

Stories from the brainreels podcast transcript

November 6, 2017

Introduction

[upbeat theme music]

CHERYL: Welcome to Stories from the brainreels, a podcast about brain injury, disability, and neurodiversity with a focus on art, culture, and disability pride.

This episode is a gift from three local actors, Debby McKnight, Anne-Marie Plass, and Eliza Jensen. In June, the Theatre Communications Group (TCG) came to Portland for their annual conference. Theatre Communications Group is the national organization created to foster communication among professional, community, and university theaters. This year's theme was Full Circle. I had the great opportunity to record Debby, Anne-Marie, and Eliza on their panel called, "Centering Our Voices: Perspectives from Working Actors with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities." These three artists take classes and perform at PHAME.

I want to acknowledge I noticed this was a mostly, or maybe, all-white group on the panel and in our audience, including me. People with disabilities coordinated, delivered, and facilitated the entire presentation. This is not special, and it's not inspiring even though I think it's probably rare both at PHAME and in the larger arts world.

Please enjoy music by one of my favorite bands in the universe, [The Sisters of Invention](#). I want you to get their album on iTunes. The Sisters of Invention write and produce all of their original electro-acoustic pop songs through Tutti Performing Arts in Brighton, South Australia. They bill themselves as "[an extraordinary, all-original learning disabled girl band](#)," and you're gonna love them. Thank you to the group for permission to use their songs.

Panel Introduction

ANNE-MARIE: Good afternoon, everybody. Hello, I'm Anne-Marie Plass, and I will be facilitating today's conversation. We are artists from PHAME Academy, which is a school in Portland that offers classes for disabled artists. Let's start with introductions.

So my name is Anne-Marie. I go by she or her pronouns. And how did I find out about PHAME? Well, I found out about PHAME through friends and family. Aaron Hobson's father introduced me to PHAME. He suggested PHAME. It's been a great avenue since doing things I couldn't have imagined I'd be doing. I got to talk with the casting director at OSF. I take classes: musical theater, rock ensemble, choir, etc. etc. Eliza?

ELIZA: Hello, my name is Eliza Jensen. I use she and her pronouns. I found out about PHAME kinda by accident. I moved to Portland in 2014. I was set up with a teaching job, which immediately fell through. And then I signed up to be a volunteer with PHAME. I found out about the program and visited the place, and I quickly realized that I need to be a participant. And it's been a great experience ever since.

ANNE-MARIE: And then what about you, Debby?

DEBBY: My name is Debby McKnight. When I first started my acting career, a lot of places wouldn't accept me. I thought I would check out programs for disabled people, and I was in Cinderella back in '93 in PHAME with the gal that started it, Carol Stady. I've been with PHAME

off and on for 24 years, but this time I've been there 13 years and love it. I just finished a play in Tigard. I'm gonna be doing PHAME's play, and then I'm doing *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* in October.

ANNE-MARIE: All right. And then what are you doing now? So now, I'm in the process of dramaturging *In A Single Breath*. Matthew Zrebski, who is a local director, is also directing our production of *In A Single Breath*. And for the first time, I'm going to be a dramaturg apprentice, which is a very big opportunity. Also, it will be a great opportunity to contribute to the production team, help make the script understandable and better, suggest to him ways to improve the script. And in a sense, it's kind of like being an assistant director, which is very exciting and kinda speaks volumes for me as well.

All right. And Eliza?

ELIZA: I actually am also in *In A Single Breath*, but I'll be acting in it. And I'm also doing rock ensemble with Anne-Marie and Debby both at PHAME. We're actually coming up on a performance. We're gonna be performing at Edgefield with Pink Martini in July. And we also just finished performing at TEDx Portland about three weeks ago, and that was just incredible. I think PHAME is also working really hard on getting our name out there, and I personally do lots of work for inclusion with them and just kind of basic advocacy work to work towards inclusion and talk about that kinda stuff.

ANNE-MARIE: All right. Debby, what are you doing now at PHAME?

DEBBY: When did I start it, or what am I doing now?

ANNE-MARIE: What are you doing now?

DEBBY: I'm taking classes. I'm taking monologue--which is acting--musical theater with Anne-Marie, I'm taking rock ensemble with Eliza, and I'm also taking--with Anne-Marie--we're taking an advanced vocal studio, and that's it.

Getting involved in acting

ANNE-MARIE: And then how did you get involved in acting, Eliza?

ELIZA: OK. So I actually started acting in high school. That's kinda when I started. I was into it, but I feel like I didn't really dig deep and become immersed in acting till I got to college. And that's when I really started loving it. Then, like I said, when I moved back to Portland, so there was about a 10-year gap between college and then that I really rediscovered it. I feel like at this point in my life I'm really wanting to explore professional acting and really digging deeper and becoming a professional and seeing what that's like.

ANNE-MARIE: And what about you? How did you get involved in acting?

DEBBY: OK. When I got married, we had small kids, and I didn't really work. So I thought I'd go out and audition for some plays, which I did. I went over to Forest Grove, and I auditioned for a play. They didn't seem too welcoming. So I went to, in Beaverton, I did a play called *Playing For Time*.

Then, I did *Pajama Game* at Forest Grove. It was fine, but I didn't feel very welcomed at the time. And then just in the past, just recently, I think it was 2013 I did another show at Forest Grove, and that group was kinda welcoming. That was 30 years ago. Things have changed

now. That was in 1986. And then, in '93, I was the wicked stepmom in my first PHAME play in *Cinderella*.

ANNE-MARIE: And then how I got involved in acting joined PHAME Academy. I didn't think I could act at first. My background is more musical and singing, and I just didn't think I could act. When PHAME was doing *Beauty and the Beast*, I really got going after I sang and heard a reaction that told me, "I can do this." Working with the teachers convinced me that I can do this. Even though I'm dramaturging now, I'm still interested in acting. Hopefully, in combination with dramaturging, I could follow this as an avenue. I love researching, when I go on vacation, I love to research.

Fulfilling experiences in acting

ANNE-MARIE: All right. Eliza, describe a few moments during your acting history that have been fulfilling for you.

ELIZA: Mm. Well, the most recent project I worked on was with the Portland Playhouse. PHAME and Portland Playhouse are beginning to work together to do inclusive plays, and I was recommended to audition. And I'm moving forward with that project.

Let's see. Along that, I really felt like they were very accommodating. My disability mostly has to do with balance, and I feel like everybody was just so welcoming and flexible. And it just seemed like a cohesive group. Along with that, I just started--I had felt like this before, but I really--I felt like part of a community, which felt really good.

And then, I wanna say another example: I think we all were in involved in *The Wizard of Oz*, which was PHAME's play last year. We hired a few actors from around to Portland, one of whom was [Lauren Modica, who's a local actress](#) around town. And she also experiences a disability, but she is not a PHAME actress. It really meant a lot to me 'cause we started talking about what it means to be a professional. And that, to me, was a really big turning point professionally, and I really felt a kind of kinship with her.

ANNE-MARIE: And what about you, Debby? What have been some moments in your acting career that have been fulfilling for you?

DEBBY: Yeah, well, when I've always auditioned, sometimes people would laugh at me. Like this one director at Forest Grove, every time I'd go audition for her, she'd laugh at me. I never got cast, and I really felt insecure. But as I say, I feel that God sees no disabilities. He doesn't see me as a disability. He sees me as a person He created.

ANNE-MARIE: And then in terms of my experience in terms of the moments that have been fulfilling for me, and I think this is very important. I'm not as shy as I used to be. I'm stronger than I used to be. I'm stronger about what I want. I don't say, "I would like...." I would say "I want this to happen. I want to be in this production." I'm beginning to speak those strong words. Definitely a sense of purpose. I was asked this question a long time ago: I was answering something for an organization, and I was asked if doing plays helped me in real life. It has helped me become more bolder and stronger. If I know what I'm doing, I'm bolder and stronger. I was intimidated. Now I have more confidence and belief. It's a cool thing that I'm doing. To hear the shock and awe when I tell them what I'm doing, they are all surprised by all the cool things I do.

And hearkening back to *The Wizard of Oz* last year, I went through four auditions to get cast as Dorothy. I was in the library when I found out. My mom called me, and I was jumping up and

down in the library saying, "I'm Dorothy! I'm Dorothy!" It was probably not the best form of decorum in that situation. [audience chuckles]

Anyway, when we went to Ashland, what I learned about the mentorship program, that blew me away. At OSF, they pair people with mentors. If I work for them, that will allow me to relax a little.

Music break

[The Sisters of Invention's *This Isn't Disneyland*]

♪ You learn something new every day, new every day, 'til the day that you
Die,
I left school years ago, school years ago, thought you should know, ♪

♪ And although there's obstacles, struggles and falls, besser-brick walls,
I'm not saying you're mean, but there are some things, you haven't
Seen. ♪

♪ This isn't Disneyland, I'm not a novelty,
This is as real as it gets,
Brave new ideas begin, to fill all the detail in,
I am as real as it gets. ♪

♪ I won't, Let go,
Of the hope that I'm holding, when troubles unfolding,
Stand, or crash land, I'm not a Novelty ♪

♪ I make my way in this world, using my voice, no other choice.
Just give me what I need, All that I need, to live and to breath,
You may think I'm out of my mind, out of my mind, But I'm not that
Blind,
Because people just cannot know, what they don't know, until they're
Shown. ♪

♪ This isn't Disneyland, I'm not a novelty,
This is as real as it gets,
Brave new ideas begin, to fill all the detail in,
I am as real as it gets. ♪

♪ I won't, Let go,
Of the hope that I'm holding, when troubles unfolding,
Stand, or crash land, I'm not a Novelty ♪

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♪ I won't, Let go,
Of the hope that I'm holding, when troubles unfolding,

Stand, or crash land, I'm not a Novelty ♪

♪ This isn't Disneyland, I'm not a novelty, ♪

♪ This isn't Disneyland, I'm not a novelty, ♪

♪ This isn't Disneyland, I'm not a novelty, ♪

♪ I'm not I'm not I'm not a novelty. ♪

What kind of roles do you want to do?

ANNE-MARIE: All right. Now then, what kinds of roles would you like to be cast in, Debby?

DEBBY: Ensemble roles and character roles.

ANNE-MARIE: And Eliza?

ELIZA: Well, I would have to agree with Debby. Although as far as the types of roles, I really am drawn to the roles that are about the human experience. I like shows that have multidimensional characters and really show humanity and that are real.

ANNE-MARIE: And then for me, in terms of what ideal roles would I like to be cast in, to be honest, I'm not too in particular. But I'd like to do the same kind of things that Eliza just said: real life situations, real life human experiences. And if it relates to you, it relates to someone in the audience. If it's a role that relates to disability, it might add perspective for the audience.

Some of the roles I've had are very different than who I am, naturally. Like Rizzo in *Grease*, for example, she was tough. Her words were tough; they had bite to them. And she did not hide her anger either; when she was mad, she got mad. She was kind of sarcastic and pessimistic.

The other thing was the second *Secret Garden*, I played Mary Lennox. And this is only after being at PHAME for only a year--

DEBBY: And I played the meanie [chuckles].

ANNE-MARIE: --which amazed me. I had to do a double take when I looked at the call sheet and realized, the role sheet, that I was cast as Mary. So that was a really cool thing.

And then one of the most interesting to that I had to learn how to do is to throw a tantrum on stage. Usually, I'm not that type of person. So it took a while, but I was finally able to do it. And it was kind of a form of amusement for me, looking back on it. It's kind of quite amusing.

Experiences with inclusive productions

ANNE-MARIE: Debby, what have been some inclusive productions you have worked on?

DEBBY: Which what?

ANNE-MARIE: What are some inclusive productions you have worked on?

DEBBY: Well, I've worked on *Wizard of Oz* at PHAME when we had the professional actors. And then *Up the Fall*. And I said I just finished a show called *Anatomy of Gray*. That was in Tigard at a theater company. And they were just really sweet people. Then, I'll be doing this

one, and then the other inclusive ones I was doing was I did *Young Frankenstein*. There was an Autistic boy in there with me. I'll be doing *Legend of Sleepy Hollow* in October, and there will be an Autistic boy in there. But he'll be in there with me.

ANNE-MARIE: And Eliza, what have been some inclusive productions you have worked on?

ELIZA: The first inclusive production I worked on was with PHAME, actually. I had acted before, like I said, in college and high school, but I feel like that wasn't really a thing, perhaps 'cause they were both in very small towns. I'm not really sure. I feel like being at PHAME has kinda reintroduced me to issues around inclusivity.

But anyway, so the actual productions I've been involved in, like Debby and yourself, I was involved in *Up the Fall*. And then last year with *Wizard of Oz*. And I think PHAME is gonna start to do that. I think with *Up the Fall*, it kinda set the precedent for having inclusive productions. *Up the Fall* was very well received. It was the first time we had performed on a downtown stage. There was several articles in newspapers about it. I think myself and another actor did a TV segment for it. It was just very well publicized. So I think that PHAME's gonna do that from now on.

ANNE-MARIE: And hearkening back to what Eliza mentioned before, *Up the Fall* was our very first inclusive production in terms of allowing actors without disabilities to come and be a participant. I had the pleasure of originating my first role as Ord. She was a goddess--kinda like a mythological goddess so to speak--who was in tune in nature. And I am kinda like that in real life. Then I was in *Wizard of Oz*, and I was cast as Dorothy. It was a good role. I learned from actors without disabilities. Not everybody is mean towards people with disabilities. We are learning from each other, and I think that is an important relationship to maintain. When you collaborate with people with disabilities, they have a lot to bring to the table. We bring ideas that can make a production even stronger.

And Debby, how about you?

DEBBY: What made me stronger?

ANNE-MARIE: Let's see. What are some inclusive productions you have worked on?

DEBBY: Well, people used to call me "retarded," but back in those days, I got in big fights. But now I say, "I feel sorry for you," and I try to pray for them. And it would make me feel insecure. But Jesus and God has helped me rise above my disability, and so has PHAME.

I don't know if you know who Joanie Erickson is. She's a paraplegic; she has a accident. Well, I used to listen to her on TV, and she wrote me a couple letters. I told her how people treated me. She says, "Well, the most handicapped person in the world is the one that doesn't know Jesus as their personal savior." And that really spoke to me, and I felt a lot better about that.

Challenges with being cast in productions

ANNE-MARIE: All right. Let's see now. Describe challenges that have come up for you when being cast. Do you think these relate to the disability? Let's start with you again, Debby.

DEBBY: Oh, what's that? What was that answer?

ANNE-MARIE: Describe challenges that have come up for you when being cast. Do you think these relate to your disability?

DEBBY: Well, the challenge I have is sometimes, like with my lines, I know lines. Sometimes I can be a little slow with them. And then the challenge I had at Hart one time was that I was in *Fools* in 2013. It was a Neil Simon play. Me and another guy, another friend of mine from PHAME, another dear friend of mine, he and I did it together. We did *Fools*. And the director just yelled at us. He didn't yell at anybody else, but he yelled at us--made me feel insecure--because of the way we were. And then the other challenge I had at Hart was one of the directors that, I think it was a director that I did when I did *Julius Cesar*. He kept telling me to take my watch off, and he kept saying I was slow. But sometimes I would forget to take it off, not meaning to, but I'd forget to take it off. But he said I was really slow, and it kinda discourages me. I remember one time my husband was saying that when I sing, I sound like a sick cow.

ANNE-MARIE: All right. Eliza, the same question.

ELIZA: OK. Well, the only challenge that I can really remember that sticks out in my brain, this was after college. I was in a production of *Wit*, and there's a part in the show where it was called the wheelchair ballet. We had to wheel the main actress around some set pieces, and my disability is purely physical, well, mostly physical. And so naturally, I had a lot of trouble with that. This director, he was kind of that [chuckles] that kind of quintessential cranky director. Or I don't know if quintessential was the right word there, but he was cranky nonetheless. And I don't think I could've said anything to really ease his frustration, but he kept yelling at me. And just his tone of voice was really unforgiving. So that really sticks out in my mind.

However, there was one other situation that I simply wasn't cast in high school. I don't think I even auditioned, but the said play was *Midsummer Night's Dream*. And the director said, "Oh, you can't be a fairy. You're not graceful enough." I didn't really think about the weight of that comment back then. But right now, if she had said that, oh boy! [audience chuckles] I would have torn her a new asshole. [audience laughs] But yeah. But fortunately, my disability is very mild, and I don't know. I feel like I haven't faced much adversity aside from just unforgiving people. But I've worked on a lot of projects recently that I feel like have been much more flexible and willing to listen to my needs and work with me. And so not every production is like that, but I've been fortunate enough up till this point to work with people who are understanding.

ANNE-MARIE: And this is challenging for me because I think directors have the choice in terms of who they want to be involved. I think that's an issue that needs to be addressed though. I think directors need to think about why they didn't cast a disabled person, and why that's a factor. How to change this so it's not as much as a factor. I know spatial awareness is a challenge for me. It comes from my disability. I don't want to sound too accusatory. Obviously, it's a director's choice.

How have you dealt with these challenges, Eliza?

ELIZA: Like I said, the first comment that I received in high school, that was kind of the first time I felt separate. And I was bummed, but again, I didn't really say anything because I didn't really think about it. But if this person were to tell me now, I'd be like, "No. This is wrong."

One of the things I wanted to say about the challenges was the most recent project I worked on with Portland Playhouse. I feel like we did a lot of choreography that was really tough for me. And so I feel like I did speak up for myself and say, "Hey, can we slow down, or can we modify it in this way?" And I was really impressed by how the other actors responded and how the director, Brian Weaver, really accommodated me. And the same with reading music; I have a lot of trouble. I don't read music real well. That's not necessarily a challenge according to disability, per se, but I remember in one of my auditions with him, he could see that I was kinda struggling,

and I was nervous. So he actually said, "Hey, let's record this, practice it at home, and then come back," which I thought was like above and beyond, especially for a professional theater company. And mostly, Brian is just a sweetheart, but I feel like that's kind of where we need to be in this world. And it's unfortunate that not a lot of companies are like that now. But hopefully in the future, it'll be that way, and we can just go with the flow.

ANNE-MARIE: And Debby, how have you dealt with these challenges?

DEBBY: Well, just being stronger. I have a mild disability, but I can remember dates well, I love acting and singing, and me being a senior citizen, things are getting better now that I'm a senior citizen. But I'm still gonna keep going, 'cause my doctor gave me a good bill of health, and I'm not ready to retire. I wanna keep going as long as I'm healthy. And I'm learning to accept myself better, 'cause when I went to start going to PHAME, it's helped me with my-- And I don't get as upset as I used to, and I like myself more.

ANNE-MARIE: For me, in terms of it being a challenge, it's the fear of talking about disability, which I think for a lot of disabled persons, that's going to be something that they'll always have to think about. And with that comes insecurity that they won't give people like me a chance. And unfortunately, that is something that we probably will consider [chuckling] until things change.

How do you relate to intellectual and developmental disability?

ANNE-MARIE: All right. And then, how do you relate to intellectual and developmental disability, starting with you, Debby?

DEBBY: How would I what?

ANNE-MARIE: How do you relate to intellectual and developmental disability?

DEBBY: Yeah. Well, I just relate to it fine. I used to hate myself because of the way people treated me at school and out in the community. But I'm handling it a lot better. I'm accepting the fact that God made me this way. He created me for a reason. He's using me to go out in the community and talk to people like this, to use me at PHAME, and I'm in a program called PAL. I'm on staff there. I get paid for it. And what we do is--tonight's one of them--we go out and do community engagements, and I'm gonna work at a pop-up show tonight. Most of our students do art and stuff. So I've got a long day today, but I love it.

ANNE-MARIE: And then, Eliza, how do you relate to intellectual and developmental disability?

ELIZA: Well, [sighs], I think that that title, "intellectual and developmental disability" is bullshit. I personally did not feel ostracized or separate in any way when I was growing up. I feel like fortunately, I was surrounded by people that were very loving. My parents didn't really, I don't know, I just didn't really feel put down. And it wasn't really till I joined PHAME that I really had even heard of this term.

I think that just that phrase, "intellectually and developmentally disabled," really separates a person. And I really don't like that title. I really wish we could do away with it, and I just feel like it's very medical. It's a very medical term. I think when people hear that phrase, it really puts a stigma on how people should behave, and I feel like it really puts a veil on getting to know that person and seeing them for their different talents. And I think as a society, we really need to move past that and just say, "Is this person good at their craft?" I think it's getting better, but we have a long way to go.

ANNE-MARIE: And for me, I agree with what Eliza says, that "disabled intellectual," those are labels, right? So I would agree that the labels need to go away. Until our nation treats us as humans, we need to take away labels. Look at who that person is. What can she bring that we've never brought before? We need to put down these words: "You have a disability." Until we stop categorizing people and saying, "This is where you go," until people start treating us as Americans and humans, we're not going to get where we want to go.

DEBBY: Well, when we were first at PHAME, they would say Pacific Handicapped Actors Musicians, but now this other guy that came on in 2010, he changed it to PHAME stands for Pacific Honored Citizens and Music and Entertainers. So that's now what PHAME stands for. So he's not using "handicapped." He's using "honored citizen." Like me, as a senior citizen and also a disabled person, honored citizen. I like that.

ANNE-MARIE: And then returning back to that: We are humans, rights? We want to have rights. We want to have active participation. The labels are a stumbling block. Until we get rid of that, people with disabilities are not going to get the rights they deserve.

What do you want directors and actors to know about working with you?

ANNE-MARIE: What would you like casting directors, directors, and fellow actors to know about working with you?

DEBBY: OK, yeah. In 1987--

ANNE-MARIE: No, sorry.

DEBBY: Oh. I'm interested in being a seasoned actor. I wanna be able to be a seasoned actor. Like when I'm downtown, I'd like to have an Equity card.

ANNE-MARIE: One more page.

DEBBY: And I want to have an acting job I get paid for.

I think I had this all backwards.

ANNE-MARIE: Yeah.

DEBBY: And I have a better self-esteem about myself. My mom told me that. And I love delivering lines, and I love being somebody else. My mom told me my self-esteem was better because of acting. And I had a great moment of The Anatomy of Grey. During dress rehearsal, I tripped, and my shoe fell. My other actor saw it and helped me out while we're in character. That was great. This show was perfect, 'cause I had a girlfriend come to dress rehearsal. She says, "Boy, Debby. Great trip." So she thought that was part of the show [audience laughs], but I tripped. But I kept in character [laughs]. And so the other guy says, "Are you OK?" And I said, "Yes, thank you, sir." I was communicating with, instead of getting out of character.

ANNE-MARIE: OK. What would you like casting directors, directors, and fellow actors to know about working with you, Debby?

DEBBY: My fellow actors? They really enjoyed it. Just this past show, they really enjoyed it, and I made some good friendships on it. And the same director that I worked with in Anatomy of Gray, she's gonna be doing the next show I'm gonna do in October, The Legend of Sleepy Hollow. And three people that acted with me are gonna do it with me.

ANNE-MARIE: And for Eliza, same question please.

ELIZA: Sure! Well, since my disability is mostly physical, I just ask people to slow down when it comes to moving around the stage and choreography. Like I was talking about with Portland Playhouse, to just be understanding, and maybe if there's a different way to do it or just throwing out ideas. But it's important kind of talking about disabled people in general. I think it's really important not to yell at us. We're people too, and we have talents. And if casting directors or directors or fellow actors don't, can't see past that, you might be missing out. I've acted with both of these ladies, and they're phenomenal. And I--

ANNE-MARIE: Thank you.

ELIZA: You're welcome! I think that what Debby has been talking about, mostly with just people not treating her right, I just think that's just crap! She has so much to offer, and I'm glad that Anne Marie hasn't experienced it, 'cause she has a lot to offer too. And--

ANNE-MARIE: Thank you. I appreciate that.

ELIZA: You're welcome. And just so many other people at PHAME are so talented. But I think the world at large right now can't see past what they see physically or how people speak or whatever the assumptions at such a high. It's disgusting. But I think it's important to recognize that that has happened so we can move forward.

ANNE-MARIE: We all have talents, right? And we need to realize that. Disabled or not, people have talents. If we don't get the opportunities, we won't get to share. And then in terms of what would I like you guys--the directors, casting directors, etc.--to know about me personally is that I would like to say that I am very focused, and a lot of my fellow students would say that 100%, I'm zero in, especially when I'm doing something. I'm also a great listener. Unfortunately, my disability does come with some spatial awareness issues, but modifications can be made. And I think that's important for you guys to know that that can happen. In most cases, I haven't had to really be accommodated very much. And that's good because I try really hard to do everything as good as possible in terms of how you want it to go. I can also be very humorous, as you have heard earlier with my library episode [chuckles]. I'm also a perfectionist by nature. So if I don't feel like I'm getting something, I can get really frustrated. That's where encouragement needs to come in. That way, I don't feel like I have to pressure myself to go too far to prove myself to you guys.

DEBBY: And another thing I forgot to say: In 1987, when I auditioned for this commercial. And I don't where the movie, if it's still there or not, but it was on Tillamook Street. And the lady's name was Carol Liukin, and she asked me if my IQ was below 100. And asking me well, do you have that? I go, "I don't know what it is," but I felt very insecure. I didn't get cast, but she just kept asking me if my IQ was below 100. What's that have to do with auditioning for this commercial, you know? I thought it was kinda rude. And then, I had auditioned for something at Forest Grove, and they had a lot of choreography in it. I was doing some choreography, and the lady that was the choreographer pushed me aside. That really-- I don't like to fight because I'm a Christian, but I mean, the way I felt that night, I could've. But I just went back and just counted to 10. And so that's about it.

ELIZA: Mm.

ANNE-MARIE: All right. Well, this concludes the panel. Now, we'd like to open up the floor to you guys. What have you learned, or what would you like to ask us?

Q and A

CHERYL: Not all of the Q and A is in the recording. We didn't have microphones circulating the room. Rather than bog you down with hearing the unamplified audience questions, we'll skip ahead to when panelists repeated and then answered some of the questions. And sometimes I'll jump in and just let you know what audience had said.

ANNE-MARIE: The question is: What theaters, organizations, and what type of roles?

For me, it's Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Their mentorship program really has appealed to me, and that really definitely interests me. And when I heard that they hired somebody who was Deaf to play a role at OSF, I'm like, going, "Oh! OK!" So it is a very ambitious dream, but hopefully someday that will come to reality.

For you, Debby or Eliza?

DEBBY: Yeah, I was down there too, at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and we sang. We sang, and it was my first paid performance. And it was right on my birthday when they paid me. Someday, I'd like to go down there and do a Shakespeare play, 'cause I've done some Shakespeare shows.

ANNE-MARIE: And what about you?

ELIZA: Well, contrary to these two, Shakespeare is difficult for me. One of the plays that really sticks out for me is Sweeney Todd [audience chuckles]. I really love that play.

DEBBY: That's a good play.

ELIZA: I mean, Stephen Sondheim, I think he's kind of a genius. And I saw the off-Broadway production a few years ago now in Denver, and all the actors played instruments onstage. And I just thought that was brilliant.

I'd really like to maybe not act on Broadway, but I definitely would love to go to New York and just, I don't know, be a big deal and be kind of a household name. That's kind of one of my dreams. I like to be in the limelight. I won't lie about that. But as far as locally, I would really love to continue this project with Portland Playhouse and work with Brian Weaver. I think he is just such an excellent director. And we're about to work with Matthew Zrebski again for this project that we're doing with PHAME. And just work with more professional directors. I found that both those guys in particular are very accommodating. And so as far as directors, I feel like I would really love to work more with them.

ANNE-MARIE: Any other questions?

CHERYL: Here, an audience member brought up *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* and how that play has typically, though not always, used non-disabled actors for the lead. Eliza stepped in with a response.

ELIZA: That is an issue. Casting able-bodied actors to play disabled characters: That, for me, is a big F you. That's where the fear and the assumptions come from. It's like, well, disabled people couldn't be professional enough. Or whatever. But I think that in some instances, that's starting to happen, but we also need to understand why we're doing it and just kind of dig deeper.

CHERYL: Another audience member brought up [Mickey Rowe, who played the lead role](#) and is Autistic. They mentioned he also has ties to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, who Anne-Marie had pointed out also hired [a Deaf actor, Howie Seago](#). I would add that [Regan Linton, a wheelchair user](#) was in the company in 2015.

ELIZA: And we, all three of us actually, went to Ashland last September.

DEBBY: Yeah, Labor Day.

ELIZA: And that was the conversation we had with Oregon Shakespeare Festival, which was they wanna be more inclusive. And they actually hired Lauren Modica for their season this year. I'm not sure which play she's going to be in, but she's a professional actress around town, and she is very good. She was so funny when she was in Oz with us.

DEBBY: Oh yeah, we saw that, yeah.

ELIZA: And so I feel like it's slowly happening. So it's good.

ANNE-MARIE: Any other questions in the room?

CHERYL: Maureen Porter from Third Rail Repertory mentioned that her company has worked on inclusivity in a number of ways but not in areas around disability. She asked the panel for advice in the process of starting disability inclusion.

ELIZA: What I would say was have it be an open discussion. I feel like a lot of people, when they want to be inclusive, it's...I don't know. I'm gonna use the term "ableistic," and some of you might be familiar. Some of you might not. From an able-bodied perspective, it can almost be like they want to be inclusive to appear politically correct or something. But I really feel like in order to be truly accessible and inclusive, you really have to have an open conversation with disabled actors themselves in terms of what they feel about what's being written or what's being produced, how can they be accommodating, etc., etc.? But I feel like that open dialogue is really pretty important.

CHERYL: Someone else in the audience expressed a lot of appreciation for the perspective that having more accessible, inclusive work will improve the work. They asked where someone goes to start figuring out how to do the work of becoming accessible and inclusive.

ANNE-MARIE: Look in your area. If there's a non-profit that caters to people with disabilities, go and see what they do. See what they are involved in. And ask them what their interests are and see them in a classroom setting. And talk to the teachers. Ask them, "What have you learned from them? Or what have they learned from you?"

ELIZA: And research. Do you research. Right, Anne-Marie?

ANNE-MARIE: Yes, research, research, research [laughs].

ELIZA: Yes.

ANNE-MARIE: If you have any other questions for us or pertaining to PHAME, please come and speak to us.

Music break

[The Sisters of Invention's *Ugly Duckling*]

♪ Knock knock
Knock knock ♪

♪ I used to hide myself away
From the laughter and the jeers
I'd wipe away my tears
When they'd say
Knock-kneed ugly duckling
Knock-kneed frizzy-izzy
Four-eyed people
Knock-kneed, four-eyed girl
You've got not place
In a normal world
In a normal world! ♪

♪ Knock knock
Knock knock ♪

♪ And if you throw those jabs today
I would never make it up high
The tears have all gone dry
I've been freed
Of knock-kneed ugly duckling
Knock-kneed frizzy-izzy
Four-eyed people
Knock-kneed, four-eyed girl
You've got no place
In a normal world
In a normal world! ♪

♪ I'm waiting for that time to come
When I emerge
From my cocoon
I'll shed my fears
And spread my wings
And I'll dance
Around the moon
This hurt will be long gone
And I'll change
From an ugly duckling
To a swan ♪

♪ Knock-kneed ugly duckling
Knock-kneed frizzy-izzy
Four-eyed people
Knock-kneed, four-eyed girl
Knock-kneed ugly duckling
Knock-kneed frizzy-izzy

You've got no place
In a normal world ♪

♪ Knock-kneed ugly duckling
Knock-kneed frizzy-izzy
Four-eyed people
Knock-kneed, four-eyed girl ♪

♪ Knock-kneed ugly duckling
Knock-kneed frizzy-izzy
Four-eyed people
Knock-kneed, four-eyed girl ♪

♪ Knock-kneed ugly duckling
Knock-kneed frizzy-izzy
Four-eyed people ♪

Wrap-up

CHERYL: Thank you again to The Sisters of Invention for permission to use *This Isn't Disneyland* and *Ugly Duckling* in today's episode. Find them at tutti.org/au.

Thanks for joining me for another episode of Stories from the brainreels. Find more info on brain injury and disability art and culture and transcripts of all the podcast episodes at WhoAmIToStopIt.com.