

**Such Stuff podcast**  
**Season 3, Episode 5: Mirrors and Windows**

[Music plays]

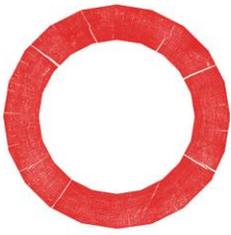
**Imogen Greenberg:** Hello and welcome to another episode of Such Stuff, the podcast from Shakespeare's Globe.

This week on the podcast, we'll be talking about disability and performance. We've recently held a number of workshops and events here at the Globe, – some public and some backstage research and development –which have looked at the relationship between disability and performance on our stages.

Here's our access manager David Bellwood, on the work he's doing and the sorts of questions he's been asking.

**David Bellwood:** My name is David Bellwood and I'm the Access Manager at Shakespeare's Globe which fundamentally means that I am responsible for assuring that the requirements and needs of deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people are met. And those people could be interacting with us at any level, so they might be patrons or volunteers or staff or performers.

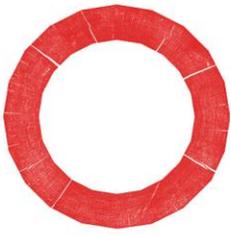
Of late we've been running a series of very different workshops. Lots of them have different aims, but for me and our work here I think what's most important is finding out what barriers exist in our structures, in our work practices and how that has detrimentally affected people from engaging with our work or potentially stopped people from engaging with our work. We recently ran a workshop with a group of visually impaired actors and sighted actors and stand-up comedians about their relationship to certain Shakespeare texts.



We run workshops for deafblind people, for dyslexic people, and we host a lot of sharing so we recently had work in house around dyslexia. We recently hosted workshops on dementia and how we can better provide for people living with dementia even though their contact with us is obviously quite transient.

We live in quite a hostile society toward otherness a lot of the time, and I think that is especially true for disabled people. And there are lots of strata to that, you know politically its very hostile, it can be socially hostile, it could be geographically or architecturally hostile. And the Globe interestingly, for me at least, and what really keeps me going, or at least what I find most interesting is we're built on terms of democracy. Our stage is a clear blank stage, our spaces are open to the elements and everyone is inside them together and their senses feed into how the play is made. Their senses and their reactions create the play as much as anything else. So it's important for us to have as many different people inside the democracy of our spaces to create the strongest performances. It's very easy in other theatres to pretend there isn't an audience. But here it's a lot more, it's not even interactive it's intersensory, it's a combination of all of the lived experiences both onstage and offstage together working through imaginative forces to create that play.

It's also important that we allow everyone to understand that Shakespeare is for them, that Shakespeare is jointly owned by everyone who decides to engage with him and his works because sometimes systems can let people get the wrong impression, especially educational systems. And educational systems for deaf and disabled people can tell them that Shakespeare isn't for them, it can be a very loud clear message, so part of the Globe's work is obviously to rectify that mistake.



Recently I've been reading an essay by J. R. R. Tolkien and he has sort of a dig at Shakespeare at being a bad fabulist, so he says 'oh the problem with Shakespeare is that he comes up with witches but of course you put them onstage and then the witches don't work'. And I think J. R. R. Tolkien could've done to come and see a play here because Shakespeare's fabulism and Shakespeare's storytelling aren't those literal plays, a disabled actor, a deaf actor can take any of the roles and choose whether or not to use the lens of lived experience to manifest that role, and that's a great, that's a gift to any actor. It's a gift to say yes you can inject your life into what this character's going through, or yes you can put on the clothes of someone entirely different and reassess things. That's an incredible gift. And that gap between literalism and imaginative work is really where any of us as humans I think can find space for ourselves.

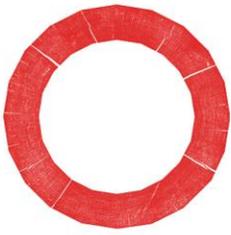
**IG:** So this week on the podcast we'll catch up with some of the people we met through these workshops.

We look at disability in relation to the characters and parts that we see – or often, don't see, on our stages.

We'll be asking how we increase representation on our stages, and the changes we need to make for that to be possible.

We look at the relationship between Shakespeare and disability, and ask whether the way in which Shakespeare is written and performed might be more or less accessible than other forms of drama.

And – an idea proposed by the wonderful Jessi Parrott, who'll be joining us later – we talk about theatre as either a mirror – to see



yourself in – or a window, in which to see the world through someone else’s perspective.

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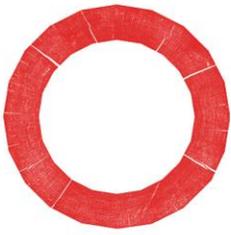
**IG:** So, we chat to performers Nadia Albina, Jessi Parrott and Dougie Walker about the parts – Shakespearean or otherwise – that they’ve played, how disability has and hasn’t informed those performances and what it’s like to perform and participate in an industry whose structures are designed for those with different experiences to them.

First up, Nadia Albina. Nadia has been in a number of productions here at the Globe, and is also active in the industry in working to improve access and the structures which limit certain performers. David chatted to her about the barriers in the industry beginning with training and the changes she’s seen in the last few years. Here's Nadia.

**Nadia Albina:** Hello I'm Nadia Albina and I'm an actress and I've worked at Shakespeare's Globe very luckily on Emilia and Macbeth and Othello.

**DB:** Now something we talk a lot about at Shakespeare's Globe is the transformative power of Shakespeare, you know has Shakespeare ever really influenced something in your life, or changed your outlook on?

**NA:** Yeah I think the way in which he writes and the stories he tells I go back to again and again and again, only because I feel like of all of the ways in which he puts words together they capture the human condition more than anyone. And there are soliloquies and



scenes where the writing is just so amazing that you can't really capture it in a feeling, it's just, there are no words for what he does I think. For me the magic at the Globe is about connection and it is about looking at the audience, and it is about communicating a story- and that's where those two things happen the best. I think Shakespeare's words and his language, it's just it's an amazing place to be, and it's because it's inclusive. There's a , there's a celebration in that circle, in that O, and it kind of makes everyone feel that they're on the same page, that the hierarchy somehow isn't the same as in another theatre. I think that makes everyone feel equal.

**DB:** I think that's a really, it's such a potent thing to have...

**NA:** Yeah

**DB:** ...as a space, and as an ethos, I think for that sort of inclusion.

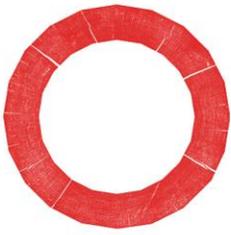
**NA:** It's visible, you know you meet in the daylight, you see everybody in the daylight. Nobody's in a box or, you know, everybody's there together and I think that really does make a difference to how you receive something. Especially, especially if you're intimidated by it.

**DB:** I think there are a couple of points that would be useful to eek out. One's about visibility actually...

**NA:** Yeah

**DB:** ...because obviously you've worked a lot in representation...

**NA:** Yeah



**DB:** Which is tied into disability so much because of your work for The Act for Change.

**NA:** Yes, yeah. The Act for Change has such a kind of short but effective life and I think when it started it was just my frustrations anyway for being in this industry for 15 years, constantly hitting my head against a brick wall by going you're not going to be seen because of your arm. I should explain that I have my right arm that finishes at the elbow, I was born without my right forearm. And I just got more and more frustrated, and the places where I thought I wouldn't find any kind of difficulties was Shakespeare because there was no, there's no kind of limits of what you can do especially you know now. And I got told time and time again that there are no parts- and I was like but there must be, there must be- and I think it really does make a difference standing on that stage as a disabled actor makes people see that change is possible and also that people can be represented on stage if you look like me or if you look different, and I think that's really, really powerful.

**DB:** And I guess Shakespeare seldom has any characters say 'look at both my arms simultaneously'

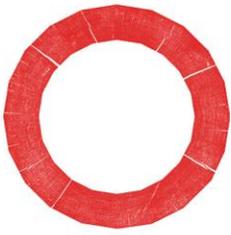
**NA:** Yeah nobody says that

**DB:** No one says that

**NA:** No one in life says that

**DB:** [laughs]

**NA:** So why should it matter? And I think that's become more and more part of the industry is that it shouldn't matter, and it doesn't

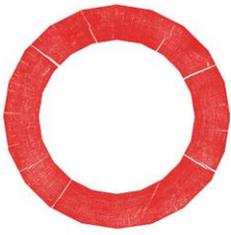


matter, you should be up there for merit alone. And also why not represent the society that we live in. I mean he did. You know when you look at how it's structured the Globe and you know the groundlings and all of that, it's all speaking to everybody so why can't we have more people onstage that look different.

**DB:** And you think the whole industry, the whole theatre industry is changing?

**NA:** Yeah I think it is, I think I've seen massive changes in the five years since we've been around Act for Change. And also just in my, and in the conversations I've had I think people are much more open to having those conversations and feeling uncomfortable, and pushing themselves to change the way in which things are cast. But think not only casting but backstage, how do we improve training for a lighting designer who's in a wheelchair? How do we get access to, you know especially in the Globe, how do we make that work? How do we make that work at places like The National? And I've seen more as I walk around and see more shows, and also see more backstage places when you're working with people that there is a difference, that there are people who look a bit more like me and less, less the same and I think it is changing. We've got loads to do but there are steps forward we just need to make some jumps.

**DB:** Yeah and there's a line which a colleague of mine pointed out from 'All's Well That Ends Well' which talks about unquestioned welcome. That's what we should be, that's how it should be and I was like yes we're not questioning whether or not you belong here, you do belong here because you tap into the human condition and that very thing Shakespeare wrote about.



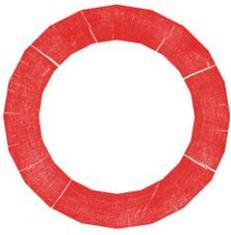
**NA:** That's a beautiful phrase. I think for so long deaf and disabled people and actors have felt unwelcome, and that's a really good way in which to look at it. Just speaking to people who have been turned away from theatres or not go to the theatre because it's not for them because they're not represented or things aren't accessible.

**DB:** So I have a concern that disabled actors sometimes have to be the pioneers for equality so they have to be the pioneers so they've got two jobs on any ... yeah.

**NA:** Yeah tiring. Yeah it is tiring. I definitely feel that. I think there's a huge responsibility because there are, as much as it's changed there is still only a handful of us that you see the same people working. And what my concern is also how do we find more disabled, and deaf and disabled actors? How we find those people? How do you make training accessible? And I think it's such a long process. And there is a, there's two jobs going on. So in rehearsals you're always being the one that has to have the other perspective. So I feel like it is still a, I think it comes with a huge responsibility.

**DB:** I remember us both being in a very different location at a very different meeting where someone was talking about disabled erasure and saying that isn't it nice when disabled people can say 'I don't even think about my disability' and I remember us both reacting quite viscerally.

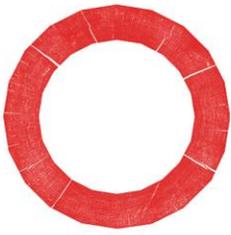
**NA:** Quite strongly, yeah. I think it's, I think that's, I think that's a dangerous place to be because actually we're not in a society which is accepting yet. And also the way in which you describe yourself is actually incredibly empowering and if that's taken away from you then we've lost something quite important to say you know I am



different and this is why I'm different, and this is why you need to think about these things from my point of view because I'm representative of this amount of people and I think that's really important to keep saying it with pride.

**DB:** Yeah and I wonder if its, you know there's an importance in acting as well about knowing who you are and your identity making sure that's firm before you embody other identities.

**NA:** Yeah, yeah. But I think the brilliant thing about acting is that it is you, you are the, you know you are the material it's just finding those parts in a character that you identify with and heightening them. Yeah I just remember someone at drama school saying to me that you'll never be as interesting pretending to be someone else than you already are. You're already vastly complex and endlessly interesting and fascinating so don't try to pretend to be someone else you aren't. And I think that really helped me in terms of I could then incorporate all my own feelings about my disability and I kind of go well actually there is so many rough bits to myself that if I was pretending to be someone else I would have to try and mask the right side of me because it's got some quite ugly feelings towards the world and myself and my relationship to my body, and actually kind of having all of that at your fingertips does enrich the way in which you present a character because there's so much more humanity to it you rather than something quite clean. And that's what I think is more interesting when you see an actor being themselves, as well as being someone else, there's something quite embodied and that's quite exciting because we spend so much of our time reducing ourselves in society by manners or your sexuality or your gender. You know you're so many things you're apologising for I think especially in our culture and actually to kind of have a place where you can go 'no this is me' is quite a privilege. And I



think it's quite empowering for other people, it has been for me. It's such a real privilege in life to be, to allow yourself to be seen and to be seen by other people because- because it validates you as a person and I think that's something that I still feel needs to be really pushed is that people need to see themselves otherwise they feel invisible. And that- that's very painful because you then go through your life feeling like you're not worth it. And to kind of see that reaction literally by putting somebody on a stage in a wheelchair, or who's deaf, or has one arm is so empowering for people to believe that they can then do what they want to do. It's very, it's very simple in those terms, you know, it's a very simple act to do to make people feel like they are- that they have a voice. So yeah.

**DB:** So what would you, if you could change the theatre industry. So let's start with realistic steps...

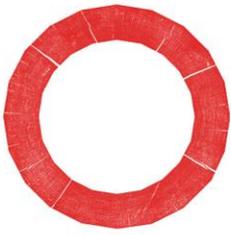
**NA:** Realistic

**DB:** Well yeah, and then we can go into your other steps

**NA:** (Laughs)

**DB:** But if you had the opportunity, I mean would you start training and drama schools

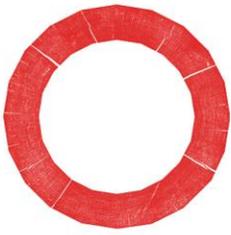
**NA:** I would, yeah, I would really be interested in to see how do you make that building accessible to people. And then how do you change the training, or change an acting class when you have people with different needs. You know those are the things I think we need to look at because then I think more people would apply if they could see that the training was accessible. So training I think would be a very big thing for me because a lot of disabled actors



that I know haven't been formally trained in places that are recognised- institutions you know- and think that's very important for your self-confidence and self-belief.

**DB:** I think it's almost too simple for sometimes for people to say disability as a challenge covers something, and in their imagination- their paltry imaginations- but in their imaginations it's a wheel chair user. That is the default setting for the disabled body. You know from that leaping to a really nuanced discussion about what is, what is disability in an environment which is built by a scene designer, a set designer and is completely manipulated to ensure that you don't face any physical barriers? So where is the, what form of disability are we representing there, and that whole spectrum of dialogue can so easily be reduced.

**NA:** Reduced yeah. You can be much more, I think it's much more creative than people think it is. Like access in particular, like how do you, how do you incorporate audio description into a show? I remember with 'Reasons to be Cheerful' we did, it was all set in a pub and Pickles was on the phone the entire time and it was like he was, you know you he was acting, he was making phone calls but he was audio describing the entire show. And I think if you haven't been open to ways in which access in particular can be creative then it does become very like we've got to make this work for these people on these dates so let's just do this. And actually from the very beginning of a show you can incorporate things that are actually quite magical and creative, and what we all want to do is to make theatre that feels seamless rather than you know there's a, there's something we've done, we've ticked a massive box there congratulations.



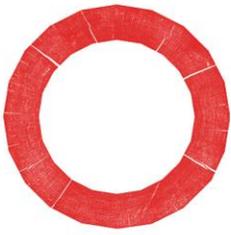
**DB:** And there's a gift in there as well I think to, you know, younger people and disabled people who want to become actors or directors or whatever to say actually your disability is a channel into a huge creative world from which the entire theatre industry could benefit.

**NA:** Yeah it taps into a whole perspective that other people haven't experienced and to put that on a stage or on a TV show or in a film is such a gift. And I think it's that perspective that needed to change because I think the barriers so far have been fear and resistance but actually there are so many more offers on the table when you bring in, when you have in your production team, in your creative team, directing team, acting team, when you have people of difference they are able to put so many more things on the table that they give you another way of looking at something. In the 15 years I've been doing it I've seen really hopeful changes. You know changes that make you cry, hope that you think God this actually possible and people are doing it and it doesn't seem to be a drama. It's just happening and I think that's, that's the most encouraging thing when you see something like that change.

[Music plays]

**IG:** Next up, Dougie Walker. Dougie is a comedian, actor and writer who recently joined us for a research and development day looking at the relationship between visual impairment and comedy in Shakespeare. It centred partly around the character of Old Gobbo in The Merchant of Venice, who is explicitly stated as being visually impaired, a rarity in Shakespeare. Here's Dougie.

**Dougie Walker:** Hello my name's Douglas Walker and I am an actor and a comedian and an improviser.

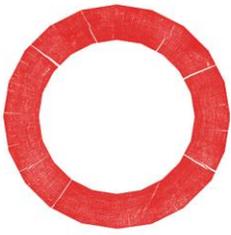


**DB:** So in your acting, I guess an important question for us is your relationship as an actor or a performer or a writer to Shakespeare

**Dougie Walker:** Well until very recently my relationship was really just an audience member and it was only a couple of months ago that I had performed my first ever bit of Shakespeare for a course I did called pathways which is run by Extant, and it was a group of 8 of us all visually impaired performers and we did sort of a series of workshops over a period of about 6 months. How would I describe it? A survey of opportunities or options for actors, so we, we visited a few different sort of drama schools, we tried a few different techniques that we looked at a few different styles of theatre, we did some physical theatre, we did some Shakespeare. And this sort of culminated in this showcase where, yeah, where I ended up doing, I mean I would never have chosen at the beginning of that course to do a Shakespeare monologue, in fact even when we were discussing what pieces we should do for the showcase it was suggested that I do this piece of Shakespeare, and I was like urgh no I don't know if that's what I should do [laughs]

**DB:** Because I think it's, what's interesting as well as Extant as a theatre company have taken on responsibility to open those opportunities up to visually impaired people who might not be able to get classic training or feel drama schools aren't accessible

**DW:** Yeah and it was great in that kind of way like, there's so many different aspects of being an actor or performer of any kind only one of which is the performing. There's a whole other kind of side of it kind of business of it, of you know how do you go about looking for work? How do you go about networking? How do you know, I mean for me yeah being visually impaired the networking that's, that's the biggie that's like. It's not just that networking is not an accessible



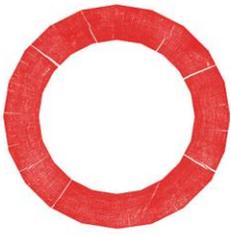
activity for visually impaired people it's that I can't, I can't see how you would make it one you know it's really so much is based on knowing who you're talking to and knowing who you, knowing who you've met before and seeing who's in a room and all these kinds of things and so it was really interesting to kind of bring together this group of performers and talking to some professionals who've been in the industry for a long time and seeing how they go about it. And thinking about like how-how are we going to tackle this aspect of the industry? It sort exists in between professional and personal and there are, there are not clear working practices and all these kinds of things you know so it's really interesting area to try and consider in terms of accessibility.

**DB:** Because one thing an actor starting their career having the confidence to approach that director they met once in a bar, but it's another thing if you aren't even aware that that director is in the bar

**DW:** Yeah absolutely, it's interesting because it's all stuff that is you know the same in your normal life that as a visually impaired person. So I very rarely greet anyone with a great deal of enthusiasm in a situation where I'm not expecting to see them. Someone says 'oh hey Dougie' I generally am not that effusive because I don't know who it is so it's hard to pitch exactly how you know is it someone you know from work, is it you know a very close friend...

**DB:** An ex

**DW:** Is it an ex, absolutely. And so that kind of caution you know years of that it changes, it changes your personality you know so that becomes actually not just a technique, a mechanism, that starts being what you're like as a person. And so that I think transfers



through into the kind of networking thing. The kind of stereotypical love darling air kisses excitement to see one another, it's very difficult, it's very difficult to sort of pull out any sort of version of that when you're used to keeping your cards pretty close to your chest of whether you know who it is you're talking to or not (laughs)

**DB:** What's your relationship to the Globe?

**DW:** Err what's my relationship to the Globe? So a few months ago I was very kindly invited along to what was a reception development sort of workshop. What we were looking at was the comedy surrounding visually impaired characters in Shakespeare and scenes, mainly Merchant of Venice. It was really fascinating there was a really great mix of visually impaired and fully sighted performers, and also a mix of actors and comedians.

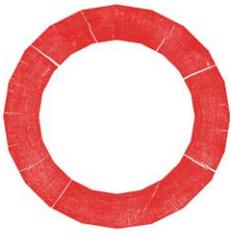
**DB:** Because it remains a really nuanced conversations, especially that, that Old Gobbo scene where it's a character who is, rarely for Shakespeare, written with a characteristic

**DW:** Right yeah

**DB:** You can create so many characters who we all feel we really really know about who are actually very easily manipulated by an actor or director's ideas, whereas Old Gobbo is visually impaired.

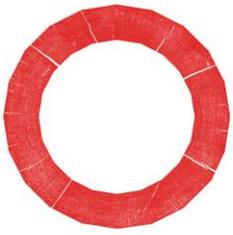
**DW:** Yeah

**DB:** I- I to this day find it a very very uncomfortable scene so it was surprising when more from the comedian's side but correct me if I, if I'm forgetting this incorrectly, but the comedian was saying well actually if you look at it Old Gobbo sort of ends up on top of the comedy structure here.

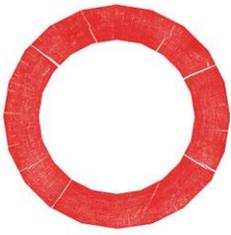


**DW:** Yeah. There are certain things that work comedically which you might nevertheless say, yeah that functions as a joke you know, and it maybe functions very well as a joke because the things you need to make a joke work are in a way quite straight forward. You essentially want to create a misunderstanding and then, or create an ambiguity, and then resolve it in the way that the listener wasn't expecting. And so you can have things that work, that function really well comedically but nevertheless you go ah but you know there's some other reason that we don't want to use this- not that it doesn't work as a piece of comedy but that, you know, it's distasteful to us for a number of, you know, a variety of other reasons. The question of that Old Gobbo scene I think it would be very easy to kind of look at it and say, this sort of making fun of someone because they're, because they're blind, and if it just that then yeah absolutely it's an unpleasant scene and even if the comedy works which is a separate question you might say ah we're not interested. But there's another way of looking at it which is Lancelot has a certain hubris that he, he thinks he's playing a funny joke and then it comes round to bite him and there's a sense in which that could be a very empowering piece of comedy. Where this blind character you can sort of see the way he- someone is making fun of him- and then arguably unwittingly he ends up getting his own back, and maybe he doesn't realise he's getting his own back and maybe that's funnier. I mean there's a sense in which people do make fun of disabled people. To depict that, you know, that's certainly not on the face of it a bad thing, you know you definitely want to depict that and to have a scene where that goes wrong for the person making fun of the disabled person, well that can be quite a cathartic piece of comedy. You have to play it exactly right-

**DB:** -To reflect that notion back to the audience-

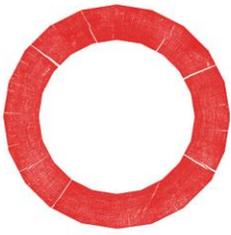


**DW:** -Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm sure there will be far more ways you can play it wrong, and maybe one or two that you could play it right. But I do think it, it would be possible. When these two characters interact in this way you know it would be very possible to read that scene in a vacuum and take that one impression of it but we have to be reading it through a comedy lens so this meant, you know, this is meant to fulfil a certain function so how is it- what do I have to do to my understanding of it to see it in that way and is it possible. You know it could be that, you know the scenes are just so out of context with how society currently is that you can't do that work to see it as comedy anymore. But I think a lot of the time you know there is a way of seeing it as comedy and if I think as a comedian I'm quite keen to you know if you could make it funny, if you could take something that could be upsetting but go no no look it's funny it's ok it's fulfilling a worthwhile function then that I think is valuable and exciting and that's the kind of comedy I want to see. I wouldn't say this is an opinion, I'd say it's a line of enquiry- do you think that people approach things like Shakespeare differently to something modern? Or if you look at things like, something like Catastrophe that I really enjoyed recently and the things that they're talking about are awful, there's bereavement, there's terminal illness, you know there's infidelity, there's alcoholism, there's- there's serious things that are serious in people's lives. But of course that's the fodder that we use for comedy because those are the things we're trying to deal with and understand and you could easily- as a person affected by any of those issues- look at them and go well that thing isn't funny and you sort of say well the comedy isn't there to say that alcoholism is funny, it's comedy has a way of approaching that, and do you think people have lost that sense with Shakespeare? If they kind of look at these things and say well look these are bad things so can we, can we find them funny in Shakespeare?



**DB:** That is a really interesting line of inquiry. I guess you know the function of comedy is a very very big question. In terms of how people approach Shakespeare, I think the big difference is from modern writing has so much literalism in it- often, not always, often- and a case in point would actually be visually impaired, or disabled people, or deaf people taking our roles in Shakespeare where by, with the exception of Old Gobbo that there isn't really that- that signal for many other characters.

**DW:** Yeah. It's interesting to look at any drama actually because you say that apart from Old Gobbo in Shakespeare there's you know, there's very few characters that you would say well that character is visually impaired. That's not different to- to modern work, you know there's very few characters who are written as visually impaired unless you're writing a play about visual impairment, unless you're writing a script about visual impairment. It would be interesting to look at how many scripts, how many stories, how many of the characters that have, that we watch every day for how many is it necessary that they are not visually impaired? Or any other characteristic you want to choose. Hopefully surprisingly- a surprising amount of them could be visually impaired and it just doesn't happen to affect the story. If you look at Friends, any of the six friends could have been visually impaired or could've been, and very few of the episodes would have to change because when visually impaired people live their life their life is not about being visually impaired. So that's, that's an interesting question with a lot of these things, you know if you take a soliloquy, or take a part, am I going to be informed by the fact that I'm visually impaired. It's interesting to know what that would mean to have the part informed by that if you're not going to change what the character says or does, you know how they act



**DB:** Yeah I completely agree, it doesn't, I know yeah. It shouldn't be a primary motivation for the character, it's it's, I think there is a place in the modern cannon for topic theatre-for theatre that is addressing subjects around that

**DW:** Yeah absolutely, yeah yeah

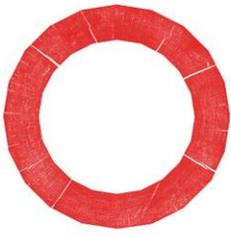
**DB:** But then where's the rest of the space for people who just happen to be visually impaired?

**DW:** Yeah, it would be really interesting. I don't know, I don't know how- what I think about it to have a character in a play or in a show or in a sitcom or something who was visually impaired but it was never really talked about. I sort of think it would be brilliant but it would also, I don't think people would be able to cope with it, you would let them know by there'd be a few points- there'd be a point you know in the play or the episode or something where they have to ask someone to read a sign for them or, and then it wouldn't get mentioned again and the audience I don't think could handle it. It wouldn't occur to people that you would just put a character like that in a play because there are people like that in the world but this play isn't about that, yeah I could go about my daily life most of the time and most people don't know I'm visually impaired and yet things happen to me which are worthy of high drama (laughs) yeah so you know I could be a character in a play who was visually impaired and yet it doesn't really come up.

**DB:** And you do get a chance to perform on the Globe stage

**DW:** Yes

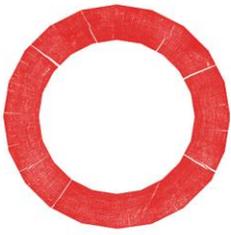
**DB:** So did that, did the space unlock anything for you?



**DW:** We were doing a workshop, you know pick someone in the audience and talk to them. What's interesting about that as a visually impaired performer being onstage is one of the areas where you feel most equal. This environment doesn't require me to have a lot of visual information about what's in front of me because I'm in command of the space around me and I know what I'm doing and saying. But that was all of a sudden a thing that I'm like oh yeah this is something that I- I can't quite do is make eye contact with someone in the audience. So that presents a difficulty that was an interesting thing that was like that feels right for how this should work and yet unfortunately that feels like an area that I can't quite do the same thing as a sighted performer. You know and being visually impaired you spend a lot of your time pretending to make eye contact. I'm sure you could learn the skills to do the same thing of manufacturing that- those tiny movements off the face that make it obvious that you've connected with someone. And you could sort of make that up and would be different element to your performance that you would have to learn but that was something that I was sort of struck by.

**DB:** Did you feel, just is there pressure to act in a way which is the supposed normative?

**DW:** It's an interesting question and I think it kind of maybe goes back to what- what we were saying before about whether being visually impaired informs your character? Whether any part of what you're doing is about visual impairment? There are times when that might not be what you're trying to convey and so it may be a distraction to have that too prominently within your, the way you present something. I mean the truth is just in your normal life as a visually impaired person you're compromising a certain amount. People show me things on their phones, people who know I'm

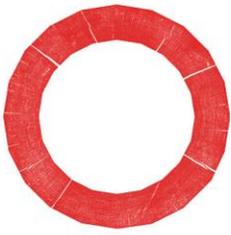


visually impaired, they show me something on their phone and I decide whether to go through the process of telling them that I can't see it or just pretend that I have seen it and you know if it's a picture of their cat or their holiday or their kid sometimes the easiest thing to do is just go 'oh yeah aww' you know. And so you spend a lot of your life making little compromises and deciding shall I- you know you go into a sandwich shop and you order something you know they definitely have rather than getting them to read you out a whole menu, and that's a- that's a choice that you make on each individual occasion. I think there's no reason that wouldn't extend into your work, where there's a choice you make if you go ok I'm going to do some pretending here because actually I'm more interested in getting across something else, you know I'm more interested in other aspects of this scene than what it's like to be a visually impaired actor and how the audience are going to react to that.

[Music plays]

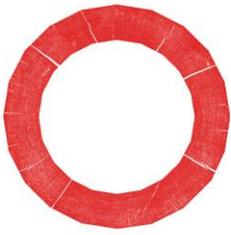
**IG:** Next, Jessi Parrot. Jessi is a writer, actor and PhD student who specializes in disability and the arts industry, and disability and Shakespeare. David chatted to her about how she approached the subject, given modern frames and definitions of disability are so vastly different to those in Shakespeare's day, and how her relationship with Shakespeare has affected her life on and off stage.

**Jessi Parrott:** I'm Jessi Parrott and for anyone for whom it would be useful for because this is a podcast I am a white woman in her mid-twenties and I'm a wheelchair user. And the reason I'm here is I'm an actress and a PHD student working on disability as an employment issue in the arts, but also my undergrad thesis was on disability in Shakespeare so



**DB:** Thank you for coming. Shall we jump straight in and talk about disability in Shakespeare, and I want to talk a little bit, I want you to talk more specifically about models of disability and what frameworks you used to discuss what disability is in Shakespeare

**JP:** Ok so I think a good place to start is that the two most known models of disability are the medical and social models of disability which theoretically function in opposition- in that the medical model is one that situates disability within the body or mind of a particular individual that then relates to the difference that they experience and the onus is then on the individual to adapt accordingly to interact with society, whereas the social model suggests that people are disabled by society rather than by their bodies or their minds and so it's society and attitudes and barriers that need to change. They were both very particularly situated in the civil rights movements of the 1970s and early 80s in the UK, so that doesn't always necessarily work too well when you're working with a playwright who was writing 4 centuries ago. So when working with Shakespeare and indeed any pre twentieth century playwright it's kind of useful to think outside of those models. There are other models that are more useful come Shakespeare set up the embodied ontological perspective, it's kind of combining the lived experience of having a body or mind that works in a different way with the attitudinal and social barriers that people experience. In terms of this conversation it's also probably useful to mention the work of Chris Mounsey who is an eighteenth centrist, who is visually impaired and he works on the concept of variability which is the idea that we are all the same only different. And so my experience of disability on a social level will be the same as his in terms of exclusion but it will also be different because the nature of our individual impairment is different. And that's useful because it's



encompasses the fact that there wasn't a political identity around disability prior to the civil rights movement.

**DB:** There's so much to unpack in just even what a frame of reference to disability is when we think about Shakespeare or performance or for us about our spaces.

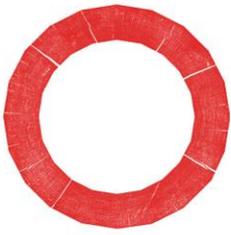
**JP:** It's the Globe and the yard space is one of the only spaces where I can pretty much have the same experience theatrically as any other member of the audience because having the ramp and then being raised up then means that I'm not disadvantaged by people suddenly standing up and being in front of me. But also it means that I'm right in the thick of the interaction with the stage because in some venues we are very specifically placed as wheelchair users so yeah I do wonder if it's something about the particular nature of Shakespeare that then makes it more conducive to accessibility.

**DB:** I think that's a really interesting question, and I think it's certainly true in terms of the plays themselves, and again the mythology of the normative body, this idea you know there's no pressure from Shakespeare in physical or neurological casting.

**JP:** No

**DB:** Absolutely not, because he's not a literal writer you know he's working in an imaginative mode of language and he's asking audiences to do more work.

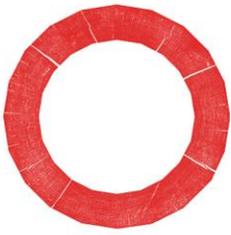
**JP:** And there are very few stage directions as well, so much of the work we have to do is imagining on top of what he's written in terms of the dialogue, so I think that give a lot of scope for different ways



of staging and different ways of moving. Yeah I remember having conversations about my particular soap box which is Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew* because I really read her as having a limp, which is something that's mentioned in the script, and then for me that makes for a really interesting perspective on her relationship to the gender roles at the time. But I mentioned this to somebody once and they said no but her only disability is her gender so that's not not a valid reading at all but I said look it's literally in the script, and they kind of said no no that's you can't make a reading based on a single line in the text, and to me that's what directors do all the time.

**DB:** But also there's- there's a point of erasure in there isn't there were you've been told this limp is not- it's neither relevant nor character defining or-

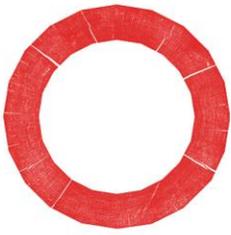
**JP:** Which really fascinated me because actually Petruchio literally says to Kate 'why doth the world report that Kate doth limp' that's something interesting I think about people's general engagement with disability that they tend to feel that people's impairments, at this point if you have a visibly disabled actor onstage then it almost is that is has to be making a point about their presence there rather than it just being something that's just there, like it is in society- disabled people are just there. People, disabled people, people with impairments, especially visible physical impairments tend to perform offstage as well as onstage and so then maybe when we take ownership of that performance people find it quite difficult to comprehend, to tease out, so then I find that interesting because actually if we are performing then that makes us inherently set up well to then take up the stage but we don't seem to be allowed to. And it's interesting because I know that actually if we widen the definition of access a little when you think about it from an



educational level a lot of people might consider that Shakespeare isn't that accessible to them perhaps because of the way it's taught. But actually for me it was certainly Shakespeare that in some ways helped to better articulate my disabled identity in a way that other playwrights that I've actively had to search to find myself in the so called modern dramatic cannon whereas, I mean we've talked about Kate, but also I remember being on the Shakespeare Summer School at RADA and one of the tutors brought me Richard III and I read the play and especially the opening monologue and I had a meltdown on the floor of one of the rehearsal rooms because Shakespeare through him seemed to have this fundamental understanding of what it was like to be disabled in society. I didn't read like I've become the way I am because of my body but it was I've become the way I am because of my response to other peoples responses to me, and in saying that obviously I'm not condoning any of the actions that he then takes from that basis but I did fundamentally understand because I live with a scoliosis and dogs bark at my chair on a regular basis so that was a very very literal experience for me. And to have somebody from 400 years ago articulate that and to do so so succinctly was overwhelming. It showed me that I didn't just have to find stories to tell they were already there and that's really huge. Knowing that you're not the first and you don't necessarily have to be a trailblazer when it comes to either performance or activism or anything it's just really nice to know that people have gone before

**DB:** You know really interesting points and think there's certain amounts of literalism in modern writing which actually presents a barrier

**JP:** Absolutely and I think, I think it's important that we push for that and for new writing to be authentic and to reflect that experience.

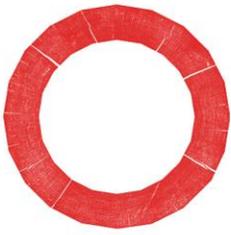


That's actually I don't necessarily always want to be playing my life, at the same time there are other aspects of the world that I want to portray and have the opportunity just to play Viola, just to play Juliet, just to play whoever. And to show that perhaps my presence as a wheelchair user could be an interesting comment on that particular role but actually it doesn't necessarily have to be. I do want people to understand a bit more and the less education that I have to do the better, not that I'm saying that I don't want to educate, I'll happily have conversations with people because I do think that it has to start somewhere and sometimes if I don't then nobody will and I'd rather them understand things than carry on in their ignorance, but educating can get exhausting so I think that the more that we can have different possibilities of having that education- which I think theatre is one of those ways- the better.

**DB:** I totally agree and I think, you know, what better tool is there for exercising our imaginative and empathetic faculties than theatre

**JP:** Absolutely. One of the things that I found useful recently is in the world of children's literature rather than theatre but there's the concept of mirrors and windows around books. And so certain books give people mirrors- so reflect back, so that's kind of the dilemma that we are wanting because we want more representation that reflects, but also then there's a responsibility for plays potentially to be windows that then open up people to other perspectives that do not mirror their own so they can have more understanding of that.

**DB:** I guess so if you, if you extend that metaphor don't you also find that with any window there is a certain amount of reflection?



**JP:** Yes. And I think obviously of course we need to address the fact that it's a very sight centric metaphor. But isn't that an interest point about how then if we represent wider society people will understand that actually we- that experience is not so far off from our own.

[Music plays]

**IG:** That's it from Such Stuff for this week but the work around disability and performance on and off our stages continues.

You can find out more about the projects mentioned, and others, on our website.

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