

## Episode 6 - Making Flux More Accessible

**Hattie** Welcome to our Smoking Apples podcast as we get ready to release our first ever digital tour of our show Flux, in this series, we bring you an exclusive behind the scenes insight into our theatre company including embarrassing stories, feminist chat and all sorts of puppet related content. Enjoy.

Welcome to another episode of Smoking Apple's podcast series, we're here to talk about all things to do with our show Flux, which will be on a virtual tour throughout June. So here you can find out all kinds of different things. And today, I've got the lovely Molly, one of my co artistic directors. And I've also got Sofia, our lovely producer, I should say. So I'm just going to start off by introducing myself. My name's Hattie. My pronouns are she and her. I am a slim white woman in my early 30s. I have bleached strawberry blonde hair with a lot of grey root coming through now, but I'm thinking about growing out, we'll see what happens. I've got an oval shaped face, with dark eyebrows and green eyes, a Roman nose and big teeth 'ting'. That's what Molly did in the first one - I stole it.

**Molly** Yeah stop nicking my ideas!

**Sofia** That is brilliant

**Hattie** So tonight I am sitting in a rather cluttered office as per usual for my podcasts, input costs of I've changed the angle slightly so you can see a bit more of the clutter well done me. And I'm wearing a blue and white striped t-shirt and I've got silver earrings in that I got for my birthday they are little flowers. So there you go. Molly, can I hand over to you?

**Molly** Indeed, hello I'm Molly. My pronouns are she and her and I'm a five foot eight woman. That's right. With long, dark hair. Although no one ever knows that it's long because I was mostly wear up, blue grey eyes. And I've got two very characteristic moles on either side of my face. I'm turning my face even though that's not helpful or beauty spots, whichever you prefer. And I have a big smile in between them. I am wearing a blue jumper and a purple patterned dress underneath it, and I'm also sitting in a very cluttered office with all manner of stuff behind me, pillows, cushions, you name it. It's in this room. So. Yeah, welcome.

**Hattie** Lovely, Sophia,

**Sofia** I really made me chuckle, I am Sofia, I, my pronouns are she and her. I am a early 30s white woman with long brown hair so long you can't quite see it on the camera. It goes down to my hip. I am wearing a silver headband, a black jumper. It's quite woolly with lots of pearls scattered around it. I have a quite big features, I would say in my face, like I've got huge glasses on. I've got like, big brown eyes. I haven't filled my eyebrows in today, so they're not quite as big, I'm always smiling, smiling very much now, laughing at my description of myself and I think that's it. I thought my headphones in black headphones in and I'm sitting against a white background. It's just my white wall behind me because it's I've got a very cluttered room behind me that nobody needs to see. And I'm on a black office chair.

**Hattie** Lovely, thank you very much. So I'm going to hand over to you, Sofia, for the questions this evening. Obviously, if you want to chip in with any answers, feel free.

**Sofia** Oh, absolutely. Thank you very much. So this podcast is all about making the show more accessible. So I'm going to kick off with question number one and then we'll go from there. So how have you decided to make Flux more accessible and why now?

**Molly** Let's talk about why. I think so. Obviously, 'Hi pandemic!' has changed a lot of things for us. And we had envisaged that this tour of Flux was going to be in person, although our access plans were still going to be going if it was going to be live. And I think we have, I don't know, maybe, it's not because we've not thought about it in the past. I think we've just gone - our work is like a bit accessible anyway, so that's enough. And the answer to that is it's not enough. We should have been doing more we are doing more now. But I think because it's non-verbal, it's highly visual, there are lots of things about it where we never sort of you know, we've not really engaged with access stuff that much in the past. But I think one of the most interesting things for us to think about was and how to blind or visually impaired audience members experience this this show that is so highly visual and how can we create a really great experience for them and give them, you know, give them the show, you know, in a kind of audio format. So there's something we've been thinking about and this time around. So we've written an audio described version of the show which me and Hattie have had all the fun with, with with some help and some guidance and from Quiplash who are a company, who've supported that. And we've also captioned the show as well. And like I said before, there's hardly any text in it. So that was kind of much more straightforward job in that sense. But in a way, describing the sound was quite hard in the captioned version, wasn't it? Because, yeah, the sound the score has quite a lot of personality. So.

**Hattie** Yeah, actually finding out what the best ways are to caption music. And to be honest, we sort of became aware that everyone's preference is different. So we tried to go with something that would suit the most people and hopefully will be useful. But our inclination or certainly my inclination is, as somebody who writes quite creatively, is to say, oh, this is really fun, upbeat 80s music with this sort of rhythm and to be quite detailed about it. But actually, that's not necessarily helpful. So that was quite interesting.

**Sofia** You spoke a little bit about audio description. Can you explain what that is and who is it for?

**Hattie** So audio description is for blind and visually impaired audiences. And what it is, is sort of what we did while it is what we did at the beginning of the podcast, where you describe the visuals for somebody who cannot see them or is less able to see them, so that they can have a full experience of the show and get the same or as much of an understanding of the show and what's happening as somebody who is not visually impaired. So, yeah, so, for example, in Flux, there's a lot of, a lot of visuals. We are a visual theatre company and that felt like a huge challenge to start with. And one of the things we sort of found out early on is that there are actually lots of different ways of doing audio description, especially in theatre, and you can integrate it into the show itself. So you could have someone, a character in the show as part of a character who is always describing things, for example. But because we have very, very, very minimal speech in our show, that felt like too much of a jump for us. So we've got essentially a script. So if you were to jump on something like Netflix, a lot of their in-house shows have audio description and similar sort of set up to us where you can choose to have the audio description on. And between the speech, it will describe the visuals for you. I hope that's explained it. We're obviously not experts, you know, it's a learning curve for us as well.

**Sofia** I mean, on that. I mean, that's I mean, there's I feel like there's been lots of learning during making like I always find that I learn so much every time I really set out to make shows accessible. What have been the key learning points, I guess? By making Flux accessible, the key things that you've learnt on the journey,

**Molly** I feel like can some interesting conversations we've, we've had are around us, perhaps not engaging more fully with access out of fear of it being wrong or like doing it in the wrong way or it being judged as like disrespectful or rude or do you know what I mean? And I think the biggest learning I've taken away from that is that, you know, we're not going to sit here and say, oh, our access is now perfect for Flux and it can reach everyone and anyone. Of course, we'd love to be able to say that. And that is always going to be the long term aim. But I think and I really feel like it's the sort of age old saying, you know, as long as you're doing something is better than nothing. Do you know what I mean? And like, we're really open to kind of hearing feedback. And, you know, it's been that strange thing with the pandemic. This is so much of this has been done in isolation. So it would be really interesting when, you know, the digital tour does go out to see how people respond to it. And I think we're really ready to learn from that still. But I think yeah, just just saying, you know, well, we're we're trying something new and we're doing it for the first time and this is new for us. The digital tour is new for us, so it would be yeah, it's just about learning not to be too precious about doing it in exactly the right way, because, like Hattie said, there isn't, it doesn't really feel like there's a right right way. There were preferences and there guidelines. And, you know, everyone's going to have a slightly different thing that they prefer to another. And so it's just about going, how can we do the best that we can with the resources that we have in this instance?

**Hattie** Yeah, absolutely. I would add that I've also learnt how creative it can be, and I wasn't really aware that there were so many options. I have experience of audio description in my theatre before and that's been fantastic. But I wasn't really sure where we would go with it as a company and how literal, whether there's rules around whether you have to be entirely literal about everything and sort of describe literally just what is there or whether you can add personality and whether you want to always have the same voice on an audio description, if it's pre-recorded or whether you can play around with that. And so to find out that there's actually a lot of creativity in that, really works well for us as well. And I think also, as you were saying, Molly it kind of surprised me as to why, we shouldn't have been worried about it, we should have just gone for it before and so yeah.

**Sofia** So you mentioned a little bit, I want to talk about that a little bit more about the writing of the audio description, especially probably the contrast between you writing for live theatre, like you just said, so what are... what I guess are the specific challenges, even though you touched on a little bit of writing for an extremely visual show. But I guess that what are the, positive is not the right word, but what's the fun of doing that as well? Because I think that hopefully maybe maybe I'm wrong, but I think this probably is something quite fun about the challenge of, I guess, of writing something completely visual. Just talk a little bit more about that that in it.

**Hattie** Yeah, I really enjoyed finding the character and the personality in it, and I actually feel like in a way, after having not done the show in a couple of years, it helped me really get back into that character and possibly even get to know her a little bit better. The main character. So that was the key thing for me, certainly. What about you Molly?

**Molly** Yeah, I think the same really it was just about kind of, yeah, like imbuing like life back into the things that like we don't you don't normally get to hear. I know that sounds a

bit silly because also I think like when we work, especially with the puppets, a common like technique, we were used in rehearsals before we sort of really got to grips with the action is that we'll often verbalise or vocalise like their internal thoughts. So like, although Kate, like she she hardly speaks in the show when we're going through the scenes in very early stages, like Hattie used on the head puppeteering will often vocalise what she might be thinking about so that we can try and better express the emotion or the reaction through the body of the puppet. So it was almost like going back to sort of that state stay a little bit, because whilst it's not dialogue and we don't sort of hear it in that form and a lot of that came through and we put a lot of quite a lot of that in, you know, to kind of, I guess, like, brighten the qualities, I guess, of how she's doing things. So rather than just saying, oh, Kate picks up a glass and, you know, we try to kind of add in like little touches around how she's doing it or the way in which she's doing it. And that was quite nice to, yeah, to refind how I suppose, like Hattie said.

**Sofia** That's really nice and I guess what is the importance, I guess, of I mean, we'll get a lot of our questions on what is the importance accessibility in theatre, but we'll save that one for the very end. But what is the importance of accessibility in a production like Flux in particular? Like why? Because we we've made great strides to really make it accessible that. Why is that really important?

**Hattie** Well. On the one hand, I've got two kind of thoughts on this immediately, and one is that. It isn't unique to Flux, it is important for all Theatre to be accessible, and it shouldn't be that only some productions, only some shows are an option to some people that shouldn't. In the same way, it shouldn't be like, oh, you can only go to some tube stations because they've got a lift, as an example. In addition to that, for Flux in particular, we've made this show about giving women a voice and empowering people and trying to get your story heard and find a way to stand up to people who cut you off or put you down. And for only a certain percentage of our audience to be able to access that feels, those two things don't meet. So it feels like it really needs to be something that everyone can have access to.

**Sofia** OK, yeah.

**Molly** Yeah, 100 percent. That's what I was thinking.

**Hattie** Yeah, OK, good.

**Sofia** Yeah, I agree. And I think that sort of like goes on to let you know that. What the importance of like they've been accessible and I guess what makes it accessible because like there's obviously audio description versions of shows, those captured versions, and there's also integrated productions. You know, we have BSL integration into like and it not just being like, you know, somebody on the side doing the BSL interpretation or, you know, the captions above and having all of these things that it actually like integrated into the productions, which I feel like Theatre is really doing like or is well pre pandemic. I feel like that is obviously the things I've really found out that was really starting to be explored. I mean, that's that's my view of it. And that's only one person's I'm sure other people probably think differently, but I guess that we'll see both what makes what makes this accessible, like for you to say this is an accessible production. What is that for you?

**Molly** I think like for me, it's just about the removal of barriers, like whatever whatever they are. So if your barrier is that you are visually impaired, you can't see, then that barrier is removed and you will give it in an audio described version or whatever your barrier is and

whatever that that also we cross out of like, I guess the things we've been discussing and into things like money and social circumstance and, you know, like physically not being able to go to a theatre. And I think that one is a really interesting one, because we've all faced that barrier because we haven't been able to go anywhere or do anything because of the pandemic. So I'm really hoping that sort of we set out to make Flux accessible in quite fixed ways. And obviously there's reasons why we did that, money and all that stuff applications and all that business. But actually where we've ended up is a digital product. And I hope that that will see our accessibility increase not only because of the different versions of the show that we've made, but also because of the digital form and lots of people who might not come to the theatre because they can't they don't want to they don't feel safe, whatever will hopefully get to see it and maybe it will have a wider reach. So I feel like that's also a version of accessibility. I hope. And I've been reading there's been some quite interesting sort of arguments or discussions about this on social media and places like that. Like a lot of people are saying particularly actually, particularly people with wider access needs are like cool, like the theatres are opening, but I don't feel safe or I don't want to go or I'm still shielding while the rest of the world is is, you know, escaping and what, you know, actually moving forwards. Although we've had to adapt and do digital work as a result of the pandemic. We we as an industry, you know, moving forwards, would it not be great to have a hybrid live digital programme so that everyone can access these things in different ways all the time? And I kind of go, yeah, and I hope that, ah, our Flux digital tour like says to us that that's something that we can know that works in terms of people wanting to see it and at venues wanting to book and that kind of stuff moving forward.

**Sofia** So with all this in mind, what advice would you give to other theatre companies trying to make their show accessible? What advice would you give from your learnings? And, you know...

**Hattie** I think the first thing you want to do in this process is go and speak to an access consultant. If you're looking at one specific area, in that specific area, if you're looking in lots of areas, speak to someone who knows each area. One of the things that we sort of found out whilst making the show more accessible was that actually there's lots of different sides to it and you can't necessarily just pull one out and work on that individually. But also you can't expect somebody who is visually impaired or is an expert in audio description to know about captioning. And that might sound really obvious, but just thinking about it and going to them first and finding out, finding out from them what you need to do, because there's there's no point in me like giving advice on how to do access because I'm not using it. And that kind of, that feels contradictory and sort of unfair. So, yeah, I would, I would say go out and look for people who offer that advice and that information, it is out there. Sometimes it is difficult to find but it is out there.

**Molly** Yeah. Yeah. And I think just like don't be afraid to ask, ask and correct yourself because like the whole point, you know, I think for us definitely there was trepidation, like I said at the beginning, that like not knowing was what was causing the the the sort of, you know, restriction around wanting to do it because it was like a kind of do we want to open that can of worms type conversation? But I feel like now is that everybody has a responsibility to open said can of worms and just deal with the contents, and that's fine, because there are lots of people who are really willing to help and, you know, I think, you know, nobody's going to be cross with you for not knowing. Like, it's that thing that, like, knowledge is knowledge is power, isn't it? Like, you know, if you know, then use it to do good things. And if you if you don't know, you can't be ashamed that you don't know, because that's the reason why you need to learn it like and it sounds very silly, but yeah.

And it's fine and obviously don't learn the stuff and then do the stupid things moving forward because then that's not good.

**Sofia** So what is the future of accessibility in the Arts?

**Hattie** Well yeah. Yeah. I mean you've touched on. So a future of there being hopefully more online options and availability in that way, I would hope it would be that everyone starts including accessibility in their processes from the beginning. It shouldn't be that, "oh, we're so great because we're making it accessible", that that should be a thing that it shouldn't. I'm not articulating myself very well.

**Sofia** Well, no, no, I think I think I get you. I think it is a case of, like, I guess the the future of it and I'm starting to see it from the positive glance is that it's in everybody's thinking what everyone that I've spoken to in the industry always thinking about accessibility and accessibility is at the forefront of the mind. And I think especially in, you know, with funding applications and, you know, and gatekeepers in that sense of the people who actually give the money for you to be able to make the work if it's in the forefront of their minds. Well, it kind of steers. And I think that's important, too, to be able to be, ah, accessibility is important. And that and that's that's the thing, I think is that it and I think that's what you're saying, is that it needs to be like. The thing from the start of making the work, it's not like an afterthought.

**Hattie** Yeah, yeah.

**Sofia** Think like with the way it's going, I feel like more and more companies and more and more artists are thinking, how are we making a successful and like not not just like, you know, accessible with a sort of accessibility in the the greatest like way of the word? That makes sense. I did not articulate that very well. But thinking about social like, you know, all of the things that come with accessibility, how do people get to see, the production.

**Hattie** Well...

**Sofia** It's quite big

**Hattie** Absolutely.

**Sofia** We're at the start of the journey of it all I guess.

**Hattie** There's you know, it's a good example or maybe a better way of explaining what I mean, it's like. Shows will advertise a relaxed performance, right, and that is something where people are welcome to like the lights might be up a little bit maybe, but otherwise people going to see that show, might expect other audience members to be a bit more noisy or a bit unsettled, for example. But why should that only be expected and acceptable at those one performances? You know, that that just isn't right and that that's something I hope we're moving away from.

**Molly** Yeah, I think we are so diverse, like diverging a little bit obviously with Kinder our R&D that we've been doing recently. And I would say that we we've been as a result of sort of doing this process with Flux, we've been making sure that we try and incorporate accessibility in at R&D level so that by the time we finish and make tenderised the final product, it will be it will be inherently more accessible because we've been working with it earlier on. But I think conversations around that, around neurodiversity and there is that

currently we're still segmenting audiences and shows made for specific audiences with versions of things like you just saying Hattie like relaxed performances or audio described performances or caption performances, and they're all in their little baskets. Whereas I hope that in the future it will just be one show that any of those people and any one without any access requirements at all just watch together and they all have everything in. And yeah, and that's just the show. And they're not made for any special reason or purpose or. Yeah. And it's just that that is what I look like for everyone. They are made that way they are finished that way. Job done.

**Sofia** Yeah I agree. And I guess that how can we all like how can we will play our part in supporting accessible theatres across the industry. Like, I mean like for example with our other show Kinder, like, we're thinking about from the very start, you know, it's embedded into the story, into the like the function of how the show is created. Like, I guess why do like what can we all be doing to make sure that accessibility is at the forefront of the work that we make, like the creation point. To the floor!

**Hattie** So, yeah, I would I would say start by having those conversations, like we've said it a few times. But it is true ,don't don't be scared to have those conversations be respectful, be kind, when you're going into that. But also that's the way you're going to learn. And that's why we are learning, still. Yeah.

**Molly** Yeah, I think as well, like by proxy, if you diversify your team, your cast, your creatives, then you automatically get those perspectives in the room and therefore you're much more likely to address those issues. Like Hattie said, you know, like you kind of ask a person who has full sight to see things from the perspective of someone who's blind or visually impaired like you know you can not ask an able-bodied person to give you an opinion on something that would affect a person who isn't able bodied. Like it's not, it's not fair and it's not reasonable, you know, like, you know. So I think if you have these people in your room and in your process, they are always seeing it from their own perspective, just like you always seeing it from your own perspective. So that will naturally be offered because they're part of the creation of the work from, from their own viewpoint. So I think that could help as well.

**Hattie** Absolutely, 100 percent.

**Sofia** I feel like this conversation's obviously what's what's exciting about it is that it's, you know, lots of people are talking about it more openly. And I think that's quite exciting. It was before it was this thing. It's that whole thing you were saying Hattie that is like, you know, be be honest, be be open, ask questions. I feel like, you know, probably 10 years ago, people probably didn't feel like they could. Or would. Whereas I feel like it's a really open space to be able to go and seek that out to make sure that things are more accessible, like moving forward. And I'm hoping that will eventually just be ingrained into everything that we do and we create.

**Hattie** Absolutely, absolutely.

**Molly** I think it can feel like quite overwhelming to like and to to start on the access journey. But I think if you see it as a journey, like not not something that you have to you know, I mean, I'm sure some people can and should be achieving it in its totality, like straight away. But also it's OK to be a process because, like, it's like waking up the next day or saying, right, you know what, tomorrow I'm going to learn French and then expecting to be able to speak it the day after. Like, you know, if you're trying to educate

yourself, it's going to take time. And you might make a few blunders along the way, but it's OK because that's how you get to something that works for you. And I think it is a you know, whilst it has to functionally do the job and, you know, essentially it's ineffective if it doesn't improve access. I think there's a there's an artistic side of that as well, which is that it has to also work for your your work and your shows and your ways of doing things. And that was really important to us that it didn't feel like a lesser offer. You know, we don't want to ever want it to be that the audio described version of Flux is any less brilliant than the non audio described version of Flux.

**Hattie** Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And I just I want to keep learning and I want to keep bettering my understanding of access, but of like just of everyone, you know. And I know that sounds really like 'oh world peace', but it's just, these things need to happen and there's enough difficulty in the world without without us making it harder, I think. I think we can generally be kind and for me that's always a good starting point.

**Sofia** Yeah, and that's a great way to like. What a great end to our podcast to be like, be kind, I feel like that that just speaks like a thousand words just that is so what's needed, especially during this this time in general, and to be kind on the journey on the process and to each other at all times. And I feel like that's where like the openness comes from, you know, immediately. You just have a different view by that point. A different approach, I guess.

**Hattie** Yeah, absolutely. Well brilliant, thank you both.

**Sofia** Thank you

**Hattie** For being here this evening. Yeah. It's been really great to kind of think about that again and actually to reflect on it now that we're sort of coming towards the end of it and to reflect on that process. Well, coming to the end of it for this show, not for ever, as we know, there's plenty to learn, but yeah, that's been really great. Thank you, everyone. Thank you very much.

**Molly** Thank you.

**Sofia** Thanks

(Outtro music)