# **I’m Me – Asking Questions Through Non Verbal Theatre**

Kelsie:

Hello. Welcome to Conversations in Social Justice, the podcast series for the 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’s 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 arising from the project.

I’m Kelsie Acton, post-doctoral researcher on I’m Me. In this podcast Mel and Luke from Open Theatre talk with Alison from Mind the Gap. They talk about practicing non-verbal theatre with the Doodle Book and the importance of lived experience.

Alison:

So. Could you introduce yourselves? So, names, pronouns, and what you’re doing on the project?

Mel:

Shall I go first, Luke? My name's Mel Daly, and my pronouns are she/her and I am the lead practitioner on the I’m Me project for Open Theatre.

Luk:

Hi! I'm Luke, my pronouns are he/they. I am the…what am I again? Sorry my brain's gone. I am the lead artist on the project. Thank you.

Alison:

I’m Alison. I’m an artist at Mind the Gap but also research assistant for the I’m Me project. So we’re talking about your practice on the I’m Me project. So could you start by telling us about Open Theater’s non-verbal practice?

Mel:

We certainly can. So I'll start and then Luke, maybe you can add in some bits if you want to? If that’s okay? So Open Theatre’s practice is nonverbal. It's physical. It's all about using our bodies. And we always use music. So we get into a room and we work nonverbally. We work physically, and we use recorded music at all times. And our practice actually started out in special schools. So working with young people in special schools, and we developed it there alongside young people across the whole range of learning disabilities. And yeah, we're always looking for connection. That's sort of one of the main things we're focusing on when we do our practice is, how can we connect with whoever it is that's with us in the space. And the other three things we're looking for is: agency, creativity, and capability.

So, finding connections so that we can help people discover agency, creativity, and capability, whatever that may look like for them. And that practice we then transfer and we also use as a theater making process. So that's how we create any of the art.

Luke:

So what we normally do is, as you say Mel, we tend to work nonverbally with music. So we tend to. We'll do a warmup. We'll put some music on, and we'll just move. See how the music makes us feel. We tend to go - there’s no right or wrong, we tend to go with the music. So, however the music makes you feel is perfectly fine. Yeah. And then we’ll move on, to -

Mel:

Yeah, we would maybe introduce, depending on the group in the session, what we're doing, maybe introduce a prop. So we'd maybe bring in something that we're going to explore together. So an example might be, we bring in a bag that's empty. But maybe we explore what's in the bag together, and we do that to the music and using our physicality. So sort of little offerings of things. So we'll start with our bodies. But then we think, what could we bring into the space that may inspire some new ideas or some new types of movement. Or types of creation that we've not thought of just with our bodies.

I think the main thing is we always work with who's in the room, and what's in the room, and whatever music we bring into the room.

Alison:

Right. Can you tell us a little bit about how your I’m Me sessions are different to your usual nonverbal practice?

Luke:

We’ve still implemented elements of our - what we know. But we've also talked a lot more, and it's been an interesting contrast to what we normally do.

Mel:

Yeah, I think because we’ve had to explain things a little bit more, maybe, and we've had to sort of talk. We've had to use words. I think we've been forced to use words in a way that we wouldn't usually in our sessions. So. There’s been verbalising throughout, whereas, as we could sometimes go for weeks and weeks and weeks without ever talking in any of our sessions, so we might talk at the end a little bit, but actually we wouldn't talk at all. But some of these sessions we've started with talking, and we've started with discussion because we've needed to, just to make sure that everyone's felt they know what's going on, and that they understand what they're part of, and I suppose the consent element of it kick that all off because we had to make sure that everyone understood what they were consenting to. So. Yeah, they've been different. But we've tried our best to stay true to our practice as much as possible.

Luke:

Yeah.

Alison:

So how did you approach complicated concepts like identity and representation?

Luke:

Yeah, so we found representation quite difficult. I think because people didn't really know how to express themselves with it.

Mel:

I think, because it's brand new, wasn't it? It wasn't something we'd ever talked with them I think there was quite a stark difference between identity and representation. So identity people could grab hold of that, and whatever way they wanted to and go, that's identity. And we could work through it together, whereas, representation…I don't know if we ever all really got to the same place with it, so.

Luke:

No, no. However. Identity was definitely, as Mel said, identity was definitely very interesting. We found that especially the safe and unsafe was - we had a lot to work with, and that was very, very interesting. I can't remember exactly what we did. I just remember it was - we’ve already got notes. There's probably video footage somewhere. I remember it being very intense and very everyone got into it.

Mel:

And I think what's really interesting from our point of view is, those were the sessions that we really stayed true to our practice. Because we took away any talking. We didn't talk about safe. We didn't talk about unsafe. We just did some things that made us feel safe, and then made us feel unsafe. So we physicalized it all before we talked about it. And I think that was a real shift for us in the project as well, because we thought, oh actually, we can do what we usually do. But we just need to flip it around and do the talking after that.

Luke:

We had some tape. And everybody had their little safe boxes almost. We kind of put some music on and explored moving outside of the safe space to see what would happen, and discovering somebody else's space and it and it's all. It was almost as if. Yeah. That was fascinating.

Mel:

That - I don't know if that answers the question. But hopefully, that's a way of, a way that we try to approach some of the more challenging things, to make them feel more real.

Luke:

Yeah.

Mel:

I think there were lots of other pages that our group responded well to. But not necessarily because they worked well with our practice. So, I remember doing stuff around the different situations, different scenarios, and they were quite interesting. And we did quite a bit of mask work like we did full mask work.

Luke:

Yeah.

Mel:

Which is something we do often is we'll take facial expressions away and just play with physicality and explore different situations, different scenarios physically, and then reflecting on them that worked really well.

Luke:

There were definitely, some very interesting discussions, as well.

Mel:

I'm just thinking Luke ,about when people remember this session, where people were recreating their...? Showing us around their ideal homes?

Luke:

Yes! Some really funny stuff. And it kind of went into like learning more about each other as well. Like one person had like a jungle home, and it was just plants everywhere. And we're just like we'd never expected it from this person, but.

Mel:

And I think that. And then also we did that. There was the activity where we made the timeline. Where we had to sort of plot like, maybe three moments in our life that were significant.

Luke:

Yeah. That was.

Mel:

And that was really fun, actually. Everyone enjoyed that. And we did that quite physically. And then we reflected on it together once we'd made the timeline. So we sort of went off on our own creating our own three things to put up.

Alison:

Luke would you like to tell us more about your role as lead artists? Could you give us an example of what you may do for each Doodle book as a lead artist?

Luke:

I found that just cause Mel was sort of the main, I kind of implemented myself more so into the group and kind of led by example, for people who were less confident and just modelling, I suppose. And just, you know, giving my experiences, as well as to help them be more comfortable with theirs and things like that. I think having my own experience, has definitely made, I suppose contributed to people feeling comfortable that they’re not the only people who have had those, with those types of experiences. Yeah. It’s definitely had an impact.

Mel:

I think that came out when we did the section on, was it communities and what communities people are part of. Do you remember that section Luke? And a load of people were -

Luke:

Yeah. Very significant. Very positive as well.

Mel:

So people could recognise, oh we’ve got that in common. But actually they might not have thought that. And I think if the people leading the sessions hadn’t brought that lived experience you wouldn’t really be able to have those discussions. So, I do think it created a different type of space because of that.

Luke:

Also planning. I’ve planned a lot more with Mel. And in the end we found that I was coming up with more ideas than Mel was. In some ways. Yeah. And also going through the doodle books and selecting the bits that we thought our group would benefit from.

Alison:

And has that changed over the course of project?

Luke:

I feel I've become more comfortable with being a leader, essentially. I feel like as the project - starting off I was very nervous, and I wasn't sure what I was going to do. I was. I was really like unsure of how to start -

Mel:

We actually, interestingly, sorry to jump in, Luke, I'm sure it was about November time you reached out to Richard and I, and said, I don't know what I'm doing. And like the three of us, got together. That was so helpful, because then we could have a really honest chat and go. And I said, I don't really know what I'm doing, because we've never done this type of project before, and I think we got to that place of honesty where we were like, right, we're both a little bit unsure. But this is how we're gonna move forward together

Luke:

Yeah.

Mel:

And I noticed your confidence definitely shot up from that moment, because you relaxed a bit more.

Luke:

Yeah, definitely. And I think by the end. And by the end of the project. Or end of working with the Doodle Book. Sorry. Project’s not over yet. By the end of working with the Doodle Books. I certainly felt like I was more way, more confident way, more comfortable with taking lead, with. Even facilitating in some ways.

Alison:

Do either of you have any advice for other researchers working on projects with people with learning disabilities?

Luke:

Yes, so I would say. Approach any project with empathy, passion and compassion. Famous quote. By me. Just be open to exploring. A different style of, understanding, different people's minds. I suppose is a better way. Understanding that it's not all. I don't know whether I'm wording this right.

Mel:

I think that openness to not know what is going to happen is great. And being able to adapt and embrace what people bring to a project. So what we always say at Open Theater is we can never predict what anyone's going to do, and that's the joy of our job. Like I think I'd be quite bored if I could predict what everyone's going to do. But actually, constantly we're surprised. So I think for any future researchers just to set things up in a way that you're open to be able to go. I'm going to embrace that, and use that rather than have a sort of fixed mind about what you’re doing.

Alison:

So what’s something interesting you’ve learned working on I’m Me?

Mel:

Oooh.

Luke:

I would say similar to what we've said, learning new things about people we know and about ourselves. It's learning that similarities, but also different. How different we are, but also how similar we are. And it’s been, like, great. And also we did learn as well that there is a place for words, but as a company personally, we don't want to allow words to dominate. But we understand that there is an element in where they can be useful.

Mel:

Yeah, which I think is a big thing, because actually, we do work non-verbally, and we don't tend to go in and use words. But it's been useful, and it's helped us discover things and, yeah, opened our minds.

Luke:

Definitely opened our minds up, yeah.

Alison:

Do you think I’m Me will change how you work in the future. And if so, how?

Mel:

It's shown me the value in doing projects like this and alongside all the other work that we already do. But it would make me much more open to being part of projects like this in the future, because I've seen the value of it. It's added value to what we're already doing.

Luke:

Definitely. And I think as well, I want to add, just on top of that. I personally think this is one of the best projects I've worked on.

Alison:

Thank you very much.