

Tom: Hello, my name's Tom Walker. Welcome to the latest in a series of podcasts I'm recording for DaDaFest, which is a disability arts organisation very much based in Liverpool, but which works across the North West and even further afield. Now just in case you haven't heard yet, DaDa is celebrating its 40th anniversary and on Sunday, March 9th, the day after the official launch of this year's festival, a very colourful event took place at the Palm House in Liverpool's Sefton Park called Pimp My Wheelchair. Created by artists Faith Bebbington and Janet Price, the exhibition features crutches, chairs, hearing aids and a white cane pimped up with sculptures inspired by plants which have natural defence mechanisms that express rage against attack. My white cane and I took part in the procession and while I was there, I recorded this podcast which starts with the sound of a drum to get things underway. We've just watched a performance of Pimp My Wheelchair and one of the artists, collaborators and creators is with me. She's Faith Bebbington. Faith, thanks for joining us.

Faith: Thank you.

Tom: Tell me a little bit about yourself if you would.

Faith: Well, I'm an artist, I'm a sculptor technically, who makes sculptures using recycled materials. I've concentrated a lot on figurative and animals, but now I'm moving into more natural forms of making sculpture.

Tom: And tell me about today's performance, the Pimp My Wheelchair performance. What was your role in relation to that?

Faith: My initial idea came from people who kicked my stick from underneath me and I wanted to make my stick more blingy and more noticeable and more dangerous so that people notice it rather than ignoring it.

Tom: You say there, people kicking your stick from underneath you. In what circumstances would that happen? Because I've got a white cane and it's happened to me, so I'd be interested to know.

Faith: Just walking down the street, basically. Walking in the shop, anywhere, basically. People tend to walk on top of me and walk too close to me because I need quite a lot of space around me to keep my balance. So people walk too close to me. I call it classroom corridor syndrome because kids, they do it in driving as well. It's like children walk really close to each other and will brush past each other where I need space. So this is why I decided to make that. This is my starting point from the initial thing, to bling up my stick so that people would notice it, basically.

Tom: And do you feel today, you know, thinking about the event and the performance, do you think it got the message across?

Faith: A hundred percent. A hundred percent, I think. People enjoyed the fact, I've spoken to quite a few people afterwards who enjoyed the fact that they want that cosiness around them, which means it keeps people away but they're cosy inside. Yeah.

Tom: Tell me about the performance. What did people actually see?

Faith: They saw eight pieces of work adorned on different prosthetics, I can't say that word, so there's a walking stick, there's crutches, elbow crutches, there's an electric wheelchair and a manual wheelchair and a hearing aid. So we're tackling different people's disabilities and the aids that they use.

Tom: And it got the message across, you're happy with that and the audience seemed to be quite engaged, didn't they?

Faith: Yeah, I think everybody's enjoyed the idea, the concept of the plants and the combination of the plants and everything's been decorated with paper. It's all paper and fabric.

Tom: My white cane, cos I was part of the performance, I thought it looked quite good, I've got to say.

Faith: Yeah, did you have a good feel of it?

Tom: I did, yeah. The thorns and everything else, yeah.

Faith: Because even though it looks really sharp and really dangerous, everything's very soft, even this. It's all very soft and bendable.

Tom: Just thinking more generally about disability and DaDaFest, do you think things are improving for disabled people overall?

Faith: I'd like to say yes, but I don't think so. I mean, shops still, there's still loads of shops and places that you can't go, even brand new ones, because they don't think about putting in a ramp up. So I don't think things have changed that much.

Tom: What projects have you got coming up?

Faith: I'm working in a school. I'm working for Warner Brothers, I'm making a sculpture for Warner Brothers. I'm doing a long project in Coventry with looked after children.

Tom: Well, Faith, thanks very much indeed for your time.

Faith: Thank you.

Shaun: For me, I didn't really have a look online at what we were doing because I purposely thought I'd worry too much if I knew too much about what we were doing.

Grindl: Yes, I think I was a bit in a similar position because I haven't long got back from New Zealand and it's only in the last day or so I was suddenly informed, now you're going to wear this and you're going to do this. So it was a bit of a surprise.

Tom: Those are the voices of two of the performers from today's procession. Shaun Fallows is the first voice you heard and then Grindl Dockery was the second voice. I'm going to start by talking to you, Shaun, if that's okay. Tell me what you were doing today. What was your role?

Shaun: I was following along in the procession, I suppose, towards the end and I was just told that I would have a plant strapped to the back of my chair and then I got given some maracas and a kazoo type thing and I was told to spin round after the person in front of me and I didn't realise before the event as well the similarities with plants. Disabled people, we are seeing plants, you see them every day but you don't notice plants because they're just there every day and I think that's disability. I'm alive every day, we're alive every day and so many people don't notice that you get around and you're living.

Tom: Grindl, what was your role and what were you wearing?

Grindl: I was wearing a rucksack with some very spiky, spiky thorns and I think it's, was it a, one of the weeds, the big prickly weeds that you, you know, that have flowers and, but I had to be careful how I moved my head because sometimes it would get a bit caught up and a bit close to my eyes but I really enjoyed being involved and I am Deaf and I think for too long disabled people have been excluded from policy and equality in just about every society you can think of.

Tom: Shaun, sorry Grindl, Shaun there mentioned about learning a lot from the plants and how the plants are often, plants, the thistle, oh there's your thistle. Shaun was mentioning there about learning a lot from the plants and how plants are often ignored. Do you as a disabled person feel

that you are overlooked and ignored?

Grindl: Oh I think so, very definitely. It's, I think a lot of politicians particularly, how many disabled politicians do we have? And so the understanding and feelings of exclusion are not there within the political system.

Tom: Shaun wants to say something, here you go for it Shaun.

Shaun: Yeah I mean I think that's where the big frustration is for me as well because everyone who's making the decisions for me and you is able-bodied and that can't be right because even in your best intentions you're only guessing if you're able-bodied so why would you go, it's like going to the doctor when you need to see a dentist, you go to the right person if you need to know, if you need that information. But I think there's a, I don't know, I think there's kind of an assumption that we won't know what we need and I think we do know what we need.

Tom: Grindl what do we need and is Shaun right?

Grindl: I think we need much more involvement of disabled people in policy and decision making because it's something that could impact anybody at any time and none of us know whether we're going to be disabled or not disabled. The point is that we have a growing older population as well and so we can expect more people with various disabilities and aren't able to get around so easy and so it's thinking about all our structures and our policies within society and how they support people who have disabilities or they exclude people.

Tom: You've kind of alluded to it but how do we improve things for disabled people in the longer term?

Shaun: I think it is things like this, you know, like, because I write poetry but you only ever see little bits of things happening in pockets and you need to see joined up things more regularly so it doesn't feel like an unusual thing. You know, like in my town where I live, I don't think I've ever seen more than three disabled people in a room, you know, so you need to see it on a regular basis to think well this isn't unusual, it's a normal thing so it's seeing it more often.

Tom: Well I'm sorry we can't speak to you for longer, Shaun, because you've obviously got smany great ideas but it's really lovely to meet you, thank you so much and Phoebe's here with your taxi so we better respect the fact that the taxi's here but lovely to meet you.

Shaun: No problem.

Tom: I'm going to carry on having a little chat.

Grindl: You don't have to charge more.

Tom: All the best to you, my friend.

Shaun: Thanks for having me. Cheers.

Grindl: Yeah, all the best.

Tom: Off Shaun goes.

Shaun: All the best, lovely to meet you.

Grindl: Yeah, get ready for the revolution.

Tom: Yeah.

Shaun: I'll crush a few toes if not.

Tom: We've talked, thank you, we've talked a little bit about rage, Grindl, and that's obviously one of the themes of DaDaFest this year. What are your thoughts on rage? Does it have to be something that is negative and angry or can we use that?

Grindl: I think it's about how many generations have we had where the battle for equality and access to services, to the physical environment, acceptance, and I think sometimes after a period of time you do feel angry and that there aren't people or more people who have certain powers and able to make decisions but it's very focused on the healthy, the well-being, the sort of non-disabled people because they're often the policy makers and decision makers. And it's about how do you set up an inclusive society that consults each other in making things more aware in terms of gaps and needs within our society.

Tom: When I was a lot younger there were groups of disabled people who basically went in for what you'd call civil disobedience and it did result in some change but a lot of people feel that things have gone backwards again. Do you feel that and do we maybe need to think about civil disobedience again?

Grindl: I think that's a possibility and I think just even generally it's not, I think probably disabled people are at the bottom of the scale but I think generally across society at the moment we have politicians who keep cutting the kind of support that society needs and for those in need. And you know I think it's, yes it can be more extreme or severe with disabled people but at the same time I think it's become very challenging for other people in society and particularly for instance in the working class and our public services and I am really concerned about the loss of our or cutbacks on our public services.

Tom: I mean that's a big thing isn't it at the moment?

Grindl: Yeah, yeah I think so because I lived in the States for a couple of years and it was really how do you say challenging in a way and you were desperate not to get ill or sick because you didn't know how much it was going to cost you. You know even to see a doctor or want prescriptions or whatever.

Tom: Do you think there's a discourse at large in this country now that once again is almost demonising disabled people?

Grindl: I think yes, I think they're not perhaps so much demonising although you'll always have people in society who will be aggressive and anti towards disabled people but I think because we've become more invisible in recent years I think people aren't hearing.

Tom: And Shaun mentioned that didn't he?

Grindl: Yes, yeah people aren't hearing or know the kind of challenges as disabled people we face. You know it's the same for instance if I want to get some new hearing aids and it's trying to find hearing aids that match my life, my social life, my working life, those sort of things but unless you pay thousands at a private company you end up with basics and I'm not saying it's bad that we don't get any kind of support but it's about how do we up the support in a way that helps us become more independent and able to support ourselves more as well.

Tom: So it's about independence and agency I guess?

Grindl: Yes, yes very definitely and having that agency is so crucial I think in the world at the moment because we have a world that is in chaos and I think, you know, disabled people will probably drop even further down the scale.

Tom: It's quite frightening.

Grindl: Yes it is, very frightening and the fact that we have so many politicians across the world who won't stand up for what's right for everybody and we are so focused these days on profit and loss and financial well-being and it's usually for the few not the many.

Tom: Finally, finally, optimism. Are you optimistic for the future?

Grindl: Well that's a tricky question with the mess the world's in at the moment I yeah I feel we need to be more proactive and we need to be voting for people we know will do the right thing and at the moment we seem to sort of as people have said to me "well that's who we've always voted for" and I've always said "well that doesn't make it right either" and I think that's what we have to think more about who are the people we need to get to stand up and fight for the causes of everyone in civil society.

Tom: Well Grindl it's been great to talk to you it was great to talk to Shaun before as well so thank you to you both.

The Pimp My Wheelchair performance was actually hosted by the Palm House in Sefton Park in Liverpool and Naomi McAllister works for the Palm House in all sorts of community outreach and PR capacity is that right?

Naomi: Yes that's that's more or less it. I am the marketing and community manager.

Tom: I'm glad you got your title in there because I would have got that completely wrong. Tell me about today's performance what you know what appealed to you about it?

Naomi: Well I think it really encompassed the idea behind the festival and certainly the neon piece that we have by Zoe Partington, Nothing About Us Without Us, to have people using their specific aids and parading them around the Palm House in such a glorious fashion.

Tom: What did the audience think of it because I guess you were in the audience?

Naomi: Oh yes it was it was joyous that's that's what I can say such a good way to start a Sunday in the building when surrounded with all the plants and the colours and with the parade coming through with the drum it was uplifting.

Tom: Tell me about the Palm House more generally a lot of people might not know it.

Naomi: So the Palm House is open from Sunday through to Thursday and so our general opening hours are 10 till 5 and you can come along it's free and which we're very proud of we provide a lot of free events and it's accessible in that way in the same way libraries are that you can come spend some time and now we've got the added bonus of having this beautiful artwork on display, planted here for the month during the festival.

Tom: And how important is it for you I know you work with communities how important is it for you to welcome in disabled people and make us feel welcome and the place to be accessible?

Naomi: It's very important indeed and I'm hoping through this collaboration and partnership that we will be able to learn more about what we should be providing because there's always more to learn and so it's been great and even just learning from Zoe and Rachel and all the people that we work with at DaDa giving us tips here and there and because I'm just always looking for ways to improve. I mean we have the you know the accessible ramp we have the we have the lift in place we have a few things you can also book a guided tour a sighted guided tour so it's a touch tour and if you get in touch with us at the office you can call on the phone or you can email or either way and we can book one of them in as well.

Tom: What lessons will the Palm House take away from this morning's performance?

Naomi: So as I said we've picked up lots of tips during planning on ways to make the space more accessible in general so we're hoping to implement them and also just from the performance itself it's finding ways to say yes and be flexible and that's the heart of collaboration we want to be audience led at the Palm House so this is part of our audience.

Tom: Janet Price is one of the other creators and artists collaborators who worked on the Pimp My Wheelchair performance today. From your point of view how did it go?

Janet: It was wonderful, it was it was extraordinary to have so many people here, so many friends so many people who just come on the lot on the off chance, it felt you know the people who collaborated with us in using the prosthetics were a wonderful group to display them and it just felt like a joy and a rage and a riot it was it was fabulous.

Tom: People listening to this won't have seen the performance so perhaps if you could, could you explain what it looked like?

Janet: We, well Pimp My Wheelchair was about brightening up prosthetics rather than them being dull and boring and as though they're things we should be apologetic about, so we took plant defence mechanisms things like the thorns on blackthorn plant, the rose thorns, we took the ways in which mushrooms send rhizomes out underground and we turned all of these things into displays that could be fitted around different sorts of prosthetics and we made them out of recycled material and plastic bottles and wire and just created these plant like forms that then were attached to or growing out of different sticks and plants and wheelchairs and blind canes hearing aids a whole range of things.

Tom: And what was the overall message then that you wanted people to take away, because the audience seemed to be quite engaged?

Janet: I think the biggest one was in talking about Pimp My Wheelchair it was, you know, access requirements are you right and do not feel ashamed about requesting them. I think that it was the feeling that we are facing increasing difficulties as disabled people that recognition of our requirements and I think the prejudice and discrimination is just getting, is growing at the moment and I think the message really we wanted to share was that please just take up your space in the world and take it up fully. I'm wearing at the moment an encircling cage of branches of a thorn tree the blackthorn and I'm definitely taking up my space in the world because it doubles the size of my wheelchair and extends into above and around me.

Tom: You mentioned there rage and obviously as disabled people we occasionally, maybe more than occasionally, get annoyed maybe angry and even outraged as well as raged about the treatment we receive. For you what does rage mean and how do we make that constructive or should we not worry about that sometimes?

Janet: I think one of the wonderful things about working with these plants and rage was that plants are great teachers because they work in so many different ways. So we've got the ones that are very physical like the thorns but we've also got things like the sensitive plant the mimosa which folds up when you touch it but then immediately will open again afterwards so it turns away from insults but then continues to live in its life. You've got things like mushrooms and the rhizomes from them which produce chemical signals so there's it's about communication it's about sharing messages about talking so there's different messages that come out from the plants about how rage can be expressed and shown and it's not simply shouting out into the world but it can be about these things like your sensory and physical reaction, the ways in which you collaborate and talk with people, yeah a range of things.

Tom: You mentioned access requirements and I think sometimes we've all experienced those whether we're wheelchair users or have some other form of impairment. Are we right to be angry when we're denied access?

Janet: Absolutely, you know we don't cause our disabilities. There are a whole range of different sorts of people in the world and you know the standard tall, active, white, young male is not the norm. Well it is the norm but it shouldn't be taken as the only proper way of being in the world. There are many different ways that people occupy space in the world and we have to become much more open to that variation and provide space. If we had taken away all the chairs in this room and just said well you have to stand unless you brought your own chair, only the people who use wheelchairs would have been really comfortable. You know we don't think about the provision of a chair as an access requirement for normally ambulant people but it is as much as other forms of provision are. So I think it's really important that we recognise that there are a whole variety of ways in which life for normative people is made very easy by the things that society puts in place for them and that the same should be true for disabled people. They should have those requirements met.

Tom: Would you say that's as a result of society being thoughtless or what is it? I've often tried to provide an answer to that question myself.

Janet: I think people become very uncomfortable about difference. They don't like things that are different and so the way of dealing with it is to reject it and turn away from it.

Tom: It's a fear.

Janet: Yeah, not even a fear can be one part of it but that discomfort can turn to rage on their part I often find that as a disabled person I find that I can be met with rage by non-disabled people.

Tom: For being in the way for instance?

Janet: No, for just demanding my rights to access somewhere sensibly.

Tom: You see the thing is we are supposed to be the passive recipients and we're not always and we shouldn't be.

Janet: No, absolutely not and I think that's another message we're trying to put across with these plants that plants may not move around but they are so deeply intelligent in so many ways and it's no good just saying, "oh disabled people they're just vegetables". Actually we have the same deep intelligence that everyone does and it's not hidden within us, it's there and we can share it if we are given even half an opportunity.

Tom: Could I just ask you about you as an artist and if you could just tell me a little bit about yourself, people who don't know you who are listening to this.

Janet: Okay, well I'm very new to the world of actually displaying art in this way. This is the first time I've done a public exhibition piece. Faith asked me and we collaborated together and I've worked with textiles in a smaller way producing personal pieces for family and friends largely over many, many years and I've been involved with DaDaFest for a number of years. I was on the board for quite a long time and when Faith asked me it was a real delight to be able to use my sewing skills, my textile skills to work alongside her to create pieces that then put together her sculptural skills with recycled materials and my sewing skills.

Tom: It was quite a spectacular sort of image and performance in the end wasn't it?

Janet: It was lovely wasn't it, the procession and the sounds and the shouts and the dancing and the claps and just the joy that you felt from people and the engagement, it was really lovely, yeah.

Tom: Well Janet, thank you very much for sticking around because I know you've got to rush off so I really appreciate that.

Janet: No, it's a pleasure Tom, thank you, thank you.

