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Berklee Institute for Accessible Arts Education

ABLE Voices Episode 17: Renata Da Costa

[Introduction music by Kai Levin plays]

[Dr. Bernard] Hello everyone and welcome to the ABLE Voices Podcast. I'm Dr. Rhoda Bernard, founding managing director of the Berklee Institute for Accessible Arts Education and assistant chair of music education, 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.

Today you'll meet our next guest host! Teacher, writer, actress, artisan and photographer Renata Da Costa. Renata Da Costa is from Brazil but lives in the U.S.A. She is a teacher, writer, actress, artisan, photographer, mother and autistic. She is the author of the works *Insufficient*, *Finesse*, *Transformation*, *My Little Big World*, *The Bath in a Tub* and *Sarah and the Family Rules*. She was the anthology organizer for Talents Behind Autism. Renata has written poetry, short stories, theater, parody and children's literature. Her texts have been published in more than 95 national and international anthologies.

Renata is a member of the International Academy of Brazilian Literature in New York, a founding scholar of the Academic Nucleus of Letters and Arts in Portugal, and a founding scholar of the Italian Academic Nucleus Decienze Letters and Art in Italy. She has won numerous literary awards and received many honors for her creative work.

Welcome Renata! We're delighted to have you as the next guest host of the ABLE Voices Podcast!

[Renata] Thank you so much Dr. Bernard! I'm really happy to be here with you and for the invitation. I'm so happy! Thank you so much!

[Dr. Bernard] It is a pleasure! So, I would like to start off by asking you to tell us your story as an artist. How did you start as an artist and how did you get to where you are today?

[Renata] Well, it's a long story but I will try to summarize as much as possible! I spent my life until I was 39 years old without diagnostics, so without treatment I started therapy at 23 years old but not for autism, but for depression.

I always liked to write. I started to write, I was 8 years old and I wrote an Epic Theater in that time. And, at the age of 12 I discovered poetry and I fell in love for the first time, and I've never stopped writing until right now. And, until this period I did a lot of theater and I loved it! I did some kind of dance, like jazz, ballet, flamenco and belly dance at the age of 15. I was already an actor, an actress, and director in a school theater and I wrote *Our One Place*, our one theater and at 18 years old I graduated from high school as a nurse, and was invited to do a mini series on an important TV channel. But, my career was blocked by parents, who wouldn't allow me to go to the TV show, and in this period I had depression until I was 23 years old. And, I was, in this period I wrote my poems and to manage the pain I was feeling at that time, I started studying photography and created some handcraft.

My first book was published in 2019. *My Little Big World*, it is a book about autism, based on my experience with my son. Well, you said I am an autistic mother, my son is autistic too.

[Dr. Bernard] Ohhh.

[Renata] I only discovered my autism after my son's diagnosis. That's where I started studying hard to write my first book and I noticed my symptoms, the symptoms of autism in me! And I said, "Hey! Maybe I am autistic?" And, after the book was published, I liked it and I've never stopped writing books.

I started to give support to families with autism, for kids with autism, especially in Brazil and around the world with a cell phone app. I studied to be an advocate here in the United States to help families here to deal with the IEP and, to help give the family a lot of support. I did intensive work with autism in groups and adults and kids. I was a teacher for 15 years and right now, I am doing my graduation in Neuroscience in education, and I've been awarded as the best Brazilian Children's writer in the United States in 2022.

So, this is my resume!

[Dr. Bernard] It's fantastic! There are some things that strike me about your story that I just want to point out because they're fascinating. You have this constant drive to create, from a very young age, you've always been creating. That's something that I hear in your story and the other piece is that you've always been in learning. And, I think those two are drives that are within you that have taken you to new opportunities, to honors and awards, to all kinds of new things and, I think that's something really interesting and unique. A lot of people don't have those drives, Renata, it's really interesting to hear.

I want to focus on something that you mentioned, which was that you were not diagnosed until you were an adult, which is unusual. Most people are diagnosed with Autism when they're children. Can you talk a little bit about that diagnosis at that time and what that was like for you?

[Renata] Yes! Sure! So, when my son received his diagnosis he was 6 years old. So, I came to the United States trying to find my son a diagnosis because he didn't get it in Brazil. So, I moved to the United States in 2015, and trying to find him his diagnosis so, and when he received an Autism diagnosis and I started studying, I said, "Hey! I see it in Thomas, it's in me! I have all these problems, all these issues of autism all of my life!" And, everybody in that period would say, "Renata, why do you want to know if you're autistic or not? This does not change your past." And I would say, "Yes, it definitely will not change my past, but I will understand and do my future better."

So, and, I decided to try to do the test and it came to a diagnosis, "You are autistic," and I said, "Now I understand all my problems, all my issues, all of my life. I understand why I am frustrated, I understand my frustrations." And, yes, I decided to study about Autism to help people with autism.

[Dr. Bernard] That's fantastic and really interesting that, hearing that diagnosis and having that diagnosis, on the one hand it made things make sense, but on the other, again, this drive, now there's a drive to service here right? That you took that experience and said, "I can help people." And, you're doing that. That's incredible! Thank you so much!

Can you tell us a little bit about your arts education? I imagine most of it was in Brazil, how did you learn how to write? How did you learn to be an actress? How did you learn how to do these things?

[Renata] That's interesting because, I learned everything by myself. So I, I self taught myself. I went to libraries, I tried to find a course in the theater, I thought about studying it, I have an

issue about going into public and I said, “Hey! If I have a problem going into public, I need to start studying something to help me in this way.” So, yes, I studied everything by myself and, of course! Photography I went to school. After I started theater I went to school too but, my parents never gave me, “Oh! Let’s go! Let’s go do it!” No. Everytime they said, “No, you can’t do that!” But, I started to learn how to hide from my parents for myself.

[Renata laughs]

[Dr. Bernard] That’s really interesting and really difficult to teach yourself all of these things. And then, to have such success, that’s amazing! Can you tell us what you’re working on now?

[Renata] Right now I, it’s...it’s funny because, right now I am writing my books, but I’m absolutely, really active with any arts. Crafting everything! I am currently doing some new theater and a monologue about autism. This year I published 3 books and I re-formulated a previous one, *My Little Big World*. I did it in Spanish right now. It’s in Portuguese, English and Spanish. I have several ideas in my head to write several books. I mostly already have, I guess, 4 books ready to be sent to be published!

So, I am writing ideas for projects, for 3 movies in a partnership with my screenwriter friend, and in the meantime, I said, I told you I am studying and my brain never, never stops.

[Dr. Bernard laughs]

[Renata] If I don’t have something to do, my brain creates something quickly.

[Dr. Bernard and Renata laugh]

[Renata] And I still, I still don’t live my life with arts to pay my bills. So, I do Uber driving. I am an Uber app driver.

[Dr. Bernard] I love this! I, first of all, I love that you say that your brain never stops. I think a lot of neurodivergent individuals can relate to that and people who are not neurodivergent can relate to that. The difference is, your brain is always creating, right? My brain never stops but I’m always worrying.

[Dr. Bernard laughs]

[Dr. Bernard] I'm not creating, I'm worrying. So, I wish I were creating all the time. I think that's incredible! One of your books you actually wrote with your, so I should say, your son Rapahel studies with us. Is a fantastic pianist and composer and he's learning about computer music and doing all sorts of wonderful work. You wrote one of your books with him.

[Renata] Yep!

[Dr. Bernard] Can you talk about that?

[Renata] Sure! We wrote the book *Sarah and the Family Rules*. So, we have some rules at home because an autistic person needs the rules, needs the consistent routine, and we decided to sit down and talk about our rules, and our routine. And, Sarah came to us this year and the rules in the Sarah book, it's our rules at home. We have on the wall, all routines, all rules and come our first, I say my first baby girl because all my books is a boy and Sarah is my first girl, so.

[Dr. Bernard and Renata laugh]

[Renata] So it's our rules. To be consistent and help kids with autism and the book is interactive because, at the end of the book it has a page to color, coloring, it has a page to help the child talk to the parents abouts his own rules, and draw in a book. So, it's an interactive book with the kids.

[Dr. Bernard] I love that! And I love that, first of all, it's a collaboration with your son which I just think is beautiful, and that, the book is a book. It's a work of art, it's interactive, it provides service, again. It's educational, it's helping people and their families. So many things at once! I love that!

What advice would you give to a young artist who has a disability?

[Renata] I believe, the first advice I give, I will not give for the person with disabilities. I will give it to the parents with children with disabilities.

[Dr. Bernard] Okay!

[Renata] And that advice would be, never give up on your child. Encourage him, help him, smile, create, reinvent, because sometimes what we most need to hear is, "Congratulations! You did it!" So, stimulate your child.

And, for the people with disabilities, my advice is, don't stop. Don't give up at your first "No!" "No, you cannot do that!" No. Never stop and the first door in your face, don't stop! Don't give up! Study what you like, do what you want, you can be what you want to be. You just need to do it.

[Dr. Bernard] I love that! That is a beautiful sentiment and something we all need to hear, and a perfect place to end our conversation. I want to thank you Renata for sharing your experience and your thoughts with us today. We're really looking forward to the episodes where you will be interviewing artists with disabilities, and where we'll have more updates on that soon.

But thank you today! I know that our listeners are really going to enjoy this conversation. Thanks so much!

[Renata] Thank you so much and I'm so happy for the invitation! And, see you soon!

[Outro music by Sebastian Batista starts]

[Dr. Bernard] ABLE Voices is a production of the Berklee Institute for Accessible Arts Education, led by me, Dr. Rhoda Bernard, the founding managing director. It is produced by Daniel Martinez del Campo.

[Outro music ends]

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 Accessible Arts Education.

If you would like to learn more about our work you can find us online at berkee.edu slash B-I-A-A-E or email us at B-I-A-A-E at Berklee, that's L-E-E.edu