Episode 1, The Past
Artists: David Bobier, Eliza Chandler, Gaitrie Persaud
Interviewer: Mary Anderson
Music: Eli Howey

MUSIC

[00:00:00] Hi, my name's Sean Lee and I'm the director of Programming at Tangled Art and Disability. This podcast, Belonging in Space, was created in collaboration with Why Not Theater and their Space Project, an initiative that explores how access to space shapes the practices of artists from equity seeking communities, including Deaf, disabled, racialized, and queer artists.

Led by Why Not's Producer Mary Anderson, we developed a three part podcast on the theme of belonging in creative spaces. Told through the voices of nine artists across Tangled history, reflecting on what fosters it, what limits it, and what possibilities lie ahead. Each episode will focus on one of three themes: the past, the present, or the future. [00:01:00]

This episode looks to the past and features David Bobier, Eliza Chandler, and Gaitrie Persaud. Learn more about Tangled's history, disability arts legacies more broadly, and how this field has evolved over time in spaces across Canada.

MUSIC

David Bobier
Mary Anderson

My name is David Bobier, and I am a media artist and founder, curator, director of VibraFusionLab. I am in my cottage home just outside of London, Ontario, on unseeded land, conservation land actually. So it's preserved, essentially a natural space that we live on.

And how long have you been an artist?

Well, I've been an artist since my early twenties, which is quite some time ago actually. I've been a practicing artist for most of my life. There was a bit of a hiatus when we adopted two Deaf children and that was a fairly significant preoccupation for me as a parent. And consequently my artistic practice shifted a little bit more [00:03:00] into administrative work and some curatorial work. But yeah, back at it and have a studio just outside. I'm looking at it right now.

Really?

Yeah.

Can you describe that?

I can describe it. It's something that I think is worth thinking about, in terms of artists looking

for opportunities for studios. We, so my wife is also an artist, we were renting space in London and finding that, you know, at the end of the day, whether we were working on other things, we just didn't have the energy to get back into London and, you know, get into the studio. So we looked into having something built and that was way outside of our budget. [00:04:00] So I started looking around and we located a classroom portable, which are sort of ubiquitous in most school settings.

We bought it for $25 and had it moved in two sections to our space here and it's 24 by 32, which is a good size. I think that's over 600 square feet. So we split it and you know, it's been great. It's really something that has helped us, in terms of just walking out and into the studio and just making much more use of it. [00:05:00]

My understanding is that they can't get rid of these portables. So, you know, if you have enough land mass somewhere, it occurred to me that it would be wonderful if you could take a parking lot and put eight portables onto that parking lot. It would be an amazing, new sort of setting for artistic practice. But that's just an idea I have in my head. I don't have a parking lot, by the way, to do this.

You can start a little artist in residency out there.

Absolutely.

So in the past when you were starting out in your practice, did you have access to a creative space that you used? [00:06:00]

You know, this is going back now to my arts education. I ended up getting a job teaching at Mount Allison University in New Brunswick so I had access to facilities there and was quite productive and had a number of shows out there. I was there for about eight years, nine years, and moved back to Ontario for my kids' education at the Robarts School for the Deaf in London. And I rented a large studio space at that time, which was very raw, raw enough that, you know, we had to have pails for catching rainwater and stuff like that. [00:07:00] But very inexpensive and I was able to work there for three or four years and then as I said, there was sort of a hiatus. Then about, I guess 13, 14 years ago, we moved to where we are now and that's when the classroom portable came into actuality.

I know a lot of your work is geared towards facilitating spaces that are way more accessible and inclusive and inviting and multisensory. If you could just kind of give us an overview of what your work hopes to achieve in that way? Accessible spaces to get folks through the door, but also in the art itself, as well. [00:08:00]

Yeah, so I guess through the VibraFusionLab, which is sort of founded on a couple of principles and one of them is to support artists from the Deaf and disabled community – support them in their creative process.

Whether you know, it's supporting them in terms of some sort of technology, adaptive technology that will give them more access to being creative, or you know, supporting them depending on the nature of the disability. We try [00:09:00] to facilitate, I guess I use that word a lot 'cause I think that's what we do is we sort of facilitate the artist with what they are making and who they are, and what their challenges may be, but also what are their capacities.

And so we have to sort of think about supporting the capacity and sort of addressing the challenges. We work a lot in different kinds of spaces. More and more we've been working with theater organizations. The other principle of VibraFusionLab [00:10:00] is supporting the Deaf and disability community to become an audience, to be able to access art, presentations in whatever medium or form that is.

And so typically with galleries or theater spaces or whatever, the question is always who is the audience and who isn't the audience, who's missing in the audience? And so that's essentially our target audience – to try and find ways of making them more comfortable coming into a space or just having available access to the art.

So we do a lot of work in the [00:11:00] area of sound and vibration, and with people with hearing loss, and thinking about how a person with a hearing loss can access sound. And vibration seems to be an obvious means of doing that.

Particularly when there's any kind of sound elements to the work, which typically would be inaccessible or partially inaccessible. So vibration is sort of the conduit or the channel for those to be able to experience sound on the body. Our technology has a lot to do with [00:12:00] building systems, developing systems, or devices that could enhance that access.

It could be something that's wearable. The technology we use is something called a transducer, which is a piece of hardware, which is designed to emphasize vibration of sound. So sound is channeled, the audio signal is channeled into the transducer. And the transducer acts as a speaker, but it also enhances the vibration.

So those come in multiple sizes from something, you know, six to eight inches to something as small as a fingernail. So we have many [00:13:00] different sources of transducers, we kind of narrowed it down to a couple that we use quite regularly. And those are then incorporated into these devices or systems that we build or create for the artists we work with. And the thing about disability is that there's no two people that have exactly the same kind of disability or challenge, so we have to work very much on an individual basis when we're working with artists.

Adapting spaces is something that we've been doing a lot of in different settings – black box theater settings. We've worked with The [00:14:00] Music Gallery in Toronto, with artists, sort of transforming installations into spaces that contain sound, but also have a vibrotactile element to them.

So there's a couple of things that are kind of standard, I guess for transforming spaces into wearables or accessing the sound through vibration. One is a commercial product that we use, it's called a Woojer strap or Woojer belt. I don't actually have an example of it here, but it's something that you wear and they're [00:15:00] designed actually just to, there's no sound to them.

It's just vibrations. We have about well over a hundred of those so we can set that many up in a theater space so that number of audience can access the sound as vibration. We've developed a special sort of cabling system that can be easily established or set up in any kind of setting for where there's seating.

But probably the more desirable is the pillow that we make, the vibrotactile pillow. It's a soft, small enough pillow that you can hug to your body. The more contact to the body, you know, the [00:16:00] more enriched experience you have. But we've also developed a 10 channel vibrotactile wall that you can lean into, like your full body weight into the wall, and it's designed so that it covers your whole body. So it goes from your shoulders all the way down to your calves. And it's designed that sound can actually move around from one transducer to the other, and you can control that movement.

And any audio file you can channel into something like that, as long as it's a separate 10 channel system. And we've commissioned composers to create works for the wall. So that's quite a [00:17:00] unique experience. I don't think there's anything like it to my knowledge. The thing with it is, while it's a tremendous experience for someone who is able to stand, it's not accessible for you know, say a wheelchair user.

So we are now in the process of compressing that, taking the scale of it, scaling it down to something that could be placed in the back of the wheelchair and still being an eight to 10 channel. And you can control it and you'd have this sort of orchestra of vibration on your back, and that we're hoping to have ready this fall.

The other thing we do more and more of is vibrotactile floors. So we build these [00:18:00] floors that are raised – they're raised components of about two feet by two feet, and they can be constructed into a space that could be, you know, 24 feet by 24 feet, and the whole floor would then be a vibrotactile floor.

And it could be programmed to have the sound and the vibration moving around. So you know, those are all kinds of ways that we can go into a space and alter it in a way that the sound changes quite dramatically. You get this more sort of spatial sound, rather than something coming out of, you know, a speaker.

So we're actually partnering with an organization in Hamilton [00:19:00] where the lab is situated, where VibraFushionLab is. We're partnering with an organization, Centre[3], and they got funding for supporting us to develop a multisensory room.

That is the prototype that then could be adapted to a gallery space or a theater space. And it would include all of the sorts of devices that I've talked about, but also would probably include other elements that we call sound visualization. So we can use light to be activated by sound.

So that's another way of experiencing sound. You [00:20:00] can also use different types of materials that respond to vibration that become a visual element. There's many ways of developing or creating a space that is multisensory and multi-accessible. So that kind of gives you, I think, an overview of VibraFusionLab. But again, it depends on the type of space that we have an opportunity to work in.

How did VibraFusionLab begin? How did it start up? What inspired you and others to come together to do this?

I have to go back to probably [00:21:00] 2010 maybe? Somewhere in that time period, there was a department at what was then Ryerson University, which the department's now called Inclusive Media Design Center.

And this was when my kids were still fairly young. And you know, being part of the Deaf community, or through my kids being part of the Deaf community, I heard about this project that they were doing at Ryerson, which was called the Emoti-Chair. So Inclusive Media Design Center does research and develops assistive technology, I guess you would say.

And so this project, Emoti-Chair, was to design a [00:22:00] theater chair for the Deaf using vibration. And they went through many different sort of stages of development of this chair. I became quite fascinated by it, from my background as an artist too, and thinking about that kind of technology.

So I contacted them and over a period of a fairly short time, I was sort of brought on as a kind of resident artist, I guess, into the program. My idea was to think about what this technology could mean outside of academia, and so I was able to start doing some workshops in the [00:23:00] community, taking this technology from their lab and setting it up in spaces where we could do workshops with Deaf artists.

That sort of morphed into their kind of understanding that, yes, this technology had real applications, almost as a creative medium. So they applied for a SSHRC grant – Social Sciences Humanities Research grant – to essentially start VibraFusionLab. The expectations of getting the grant were pretty low because [00:24:00] universities don't like, you know, money to flow outside of their sort of boundaries.

However, we did get it. And so what we did was I rented a space in London, Ontario, and moved a lot of the technology out of their lab because they had sort of reached the kind of research that they were hoping to achieve. And so we set up this space in London with all this technology.

It was a three year grant and I was also able to get funding through Ontario Arts Council and Canada Council to invite artists to come into the space, which I did. Over the three year period, we had musicians, we had dancers, we had visual artists, [00:25:00] sound artists, like a whole, sort of, array of artists come in for a week at a time typically, and just sort of handed over the space to them.

And the hope was that they would see some possibilities of incorporating this work, this kind of technology into their work. So that was how it started, and then at the end of three years, and as you know, in the arts, funding can be sporadic, I had to close the space and I started kind of operating essentially out of my home studio. This was pre-COVID and I started to get work in the UK and spent a fair bit of time in Amsterdam [00:26:00] working with some artists there. And the word was starting to sort of spread more internationally.

I was traveling a lot at that time. And then COVID hit and travel stopped and I brought Jim Bruxton in, and he was working out of his basement at the time. Travel started to pick up mostly in Canada, and since then we've worked from Halifax all the way across to Victoria, and managed to open a space in Hamilton about a year ago.

So we have now [00:27:00] a lab, what we call a lab, which is, you know, where all of the technology is. And we share it with Centre[3]. There's a space at the front, which is sort of a community space. That's where we do community programming and they program out of it.

If it wasn't for that, we wouldn't be able to afford the space. So its shared space, shared costs. We started doing residencies. Last fall, we did three week residencies for eight artists all from the Deaf and disabled community. We had two ASL interpreters for the duration of the residencies.

We had [00:28:00] two Deaf, Indigenous women, mentors, elders come in for three or four days just to sort of situate the residencies and address issues of reconciliation – amazing experience. So we're hoping to keep the residency programming going, but in the meantime, still working with various organizations from aerial circus to burlesque, to dance to gallery space, you know, the whole sort of range of mediums, arts, artistic practices.

It's interesting when you think about [00:29:00] how broad the effects can go from some of these research ideas that initially are just like, "oh, I like this idea." And then once you start putting it out there – that's what I love about academia is once you start opening the doors up, I think that's where the magic really happens, right?

Yeah, absolutely. I think there's so much interesting stuff happening. From the general public's experience, it's very alien, I guess. The other thing is when you say about things just sort of spreading, there's this sort of organic thing that happens. And one of the things that's happened is that Humber College in Toronto have actually [00:30:00] purchased quite a bit of stuff from us. They're building a new media center in the harbourfront campus and we're going to be building some systems that will become part of their music programs.

They're really wanting to sort of influence or have students start to consider accessibility as part of the educational process. It only takes an organization or an individual to say, you know, let's do it to set the standard of something new and become a model for people to begin to understand how it works. [00:31:00] I always say you can talk about this forever, but if you don't experience it, it's kind of meaningless. It's hard to understand.

It's been so amazing to learn the openness and the willingness that has to be at the forefront within the community. I think that's another reason why I wanted to embark on this podcast is because there's no checklist.

Like there's not a, you know, this is what we need for accessible spaces. It's like no – the approach and the action that has to go into this has to be so different. Anyway, I mean folks know this, but [00:32:00] I guess some people just aren't aware of the diversity of needs and desires and whatnot. It's just been so much more evident in these conversations of having that heart in the right place with all of this stuff, if that makes sense.

Absolutely. You mentioned openness because, you know, if you're not open, you're not understanding, and if you don't understand, I mean how are you going to support someone? You know when we have like four artists in our lab at once doing a residency, they're all going in four different directions.

You know, accommodating each individual. The thing that really is [00:33:00] wonderful though to watch is when you have three or four people together, how they start kind of responding to each other, how they start working with each other. They're influencing each other, they're inquiry is rich. And then to see them take some aspect of the technology and take it in a direction that maybe we didn't anticipate at all. It's so exciting. And challenging. But yeah, openness and willingness to take those chances, take those risks, which I think what you're doing with the Space Project is a lot of challenges there. [00:34:00] Figuring all that out.

One of the things that I've learned as an artist, and I started in my art career quite a few years ago, it was all about solitude, you know, working on your own, and I couldn't fathom working with someone else. It just didn't make sense to me. And now it's all about partnership. I mean, we thrive on partnerships. I think in terms of sharing, in our case sharing space or sharing staff, like different ways of being creative. Creative partnerships – you know, if [00:35:00] I'm talking to a younger artist or something, that's my, you know – make sure that you think about that because it just adds to and it brings in all kinds of new opportunities, but also new ideas, new challenges. And so out of that, just comes something more powerful or more important, more relevant, I think. I believe very much in partnerships.

I agree. I think everyone has illustrated that too – almost like an intergenerational learning too from this in many ways.

Oh my God. Yeah. Well, you know, I'm working with artists that are, you know, early thirties and it's like, holy mackerel. [00:36:00] You know, you're right there. Maybe your body isn't right

there, but your mind is right there, and it's just so exciting to be part of that.

MUSIC

Eliza Chandler
Mary Anderson

Well, let's start off by introducing yourself and where you are tuning in from today.

My name's Eliza Chandler and I'm tuning in from Halifax, Nova Scotia.

How many years have you [00:37:00] been an artist?

Oh, well I'd say 25 years.

Okay. And what is your creative practice? Because I know you have a lot going on.

I think that's why I hesitated. About 25 years ago, I started art school and I focused on sculpture and video art. But in recent years, my practice is focused on curating other artists.

When you were younger, did you have access to a creative space at the time?

When I went to art school, I did. I mean, I went to NSCAD so I had access to the artistic facilities. I studied sculpture and video art. And then after I graduated, I [00:38:00] moved to Toronto and I did not have access to space at all. I also did a lot of textile art and weaving and things like that. And I remember being desperate for a loom of some sort and just did not have access to a sculpture studio, a weaving studio.

And that really is what sort of ended my artistic career in those mediums, anyway, not having access to space. I was poor, I was not connected. I moved to Toronto on like a hope and a whim, so yeah, I didn't have the network that might have connected me to affordable space.

Do you recall the first time you made in a space where you felt like you could be yourself, [00:39:00] that you could be comfortable creating?

So years later, I left NSCAD – you know, whenever I talk about that time in my life, I always say I was, you know, noticeably disabled, but I hadn't come out as Crip yet. And I found the studios at NSCAD to be very friendly and warm and hospitable. But because of my own internalized ableism and because of a lack of conversation around accessibility or accommodations, you know, I did not access those spaces as well as I could have. As I mentioned, I was in sculpture so there was a whole welding studio and you had to take training in order to use that welding studio. [00:40:00]

And I couldn't do that, right? So I'm not suggesting they should have let me anyway, but, you know, there could have been some interdependent, artistic collaboration or something in spaces like the welding studio. Even I took photography back in the days where you were rolling your film in the darkroom, and you know, that was really difficult.

Then all of my prints would have splotches and I just remember being in those rooms for hours trying to sort of wind the film without having the film rub against one another – to create these spaces where the solution couldn't develop the film if the film strips that were touching each other. But again, I didn't have the [00:41:00] vocabulary or the sort of self-advocacy to say, okay, like someone else could clearly do this. So instead I just sort of went to a different department. Years later, after I came to Toronto and got involved in disability arts, and that was a long winding road, my friend Lindsey Fisher and myself started Creative Users, which is now Lindsay's project with Creative Connector.

And one of the first projects that we did together was Crip Interiors. And that was a workshop that started, that was meant to be sort of a three month workshop that she and I co-led with jes sachse actually, and brought together disabled people to make artwork, based on props.

And I'd say [00:42:00] that was the first time that I really felt like I could access making artwork in a way that worked for me, felt right. Yeah, these kinds of things. And then we had a show at Artscape Youngplace – Crip Interiors was the show. A few years previous to that I hooked up with a research project, a digital storytelling based research project, and it was about disabled women's experience of healthcare.

And I really was attracted to that project because it wasn't our space project. And as I mentioned, I did video at NSCAD and here was a research project, which would facilitate participants in my community to tell digital stories. [00:43:00] I was interested in the project, but I was also interested to have access to software and hardware and training to be able to create videos again.

And to my surprise, other disabled people were in that space for the same reason. That's where I met Lindsay and jess actually, in those workshops, and I think we all were there because it provided a way to access like artistic training and equipment, and unbeknownst at the time of signing up, access to artistic peers, as well.

Hearing you speak about meeting these people in this environment and then watch what happens in terms of like, it flourishing, you know?

Totally.

It's like you just need these starting points of connection and resources and then with [00:44:00] time, so much can happen, you know?

Totally. Yes.

Amazing. So can you tell us a little bit about your history with Tangled? Did your relationship with Tangled happen after that?

Yeah, it did. It's all very connected. So, I did this research project. I stayed on the research project and I took the digital storytelling facilitator training. So I worked with other groups and through that work we presented these videos at a film festival in Guelph.

I wanna say it was called Reframe. That might not be quite it. And at the same time, Abilities Arts Festival had hired [00:45:00] Rina Fraticelli to be their artistic director. And Rina's sort of vision for Abilities was to turn it into a disability-led disability arts program. It was a festival, so she wanted to turn it into an organization.

And so she hired Kara E Scott to be our community outreach coordinator or facilitator, and they came to the Guelph Film Festival to see our films just because they were like, you know, probably scoping out where is disability art happening. And previous to Rina's hiring, Abilities Arts Festival was really focused on bringing international disabled artists into [00:46:00] Toronto for a week-long festival.

So folks from the states and from the UK, and Rina thought, you know, there must be stuff going on here. Like Abilities should focus on sort of gathering and cultivating disability arts in Toronto and Ontario. I don't know their end of the story, but I assume they went to the Guelph Film Festival to check out, you know, who are these disabled filmmakers. And I got up and introduced it and afterwards Rina and Kara came up and said, we're from the Abilities Arts Festival. You know I think I heard of Abilities Arts, but it wasn't something that I found interesting or like something to connect with. And then, you know, I was graduating from my doctoral studies and looking for the next step, and Rina said, why don't you join the board? [00:47:00]

And it was at that point where we were having discussions about, okay, like do we need a new name? Do we need a new focus? Like trying to get on public funding, Canada Council, Ontario Arts Council. I was so lucky enough to be part of all of those conversations. That was around 2010, 2011, and then Abilities Arts Festival became Tangled, and then Rina, her term as artistic director ended, so I was hired as the artistic director. And the rest was really history. She had sort of set it up so that we would have a festival called Strange Beauty [00:48:00]. And her strategy, which was very effective, was that we would sort of occupy the 401 building.

So we would have partnerships with different galleries as well as the main space, the cafe, and stuff like that. And so at the time, Rina had her own art studio in the basement of the 401 Richmond Building, which for those who don't know, is this great sort of old big building in downtown Toronto with lots of artist-run centres, and artist studios, and some commercial galleries, and film festivals and things. She just, I think since the 70s, had her own personal studio in the basement and turned that into Abilities and then Tangled. So we were in the basement and she thought, you know, we need to let people know that we're here. [00:49:00]

So we had all these exhibitions and artist talks and everything else. We had this great opening and it was like, talk about cripping a space. Like we had so many disabled people, like the Richmond Street was like rotating with wheeltrans drop-offs, there were so many wheelchair users in the hallway, lots of ASL interpreters, lots of Deaf folks.

It was just really filled with so much community. And sure enough, like I think a week later, 401 called us in and they said, you know, we have this space that's becoming available. Is it something you want? And as they do, they offered it to us for [00:50:00] an affordable rate that we could afford.

I mean, I think at that time it was so exciting because, oh my God, this permanent public facing space, which, you know, will allow us to grow as an organization, but also fill a community need to have like a gathering place for disabled people to come and have book launches or community discussions or just hang out, right? There's a need for this kind of space.

It's very cool to just hear how things come together. 'Cause I think that's a big barrier for folks – sometimes they just don't know how to start. And I think so often you need the space before you create these kinds of movements. Sometimes it's not that linear, you know?

Yeah. I mean this is a very sort of [00:51:00] linear story, which did not feel linear at all at the time. Like, I have to tell you, we did not foresee any of this, but I think the strategy, Rina's genius strategy of like hanging some artwork in the cafe, right?

There's an organization in Ottawa, Being Studio, another disability organization, and they got their start from hanging artwork in the bagel shop and the Second Cup and stuff, right? And I think that is a tactical thing to be strategically employed. Is there a community gathering space? Can you have a meeting circle there or a film screening, or hang some art or like a book talk. Just to be sort of visible and present I think is really important. Especially, I [00:52:00] know it's difficult, like in times of COVID, I get that, but also I think a lot happens online, which is great, I'm not saying that's doesn't work, but it's also good if you can safely gather in public or even, you know, in the open air just to be there as a felt presence, right?

I know that your project is beyond folks with disabilities, but there's something there, there's something that happens when unexpected people show up to a space, right? You can be tactical, like I was going to say, you can just slink in like everyone else, but you can't always. Like a wheelchair user – a group of five wheelchair users are going to be disruptive. And I think that's key is to use that disruption as [00:53:00] a chance to say like, isn't this cool? Wouldn't it be cool if we could do this all the time? Like if you put a ramp in, you can have this kind of energy all the time or you know, whatever the equivalent is.

Yeah. It's this openness I think and willingness to just be welcome to all experiences and abilities, obviously, but to really, like you say, be open to chance and to take a bit of risk too. I think so much of this stuff, especially stuff that's affiliated with space access, I think folks that are running spaces or these property developers that want to try out a six month short lease

with an artist collective, for example – they almost want a checklist. How do we make this accessible for [00:54:00] disabled folks to access and whatever. And it's like when you stop and kind of think, it's more about just listening and learning and being open and seeing how people engage with that space continually. And how it just has to remain fluid essentially, you know? And that's not easy, in some ways, for people to kind of grasp.

Yeah, you put that very well – I would totally co-sign that.

Now that you've kind of gone through this journey, everything that you've been part of, in terms of revolutionizing the local disability arts scene here in the city, what are you excited about now when you think how far you've [00:55:00] come, in some regards? I mean, there's still a lot of work to be done, obviously.

I'm really excited for the direction Tangled is headed in. I mean there's a couple things. The initial intent, as I said, was to cultivate disability arts locally. And I think the next step in that particular trajectory would be as Tangled as doing, as you're doing, is to make sure that there are places for folks to go onto after they've exhibited at Tangled, right?

So that all of the galleries and theaters and microspaces in the city and the province and the country are accessible and have a mandate to show disabled artists, Deaf artists, MAD/neurodiverse artists, right? I think that's sort of the necessary next step. [00:56:00] And I would say, you know, I do a lot of work with organizations trying to become more accessible and work better with the disability community.

And I find the piece that is often missing is programming disabled artists – that is key. You can have all the ASL and relaxed performances in the world, but if you are not casting disabled actors or disabled playwrights and plays, you're not sufficiently connecting up with community, in my opinion.

And I've seen that gap a lot. And so yeah, to complete that thought, so that other places exist. I mean I would have early interviews at Tangled, and sometimes the interviewer would say to me, I guess the point of Tangled is to make your job irrelevant, like put yourself out of a job. No, that's not the point. Their line of thinking was that there won't be a need for a disability-identified gallery, and I would think there would always be a need – we're a community, we're a culture, there's something so vibrant about Crips getting together and making work and having some culturally specific conversations that might be too risky or too nuanced or too specific to have in other spaces. And that would always be the value of Tangled. [00:57:00]

I mean, places like Workman Arts and Being Studio are great too, and there will never be a saturation of disability galleries, in my opinion, they can grow forever. But at the same time, [00:58:00] people, you know, they want to be able to show at the AGO or wherever. And so these spaces, they need to have a mandate to show disabled artists. And I think as Tangled is doing, it's not only cultivating local talent, it's really sort of making international connections as is relevant, I think.

I mean they have such a reputation, people gravitate towards them, but I think they're being very thoughtful in the partnerships they're making across the world, and that's very exciting to me. I think, I could be wrong, but it seems to me like Toronto, Tangled is a bit of a hub for disability arts, there are certainly other hubs. [00:59:00] But as I mentioned, I grew up in rural Nova Scotia, so when I was a kid in the 80s, I would never have dreamed of such a thing, right?

I think it's very important to continue to branch out. When I first started, again, Rina had initiated a Tangled On Tour program and we went to London, which is how I met the fabulous David Bobier, and worked with him very closely. And we went to Ottawa and we went to Thunder Bay, and we worked with an artist Eugene Francois, who's a fantastic artist in Thunder Bay.

But I think those kinds of initiatives continue to be important. When we were in Thunder Bay working locally with Indigenous communities, like Eugene, [01:00:00] was it the chair of the Injured Workers Association of Ontario? So that's a different way of like relating to disability.

There's just different ways of relating to disability that are geographically significant, I think? When you reach out to folks, you get folks who acquired diabetes because of living in a food desert, or just don't have access to narratives of disability pride, or have become disabled because of police violence, you know, or become disabled because of wildfire smoke, right?

Because disability is produced largely through environmental and cultural interactions, where you move geographically changes [01:01:00] the way you understand disability and access, and I think that's always going to be very important.

I was glad that David mentioned that today too, just in terms of branching outside of this city. That's something that I'm grateful for too that it wasn't just Toronto specific, because I was fortunate I got to fly to Edmonton and to Regina, and I'm from Saskatchewan originally so I was very excited to go to Saskatchewan, and I tried to do as much audience/community feedback as possible because so much of what we're collecting too has been how have these different spaces/community organizations – they're very much housed in neighborhoods and how that has trickled out, and who's accessing these spaces, and what programs, and how long has it been in the neighborhood?

And it's been really [01:02:00] interesting to see how different it is depending on, you know, obviously the city. But it's worth noting that it's not just, you know, this is like an access to space for artists is tricky because of A, B, C. It's so much more nuanced than that. And it's cool to see what artists and their communities are doing to explore outside the box a bit.

And that's true too. Like, to your last point – when I speak about expanding, it's not like bringing disability arts, it's sort of forming those relationships to see what's happening, where it's happening, how it's happening.

Yeah. I guess my point is when there's more collaboration, or I guess more unique styles of collaboration, I think that's when you start getting some interesting relationship building. And [01:03:00] that stuff excites me, anyway.

I'm totally with you on that. Like, some cool things can happen through unexpected partnerships.

Do you feel like you have a sense of belonging within the spaces that you inhabit here? I guess in Halifax and here in the city of Toronto?

Yeah. I mean, I'm just here right now, but I've spent most of my life in Toronto. Yes and no, right? I think it is about cultivating feelings of belongingness. It's interesting, I'm doing a project right now working with organizations on their accessibility plans, and something that comes up a lot is how can we make disabled people feel like they belong.

And you can't, but [01:04:00] you can create the conditions that make that a bit more possible. I think, you know, even things from having straws at the bar so that people don't have to ask for straws, or chairs, or whatever, to again having artists who represent different communities and cultures. But when I do feel included and a sense of belonging, it's always because the folks in the room are very eager to make that happen.

And that's where it feels best for sure. And I think that happens a lot. So I feel very fortunate to be somewhere where it does. [01:05:00]

MUSIC

Gaitrie Persaud
Mary Anderson

My name is Gaitrie. I'm an artist who wears many different hats. I live here in Toronto. I'm a mom of three children.

How many years have you been an artist here in the city?

Almost 13 years.

Can you describe your creative practice?

Yeah, so I mean, really I'm involved in working on many projects currently. Right now, I'm working on my own theater performance as a solo female. It's called The Red Rose Bleeding. My character is a serial killer who has trauma from different sexual assault experiences, and her identity feels oppressed. If you think about [01:06:00] like, kind of like a Batman character, there's like a double story there. So I'm really focusing on that project because we're going to be performing shortly in the next couple weeks with SummerWorks.

Congrats. That sounds amazing.

Yes. Thank you.

So I gotta ask, what space are you currently rehearsing in?

I've also been teaching a music workshop to develop different characters, how to switch between different moods and different modes, what is their habit like? Trying to rehearse in these different ways with teaching Deaf people how to sign music, how to translate lyrics, how to incorporate certain metaphors. [01:07:00] I also teach improv, as well, how to use – I mean in Deaf culture we typically use our face and expressions, but in the improv space, I really try to challenge folks to use their body and the movement of body over facial features and expressions. So I usually work within Studio H.

And where is that?

It's in Toronto. It's close to, I forget the name. I think Sterling? It's close to Sterling Road. Studio H itself is on Bloor. And it's very accessible for Deaf and disabled artists. It's quite a large studio so it gives us some room, but it's a great area.

Do you recall the first space that made you feel comfortable being [01:08:00] yourself or where you felt welcomed? What was it about that space that made you feel like you belonged?

I really need to match the vibe of the space. I love, you know, when there's restaurants close by and perhaps when there's, you know, a really great restaurant. For example, by Studio H there's a great Portuguese restaurant. So during break time I can go get some food and come back to the studio and it really feels like home. There's not a lot of people so it is quite private. And there's also a lot of parking so it is accessible in that way. So I feel it's quite stress free. And it's important because downtown Toronto typically, so much of the barriers of getting into the space involves looking for parking or worrying about if you're getting a parking ticket, but Studio H has [01:09:00] free parking and that's just included. So it's easy for me to get there, to get in, to feel like I'm ready to focus on my work. It's also really nice because it is surrounded by some nature, like there's quite a lot of trees and sometimes you can see the train coming by, which could be a little bit annoying. But as a Deaf person, it's really nice because we would feel the rumbling and the vibration of the train coming. So it's really nice.

Wow, I'd like to go check it out. That's amazing.

Yeah, you definitely should.

What does it mean to you to belong within the creative space? So you just described that whole environment of Studio H. Why is this important? What does it mean to belong as an artist here, or there rather?

Well, typically, I mean, Studio H provides everything for us. [01:10:00] They let us use the space and they have all the equipment. So if we need tables or we need chairs, if we need a projector or some sort of tech setup, everything is there ready for us.

So I can see my creative ideas projected or I can feel like, you know, we can have really fruitful discussions. I feel belonging is similar to feeling like it's a warm, welcoming space. It's just like home. It is space, yes. But it is, you know, even roomy so that we don't need to be bumping into tables.

We have a lot of space to even just move around the space. Myself and Courage last year hosted an event about Black storytelling and I think around 50 people showed up just in that space alone. And it was big enough that we could mingle and socialize comfortably. So I feel like there is history within the space and it also gives [01:11:00] me inspiration to be more creative, to think about other stories or other workshops that I could work on.

So that's why I primarily go to Studio H and why I love it there. And I mean, it's really easy to communicate with their team, as well. They are very understanding and very open. And I mean, thinking about belonging also, it's also accessible price wise, because when I'm negotiating with them, they're very open.

It's been interesting to see some of the artists' reflections we've been getting over the past year about how artists will go into a space with an idea to create and how they're just blown away by how some of these spaces amplify these ideas. And I think it just goes to show how valuable specific sites can be in developing new works and facilitating that creative freedom. [01:12:00] So it's great to hear that a space like this is out there.

Yeah, absolutely. Because, I mean, I could stay home and work from home, but sometimes I just feel like, okay, I'm here all the time. I need a change of scenery. I need to be a little bit more creative. I need to get out, right? So Studio H is my escape.

Can you tell us a little bit of your history with Tangled Art and Disability?

Yeah. I mean, Tangled Art, wow. They've really touched my heart. They've been so supportive of my career. They've been so supportive of my company, Phoenix The Fire, if you're aware of it. They've just been really encouraging for all Deaf artists to really believe in themselves.

They push us to get better and to do more. And that kind of support is really inspirational for [01:13:00] myself, to try something different. And they're also really willing to share resources and different things. They're truly amazing and they really believe in us. I think especially with Deaf artists – I think a lot of organizations, I feel like it's hard to really connect. But with Tangled, we were able to connect and have an incredible relationship and other organizations, as well. But Tangled is just, uh, so close to my heart.

So take us back when you were younger, thinking about accessing creative spaces, primarily I would assume here in Toronto. What were the conversations like? What was the dream like for Deaf artists to access creative space in a way that would support and amplify the work?

You mean like before when I was younger, becoming an artist?

Yeah.

So I mean [01:14:00] really, I grew up in a Deaf environment. I went to E.C Drury, which is a Deaf school. I was in drama class. I thought that it was just a hobby of mine at the time, and I always wanted to become a lawyer, strangely enough. And so I went to Rochester Institute for the Deaf and Gallaudet University in the States, and I thought, whoa, wait. Deaf folks in the States are so involved with music and theater, and I didn't have that exposure coming from Canada.

And so while I was in school, it really opened my eyes and I thought, wait a minute. So I brought that back to Toronto and I became a mom at a young age, but I was still feeling like I want to do something. I want to do something different. My heart was telling me to just follow my [01:15:00] passion and to just do what I want to do.

My uncle passed away when he was 55. He had a heart attack, and that really made me pause and think, okay, life is actually really short. And I can hear my uncle's voice at the time saying, follow your passion, follow your heart. So I was working at an airport at the time as a cleaner.

And when all of this happened, I quit because I was also thinking, I'm not happy with this job. And I heard my uncle's voice saying, okay, it's really time to follow your passion. It's time to follow your heart. So I took a risk – I quit my job and I became an actor. And I was following that, pursuing that dream. So I was like, just be expressive, be creative, and just keep going. And here I am.

Thinking back, outside of Tangled Art and [01:16:00] Disability, were there other arts organizations or artists that come to mind when you think back to disability advocacy in the arts?

Yes, absolutely. Oh my goodness. Wild Seed Collective – Cyrus has been incredible. They're an artist as well, and a disabled artist. They're amazing. And also LAL – Rosina is the person's name, Deaf Spectrum. Deaf Spectrum is really the company that inspired me to set up my own company and really led my career as an actor. They had a lot of people really encouraging me, specifically as a BIPOC person that has specific skills. [01:17:00]

Can you maybe tell us more about your company, Phoenix The Fire?

Yeah, for sure. So Phoenix The Fire really focuses on Deaf talent. We host workshops, we provide ASL interpreting, specifically in music and film settings, and theater settings, as well.

That's what we focus on. We do Deaf performances, we do training for Deaf folks who want to become writers, or directors, or producers. I provide a mentorship program for them as well.

Can you maybe give some examples that help support Deaf artists?

Absolutely. I mean, breaking barriers is a lot of work. You need to invest a lot of courage into that. As a Deaf person myself, I grew up with experiences of everyday oppression, everyday [01:18:00] racism. As a brown queer woman, I experienced sexism. So I really took a lot of, you know, I had to be brave in a lot of settings. Really, it takes a lot of education as well.

Sometimes I feel exhausted and that I don't want to have to educate this person, but it's really worth it to know that, you know, just because I'm Deaf, we're still the same. I have wants and needs. I want to become an artist. Perhaps you want to become an artist too, let's work together. And for the times where I was given a chance, these organizations where these people learned about me. And it's really beneficial for the Deaf world too, because we share resources. So I think the main point is having an open mind.

That's been a consistent theme throughout all these interviews, is just that willingness to be open and to want to learn and to listen and [01:19:00] understand from there. So, I just had to add that.

Yeah, as well, I mean, if you play chess, you have to kind of like work together. Are we doing this? Am I doing that? So it is almost like a journey, right? And that's the way to become successful. Oh, if I could also add, I always tell people, look at me as Gaitrie. Don't look at me as a Deaf person. Look at me as Gaitrie. I have skills, I have talent. I'm a person. Don't look at these other parts of my identity. I think just don't give up for other artists. Just keep going. You will get something that you want. And be creative. I mean, life is so full of color and, you know, sometimes the world can be discouraging, but just focus on yourself, live your creative dreams, and bring the color to your own life.

I need to put that [01:20:00] on my wall.

I mean, that's how, you know, I remind myself like, sometimes we all have dark days and we feel sad, but you know, that's something that's temporary, right? And sometimes it's just a test on my courage and the ability to just keep going. [01:21:00]

MUSIC