Anthea Williams: Hi, this is Anthea Williams with Activated Arts for two RPH. Thanks so much for joining us. Today, we are going to talk about one of my favorite programs and it's one of my favorite programs because I took part in it last year. Screenability is supported by film New South Wales, and the films that are made through Screenability are part of the Sydney Film Festival. Today, I'm joined by Emily Dash and Shawn Spina, both of whom have made Screenability films in the past. Emily Dash is an actor, a writer, a speaker, and a disability advocate, and she has an emphasis on social inclusion and expanding perceptions of disability in her work. She's a founding member of the theater company, Midnight Feast. Shawn Spina is a writer and actor, and he's one of the lead writers on the website Las Rosas. Thank you both so much for joining me today.

Emily Dash: Thanks for having us.

Shawn Spina: Yeah, it's a pleasure to be here.

Anthea Williams: So Emily, you made your film last year in 2020, Groundhog night. Can you tell our listeners a little bit about it and how you came up with the idea?

Emily Dash: So Groundhog Night is a family comedy drama around living with a disability and the family dynamics that are around that. How I came up with it is that it is very much based on my experiences, but still fictionalized. So what I like to say is it's not a true story, but it's a very real story. Not all of the things that happened in the film, including the end, are things that people have done or said to me so that's interesting. I need to add that my grandparents are actually very nice people. Yeah, so that's all fictional. That is something that has been said to me.

Anthea Williams: I'm really pleased to hear that your grandparents are lovely people. Look in the film the grandparents are so well-meaning, but yeah they make some terrible calls. It is such a great film and look, one thing that's great about all of these films is they're available on ABC iview. So if you are listing in Australia, you're able to go and listen to any of them for free, watching them for free, I should say and I will absolutely put links to all of them in the show notes. Shawn, can you tell us a little bit about your fabulous film Prone To The Drone?

Shawn Spina: Yeah sure. Prone To The Drone is about a young man that lives by himself and just isolates himself from the world, and it's not until one day a drone lands in his backyard he's forced to like confront his feelings, his emotions and that and just get out there. I came up with the idea from basing off feelings and emotions I had a couple of years ago when I fell into a depressed state and I wanted to like get out of that and I wanted to bring out the good and the funny and the bad situations.

Anthea Williams: Yeah, it's a really beautiful film. Your character in it has such a beautiful interaction with the boys in his neighborhood and I really appreciated that. Both of you wrote your films and acted in them. How was that? That's a lot to take on.

Emily Dash: Yeah it is a lot to take on. People always asked me I like better, writing or acting things and the answer is that both of them bring you different things and you learn different skills and you can bring different parts of yourself to them. So while it's a lot to take on, I really enjoyed every single aspect of it, and it was important for me to be at the center of that story because it's so well informed by my own experiences and my family's experiences.

Anthea Williams: That's really interesting. You're giving a lot of yourself. The film that I made, I didn't write, I directed it and I wasn't in it and I still felt like I gave a lot of myself in that process. We worked with a young actor who had cerebral palsy. I grew up with rheumatoid arthritis, so much of the disability is the same, they're both physical disabilities that lead to similar outcomes. There's a moment in the piece where the young boy jumps on a bed and that is exactly what I remember doing in a hospital when I was a little bit younger than my character, but I certainly felt like I gave a lot of myself in terms of bringing the film to light. Do you feel the same Shawn? Do you feel like it was an opportunity to tell a really personal story?

Shawn Spina: Yeah, definitely. I've always been a part of other people's stories and helping them tell their stories and their experiences and that. For me to come out and just be able to tell my story and get the support and the help from people that have contributed and been a part of the past couple of years, it was a beautiful comeback kind of experience whereas we've known each other for years and now I finally want to like come up and tell something and everybody just jumped on and it was a really beautiful experience.

Anthea Williams: Yeah, that's awesome. I know you worked with Curious Works and they're a remarkable company, so it's nice to acknowledge their involvement in it as well. Had either of you applied for funding to make yourselves films before?

Emily Dash: Yes, I had, including that I was going to apply for Groundhog Night funding the previous year, but we couldn't get the script together in time, but yes, for other projects I've also applied for funding.

Anthea Williams: How had that gone? Had you had a lot of support from the industry previously?

Emily Dash: No, I haven't had a lot of support. I don't know about any of you but I've always found it really difficult to get funding. I think that's par for the course though because we live in a very competitive industry.

Anthea Williams: Yeah, that's true. It certainly was a process that opened up a lot of doors for me and I think Sophia Golin, who does a lot of the running of this program through Screen New South Wales has been fantastic, because I certainly know when I was looking at places to apply for funding, it was going to be really difficult even though I had a lot of experience in a sister industry to get funding for a short film. Having made the short film has opened up a lot of doors for me. Have you found that as well Emily? I know that you should tell us a little bit about where Groundhog night is going now.

Emily Dash: Yeah look, I can't even begin to tell you how many doors making this film has opened up for me. Getting this funding from Screen from New South Wales, not only did the film raise my profile, getting into lots of international and national festivals and have lots of great success. But it's also been a stepping stone towards some of my next projects, basically one of the things I want to do that's taking up a lot of my focus at the moment is I want to develop the characters for Groundhog Night into TV series because we really enjoyed the character dynamics and think that they have a lot more stories to tell. So yeah, it really opened up a lot of doors.

Anthea Williams: Yeah, that's fantastic. I've had a similar experience and I know Shawn, when I was looking at Prone To The Drone, there is a lot of Laurels on that poster. I know that short film has been to a lot of places. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Shawn Spina: Yeah, after the Sydney film festival, it went through to the Traveling Film Festival. It is a great and interesting experience to just see that travel and go through there. It got nominated for a Canadian award at a film festival in Canada, an interesting experience to just have people hear and talk about me and people come up to me and they kind of know me. It's a opening experience and that now. Before I was a nobody now I'm somebody that's somewhat recognized in the industry.

Anthea Williams: Yeah.

Emily Dash: Something that's been really interesting for me is that, while I couldn't go anywhere and do things because COVID was on, my film was going everywhere. So things like the Traveling Film Festival, [inaudible 00:09:34] Film Festival, Cleveland International. It went all these places that we couldn't go, but still the film was being seen by so many people, hopefully changing hearts and minds all over the world while I was stuck here so that's good.

Anthea Williams: I had that experience as well, and it's delightfully frustrating, isn't it?

Emily Dash: Yeah.

Anthea Williams: On one hand, you're so thrilled and on the other hand, you're just like, "What the hell, my film's in America and I'm not? This is so unfair."

Emily Dash: Yes, absolutely. I know that when we went to St. Kilda Film Festival and saw it with an audience for the first time, it was a really amazing experience.

Anthea Williams: Yeah. I had that experience at the New Zealand Film Festival, and I think I had that experience, probably the earliest of all of the filmmakers from our cohort because New Zealand was able to open up really early. So before my writer or my producer or anyone else I made it with was able to see it, I saw it at the New Zealand film festival with about 600 people and that was remarkable. That was the first time I heard my film with surround sound because I'd rushed back to New Zealand so I could help my parents through lockdown and I'd actually done the sound of my film on my laptop. So I never heard it with surround sound. Yeah, it was amazing to have that experience. So I think it'd be interesting for the three of us to chat because we will identify as living with disability.

Emily Dash: Yes.

Anthea Williams: How do we feel that the film in screen industry treats people with disability?

Emily Dash: It's very slowly changing, but we are still the most underrepresented group on screen so that's something. There's obviously so many additional and other types of barriers as well in terms of training and employment in things like this, so we've still got a long way, but we'll get there.

Anthea Williams: Yeah, I certainly hope so. What are your thoughts, Shawn?

Shawn Spina: I think Emily pretty much said the key point of it is that, yeah, it is slowly starting to change, but I see there needs to be a bigger change to push forward and put more artists with disabilities into a situation where we're giving more opportunities, more recognition and just recognized in such a better light than just a person with a disability. We're all human beings.

Anthea Williams: Yeah. What do you think most needs to change in the industry?

Emily Dash: I think representation, I think it really starts with representation. So when you're making a project about a community, make sure that you're authentically connecting with that community and not just one person.

Anthea Williams: Yeah.

Emily Dash: So if you want to make a story about disability, you don't just go have a coffee with Emily Dash and say, "Oh, I consulted with a disability..." No, you don't have to find ways of connecting with the community, whether it's yours or someone else and find ways of meaningful engaging whether that's a co-writing role, roles in front of and behind the camera are really important as well.

Anthea Williams: Roles both behind and in front of the camera, I think that's really true. I was amazed when I was making Safety Net. Sophia was wonderful and I had so much support from Create New South Wales to do what I needed to do, but it did have a few people who were wondering why I was working with an actor who hadn't done a film before. They seem to think I could get a kid to pretend this, my lead actor was 12 years old. Of course, I was possibly going to cast someone who hadn't done a film before. I was so clear that there was no way I was making this film without casting a child who had disability. I think it's amazing that those thoughts are still around that that can happen.

Emily Dash: Yeah.

Anthea Williams: Yeah, have you come across those kinds of thoughts in your work, Shawn or Emily, people making those kinds of comments?

Emily Dash: I have certainly. Something just even recently crossed my desk that was completely not open to authentic casting at all. It's moments like that, where you think, "What are we doing this for?" But if there's at least one more authentically cast, authentically represented story, then we're doing our job and it's making a difference.

Anthea Williams: Yeah, I think so. I've also had the experience recently of going back to revisit films that I didn't judge at all harshly when I was younger, because I was just so used to seeing a really limited vision of people with disability. Even though I lived with disability, I didn't question it, and now realizing that I would view those films in a completely way, which is a great realization.

Emily Dash: It's really interesting because I get asked when I'm being told some representation things, I asked whether the authentic casting takes away absolutely from a great performance, say in my left foot or something like that and one of the thing is this goes across the board for everything, you have to be aware that something is a product of its time.

Anthea Williams: Yeah.

Emily Dash: So for that time those things are great. For this time if we were to make that film now would not be great.

Anthea Williams: That's a really good point, Emily. I like that a lot. Do you agree with that, Shawn?

Shawn Spina: Yeah, definitely. Just hit it right on the ball there. That's exactly what I was thinking. We have so much easier access to communicating with people. There's no way you can't find people that you want for a specific film. It should be a lot easier to find that representation to uphold in those films now than what there would have been like 20, 30 years ago.

Emily Dash: Yeah.

Anthea Williams: Absolutely, and you're absolutely right as well Emily, that thing you said about having a conversation with Emily Dash over coffee is not consultation. I love that.

Emily Dash: It's only because it happens so much.

Anthea Williams: Yeah, absolutely. We did a piece on consultation last time we did the show and I spoke to a brilliant theater maker, Tom Middleditch who said every consultation needs to be done with the person who is highest up on the creative chain. So you need to be having a consultation with the writer or the director, because if you're any lower than that, you actually can't implement what needs to be implemented and I think that's really important as well.

Emily Dash: Yeah.

Anthea Williams: But yeah active engagement, active involvement. That's so important.

Shawn Spina: Were your films screened online when they came out or was it in-person?

Emily Dash: No, we couldn't have a in-person screening because of COVID so our premiere with Sydney Film Festival was online. I only had an in-person film festival about a month ago.

Shawn Spina: I was thinking for 2019. I wish they would have a thing where after they screen it, for the duration of that festival, they could have it online, pay a slightly smaller fee, rather than having to go on the train and go out to a place that's probably two hours away, three, four hours away. You could either watch in-person or online for a duration.

Emily Dash: Yeah.

Anthea Williams: Certainly COVID has taught us so much about access. So often we think about access, we think about ramps and seating and that is really important, but there are so many other forms of access that we need to make available to people as well, including geographic access and economic access. It was wonderful that the festival was so available to people. It was tricky for us filmmakers in some ways, because we were part of the Sydney film festival, we couldn't apply for the Melbourne Film Festival and there are some great programs that are a part of both festivals, which would have been wonderful to be able to access. Certainly it created some issues, but yeah, it was wonderful that I could invite friends all over Australia to see my work. So what I would love to hear now is what you're up to at the moment. Emily, you've told us a little bit about Groundhog Night and moving it into a series. What are the other projects that you're working on?

Emily Dash: Well the other projects I'm working, I'm currently working on a web series called Free Wheelers. I just written a film called Valent, which is another film with Bus stop films. I work in my current day job as a writer and producer at this small production called My Treehouse so that keeps me busy. Yeah, I have a play called Free Fall that I'm looking at adapting into either a film or mini series. So yeah, doing a lot at the moment.

Anthea Williams: So you're super busy. What about you Shawn? What are you up to?

Shawn Spina: I'm doing a collaborative work with Curious Works title pending, but it's called T Y stories. So basically we wanted to make a collaborative art installation about something that represents Western Sydney and something that represents everybody from our group as just a bunch of tales and things that revolve around bus stops and that, that's one project. I'll just show you something here. So on my wall over here, I got stick it notes for a short feature that I want to make. It's about understanding the emotional love and what does it mean to love and have that feeling, do self care and that. Other than that, I've started on a path to exploring how to use live streaming as a more film theatrical kind of element.

Anthea Williams: Awesome. So for our listeners who don't have the benefit of what I just got to see on Zoom, Shawn just spun his computer around and showed me this dark green wall he has that is completely covered in post-it notes. Post-it notes the writer's best friend. I know that I have used them a great many times as well. It's lovely to hear that you are so busy writing and creating as well. Hey, it's been so wonderful chatting to you both. I just like to remind listeners that the Sydney Film Festival is coming up in a few months in Sydney and they're doing Screenability again, I've spoken to some of the Screenability creators from the sea coming up and I've already got to see one of the films. It's a great lineup so I really suggest people go when it's part of the Sydney film festival. Hey Emily and Shawn, thank you so much for joining me today.

Emily Dash: Thank you for having us.

Hannah: Yeah, thank you for having us. It was a great pleasure.

Anthea Williams: Make sure that you get onto iview and watch both of their films, Groundhog Night and Prone To The Drone. And of course, watch my film as well Safety Net (music).

Welcome to Activated Arts on two RPH, Hannah, brilliant Hannah, what have you been seeing and not seeing this month, what have you got to recommend for us?

Hannah: Well, this first one turns the tables a bit because it's something I got to experience, but now the festival has finished so others won't get to, although maybe we'll be lucky and this artwork will pop up again somewhere else in the future. Take me somewhere, Glasgow's Festival of Contemporary International Performance went online this year and I swung by the digital festival to catch Sarah Hopfinger's Pain and I, an intimate audio experience exploring the complexities of chronic pain. This is a primarily text-based audio work and there's also a PDF transcript available and this work actually originally existed as a live choreographic performance. So this new audio experience is a transposition of that work into a different form.

We're seeing a lot of exciting experiments in this sphere of the last year. It reminds me somewhat of the transpositions of audio to dance, to audio in the chain collaboration of Andy Slater and EB Anasemore, Pepper Simiya and Hilary Cordell or the intimate and embodied listening experiences created by the iconic, the Thai Tamowa Pole. As a bedridden audience member, it's a very satisfying way to experience an artwork. Now, I wasn't sure how I would react to a piece about pain. I live with chronic pain and sometimes I find artwork that reflect that experience back to me soothing. Sometimes I'll read Anne Boyer's The Undying during a flare, but sometimes I find it makes it harder to endure. So I went into this audio work with a little trepidation, but I actually found it to be a really beautiful experience that made me consider my pain and my relationship to it in a totally different way.

Anthea Williams: Yeah, that's so interesting. I'm really intrigued about seeing it now. I have exactly the same thing, I was really worried about reading a couple of books that we talked about on the podcast a couple of months ago Unseen and Tell Me Where It Hurts, [inaudible 00:23:56] Kylie Muslin's books and I was so pleased I read them. But I was really concerned about reading something about chronic pain when it's something I experience, because so often I use distraction techniques to get me through. Yet those books helped me learn so much about my own experiences and how my experiences are related to other peoples with disabilities. So I'm really pleased that I had read them. So, yeah okay, I'll get involved. What's your other thing, Hannah?

Hannah: The Aha ensemble are currently artists in residence at La Boite theater in Brisbane, and they'll be giving a showing of their new physical creation Yolk at the round house on June 25 and 26. Yolk explores interpersonal relationships and how lived experiences of both visible and invisible disabilities shape the parameters of connection. Access wise, this work is primarily a visually based work with some spoken dialogue and auditory elements and no strobe effects will be used. Thank you. June 25th performance will be an osland interpreted performance and June 26th will be a relaxed performance and tickets are at laboite.com.au.

Anthea Williams: Awesome, they both sound like really amazing events. That's cool. Hey, I've got something to recommend as well. Coming up on August the 22nd, into the space between the notes is going to be on as part of the vivid festival at the Sydney Opera House, Liz Martin supported by Eliza Hull and full band, it is going to be a fantastic event and I'm absolutely going. It's going to be wheelchair accessible. Unfortunately it doesn't have an online component, which is a real shame, but both of these women live with disability. I think it's going to be remarkable to see them perform together. A lot of people will know Liz Martin from this podcast because Liz used to do the What's on with us. Also a lot of people would have tried to see her at the Sydney festival earlier in the year. And unfortunately that didn't go ahead because of COVID and people not being able to arrive from Melbourne. So it's going to be an excellent chance to see her live here, her fantastic and music and see her perform with the Eliza Hull.

Hannah: Well, I'm disappointed I don't get to see that one. That there's no online component because Liz's music is amazing, but I hope that everyone else gets the chance to go in and experience it.

Anthea Williams: Yeah, absolutely. Hey, as always, it's been brilliant chatting to you, Hannah. Thanks so much for joining us.

Hannah: Thanks for having me.

Anthea Williams: So to take us out today, we're going to listen to Nighttime by Liz Martin. I hope you can get along to the Opera House and see here.

Liz Martin: (Singing).