



Berklee Institute for Accessible Arts Education

ABLE Voices Episode 6: Mark Beer

[Introduction music by Kai Levin plays]

[Dr. Bernard] Hello everyone and welcome to ABLE Voices Podcast. I'm Dr. Rhoda Bernard, founding managing director of the Berklee Institute for Arts Education and Special Needs and I'm proud to present this podcast featuring disabled artists and arts educators. We are inviting artists with disabilities to be guest hosts for the ABLE Voices Podcast.

The guest host for today's episode is internationally celebrated mezzo soprano, Sophia Grech. Hailed by the Sunday Times as a "singer who delivers without effort", Sophia has won great acclaim and notoriety for her performances at leading concert halls, opera houses and international festivals worldwide, leading to regular invitations to give master classes around the world. In 2015, Sophia was diagnosed with Autism and she is now a leading ambassador on behalf of Autism organizations. Her book, titled, *I Wish I Could Sing* was published in 2020.

I hope you enjoy this episode, hosted by Sophia Grech.

[Introduction music ends]

[Sophia] It's a pleasure to be hosting today's ABLE Voices Podcast and joining me for this episode is renowned British actor Mark Beer. Mark, who was born with Cerebral Palsy, has enjoyed a busy career spanning over thirty years, on both the stage and screen. At age 17, Mark won the bronze medal at the Cheltenham Literary Festival and in 2017, he was nominated by BBC Radio Drama for the Norman Beaton Fellowship Award.

Welcome Mark! We're delighted you could join us today for this ABLE Voices Podcast.

[Mark] Thank you very much for inviting me!

[Sophia] I'd like to start off by asking you to tell us your story as an actor. How did you start your career as an actor and how did you get where you are today?

[Mark chuckles]

[Mark] I'll try and do that as simply as possible. I started working professionally when I was 17. But before that, at the age of 16, I auditioned for all the top drama schools in the country. RADA, LAMBDA, Central, all the main ones, and this is going back to 1983 and of course they were not accessible back then. And, so, 2 out of the 3 top drama schools took me aside and said, "Mark, I'm really sorry, we can't offer you a place because we're not accessible." So I said, "Fine, what do you suggest I should do?" and they said, "We suggest that you go to work as soon as possible." And, luckily, I was in college at Cheltenham for people with disabilities and took part in the Cheltenham Literary Festival and a director spotted me there and offered me a job! Within a couple of weeks I was playing the lead in a play called *Chairperson*, at Riverside Studios in Hammersmith.

[Sophia] Oh wow! That's amazing! Can I ask, what inspired you to become an actor?

[Mark] I think, there's a lot of theatricality in the family. My mummy's brother's sister, I'm sorry, my mummy's brother's daughter, my cousin in other words, was a dancer, a trained dancer and tread the boards. And so, there was a possibility when I was very young, I kept thinking as a child, because no one really explained my disability to me when I was very young until I was old enough to understand it, so I just automatically assumed that one day I'd be able to stand up and go off to ballet school like she did. And once I realized at about the age of 15, when my uncle, her father, spoke to me and said, "Actually this is not going to happen and you're going to be like this for the rest of your life." So, I decided having spent 2 days in my bedroom crying about it, I then decided, "Right, okay, now I need to do something else." and the obvious choice was to act instead of dance.

[Sophia] That's amazing! So, did you excel at drama at school?

[Mark] I did really because I loved it so much. I mean, at the age of 14 or 15, I can't remember which, I played Macbeth and that really started me with the bug really.

[Sophia] Amazing! So, was there an actor that inspired you when you were growing up?

[Mark] There wasn't a disabled one, i.e until I started working and I met Nabil Saban, who founded Dry Eye Theater Company, the only national theater company of Great Britain, and I've since worked with Nabil on stage and on screen, so, it's really lovely how he inspired me from a young age because he was the only person I could draw from and obviously, both physically and artistically, we're very different people, but we have actually worked together many times now.

[Sophia] That's absolutely amazing! And did your parents really support your choice to become an actor? Obviously it was in the family.

[Mark chuckles]

[Mark] I'd like to say 'Yes' but the honest answer is no.

[Sophia] Oh!

[Sophia laughs]

[Mark] My whole family have a chain of jewelry shops in Birmingham and Stratton and it went back about 3, 4 generations, so it was automatically assumed that I would be a secretary and answer the telephones and you know, do what was required of me really. But, my mummy was very, very, very supportive and still is to this day.

[Sophia laughs]

[Sophia] Oh that's lovely.

[Mark] Very lovely, and we have a great relationship! And she, instead of enrolling me at secretarial college, found this college in Cheltenham where I went to study drama for 2 years.

[Sophia] Oh that's fantastic! And I also wanted to ask, one of your first jobs, I think it was presenting on BBC Television, I'm sure I remember seeing you on a program when I was a child.

[Mark laughs]

[Mark] That's very lovely! I used to present at a children's program called *Play Days*.

[Sophia] That's it!

[Mark] Which was for preschool children, and I did that from the age of 22 to 27.

[Sophia] Wow! What was it like being a presenter?

[Mark] I really loved it and naturally enjoyed it and naturally connected with the children. And I think it helped enormously that I had no fear about it. Because when you're young, you have no fear, do you know what I mean?

I just, I was in a production of *Beowulf*, touring the country and the director of the, from the BBC, Brian Jameson, who has subsequently produced things like *Balamory*, over here, and he saw me, came to see me in the show and then I had a lunch meeting with him afterwards and offered me the job on the spot.

[Sophia] Oh that's absolutely amazing! Wow!

[Mark] It was!

[Sophia] Yeah! Fantastic!

[Mark] Which was very, very lovely and I was there, on and off over five years really.

[Sophia] Absolutely brilliant! Now, I really wanted to ask you, could you tell us about your experiences as a person living with a disability and if this has obviously impacted on your career, and basically, what challenges you've had to overcome?

[Mark] That's a big question. I'll try my best!

[Sophia] Oh no!

[Mark laughs]

[Mark] Yes, obviously it has impacted enormously on my choices, and in my early career I think, I can remember my agent who looked after me from 17 to 27, constantly being told by casting directors that it was a "great shame" because I had a great face and I had great ability but because of my disability, it was very hard for them to cast me. And, I remember some big BBC drama series, I forget what it was called at the time, but they actually connected with my agent and really wanted me to read for this lead role and then once they realized I was actually

disabled, because they'd just seen my face and stuff on spotlight, they obviously dropped the idea really.

[Sophia makes disappointed sound]

[Mark] So in the early days, it was very much about proving that I could act and proving to see beyond my disability and I'd like to say that that's changed, but not really, not really.

[Sophia] That's a shame! I'd also like to ask you, you have to do a lot of pre-planning for traveling because I imagine traveling can be a challenge?

[Mark] I have joined a new agent this year, it was a lovely, lovely lady called Nicola Bolton, and she has, since joining her in January, put me up for a number of tours and I toured basically non-stop from 17 to 42, as I'm 55 this year. And, I said to her, "I'm sorry, I'm not prepared to tour anymore." because, partly because of the traveling, but partly because physically I don't have the same strength that I used to have. You know what I mean? And the same stamina. When I started at 17, I was a boy, you know what I mean?

[Sophia] Yes, yes!

[Mark] And obviously, although, the production companies have been very kind and said, "Oh, they'll make it as easy as possible!" and blah, blah, blah, I consciously made a decision in my mid-40's that actually, I would go and work anywhere, anywhere in the world, anywhere in the country, anywhere, as long as I'm based in one place. I just don't want to do a week here, and a week there, and a week here, and a week there anymore.

[Sophia] Yeah that absolutely makes sense! And do you find that your colleagues and other cast members are helpful and considerate of your disability?

[Mark] I have to say, I think in the whole, what, 38 years this year, I've only had 2 companies that have not and I won't name them because they're not worth naming, but in that whole time that's remarkable really and I would say, you know, 99.9% have been very supportive and very lovely.

[Sophia] Well that's brilliant! Now, I understand that you have an excerpt from one of your performances which you'd like to share with us. Could you please tell us about what we're going to hear?

[Mark] I think you've got 2 pieces but one of them was taken from the *Talking Heads* by Alan Bennett.

[Sophia] Yes! Yes, that's it!

[Mark] The *Talking Heads* by Alan Bennett, which I recorded in 2020, and I'm playing Graham Whittaker, the role that he wrote for himself basically.

[Excerpt from The *Talking Heads* plays]

[Excerpt ends]

[Sophia] Oh well, thank you Mark! That was wonderful! Now, I can hear that you have an accent in this, I believe, is it a Northern Accent?

[Mark laughs]

[Mark] It's my attempt to have a Northern accent.

[Sophia laughs]

[Mark] Yeah! Yeah, I mean I have to say, my friends that come from the North of England are very happy with it, so, I was pleased. Yeah but, it's definitely not mine, this is my normal accent, what I'm speaking now, so.

[Sophia] What's your favorite to do? Do you have a favorite one?

[Mark] I would say, I really enjoy trying to do a Cockney, which is quite difficult.

[Sophia laughs]

[Mark] Because I've been based in London for over 35 years now and I've been to the casting directors at Eastenders twice and both times obviously, for accent reasons I think, they've cast me as middle class poshman. So, I don't think I'm going to be cast as a Cockney any time soon really.

[Sophia laughs]

[Sophia] How easy is it to learn an accent as an actor?

[Mark] It really depends on how the speech was written. If the speech is written properly, and has the right rhythm to it, like a piece of Shakespeare or a lovely piece of poetry, it's very easy because it's written in a way that your voice can follow. And if it's not, if it's very badly written then it's very hard.

[Sophia] Oh, well that kind of makes sense actually and I know that our listeners would like to hear about any drama training that you did receive and how you learned scripts, and do you learn in the same way today or is it different?

[Mark] No, I mean, I was very lucky. I did go to the City Literature Institute in Hoban, just around the corner from the West End. I had a beautiful friendship and a lovely lady in my life called Catherine Scofield, who is a very famous actress in the 60s, 70s, and 80s in England. She has done a lot of American movies also, and Katie passed away some years ago, but when we were very close, right up and from the time I met her in early 2000s, so she passed away. Oh, sorry, met her in the late 80s, sorry and she passed away in 2003. And she encouraged me to go to a professional acting class, there at the City Lit and her dear friend Valerie Colgan coached me for over 10 years, I think.

[Sophia] Wow!

[Mark] And that's how I used to go every Friday to this professional class, that was funded by the government and you paid a small amount of money, and obviously as I was working full-time, I could easily afford that, and so I deliberately, unless I was filming or you know, I went every Friday so that I could maintain my voice really. And I definitely know that having had that weekly training for over 10 years has stood me in great, great stead.

[Sophia] That's absolutely amazing! Do you find that it's easier to learn scripts as you get older?

[Mark laughs]

[Mark] No!

[Mark continues to laugh]

[Sophia laughs]

[Mark] I would say, it was much easier when I was younger. I think your memory is sharper and things, but I'm actually very Dyslexic, so everything I have to learn I have to put onto audio tape. You know, so I can listen to it like I'm listening to you now.

[Sophia] Yes.

[Mark] In my headphones. And, I have a number of friends that will help me or my partner will help me and read it backwards, and forwards, backwards, and forwards and such. But, my ability to learn quickly hasn't left me.

[Sophia] Right! Ok.

[Mark] I think that's because of doing live telly, you know, recorded, live tele for years or whatever it was. Scripts were changed constantly on a daily basis so you'd have to learn them very fast.

[Sophia] Okay, so what is easiest to learn, TV or stage productions?

[Mark] I think it's easier to learn the theater, as in, you know, a stage production because it never changes. So, once you know it, it's very unlikely that the director is going to turn up on stage after opening night and say, "Can you do it this way, can you do it that way?" well, where as if you're recording in a studio they can very much easily stop you and say "Oh, we'd like you to be moved. We'd like it to change, we'd like to add this line, or we'd like to add this paragraph." or whatever.

[Sophia] Isn't it more frightening when it's live performance, well, because it's live?

[Mark] It depends really. I mean, I enjoy it personally much more. I think it's because I've done much more theater of late than I have tele, because I did a lot of my telly from, I'd say 20 to 30, and then went back into theater after that. And so, my passion will always be live theater, really. And, you know, I have no qualms, I will do telly, I will do film, I will do whatever, if I'm lucky enough to be cast in, but if I had a choice, I'd stay working in the theater I think.

[Sophia] Ah okay, can I also ask, what has your experience been of changes to accessibility for disabled actors during your career?

[Mark] There's been a massive change, in the sense that when I started I had to be carried up and down stairs like a bag of potatoes or put into the guard's van on a train journey because

there were no accessible seats. I mean, huge, huge, huge changes, in the sense that now there are about 10 or 15 accessible mainstream theaters in the UK that were never accessible to begin with. And they've only really become accessible in the last 10 years or so.

[Sophia] Is that older theaters that have got funding to make changes or are these new theaters?

[Mark] I think it's a little bit of both really. I think a lot of them, a lot of the original theaters have been given national lottery grants or grants from local authorities, and, I mean, I got in touch with recently the Chelsea Theater because it was recommended to me as a working space because it's brand new and it's got all wheelchair accessibility in place. Which of course, it would have to now, because the industry has changed so much and moved forward so much, but over the nearly 40 years, that change has happened very, very slowly.

[Sophia] Yeah, absolutely. I think that all new buildings today in the UK have to have, have to be accessible for everyone. I mean, for example, I built my own house about 10 years ago and by law I had to have my front door wide enough to accommodate wheelchair access, whether someone was going to use it or not. It didn't matter, you had to have it, which I think is really good.

[Mark] It's a great move forward and I think, it's not really just about the buildings anymore. It's now about attitudes. We moved so far forward integrating racial casting, and we've moved forward on that political point of view of seeing beyond what you see, as far as colors concerned, now we need to get there as regard with disability.

[Sophia] Yeah, you're absolutely right. Now, there's a second excerpt that you'd like to share with us today. Please, can you tell us about what we're going to hear?

[Mark] This one is taken from a recording of *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens, which I recorded in 2021, in November and I'm very lucky to say that this was an audio version, but later this year, at the end of November, I'll be performing the whole piece live, in a production of *A Christmas Carol* at the Actors Church in Covent Garden.

[Sophia] Oh fantastic!

[Excerpt of Mark in *A Christmas Carol* plays]

[Excerpt ends]

[Sophia] Mark, that was absolutely brilliant! Now, *A Christmas Carol* I think is an absolute classic and I've seen so many film versions, but did you say you're doing a staged version?

[Mark] I am, yes. It will be on, I think it's from the 20th of November to the 26th of November.

[Sophia] Oh my gosh, that is going to be so much fun! So, how many performances will that be?

[Mark] I think that's going to be 8 all together. 8 or 9. Depending on the amount of matinees that we're going to do and it will be on at the Actors Church in Covent Garden in Central London, known as St. Martins.

[Sophia] Oh, I know, I've sung there, I've sung there. I know it's an actors church, but I've actually sung there.

[Sophia laughs]

[Mark] It's got a beautiful sound to it.

[Sophia] It has, it really has. Now, I should probably think they're probably a lot of budding actors that would dream of playing that part. So, can I ask, what advice would you give aspiring and existing actors with disabilities?

[Mark] That's a very big question. I think, luckily I think there are opportunities and courses and drama schools and all the normal routes now that actors are encouraged to take, are open to people with disabilities and I know people from RADA have been there. Sorry, people with disabilities are now accepted at RADA and people of hard of hearing or deafness are also taken on various courses. I know, so that's a great start, but personally, I think that the best advice that I was given was from the director of a drama school when I was 17 that basically said, sorry, at 16 who basically said to me, "Mark you're good enough to go and work now." And I believe I wouldn't have been as successful if I hadn't just taken the bullet and just gone with it really.

Yes, I was very lucky, but I also worked incredibly hard and that's why it's continued today.

[Sophia] I think that's absolutely amazing! I really do, you've done so well honestly. Now, I know that our listeners would really love to hear about what you're working on today and the projects you have planned for the future. I know you mentioned that you're going to be the *A Christmas Carol*, but do you have anything else in the pipeline?

[Mark] At the moment, I'm in talks with a company in the Cotswolds to do a version of the *Importance of Being Earnest* later in the summer and I will be taking on the role of Lady Bracknell, which will be an absolute joy because the last person to play that role in England is David Suchet, in a West End production, so. But, it's very early days and we're just into discussions about it.

[Sophia] Okay, so what happens then? Do you just get the scripts and then learn your parts? How long do you have to learn a part?

[Mark] It depends on how long the rehearsal process is, and on average, the rehearsal process would be no more than 3, 3 to 4 weeks possibly, and that's a long time.

[Sophia] Right. Okay, so is that part very big, is there a lot to learn?

[Mark laughs]

[Mark] Yes, yes, she's in every act and she's very funny, it's a very funny part to play.

[Sophia] That's fantastic, so when would that be sorry?

[Mark] I think it will be later in the summer, once it's all been confirmed.

[Sophia] Okay, so at the moment, are you reading through it to get used to the character and all such.

[Mark] Yeah, not yet, not yet until I know it's definitely going to happen. As soon as I know it's going to happen, then I'll go into work mode.

[Sophia] Right! And, *A Christmas Carol*, is that going to be a staged version?

[Mark] It is. It is going to be a staged version. With a cast of about 9 people I think and we're going to have classical singers as well that will sing in between scenes.

[Sophia] Oh that sounds really different!

[Mark] So it is going to be very magical I think and the script is very much aimed at children and I know the director and I are working towards together at advertising it around local children in London and Central London to come and see.

[Sophia] Oh that's absolutely fantastic! Oh Mark, I really just want to say thank you so much for joining us today and for sharing your inspiring journey with our listeners. We wish you success with your ongoing and future projects. Thank you!

[Outro music by Sebastian Batista starts]

[Mark] Thank you! Thank you very much for having me, it's been a joy!

[Outro music continues]

[Dr. Bernard] ABLE Voices is a production of the Berklee Institute for Arts Education and Special Needs, led by me, Dr. Rhoda Bernard, the founding managing director. It is produced by Daniel Martinez del Campo, the introduction music is by Kai Levin, and our closing song is by Sebastian Batista. Kai and Sebastian are students in the arts education programs at the Berklee Institute for Arts Education and Special Needs.

If you would like to learn more about our work you can find us online at [berkee.edu slash b-i-a-e-s-n](http://berkee.edu/slash/b-i-a-e-s-n) or e-mail us at biaesn@berklee that's l-e-e-dot e-d-u

[Outro music ends]