s now become a good friend of mine. And me and my brother went to see her show together. And Georgie started telling her story she had a comedy show, about her experience of becoming visually impaired, losing her sight. And it was so freaky because it was so similar - we have the same eye conditions, we were treated by the same doctors and we're about the same age when we lost our sight, and also have freakishly similar family situations. And me and my brother were sat in the back row turning to each other and going ‘What!, Is this happening!” And it was just amazing to be in a theatre and see someone telling a story that is similar to yours – it’s such a powerful and moving experience.

*AG: And that just speaks to the importance of having different voices on the stage doesn’t it?*

BW: 100 percent.

*AG: Amazing. Thank you for those. And finally, for anyone that’s listening who wants to read up a bit more, get more advice about some of the things we've talked about. Are there any particular places you can recommend? I mean I know google can throw up everything you could want, but are there any unusual ones perhaps that people might not know about.*

BW: Good question. I always say speak to disabled people about this stuff. There are great disabled artists you can find online in various places, and they’ll be more than happy to have a cup of tea, whether in person or over zoom or over the phone and just to have a chat. But just start that relationship and start having those conversations.

And to me, a vitally important one is go and see work. Go and see work that does interesting things with creative access from small-scale stuff to mainstage, and everything in between. See artists doing interesting and creative things with access and telling stories in new and amazing ways. So actually the best resource is the work itself and its people and all that sort of stuff.

And then in a blind, visually impaired context, I’d give a shout out to Extant, a great visually impaired-led theatre company. They have loads of resources and work really hard and they’re always a good first port of call and they can put you in touch with visually impaired artists and other voices. Similarly with disabled artists more generally there’s Graeae theatre. People often ask me about terminology. People get obsessed with words and language, so I point them to the language guide that Graeae have on their website. They send it out to journalists who are reviewing their work. So that's a really good little tool. And yes, just chat to people. See work. And just do it. Just crack on. Don’t just talk about it for hours, hours about how to make work accessible, just crack on!

*AG: In the words of Nike [laughs] Just do it. Ben, thank you so much. It's been so interesting. I really appreciate everything we've talked about here.*

BW: Absolutely. It’s been a pleasure.

[music]

**Links**

Extant Theatre

<https://extant.org.uk/>

Graeae Theatre

<https://graeae.org/>

Ramps on the Moon Project

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

Sheffield Theatres

[www.sheffieldtheatres.co.uk](http://www.sheffieldtheatres.co.uk)

*Oliver Twist* – NT At Home

<https://www.ntathome.com/products/oliver-twist>

Georgie Morrell – comedian, actor, writer

<http://georgiemorrell.co.uk/>