

Hello, I'm Caroline Bowditch,
and I am a white, middle-aged woman

Today wearing a black polka dot top

and red-frame rimmed glasses
and red lipstick.

And I'm coming to you from the lands
of the Bunurong people

of the Koolin Nations in what
is now known as Melbourne.

I'd like to pay my respects
to elders, past and present,

and acknowledge and uphold their
continuing relationship with this land.

I am currently the CEO
at Arts Access Victoria,

but prior to taking up this role in 2018,

I was living, working and performing
in the U.K. and Europe

for 16 years.

I think I always wanted
to change the world.

I think it's only in the last few years

that I've started to realize
that my presence

and/or the presence
of a disabled body

can change the alchemy
of an environment.

In a way, all deaf and disabled people
are agents for change.

In one way or another,
whether it is deliberate,

intentional, or by default.

A motto that's been present
in my life for some time now

is the following quote,

sometimes attributed
to the Dalai Lama,

other times, Anita Roddick,
the founder of The Body Shop.

The quote says,

"If you think you're too small
to have an impact,

try going to bed
with a mosquito in the room."

I've been described
in many ways over the years.

Choreographer, performer,
teacher, leader.

And sometimes, as a mosquito
buzzing in the ears

of the arts and culture sector.

Always asking questions.

Always with the intention
of disrupting the status quo.

The mosquito idea emerged from my role
as dance agent for change

that I held for four years
at the Scottish Dance Theatre.

A key part of my role
was to challenge the concepts and ideas

around what is a dancer
and who can dance.

As someone that lives
with a non-traditional dance body,

as a wheelchair user,

I very much had asked those questions

or been asked those questions myself.

It was through my role
at the Scottish Dance Theatre

that I became connected
to Skånes Dansteater.

Over the past nine years,

I have very happily,

almost annually, spent time in Malmö.

Performing, leading workshops,

expanding dialogues

and even making work.

I've always been invited in
to evolve thinking,

build skills and confidence,

and mostly to ask a lot of questions.

It's always been joyous,

and it's a pleasure to be here
with all of you today

to continue the thinking.

So let us begin.

We live in a world
that reinforces the belief

that being non-disabled
is preferable to being disabled.

We live in a world that views
disabled people as lesser beings.

We live in a world that suggests

that we, as disabled people,

are problematic,

inconvenient and best avoided.

We are all not equal.

Even though we like

to believe we are.

We're not.

Some of us are more privileged

than others.

Some of us recognize

the privilege, and others

have no awareness of it at all.

We have an arts and culture sector

currently

that prioritizes access

for non-disabled people.

We see evidence of this demonstrated

through the recent study "Time to Act,"

undertaken by the British Council

as part of their

"Europe Beyond Access" project.

The findings from this report

demonstrate ableism.

This is ableism.

It is everywhere,

and it is alive and well.

Ableism is the disability equivalent

of racism.

It is the term that we use to describe

the prejudice or discrimination

experienced by disabled people,

directly or indirectly.

Cultural ableism shows its presence

in things like

the ways that deaf and disabled people

and our stories

are represented in the media

and popular culture,

which is still either lacking,
mostly negative,

or when disabled characters are present,

they're most likely created or portrayed
by non-disabled people.

It's also the invisibility of deaf and
disability culture and community.

Disability history, rights and models

still aren't part
of many people's education.

And where they are, they often use
outdated models and language.

We are only just really starting to see

some visibility of deaf culture,
disability culture,

and disability pride.

We know that it's still
incredibly difficult

for deaf and disabled people to get
tertiary level training in the arts.

And most of our skills
are learned on the job,

or via sporadic targeted
professional development opportunities.

All of these factors lead and reinforce...

Sorry. All of these factors
lead to ableism,

and reinforce that some people,
their lives, their stories,

their artistry, are valuable,

and some are disposable,

and able to be ignored.

As a society, we seem to view disability

as something that happens
to other people.

And most often as the worst thing
that could happen to anyone.

Something best avoided if we can.

Disability has been
and always will be present

as long as humans exist on this earth.

Disability does not discriminate,

as others will discriminate against us.

There is an open admission policy.

Everybody is welcome.

Disability does not care about
your gender, the color of your skin,

where you come from,

where you were born,

or what language we speak.

It doesn't care about
your socioeconomic background,

your sexual orientation

or your gender identity.

And disability is likely

to come to everyone

at some point in our lives
if we live long enough.

We know that more than 90 percent
of disabled people

acquire the disability
during their lifetime.

So how could we be thinking differently

about disability and ableism in the arts?

The United Nations says
that disability results

from an interaction between
a non-inclusive society

or environment and an individual.

This definition acknowledges that
disability is a social construct.

And it reinforces that the opposite
of disability is not ability.

The opposite of disability is access.

This is the basis
of the Social Model of Disability.

I'd never heard
of the Social Model of Disability

until I moved to the U.K.

And it is still not widely known about
in Australia

and many other parts of the world.

The Social Model is a philosophy,

or a way of thinking, that recognizes

that people are disabled
by barriers created by society,

not by their diagnosed condition
or impairment.

There barriers can be found
in the environment,

communication, and attitudes,

and can have impact

on access to information,

education, employment,

appropriate housing and accommodation,

or socialization.

The consequences of these barriers
can include poverty,

marginalization,

discrimination, and shame.

The Social Model of Disability grew out
of the Disability Rights Movement,

and provides an alternative
to the more known or frequently known

medical or charity models of thinking
about disability.

The Social Model is rights-based.

It focuses on access, not ability.

It models disability pride,

and it also models best practice,
like disability language.

Language around disability
can get messy and uncomfortable,

with lots of non-disabled people

saying things like they just wished
they could eliminate

the word "disability" or "disabled"
altogether.

For those of us who subscribe
to Social Model thinking,

we prefer to use the term
"disabled people."

It acknowledges that we
are disabled by society,

by ableism,

or the environment,
and not by our bodies

and/or our minds.

Disability is part of our identity

and our culture.

It connects us to a community,

it allows us to reclaim collective power
and builds disability pride.

Not viewing access and inclusion
as a priority

is what has built ableism
and inequality

towards disabled people
in our society.

The Social Model makes disability
a collective issue.

Something that all of us
can help to change.

Disability pride means
not having to hide who we are,

or asking for the access we need

to be the best versions of ourselves

without apology.

It also means that disability

is something that all of us
can influence and change.

Not by spending time and resources
on trying to cure our impairments

but by working together
to remove the barriers

that prevent deaf and disabled people

from taking part in ordinary,
everyday and cultural life

in the same way as everyone else.

Disabled artists are some
of the most lateral, creative thinkers

and problem solvers you'll ever have
the privilege to work with and meet.

Why?

Because we constantly need to find
solutions to situations or environments

that aren't welcoming
or accessible to us.

Artistic work created and led
by deaf and disabled artists

are some of the most vibrant and
dynamic contemporary arts practice

in existence today.

So some of the questions
that we need to ask ourselves

are how do we support,

showcase and celebrate
deaf and disabled artists in what we do?

How do we support disability arts,
the genre,

and broader arts and disability practice?

And how can we collaborate
with deaf and disabled artists

to build a stronger,
more vibrant cultural offer?

Disabled writer and activist

Mia Mingus, in her blog,

talks about the importance
of deaf and disabled people

leaving evidence in the world.

She says, "We must leave evidence,

evidence that we were here,
that we existed,

that we survived, and loved, and ached.

Evidence of the wholeness
we never felt,

and the immense sense of fullness
we gave to each other.

Evidence of who we were,
who we thought we were,

who we never should've been,

evidence for each other
that there are other ways to live,

past survival, past isolation."

Deaf and disabled artists
are more than just artists.

We are change-makers.
Our work is more than just art.

It is evidence. It's advocacy.

And it's a crucial artistic movement.

Some things to remember.

Access is a right, not a privilege,

in most of the countries.

Disability is a social construct,
it's not an individual issue.

The opposite of disability
isn't ability.

The opposite of disability is access.

And not viewing access
and inclusion as a priority

is what's built inequality towards deaf

and disabled people in our society.

We all have the potential
to create or remove barriers.

Being agents for change,

which I hope you're all going to become,
if you aren't already,

is a way of being in the world,
it's a behavior.

It's not a job or a status.

Thank you for listening.