‘Practice Makes... Disabled-Led Theatre’ Transcript

Tics are identified in italics in this transcript.

[Music]

Madeleine
Welcome to Practice Makes: the Oxford Reimagining Performance Podcast, where we put leading scholars in conversation with actors, directors, and other practitioners to crack open the connections between theatre research and performance in practice. I’m Madeleine Saidenberg

Helen
And I’m Helen Dallas, and we’re PhD students at Oxford.

Madeleine
We’ve worked in theatre, as directors and dramaturgs

Helen
And now, we also ask academic questions about theatre

Madeleine
In today’s episode, we talk with Dr. Hannah Simpson and Jess Thom, also known as Touretteshero. Jess Thom is a performer, comedian and disability activist. After being diagnosed with Tourette’s Syndrome in her early 20s, she established Touretteshero, an alter-ego online platform and all round amazing creative space, in order to increase awareness of the neurological condition. She has been at the forefront of campaigns for relaxed performances in theatres, hoping to make events and performances more accessible to neurodivergent and disabled people. Jess has created and starred in Backstage in Biscuit Land, which won the 2014 Total Feeder award at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. It was adapted for television by BBC Two as was a documentary about the making of her remarkable rendition of Samuel Beckett's play Not I. She also creates and curates works such as Brewing in the Basement at the Barbican and Lamppost, Light of My Life at the South London Gallery, and this year just created Journey to a Better World, an interactive, creative imagining of a world after the COVID-19 pandemic, which grew from Jess's experience shielding for 24 months.

Helen
Dr Hannah Simpson has just completed her tenure as the Rosemary Pountney Junior Research Fellow in European Drama at St Anne's College, Oxford. Her brilliant monograph Samuel Beckett and the Theatre of the Witness: Pain in Post-War Francophone Drama, came out in May of this year and her new book, Samuel Beckett and Disability Performance is coming out hard in its heels. By the time you're listening to this episode, it will be available to read. Her post-doctoral project focuses on the forgotten plays written by much-loved modern novelists such as Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, F Scott Fitzgerald, James Joyce, Elizabeth Bowen and more. She serves as the theatre review editor for the Beckett Circle, and as the theatre and performance reviewer for Oxford University Press's The Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory. She has also been our leader as a founder and convenor of the TORCH Reimagining Performance Network for the last year, doing great things like

hosting events and discussions, and fostering this very podcast. It's so wonderful to have you both here!

Madeleine
We're really excited to see you.

Hannah
It's lovely to be here. Thank you.

Madeleine
So how did the two of you meet or get to know one another's work?

Hannah
Well, I first made contact with Jess back in 2017 on the basis of some research I was doing on relaxed performances in the contemporary British theatre scene, and I knew of Jess's work from from Backstage in Biscuit Land and and your autobiography Jess. And it was a great conversation. And you know, you said wonderful and useful things about relaxed performance and then sort of towards the end of the conversation you dropped in that you were working on Samuel Beckett's Not I! Which I hadn't realised and I sort of went, oh right, hang on, could I get another 45 minutes of your time to talk about this? And then just kept coming back and saying could we, could we talk a little bit more? Could we talk more about that? And Jess, you've of course been very generous with your time. Thank you.

Jess
Biscuit. Well, I feel like, yeah, I think it was, it was really exciting to be able to, to be able to talk to you, Hannah, and to be able to start talking about – I, I'm going to just acknowledge that my cat has arrived *[laughter]* and the minute that we start a conversation, he, he turned up and he's just, he needs to get – So if you could just get yourself comfortable, cat, that would be great!

Helen
It's OK, it's a relaxed performance! Can I just ask if one of you would mind defining relaxed performance, 'cause I don't know if our listeners will know, and it seems useful to give them the vocab.

Jess
Yes, yeah. So relaxed performance is a way of identifying performances that take a relaxed approach to sound *biscuit* and movement in the audience relaxes some of the expectations about traditional theatre etiquette and behaviour, to allow by space for inclusivity, neurodiversity, humanity – cats. *[laughter]* And as someone with a neurological condition, as someone with Tourette's syndrome who makes noise and movement all the time, relaxed performances are an access requirement for me. *Biscuit*. But they are also, I think they also add an interesting from a theatrical perspective, and from the experience of what it means to be in a live, to sort of watch live performance together and and so yeah, I'm excited to make sure that no one misses out on incredible performances, including cats, *[laughter]* because of preconceptions about who they're for, or how they should be enjoyed.

Helen
Oh, thank you Jess. Sorry I interrupted you. Well, Monkey interrupted first, so *[laugher]* not taking the blame for that, but, you were talking about your working with Hannah?

Jess
Yes. So yeah, I think for me it was, you know, I I became a performer because I found it difficult to be in an audience *biscuit,* and you shouldn't have to make a show to be safe in the theatre and but that was sort of my experience and my route to performance and to occupy occupying the only seat in the house I knew I wouldn't be asked to leave: on stage. And so Backstage in Biscuit Land was a very sort of joyful, funny show that celebrated and embraced relaxed performance and spontaneity and the sort of chaos of trying to stick to a script when you're are neurologically incapable of that. But well, and that was really interesting when we took that to Edinburgh, and it was really interesting when we toured it. And one of the things that we found was that lots of venues would say, oh, we're really interested in making our work accessible and in relaxed performance, but we just haven't had the right type of show yet. And Not I had been a reference of Matthew and I, who's, Matthew the co-artistic director up Touretteshero. He introduced me to that years before, and it had been a recurrent reference for us. But then we were, but increasingly we became interested in the cultural curation that was happening around what work was and wasn't considered suitable for relaxed performance. And one way of challenging that was to take a really intense theatrical experience like Beckett's Not I, and make it accessible at every level to both performer and audience without reducing the intensity of the experience. And so there was an element where it's like, if we can do Not I as a relaxed performance, no one can say shit to us about *[laughter]* /

Madeleine
Yeah!

Jess
What can and can't be relaxed. But actually when when I read the play, and when I really connected with the words that had were, that were written there, that what became clear to me was that this was, that Mouth was a disabled character, that she was a neurodivergent character, and that so much of the, so many of the lines deeply resonated with my own experience, and therefore I cared about this character and and I wanted her, I wanted that play to be understood in the context of disability culture. And I think that that was one of the things that Matthew also had on his agenda was how the scholarship around Beckett, and the fact that actually once, once we do Not I as a Beckett play, it will be hard for scholars not to acknowledge disability and neurodivergence. It's sort of squeezing disability culture, politics and justice into sort of academic discourse, is one way of helping that develop, and the language and conversations around disability change and evolve. And so it was really exciting when I first spoke to Hannah and when it became clear that actually we had this, we had inadvertently connected at a really early moment in that in that journey. And so revisiting that at different points I think was a really, I felt incredibly lucky to have that opportunity because my thinking and relationship with that play changed, deepened, evolved, and each time we've been able to talk about it, I've and I've really felt the benefit of that.

Helen

Wow Jess that is such a fascinating – Like, I mean our whole podcast is interested in practice and research, and as you say that that is such a a profound way that practice changes research. That's amazing. I was really struck as well by your sort of description of it in some ways as the origin story of Touretteshero, and about relaxed performance being the inception of performance for you as a performer. Would you be able just give us a kind of a a potted history of how you came to be making the work you do?

Jess

*Biscuit S*o I like. I am a, I am a create. I've always been a disabled person. I've always been a neurodivergent person. I've always had tics and Tourette's since very early memories of involuntary movements, noises and behaviours *biscuit*, but I wasn't diagnosed until adulthood with tics, although Idid have other neurodivergent diagnoses, and I had studied create like I studied drawing and visual art college and and alongside my creative education as a visual artist and *biscuit*, I was I worked as a play worker and play workers are people who support and nurture play on adventure playgrounds. So London has this amazing wealth of adventure playgrounds, which are playgrounds that grew out of upon bomb sites from the Second World War where children started playing on them, they became junk playgrounds, and this movement and adventure play grew from that. And so my artistic practise for my play work practise and inclusive play work practise for disabled and for disabled and non disabled children was always, those two things were always really important to me and Matthew and I met when I was a teenager, working on an adventure, working at at adventure playgrounds for disabled kids, and so we had worked together for a long time. We increasingly were interested in arts and bringing bringing artists onto play spaces and bringing children into cultural spaces. And and as my tics intensified and had a bigger impact on my life, Matthew was really important in me adjusting and acknowledging, and making peace with a voice that I didn't always recognise, and with parts of myself that I didn't always recognise, and we started Touretteshero together. And after a conversation which he described Tourette's as a sort of crazy language generating machine and told me that not doing something creative with my tics would be wasteful and I was able to hear that sentence in a totally different way. And we were still working full time in play work until 2016. So, when we accidentally had booked Biscuit Land on an international tour *[laughter]* and it was clear that we were going to have to make some choices, and we had a really supportive employer and we're still very involved in play work. And I mentioned that because I think play, and my connexion to play, and the non-precious risk taking and in, in, nature of playspaces definitely has informed our practice as artists. And we have and and essentially so Touretteshero we started as a creative organisation, that was really taking a very simple idea that rather than ignoring tics *biscuit*, get we were going to make them available as creative springboards for other people's creativity and imaginations and to be the catalysts for new things. And then we, I'd had a difficult, we I'd been to see Mark Thomas's Extreme Rambling with Matthew in 2011. At the Tricycle, what was then the tricycle Theatre in London, and despite doing loads of planning and prep with both the theatre and with Mark, and he meeting me beforehand and and introducing me to the audience, despite all of that, I was still asked to move and sit separately at the interval because of the noises I was making. And it was a really distressing and upsetting experience and I sort of sat behind glass in the sound booth watching a show that was about segregation and Mark walking the Palestinian separation barrier. And I promised myself that I would never set foot in another theatre again. *Biscuit.* Instead, *[laughter]* Matthew challenged me to, to take a different approach, and together we started to explore the possibility of making a show, and that included meeting Jess Mabel Jones,

who's the co-performer and co-creator of backstage in Biscuit Land with Matthew and I, who was a former who we'd seen at a relaxed performance of ah at the Young Vic. So, *fuck* it's definitely, we definitely, I'm I'm drawn to barriers, and to making those barriers visible and to challenging those barriers and to find and creative solutions, and I think definitely the moment that another, that a theatre company, another theatre company said, oh, the Beckett estate will never let Jess perform the role of Mouth. That was also the point where I knew that my fate was sealed *[laughter]*, and that Matthew came out of that meeting and was like: so, Not I. So I think that we are both, what unites us is that we're drawn to to to occupy space and to claim space as disabled neurodivergent people that I think historically we haven't been s present in. *Fuck.*

Helen
We have a lot to thank Matthew for for facilitating you onto the stage!

Jess
Fuck biscuit, yeah, I found that lots, lots of moments of revelation and connexion come through my conversations with him, and and his challenge to me often and to my his willingness to disrupt my thinking and uh and, I feel like it's only fair to then go and disrupt traditional expectations about theatre as a as an effect. As a as part of yeah, part of of handing that on. But yeah, I think it it helped me realise / the power of what we say to each other, the power of moments of change, like,

Madeleine
You know –

Jess
And and and what matters is connecting to ideas and I think that that's. I think it can be very easy to feel like things aren't for you, and an to internalise those message messages and I'm interested in helping people connect with things that might help them understand themselves and other people better. *Fuck.*

Madeleine
I wanted to turn this over for a second and ask Hannah about, about sort of your research practises and your questions. But I wonder if just based on that and and sort of the ideas of barriers in the theatre and and expectations of the theatre, if I might ask both of you about where we get our expectations about what theatre should look like and sort of what the audience should do and if you know where those sort of expectations come from and and how we can sort of undo them.

Hannah
I mean, if I take the sort of the academic route for a moment, I'm, I'm, I'm, I'm really interested in this question of of how we've come to this idea of of course, this is how you act in the theatre, of course this is the etiquette and I'm sure a lot of listeners will will know the work of Kirsty Sedgman, who looks at at this sort of idea of 'reasonable behaviour', the idea of something that is 'common sense, of course it's like that because that just makes sense, doesn't it?' One, one, one thing I've written about is, is the the moment in sort of inter-war and and post war theatre, where actually British theatre is opening up significantly to working-class audiences, and there are fascinating archival documents about how actually this then launched a campaign from within the theatres to

teach people how to be audience members. We had, you know, Richard Burton touring schools to talk to children about how to be an audience member and what their parents shouldn't do. The National Theatre releases this little guide of you know, The Plain Man's Guide to Coughing in the Theatre, how you mustn't cough, you mustn't do that. There is this, I mean very, very literal educational campaign about how to be an audience member. And of course that's not where the whole thing begins, but it's a really interesting explicit moment of setting up these things that that that still linger and it's still, I think absolutely have a really really significant impact on how we are in the theatre. I mean even just I I think even walking into a theatre building can be terrifying if if you have not been there before, if that has not been sort of your your common sense expectation of of where you go and and what you do. It absolutely changes how we think about who can and can't access that space. But one of the things that you want, the reasons I'm interested in that question is, is one of the grounding questions of much of my research is this idea of why theatre in the first place, right? Why does anybody make theatre? It's really hard to make theatre. It's really expensive. It's really time consuming. You need a team. You can't just, you know, sit and write your novel in your room, she says, as if that was very easy *[laughter]* And why do we go to the theatre? You know, why do we travel? Why do we put on our clothes and sit with other people, etc etc? And I do think one of the things that that that distinguishes a lot of live in person performance is that fact that you are, yes, confronting another body on the stage, your body is live and space and time with with that other body, but also that you're surrounded by other people and and some that, you know and sometimes it's a sort of solidarity element to that community, sometimes they're very uncomfortable things about being part of that group of people, but it's one of the crucial defining elements of being in the theatre, you're surrounded by other bodies before you and around you. So it's a bizarre twist to try and 'say, right, OK, great, but we mustn't be aware of those other bodies, you shouldn't ever hear, or be made aware of the bodies around you, and you must make sure that nobody is is aware of your body', it's it's one of the points of the theatre medium.

Jess

But that, but that's funny in relation to Not I, like its character of Mouth, because one of the things that Matthew find thinks is funny about it, Not I, and is like humorous about Not I isthe fact that it's like, the aim is to get this disembodied man, but obviously mouths aren't disembodied! It's like the denial of body and it's like that it it there are, there are interesting sort of parallels and and threads there in terms of what like trying to achieve something theatrically, that is a physical impossibility. If we acknowledge that bodies are, the reality of our bodies. And then in a space that also often ask people to deny the reality of their bodies and their humanity.

Madeleine

I guess, I wonder if we've talked a couple of times now, we've touched on, on this production of Not I and I wonder if we can just sort of introduce the play and and then your production of it and talk a little bit about what Not I is?

Hannah

I'll speak, I'll speak about Beckett's Not I, and then we can do Jess's and Beckett's Not I, I guess. Yes, so Not I, it's it's reasonably late in Beckett's career, in 1972. It's a monologue for a single female voice, and she is only identified as Mouth in the script, and the staging directs that on the stage

originally there is the as, as Jess says, the disembodied Mouth. You can only see the mouth onstage, and the actor's body is is hidden in the dark, on one side of the stage, and on the other side of the stage is the Auditor, a figure who is cloaked in black, who does not speak throughout the performance but every time Mouth hits her refrain, which is, 'What? Who? No, she', the auditor lifts their arms in what's described in the directions as a gesture of helpless compassion. Or at least that's how it's described in the English stage directions, the French are slightly different in interesting ways, read my book to find out why guys! *[laughter]* And the monologue itself is disjointed. It's it's a, it's a form of what seems like compulsive speech at speed. If you look at the text on on the page, it's very, very broken up by ellipses. And it's a woman of seventy year old, 70 years old, who seems to have collapsed in a field at some point, and she talks about how she's silent most of her life and every now and again she has has these, sort of attacks of speech. She has to speak compulsively, but she will not recognise this voice as her own. It's she, she all the way through. And hence we get this refraim every now and again, she seems to be responding to another voice we can't hear, who seems to perhaps suggest 'you?' or 'I'? Says 'What? Who? I? No, she.' Is the original text.

Madeleine
So Jess, do you want to talk about your production of not I?

Jess
Yes. Uhm, so Not I had been a reference for a long time, and for the sort of show that followed on from Biscuit Land, which had very much been about the experience of audience members, Not I felt really interesting because it was about who gets to perform what roles ,and and also about what does this what what why why do I feel such a connexion to this play? Why do we feel it matters to say it now, and actually as a play that lots of people perceive to be about about isolation, and about There were moments in that where actually I didn't see isolation. So there's this moment where where Mouth is shopping and hands in a list and doesn't say a word and just hands in a list and a bag and and not so much as goodbye – God, I don't even know the lines anymore! – and this idea that then someone does, someone does the shopping and Mouth paysand goes without without saying a word. And it's like, oh look at how differently and how, how you know, how non-normatively, you know, and how that must be really, that's really isolating, and how odd that she shops in that way. Where I saw a community meeting her requirements, and like helping her access food in the way that works for us. The funny thing about that is that most of us now shop online, *[laughter]* don't say a word. And it's like but but but Beckett was using supermarkets and shops in the same way that documentary makers when they make documentaries about Tourette's – there's not a single documentary about Tourette's that I've seen that doesn't really include a supermarket or a library, because it uses these normative spaces to show the unusual height and the unusual behaviour. When we made Me, My Mouth and I, the documentary about the making of Not I, I said 'no supermarkets and no libraries!' *[laughter]* And then really sneakily: both. *[laughter]* We got both supermarkets and libraries in, hopefully in slightly unusual ways, but still there was a bit where we were going with Derval to look at an original manuscript and I was like, we're in the in the library, this amazing library that looks like Hogwarts in Dublin, and I'm like, I'm in a library, I said no libraries! *[laughter]* Hannah mentioned the auditor and I think the auditor is really interesting in and and mentioned translation and actually the radical thing for the Beckett estate was not a performer with Tourette's, as it turned out. Our radical ask, we you know they had by the time they said yes to that they had, I think they've made their peace and acknowledged that that was, and understood why it

mattered to me to take on this role. I think the thing that they had not thought about or they weren't prepared for was our wish to do it with integrated British Sign language. And I think that that was because they've literally never been asked. And I think we felt real pressure about getting that ask right. Because it's like, if we get that wrong, then potentially anyone else who goes with that ask is gonna hit a hit a barrier, whereas if we get that right, then then that might open that might open that up to other other plays and other work and other productions. What was really interesting was working with Deepa Shastri and Charmaine Wombwell, who were the Deaf theatre-maker and British Sign Language performer *biscuit*, who supported the translation of the text into BSL. Because BSL is quite a literal language, and Not I is quite an abstract text. And there are these, there are these words that have multiple sort of meanings or interpretations, and often with BSL you have to commit to one, from my understanding of it, but this process of translation and retranslation within Beckett's work felt totally right, both in terms of what it was saying to the world now about the fact that Mouth is only as isolated as her community makes her. The message of those, that the message that we found in that text and also the idea of this translation and retranslation process, and actually where the Auditor had been dropped from more recent productions 'cause Becky had never found, my understanding is Beckett never found a satisfactory way to make that Auditor role work, I my feeling is that it's just because he hadn't discovered integrated BSL yet. *[laughter]* And that and that actually that was, that was the right like and I think the the Auditor is important to me, because that is someone who is bearing witness to Mouth, in whatever way, and the audience of bearing witness to Mouth, but the Auditor is bearing witness to Mouth, and as someone who's never on their own, the fact that there are two bodies on stage was was significant to me. There was a time in Edinburgh where Charmaine was pregnant, where we technically had three bodies on stage, but but one of them was very hidden!

Hannah

And I think if I can sort of jump back to the auditor there, I I do think this is one of the really fascinating bits of of the Touretteshero production, because the Auditor has this history of disappearing on and off the Not I stage. You know, initially when it staged, there's the auditor. He's usually played by a man, it's it's not specified in the script, it's 'sex undeterminable' 'cause Iunder this big cloak, but but all the all the the previous cast members I've been able to find have been men, and so there's something intriguing there as well about Charmaine taking on the on the role. But often just proved really difficult to stage well, in part because of this sort of visual dimension, you have the tiny tiny tiny little Mouth on stage and the Auditor on the other side, it actually, you know, sort of distracts from the Mouth to some degree. And Beckett has a really interesting line in one of his letters were at one point you know he has taken the Auditor out of a a theatre piece, he hasn't been able to do it. and then two American writers, two sorry, two American directors write to him and ask him for his advice on staging the Auditor, they haven't been able to make it work, and Beckett says, you know, feel free to to remove the auditor if it's not working, and the quote is 'to me, the play needs him but can do without him.' Which makes no sense, right? Needs him, but can do without him. So there is something really intriguing there, I think, about the Auditor being, you know, almost from the beginning, this sort of failed figure on the stage, this figure that that Beckett wants in some way, needs and needs that witnessing body or that other body, you know, as you say, Jess, that that that Mouth shouldn't be alone onstage in some sense, but hasn't been able to formally make it, make it work. And and there was something then interesting about actually this sort of precedent for, for, for the Auditor having changed in performance and when Beckett comes

back to Not I, he does keep trying to put the auditor in and changes the gestures in certain ways, changes the, particularly the final gesture. So there is this, you know, if if you want to be purist about it, there is this tradition of Beckett playing around with the Auditor and trying to find the right bodily press. But then I think Touretteshero were able to build on in in in a really exciting way to sort of go look here is a sort of a a figure who is not Mouth but is completely bind up in Mouth's story who's doing this other translation, and and I guess I mean one of the things I find really intriguing about watching it was that in your staging, Jess, that the fact that you you did have to choose whether you were going to look at you or whether you're going to look at Charmaine. Were we interest, you know, which body were we watching? And this sort of constantly fragmented viewing going back and forth between the two. Which, again, from a horrible academic point of view, you know this question of a kind of mind body split, that Cartesian dualism is such a recurring concern in Beckett's work, the idea of having a language in a body to some degree split or not recognising each other it it fit perfectly to have this other bodily language going alongside Mouth's verbal language.

Jess

And it was really important for us that Mouth, that Charmaine never, never signed 'I', that, that, that, that. She didn't say 'I' but she she she I my, my memory is that we did the the the decision was she sort of placed it near me, but not complete, like it was, like it was placed in a in a space in space, with a distance, but between us, potentially. I think was basically where it but it was like. Yeah, it was really important to us that, that, that, that. And the other interesting thing about the other interesting thing about the British Sign Language performance in some ways was that because it's such a fast monologue, and because a lot of it is about being overwhelmed by language, no hearing audience is collect, is getting all of those words and all of that narrative, and it's like there's something incredible about the sort of the the beauty and depth of the writing that's then almost thrown away with the speed of the performance, but that I that just feels really again, it feels quite funny to me and also quite magic and very, very neurodivergent and disability culture. But also really interesting from a from a interpreting point of view, it's like at that point it's and from a BSL performance point of view, it's like how much is OK for a Deaf audience to to miss? How do we make sure that Deaf audiences understand that that that that that if they're missing stuff, or if it's vague, it's not 'cause we've done a shit job with the translation or the that that, that's because that. How do we help people understand the intent and how, and some of that's also about how we set the space up around it, to hold a disabled and neurodivergent audience, particularly, and audiences who maybe are coming to Beckett for the first time, where it could feel alienating and like you're not getting this, rather than the experience is to feel this and not to get this, and that you can just let this, this is meant to act on your nerves and not your intellect, which I think is was a quote from from Beckett at some point. And I think that that, that all of those conversations and discussions and and and was really, it was really interesting.

Madeleine

I always forget because because I think I've read the play before and remember so much of the text of that monologue, I frequently forget the gesture, or or to imagine the physicality of that gesture. Which is one of the things that you know I find myself... I'm taking us off piste a little bit here, but I find myself really missing sort of live theatre in that particular way, and it's making me think for the last few years about, you know, we've been talking about what what the experience of a group live audience is, when a group of people get together to watch, you know, something staged like this and

the sort of expectations within and between that audience and I kind of wonder, you know, how do we, how do we deal with with the explosion of Zoom theatre that's happened lately and the changes that that might offer?

Hannah
I mean, certainly, and Jess, I'm sure you'll have more to say about this, but certainly if we're going back to the idea of access there is, you know, there's something fascinating there about, you know, all these things that we absolutely could not do, definitely no, definitely would have been impossible, we can't live stream things, we can't record things, et cetera, et cetera, and suddenly when the majority of the population needs it, oh, hang on, we can. Oh you'll pay money for that? OK, great! And I mean, I don't think one is a replacement for the other necessarily, but I am interested to see uhm, whether you know a lot of theatres keep this remote access available and you know, for example, in the way that Bush Theatre is currently doing, every performance has a at least one online performance. Whether this remains as as a form of access that that you know mainstream theatre will continue to run.

Jess
I think that there was this moment early in the pandemic that felt exciting from an access point of view because innovation was happening. There was a moment of frustration for many disabled people because it's like accommodations that people had been asking for for generations and had been told were impossible were suddenly possible. But I think there was also this in there, there was also this moment of experimentation and innovation, and that creative experimentation with what it means to connect with other people, and I think that it challenged us to do that in different ways. What I can see is that that now as most people can come together, that has dropped away and while that may be some places are holding on to access, it is not, that that isn't energy and time and creativity being put into what that is and how that might evolve generally. And and I think as a clinically extremely vulnerable artist, the last year in particular has been really challenging as as so many of those norms are being back in physical spaces has happened again, which is amazing and I totally understand the instinct for that, but it's very easy to feel left behind and invisible. And actually, the more other people, the less restrictions there are, and the less consideration there is, the harder it is for those of us who are who for whom COVID still presents significant risk, the harder it is for us to leave our homes, let alone think about how we make creative work. And there was definitely a moment in the pandemic where it's like as a disabled led company in a as a disabled artist, it's like I was having to put so much extra energy and time into survival, and like not organisational survival, or whimsical survival, but like physically surviving. But there was no opportunity for me to be create like there's no space for me to be creative and and that that that is something that I would really, that I'm interested in. We're now in a situation where the risks presented by COVID are going to be long term; the exclusion presented by COVID is also long term, unless we develop and experiment with new access practises and approaches, that explore how we can connect safely with audiences who, with chronically ill audiences who've always been excluded from fear, from spaces and in many ways. But that is a bigger proportion of the population now then maybe it was historically, but I but I also still feel excited by the potential. We talk a lot about non-physical participation at the moment, so every creative project that we do, we think about the non-physical participation offer what's the, and we don't call it digital, because it's not always digital, sometimes it's a board game, sometimes it is a stream, sometimes it's a podcast. I'm really

interested in how we can think about what is the creative offer that gives access to this work and to this content, but but does so in a way, that's right creatively for the ideas and form of that thing, that artwork and I think how that links back some of that links back to Not I is that when we when we decided to do Not, I I think with Backstage in Biscuit Land and I think increasing at Touretteshero we've understood the art that we make is less about the thing and is more about this feeling in the room. It's about something that we want our audiences to feel and that's about connectivity to ideas, it's about connexion to each other, and it's about the presence of community. And one of the things that that we didn't know with Not I was whether with a play that intense and with that history and legacy and and all of the things that are around it and expectation around it, tradition, whether we were going to be able to create that feeling. And actually I think that, I think that in lots of, in lots of spaces we did. And I think that that the feeling in the room is as much the art that we're looking to make as any single performance show or object and I think that that idea of like finding ways to connect is really is really exciting and really interesting. And that's why theatres exc, that's why theatre and live performance is exciting to me, *biscuit*, and it's also what I really miss. *Fuck*.

Helen

Jess I just I did just wanna say I mean, I think it's really important to talk about the ways in which the pandemic stunted creativity b- but t is also worth saying that you you did make a show about, or a , a creative space I suppose might be it might be the best way to describe it about the experience of shielding. I just wondered if you wanted to talk about that a little bit as well whilst we're on the the lockdown topic.

Jess

Fuck We when when we were shield when I was shielding and and as a clinically extremely vulernable person staying in my home and I'm also a social care user so I have a team of people who support me to live independently in my home my the Touretteshero team and my support team and my family, we started talking about my home as the spaceship, and we were imagining this experience of shielding as like everybody's been thrust into their spaceships, and we're on these long, uncertain journeys through time and space. And part of that was like we were literally saying, right, we could have got to the moon and back by now. *[laughter]* We could have got to Mars and back by now, it's like we we're marking time and distance, and but also it it it spoke to the to the uncertainty, unpredictability, but also this idea that as a disabled person, we offered, we could offer leadership. We could, you know, I could be the captain of my spaceship and chart a course and and that and some of that links to other disabled writers and activists writing around that time, the amazing thinker Alice Wong in the US wrote about disabled people as the oracles for now, and at the start of the pandemic, the idea that disabled people had lived knowledge of unpredictably and unpredictability and uncertainty and change, and that we had the skills, knowledge, and insight to help navigate. However, often the question is whether non-disabled people are ready to listen to that insight and that expertise. But when we were invited by Festival Theaterformen in Germany to create a piece of work as part of a sort of a festival and a sort of layer of experimental practise that they were putting putting together, we decided to make the spaceship real, and create our journey to the b, journey to a better world, which, yeah, isn't really a show although that is how it's that is how I explained it to my niece, because interactive performance based just was probably not going to cut it. *[laughter]* It's basically we made we made us a spaceship, an accessible spaceship and invite disabled and non-disabled people to come and be our crew, sit in the captain's chair and tell

us what they, where they would go on our journey to a better world, how we would chart a course together. And it's a space that centres play, centres centres exploration and centres children. And I think it uses performance practice and it uses play practice and it uses disability culture and it mixes them all together to hopefully create a space for coming together, connexion and reflection and thinking about how we navigate in and out of these of of a number of intersecting disasters and crises that are increasing with frequency and intensity and that are buffeting and and moving us around in it like practically and emotionally in very dramatic ways and how we can hold onto each other and to the things that enter the values and ethos and ethics and loves and cultural and creative roots to try and find ways through that together. *Fuck.*

Helen
Can I just jump back onto something that Jess said earlier that really made me think of something that you've written Hannah. Yeah Jess is talking about witnessing, and I know in I I believe it's in your in your upcoming book, soon to be released book, uh, sort of grappling with some of the ways in which Beckett has been dealt with from a disability perspective, of coming not from disabled voices, and ways in which the disabled body as something to have a an effect on the the non the non-disabled audience and. I just wondered, you know, I think that's a really interesting conversation about how how do we think about witnessing and staging and disability and audience just drawing a lot of the threads that have followed through here together.

Hannah
I mean to speak as well specifically to to the disability question. I mean dealing with with with Beckett and disability, I I introduce Samuel Beckett and Disability Performance book with this idea that it's it's a grappling with Beckett and disability. Because, and again, I sort of I, I have this as as a as an opening anecdote, literary studies are built on anecdotes, I think, in in the preface about an earlier piece that I'd written for the Journal of Modern Literature that was about taking a disability informed perspective on Quad, and I got, you know, a really useful, really generative peer review back, but the reviewer and I completely disagreed on this element of what Beckett does with disability. And the reviewer said, you know, in this in this article, you're reifying the disability phobia of able-bodied culture rather than challenging it. And Beckett's presentation of disability is not stigmatising, et cetera. And there is, I mean, I think there is a point to that, to that criticism, you know, Beckett Beckett absolutely makes the disabled or the impaired body the norm across the stage, there are no perfectly functioning bodies there. And in fact, I think there's a lot of comic undermining of this idea that we should, of course, automatically have perfectly functioning bodies. But at the same time, I think it's really disingenuous to try and read these plays as straightforwardly positive or activist presentations of disability. You know, often the these are players that are, you know, the disabled body is really skewed with discomfort and abjection and despair, that is used very, very deliberately, and hence why you know, Ato Quayson's critique of the idea that we've always tended to read these these disabilities as metaphorical. And I mean, I think he's correct there, but at the same time there's there's a way that I think it's understandable that critics have done so because a lot of these bodies sit within these deteriorating worlds or these sort of despairing worlds. And there, you know, there are really nasty disability stuff in their thinking about one of the productions I look at is the Hackney Showroom and Culture Device production of Waiting for Godot, which is done by by the Culture Device Theatre company, who are a group of professional actors with Down's syndrome. And suddenly a lot of that script sounded completely different

whenever you heard these actors saying those words. You know, they call each other halfwit, they call each other cretin, they talk about abortion. It's, you know, it's an incredibly uncomfortable and I think really generatively uncomfortable rendition of the play in that sense. And I don't think that to to engage with with Beckett's version of disability, we need to reinterpret it as this sort of squeaky clean, socially responsible version of theatre. You know he's using these bodies aesthetically and and affectively first and forward first and foremost. And that is partly why I was interested in doing the book through some very, very specific case studies of of disability performers and disability led theatre companies. Because the bit where I think the disability ethics often comes in is in how these professionals have engaged with these performances and thought about, you know, in a politically alert way havethought about how they're encountering these bodies. And I wasn't interested in writing a book that sort of condemns Beckett's representation of disability as unethical, but I wasn't interested in offering this really sort of determinedly redemptive gloss on how all of these plays are are actually really activist and and really forward thinking, etc. Uhm. No. I think one way where that links into to maybe the contemporary situation though is, is this idea as you've touched on, Jess, you know, the idea that so many of these bodies, I mean, they just are disabled. Like, so obviously disabled, whether that is like literally in the stage direction or, you know, OK, it doesn't say, it doesn't say Mouth: disabled woman, but she's speaking compulsively and she's lost control of her body. And we have refused to recognise that and we refuse to recognise that in our in our criticism and our scholarship, but we've also refused to recognise that in terms of casting. And, you know, Ham is a disabled man, you know he's paralysed, he wants a wheelchair and he doesn't have a wheelchair, and it's it's the big role for able0bodied men at a certain point in their career, right. And they get the praise for ‘doing disability’ very, very well. And they do all the method stuff you know, they sit on their legs and their legs go dead and my goodness, what wonderful acting. Could we not just use a disabled body? And I, you know, and there's a huge conversation to be had there about the politics of cripping up, I do think there's something very, very specific about Beckettian performance in that Beckett is so, you know, every time he directed or every time he was, you know, an advisor in any of his plays, he's so interested in these psychophysical methods of acting. He's not interested in the method stuff. He's not interested in the sort of tell me about the psychological background so I can get the character, he's going do the bodily movements and then you'll understand the play. Do it exactly, do the footfalls exactly as I tell you to do them, do the movements exactly as I tell you to do them. These plays in performance are about really literally inhabiting the situation that’s described, you have to speak compulsively, or you have to wait on stage, or you have to not move, ou have to be trapped in a mound. Tere is so much precedent there within within Beckett performance to to say, look, actually one of the things that is being asked is to reproduce the bodily situation as closely and as rigorously as we can. And again, I think this is one of the interesting things about the way you talk about relaxed performance, Jess, that this idea that relaxed performance can be sort of loosening of the rigour, and actually you have to work much harder. There's this idea of going like, actually the rigour or the virtuosity in this performance is using the disabled body in order to actually fulfil that script in a way that it hasn't been fulfilled before.

Jess

Yeah, and one of one of people concerns often about relaxed performances is worry for the actor and like showing respect or like damaging their performance. And actually what we often say is that you as a performer you have to work harder, but actually that means that the performance is often tighter more, live more, more on more on point, more on fire more it's it's in the room more

because you have to be in the room more. And there was a point where we were, we were doing a run of Beckett of Not I at the Battersea Arts Centre, and, you know, there was an adult Tourette's group in the room with like, you know, six or seven other people with Tourette's and their tics in the space and Tourette's tics are very suggestible and it's about like and it's like I like I was like, right I have to put my money where my mouth is now, I I have to do this and I have to be able to do this. But if I can do this, then it will, then it will, then it, then I can confidently keep saying that it makes that it does do something to the performance that is interesting. And in fact, our best performances have always been when there's other people with tics in the room. By far and away the most. My best performances and the most energy in the room has been because it's then not just on stage, the, the, the, the, the automated speech is then it's, you know, it's so like it. It is, uh, we it is a, it is a presence in. It's a very real presence in the room at that point. And I think that's that that's really interesting. And, you know, I don't identify as an actor. I don't. In some ways, the sort of Beckett's 'for God's sake, don't act' , you know, lines relieved me because it's like, I'm I'm I'm not able to do that. I know I'm not. Tourette's makes it quite hard for me to do that type of acting to to do anything other than the than than be the, you know have a sense of an authentic performance. But it definitely pushed me as a performer and terrified me as a performer and made me and challenged me as a performer in ways that I could never have imagined. But one of the things that I was very clear that I wasn't going to talk about is that with Not I there had been a lot of chat about how difficult it was to perform, and about like the physical restrictions that were necessary in order to perform it and to realise this disembodied, and so we were quite, we were quite clear that we were going to, that we weren't interested in making me, you know, we wanted to try and do it in a way that worked for my body and therefore, for example, I wasn't held still, but the light followed my mouth and was in my hood. And we realised it differently, but it was important it it. The interesting thing about the performance for me is is not about how hard it is, but it is about where it takes you as a performer. I was really interested *biscuit* as to whether I was at a neurological advantage as a performer with this play. *Biscuit* Because I understand, like automatic speech is something that I've made my peace with, like *[laughs]* and I also know that my brain can do things automatically and if I trust it, if I learn it, if I, if I, if it's there *fuck* I can give it over. *Hedgehog biscuit cats.* That what's interesting about the writing of Not I is that there's so many lines in there that are that that can that can only have come through such intensely close observation and scrutiny like scrutiny or really like there's some like, you know, like, you know, going to the going to the toilet to let rushes of language out is a strategy that I did throughout my education and so to find it in her play was like. How on earth did he know that? So there were not and there were lots of moments like that and and I think, but I think it is I think it's also like, you know, it's also interesting, it's really interesting as a disabled performer to find yourself your most intimate, personal bodily experiences in a text, that hasn't ever been identified like, you know, and and I'm not saying that that is, uh, Not I is about Tourette's at all, but it is the the the the the there was this, that my lived experience was was deeply woven through that.

Madeleine

I was just going to say the frustrations and the challenges of performing a Beckett play of working with the, you know, the the opportunities and the and the frustrations of working with the estate and with working with a piece that was that has this sort of expectation loaded on it. I wonder, you know, working with canonical pieces versus working, like creating your own new work, whether you know what the what the different kinds of opportunities are with each of those?

Jess
Initially, I think when we first started talking about Not I, it was like, and if the Beckett estate don't let us do it, we'll put a question mark on the end and be like, Why Not I?, you know? But actually that became much, much less interesting than the play itself and staging it in a way that that help, that moved relaxed performance on, that moved our performance practise on, that that move, like that helped us have conversations that shift that that shifted our thinking in in as artists and makers and performers, and I think that that being able to build, build, build on that legacy, and mix up audiences. One of the things that we were really interested in doing is what happens if we put a Beckett audience next to a disability culture audience. It's like we want those people to sit next to each other and we want them to occupy space together, and so in some ways it was as much about the audience as it was, as it was the the performance, in some you know, as it was that that play it was also about the people who would be drawn to that play and having them in the same room and why we thought that mattered. And I think that the that we like we don't do any one style of creating or making art, I think we go to where we'reinterested and follow follow those lines, and so I'm often surprised by where we end up, I would never have predicted that I would have ever performed a Beckett play, that was not something that I had been exposed to or had, you know, that I thought was part of the plan. But I'm but I and it also happened when I first had those conversations I was worried that I wouldn't have the language, that intellect, the insight to be able to engage with that. And I think it's really helped me understand that, that lots of those ideas are shit ideas. We don't need to worry about those things. And actually, what we find in performance is is what matters, and I think that that's helped me as an artist and as a human being. *Fuck.*

Helen
Oh, if I had my way this conversation would just never would just keep thinking about this. Always. I want to hear everything but that is that is not feasible or probably sensible. Uh, we should we should let you both go. But I do just want to say thank you so much for your time, for your insights, for your humour and creativity, and for everything that you've brought to this podcast today, 'cause, this has been so wonderful to hear from you both, speak with you both. I'm very excited for when we can share this episode with others as well.

Jess
It's really nice to have an opp, like it's really nice to have an opportunity to re to revisit it and and stepping, stepping away from like some of the performance in time and and thinking about that how you know how our sort of performance practise continues to grow. It's really I feel, yeah, I feel really lucky to have had the opportunity to have this discussion and particularly ongoing conversations with Hannah have been really important for me, making sense of what is quite a weird and intense thing to to have done and to do.

Helen
Oh, I'm so glad t hear that 'cause lucky was really like one of the words I was thinking oh like I feel really lucky to be here

Madeleine
Me too

Helen
And to get to bring this to other people like that's such, such a wonderful position to have.

Hannah
No, and thank you both as well. And again, Jess, as always wonderful to talk. I mean, this was partly why I was so determined to get Samuel Beckett and Disability Performance out into the world, 'cause it, you know, it's it's 50% practitioner interviews and I just think, well why wouldn't we publish half hour books with practitioner interviews it's where the interesting stuff is, I think perhaps everything Jeff says should be should be written down and published somewhere. But again, perhaps neither feasible or sensible. I don't know.

[laughter]

Jess
Yes, some of the stuff I say is definitely *[obscured by laughter]*

[fade to music]

Helen
This has been Practice Makes: the Oxford Reimagining Performance Podcast, with Helen Dallas and Madeleine Saidenberg. Thanks for listening!