This transcript is from ISPA's Podcast: Meditations On

Season 1 Episode 3 – *Meditation on Digital Accessibility*

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CREDITS

Hosted by Ilter Ibrahimof (Artistic Director of Fall for Dance North, Canada)
Featuring guest provocateurs Anna Gallagher-Ross (Fusebox Festival, USA), Debbie Patterson (Sick + Twisted Theatre, Canada), Maria Vlachou (Acesso Cultura, Portugal)
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EPISODE DESCRIPTION

As we all feel under pressure to vastly expand our organization's digital footprint and use technology to innovate the way we connect with our audience, how can we make sure we don't neglect accessibility? In this episode we discuss this topic with three distinguished colleagues from three different perspectives: artist Debbie Patterson (Sick + Twisted Theatre, Canada), consultant Maria Vlachou (Acesso Cultura, Portugal), and presenter Anna Gallagher-Ross (Fusebox Festival, USA).

TRANSCRIPT BEGINS

[theme music]

0:06
Ilter Ibrahimof
[theme music]
You are listening to *Meditations On*, the new podcast from ISPA. I'm your host, Ilter Ibrahimof. Sometimes a single word or phrase defines an era. In performing arts globally, we may always remember 2020 as the year of the pivot. A close second, and my personal favorite, you're on mute. As we all feel under pressure to vastly expand our organization's digital footprint and use technology to innovate the way we connect with our audience, how can we make sure we don't forget about accessibility? We discussed this topic with three distinguished colleagues from three different perspectives: an artist, a consultant, and a presenter. These are their meditations.

1:03
Debbie Patterson is a playwright, director, and actor based in Winnipeg, Canada. She's a proud advocate for disability justice through her work as Founding Artistic Director of Sick + Twisted Theatre. She's in demand across the globe as a consultant on accessibility. And, as a disability dramaturg, in 2016 Debbie became the first physically disabled actor to play the title role in Richard III in a professional Canadian production. Initially resistant to incorporating digital platforms as part of her artistic practice, she spoke with us about what changed her mind.

1:42
Debbie Patterson
So my thinking around using digital technology to do my work has done a complete 180. In the last year in the fall of 2019, I was approached by this person who was organizing a conference on digital technology in the arts asking me to speak at this conference on using digital technology to create access for people with disabilities and I was just not interested. You know, I work in live theater, and I really like the live intimate experience of live theater, and if the liveness isn't there, if that intimacy, that physical presence, isn't there, it just doesn't feel worth it to me. And so, I was like no, I don't want to do this. And she just kept at me you know like she thought I would have something to say about creating access because of my lived experience of disability. And so, we talked and talked and I finally got to a place where I felt like okay maybe I have something to say about digital technology in the arts in terms of creating access. But then, just before the conference, I was in an accident in another city and I ended up hospitalized there for a month. So, I wasn't actually able to be at the conference. And when that happened, I suggested that well, since it's, you know, about digital technology creating access for people with disabilities – my accident was related to my disability – I was like okay, so let's create access using digital technology. Let's use Zoom. And we were both kind of new to Zoom. Like nobody was really using Zoom a lot at the time. This was in February 2020 and since that happened there have been all kinds of things happening on Zoom and all kinds of opportunities to use digital technology to make work and this thing that I've been super resistant to has become normal for me.

3:42
[ambient music]

3:51
One thing that's really great about disability is it forces you to find new ways to do the thing you always did. It sort of interrupts business as usual and makes you adapt you know. And some people with disabilities call themselves adaptive rather than disabled because we're constantly adapting how we do things in order to match what our abilities are doing. And so that idea of pivoting is kind of central to the idea of living with a disability. And that capacity to pivot or adapt is I think one of the best things about disability. Because, as soon as the normal way of doing things is not available to you, all these new options open up that wouldn't have opened up without that disruption. So like just the way disability disrupts you know business as usual, Covid has done that as well. And has offered us this really fertile and potent disruption to the way we normally do things. So that, as we pivot, we can discover not just new ways of doing the old thing but the new opportunities that exist within that new way of doing things that we never would have discovered without having to pivot.

5:06
Because we're all learning to adapt you know we're all learning to I call it cripping it you know when you Crip it you find the other way, you find the adaptation, you find the obstacle that forces you to discover the new thing. And then within the new thing there's all kinds of new potential for artistic exploration that you wouldn't have found otherwise. So, something that's happened with Covid is we've all sort of agreed that our well-being is more important than our productivity. We all stopped working, we stopped shopping, we stopped doing all these things because we needed to protect our bodies right. It's the same choice to say that our physical vulnerabilities are worth investing in. And that's the choice we're making when we spend money

on creating access for people with disabilities. We're choosing to honor the basic human condition over capitalism.

6:08
And now, I'm finding that I don't want to travel, I don't want to fly because of climate change. Like I want to reduce the amount of times that I fly in an airplane. And so, if I can participate in a workshop, like I did this fall, you know a play development workshop, via Zoom, that's awesome. It's not the same as being there in person. Frankly, I still think it's not as good as being there in real person. But maybe it's better than being there in real person if you have to sacrifice the climate in order to facilitate your physical presence in the space. And we know that continuous growth, continuous expansion, is unsustainable. That our planet can't sustain it. So it's made me think about how do I in my own practice as an artist use expansion and growth as a measure of my own success. And how do I need to rethink that in order to reflect a commitment to interrupting climate change. And so, thinking in terms of defining my success as a deepening of my connection to my local community rather than expanding my reach across a broader community. And in that way I feel like I can hold myself personally accountable for the ways in which I buy into this notion that continuous growth is a measure of success.

7:40
[ambient music]
And I'm discovering that there are all these people in my community with disabilities who can't go to the theater because of their disabilities. They can't leave home so they're in isolation, they're in lockdown all the time. And so suddenly theater is accessible to them because all the theater is happening online. So now, I'm working on making sure that that continues as part of my role as the Artistic Director of a disability theater company. I'm making sure that theaters continue to offer programming on digital formats so that my peers who are unable to leave home at any time can still access theater. So it's been a complete 180 for me. From feeling like digital technology has no place in my artistic practice to recognizing that digital technology is actually an integral part of accessible theater practice for people with disabilities.

8:54
Ilter Ibrahimof
Maria Vlachou is a founding member and executive director of Access Culture or Accesso Cultura based in Portugal. She and her team work tirelessly to improve access physically, socially, intellectually, and yes digitally, to cultural venues and cultural programming in Portugal and beyond. She spoke with us about Access Culture and the new challenges and opportunities that emerged as a result of the pandemic.

Maria Vlachou
Access Culture is a not-for-profit cultural association based in Portugal. Our mission is to promote physical, social, and intellectual access to cultural participation. And our members are cultural professionals or culture organizations. We do a number of training courses every year, an annual conference, public debates, access audits and other kinds of consultancies, and we also have some publications, the latest one being a manual on how to create an access plan. A very practical tool, which will be translated into English next month. But we also have other publications already translated into English regarding for instance the role of culture organizations in the inclusion of migrants and refugees, or a report we did on a trip around

Portugal called Beyond the Physical Barriers to Cultural Participation which I believe has got interesting and useful information also for people from other countries interested in these issues.

10:28
Our aim, our wish, is to contribute towards a society where difference will be mainstream. It will be a natural part of our lives given equal opportunities. In this last year, the most significant development perhaps was that Arts Council Portugal, in a partnership with us, created specific funding to support disabled artists and disabled led projects and also to support the implementation of services such as interpretation in Portuguese sign language or audio description or relaxed sessions. And it is fundamental for us that the Portuguese State and Ministry of Culture have acknowledged the high-quality work created by individual disabled artists and artistic organizations. Disability arts are definitely on the map now for us.

11:19
[ambient music]

11:23
Now considering the pandemic it brought a new challenge to us as to the whole of the cultural sector in Portugal and abroad. Regarding Access Culture being a small and flexible organization, we managed to quickly adapt to the digital and we proposed new editions of training courses that were particularly relevant in this context such as open access to museum and archives collections issues of copyright and public domain or digital marketing. They were all sold out, and perhaps this was after all an opportunity for us to raise greater awareness regarding issues that had been on our menu since we created the association but were not taken seriously by many cultural organizations in Portugal. We also created a space on our website with useful information regarding the pandemic from different parts of the world. Information on support programs, opinion articles, manifestos, manuals, case studies. And we also organized weekly evening online meetings in the months of April and May that were very critical months for whomever wish to join and have a conversation among colleagues in order to navigate together through uncertainty. We did what we could considering also our size in order to support our colleagues through this situation.

12:52
Now there were a couple of issues that we kept bringing up at that time and we are still bringing up. We urge our colleagues to always question themselves on why it is that they do what they do and for whom. The rush we experienced to put content online was very concerning to us as it resulted in people becoming exhausted but not necessarily for a clear or good reason. We proposed at the time a new seminar, which eventually also became a full course because of the interest demonstrated by our colleagues, on the mission of culture organizations. Since this is not acknowledged in Portugal as an essential management tool. Actually, most organizations think that their mission is what they do and not why they do it. So we are considering also offering this course internationally in 2021 as we know that this is not the case only in Portugal.

13:50
Another issue we wish to raise awareness about is the fact that despite putting all that content online, supposedly to serve our audiences and communities, we don't take the necessary steps in order to make it accessible to people with disabilities. Most of that material hasn't got

subtitles, or interpretation in sign language, or audio description. And we wish our colleagues to understand that in this way we are reinforcing the exclusion of people with disabilities. We treat them as usual as second-class citizens. And then finally, we wish also to remind our sector that not everyone has access to technology. During this period, we have tried to give more visibility to projects and initiatives taking place away from the internet. For instance, the Fernando Pessoa house in Lisbon, and Fernando Pessoa is a celebrated Portuguese poet, it is booking appointments with people on the phone in order to recite a poem and to have a chat. At ISPA's last year's conference Madani Younis was one of the guests in the panel and he said something that resonated with me.

15:03
[ambient music]
He said: “Generosity is not justice. And inclusion is not equity.” So these words have been guiding us through these unusual times and will continue guiding us in the future.

15:23
Ilter Ibrahimof
Anna Gallagher-Ross is Co-Artistic Director of Fusebox, an annual contemporary performance festival based in Austin, Texas. They shocked and delighted us in April 2020 with their digital programming as one of the first major performing arts organizations to pivot sharply to presenting an online festival. How did they approach accessibility during the five short weeks they had to design a whole new model? What did they learn? With the benefit of hindsight, Anna offers us her reflections on these questions and looks to the future.

15:59
Anna Gallagher-Ross
Fusebox's mission is to explore the potential of live performance and the unique possibilities that emerge through the act of gathering. And I am so pleased to be speaking to you today about accessibility because that is one of Fusebox's core values as an organization. We're now entering our 17th year as a festival. 17th! And in 2014, this is sort of how I'll start talking about accessibility, in 2014 we decided to make our festival entirely free to attend. We did this because we believed that the arts should be accessible to everyone in our city. This was meant to establish a relationship between art and audiences that was more relational and less transactional but also to ignite a conversation about the real costs associated with making work. To underscore the fact that the cost of a ticket does not come close to paying the artist for what it costs to make the work and to ask people how as a community and as a field we wanted to pay for the creation of new work.

17:07
And today I've been asked to talk a little bit about our virtual festival and our pivot to the virtual which brings up a lot of interesting questions and answers about accessibility. So I'm going to take us back to March 2020 which I'm sure none of us want to do right now. I think that the first signal we had that our festival which takes place every April was not going to go ahead as planned was the kind of domino effect we saw when South by Southwest was canceled, which is one of the largest festivals in the country and also in our city of Austin. Soon after that, large gatherings were suspended, we remember how it goes. And we realized that the chips were down. And as all of us remember, there was just this wave of cancellations hitting the field. And we were sympathetic and so in solidarity with all of these colleagues and organizations. And I

think as a sort of small nimble organization what we wanted to do in that moment was to try and offer a creative gesture. So we decided collectively that we would make our festival entirely virtual.

18:20
And so we asked artists if they wanted to be involved and we were overjoyed that over 95% of them said yes, I would love to, I need this right now. But then began the curatorial conversations with these artists because rather than trying to force their work into a medium they did not conceive it in we were really more interested in asking them to come up with ideas that meant something to them in that moment, and in response to it. And so we pivoted to this virtual edition in just under five weeks after spending two years planning the festival. And we were conscious that we were asking artists, our crew, and ourselves to reskill and retool at a time when everyone was going through it. And so the conversation began with: what can we do in this moment that is meaningful, and how can we take care of each other?

19:13
So we went ahead and built a custom web platform for the festival, what we called the central hub or venue. And this had accessibility built into its design by the web developer we collaborated with. We also streamed all of the events and programming through OBS, open broadcast software, to Facebook, Youtube, and Vimeo so it really was activated on several platforms simultaneously. I was overwhelmingly grateful to our web developer Daniel Carter who is based in Austin and was able to actually walk us through a lot of the accessibility questions related to the platform that we were building out. So, I was learning sort of on the job during those five weeks building this platform with Daniel about the kinds of components we needed to see.

20:04
So, I say all of this with the acknowledgement that we still have a lot to learn about the virtual space. I actually like to call it the virtual venue. Although we provided things like live captioning, translation, Spanish language translation for our events, and other accessibility provisions, we realize that there's a lot we need to learn to ensure that the virtual realm is truly accessible. And I need to implicate myself in this because I think I'm learning and needing to be vigilant about the work I'm doing in accessibility as a presenter. I would say that I think a misconception is that you can stop at compliance. I think it's not about being compliant with accessibility, it's about going beyond that. Creating truly meaningful invitations into the work you do and that has practical considerations in terms of, as I was saying before, the accessibility of venues. But it also extends to cultural spaces and who they are for. So, I could sort of talk I think of accessibility prismatically. I think of it as being something we need to approach from multiple perspectives. To me it's a verb not a noun. It's something that is ongoing.

21:17
[ambient music]
I think that ultimately, I look forward to the kinds of global partnerships that can come out of this. I look forward to inviting new audience members into the work we do who might not be able to travel to Austin. And I think that at a time when borders are contested, when the climate is being ravaged, it's absolutely fundamental that we continue to think about how the digital can play a role in the work that we do. I would just say that what has to underpin that is a care for live performance, and a care for artists, and the incredible people who work to realize performances

behind the scenes, and ensuring, to the best, of our ability that everything we're doing is as accessible as it can be.

Ilter Ibrahimof
[theme music]
Meditations On is presented by ISPA. This episode was produced by Johnny Spence and hosted by me Ilter Ibrahimof. Our theme song and all additional music is by Johnny Spence. The Executive Producer is David Baile. Special thanks to Debbie Patterson, Maria Vlachou, and Anna Gallagher-Ross. This episode was sponsored by Theatre Projects. They know how to create performance spaces that come alive. Learn more about their work at theatreprojects.com

TRANSCRIPT ENDS