

You are listening to The Red Line Sessions - a new series of podcasts from South East Dance as part of their Dramaturg in Residence programme.

Over the next weeks you can join dramaturgs Lou Cope and Luke Pell for a number of reflections, discussions and exclusive interviews with artists shed light on how the work we see on and off stage gets made.

The podcasts will be uploaded every week to uploaded to The Red Line website or you can sign up to the South East Dance mailing list and we'll deliver them to your inbox

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The Redline Sessions - Podcast 6

Luke Pell with guest contributions from Caroline Bowditch and Claire Cunningham in conversation with Robert Softley Gale.

A Serious Shift – Part I

Hello, I'm Luke Pell and welcome back to 'The Redline Sessions' my name's Luke Pell and I'm one of the Guest Dramaturgs with South East Dance. The next couple of podcasts from me are called 'A Serious Shift', they happen in two parts, this week I'm going to be joined by artists Caroline Bowditch, Claire Cunningham and Robert Softley Gale and in the following podcast I'll unpack and reflect on some of what we talk about today.

Currently Glasgow based and Australian born performance artist and choreographer [Caroline Bowditch](#) describes herself as a performer, maker, teacher, speaker and mosquito buzzing in the ears of the arts industry in the UK and further afield.

We first met in 2008 when Caroline was working as Scottish Dance Theatre's Dance Agent for Change and I as Head of Learning and Research with Candoco Dance Company. We've since worked together closely on artist projects and numerous development initiatives advocating for inclusion, alterity and particularly talking about the innovation that disabled artists bring to performance, choreography and dance.

In July 2018 Caroline takes up the role of Executive Director of [Arts Access Victoria](#) in Australia. As a parting gift through her work with Imagnate <https://www.imagnate.org.uk> and The Workroom <https://theworkroom.org.uk> in Scotland Caroline has developed a manifesto that she invites other people to continue. Caroline has kindly shared the beginning of these thoughts with us here today.

Caroline Bowditch's voice >

I want to live in a world where:

- EVERY disabled child receives their creative entitlement
- Children have a chance to see bodies like theirs on stage and screen
- Work made for young people, from babies to teenagers, is seen as valued and valuable
- We employ positive action until we redress the massive imbalance that currently exists
- Young disabled people can receive the education they are entitled to that pushes them and allows them to thrive from nursery to PhD
- Where the 'value added' that disabled people bring is acknowledged rather than using a deficient model
- People are aware and acknowledge their unconscious bias towards people outside of their 'inner circle'
- The innovation, lateral thinking and organisational skills utilised and generated by disabled people is acknowledged
- I can be spontaneous and have just as much choice as everybody else
- I can take risks - artistically and in general
- EVERYONE feels valued and valuable
- We're more interested in what makes us individual than the same
- I can Google disabled leaders and not be faced with a barrage of inspiration porn
- We talk about access NOT diagnosis
- Where access is viewed as an artistic opportunity NOT an after thought
- I make art

> End of Caroline's manifesto

LP>

Caroline's manifesto and in particular this notion that access is an artistic opportunity and not an after thought resonates deeply with me and with many of the artistic processes that I'm involved within, often whilst in the studio or working on a project I'm in conversation with artists about subtlety and nuance, about embedding access, how we consider access as part of the dramaturgy of a work, not as a bolt, distraction or interruption but as another way into artistic conversations and whilst we're doing this also considering how the way that we work with access isn't interrupting the integrity of its function for those who have particular access needs. This afternoon I talk with with Robert Softley Gale (RSG), Artistic Director of [Birds of Paradise Theatre Company](#) and performer and choreographer [Claire Cunningham](#) (CC) about how this plays out in some of their projects.

Interview Begins

LP – Good Afternoon

RSG – Hi Luke Pell

LP – So very pleased to be joined by Claire Cunningham and Robert Softley Gale, Artistic Director of Birds of Paradise Theatre just to have a small conversation this afternoon about this idea of A Serious Shift – which was the way that I came to think about how embedding access within theatre, performance, dance isn't and shouldn't be a bolt on or something that's slight but is something that's really serious and in working with each of you I've encountered how the artistry of that is embedded within your work, how nuance is considered, as well as the functionality of access. And so I wondered what it would be to ask each of you what embedding access in your work means to you ... Claire you're nodding so I'm going to come to you first.

CC – oh no... my attempt to be a good listener has got me in trouble... Um, yeah well I think, the notion of embedding it has kind of evolved with each work that I've made and has become an understanding of what it is to think of it from the beginning of a process actually, I think, I guess maybe the last two works that I've made particularly, stage works, which were *Guide Gods* in 2014 and then *The Way You Look (at me) Tonight*, I think were ones where in particular this realisation of thinking about access from the very beginning, I know I'm going to make this work, I don't what it's going to look like or anything, but I know I want it have as broad an access across sensory modalities and physicalities as I can, really, really fed the creative direction of the work, really, really shaped what the work became and became something that really was such a strong stimulus for the work it's self in those pieces particularly and I think that, that was quite a vital realisation for me, actually with something like *Guide Gods* it really shaped the space as well as the content of the work, um, and the same with *The Way You Look (at me) Tonight* it actually really shapes the form the piece took as well.

LP > Uhuh uhuh – Likewise for you Robert, Birds of Paradise are renowned for the innovative and exciting ways that you work with embedding access within your shows. Can you talk about where that comes from artistically, what that means for you artistically?

RSG> Yeah, for me it starts from a moral thing of, if I am as disabled artist am going to take public money to make work I cant spend that and exclude other disabled people from seeing that work, that just doesn't square in my head, so there's that moral impetus and that starting point. So then once you've committed to embedding access in the best ways that you can – we don't always get it right - so it's about exploring ways of doing it, but once you've committed to that it's about well what possibilities does that open up... and you know making theatre is always about how do we grapple with all of these things that are difficult to do.

So embedding access is another thing to grapple with, in the same way that you've got a time frame, you've got sets of X, you've got a budget of X, you know theatre's all constraints to me and then what you do within those constraints is what makes it interesting, you know that's the fun of it for me.

So then yeah something like *Wendy Hoose* where we made quite a big statement by putting BSL on video within the frame of the work was important. So, there's a TV in a bedroom which made sense, we then had the interpreter doing funny stuff on that TV which worked in with the whole mood of the show. We then had captioning, which because the show was about text messaging or worked from that ... then having captions with emojis and other stuff made sense and then the audio describer in some ways is the most important part of the show...

<Laughing>

Oh I still laugh about that

CC> Sorry, yeah it was one of the best things I've ever seen and the audio description was a massive part of that for me. I loved *Wendy Hoose* because the audio description – as somebody who doesn't need audio description even - was just extraordinary and added so much to the work it made it even funnier.

RSG> That's the thing, that's the thing – once you work out that these things add possibilities, they don't take them away, then you're like great, on we go... so with every new piece, we're like 'how do we take it that bit further.' You know, so like the BSL in (British Sign Language) *Wendy Hoose* worked well for what it was but how functional it was for BSL users in the audience is up for discussion.

So the next production that I made was *Purposeless Movements* and there the BSL interpreter (Amy Cheskin) was so integral to the work and on stage and I remember when we had the discussion night for *Purposeless* and all of the BSL users in the audience were talking about the work in a really sort of developed way, you thought fantastic, they got the work, it wasn't, they didn't get a lesser version of it, they got what it was. Yeah that.

LP> Yeah, I remember that post show discussion and also that conversation being really integral to our on going chats in *Purposeless Movements* when I worked with you as dramaturg on that project.

In both of your practices and working with you, you've talked about this thing of considering all of the possibilities and all of the restraints and all of the unimagined things that embedding access offers, and so my other wondering was...

For you what role does the dramaturg play in attending to the artistry of access within your practice?

**some external ambient noise in the background of this question*

CC> Yeah it's funny I guess, it's another person as a sounding board in one way, but also 'cause I think, I think what's been interesting at moments going along in thinking about the works that I've embedded access more is it's something that also reaches out into the wider creative team as well as the dramaturg for me...

The musician and the composer, you know like actually the idea that they understand that there will be audio description - that actually ideally they want to creatively engage with that idea as we did with *The Way You Look (at me) Tonight*

That Matthias (Herrman)... it's a new concept to Matthias but he's like okay... yeah let's go into this and make something that he's satisfied with as well - as part of a sound world - that I think there's that aspect of like the video artist was also, in terms of where captioning comes in...

But then that possibility that you bring as my dramaturg of hearing those possibilities maybe for me in moments where I'm missing it and being able to kind of connect those dots and conversations with that creative team for me and yeah... I think also the fact - because I work with you, Luke and - you have such a sort of particular interest in work that comes from the lived experience of disability, you have quite a broad awareness of methods of access that could be there, so I think yeah the possibility of working with you just from a practical sense from your awareness of other work that's gone on and what people are doing and to be open to what other people - ah well that's interesting they did that...

But I think it's also about this notion that your kind of looking at all the layers potentially that a work can have, I don't think about building work in layers, but I like the idea that audiences might be working on different channels - as you've often talked about, of tuning channels up and down - that I think what you bring when you come into my process is that awareness of what channels might get tuned up and tuned down at different moments, where I might not be able to focus across all of them and that notion of how things can be reading in different ways for different people and where are the holes, you know...

Yeah, I mean I think of something like with *Guide Gods*... this sense that there was because we had a voice over - the audio description - had a certain implication, of sort of maybe a voice of God or... and just playing with the timing of like whether you did an action before or after... cause it's a work that's about faith and religion, for me the fact that we could consider that there might be different levels of interpretation with that, that the audio description serves a function to visually impaired audiences but sighted audiences can be hearing it as a voice of prophecy or a voice of God, or - you know, a mysterious voice that they don't really quite... or a narrator...

...that there's these levels people could choose to take it on and the same with the captioner... that we had a captioner sitting on stage and for me this idea that we could see that there were these other levels we could work at, of this was essentially a scribe on stage, which the nature of most... you know, there's a number of religions which are scripture based and the human fallibility of a scribe was also on stage in the form of a captioner, you know and the reality of deeds and laws and ways of living being dictated by someone who is writing it down, in our case it was a women which was a nice change than a lot of scripture.

I think those conversations were possible with you, of the reality of seeing even just beyond I want there to be captions, I want to there to be audio description, I want this to be a space where everyone has an equal choice where they sit and then I think being able to have you in the space and sometimes pull me out of the logistics that I'm also juggling, of going I want it to be as accessible as possible and go ...we can also look at in this light and yeah... how much do we want to reference those possibilities and how much do we just want to kind of leave it up to people and I think there was the space for those conversations with you....

LP> What you've just described reminds me of considering the dramaturgy of access...

CC> yeah, exactly

LP> ... as one of the dramaturgies within a work, so much like with Robert, you were talking about Amy Cheskin as Sign Language Interpreter within *Purposeless Movements*, actually how is that part of the dramaturgy of that work, rather than a separate thing that's happening.

RSG> Yeah

CC> Yeah ... the notion of looking at making *Guide Gods* and going okay, just noticing - by having particularly somebody like you there - just somebody to point out - okay, your potential voice of God, is clearly a male voice... even all those things, this is part of a world we are creating and everything you know says something and has meaning, as soon as you put in a performance, everything suggests meaning to an audience whether you mean it to or not... just those sorts of things, of am I okay with that...yeah and in actually this context, God is Scottish bloke, in that world and maybe making it five years later maybe I would change that

But just that those things are also acknowledged, the dramaturgy of what that means to have that particular and all the connotations of that person and whether you have a ... how your sign language interpreter... is it a man or a women or someone who isn't identifying specifically to one gender...how are all these things considered...and that it's not just who get's hired, who's available, but that those things are also part of the dramaturgy of the access.

RSG> I think the thing that hits me is that we quite often see access as being on the outer layer of a piece of work, it's the thing that happens almost last that we add and then we see dramaturgy as being pretty core to what it is and I would say that for me - for us I think - that access and dramaturgy are both at the core, so this idea that the access element is so integral to the work that it has to start from that place...

I mean the whole point of making any theatre for me, is taking some random idea that we had in our heads and then going 'how do I communicate that to an audience?' So it's all about access. It's all about how do I make my stupid idea more accessible, if it just stays in my head, if it has no form or language then it's completely inaccessible. Everything we do in putting something on stage is about making work accessible. It's just that what we're talking about is access for particular people, with particular impairments, but actually theatre is all about access, so that's where for me this isn't an added extra or it isn't something that we can think about in abstract, it's something that...

...Yeah, I just want to communicate ideas people and to do that I have to work out where they are coming from and what barriers might get in the way.

So in the same way that I make a lot of work that uses comedy, I'm always thinking that's quite targeted at a sort of Scottish comedic taste because I'm going that's my audience they'll get that sort of comedy, but see, you're always thinking about your audience anyway, therefore you also need to think about their access needs, it just makes sense.

LP> Thank you, that's great, thank you so much for that, for your thoughts and insights, it's so beautiful to hear you talk together. Great thank you.

CC> Laughs

RSG> Thanks...

Interview ends

LP> Thanks for listening, that's end of Part I of this podcast 'A Serious Shift'. In the next part I'll be reflecting a little more on what's been discussed today, this proposition that Robert Softley Gale made of wanting to communicate ideas to people and having to figure out where they are coming from and what might get in the way.

- How do we acknowledge power structures?
- How do we think about what's compelling to who and for why?
- That our work meets not only with other people and perspectives, but with other *lived* experiences
- How do we consider and acknowledge patterns of power and privilege - the knowledge spheres these influence, very different and cultural and political contexts
- What does this mean in dance, how do we notice and attend to privilege, to unconscious or entrenched bias... in a making space, an approach, an art form.

Next week you can catch up with The Red Line sessions with Lou Cope and in the meantime please keep talking to us on Facebook forum and on twitter by tweeting #DiR