

An introduction to Deaf and disabled arts in the UK

Garry Robson (Fittings Multimedia Arts), Tony Heaton (Shape) and Jenny Sealey (Graeae Theatre Company) provide valuable insights into the context in which UK Deaf and disabled artists have emerged to become key international names.

One of a series of five short films, capturing the thoughts and experiences of key people from the arts sector and exploring the framework that is enabling UK disabled artists to flourish.

A film commissioned by the British Council.

Garry Robson

One two three.

Brrrrrrrrrr.

Art is for everyone.

[Sings] Mmmmmmmmmmm eeeeeeeeeeee iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii

ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

...that taps the wellsprings of the human heart, and even what little there is doesn't work so well once it's been used a few times.

Deaf and disability art in this country and globally it's been a kind of a niche market for many many years.

Tony Heaton

I think it's probably important to remember that disability arts started in Britain and it was part of a struggle for civil rights.

Jenny Sealey

Back in the sort of like early 80s, being in and around an emerging, developing concept that we, as Deaf and disabled people, we can create theatre.

Tony Heaton

Disability wasn't about people's individual impairments but that it was all about the fact that you couldn't get on the train or you couldn't get on the bus, you couldn't get in the art gallery and you couldn't actually get into places of education.

Jenny Sealey

We started, developing performances for each other, and over a period of years really we started to get braver and much more confident that what we had to show was good.

We stepped out into the more mainstream world and said, “Excuse me, we’ve got stories to tell”.

Tony Heaton

A lot of disabled artists have taken a creative journey that has bypassed art colleges because for whatever reason the art colleges were not accessible to that artist.

Garry Robson

There’s a whole range of work coming up throughout the whole country and people bring different experiences to it, and the work is at a lot of different levels throughout the country – there’s smaller works going on, more intimate works, more discreet works but they all bring value.

And they’re all about developing people, developing people’s confidence, their skills, and I guess saying to other people, “Look, it can be done”.

Jenny Sealey

Graeae was set up because Nabil Shaban, disabled performer wanted to, well, be on stage, and all the audiences and the other directors went, “Someone like you cannot be on stage”.

So back in the 80s if you were marginalised, what you did then, politically, was you set up your own company.

Garry Robson

The purpose of Graeae was to change the way that disabled artists and performers are seen in the UK.

Jenny Sealey

I was in Tokyo, my phone went. “Dear Jenny, we are interested in interviewing you and Bradley Hemmings to be co-directors for the, Paralympic Opening Ceremony.”

We got the job and it was absolutely extraordinary.

Garry Robson

DaDaFest has been going for a couple of decades really. It was a small scale community festival based around the Deaf and disabled community in Liverpool.

In 2008, they got money to do a much bigger programme, an international programme; the best of Deaf and disabled work worldwide, and it was a huge success.

Tony Heaton

We are certainly moving towards a more inclusive way that we operate as a society, and I think people are understanding that it’s not people’s

impairments that stop them doing things but it is the barriers to inclusion that need removing.

Jenny Sealey

I don't understand why every theatre in the whole of the country does not have one, two Deaf or disabled actors in, in every play and I think theatre should be fully accessible and really inclusive so in 2020 Graeae should close down.

We'll become something different.

We'll just become a theatre. I'm sure I'm the only... only director in the whole of the world that wants to close their company down, but it's for all the right reasons.