Anthea:

Welcome to Sideshow on 2RPH. Today, we have Kiruna Stammell. Kiruna is an actor and dancer, she's Sydney born and trained both in the UK and in Australia, and has appeared in films like Moulin Rouge, on TV shows like The Serpent Queen, and on stage. She's even been on Play School. Currently, she's playing Kirsty Millar on British soap, Doctors. Kiruna, thank you so much for joining me on Sideshow.

So, hey, how is life treating you on a soap, and how is it different from your other jobs?

Kiruna:

It is radically different. I can't tell you, I mean, I think I've learned more doing a year and a half of a daytime soap than I have over my 20-year acting career. So, imagine rocking up to work and the only way I can describe it is, it's like there's a printing press that's constantly just pu- pushing out paper, and you're grabbing the pages, digesting them as quickly as possible, interpreting them, delivering a performance, and then it's next. So, it's the fastest I've ever worked in my entire acting career. And Doctors is notoriously famous for being, I think, one of the fastest ones that's shot in the UK.

So, yeah, you are, as one of the lovely established actresses, Elizabeth Dermot Walsh, said to me, flying by the seat of your pants. Or as she termed it, "Going to work every day without any pants on."

Anthea:

Right, okay.

Kiruna:

So, that is really how it is. Also, it's interesting as well, because you've got a fan base that are, um, they're lovely and, you know, it, the show means so much to them. But they're kind of like a little bit, they make me think a little bit of, like, people that are obsessive about Dungeons and Dragons. Like, it's their world, their rules, their people that they like and dislike, and their emotions and relationship to the show are really close to the surface, and there's a real sense of ownership around the show, um, and the shared experiences it gives them with other fans and other people who watch the show.

Which is also a really different experience as an actor, because you're dealing with a different kind of feedback, different, um, intensity with the commenting online.

Anthea:

Yeah.

Kiruna:

Um, you know, at, whereas I've done loads of TV shows where I've been, you know, a, basically like a guest artist. You come, you do an episode, you, you knock out a performance, it's a lovely story told over six to eight episodes. Um, and there are some people that really love the work and really love what you've done. But it's not the same kind of group of people, necessarily, really, um, hyper focusing on sort of, you know, the minutiae of a show, for example.

Anthea:

Yeah, 'cause it's...

Kiruna:

You know?

Anthea:

Been running for decades, hasn't it?

Kiruna:

Yeah, and our audience, um, I mean, we rate very well. We get, I think, 30% of the television share during our daytime slot, which is amazing given the state of terrestrial TV these days, compared to sort of streaming. And because it rates so well, getting 30% of the audience at that time, you, you've kind of, it's a shared experience, so I think there's something about that. And also about the demographic of our audience who, you know, are people that are at home, watching something in the middle of the day, that there's an investment in that show to kind of give them access to the outside world story telling, they want something that is, um, challenging, but also a little bit safe. Like, it, it's doing something very specifically for a demographic as, you know, at the same time. And I think their investment in us is very passionate, and they give themselves over to it a lot.

Anthea:

And so, how many episodes are you making a year?

Kiruna:

Oh, I don't know the total a year, but we will shoot three episodes over seven work days, and there are usually two blocks running. So, a block is sort of a team that are working in over the seven days, and we'll have two concurrent blocks, at least, running. So, that's shooting six episodes every seven days, with two different teams. And then, once a year, they'll triple bank, where they add another block, so you might be across nine episodes, um, being shot within a seven-day period, if you're an actor moving between the blocks.

Anthea:

Wow. That's so intense.

Kiruna:

So, it's a lot. Like, I know we're up to 200 and something at the moment's the one that I remember most recently reading. So, yeah, we've been, each season, you know, there's a large number of eps that come out.

Anthea:

Wow. And how many takes do you get in your scenes?

Kiruna:

Well, this was the thing that was such an interesting thing to learn. Um, if they can get it in one, they'll at- they'll get it in one. But, you know, often there might be a boom or something and you'll, you'll redo it. When you're an actor, you kinda gotta hold your m- "Can we do that again?" Moments for when you really need to do it again. Like, you can't be doing it again all the time. But I reckon, gosh, I feel like sometimes it's definitely just one, like, bang off the mark, and then sometimes two, three?

Anthea:

Wow.

Kiruna:

But it's fast. We work really quick.

Anthea:

Wow.

Kiruna:

Yeah. And that's what I mean, like, you've gotta park your ego and your inhibitions at the door, because there's no time.

Anthea:

Yep.

Kiruna:

And there's no time to be precious.

Anthea:

No. No. Now, look, I know we'll have some emerging, emerging performers listening to the show. Can you tell me a little bit about your training?

Kiruna:

Hmm. Well, it's interesting for me, because I'm 42, so I believe I was one of the first generations in Australia with a disability to expect to attend mainstream schooling...

Anthea:

Hmm.

Kiruna:

To be integrated and not sort of s- sent up to special school. Even that, I mean, I've got stories of my parents, where there was a primary school teacher who openly refused to teach me, because of my dwarfism. Those sorts of things were happening behind the scenes, I mean, right at the beginning of I just need regular education.

Anthea:

Hmm.

Kiruna:

And then we've all got our story from our very first school play. I mean, there's, girls famously, apparently, it's one of the moments they clock whether they're pretty or not because of the way that, you know, the primary school play is cast. And, you know, so I went through school with some of those things happening when I was very young behind the scenes and, at that point, unaware of them. And then, by the time I got through to university, where I know there'd been a few real bright stars that have kind of, um, been disabled and come through Australian universities, but, you know, going to university and, and being there with a visible difference, was really quite challenging and isolating.

Um, and, I mean, right up until the late 90s, 90s when I auditioned, um, for one of Australia's leading drama schools, you know, I was openly told at the audition, when I got through to the penultimate round of selection, that there was no point training a dwarf.

Anthea:

Right.

Kiruna:

Um, which was really, on one hand, I mean, the discrimination's terrible, that's a given, it shouldn't happen. But weirdly, because it was so overt, it was also freeing, because it made me look elsewhere, in that, if that's the core belief of the people that are meant to be training me, what can I possibly learn from them? Because I'd be meeting discrimination and barriers every time I went in. I'd be showing them how human I was every time I was performing, rather than coming away with a great skillset.

So, that was part of the impetus for me to actually leave the country and, and look elsewhere, because the disability rights movement had happened in the UK, the big one, in 1995, where people had campaigned for access to public transport and things, and there was a real push in the late 90s, early noughties, to, um, improve the representation of people with disabilities on screen. So, it was actually a really fortunate time for me to kind of jump ship.

Also, the internet had been invented, and was still relatively new and exciting, which meant I, for a sweet period in history, was able to email directors on the other side of the globe, who were maybe thinking a little bit more diversely and progressively. And then physically post a digital videotape of me auditioning. Uh, so, you know, that was kind of how I was being seen by them, and then that led to work in England and Europe, which just basically didn't stop. Um, and once I was over here, I went to LAMDA, I was accepted into, um, one of their full-time training courses. But as an overseas foreign student at the time, I think in like 2003, it wo- would have cost about 30,000 pounds to do the course, which was just not...

Anthea:

That's...

Kiruna:

Feasible for my family.

Anthea:

So much money.

Kiruna:

I remember, um, bawling my eyes and manipulating my dad, nearly, into mortgaging the house, to allow me to do it. And my dad was nearly manipulated, and he just said to me on the phone, "Darling, when you become an actor." I mean, I was acting at the time, but he's like, you know. "W- with your future acting career, do you think you will ever be able to pay off this mortgage that I take on the house?" And I remember at that point just suddenly stopping the mini pilody of crocodile tears and going, "Do you know what, Dad? Um, I'll just start working. It's fine. I, I, I won't do the full-time course at drama school."

But I did cobble together my training, basically, from the late 90s through to even now, I do things to top it up, but short courses. So, I did, um, uh, Shakespearean and, um, Jacobean plays at LAMDA for a solid eight weeks, in the UK. And, um, that was also my introduction, kind of, to London. It gave me enough of a taster of drama school to kind of steal what I needed to steal as knowledge, and, and also work out what I maybe wanted more of myself, in terms of my own training and career development. And, you know, I went to the Actors Center in Australia when I was there, um, did every play that I could kind of feasibly be cast in at university.

Uh, which was, again, hard, because even at that point at uni, in Sydney, you had young men and women that were casting, I mean, yeah, sure, they were my age, but they were still affected by all the ableism in society. And, you know, I wouldn't get a look in at some auditions, 'cause I knew that, that the, a hot, you know, director that was basically just wanting to cast his next girlfriend.

Anthea:

Yeah, that's...

Kiruna:

So (laughs), you know, that sort of drama at uni, you gotta kind of have a, you know, very honest, uh, perspective of, of these things. And so, yeah, I put together as much training as I could, and then got loads of experience with a company in London called Graeae Theater Company, which were a disability-lead theater company. Um, as well as meeting every director that was open to having a conversation with me, and, um, getting the ball rolling that way.

Anthea:

Now, I know you did a sitcom in, at Graeae at one point. I think...

Kiruna:

Hmm.

Anthea:

That's so interesting, it's such an interesting company. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Kiruna:

Well, what was great about the sitcom in, in Graeae, wasn't just the fact that it was giving me access to stage time, a tour, and, you know, really letting me sit in on rehearsal processes, but I met loads of disabled people. Loads of different bodies, loads of different neurological conditions and, you know, people dealing with all sorts of different situations, sensory impairments, physical, um, you name it. And that was really what forged my disability politics and sense of identity, which in the 90s, growing up in a fairly middle class family in Sydney, I had an idea that I was being treated badly, I'd had the, I, I mean socially, I'd had experiences where primary school teachers had refused to teach me. I'd had awkward moments at university where lecturers have come out with really shocking statements about me in front of the class. Things like that.

So, I had a really strong sense of, uh, justice while I was in Australia and what I wanted to change, and, and how I wanted to be treated. But, um, I felt a-, in many ways, alone in that, except for the blessing, actually, that my siblings have the same disability as myself. Which gave me a little bit of a shared experience, um, particularly about my ideology around representation and how important that is. But I didn't really find a disabled community until I came to England and had met people that had trained themselves to buses and insisted on the development of ramps to access a bus.

And I think the difference was, they had all been, the generation just above me, had all been in the UK sent to special schools. So, they knew one another when they were kinda ghettoized in education. The civil rights movement kind of happened, they got swept up along in that. They then accessed university and, you know, there was a deregulation of institutions, so a lot of people were integrated into society, or some of the awesome people I met were famously busting friends out from institutions. You know, people who'd been put away by the, I'm using quote marks here, 'cause I know the language is inappropriate, but it was "of the time", you know, the spastic society.

Anthea:

Hmm.

Kiruna:

You know, people were in their housing development stark. And at the time, the charities, because that was a source of income for the charity, providing a service to the government. You know, they were saying, "Oh, don't worry about building accessible housing socially. You know, we've got the people here in comfortable, you know, institutionalized accommodation." And whereas the disability rights movement was like, "No, we wanna be able to buy a house, or live where we wanna live, or live outside of an institutional situation."

And I'd never come across that before, because I was, I think, generationally in a weird spot as an Australian who, well, it was great, I was, you know, integrated into my local mainstream schools, I became vice captain of my high school. There were things I look back and realize were inaccessible to me that may- you know, really disadvantaged my education, that I didn't have insight into until suddenly in my mid 20s I went, "Oh my God, maybe the fact I couldn't reach anything in the science lab really had an impact on my HSE levels when I was trying to do science and physics, and that's why I dropped out..."

Anthea:

Mm-hmm.

Kiruna:

"Of those subjects." Like, but I didn't realize that until my 20s and went, "Oh my God, the height of science labs are a social construction. I didn't have access to any of that. Oh, I was, I really had a hard time at school, retrospectively." Or remembering that, even when I walked to my HSE exam, you know, some awful adult, you know, apropos of nothing, lent out of their car as they drove past me and shouted the m-word at me. So, you know, I'm five minutes away from walking into major exams at high school, and I've just been, you know, experienced some serious ableist abuse that's really upsetting.

But I'm like, "Nope, gotta put that in a box and do this maths test." And did very well, but you go, "That's gotta have taken a couple of points off," 'cause that woulda been...

Anthea:

Totally.

Kiruna:

In the back of my he- mind while I was pumped full of adren- So, you know, there are things like that, that I didn't have insight into until I was much older and outside looking back. And my parents are lovely, bright, thoughtful, caring, loving people, who were both teachers themselves, so I think, how did they not look at the science lab and go, "Oh, that'll be tricky for Kiruna." But then, you realize that nobody can know anybody else's body or experience, and it was completely new to them.

Anthea:

And will...

Kiruna:

And it was like, "They can't have seen it..."

Anthea:

No, so in the end we're all swimming in ableist soup. So, we're all...

Kiruna:

We are.

Anthea:

We're all aware of the, not aware of, and I think about some of those things as well, like I did really well at visual arts when I was younger. And as soon as I got older and the workload got bigger, I couldn't do that level of work with my hands, 'cause my hands...

Kiruna:

Mm-hmm.

Anthea:

Would just get too sore. And so, I went from getting an A in art, to failing art, because I just didn't have enough working documents. And I, I just thought I was lazy...

Kiruna:

Yep.

Anthea:

And I'd messed up. And...

Kiruna:

Yeah.

Anthea:

Actually, it wasn't that at all, it was that the workload had tripled and I, I couldn't do that amount of work with the hands that I had.

Kiruna:

Yeah.

Anthea:

So, yeah, no, I totally, I, I completely...

Kiruna:

Yeah.

Anthea:

Understand that.

Kiruna:

And, you know, you think it's obvious, as well, when somebody's got like a visibly, really obvious impairment. You'd s- but you realize, no, people have absolutely no idea. So, you know, I've got a lot of empathy too when people kind of, you know, are ticking the invisible disability box, because it's like, if people can look at me, who's three foot tall, in the standard kitchen, which did happen when I was applying for a grant to get my kitchen adapted, and go, "What's the problem?"

Anthea:

(laughs)

Kiruna:

(laughs) "W- w- w- w- what, what, I don't understand why this kitchen doesn't work for you." And I'm like, "'Cause everything is higher than my head." E- I just think, "Ugh, you know, we haven't even got near the edges of dealing with stuff that people can't overtly see."

Anthea:

So, how do you deal with your working life now? Do you think there are big differences...

Kiruna:

Mm-hmm.

Anthea:

Working with a disability in the UK and in Australia?

Kiruna:

Yes. So, I did have jobs in Australia that were mostly office-based. I did do acting work in Australia, but a lot of the acting work I got, I was really lucky, like Moulin Rouge, for example, ended up lasting for months. So, I was going to the same studio day on day, which meant I kind of did have a certain level of control around the environment that I was in. So, things that may have been inaccessible to me, like for example, there is no way with my short arms I would've been able to lace myself up into a corset. Well, no one really can lace themselves up into a corset, so there were loads of, you know, costume people around who, that was their job to help you in and out of those things.

So, it was interesting in that, and also, actually, I was working so hard and had such a nice role in it, that a runner would bring the lunch to you. So, there were things that sort of weren't a problem, but they were accidentally not a problem. My ordinary workplaces, I just took steps everywhere, but also it's tricky, because I was sort of in my, uh, early, early 20s or late teens when I was working in Australia. I was really comfortable with, at that point, being physically uncomfortable and keeping everybody else comfortable in the workplace.

What I've noticed in England, where I've now been working for the last 20 years, not only have they got an excellent program called Access to Work, which means I apply for a budget each year, and I can employ an access support worker, which I do do, and they're my employee, not my, not my company or contractor's employee. And this person basically shadows me, and their job is, um, mostly to be on standby, because if you look at Doctors as a workplace, yes, often times I'm on set and at base. So, I know base, I've got steps around base, I've got modifications at base. But base also still has a standard greenroom, where I wouldn't be able to safely make a tea or coffee, because it's very difficult to get a company that is hiring a space to then modify the kitchen, for example.

Anthea:

Hmm.

Kiruna:

So, I have, in my dressing room, um, a low kettle, low mugs, low sugar, low milk, so that I can reach everything. But my access support worker, for example, will fill my water supply every morning so that it's somewhere that I can reach it. My access support worker will shadow me when, for example, as an actor, you could end up on any set or location, because you don't have that level of control in the workplace to go, "Oh, that house has door handles that are too high for me to reach, we can't film here." I can't really say that, um, because I'm not part of the location's team, I'm dealing with enough learning X number of scripts in a week.

So, it's easier for me to employ an access support worker who will shadow me when we go to locations which I may have never visited before, so I don't know how accessible they are or they aren't. And that access support worker removes those barriers. So, the most obvious one is, we go film in an oldy worldy house, and this, the rooms that we're filing in have been decked out to look accessible for me and my character...

Anthea:

Hmm.

Kiruna:

So, that's all believable. Um, so, the art department sometimes brings, like, door handles and things that are fake that they can then drop to my height, so my character is able to let herself in and out of spaces. But Kiruna, the actress, might need to do a 10-1, which, by the way, is secret for needing to wee, everybody...

Anthea:

(laughs)

Kiruna:

Which always makes me giggle.

Anthea:

Mm-hmm.

Kiruna:

And we all know what it means, but we all politely go "10-1". 10-1, everyone! I'm off for a 10-1. And it's like, I don't know why we don't all just go, "I'm off for a wee." 'Cause i- it means the same thing, but anyway.

Anthea:

I know...

Kiruna:

Humans are funny.

Anthea:

It's so funny.

Kiruna:

(laughs) So, um, you know, my access support worker will often come to the toilet with me, and their job will literally be, can you guard the door and make, because I can't reach the lock to lock the bathroom door, so your job is to stand guard and hold the door shut for me. You know, or can you reach the soap for me, and things like that. Whereas I'm somebody that, in my ordinary life, I don't need that kind of assistance, because I've adapted my home. So, or my workplace has a set of steps so that I've, you know, like I've made modifications where I regularly am. But as an actor, I can't control the other environments that I'm not part of.

Um, what's gorgeous as well, working on this soap, is the art department have really got to know me. So, they already, in their heads, are often problem solving, in terms of prop choice. You know?

Anthea:

Wonderful.

Kiruna:

They give me a rucksack that's the right size for me to carry. They give me, um, a pair of scissors that are comfortable for me to chuck something with, like, you know, there's a real... And that's just 'cause they've spent time with me. Like, I haven't needed to particularly educate them on that.

Early on, I did have to reinforce to everyone that it was like, "Please ask me. If you ask me something inappropriate, I'll tell you it's inappropriate and not answer. But please don't be scared to ask me, because you can't know everything. What's much harder for me is you working yourself up, preemptively solving a problem without consultation and giving me a solution that's much harder for me to work with than something I might've suggested. Or even me telling you, actually, in that instance, that isn't a problem."

Anthea:

Yeah.

Kiruna:

Um.

Anthea:

Yep.

Kiruna:

You know, things like that. So, the classic for me is often, as well, a lot of, um, products that are kind of advertised as disability aides, because wheelchair users are still, you know, the poster-child of disability in most places around the world. Well, you know, a wheelchair accessible toilet seat, for me, is four inches higher than I'm able to manage. Whereas I've lived my life hopping on and off average height toilet seats.

Anthea:

Toilet seats. Yeah.

Kiruna:

You know, so that I'm fine with. You know, just things like that.

Anthea:

Hey, we are gonna run out of time. It has been so...

Kiruna:

Oh my God, I just went for the clappers.

Anthea:

I know, it was amazing! It was absolutely amazing, it has been so glorious to speak to you. Thank you so much. I really hope the birds have, um, ha- outside my house having a party haven't created a problem for us. But thank you so much for joining us today.

Kiruna:

Aw, thank you. Oh, and I just wanted to say, I'm absolutely delighted that the disability rights movement in Australia has really, you know, hit the ground running, campaigning for the NDIS, all of these things that I'm really seeing, um, my sisters benefit from and their world be opened up by. Um, just don't let the non-disabled politicians tinker with it too much, because that's, again, where problems overseas, in the UK, I, I've clocked them. Non-disabled people decides something's too generous and, and they start to meddle, and they, um, make a real hash of it. So...

Anthea:

Yes, they do.

Kiruna:

That's the only piece of advice I can share.

Anthea:

Thank you so much, we so need to hear that right now.

You're on 2RPH with Anthea Williams, listening to Sideshow. Now, Hanna, I believe this month you have two shows you're going to tell us about that you're not seeing, and one show that you are able to access.

Hanna:

This month we're drawing to the end of Melbourne Fringe. And I've got two more picks that I won't be seeing, but I wish I could. So, I hope some of you will get the chance to catch these works. First is Sheltered, written by and starring Kathryn Hall, and directed by Andi Snelling. Sheltered is a play following Kathryn's hilariously honest take on the ups and downs of finding adulthood in a youth shelter, while navigating cerebral palsy. Access details are on the Melbourne Fringe website, and an access pack is available on request. The final two shows are on October 20 and 22.

My second choice is Deaf Enough, created and performed by Nathan Borg, and presented by Sam Martin. Deaf Enough is a deaf-led conversation that will be told in Auslan, by Deaf-Queer actor and activist, Nathan Borg. The October 20th session is already sold out, but tickets are still available for the 21st and 22nd of October. Both these shows are on at Festival Hub: Trades Hall, with tickets and further info available at melbournefringe.com.au.

Now, listeners may remember me recommending Kinetic Light's work-in-progress documentary online a few months ago. Well, now, they're having a rare screening of one of their famous works, Descent. This online screening will include all new access provisions, as well as a conversation between Kinetic Light founding artists, Alice Shepard, Michael Maag, and Laurel Lawson. It's on October 26 and 28, and will be available to watch back as on demand viewing for 48 hours after the online screening. Tickets are a sliding scale, starting at $0, and audiences can choose from four different access options, including ASL music interpretation, and multiple types of audio description. Tickets and further information are available at www.tickettailor.com/events/kineticlight/1021305.

Anthea:

Thanks, Hanna, they sound like great projects. Now, to take us out, we have The Psychotic Reactions, with Take It Easy.