

Tom: Hello, my name's Tom Walker. Welcome to the first in a new series of podcasts. I'm recording for DaDaFest, which is a disability arts organisation based very much in Liverpool, but which works, well, across the North West and even further afield. Now, on the 8th of March DaDaFest is celebrating its 40th anniversary. Its festival will begin then, but not only the festival, but there'll also be an exhibition. And I'm in the space in the Bluecoat Centre in Liverpool where the exhibition will be staged. It's called The Vide, and we'll find out a little bit about that in a moment. With me are Rachel Rogers, who's the executive producer for DaDaFest, and Bryan Biggs, who's the director of cultural legacies at the Bluecoat Centre. I'm going to start with you, Rachel, first of all. Just tell us a bit more, if you would, about DaDaFest.

Rachel: So DaDaFest, DaDa is an organisation that was originally set up in 1984. So yeah, as you said, 40th anniversary, kind of moving into that this year. It was part of, it was originally called Arts Integrated Merseyside and was part of Shape Arts, which is a London-based organisation. And then it sort of transformed into a festival-focused organisation in 2001, which was really championed by the then artistic director, Ruth Gould, Ruth Fabby now. And over the years, we've become a biennial organisation. So every two years we have a large international festival, which is really an incredibly important platform for disabled artists to be sharing their work, to be meeting with their peers, discussing significant subjects for disabled artists. But really it's a platform for disabled artists to share their work and get to build their audiences.

Tom: Now, I know you're very busy and working on the festival. Almost as we speak, tell me,

just give us a little idea as to what the festival is going to involve this year.

Rachel: Yeah, so we're not far away now. We've got about six weeks till we launch. It's really

exciting. We've got lots going on. We've an artist in residence at Metal over at Edgehill at the moment. They've just been in this morning because they're going to be sharing their

work here at the Bluecoat in the performance space. That's a live art piece, which is really

exciting for me, bringing live art back to the Bluecoat, which is something that I'm

really, really excited about. We've got a couple of other exhibitions, which I think

we'll be talking to you about at some point in the future, Tom. One really exciting one,

again, which will be launching the festival. It's an exhibition of 14 portraits of disabled women who were real leaders in the disability arts, disability rights movement back in the

80s, 90s, and actually some more recently.

Tom: Bryan, we're in the Bluecoat Centre and more specifically in a space called The Vide. Tell

me about the centre and the space we're in.

Bryan: Well, Bluecoat Arts Centre is the oldest arts centre in the country, the very first.

It goes back to 1927. So I won't give the whole history of that except to say that we're still here and we're delighted to be working with DaDaFest who are one of our valued tenants.

So we're an arts centre that cuts across all the different disciplines of the arts, although

the main focus is on visual art at the moment. But we have a working community of artists

in the building, but also arts organisations. And when we did a massive capital development

in 2008, we reopened in time for Capital of Culture. We'd made the building accessible for the very first time. And we were delighted when, as I say, DaDaFest became one of our

first tenants and they're still here.

So this exhibition that is in The Vide space is going to be looking at our relationship to DaDaFest over those 40 years through material that relates to activities, so it's exhibitions,

performances, etc.

Tom: Before we talk about the exhibition itself, just tell us about The Vide Centre because

scholars of the French language might recognise the word Vide.

Bryan: Well, it just means void. It's a void. It's a circulation space. When this big development

happened, the capital development, which opened in 2008, we basically had to create a new

wing, a new arts wing. And this is the space that connects the old building to the new wing.

Tom: I know this space isn't very big, but perhaps you could give us a little guided tour. Just

tell us what's here.

Bryan: Yeah, well, it's called The Vide, the void if you like. But the space we're in now is only a narrow space, but we've got vitrines, cases, display cases here.

Tom: Are we allowed to tap them? We are.

Bryan: And in those cases, there's a selection of material, what we called ephemera, from our archive. We've got a very extensive archive because we've been careful over the years to keep as much as we could, catalogues, posters, private view cards for exhibitions, and so on.

Tom: And over here we have the...

Bryan: And over here we have a selection of posters. And what you're going to see when the exhibition is on will be posters from the various DaDa festivals.

Tom: Give us an idea of what those posters will involve, what they'll look like.

Bryan: They're basically the generic posters for the festival, if you like. But alongside that, we'll have very specific things that relate to what the Bluecoat's done. There's going to be photographs also of other key moments, iconic images, if you like, of things that have happened here. So for instance, Tony Heaton, he did a fantastic piece for an exhibition called 'Art of the Lived Experiment' in 2014.

Tom: Thank you, Rachel.

Bryan: And he actually had one of those invalid cars, which some of your listeners might remember,

sprayed gold hanging in the space, a life-size invalid car hanging in this space. And again,

I mentioned the void before, the Vide, it is this tall circulation space, and it looked fantastic. And it was called 'Gold Lane', so he was playing on that word play, if you like, with the word lame and gold lame. And it was a fantastic piece. So there'll be images of iconic pieces of art and indeed iconic performances that have happened in the Bluecoat as part of DaDaFest.

Tom: And what people won't realise is I'm standing right in the spotlight now.

Bryan: You are. You say, yes, you can feel the heat, can't you?

Tom: I can almost, yeah.

Bryan: So what we've got here, these images on the laptop are of previous exhibitions and events

that we've done at the Bluecoat for DaDaFest, who of course became tenants here in 2008.

So the images we're looking at now are from members of Blue Room being involved in different

things.

Rachel: That's Josh.

Bryan: Is that okay? That's Josh, isn't it?

Tom: Rachel, you've had a look at some of the photos on Bryan's laptop. What do you make of them?

Tell us about the exhibition from your point of view.

Rachel: For us, it's just really important to have the catalogue of those moments where Bluecoat

have really been supportive of DaDa as an organisation and come together to collaborate

on some really exciting performances.

So I think one of the best images for me, which is definitely going to feature, is an image of, I couldn't even say how many people there were, but a huge number of young disabled

people who have clearly finished a performance event and they've come onto the stage space

to celebrate together.

And the joy there and the excitement and the energy is really palpable just from that image.

There's a couple of other images we're talking about, including performers who sadly, local

performers, and sadly they're no longer with us.

So Garry Robson in a piece, a solo piece that he did about injury, and the incredible

Jackie Hagan in a cabaret performance that she joined us for in 2019.

So again, really stunning performance images from those two artists in particular.

There will be more there as well.

Bryan: So this was the last exhibition we did, which you can see what the case looks like.

Tom: From your point of view, Bryan, how important is it to have DaDa based in this building?

Bryan: It's really important.

And it was one of the reasons we did this big development to make the building accessible

so that actually organisations like DaDaFest, who are completely inclusive, could actually

make this their home, make it feel safe for people who have disabilities to actually feel they'd like to come in here and get involved in it.

And I suppose in a way it is connected because around the time that we were doing this development,

we started a relationship with a project that turned out to be called Blue Room.

And that's an ongoing user service really that we provide for learning disabled adults who come here every week and they take part in art activities and create their own art.

And actually we're helping to develop them as artists in their own right.

So Blue Room has been here for a very long time, almost as long as we've been working with DaDaFest.

And so they'll be represented in the exhibition with some images and various things.

Tom: You use the word inclusive there.

For me as a visually impaired person, art isn't always inclusive.

Is that something that concerns you?

Bryan: It does.

Obviously the cost of making everything completely accessible, like sign language interpreters

for live gigs, that's become almost impossible to do.

We used to do that occasionally when we could afford it.

But I think we need to rethink that as an art sector at a time when there's hardly any money around for anything.

It's how do we make things truly inclusive?

Because we're not, to be frank about it, we're not.

And we make things as inclusive in terms of interpretation and so on, but not always 90 degree interpretation, if you know what I mean.

Tom: Rachel, from your point of view, obviously inclusivity really, really matters.

Rachel: It does.

And as Bryan was saying, it's hard to make something fully inclusive, fully accessible, so something that we're really trying to do this year is just to be a bit more experimental with how we're making things accessible.

So, for example, this podcast.

Yes, there will be audio description available for a lot of our work as much as possible.

Some of that's being done by the artists themselves.

Some of that will be done by our internal team and some by professional audio describers.

But this podcast is perhaps a more interesting way, rather than just sort of talking about the images, to find out more about the exhibitions and what it means.

And what Bryan was saying about the BSL, yes, we are doing that for our live performances,

our events where we're hoping that we will have Deaf people coming.

But something we've been talking about, which is absolutely not immediate, is like, we need

to pick up the campaign for BSL in schools because then BSL becomes part of people's language every day.

And sorry, BSL interpreters, we may not need them anymore in 20 years' time.

Tom: Tell me about the lengths you go to to make your performances accessible and inclusive.

Rachel: I think we do that on a case-by-case basis.

So for example, our live art commission that's happening in Bluecoat today, we've just been



talking through with Zack, Zack Mennell, who's in residency at Metal.

And one of the things that they've been doing is thinking about access from the very start.

So how can they make the piece accessible, particularly in terms of audio and BSL.

And Zack's been great and really, really considered that.

So for example, as a BSL user, you will be able to come into the space.

It's a visual, it's an installation that will have activations.

You'll be able to come into the space and there will be a film that is part of the main installation that will explain the situation, the sounds that are going to be heard, the text that will be playing on the film.

And Zack is also creating themselves an audio file to describe what the space looks like.

And then for the performances themselves, we've talked about how that BSL will then be shared by a live BSL interpreter.

And there will also be an audio describer in the space for that.

So that's been a really great experience for Zack.

It's a learning experience for them and also for us.

And then there's other stuff which is, I suppose, a bit more straightforward and traditional.

So there's shows that are already in existence, but they have not been able to be developed

with BSL as part of the show.

So we would then be bringing an interpreter in to work with the artist on the day or the day before to figure out how we can include things as much as possible.

Tom: Rachel, you very neatly moved us on to the festival.

Tell me what's coming up.

Rachel: Okay, so we launch on the 8th of March, which I think we've said already.

This exhibition here in Bluecoat will be part of that launch day.

We're launching at Open Eye Gallery with an exhibition of 14 disabled women, which is very exciting for us.

Some of those women will be there.

Some of those names will be familiar to people.

So Liz Carr, who's actually being photographed today, Ruth Fabby, previous artistic director,

Kaite O'Reilly, who gave us the Rushton lecture in December, Amina Atiq, who's one of the

artists that we're working with, who's a bit more contemporary, based in Liverpool.

So that's just a snapshot of some of the people in that exhibition.

We're also then having a huge projection event with an artist called Cathy Mager, who's Bristol-based.

She's coming up with her company, Spectroscope, and we're projecting a kind of a dance movement

piece on the Cunard Building called 'Hand Ships Sail'.

That's also part of the launch.

And then the neon, Zoe Partington, DaDa's new chief exec, has a series of light sculptures.

They are text-based.

They are slogans from Disability Rights Campaign.

So things like Nothing About Us Without Us, Rights Not Charity.

And those will be located in different venues around the city and a bit further afield.

So Zoe has gone to Williamson Art Gallery today in Birkenhead, and we're also speaking to St. Helens Library.

So we're looking a bit further afield across Merseyside.

So those are some of the highlights.

Tom: Bryan, you've heard there what Rachel's said.

How excited are you about what's coming up?

Bryan: Well, it's great to have DaDaFest back here, because although they're tenants of ours,

their offices are based here, we haven't actually participated in the festival for a very long

time.

So it's great to have some events actually happening here, which is fantastic.

And the neons, I think these are Tony Heaton's neons, or they're not?

Rachel: Zoe has a series of nine, and then Tony has, I think, something called 'Raspberry Ripple'.

Bryan: Yeah, that's right.

Yeah.

So that'd be great.

I mean, we don't know where that's going to be on this building, but it's possible we might have a neon on the building by Tony Heaton, who did the 'Gold Lane' installation.

So it's always great to see new voices, new faces, as well as some of the old guard, if you like.

And I think DaDaFest has always done that very well, is to encourage and support emerging

talent alongside the more established artists.

Tom: Rachel, and there's a theme, isn't there, to this year's festival?

Rachel: There is, yes.

Our theme for the festival this year is rage.

And this came from consultations we did with disabled artists, disabled people, and stakeholders

in the city and beyond.

And it's just this feeling that disabled people, disabled artists have been trying to change

things for so, so long.

And there was progress, and now it feels like globally those rights are being stripped away

and more barriers are being put in place.

They may not be the same barriers.

There may be ramps in buildings.

There may be accessible transport.

But some of those rights and barriers seem to be being stripped away, and people are incredibly frustrated.

So we're looking at rage in all its forms, and some of that is real righteous rage, anger.

So there will be some very energetic and noisy stuff going on.

And then also looking at more quiet protest and people working to channel that rage into

something really, really productive through quieter and more strategic actions.

Tom: I co-wrote a song for the Liverpool band The Vow, and the final lyric of disconnect was,

'this is the age of rage'.

What do you think?

Rachel: I think this is the age of rage.

And also we're wanting that to be proactive and positive rage rather than just raging

at people for no reason, because this is also the rage of getting your opinion across and shouting about things for nothing.

And I'm not sure about that.

Tom: Bryan, you don't look like a man disposed to too much rage.

Bryan: Oh, I don't know.

Rachel: Yeah, you don't know, do you?

Bryan: I'm very angry with the world at the moment.

Aren't we all?

Rachel: Yeah.

Bryan: But as Rachel says, it has to be a positive anger, and we can't be defeatists.

Tom: And does this signal a new era, if you like, of joint working between Bluecoat and DaDa?

Bryan: I think there's a real energy there now, and they're keen to work with us, we're keen to

work with them.

So I'm hoping this will be the start of more collaboration.

Tom: I was going to say, collaborative working is very important, isn't it?

Bryan: I think for everybody in the arts, it's the only way to survive at the moment.

Which is, everyone I meet is saying, we have to work in partnership, we do work in partnership,

it's the only way we can get by.

So I think it's a necessity that more arts organisations do collaborate.

And there's a great spirit of that in this city, in the city region, of arts organisations working together.

Obviously, you get the occasional rivalries.

But I think we've all discovered that it's best to work together.

Tom: From your point of view, Rachel, how do you feel about that partnership working?

Rachel: I think, as Bryan said, not only is it necessary, it feels like, just in recent months, it feels

like people are really feeling the value of that even more, and the necessity of that even more.

And things like the Culture Network have rekindled those discussions about how do we make it

work for us?

How do we really make sure that the smaller organisations are included in those collaborative

discussions and really share some of the incredible work that's happening across the city?

Because there are, like DaDaFest, Homotopia, some of the smaller organisations who have

quite a specialist focus are doing some incredible work that isn't happening other places, even

in the UK.

And it's really using that collaboration to shout about that and shine a light on some of those.

Tom: You've probably got about six weeks to go before March the 8th.

Tell me what your life, your working life, is going to be like between now and then.

Rachel: Canceled the weekend.

Lots of frozen dinners.

It's also really exciting.

The team is very busy, frantic, slightly.

But it's also, again, there's a real sense of camaraderie and pulling together to make things work and a real sense of excitement because of who we've got involved.

As Bryan said, we've got some incredibly big names from disability arts history and we've

also got lots of young people.

We're working in partnership with the Young Everyman Playhouse producers.

There's younger artists that we're supporting and we're bringing in to show their work.

So it's great.

It feels like an exciting time and a time to really think about what our purpose is and how we take this momentum forward into the future.

Tom: We all know that disabled people are hugely underrepresented in the arts and do face that

glass ceiling.

Do you think what DaDa's doing, the festival and all the other work you're doing, is that beginning to help shatter that glass ceiling?

Rachel: It's, honestly, I think it would be artists who would be able to answer that with their

experience of actually how it is working with organisations who aren't necessarily set up like this.

Like Bluecoat has a lot of knowledge around working with disabled artists, partly because of the partnership, partly because you're doing it anyway.

And then also we're here.

I think, I mean, yes, obviously it's helped a lot and things have shifted.

You do see disabled artists programmed on "mainstream" stages or in "mainstream" galleries.

I'm doing that in inverted commas.

But I think really it would be the artists who would be able to say what the experience is really like and whether they do feel supported and welcomed.

And that's something that we can talk to people about here in the festival and then work out

what we can do to continue that change.

Tom: Well Bryan Biggs from the Bluecoat Centre and Rachel Rogers from DaDaFest, it's been

great to talk to you.

Thank you both very much indeed.