

**Theatre Unwrapped Episode 6: Making it Real. Access and Inclusion in UK Theatre**

**Transcript**

**SPEAKERS:** Sue Lawther-Brown (host) Amy Leach, Ben Wilson

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

Welcome to Theatre Unwrapped, the New Wolsey Theatre podcast. I’m your host Sue Lawther-Brown and I’d like you to join me right here in Dressing Room 3 to unwrap the secrets and stories of theatre.

This episode is part two of my exploration into making theatre accessible and inclusive for everyone. In part one, I spoke to Sarah Holmes and Michele Taylor, about the responsibilities of leaders and funders in the theatre sector. In this episode, I take a deeper dive into what access and inclusion really look and feel like at the creative end of theatre making. First up is Amy Leach; Amy is Associate Director at Leeds Playhouse and is the director of an extraordinary new adaptation of Oliver Twist by Bryony Lavery for Leeds Playhouse and Ramps on the Moon. Amy’s learning curve was pretty steep – (Amy: ‘Now I can’t really think about making work without thinking about access’) and she worked closely with my second guest Ben Wilson, to realise this ground-breaking project ( Ben: ‘We are excluded from 99% of all theatre, and film and television and music and drama and arts and all of these things’.)

So why was the learning curve so steep? Oliver Twist features an integrated company of deaf and disabled artists, integrated creative sign language, audio description, and captioning at all performances and it’s an extraordinary piece of mainstream theatre.

Amy - a very warm welcome to dressing room three.

**Amy Leach**

Oh, thank you so much, Sue. Nice to be here.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

Well, Amy, first up, let's talk about Oliver Twist, because it's available right now online, isn't it and it's rather special when the show originally opened in March 2020. Adam Bruce from WhatsOnStage said, not only is it a fully integrated and accessible production, it's also a harmonious and exciting piece of theatre that breathes new life into Dickens masterpiece packed to the brim with stunning performances, and groundbreaking design concepts. It is an unmissable extraordinary production, you must have been thrilled with a review like that.

**Amy Leach**

I mean, it's very lovely. It's always very lovely, of course, to get really nice reviews and that side of things. But I suppose like two things connected to that really - one is that I think Ramps On the Moonover time has really noticed a shift actually in the way that the ramps of the moon productions have been reviewed, which I think that maybe in the early days were maybe slightly more patronizing in tone, like ardent they do well. And actually, I think that's really shifted in the industry, which is fab to see there's a lot more critics who've got a better kind of understanding of what they're watching, but also kind of really treating it as any other piece of theatre. And, you know, judging it on its merit as a piece of theatre as opposed to like, you know, isn't it great that it's also kind of thing about these other things. So that's been really nice to kind of have so many lobby reviews, that really kind of got it. But I think for us as a company, the reviews that mean the most was are the kind of audience responses. And that's been just amazing to see, and particularly deaf and disabled audiences to kind of have so many lovely comments of people just feeling really seen and represented and thought of in this process has just been fantastic. So really, those are the ones that matter. I think

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

They're the ones that really count Yes, of course. And so what do you think is extraordinary about the show?

**Amy Leach**

It's quite difficult to say about your own work. So but what I would say is that this show is the effort, that kind of combination of effort from such a huge number of people, so many people's thoughts and ideas, and efforts and commitment went into making this production. And I think in a way that's one of the things that makes it really extraordinary is that team effort about the kind of collaboration that absolutely everybody was working towards the same goal of creating a piece of theatre that was both as exciting and exhilarating, and as visceral as you want any piece of theatre to be, but also was doing so much in terms of moving the conversation forward on in terms of disability. So I think that's one of the things that makes it extraordinary, I think it's just also a hope, I hope it's just a really cracking version of Oliver Twist. And I think one of the things I love about it is that by looking at the play through or the story through this kind of, I suppose new lens of having different disabled characters in the world, thinking about different stable history in this world, thinking about access, I think it's brought a new angle, a new lens to that story. So these stories we think we know and we all think we know Oliver Twist, it's, you know, it's part of our kind of cultural landscape. But actually, I think it's made a set of fresh and and that's really exciting, because that's the creative possibility of all of this work is it's like it's not just about patting yourself on the back. And isn't it a good thing to do, but actually, it's about how does it make the work better? How does it make us see stories in a new light? So that's what I love about it.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

Let’s unpick some of the detail, Amy. It's so easy to say the words access and inclusion, but it's quite another thing to make that a reality. So tell me about the captioning and the British Sign Language and the audio description. They're integrated into the staging and performance, aren't they? So can you explain what that means for the audience?

**Amy Leach**

One of the things I think is to sometimes when we talk about access - inclusion, and I think what we tried through a lot through the process of this production was just think about visual storytelling and aural storytelling, if when a person comes to experience a play, they're experiencing it through all of their senses. And for those of us who can see and hear, we are often seeing a visual story being told, as well as aura lstory being told. And of course, if those senses aren't accessible for you, then actually that kind of the visual world needs to be more heightened, and the or the, you know, the our world needs to be more heightened. So I think what it means in terms of this actual show is that what we've done is tried to be as kind of bold and as kind of, kind of exciting with all of the senses as we can possibly be. And that's meant that what we have done is all the way through is each scene, think about from all of those different angles, how can we use audio description, and captioning and sign language in ways that enhance the story, turn up the dial on all of those kind of aspects of how an audience might receive those stories. And so we do it in really different ways all the way through. And so for example, in terms of sign language, sometimes what we're using is just really bold gesture. Sometimes what we're using is sign supported English. Sometimes we're using visual vernacular, it's like it changes as we go through the piece. Sometimes it's just it's mime, it's just pure visual storytelling. And the same with the audio description. Often, most of the time audio description is something that a blind or visually impaired audience get received through headsets. So it's not part of the actual piece itself. What's I suppose one of the special things about this production is that the audio description is absolutely just part of the world of the play. So you don't have to wear a headset to watch it if you're blind. And again, that manifests in different ways. Sometimes it's through the narration of the ensemble. Sometimes it's through the sound design, sometimes it's because characters are wearing elements of their costume that make sound, sometimes it's about kind of somebody vocalizing, how they're feeling, or, you know, adding an extra noise or expression to how they're responding to something. And so it's when all of that adds together, it makes it accessible for either a deaf or a blind audience. So yeah, but really, it's all just more kind of ways to tell stories, really.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

So the accessibility is really built in to the DNA of the piece of work isn't it is, it's not that you've got a sign language interpreter on the side of the stage. It's very, a very different experience by the sound of it.

**Amy Leach**

Definitely, it's really kind of, I suppose what it hopefully feels like, although that took quite a lot of work was it feels very organic, and it's very much the fabric of a piece. And that's also partly because it was part of the creative thought process from the very beginning. So when we commissioned Bryony ( Lavery) to write this adaptation of Oliver Twist, that was part of the parameters that it needed, the whole thing needed to be accessible in those ways. And so from the very word go from the very first moment, that we even began to think about the play, we were thinking about it on all of those levels. And therefore, in the same way that you might think about, well, how is a movement director going to work through this piece? Or how does the fight language of this show, it just becomes another layer like that? So yeah, it's really exciting.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

So tell me more what that all meant for you as a director? How did you approach thinking about that from the very start?

**Amy Leach**

Well, like I say, like the kind of very seeds of the commission and the development of this piece, and had all of this as part of it. And that involved we did a big R & D before Bryony started writing where we looked at moments from the story and we kind of explored with a range of different several people kind of how we might start to bring the story to life and using those kind of access tools kind of become creative elements that also then impacted on the actual story in that we were talking about it being in the Victorian era. And what does that mean, in terms of Deaf history, for example, there was a really significant moment in Deaf history that happened in 1880 - the Milan Conference - kind of finding out more about that bit of Deaf history really impacted on the choice around which of the characters might be deaf characters, how that might impact on their lives and the way that they're able to live their lives and their views and their outlook on the world. And so very much kind of organically from the start it was part of it all and and I suppose I you know, I've used this phrase a lot when people have asked me about this show, but for me as a director, what it's meant is, I feel like my toolkit, my paint box is like it's like I had this paint box and I've just found a whole other layer of paints that I didn't know. So that's how it feels, to me. Really, what it's meant for me is it's pushed me as a director, but it's also really just opened up such new and interesting creative possibilities, which is like thrilling.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

I can hear that in your voice talking about it. And of course, Oliver Twist has a cast that includes disabled actors. So how different was the rehearsal process if it was different? Did you have to make adjustments?

**Amy Leach**

Part of rehearsals is always as a director kind of work now, how all those individuals in a room how they work best, what they need to do their best work, and then support them in that. And of course, when there's a number of different disabled people in the room, they have kind of maybe more obvious access requirements, I suppose within that. So we did make adjustments we had, for example, because we had six deaf actors in the company. And we it's very difficult to sign and hold a script at the same time. So we put a television screen in the room that had a PowerPoint of all the text. What was so interesting about that, though, and I think what you often find when you kind of support somebody in an access requirement, it can actually impact and benefit lots more people. So actually, what was really interesting is the non deaf people in the room, going, Oh, this is brilliant. I don't have to hold my script, I can I can act, you know, I can, I’m freed up, actually. So we did make obviously, adjustments like that kind of things like the TV screen or, you know, printing scripts on different colored paper and things like that. But I think those are all adjustments that obviously we would make for working with any deaf or disabled person in a space. But I think one of the really key things was actually about, at the very beginning, was asking everybody, What do they need to do their best work? And what is useful for each of us to know about each other to do our best work? And that is less focused on like, you know, this sense of like, What is wrong with you? Or what or what do we need to, you know, but actually about like, Well, we actually, we're all just humans that want to do our best work. So how can we make that possible? And also equalizing that experience. So asking everybody, so it wasn't all like, let's all sit and look at the different disabled people and ask them, but actually, we've all got our access requirements, and the things that would be useful for people to know about us. So that's kind of really trying to equalize the experience of both being able to ask for what you need, but also know that you can be supported and all of us taking responsibility for each other to look after each other in the process. I suppose. So yeah,

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

I would love somebody to ask me what I need to in order to do my best work. Who wouldn't? Who wouldn't want that? That's a benefit to everybody, isn't it?

**Amy Leach**

I think so. And again, it frames it around doing good work. It frames it around the work, you know, doesn't it rather than... And again, that's in the end, we're here to make a great piece of theatre, you know? And so actually, if, if it's framed around, How do you do your best work? that feels like it's just focused on the work? And actually, it's just what you need to know about How To do the best work? That's it? Yeah. And so yeah, it's and what was really interesting, actually was that was some of the non disabled people in the room, who have never been asked their access requirements before, they've never been asked those questions, you know, and they, luckily, I gave them a bit of a heads up to kind of think about it overnight. But you know, I think they found that quite a profound thing, like you say, to be asked for the first time, what do you need? And what will be useful for us to know about you? And so, yeah, it was a it was a kind of a really special thing to have done, actually. And it's something that I now do as standard in kind of all of the room, the rehearsal rooms that I'm in is ask those questions.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

And the production was able to employ disabled people as cast, but also, as creatives involved in the production behind the scenes, is that right?

**Amy Leach**

That is right. Yeah, yeah. So there was kind of representation on and off stage. And that just feels really important that there was a real diversity of thoughts and experience and skills that could then be brought to the table to make sure that yeah, the production was kind of embodying its ethos, on a on on and off stage. Yeah. Yeah.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

And was there ever a point, when you thought it wouldn't be possible to achieve all that you've wanted for this show?

**Amy Leach**

I mean, every day many times saying that it's tempting to put all of those access elements into a production, or live within the production, with the level of creativity that we want to deal with, is a massive task. It's massive. It's huge, and hard work, and kind of minute by minute challenge. And so yes, there were many times when, you know, maybe I wouldn't necessarily let on to anybody else. But you know, my goodness, because also that all of that stuff takes time, working into languages takes time, translating things takes time, you know, thinking about a scene that's entirely BSL and working out? How on earth can you make that accessible to a blind audience takes detail and time. And sometimes you get caught in these access loops, where you know, you'd have solved it for, say, a deaf audience, and then you'd be like, but hang on. Now we need to solve it for blind audience. But now we're back to needing do we now need to then interpret that for it just kind of go round around in circles. So yeah, every day, it felt kind of we were trying to do something quite what yeah, it was a massive mountain to climb, I suppose. But in the end, I suppose there was always a summit and you know, you have to accept that even now having even go you know, obviously, we've been able to revisit the show and add more detail in and it was amazing to get that opportunity to kind of, uh, you know, improve what we done, but I think we could probably work on it for a year and still be finding ways to make it more accessible and more that we could find within the process, but at some point, you just have to go okay, it's open now. We've done it.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

It sounds like, it sounds like it was a huge learning curve for directing Oliver Twist. And I, I wonder if you can sort of - just paint a little picture of - of how steep that learning curve was. And within that, were there any Aha! moments?

**Amy Leach**

I think you're right about that, it could have been, I mean, it was a steep learning curve, I think it could have been steeper, if one thing I was quite aware of was how steep that learning curve was going to be. And so what I tried to do was before doing Oliver Twist, was to kind of start practicing elements and starting to experience elements of the show, but not all at the same time. So actually, my practice has kind of changed quite dramatically over a number of shows leading up to Oliver Twist and beyond it actually, where I started. So I've done, you know, three or four shows, I think now with integrated audio description in different forms, and different ways of trying that. And I've also done another couple of shows with integrated BSL, again, in different ways. So kind of had started practicing. And I think that was good, because it meant that the steep trajectory wasn't quite as steep as it could have been otherwise. Because there's a lot to take on and a lot, yeah, to get your head round. And, of course, in a way, there weren't any aha moments, because almost again, minute to minute, every day, we were learning new things every single day. And everybody was, that's one of the glorious things about all of this work is he's also seen other people go on those journeys. And you know, seeing, for example, some of the deaf actors who are really experienced in loads of accessible work, but I've never actually had to put audio description live into a show so that, you know, they're super experienced, but they're going on that journey, it's been lovely to see some of the actors who had no experience with BSL kind of basically start to be able to communicate in sign language through the course of the production, and actually then in the kind of pandemic gap that we had in it, go off and then start to actually officially learn BSL. So, you know, we've all been on these amazing journeys. And obviously, we as an organization at the Playhouse, at Leeds Playhouse have also been on a collective journey through the process of working up to this and then doing this show as well. And that's about so just so many small changes and small details. So no big aha moments, because it's just a constant, ever evolving journey of learning that, you know, we're still on,

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

And a really bonding experience as well, I would imagine, because, you know, when you're learning anything, you are, by the very nature of learning out of your comfort zone. And so to do that with other people being that outside your comfort zone space, with people in the creation of a piece of theatre must be an incredible experience for you all to share.

**Amy Leach**

Definitely, there's a real sense of family of this show, they all call themselves The Twisters, which is very sweet. And I think that was when, when the production has to be paused for the pandemic, I mean, the heartbreak of that company, because of everything you've just said, really, and, and, you know, people were desperate to share the work we've done and the learning and not to say that we've got it perfect, but actually to kind of inspire and provoke thoughts in other theatre makers and to share it with audiences and stuff. So I think we felt hugely lucky to be able to return to it, and to kind of to be able to film it so that more people can see it. But yeah, it's a real family. There's, so I've never known a company look after each other. And considering how hard it was, I don't think we ever had a moment where somebody got cross or somebody lost their temper, or, I mean, it was just when you think how many weeks we've spent together doing really difficult work. That's quite an extraordinary thing, I think. And I think you're right, it's because of that collective leaping into the unknown and needing to support each other on that journey.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

And sometimes language can be a barrier when discussing accessibility and inclusion and the fear of, of getting it wrong. And yeah, so did you kind of notice that fear of getting it wrong in yourself and colleagues, and language being a tricky thing sometimes?

**Amy Leach**

Yes, we actually tried to kind of address that immediately at the start of the first block of rehearsals in that we did a big activity as a team, which was looking at language, and actually this fantastic kind of task that a brilliant woman called Vicky Ackroyd, who's amazing, works with Totally Inclusive People. She provided this brilliant task and it was just kind of lots of like, words connected to disability, on little pieces of paper, and we had to kind of in teams sort them out, basically and work out you know, what felt appropriate language what didn't feel at all appropriate and what were we sure about? And it wasn't a case of like getting it right or wrong because of course language ever evolves and ever shifts and someone was people feel comfortable with another it doesn't - but actually that the process of doing that was really about creating a space where people could raise if they didn't feel comfortable with the language that was being used and could actually really get their brains in gear about it and take away some of that fear. That actually maybe within those discussions, maybe this language is maybe better to use than others, but also to kind of just create an environment of safe failure, I suppose, where actually like, you know, if you do say something and somebody doesn't like it, it's okay. They'll just point it out. But it's not that you've done something wrong. So I think that was a really good thing just to address it head on straight away. So in a way, I don't think we had an issue with it at all through the process, actually, which is, but I think it Yeah, just really getting in there early doors, I think helps massively.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

And you, you sort of touched on this a little bit earlier. But I'd like to know a bit more about how this experience changed your practice as a director, and I think you said, you've done work before and since but just tell us a bit more about that.

**Amy Leach**

I mean, one of the - I think one of the things that attracts people to being directors is because we're, we're excited or theatremakers, generally theatre artists is that you kind of try to do the impossible all the time, how do I put an entire war on stage? How do I make that character fly? How do I transport that audience to that place, you know, at that time, so that's kind of one of the joyful things is that one of the scary things, but also one of the joyful things about being a director is is trying to do the impossible. And for me, what I've loved about this is that, you know, it's, again, it's another set of creative challenges to try and figure out like, and big and you know, if we truly think that work should be accessible and inclusive of everybody will, how do we actually practically crack on and do that and make it a creative thing, rather than like we said before, that kind of add-on? So yeah, it has changed my practice. And I think in a way, it's become quite addictive, because now I just can't - I suppose it shifted my head, I can't think of a show without thinking: What might be the kind of creative access layers in this? and, you know, Who might these characters be? And if they're a disabled character, or Deaf character, what does that mean for the story, and you know, really kind of, you know, and some of that is just because, like, on a really basic level, well, I've got friends who are deaf and disabled, and I want them to be able to come and see the work. And of course, you know, I've got more disabled friends since doing this work. And that grows daily because of it. So actually, I want them to be able to come and see the work that I make. So it's become kind of like a personal need, I suppose, as well. But yeah, now I can't really think about making work without thinking about access. Yeah. And wondering, what else can we try? What else can we find and discover, which is really exciting...

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

It sounds as if this is really enriched your practice. I wonder, why do you think more productions more directors don't embed access in the way that you have with Oliver Twist? Is it? Is it money? Is it time? Is it habit or something else, perhaps?

**Amy Leach**

I think it's so many different things. And I think time and money are definitely part of it. And they can be real barriers to be able to do the work. But not always. I think there are kind of creative solutions to it to kind of the, the money and time side of things. But I think we're not used to it, I think is one thing, it's not been around for very long. You know, obviously it has this been amazing, the Graeae’s of this world who have done this work for donkey's years brilliantly, but I think there's maybe been that sense of like, the people haven't just had it in their consciousness to do it. But importantly, to think of it as a creative tool. And that's, I think, where this real shift has to happen, it's kind of shifting away from this notion that it's something that you add on, you know, and that is a pain, in some ways to add on for whatever reason, but actually thinking about it as a true creative layer. So in some ways, in a way that maybe like 10 years ago, we weren't, there weren’t loads of movement directors in the industry. And now it's like, well, pretty much every show has a movement director. Well, hopefully, as this builds, it will just become standard that there are access consultants and access directors as part of shows, you know, and that just becomes standard. What have really noticed is how many people have reached out directors, this makers to talk to me about the process of Oliver Twist since making it and particularly kind of the young generation are kind of hungry and really alive to this. So I think that's quite interesting. I think there is a massive shift happening. And what I'm always trying, quite consciously to say like, but also please talk to deaf and disabled people about this because I don't identify as disabled myself. And so I can obviously kind of say so much, but it's really important that deaf and disabled voice is a part of that creative process. I don't know whether it's kind of Yeah, yeah, I just think it's really important that deaf and disabled voices are kind of at the heart of all of these processes.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

And this production of Oliver Twist stands out for two reasons. Firstly, because of the inclusion of disabled people, not only as audiences but in the creative making process as, as we've just been talking about. And secondly, it stands out because it's an incredibly powerful, beautifully crafted piece of theatre. And I guess that what we might hope for in a truly inclusive future, is that a production like Oliver Twist won't stand out for the first reason, it would only stand out for the second reason, because it's just simply wonderful theatre. How far away do you think we are from that becoming a reality?

**Amy Leach**

Crikey, what a question.(Sorry Amy!) I mean, obviously, yeah, I totally hope that that's that second reason that it stands out, if it stands out, it's hard for me to say that. But that should be the only focus, you know, but how far we are from that being the reality across the industry. I fear quite a way still, but I kind of I'm quite hopeful. So it's like, pains me to say that to be honest. But yeah, I don't know. Really, I think it's a really difficult question to answer. But like I say, one of the things that gives me real hope is the number of early career artists in particular that are so switched on and so desperate to make their work accessible. You know, and that is brilliant, because I think and, you know, just the kind of the growing conversations, the, the more shows that are out there even you just kind of flick through Twitter, and so many more shows, now we've kind of integrated access elements and working with deaf and disabled artists. So it really is shifting. And so you know, hopefully that that ideal of a future will come around soon.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

Yeah, I hope so, too. And, clearly, clearly, things are moving in the right direction, it would be great to accelerate it, wouldn't it so that it happens, happens fast. And so I wonder what what's your next project? Amy? What are you? What are you up to now?

**Amy Leach**

Well, I've got a couple of things on the horizon. One is a big show at the start of next year, which isn't yet announced. I probably can't say what exactly it is. But that's yeah, a big, big show at the start of next year, and then also some R & Ds for some other work. But again, both of those projects have integrated access in them. And yeah, again, kind of trying to continue that learning journey and keep pushing the boundaries of what's possible in terms of audio description, in terms of BSL and captioning. So yeah, so that's, that's on the horizon.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

Okay, that's a bit secret squirrel. All right, we’ll just have to keep your eye on Leeds Playhouse and what you're up to?

**Amy Leach**

Yeah. And I think alongside that, because one of my roles at the Playhouse as Associate Director is obviously not just directing plays. But one of the things I head up is our Furnace Activity program, which is everything we do in terms of artistic development. So a big part of that is also about how do we support artists at various stages of their career. So there's some really exciting projects that we've got on the horizon says particularly support different disabled artists. There's a big project that we're going to be doing with Ramps On the Moon and Sheffield Crucible, in partnership with them, which is a kind of three ‘introduction to’ courses, one for writers, one for directors, one for producers, all aimed at deaf and disabled very early career artists. So that's going to be kind of in the new year. And there's some other projects we've got that are kind of very much focused in terms of supporting deaf and disabled artists. So because you know, I think when going back to your kind of that question about the ideal of the future, the ideal is also that productions like Oliver Twist in the future are directed by deaf and disabled people, you know, and so how we support those artists to work on that massive scale and kind of, you know, with all the experience and skills that that requires, how do we make sure that in the future the people we’re commissioning to adapt the Oliver Twist of the future and direct Oliver Twist in the future are deaf and disabled themselves. So that's feels really important as well. And that's a big part of my remit at the Playhouse.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

And I think it's just worth mentioning that Ramps On the Moon is a project that is made up of a consortium of theatre theatres of which Leeds Playhouse is one and we talked about the Ramps On the Moon project a bit more in an earlier episode, Episode Five, where I spoke to Sarah Holmes, who is Chief Exec of the New Wolsey theatre, who was a founder member of Ramps on the Moon. Yeah, and the Ramps On the Moon project mission is, through the creation of these integrated, accessible performances, is to normalize the presence of deaf and disabled people on and off the stage. So Oliver Twist is one of the productions that has kind of come out of that Ramps on the Moon project, isn't it? (That's correct Yeah, yeah) And sadly, Oliver Twist had to close earlier in it's run because of COVID. And you touched on it earlier, but you've decided to, to make it available online. So can you tell us about that. And how people listening to this podcast can see this show.

**Amy Leach**

So what we were able to do, which is amazing, is to bring the company back together, rehearse the show, retake it, and put it into the theatre, and then film the whole thing. So it's actually we've not done live performances this time around, but we've created a film of it instead. So it's very much a film of the theatre production. But it's been beautifully created by 104 Films, we've worked with and Arc Media. And we've worked with them to kind of film it from lots of many different angles, and to edit together a film of the show. And it looks fantastic. It went live last week, it's available for a month, and you can get tickets via the Leeds Playhouse website. And it's called Oliver Twist At Home. And you can watch it at home. And as with the stage show, it's got captions embedded within the piece so that it's not kind of separate thing that you have to click through for those. And of course, you know, we've been very careful with the sound kind of capturing to make sure all the audio description is there. So yeah, it's there to watch. And it's available till I think the 20th of November. So yeah, hope people enjoy it if they get a chance to have a look

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

Great. And of course it is, in some respects, even more accessible because it's available online. Because, you know, so many, many people disabled and not disabled are a bit anxious about perhaps going into a crowded theatre. So being able to get this online is a bonus really, isn't it? (absolutely!) Thank you. Thank you so much for your time today. Amy. I know how busy you are. It's been a pleasure to speak to you. Very Best of luck with Oliver Twist - on until the 20th- It's a terrific piece of theatre. So I really urge listeners to go and check it out. Thanks, Amy.

**Amy Leach**

Thank you

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

My second guest today is Benjamin Wilson. Ben is a blind actor, director, theatre maker and audio description consultant. For the past four and a half years, he has been the Ramps on the Moon agent for change at Sheffield Theatres, Ben co founded award winning Theatre Company Brickwall Ensemble, and creative audio description company Hear the Picture. His work with Brickwall includes creating and playing the lead roles in productions such as their bold reimagining of *Henry V* and audio drama *Mike on the Mic*. He's also used his experience as a blind theatre maker to act as audio description consultant on a number of shows, including *Road* and *Oliver Twist* at Leeds Playhouse. Thank you so much for agreeing to talk to me today. Ben,

**Ben Wilson**

Thank you very much my absolute pleasure.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

So Ben, you were the audio description consultant on Oliver Twist. Can you tell me what that role involved?

**Ben Wilson**

Yeah, absolutely. So as I said, I fulfill two roles in Oliver Twist, I was in the cast playing Mr. Bumble but also one of the two audio decryption consultants along with my colleague Chloe Clark, and that was essentially is is leading on and working closely with our director Amy Leach, to ensure that the show is not just as accessible as possible to blind and visually impaired audiences. Also, as entertaining and engaging, that's the, that's the thing that I think sometimes access forgets, we've put a lot of effort into making sure that people can understand what's going on and forget to try and engage them and entertain them and tell the story to them. In as exciting and enjoyable way as possible. So yeah, I was sort of in the rehearsal room every day in two capacities, one, you know, trying to work out what I was doing as an actor, but also Yes, supporting everyone in going over every moment in the show, and making sure it was an integrated audio description, and the aural side of storytelling was, was interesting and engaging and exciting and enjoyable, and, and as welcoming to everyone as possible.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

Yeah, so I'm really interested to know, a bit more about what's good audio description, and what's poor audio description, and you kind of hinted that, sometimes it's, it's not always great. So can you just tell me a bit more about that?

**Ben Wilson**

Yeah, absolutely. And I think that's actually a really interesting question, because, I really like that question because it's the idea of being subjective. And there are there can be good, that can be bad, and it's gonna be and everyone's gonna have different opinions, and different thoughts, like every other, you know, artistic endeavor that we that we set out to achieve, you know, everyone's gonna, the, the joy of doing it is that it's subjective, and people are gonna love certain bits, and other people will dislike it, and everyone's got their own opinion. But so often access and audio descriptions specifically isn't treated as an artistic skill set, an artistic art form, it's treated as a, you know, an access, you know, provision or, you know, bolted on afterthought and not given any, and not treated as if it's, you know, a creative element to the show. And so isn't thought of in those terms of being, you know, being assessed artistically. And I suppose that would be my personal thought. So often, when I go to the theatre and listen to audio description, you know, the audio describer’s worked very hard to create a really effective audio description that really does the job of filling in the visual gaps that are missing. And that's wonderful, and really essential, and really important. But it's also really clear that despite all the audio describer’s hard work, no one from the production itself has given any creative thought to how they want the audio description to work, you know, the, the director, the writer, the cast, the producer, the you know, none of those people have, have taken any time or effort to make any artistic or creative choices about the audio description. And so that element of the show feels separate and different and not part of the world and not part of the artistic vision of the show. And there's very few other elements of this, it's never really quite made sense to me that, you know, as somebody who has, you know, has worked as a director, why would you ignore one of the elements of your show? You know, a chunk of your audience, their entire experience of the world of your show has been defined by this one element, and you're not even going to engage with it or have a conversation with the person who's going to do it. You wouldn't do that with any other part of your show. You wouldn't say to the, to the lighting designer, Yeah do whatever you want - see you on press night for a drink. You wouldn't, you wouldn't do that. And so the message that says to me as a blind audience member who requires that audio description is that you don't care as much about my experience of the show, as sighted audience members experience of the show, if you're directing a show and not engaging with your audio description, not thinking about your blind and visually impaired audience, then you're telling us that we don't matter as much to you as, as everyone else. So that would be I think.... a long, rambling way of answering that question is that, for me, good, exciting audio description is when it feels like it's obvious that everyone in the show is taking responsibility and taking charge of what the experience is for a blind or visually impaired audience member as they do for a sighted, hearing non-disabled audience.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

And just to go back to basics, you know, give me give me kind of Audio Description 101: it's somebody that is describing the action on the stage and through some headsets, is that right?

**Ben Wilson**

Traditionally, yeah, that would be the traditional, you know, you know, the way that audience description happens 99 times out of 100 is that you arrive at the theatre, you're given a headset, and from personal experience, the most uncomfortable and painful headset to wear in the world. I would love some work to be done to make those more comfortable and a more pleasant experience to wear and use. And yeah, and then there'll be someone hidden away in the back of the theatre somewhere, maybe in a little booth or upon the tech area, or whatever. And they will be speaking into a microphone that is broadcast to your headset. And before the show, they will describe the set and the props and the costume. And the actors, give you a little intro introduction to what things look like and maybe set up some of the visual elements of the show. And then during the show, they will chip in – they try and time it so that in the silences between dialogue, they will describe the action they see. So that is the sort of traditional way of audio description but, I am very passionate about challenging that traditional normal way of doing things. And I would suggest that there are better ways of approaching it and more interesting and artistic and creative and better ways of providing a high quality experience for a visually impaired audience than that very traditional, very simple.. easy...there are more interesting, exciting ways to approach it. That’s how audio description works.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

And so presumably, you did something more exciting and interesting and creative with Oliver Twist. Can you explain how that worked?

**Ben Wilson**

Sure. Yeah. So I suppose the there are, there are several different ways of doing more creative audio description. And on Oliver Twist, specifically, the choice we made was to get rid of those headsets to get rid of headsets that no one had to - there wasn't an added extra layer of audio description that only the blind and visually impaired people were hearing through those headsets, we got rid of that. And so everyone was just experiencing the same show everyone was getting the same show. And so we, you know, we refer to that as integrated audio description, integrating it into the show. And so how we...there were several tactics and ways of going about that that we used and on Oliver Twist. So there are moments where you can try and integrate into the text so that it makes sense aurally as well as it does visually. So an example I would use is if you've got a scene where someone is shooting another character - say me and you were doing a scene right now and the scene is that you're gonna point a gun at me and shoot me. If that was the scene, the visual moment - I hear a bang of a gun, maybe here's some screams but I have absolutely no idea who shot who, who's done, what's happening. But if you said to me, ‘Ben, if you don't shut up, I'm going to shoot you’. And then I don't shut up. And then I hear the bang. And then I specifically hear that character in pain and someone else goes, ‘Oh, no Ben's been shot’, you've integrated into the text so it makes sense. That was very bad writing, obviously a more talented writer could have written in a more interesting way than that. It makes sense aurally in the text, it's been integrated into the text. So aurally it works as well as it does visually in the way that we are all used to hearing radio plays, for example, but that's, that's just one tactic. Then there are moments where the cast on stage can perform what we would think of as more traditional audio description in Oliver Twist, we had the ‘US’ who were the sort of the chorus, almost like Narrator characters, at times who, so those characters can take charge of audio describing a particular visual sequence. There's a sequence in there, in Oliver Twist, where Oliver walks to London, which is a beautifully performed bit of visual vernacular ( VV) by a wonderful dancer, Brooklyn who played Oliver and they are doing this wonderful visual sequence of telling us the story visually of all of his journey to London, and obviously, that is inaccessible to blind audiences. So the ‘US’ then are replicating that journey, telling and replicating that story through a very poetic, beautifully written bit of bit of narration/ audio description, that fits seamlessly with that, that visual sequence so that's a really good example of the story being really engaging visually, and really engaging aurally, so that if you can engage with both of those elements, great if you're going to engage with one, great, because it's just as.. it works just as well on both of those levels. So it's a treat for all senses. So that if one of those senses, isn't you know, you're only using one of those senses, then it doesn't matter because you've got the others are being treated and spoiled and told the story. And then there's also the added element then of sound design and music as well, to really make it a pleasure to listen to and really engaging and add an extra layer of gorgeousness; we had a great composer, Oliver Vibrans, and great songs that sound designer, John Biddle working on Oliver Twist and both of them did a brilliant job of making it a real treat to listen to the show and make it a really enjoyable, engaging experience. But then there are other moments when you can try and be more prescriptive. And can we tell the story, the visual story through music, through that sound design? Can we use sound effects and noise and, and music and all of those things to tell the story that's happening visually and replicate that story aurally.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

Amy described what a powerful learning experience it was for her to direct that show. How much of a learning curve was it for you?

**Ben Wilson**

Definitely, I think whenever you're tackling a piece of theatre of that scale, though, you know, big big stage, big cast, big company, big, you know, beautiful design, whenever you, I think there's always challenges to overcome. And when you're engaging with creative access, as well, when you throw those elements into the mix, there are other more exciting, creative elements to wrestle with, there are always going to be challenges and new things to discover a new ideas to play with. And with that, you know, some exciting learning will come and I definitely, on Oliver Twist, the fact that we were really we weren't having audio description hidden away on headsets. And we weren't having BSL interpretation sort of separate off over on the side of the stage or anything like that. The fact that we were trying to make this really gorgeous, engaging, multi layered story that works on all those different layers for all these different audiences. For me, you know, the chance to work with brilliant deaf artists and actors and creatives who are taking charge and then leading us through the experience of making it accessible for Deaf audiences, is always a pleasure and always a joy. And really, and saying we've learned disabled members of the cast, working with them to make sure that the process was accessible for them. And I've just, I really, really enjoyed learning and engaging with all those different access elements to make sure that this show worked for everyone and was a really warm welcome experience for everyone. And likewise, being given the opportunity to chip in and lead on the blind and visually impaired elements of the access is was a pleasure as well- how those elements when they feed together and work seamlessly together and really support each other. And then when occasionally those elements clash slightly. And if you've made a beautiful scene that is entirely performed in BSL and silent is brilliant and really accessible to deaf audiences right now. How do we make that that scene also accessible to blind and visually impaired audiences? That can be a bit of a challenge, but I really what was so inspiring about working on Oliver Twist was that everyone was really passionate and engaged and excited about taking responsibility and taking charge. We didn't think of it as Oh no, we've got this awkward problem to solve and making it accessible. We've got - no it was: we've got this exciting, amazing, engaging, artistic challenge of making this brilliant, wonderful show that works for everyone.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

Yes. And Amy also spoke with passion about the team at Oliver Twist. And did you feel at the time that there was a sense of something really special happening?

**Ben Wilson**

I think so. Yeah, I think it's, for me personally, my career I've so often been, I've been the token disabled person in the room, you know, trying to make change or trying to, or just because that's you know, the lack of diversity our industry you know, it's, it's you are just the only one who's in the room so often and it's it's always a special experience when you can be in a group of people, be part of a community.... There's a line in the front page of the Oliver Twist script that Bryony Lavery wrote for us there, in the stage direction, that says that everyone in the ‘US’ , everyone in the company takes responsibility for telling the story to everyone, to interpreting, describing; you're telling the story on all these different levels. And I think also that spread out into the culture of us as a company as well as a cast and creative team and crew. In that we really did, whether we were in the rehearsal room, or on the stage, or in the pub over the road, whatever it might be, as a group of colleagues and friends, we really took responsibility, there was a real culture of supporting each other and taking responsibility for each other's access and each other's experience and it became a real, yeah, such a warm, supportive environment to work in that it's just such, such a thrill and such a joy. And it's sort of reinvigorated me to be like - I need to find more spaces and more people in places like that and more rehearsal rooms and processes that are as warm and welcoming and accessible as that one. So it also brings into sharp focus the other parts of the industry and other parts of our working lives that aren't that and remind us that we shouldn't have to put up with all that nonsense.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

Yeah, I mean, you've been working in theatre for many years, haven't you? And I'm interested to know what are the kinds of barriers that you've regularly come across?

**Ben Wilson**

The biggest challenge is engaging people getting into acknowledge the barriers and acknowledge that things are slightly tricky and slightly difficult, and, and all that sort of thing. And once they're aware of and made aware, and had their eyes open to this stuff, it's like, oh, yeah, of course, let's crack on and start working and make these changes happen. But I think sometimes the biggest challenge is that first one, the first hurdle of getting people engaged and getting people to acknowledge that things need to change and that the current world has its problems that need changing. And as soon as people in my experience, often most people, as soon as they're made aware of the barriers and the challenges and the things that aren't ideal at the moment, they are more than happy to engage and work hard to make those changes happen. It's just Yeah, it's that first hurdle, getting people engaged in the conversation and in the room, and all that sort of stuff. That's the one that's often the biggest, the biggest one.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

I'm always interested in language, how it's used, and the power it can wield. And I think people are sometimes unsure about what language to use when talking about disability and inclusion. And I think what you were just saying about the first hurdle is getting people engaged. So if languages or nervousness about language is a kind of barrier to that initial engagement, how do you think we can get over that?

**Ben Wilson**

Yeah, you're absolutely right. Because language is a very important thing. And we work in it, we work in the arts, we work theatre. We passionately believe in the power of words, and the power of stories and the power of power of language and all that sort of thing. And, you know, and also it can be a very personal thing. And I know from my own experience, that when I first lost my sight at first, I didn't really understand the world of disability, the world of disabled politics, the world of disabled narratives and the disabled community. I didn't, I didn't really get it, and I felt uncomfortable about, oh, do I want to describe myself as being disabled? What am I, what am I describing myself as there? Because I was very much stuck in the world of what we think of as the Medical Model of Disability. Where that definition of disability defines disabled people, as you know, that there's something medically different about them, that means their life is more difficult. So I know if I was thinking about disability in those terms, I was like, No, I don't want to think of myself as being less or broken, or because that's not how I feel. That's not who I am. But then as soon as I learn about the Social Model of Disability, which says that disabled people, we're not disabled by our bodies, but by our environment and by society. So as a blind person, I'm not disabled because I can't see, I'm disabled because the world is built on the assumption that everyone can see. And therefore that disables us as blind, visually impaired people and makes life more challenging. And as soon as I learned about that, I was like, Yeah, I'm more now I'm really proud to wear that badge of ‘I am a disabled person’. Because when I say that now, that feels like I'm saying to the world, you are disabling me. You are making my life more difficult. You are discriminating against me. And that feels like a really cool punk rock revolutionary thing to say a really great badge to wear with pride that yeah, I am a disabled person I wear that I now wear that badge with pride. But yeah, so to answer your question, yeah, I think it can be a personal thing. But also the worst thing that anyone could ever do, in my opinion - and this happens all the time in the industry - is doing nothing because they're scared of getting it wrong. And I think that is such a common thing when it comes to tackling access and talking about disability and accessibility and inclusion and diversity more broadly is that people are so scared of saying the wrong thing or doing the wrong thing that we'll just do nothing. And that means that nothing changes, everything stays the same, we stay excluded, we stay, you know, not allowed into the avenues of power in this industry and in all corners of society. And I would say to people, don't be scared of, of getting that wrong: be open and honest with people and ask people to have conversations as a disabled person as a blind person. I've never once been offended by someone asking me what language is the most appropriate to use? How would you like to be described? How do you describe yourself? I've never, ever been offended by someone asking those questions in a professional context. I am offended if people presume and make assumptions on my behalf and get it wrong. And if I have said, I like to refer to myself as disabled or blind rather than... you know, something else, and then they continue to get it wrong. I'm offended if they've asked me, engaged me and listened to me and then ignored me. I'm offended if people I don't know put me in a box without consulting me, but I've never ever been offended by being engaged, in people having the conversation. So I say if you are worried about getting things wrong, or getting language wrong, engage with people have conversations with people -ask them - what language should I be using? What language do you prefer to, to associate with and, and use? And actually, we don't always have the answers as well. Like I sort of rotate around using ‘blind’ and ‘visually impaired’ and ‘partially sighted’.

I use all of those terms at different times, depending on the context. And I've not quite settled on one, which of those terms I best prefer for myself, I know that I prefer being referred to as being disabled, rather than having a disability, I don’t like to think of myself as having a disability because that feels very medical model of disability rather than ‘I'm disabled’. I'm being disabled by society in the Social Model sense. But yeah. And again, I would also... that's what I prefer. I don't say that I'm sure there are other disabled people out there who completely disagree with me, and they're happy to say that they have a disability. And that's, that's also great, that's fine. I'm never going to be a disabled person that says, ‘Actually, you're getting it wrong. You're describing yourself in the wrong way’. That seems just stupid as well. I just think the best way of dealing with that stuff is having open, inclusive conversations with people and just chatting to people asking them and listening to them, and being led by each person and that sort of thing.

And also there are...people often worry about language, you know, I often talked to people who work in theatre, who maybe work front of house, or work in box office, and they’ve asked me like, ‘Oh, if... you know, a disabled person comes into the building, how should I refer to them? How should I say....?’ What's the language they use to describe them? And I often say they're a person first and foremost. Actually, there are very few contexts where...in most contexts you don't need to use any other language. You don't need to say,’ this person using a wheelchair has entered the building’ you can just say, ‘Oh, we've got a person here to see you for a meeting’. You don't need to say, ‘Oh, there's a person in a wheelchair, they’ve come to see you for a meeting’ or ‘ There’s a blind person here to see you for a meeting’. First and foremost.. Yes I'm a disabled person.. Yes, I'm a blind person....But first of all, I'm Ben. More than anything else. Yes, including people in these conversations. But actually, people worry about language more than they should. I think sometimes, it can be important, that's the sort of the decoration and actually what matters more than the language is the context of, of what we're saying and the actions that we're putting into action rather than how we're talking about it.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

Have you found yourself siloed as a disabled actor? And if so, how much of a problem is that across the industry do you think?

**Ben Wilson**

I think it's a really interesting point, because there needs to be a mix, I think there needs to be platforms, specifically for disabled voices. There needs to be the procedures that are - this is a moment that, we are going to proudly give a platform for disabled voices and disabled stories. And that type of thing is really, really useful, having a specific place that is for us and for our community, to discuss our, our stories and our issues can be really, really useful, but also that if that is the only place in the industry where we are allowed, that feels wrong as well. So there also needs to be more diversity in terms of inclusion in terms of mainstream programs, and it's just...we naturally fit into and being a part of the everyday life of the industry in the everyday life of mainstream work. That is really, really important. Definitely. I want to be able to, I want as an audience member, I want the opportunity to go to the theatre, and specifically see disabled stories by disabled people. Also I want to go to the theatre and see a show and it just happens to have a disabled actor in as part of the cast as well as a wonderfully diverse cast in every other aspect and element as well. I want both of those things to be able to happen. And also specifically for me, as an artist I want, I often feel, you know, I always fight against putting being put in a box and being pigeon holed about who I am and what I do. I'm one of those awkward people in the industry, who wears lots of different hats, and does lots of different things. And I take great pride in that. I’m very passionate, very, very passionate, as we've discussed in this in this conversation, around audio description and creative audio description. And that is becoming more and more part of the work that I do. And I always want that to be the case, I always want to be doing more exciting and wonderful and artistic and engaging things, with audio description to be a part of a key central part and of my working life.

But also I feel on the other hand, the sort of, the other side of that coin is, I feel very passionate and uncomfortable - I feel very anxious - about the industry, putting me in a box of saying he's the blind guy. So he can only talk about audio description, that's where he's allowed to have an influence on the industry. That feels very wrong as well. Although I very passionately want to be an industry leader, when it comes to audio description and creative audio description, I feel very uncomfortable about only being allowed to play with that particular tool, because that's the one that specifically relates to my community. You know, I also feel like we as disabled people have things to say, and not just about disability. We also deserve to be artistic leaders, when it comes to writing, directing and producing acting, everything - in stage management - whatever it might be, we shouldn't just be put in the box and allowed out to play when it comes to specifically discussing disability. You know, we also should be allowed to discuss, you know, the best new work, new writing and the best of the classics and whatever else it might be. We also deserve to be given a platform as actors and writers and directors and makers and producers and all of those things in our own right - on a mainstream stage or mainstream platform, regardless of you know our identity as disabled people.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

So what do you think funders and investors in the arts, particularly those that subsidise theatre can do to improve access and inclusion?

**Ben Wilson**

I think we are in this industry, we are very, very good at talking about this stuff. And we are less good just cracking on and doing it. And all of my favourite experiences have been times when people have just stopped talking about it and gone, ‘Right, let's just let's just do it. Let's just give it a go and see what happens’. And, you know, I think actually, I think Ramps on the Moon is a very good example of that. The six Ramps on the Moon theatres... I think Ramps on the Moon isn't six theatres in the industry saying, ‘Oh, we are really great at this stuff’. It's not that at all, it’s six theatres saying ‘we want to get better at this, this is a great way of us just doing that. We're going to..we're committing to making the shows and doing this work. And that's going to force our hand into putting our money where our mouth is, and just cracking on and doing it’. And also the work that I've done with Amy Leach, over last few years...I've had so many conversations with directors over the years about audio description, and why it needs to be better and how it needs to improve and how it needs to be creative. And so many of them smile and nod and go ‘ hmmm yeah, that's really interesting. I agree, we’ll think about that. That's really interesting’. And Amy is one of the few examples of people who listened, did the smiling and nodding going, ‘oh, yeah, I agree’. And then a week later called me and went ‘Right - what are we going to do about it? Here’s a show, we're going to crack on and do something with it.’

And so that's what I'd like to start, the sort of people and the sort of projects I'd like to see, given more, you know, given funding given opportunity, given mainstream platforms. It’s people stopping talking about stuff and cracking on us and saying, ‘Right, we're going to give this a go, we're going to be set ourselves bold, ambitious targets with creative access, we're going to crack on and give mainstream platforms to disabled voices. We're not going to talk about Oh how are we going to do it. We're gonna stop talking about it, we're going to do it. We're just going to put the words into action and make these things happen’. I think there's two sides to that, I think there's one - we need more of the best non disabled artists in mainstream and major positions of influence to crack on and start working with more disabled artists and to engage more with creative access. But also, where are the deaf and disabled voices given a mainstream platform to do that themselves? I love being able to consult on people's work and make their work more accessible. But also there needs to be a point where we stop consulting, and you know, stop sharing our knowledge and get to put our skills into action ourselves as well. And see, they're the two things I'd like to see more of what because also, we spend a lot of our lives you know - the people in positions of influence, the senior management teams of major theatres, and all that sort of stuff - there are brilliant people in those roles around the country who are really engaged in improving that stuff. But actually, when do we get to a point when we say well one - we need more diversity in those groups of people, where are the disabled people in those positions of power? Where are the -you know- where are the disabled people with mainstream platforms to make this change happen themselves? But also, I'd love us to get to a point in the industry where we stop saying we need the senior management teams and the artistic directors and the chief executives and the senior producers and all these people in positions of influence in our buildings - we are at the moment, we're at a point where we need to support these people to get better at Creative access or to get better, and we need to work with them to become more engaged and educate them about how to get better, I want us to get to a point in industry where we say, right, actually, this is one of the essential criteria of getting a job like that- is that you need to have a deep understanding of these issues and of whether that's from personal experience, or whether being an ally from outside. Actually, I think we need to get to a point where one of the basic criteria of being an artistic director of a major theatre in this country is - one of the skills you need to have is creative access, and is a knowledge of the deaf and disabled politics and deaf and disabled culture within the theatre industry. Rather than us trying to engage and educate the people in these positions of power, let's put the people in those positions of power, who are already engaged and already have those skills and that knowledge and that passion, and that drive.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

Some theatre-goers have traditionally been put off going to see a show that's labeled as accessible. They'll pick another performance if they can - why do you think that is? And do you think that's true? That’s what I've been told by people who run theatres - traditionally audiences avoid a show that's labeled as accessible.

**Ben Wilson**

I think there is some data about that. I think there's two elements, two elements to that. One, I think is we need education, because then that's just purely coming from a place of ignorance that, you know, that access performance isn't for you. People might presume that, oh, that performance is specifically for that group or not for me, or people might -like you said - might think it might spoil the, the experience for them if it's being BSL interpreted or captioned, or audio described or whatever, or a relaxed performance, or whatever it might be. And in my experience, that is just simply not true. And so it's just we need to educate people, we need to spread the word and change that perception and challenge our perception. And the second one is that I think, again, I think creative access is the solution to this as well, in that, actually, if the.... because the boring traditional ways of doing access - you're having an interpreter stood on the corner of the stage, in all black in a spotlight on the side of the stage, separate from the rest of the action, having a big sort of slightly ugly looking caption screen on the set somewhere and having this sort of traditional audio description in the very dry and traditional and uncreative manner. You know, actually, how damning is it about the provision that we provide for deaf and disabled audiences that those elements can spoil the experience for everyone else? And yet if something that spoils the artistic experience of watching a show for someone is what I need to engage with the show the answer isn't to hide away the element that is spoiling the show for people because people need that element, the answer is to make the element better, and make it more engaging and enjoyable and wonderful and artistic and engaging. I think we put so much work and energy into in our industry into hiding away access so that it doesn't spoil the artistic experience of non disabled audiences. Why can't we use that energy to instead make the experience wonderful for everyone – disabled or non-disabled, deaf or hearing, blind or sighted? Why don't we just Yeah, It blows my mind that people's priorities sometimes seem to be so to be so wrong. So there are two elements: one, let's educate people, let's spread the word out and make it clear to people that know these elements won’t spoil your experience. But also, let's make sure those elements are as creatively integrated into the performance as possible, as artistic as possible, as joyous as possible so that it is a joy for everyone. So it's just a key central part of the artistic vision of the show. And also, we want to get to a point in the industry where we don't just have one audio described performance, one BSL interpreted performance, one captioned performance, during the run of the show. We want to get to a point where we say, we're seeing more shows that has those elements integrated into the show for every performance and so then it won't matter will it? Then it doesn't matter... all those problems disappear and go away. And also, quite frankly, as a disabled person, if putting on accessible performances is putting off non-disabled audiences, then oh, boohoo sorry! You know, we are excluded from 99% of all theatre and film and television and music and drama and arts and all of these things. So if there's one performance during a run that's excluding you in some way - even though I don't believe it’s excluding you - that might be slightly uncomfortable for you, then Oh! That must be really difficult for you. Bloomin’ eck! No, the rest of us living every day, every second of every day of our lives.. like come on, pull yourself together grow up and, and get on with it. I find it very hard to have any sympathy for people who are experiencing a barrier for five minutes in their lives when those of us who face barriers all day every day just have to shut up and make do with the sort of the bare minimum.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

And Oliver Twist is a great example of how an accessible show is a show that even more people can enjoy it's not ... it’s taken all those elements of making it accessible and created a wonderful show that actually everyone can enjoy without barriers..

**Ben Wilson**

I think that's the thing is- that artists want...when I lost my sight and started becoming more engaged with all these accessible stuff, all of a sudden I was like – I had my eyes opened to all these wonderful new weapons in my arsenal, you know, tools in my toolbox. It’s an arsenal I've been ignoring previously. Why have I ignored all this stuff? It's so exciting. From an audience point of view, it's - you're right with Oliver Twist – it’s making the show really engaging, and entertaining and enjoyable aurally really doesn't just, you know, serve blind and visually impaired audiences, it serves every audience who can hear that. Making the show really engaging and vibrant and exciting visually for deaf audience doesn't, you know, it also makes it a more wonderful, enjoyable experience for everyone who can see those visual elements. I think these creative layers to your show isn't a burden that weakens the show for non disabled audiences. It adds extra, these extra exciting and vibrant layers that makes your show more enjoyable, more exciting, more wonderful to everyone who's experiencing it.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

What's not to like about that? What are you working on next?

**Ben Wilson**

Well, I've very excitedly announced this week in my role - so one of the central parts of my role is as Agent for Change in Sheffield theatres – a Ramps on the Moon Agent for Change at Sheffield Theatres And its Sheffield Theatres’ turn next to make the Ramps on Moon show. So it was announced this week, that's gonna be Much Ado About Nothing directed by our artistic director, Rob Hasty. That's one of the things that will be the focal point of my year next year, my 2022....supporting the building, getting ready to make that show, to make that show happen and make sure everyone is engaged and excited and ready for the really amazing possibilities that making a Ramps on The Moon show can do. And yeah, I've got some very, lots of exciting things, a couple of things that I'm working on that, you know, typically I’m not allowed to talk about yet - because we all like to keep things secret in this industry – but yeah, continuing working as both audio description consultant on some brilliantly exciting shows, continuing work as an actor and continuing to try and develop as a director as well. They're my exciting plans for the next few years of my career.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

Well, I can't wait to see Much Ado About Nothing. When is that going to be presented - towards the end of next year?

**Ben Wilson**

Yes, it's Autumn 2022. It will be touring around all the Ramps on the Moon partner venues

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

Ben, thank you so much for joining me today. I've loved talking with you. I've learned a lot and I can't wait to see Oliver Twist. It's available online from Leeds Playhouse until November the 20th. And, and perhaps beyond that, who knows? It seems a shame to end it there on the 20th. It would be nice if it had a longer life.

**Ben Wilson**

Absolutely. That sounds wonderful to me. I would love as many people as possible to watch that show because we're all extremely proud of it.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

Well, thank you again, Ben. I hope you have a great rest of the day.

**Ben Wilson**

Thank you very much. You too.

**Sue Lawther-Brown**

Thank you so much for joining me in Dressing Room three of the New Wolsey theatre.

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**END**