**I’m Me Podcast**

**Episode 3: Tackling Serious Topics Part 2**

**Jess Boyes, Alison Colborne, Daniel Foulds, Jess Mackenzie and Laura Walne**

Introduction

Hello and welcome to Conversations in Social Justice, the podcast series for Institute for Social Justice. Today we’re chatting about I’m Me, an AHRC funded collaboration between the Institute for Social Justice and Mind the Gap, one of England's leading companies in learning disability performance and live arts. I'm Me uses creative methods to explore artists with learning disabilities and autism, understandings of identity, representation, and voice. In this project, artists at Mind the Gap develop a Doodle Book, a book of creative prompts which is then shared with a network of six other learning disability performance companies across the UK. These companies then generate their own creative responses to these prompts on identity, representation, and voice. This podcast series consists of conversations about topics arising from the project.

Daniel Foulds

Yes, so, hello, hello, so everyone, I'm Daniel Foulds, and, and I'm joined by two different companies. Would you like to introduce yourselves, please.

Laura Walne

Yes. I'm Laura.

Jess MacKenzie

I'm Jess from About Face.

Laura Walne

I'm an actor at About Face and About Face Theatre company is set in Leominster. And we work with puppets but we work with masks.

Jess MacKenzie

We make all our own plays, don't we?

Laura Walne

Yes, we do.

Jess MacKenzie

Yes, we write our own plays.

Alison Colburne

And I’m Alison with Mind the Gap. Mind the Gap is one of England’s leading live arts and theatre companies for people with learning disabilities and/or autism. Because we know audiences often think of such people, you know limited in what they can do, we often like to do high quality performances which have the wow factor. Which directly challenges people’s perceptions of what we can do.

Daniel Foulds

Today, we’re going to talk about challenging topics. Laura and Jess, at About Face have tackled complicated subjects with art before I’m Me. Could you tell us a bit more about those topics please?

Jess MacKenzie

So we're talking about challenging -

Laura Walne

One of our shows that we've done that been challenging. One of our shows that was challenging was probably, yeah, I'd say our hate crime show was challenging.

Daniel Foulds

Can you tell us a little bit more about in what ways were they were challenging?

Jess MacKenzie

Maybe describe a little bit about what the show's about.

Laura Walne

Well, our show is, based on a true story. And it, and it's set on a train and it's about someone that’s got autism.

Jess MacKenzie

And what's he doing?

Laura Walne

Well, he's going off to, college.

Jess MacKenzie

And what was difficult, more about making that story, why do people find it difficult?

Laura Walne

Because obviously, because obviously we have to wear mask over our face so we couldn't actually speak with our mouth. We have to speak with our bodies. And also we have to put a horrible word in there which some people found difficult.

Jess MacKenzie

What was the word?

Laura Walne

The word was called, retard.

Jess MacKenzie

So how did the audience feel when they heard that word? Did they react?

Laura Walne

Yeah, yeah, they did react. Yeah.

Jess MacKenzie

Yeah, so a lot of people in the audience, there was a sort of intake of breath at that word. Because I think it's kind of universally recognized as being an offensive word. But I think the actors also found it quite hard. So we talked, didn't we, Laura about whether we needed to use a different word?

Laura Walne

Yeah.

Jess MacKenzie

Can you talk about that? Did we think that was a good idea?

Laura Walne

No, it wasn't a good idea because obviously we needed a horrible word that you would say to person that's got a learning disability.

Daniel Foulds

And what was the casts’ thoughts on using that sort of language? Was there other language that you should have used differently?

Laura Walne

Well, obviously one actor didn't, one of our actors didn't like, didn't want us to use that that word at all. Because he just doesn't like hearing that word.

Jess MacKenzie

But is he in the play?

Laura Walne

Yes, he is in the play, yes.

Jess MacKenzie

So what do you think they can change his mind?

Laura Walne

Maybe cause he because they wanted to be part of the, he wanted to be part of the show.

Jess MacKenzie

Yes. Do you think it's important to do that sort of work that might upset people? Is it okay to do that work?

Laura Walne

Yeah, it's okay to, do that sort of work.

Daniel Foulds

Yeah and do you think it has helped when taking it to schools for people to hear this and to experience some of the challenges faced by learning disabled people.

Jess MacKenzie

So, do you think this, the play that we take out, do you think it helps people understand? The students understand what it's like to have a learning disability? What its like to be an autistic person trying to travel to college on the train?

Laura Walne

Yeah, I think they, I think they do understand because I think that is a great show. To send out a message to them and to make them understand. Yeah.

Jess MacKenzie

I think one of the other messages in the story is that you shouldn't stand back and let things happen but there are ways without being confrontational that you can support people if they are having a hard time and I think that's part of the message really.

Daniel Foulds

In the feedback that you receive from, you've toured this too, what has the, the, what, one of the things to, that they've said back to you?

Jess MacKensie

I think there's, as far as you know, I've been going through them because we're recording all the feedback stuff, but people are feeling enlightened, they feel a sense that it's wrong. A lot of people go, we didn't know this goes on and it's wrong. There's a sort of recognition for anybody that has a relative or that might deal with that sort of constant bullying that's happening sort of for people with learning disabilities, travelling on public transport. So I think it has been well received and I think the actors going into schools is a really positive message.

Daniel Foulds

Alison. Can you please tell us a little bit about a challenging subject that Mind the Gap has worked on in the past?

Alison Colburne

Well a couple years ago we did Daughters of Fortune. It’s a bit of a challenging subject just because it’s hard to research. If you look for a parent who has learning disabilities all you could find was parents who had a child with learning disabilities. So of course we wanted to raise awareness. But when we went out to these parents, who weren’t even out in the open, actually some of them had had hard experiences. Partly because most of the people we interviewed had had their child taken off them. And when these things happen you want to support them so that you feel like they can tell the story. Say, it’s okay if its too much for you, you can stop telling this part of the story. Because we don’t want to leave them in worst shape than we found them in.

Jess MacKenzie

You want to say a bit about how we worked with those parents and how we made sure that people felt comfortable and like their stories were going to be used carefully.

Alison Colburne

We said at the beginning, that before we did anything with any material we would always go to them, tell them what we intended to do, were they happy or not. So they felt like they had some control over what was happening. Because we never did something without their permission. And I like to think we didn’t pressurize anyone into anything because we tried to be as honest and open and keep things within the original context.

Daniel Foulds

Laura and Jess, can you tell us about how the group felt about asking big, sometimes challenging questions about identity, representation at the start of the project.

Laura Walne

When we first started doing the Doodle Books. I think some people weren't sure about doing them and some people got upset about answering difficult questions. That might be in the Doodle Book, so they would just leave the do leave the hard questions blank.

Jess MacKenzie

And what do you think happens now?

Laura Walne

I think the Doodle Books have helped them to be more confident and asking those difficult questions. Well, whatever the difficult questions are. And some people would still keep it bottled up inside them. So they won’t let it out.

Daniel Foulds

Can you tell me a little bit about how people how it's been how things have been managed for when people have been bottling things up?

Laura Walne

Yeah, a safe space to, to share stories.

Jess MacKenzie

Do you think you get support from each other? If someone gets upset, how does the group react?

Laura Walne

Well, we do get, we do get support from, from each other, yeah.

Jess MacKenzie

So safe spaces are important?

Laura Walne

Yes, yes they are. Yeah.

Jess MacKenzie

And also we were talking like we about do people get forced to answer these questions?

Laura Walne

No, people don't get forced to answer the questions. They can answer the questions if they're confident and brave enough but they can still leave the questions blank if they're not confident enough and just build the question and fill the question in when they are brave enough to do it.

Daniel Foulds

So when looking at different subjects of identity and representation. Did you found both quite challenging in general?

Jess MacKenzie

I think the group are finding this, the second book, the representation book much harder to think of the answers. We talked about it late yesterday. And people said that they don't think about themselves as being disabled, they're just people getting on with their lives. And so they don't they don't really consider some of the questions that are coming up and they're finding it really hard to articulate those answers. And yesterday we were talking. Actually this morning we were talking, and Laura was saying that one of the things that's needed is the time to process your thoughts when we're talking about those difficult subjects. We're really lucky because we meet two days a week. So we can start the work on Monday. People can mull it over overnight and then come back. That I think is what Laura means about not being ready to answer the question on the first day, but on the second day you might go, okay, I feel better now, I processed this, I've got, I can do this now. And I think it's given us time to sit round a table and have those discussions, which we didn't really do before.

Daniel Foulds

Now that quite a bit of time has gone by, how do people feel now?

Laura Walen

Definitely more confident. Yeah, definitely.

Daniel Foulds

Can I ask little bit more about how they feel confident, is that in the sessions or is that personally?

Jess MacKenzie

We've got, quite a few people in the group at the moment are going through quite a lot of traumatic things in their lives. And I think Laura is saying about bottling things up, I think people are finding it really hard. They don't want to become upset by talking about these things. And I think, I think even during the first book, they wouldn't have talked about them. And now I think it's a little bit more out there and feeling a little bit more able to be vulnerable.

Laura Walne

Yeah.

Daniel Foulds

Do you think that's what's helping make change? What's that help make things change in sessions or do you think that there's going to be more change to happen as things progress?

Jess MacKenzie

So, do you think people have changed? So from where we were when we 1st started, yeah, people being reluctant maybe to join in and getting quite upset and angry about things?

Laura Walne

Yeah.

Jess MacKenzie

So now people are more accepting, they'll sit around and they'll talk a bit more and they'll get upset in front of their friends. Do you think we've got further to go in that sort of journey? Do you think when we go to the next book we’ll be more open to sharing ideas?

Laura Walne

Yeah.

Jess MacKenzie

And talking about personal stuff.

Laura Walne

Yeah, yeah.

Jess MacKenzie

So, do you think we're on a bit of a journey?

Laura Walne

Yeah, I think we are on a bit of the journey. Yeah.

Jess MacKenzie

And where do you think on that journey we are? So, we're not at the beginning.

Laura Walne

No, we're definitely not at the beginning. We've gone past the beginning.

Jess MacKenzie

Past the beginning and we've got more confident.

Laura Walne

Yes.

Jess MacKenzie

And are we in at the end or do you think we've got a long way to go?

Laura Walne

Yeah. Maybe getting towards the end. Slowly, yeah.

Jess MacKenzie

I guess we'll have to wait and see.

Daniel Foulds

So, when you say what around challenging subjects how does has it been received by people outside About Face?

Jess MacKenzie

If you're doing a challenging piece of thing, if you want people to not feel lectured, you need to get some humor. So our creation show, yeah, starts off - there's the middle section that's very funny, isn't there?

Laura Walne

Yes, there is, yeah.

Jess MacKenzie

And then the end is pretty. Strong and powerful.

Laura Walne

Yeah.

Jess MacKenzie

And how do people feel when they leave?

Laura Walne

They feel upset and emotional.

Daniel Foulds

Is it the subject matter or is it, from the show itself.

Jess MacKenzie:

I think we lull them in with an amazing story where we have a tiny puppet on a pastry cutter unicycle and we have a whole dancing eel that tries to seduce a giant frog. And then suddenly it all changes and it gets very serious. And I think, I think people suddenly realize that About Face have got something important to say. And I think they're surprised that people with learning disabilities can produce work that is profound and upsetting and while still trying to be hopeful. Are you proud of being in that show?

Laura Walne

Yeah. Yeah, I'm definitely proud of being in that show.

Daniel Foulds

Yeah. So one of the things that's come up in the I’m Me project is that sometimes people are upset by hearing people’s stories. Should we share stories from our lives that might upset people?

Jess MacKenzie

I think Laura's got something to say about that.

Laura Walne

Yeah, yes I have. One of our actors, gets upset when other people get upset. But everyone has the right to share their stories and shouldn't worry about upsetting anyone.

Alison Colburne

And one thing I was thinking is that there are rights to research. Like you have a right to support which means should you get upset there should be actually one person to help you out even if it means going out of the room with you until you pull yourself together. Also, if you don’t want to tell a story you can always say no. That’s another right you have in something like this. You should never be forced to share something you’re not comfortable sharing.

Daniel Foulds

Thank you very much, everyone, for listening and thank you to everyone who participated in the podcast. Much appreciated here from all of you.