Anthea:

Hey, podcast listeners. This is Anthea Williams with Sideshow. Because you are listening here on the podcast, you're going to get the full interview of me talking to the awesome Apothetae Theater, a theater company based in North America that investigates the disabled experience.

And then at the end, I'll be chatting with Liz Cooper about what we are and are not seeing in disability arts this month. With me from the Apothetae, we have Gregg Mozgala, AD and founder of that theater company. We have Kim Weild, who is an award-winning theater director, and we have Katherine Williams, who is a lead scholar on Shakespeare and Disability. Thank you so much for joining us.

Katherine:

So happy to be here.

Anthea:

Greg, I'm gonna start off with you. I know that you set up Apothetae Theater over a decade ago. Can you tell us a little bit about setting up that company and where the company came from?

Greg:

Yeah, I'd be happy to. Um, thanks for having us. I started the company in 2012. I can't... I was just [inaudible 00:01:09] the other day that it's been 13 years almost, which seems ridiculous. I never intended it to be that long. Um, but it was really started out of an impulse that nobody was making plays, uh, for, with or by disabled people in any satisfactory, rigorous way.

I was a, um... I have a BFA, a Bachelor of Fine Arts, I'm an actor. And at the time I was working with one company here in New York City that was kind of the one big company that did work, integrated work with disabled and non-disabled. So that meant I only had an opportunity to work if there was a part for me in their season. So I was facing a lot of difficulty just getting work, and so I thought, well, what do I do? I need to make plays.

What do... What are actors? And actors are in plays. So it really came out of an impulse to just be generative and make new plays, um, and expanded beyond that since. Um, but it was really just, I wanna work, I want other people to work, I wanna work with interesting, dynamic people. And I just felt the impulse to kind of take the reins and, and start doing that. And it's since growing well beyond that. But that was- that was the original impulse, just get plays made.

Anthea:

I think a lot of people are gonna find that really inspiring that you just wanted to do it. So can you tell us, what were your first steps?

Greg:

Uh, my first steps were to find... Well, think of- think of ideas for plays, and then find writers who I thought could write those plays. So I, I had sort of three or four big ideas in my head rolling around, um, and I identified writers who were primarily non-disabled. Um, I did have one disabled writer, uh, in, in the mix. But, um...

And that was intentional almost. I wanted... Because it- my experience to then had been, when I had been working with this theater company or whenever I did work, uh, with "disabled companies" or in that vein, I always felt this incredible separation or line from... I always thought I, I was- I was, um, kind of extracting myself from my everyday life (laugh), um, and then suddenly going to be with disabled people. And it became... It wasn't reflective of my day-to-day experience.

Anthea:

Yeah.

Greg:

So I wanted the work that I made to be more reflective of how I actually lived. Um, and so, uh... And also just to thinking, these writers have fans, they have potentially built an audience. You know, um, they could bring people to the work. I also wanted to expose, uh, you know, people to new writers, new directors, um. And at the time, you know, th- those were primarily not non-disabled writers, directors, just people in the field in general.

So that was, uh... It needed to... It needed to be done. And at the time, I didn't know any other disabled artistic directors. I... Like, it... It felt strange to me that a lot of the companies that, uh, were forefronting disability in their work were by- had non-disabled artistic directors. Uh, and that wasn't the case with other populations, uh, based on like race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, whatever it may be.

So that was puzzling to me. So I thought, well, we need to... If we're gonna do this, then, you know, we should control the, the reins of power, the how we create and how we tell our stories. We should have agency over the stories that we are telling about ourselves and about our communities and about our histories.

Anthea:

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. And Kim, how did you get involved?

Kim:

Um, well, I have been directing, working with disabled artists. Actually, my very first teaching job was for the National Theatre of the Handicapped in- based in New York City. And from there, as I began to make my way first as an actor and then as a director and having, uh, family members who are deaf and disabled, I was always looking at how to find ways to reflect the world that I grew up in, on stage.

Um, so I came at it from a different way, uh, than Greg. And I have a long-standing relationship with a playwright named Charles Mee, who is a disabled playwright. And, um, I've done six of his plays. I was doing a show of his called Fêtes de la Nuit in New York in 2010. And then Greg, you and I met, was it '13? Was it right when you were starting the Apothetae? I don't rightly recall.

Greg:

I think it was right around there, yeah. You actually worked... I don't know if you were working at NYCDA with my wife at the time.

Kim:

Oh, maybe.

Greg:

But she... So Kim was maybe working at a conservatory where my wife was also working. They... You both went to Columbia University.

Kim:

Right.

Greg:

So you knew each other from there. And I remember her telling me about y- how you dealt with, uh, a deaf student in class-

Kim:

Yes.

Greg:

... and how you made the class more inclusive for that particular student in terms of feedback. And that was like, that... In my memory, that's my first introduction of you, and then I was like, "Oh, we have to, uh... I have to meet this person." Our paths eventually crossed. And then I just started calling you like (laugh)-

Kim:

(laugh).

Greg:

... every couple weeks to be like, "I have an idea. What about this? What about this? What about this? What about this?"

Kim:

Yeah.

Greg:

Um, yeah.

Kim:

Yeah.

Greg:

Something like that.

Kim:

Yeah. So that's- that's how Greg and I first came together and met. Yeah.

Anthea:

And it's a bilingual company, isn't it?

Kim:

We... So our production of Titus that we're working- that the three of us, Katherine, Greg and I are working on is bilingual. It's American Sign Language and Voiced English, yes. It's deaf artists, hearing artists, hard of hearing, um, disabled and non-disabled. Lots of cultures happening there.

Greg:

As she said, the mission of the Ap- the Apothetae is to produce and explore works that illuminate the disabled experience. And at the time when I wrote that mission statement, I didn't really know what the experience was in full I- because I didn't have... One of the main reasons for starting the company was, I have no idea- I have no context for myself as a disabled human being in the 20th and 21st century.

Kim:

Mm-hmm.

Greg:

I don't know what... I don't know... I don't know what my history is. I don't know who my- who my role models are. I had very little context for any of that. So... And then I thought, well, if I'm gonna be- if I'm gonna call myself an artistic director and have the focus on these particular communities, then I need to create work that is reflective of those communities. So I think every play has been designed in some way...

And I'm physically disabled. I was born with cerebral palsy, so I may- I may have leanings that way. But, um, you know, I was like, "This... This community is incredibly broad and incredibly vast, so I need to- I need to figure out how to..." And I didn't... My knowledge is very limited. I've...

My knowledge has grown due to exposure with those communities through the artistic process and through these, for lack of a better term, strategic alignments with people like Kim or others who have experience working with, um, communities that I necessarily don't have access to. Um, and so that's, um... Yeah, that's just kind of how the company has evolved and grown over the- over, over time.

Anthea:

Uh, I completely understand where you're coming from. I feel a little bit the same. And I, I think particularly for people like you and I who've had lifelong disability, I think sometimes it's even more the case because we haven't lived outside the disabled experience. So in some ways, it can almost be harder to see it.

Kim:

Mm-hmm.

Anthea:

Um, but that's partly why we called this radio show Sideshow, to kind of honor the fact that often that is where disabled artists were performing, on the sideshow. Um, yeah. So, no, thank you for that. Katherine, how did you get involved?

Katherine:

Sure. So I am a professor of, uh, English and Theater, and my specialty is Shakespeare as well as Critical Disability Studies. So my first book, which was called Unfixable Forms: Disability, Performance, and the Early Modern English Theater, is about what Shakespeare and Shakespeare's culture understood disability to, to be. So Richard III is the figure that we always think about in relation to disability in this earlier moment.

But I was really interested in the range of disabled characters that show up. They're everywhere in the early modern theater. They are figures of wounded soldiers who have come home from battle and have prosthetic legs. There are plays like, uh, a play that's by an, an... It's anonymous. We know nothing about its performance history, but it's called The Fair Maid of the Exchange. And it has a central character who is actually named Cripple.

He's not given any other name in the play text. He's this amazing figure who can work. He... So he can labor. He defies so many of the stereotypes around disability. Um, and I was interested in how the theater has actually always been representing disability even in the 16th century. So I wrote this book because I was interested in thinking about how these earlier texts could help us think about questions of embodiment in a different way.

And as I wrote that book, the question that I kept getting was, what about now? Like, how do these plays from the past help us think about theatrical virtuosity now? What does this mean for disabled artists in the present? So, of course, one of the answers to that question was Teenage Dick, Mike Lew's play. So I saw Greg in that play.

I had decided to write about it, and then I was invited to do the program note for the Donmar Warehouse production that starred Daniel Monks, where Lew actually changed some of the disability characterization language to reflect the embodiment of a different disabled artist. So this was amazing because it was a hands-on moment where working with Shakespeare's play actually illuminated all of these possibilities for disabled theater making, and for us to see in the theater.

Well, for everyone. I say us thinking from a sort of disability community standpoint, but actually, it's a gift to everyone, disabled and non-disabled, to get to see new work that features disabled artists and refuses to say that disability can only mean one thing. Um, so as a result of that, Greg and I connected, and then, um, the possibility of working on Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus in this residency, uh, was so exciting as we began to, to think about what might be possible together.

Anthea:

So I just wanna go back. I, of course, know Teenage Dick. I think it's not only a fabulous title (laugh), it's a brilliant play, which I've read. Daniel Monks is a fantastic Australian actor who played Richard in it, uh, in the Donmar Warehouse production. But Greg, you've played Richard in it as well, haven't you?

Greg:

Uh, yes.

Anthea:

Yeah. It's done productions all across professional theaters in America. And I would be lying if I didn't say I haven't tried to get a professional production of it up in Australia. Um, I certainly hope that's gonna happen in the next couple of years. So could you just give the audience just a little introduction to it, uh, for those people who haven't read it?

Greg:

Katherine, do you wanna (laugh)?

Katherine:

(laugh).

Greg:

I think [inaudible 00:12:46]. I was just like, in awe of hearing you talk. I, like... It's so... I'm like, "So I know, it's like, in the weed." You're so cool. Like, I can't. Like, Katherine and I met at a... I just have to say, Katherine and I met at a diner, right, after she emailed me. And I was like, "I... Let's..." Do you know? And I think that's what's so great about all this stuff. It's like we felt...

It's not like we knew of each other. We found each other, you know (laughs). I feel like we were like la- laboring, like, you know, in the wilderness, in our own little corners, you know? And then through chance or just, uh, I don't know, uh, inertia or whatever it might be, you know, we all kind of found each other. And it's not... This, our dynamic is so special, uh, for lack of a better term, right?

Katherine:

Mm-hmm.

Greg:

But it is so- it is so unique, right? And it's so, uh, refreshing for me to be like, "Oh, these people get it."

Anthea:

Yeah.

Greg:

They, like... They understand something about the history, the context, the larger picture. And their, their- the need and their personal fire and desire to kind of bring this work to the world is so, uh, encouraging and affirming. So I just need to- I just need to, um... I just need to go off on this tangent, uh, in praise of these two women, um, because it's- it's really incredible. And, uh... And it's not hyperbole to say, uh, they've changed my life-

Anthea:

Oh.

Greg:

... uh, for the better. So, uh, and then... So go ahead, Katherine (laugh).

Katherine:

(laugh), ah, I am... I'm a little bit [inaudible 00:14:24] from that amazing, uh, affirmation from Greg. Thank you. Okay, let me try to just recollect. So, okay, Teenage Dick is an adaptation/appropriation of Richard III that is set in a high school. And so it brings the massive sprawling history play down to this social world of the high school.

And in the story that follows, it explores what disability means, and one of the ways that it does that is by introducing a second disabled character. So we have, uh, Richard obviously, uh, but we also have the character, Buckingham or Buck, uh, who is played by an actor who is a wheelchair user. So you have a Richard, uh, with a visible disability. You have Richard interacting with these other characters.

The long for love with Anne Margaret, the competitor- competition with this rival, Eddie. You follow this plot that is also thinking about what disability means in a social world. And it's interesting because every time Richard draws us into his vision of what disability means, you also have another disabled character played authentically by a second disabled actor who is there to complicate or challenge that sense of what disability is about.

I was really interested too, because Greg in originating the role, also worked with the playwright as both, both of the actors, uh, worked with, uh, the playwright, in shaping the characterization. And there's one moment in particular in which Anne Margaret, this non-disabled character, but who is a dancer. So she's thinking about embodiment and sort of how bodies work, and she turns to Richard and she asks Richard what it feels like to be in his body.

And in the original version of Teenage Dick, the answer that Richard gives comes out of Greg's own experience of having CP, of what it means to move about the world, what it feels like to be in that body. And in the Donmar production, what's fascinating is that is a moment that is different because it is rescripted around Daniel Monks' experience of embodiment, where Monks' Richard actually refuses the simile, and says, "Actually, it's probably like what it feels like to be in your body." And then offers a really different e- account of the sort of experience of pain or experience of movement.

So this idea that bodies and how we experience them is both a point of contact across disabled and non-disabled experience, but it's also a way of crafting new ideas about bodies, because you've got two different disabled actors, disabled artists, as every- I mean, a kind of infinite number of disabled embodiments might reshape those minds to talk about what it's like to be in their body, thereby creating new opportunities for their characters.

Anthea:

That's absolutely awesome. So now the three of you are all working together at the Public Theater on this residency as co-artistic leads, and you're working on Titus Andronicus. So what was the impetus for this production, and how were you working together on that?

Greg:

Uh, I'll just say where it came from, and then Kim, I'll kick it to you, right? So I think I was contacted by, uh, a dramaturg who, uh, formerly worked at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival here, um, who mentioned, uh, a production of Titus with deaf actors. And she asked me for some feedback or advice. I c... I can't remember... It was so long ago, I can't remember what the exact question was.

But I remember thinking about it. This idea was in my head. And I... And I was preparing like, a pork tenderloin for dinner. And, you know, I just had the thought of, well, I've always been in- interested in Titus. It's always a play that fascinated me. I've always enjoyed it. I think it's tons of fun. And it turns out there's disability all over that play.

The Apothetae had previously done an exploration of A Midsummer Night's Dream, where the concept was just reductively non-disabled, uh, lovers, physically disabled fairies, and the rude mechanicals consisted of actors, um, with intellectual disabilities or who were neuro- neurodivergent, right? With the exception of Peter Quince, the, um, director... Um, uh, director/manager, right?

And so Kim and I had tried to... Kim was originally slated to direct that show. Um, but, uh, got a- got a professional opportunity in, um- at about. So, um... But um, this is to say like, uh... I've always the idea of like exploring Shakespeare and integrating disability in a way has always been sort of at the forefront of w- what the Apothetae does fro- from, from very early on. So anyway, Titus was...

You've got these two cultures in Titus. Rome has been at war with the Goths for 10 years, right? This general returns home victorious, bringing, as prisoners of war, the queen of the Goths and her three sons. The play takes off from there. But I thought, well, these- they would've been culturally different from the Romans. They would've had a different language. And I wanted to work with other...

I was like... I had worked with physically disabled, I'd worked with, um, uh, neurodivergent, intellectually disabled in Midsummer. And I was like, "Well, I..." And I've always been intrigued by working with the deaf. Kim and I were always conversing, like... You know, she was my kind... She was my bridge to that community, right? And I thought, oh, well, here's an idea. What if all those characters, the Goth characters were deaf and they, they use ASL to communicate?

That would really, um, be illustrative of a d... They would have literally a different language, right? And would that help the cultural cl- cultural clash within the play, uh, be illuminated in a new way? Not to mention that if you know the play, a lot of hands and tongues get cut off and out, right?

Anthea:

Mm-hmm.

Greg:

So I just thought, there was something. So that was the... That was the spark of the original idea. Sorry, that was a... I talked... That was a long way to say just, it was a way to (laugh)... It was a way to work on Shakespeare, to integrate deaf, non-disabled and, and disabled actors in, in, in a- in a Shakespeare play, so...

Anthea:

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. And... And Kim, yeah, it would be fantastic to find out how you're working now.

Kim:

Sure. So one of the things that a- the three of us represent is, I say we're like the whole- we're a Holy Trinity or a three-legged stool. We work incredibly well in a symbiotic way. The first phase, though, that we recognized is in American theater, when working with deaf artists, it is very rare for a script to be translated completely into American Sign Language first, uh, and then given to the actors so that when they arrive a- to the first day of rehearsal, they have a script that's in their language.

So we set out the first year, basically... What... Well, actually, what we worked on prior (laugh) even to first rehearsal, was creating a complete translation of Titus Andronicus into American Sign Language, which had never been done, to our knowledge, this way in the United States. Um, it might... Elsewhere, there might be a sign language, uh, complete translation of it, but...

And we're working with... We have a team of three phenomenal DASLs, which are directors of artistic sign language; Andrew Morrill, Kailyn Aaron-Lozano, and Kalen Feeney. And that has been a very illuminating and intricate process where we could probably take up the whole time talking about the art of translation and the, um- and what is required for this work, uh, especially the poetics of Shakespeare, translating that into American Sign language, which Katherine can speak in- incredibly eloquently about.

Um, so we did that. And our first workshop was bringing everybody together and doing a deep dive into the table work and reading the script, and creating a room where people could ask any question that they wanted to ask, even if they felt it was a stupid question or a question that perhaps they have been told never to ask. I'm very aware of growing up with, with my brother, of being around kids whose parents were telling them not to look.

Anthea:

Hmm.

Kim:

And when I'm in conversations with my brother or deaf friends, people wanting to look, but being not sure if it's okay or... So our whole thing was look at... You know, we want people to be watching and looking and receiving and asking questions. There's no question that isn't okay to ask. So we create a very open room, I would say a room that allows for the artists to bring fully who they are.

We also had an hour, was it an hour? Set aside every day where anybody from the public theater could come in and just watch us work. Because part of what we're doing, this is also a laboratory where we're investigating and developing the best practices for working with deaf and disabled artists and wanting to share this. So the first year was really s- really spent on translation and doing this deep dive into text analysis, and looking at, what does it mean for these two different cultures to come together?

That the Romans are disabled because they have been at war for 10, 15 years, that the Goths have their own language, which is sign language. And then for me, uh, one of the things that I'm very excited about inside of this is what, what happens to Aaron. Because he comes- he arrives in Rome with the Goths, and there is this moment right where Alarbus is, is taken to be executed, and Tamora steps up to say something and she's signing.

But then she taps Aaron and asks him to translate for her. And so this person who arrives where you think at first maybe he's just, you know, a servant becomes elevated because he is a bridge and it is about communication. And then you begin to see throughout the play how he's threaded, where he's translating for her, he's translating for other people. He's hearing things that maybe he shouldn't be hearing.

He... When is he translating exactly what's being said? When isn't he? And then there's the moment when the nurse comes in with the baby and the baby is... We don't know if the baby's deaf or not. So we have this scene with, you know, remarkable language, spoken language spoken that is beautifully translated into sign language. And you're seeing a hearing father signing to his baby-

Anthea:

Hmm.

Kim:

... because he's acknowledging the mother. And it's actually, for us in the United States, language acquisition- language acquisition for the deaf is, is a major issue.

Anthea:

Yeah.

Kim:

It becomes... It's almost a political statement in it- in its own way, right? So that's a small bit of it. And then the second (laugh)... I know I'm gassing on here, but... And then this- the second workshop that we're prepping for, which happens in June, is the embodiment phase now. Now we're taking all of that knowledge, everything that we've investigated, and we're moving into the center of the room now. Katherine.

Anthea:

Katherine wants to jump in. Jump in, Katherine.

Kim:

Go, Katherine.

Katherine:

I wanted to, to jump in. So yes, so co-artistic leads, my role within that triumvirate structure is scholar and dramaturg. And it is so exciting to think about drawing on both the cachet of Shakespeare's work and also the canonical familiarity with it. So people... I mean, Titus Andronicus is a play that people may not have seen, but there's a lot of general familiarity with it.

And then one of the things that our work does is wake up familiar language, particularly language of embodiment, through the experiences and embodiments and disability knowledges of deaf and disabled artists. So one of the things that we say about this is artistry drives access, and access drives artistry. And part of the idea here is that we can use Shakespeare's work to foreground the artistry and the virtuosity that we all know exists from deaf and disabled artists, but who are so often cast as just a single person in a production.

Anthea:

Mm-hmm.

Katherine:

So, uh, the scale of casting, thinking at the level of culture, as both Greg and Kim attested to, that actually lets us experiment with there's never only one disabled character, right? It's always multiple. It is deaf culture coming through golf, uh- Goth culture in terms of the language. So that feels like an element of what we are doing that has we proven to be, even just at the level of tech, already so transformative.

Anthea:

I wish we had more time. I would love to chat to you for longer. Thank you so much for joining me.

Kim:

It's been a real pleasure and an honor certainly, so... And I think- I think, um, Greg should come to Australia and do Teenage Dick.

Greg:

Greg ain't no teenager anymore.

Kim:

(laugh).

Anthea:

(laugh).

Greg:

No. But I- I'll- I'll take you up on the Australia part.

Anthea:

That would be awesome.

Katherine:

Thank you so much for the opportunity to talk with you.

Kim:

Yes, thank you.

Anthea:

Hey, Liz. Thank you so much for joining us again. What are you seeing and not seeing this month?

Liz:

Well, this month what I'm not able to see is the exhibition, The Immersive World of Thom Roberts at the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra, which is opening on the 12th of April. I wish I could see this exhibition. It looks amazing. This is the first solo exhibition for multidisciplinary contemporary Australian artist, Thom Roberts.

So many of the audience may already be familiar with Thom's work, which creates bold portraits that often morph people and trains and buildings. In his work, people and places are often bestowed with new identities and exist in multiple personas. His work is compelling, it creates its own universe, and it's really fun to dive into. It's quite a momentous moment for Thom's career because this is his first solo exhibition, showing over 100 of his works.

It features paintings, installations, animations, as well as new major works, which is very, very cool. I anticipate it will be playful, surreal, and deeply personal. And what a perfect way to spend an afternoon taking it in.

Anthea:

That sounds fantastic.

Liz:

Doesn't it sound fun? He's really an- really exciting contemporary artist. This exhibition will be opening on the 12th and running until the 20th of July at the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra. And the rest of the details, of course, as with all their access information, is on their website.

Anthea:

Awesome. And what are you seeing this month?

Liz:

This is so fun. Okay, what I'm seeing (laugh), or rather what I'm participating in, is Move, which is a movement-based workshop as part of the Art Gallery of New South Wales' After Hours series. The workshop is led by artists and twins, Bedelia and Jeremy Lowrenčev, and is inspired by the gallery's exhibition, Pause, Turn, Touch, Reach, which is an exhibition curated from the gallery's collection around the theme of Bodies in Motion, which is a cool exhibition if you haven't already seen it.

But I'm really looking forward to this workshop. It's about being present as we move together as a group through the space of the gallery, exploring ways to ground ourselves in ever-changing environments, and finding replenishment through togetherness, which is just a concept I really, really love. Bedelia and Jeremy's work is rooted in disability as a culture, called queerness. And the idea of rest as something that we actively reclaim.

You m- probably have s- seen a lot of their different work that they've done in different public spaces.

Anthea:

I have. I think they're remarkable artists.

Liz:

They really are. They're really interesting. And I've- I find increasingly they're just gathering speed, so to speak, in terms of... That's not the way to put it when you're disable (laugh).

Anthea:

I love that.

Liz:

Um, in this workshop, they'll be asking us to think about collective care and reciprocity in third spaces beyond home and work that bring people together like the art gallery. And it feels really relevant as a disabled person 'cause we're always navigating environments that weren't designed necessarily with us at the front of mind. So I'm really excited to be part of this interactive workshop.

Anthea:

So tell me when is it? Because I might come with you.

Liz:

It's being held on Wednesday, the 16th of April at 6:00 PM. So it's a- after hours, which is a very fun time to be at the art gallery when it's getting dark or after, after hours. I'd love it if you came with me.

Anthea:

I will. Awesome. Hey, lovely to chat to you, Liz.

Liz:

Thank you so much. And I look forward to talking to you next month

Anthea:

To take us out, we have an awesome track called Hold Out by BATTS.

MUSIC:

Hold, hold your body close to mine.

My mind, I'm feeling.

I wanna wrap my arms around time.

The past succeeding.

Hold, hold.