

Variety D - Edit

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Disability, ableism, performance, representation, blackouts, wheelchair, comedy, accessibility, brain surgery, audience reception, inclusion, festivals, carers, improvisation, social media.

SPEAKERS

Miggy Barker, Cerys Bradley, Variety D, Speaker 1

Cerys Bradley 00:04

Hello and welcome to It's Ableism, a new podcast about disability and ableism...

Miggy Barker 00:08

A cool, new podcast about disability and ableism.

Cerys Bradley 00:11

Oh, we're cool. Now, are we?

Miggy Barker 00:13

I said the podcast was cool, not that we're cool.

Cerys Bradley 00:16

Okay, fair enough. My name is Cerys Bradley. I'm an autistic comedian and a level maths teacher.

Miggy Barker 00:22

And my name is Miggy Barker. I am a performance artist and writer, and I am a wheelchair user.

Cerys Bradley 00:27

In this episode, we're talking about performance which is fitting, because you are a performance artist. So we're talking about how we perform disability and how we perceive disabled performers.

Miggy Barker 00:37

Like, how do you do a good representation without accidentally doing bad representation. And if you don't want to represent anyone but yourself,

Cerys Bradley 00:46

okay, there's actually quite a lot to talk about here, isn't there?

Miggy Barker 00:48

Yeah, this is going to be a big episode.

Cerys Bradley 00:50

Okay, we better crack on. Then we are joined today by Variety D, a comedian and actor whose credits include, Sorry, I Didn't Know, and the Judy Love show. Thanks so much for coming on the podcast and talking to us Variety D.

Variety D 01:02

Hiya, how you doing?

Miggy Barker 01:04

Good, yeah. How are you?

Variety D 01:05

I feel... mash up.

Cerys Bradley 01:07

Great! We're going to start with ableism of the week. This is where we share a thing that has happened to us which we think is ableist. And because I'm a very competitive person, one of us is going to win this conversation. So this week, it's Variety D versus Miggy. Variety D, what's your ableism of the week this week?

Variety D 01:25

Well, my one is epilepsy, not any epilepsy, because that's too, too blunt. Blackouts. You know, absence seizures. Reason why I say that? Because I had one just this morning in the auditorium. But no one noticed. Just sit down and just and just stare. Yeah. No one knows nothing.

Miggy Barker 01:42

Is that a good thing that no one noticed?

Variety D 01:44

I think it's good, but it's also bad at same time, because, though that, there's a panel talking on a stage this morning about the industry and stuff and about, ironically, representation, but I think one of the panelists assumed that I was being naughty and just ignoring them, or just blanking and going away with the fairies, but not realizing my disability.

Cerys Bradley 02:04

The it's good, but also bad at the same time, is such a succinct way of describing disability in general.

Variety D 02:12

True.

Cerys Bradley 02:13

I can't believe, like being on a panel talking about disability and representation within the industry, and then having a blackout experience, and then someone presuming that you're being rude, as opposed to recognizing that you might be having a hidden like and experiencing a hidden disability, when that's literally what you're there to talk about at the time, that is wild.

Variety D 02:33

Yeah. I mean, ignorance is bliss. I mean, and sometimes you got to remember, there's ego, ego in the industry. I'm talking me, me, me, yes, me. It is I.

Cerys Bradley 02:44

Heaven forbid your disability interrupts my monologue.

Miggy Barker 02:48

Oh man, there's so much to say around, like, how you how you're, like, taught to listen properly.

Variety D 02:54

Yeah! So when I was a kid, see, it used to be a problem. They thought I was being naughty, yeah?

Miggy Barker 02:59

But it's like, they don't even care if you're actually listening. They just want you to, like, say, want you to, like, sit down, shut up and look, if I'm trying really hard to look like I'm listening, I'm not listening

Variety D 03:07

So, yeah, that's, that's my disability of the week.

Cerys Bradley 03:10

Miggy, can you top that?

Miggy Barker 03:12

No. Mine this week. I should not sway the judge. Don't sway the judge. Damn it. Mine this week, it happened twice on two different days, completely irrelevant to each other, where I was getting on a bus and I was with someone, and that might the someone I was with was getting onto the bus through the front, and I was getting onto the ramp, and some random guy decides that I need help. And this is my power chair. It's electronically powered with a joystick. It's very obviously a power chair, but they just hold on to the back of my chair and push and I'm like, you are doing nothing. You're doing you are not pushing me...

Cerys Bradley 03:58

It is the perfect metaphor for men in general, like visibly looking like they're helping without doing anything at all genuinely.

Miggy Barker 04:08

And it's like one of the guys and they were both being so genuine about it. It's like, oh yeah, love let's go like, you've got this. I'm like, I know, I really do. Got this. You're fine. You don't need to be a part of this. But, yeah, so that's mine.

Cerys Bradley 04:22

This is actually, it's quite difficult to judge, because Miggy, yours is, is two things happening independently of each other in the space of one week. But the irony of Variety D's, like, if, if that hadn't been happening specifically at a panel about inclusivity in the industry, like, I just think that that increases the order of magnitude of the ableism, like the lack of self awareness for the context. So you've both got these great amplifying like elements to the story, which does make it quite difficult to judge, but I think, I think it's just too ironic, and so Variety D has to win this week.

Miggy Barker 04:58

I understand

Cerys Bradley 04:59

Congratulations. You may have experienced ableism...

Variety D 05:02

What do I win?

Cerys Bradley 05:03

Um personal satisfaction?

Cerys Bradley 05:06

Okay, so that I that was a great ableism of the week. I'm glad, I'm glad that we've settled that dispute now, so I guess we can crack on with episodes. We've got quite a lot to talk about. Time for the big chat.

Variety D 05:27

Right, so is it ableist that I feel like I have to talk about my disability on stage?

Cerys Bradley 05:35

Yes, yes, yeah. I think there's so much to talk about in terms of, like performance and being disabled. So we're all disabled. Variety D, how long have you been performing?

Variety D 05:45

Say a number.

Cerys Bradley 05:47

five?

Variety D 05:48

Higher

Cerys Bradley 05:48

10

Variety D 05:50

Higher

Cerys Bradley 05:50

15

Variety D 05:51

Higher

Cerys Bradley 05:52

20.

Speaker 1 05:53

Well, if you wanna include drama stuff, then yeah, but no comedy, 18 years this year, since I was 16.

Cerys Bradley 05:59

Wow.

Variety D 06:00

I'm getting old. Okay?

Cerys Bradley 06:03

we're, like, basically the same age. So let's, let's not talk about 34 being old. You're 21, shush now I'm gonna be 34 in May.

Cerys Bradley 06:12

So have you? Are you? Have you always talked about disability in your comedy,

Variety D 06:16

Not always when I first, yeah, I hate, but I love to say this, because it's breaking the ice and the glass ceiling. I never used to talk about my disability or never mentioned it to comedy promoters, because they wouldn't book me in. I never mentioned my comedy on stage when I was doing the urban circuit, because disability back then, not all, but most of my community, back then, in the urban circuit, used to frown upon disability and be like, Oh no, you're sick. Oh, you're not well. Why are you doing comedy for then? And this is that way, way, way back when. This is again, you're talking about before blackberry and, you know, the socials and stuff and the notoriety of disabled comedians that we have now. So, yeah, it's so I had to hide it, and, you know, take medication before going on stage. And then I got caught taking my medication like it was illegal drug, but it's not, by a comedian called the late, great Felix Dexter. And he said to me, what's that you're taking? And I was like, Okay, it's gabapentin, but

Felix please don't, don't tell no one, because they won't let me perform. You know, I want to do better, this was at the Tabernacle, years ago.

Miggy Barker 07:39

Is that a problem now?

Variety D 07:40

Nah, because now, like when you Google me, type in either Variety D comedian or who is Variety D, and they will say the first Black British disabled comic of her era. So now people know the reason for taking my medication that you know, yeah, and the mindsets have changed now promoters, no matter what background, they've actually opened up a bit more and made sure you're that you as a performer are okay to be on stage and even after, like, how you doing, how you getting home, and that kind of stuff. So it's shifted now. So the urban, the mainstreams, the alternatives, they've they're kind of making sure everyone's okay. It's not 100% that perfect, but we're getting there. It's just we're making steps now of being noticed.

Cerys Bradley 08:28

I agree with you that things have changed, but it definitely is still the case that there are some performers with some disabilities where, like, if you approach a booker, they won't book you if they know that you're disabled. So like, Miggy, you know, we've tried to, I've tried to book you for gigs, and then we've been told that you're like, the space is wheelchair accessible for audience members, but not for performers, because your wheelchair is considered and, by extension, therefore you are considered a fire hazard.

Miggy Barker 08:59

Yeah, yeah, that was wild. So the idea was, you knew, you were told it was wheelchair accessible because it was for audience members. So we were going off of that, and then you were emailing and found out that the stage wasn't step free. And I was saying, Okay, well, a thing that I do sometimes is perform in front of a stage, so maybe I can do that. And they were, or like they were talking, I think they were saying for a minute about, like, making a ramp to go onto the stage, which, whenever, whenever anyone starts talking about that, it's usually a fail, like it's not gonna work. Because they kind of don't register that if the stage is more than like a foot off the ground, you need a massive ramp.

Cerys Bradley 09:43

Yeah, I would say that the physics education in this country is too poor for people to be making their own ramps. Too many people in this country think that they can take a point off Serena Williams in a tennis match and think that they can erect a ramp for a wheelchair user without knowing any of the required specifications. Those are two things that people believe about themselves, which are not true in this country.

Miggy Barker 10:04

And the worst thing is, you totally can make a ramp, but you need to, like, know what you're like, Google, something quickly, at least, you know, like,

Cerys Bradley 10:14

ask questions, how heavy is the wheelchair?

Miggy Barker 10:16

Yeah there are, there are specifications that are needed for it to be safe. And people don't think about that. And then venues will say, we can make you around. We'll sort it out. It's fine. And then without thinking, and then go, the stage is like, four feet off the ground actually, and there's no room around it, so maybe that's not gonna work. And then I was saying, Oh, I can perform like, in front of the stage, or, like, even within the audience. And they were like, there's no like, the wheelchair accessible space in the audience is not in a good position to perform in. And I'm like, that's kind of the point. But okay. And then they were saying that I couldn't perform directly in front of the stage because then I would be a fire hazard. Ooh, that's so cool. That's so cool of me, because I'd be blocking the exit as if I'm not a thing that would also be trying to exit this theater in emergency. It's it's a joke.

Cerys Bradley 11:12

I'm reading Judy Heuman's autobiography at the moment, and when she first applied for her teaching license in America in the like, 70s, she was told that she was not safe in the classroom because she was a fire risk. And she was like, but if there's a fire in the building, I also want to exit the building, I'm not going to be blocking the door, because I'm also going to be leaving with the children, and I'm actually better in a fire situation than most adults, because I can carry more children in my motorized wheelchair. So they're like, yeah, the history of disabled people being called fire hazards and therefore being denied access to work and other things is long and rich, unfortunately.

Miggy Barker 12:00

Because what that means as well is not just like, that's not just a ridiculous thought, but if you're saying that I am a fire hazard, I'm going to block an exit, you're saying that the exit isn't accessible for me to exit, in which case your building is not accessible. Because if I can't leave an emergency exit in an emergency then it's not an... what are you talking about?

Speaker 1 12:25

It's like a discrimination Hogwarts. So I'm saying, yeah, they're not letting you in where it's happening. Hey!

Cerys Bradley 12:32

I feel like that. That is also like the way that that conversation played out was your act when you can't get on stage is to talk about how the venue and other venues aren't accessible. And as soon as your act becomes like embar-, they were, they were sort of trying to work with us to make it accessible and then I think the penny dropped that they were going to have a disabled performer who was unable to get on stage, performing in front of an audience, and that was going to highlight the fact that their stage is not accessible. And then that's when they say, actually, we just can't have you at all. You're just not allowed to perform.

Miggy Barker 13:06

Yeah, don't come in. And it's when that happens that I I speak like it's happened a few times now, that I talk to like whoever is making the event, and I'm like, can I give you a video to put on instead? And, you know, I try, I try to work on my way in to places that clearly don't want me. And sometimes that works really well. But I do think that comes back to this whole thing of, like, I can't do that and not talk about the fact that I'm disabled, because it's kind of the point, right? Like I am, if I'm talking about access being a problem, I'm talking about it's being a problem for me as a disabled person, and so I am now, by default, talking about being disabled, even though that was not necessarily what I wanted originally or like, what I always want to do? Yeah, I have a lot I so I do, like, cabaret circuits, like, it's short, short acts, lots of different things. But like, I the amount of ideas I have that I've not been able to try because I'm so stuck on the but access, though, like, and I want, and it's like, nearly at this point a) I feel like I have to, because whenever there's the opportunity to go this, like, Thank you for having me, but this venue's fucked, I feel like I need to, because then other, especially because then, like, other disabled people who were like, Why can't I perform? Like, I'm it's my fault. I'm doing this. And that's like, No, it's not. It's It's not your fault. The venue is the problem. I am doing all of this and I'm still having a hard time. Yeah. So yeah, it's it's just so ingrained.

Cerys Bradley 14:50

Leila Navabi had a show in 2023 which was nominated for Best Newcomer, Edinburgh Fringe, and it's one of my favorite shows I've ever seen, where she talks about how they want to be a silly music comedian, and have written loads of songs, like silly songs, and that's what they want to perform on stage. But because she is queer and because she is a person of color, that is the thing that she has to address before she starts performing. And I think it's very similar with like disability, there's like a thing that you have to talk about at the beginning, and once you've done that, the audience can only see you in that way which affects your ability to talk about anything which isn't disabled or disability related. But if you don't address it, then that's also a problem. So you're like, you can't do either of the things. And whichever one you do, you get told that you should have done it the other way, which I find very frustrating

Miggy Barker 15:49

Variety, I had a question for you earlier, and it's just come back into my head, because, like, you were saying you've been doing this for a long time now, and when you started, you were, like, hiding the meds you were taking. It was not, it was like a taboo thing. You were not open about that. And that was just the thing. No one was open about their stuff, even though, from the sound, from my understanding of the comedy scene, everyone has so many problems, so, like, disabled or otherwise, like, there's a lot going on so, but as you've been doing this, it's gotten better. People are talking about their stuff. More people are talking about being disabled. When did you start talking about being disabled? Like, when did that switch happen?

Variety D 16:32

It was when so then, yeah, so, and that happened back way back when the medication. And then a few years later it was so basically, it was so basically it was when I had the brain surgery. And literally, the night before, I messaged every single comedian at the time who I who I knew, and I said, Pray for me. Pray for me. Pray for me. Because when I had the brain surgery, it was in 2020 and everyone knows what happened in 2020 Okay. So my mom couldn't visit me, or nothing like my mom. My brothers, my

brothers are also, they're, they're, they're autistic but different spectrums. So imagine I'm epileptic, my brother's autistic, my mom's hectic, like it's just all stress going on, stress, stress, stress. So, so I'm telling all the comics now I'm gonna, yeah, pray for me, because I want to perform. I want to succeed. What I want to achieve in life my dreams. I don't want to be dead yet, you know, so this brain operation needs to be good, because I had a tonic clonic seizure at my mom's house in her conservatory, and she saved my life, where, literally she had to force open my my jaw, because I clapped on the floor, and then she was like, tighten that. And I literally went from from brown to pale to blue, my mom said, and then she's went, she's opened up my mouth. And then, yeah, I went to, went to my doctor, my neuro not neuro psychologist, neurologist, and then the professor said, You are not going to have the operation done in this hospital, D, King's College. Love you. It's Camberwell. But um, you're gonna have it done at Harley Street in like his private, uh, wing. How much is gonna cost? Nothing. I was like, okay, okay. God bless you. You know, pillows are nice. They have nice bedding, they have food. I felt like Jesus with no friends because there's no visitors. Yeah, and oh, and that's it, when I was recovering. So I went so had to relearn how to grab items like, you know, like a teacup, or, you know, relearn how to walk and chew solids again. So the process I had, it's called the frontal lobe operation, hippocampus, where it's called sounds like a song. But yeah, and I first revealed my disability on Judy Love's show on BBC Radio London. So basically everybody who visited that radio station, they heard me, but then everybody literally went, what? And then shout out to Andrew Roach, my former agent, like he heard on it. And he picked up and said, Yeah, you know what? When you get better, you know I'll make sure I see you. And then that's when I got onto channel, Dave, you know, and performed alongside Rosie Jones and Chris McCausland and a lot of other great stand ups who are also disabled.

Cerys Bradley 19:23

So when you told everyone you had like this, there was this positive kind of reception, sort of from the industry. Have you? Have you experienced much difference in terms of your audiences, from when you weren't talking about disability to now talking about disability?

Variety D 19:39

Yeah, definitely, I think after the BB pin era. So the BlackBerry stuff that went away, and I think during the time the social medias that were around was Myspace, Bebo, and I think the early Facebook, when Facebook was nice, the audience has changed. But I made sure I also go to different audiences, meaning that I would step out of London too. I wouldn't just stay in just the same borough.

Cerys Bradley 20:08

Um, so you've, you've met some like, new audiences since you've kind of like post, post pandemic, different kind of gigs, that kind of thing. Have you found that audiences like, have you had like, a different reception to the material that you do about being disabled than when you were hiding it before. Do you think it's being received differently.

Variety D 20:26

There's a lot of that sympathetic one,

Cerys Bradley 20:29

oh my god.

Variety D 20:29

And I'm literally thinking, don't aah me *makes sympathetic noises*

Cerys Bradley 20:31

You know, this is actually very this is very funny. The correct response is to laugh. Like, what? Yeah.

Miggy Barker 20:41

I'm hilarious, actually.

Cerys Bradley 20:43

Exactly. I am definitely done with the pity, like people telling you, Oh, you're so so brave.

Variety D 20:49

Ah!

Miggy Barker 20:50

So brave.

Cerys Bradley 20:52

Thank you. Thank you for sharing this. That's I get. Oh, I learned so much from your set. Those were, those were actually very carefully constructed, or very like, well put together jokes, or Variety in your case, like often fully improvised, perfect puns coming out. There's no appreciation for that. It's just the fact that you have the ability to stand up and be disabled in public. That's the only thing that people are impressed by. I just finished reading a book of essays about like, like, freak shows in America in like, the 18th century. And there was some very interesting stuff in that about how like, so you've got these people who are performing as freaks. So they're sort of like, there as a spectacle. And like, a lot of people were enslaved in that process. And like, they didn't necessarily have very much choice about what they were doing. But often, when we talk about the history, we erase the fact that they were also very good performers. And so like the people who were successful, it wasn't just that they looked or behaved in a way that was freakish for the time, but also they were, like, very, very charismatic, and had really good rapport with the crowds and like were in control of that space. So it was really interesting to kind of like, think about when you talk about disability on stage. I think people really don't want you to be, like, in control of that process, because that kind of changes the way that we think about disability and disabled people. And so even if you're doing your like, your best work, and you are being really funny and really charismatic, there's still, like, a tendency for audiences to not see you as being in control of that, or being like autonomous. So like, anything that you do that's funny is kind of accidental, as opposed to the idea that you also might be a performer who is presenting themselves on stage in a particular way.

Variety D 22:51

Yeah, just, just show the Greatest Showman, yeah, just to just show those people the Greatest Showman and sing them songs 10 times

Cerys Bradley 22:57

Whilst throwing encyclopedias at them. That's the only way they'll learn.

Variety D 23:01

yes!

Miggy Barker 23:02

And then they're all cured. That's the only way.

Variety D 23:05

Knowledge!

Cerys Bradley 23:08

We normally like to finish the episode by talking about, like, things that we can do to kind of improve the space. I feel like the solution cannot be show people the Greatest Showman whilst throwing encyclopedias at them...

Miggy Barker 23:20

No, you don't think... that's not a good conclusion.

Cerys Bradley 23:24

Variety you've talked a bit already about how you think, like in your long career, long and eventful career, that things have definitely improved since when you first started performing. But like, what kind of can you point to, any particular like moments that you think really did have made, like, a big positive difference?

Variety D 23:47

Like the last last year when I got to host the Greenwich Docklands Festival Preview at the National Theater Riverside. And it was in the summer, and just seeing, not just myself, because I've got to do one day of that one and then there's other presenters who or hosts who have disabilities, and someone could sing and, you know, and do other bits and bobs. And just like seeing a whole crowd, and we're talking about facts. So when I was hosting it, it was daytime till night, so I had to make sort of toddlers *makes baby noises* and then when the time went on, and it was like, uh, senior citizens got thinking about back up their youth, and I was like, wahheyyy And then, um, night time. Now it's just like Ibiza, but in London, you know. And speaking to the tourists as well. And what I liked about was the fact that I said, If anyone is sensitive of hearing or, you know, or doesn't like loud noise, please your headphones now, because only some incredible fireworks Okay, now, 321, okay. Wayyyy So it's coming around now, kind of thing, and I wave at them as well, so, and it's really nice. And they're, they're carers, because I always make sure include the carers, so it's those things there. And it felt, it felt like I knew everybody, even the execs that was standing in the balcony, like it was just like, yo. That was, that was magical man that I didn't expect that, you know, if anyone told me 10 years ago say, You know what D you're going to be hosting a big festival in the capital. That's for, that's for, for the level five comics. That's for the ones you see on the busses just going, you know, I mean, that's for the ones in the tube station going, you see what I'm saying, like, coming soon, you know.

Miggy Barker 25:46

I think you need to get on a bus then, yeah, we need to get your face on a bus. Clearly, you've made it. If you're doing the festivals.

Cerys Bradley 25:54

Yeah, when It's Ableism, really takes off, and we get, I don't know, some money from somewhere to pay for a London bus ads. We'll put our faces up like taskmaster.

Variety D 26:03

some money from somewhere!

Cerys Bradley 26:04

Yeah, some money from somewhere

Variety D 26:05

You just have to say it, you know, just say, look, D get your, get your DLA, okay, and we're gonna make sure, make it happen. You know, by um, by Christmas,

Miggy Barker 26:15

Let's go. Let's do it.

Cerys Bradley 26:16

I think, I think, um, that is such a good story. But it's also like, yeah, you can feel the difference when you're performing to a disabled crowd. So when you're not performing to a disabled crowd.

Variety D 26:26

And the thing is there's different ages and people who have been through the chaos of disability being like a taboo thing, like really looked down upon, or people always have their stories - during the breaks I used to always, like, talk to some of them. I say, Hey, how you doing? You all right, you know kind of thing. And I said, Oh yeah, and they'd go you're doing well and I'd say Oh yeah, Cheers, man, yeah. But how are you, you guys are amazing, you guys are laughing and stuff, everything, okay? Because it's hot in the summer, so like, I will make sure everybody's like, okay, but I can't really make sure everyone's all right, because the stage is like, over here, and the crowds are way over there, that you got some in the front and you got some, like, in the other end of the Thames. You're like, hey, it's different. You see, it's like, one of my, my dreams come true. And I want that to, like, happen again. You know, I can feel it. It's gonna happen again. Like, you know, rather than a seizure, I want to have that moment. I want to have that.

Miggy Barker 27:21

Less seizures, more festivals.

Variety D 27:24

Yeah, less seizures more stage. There you go.

Cerys Bradley 27:28

Yes, less seizures, more stage. I like it. I think it's a nice, nice note to end on as well. Like that is the kind of antidote, isn't it, to the ableism within the industry is like finding the right audience in a space where, yeah, they've got Ear Defenders for everyone and carers who are there and like, it's a space which is accessible for the performer and the the audience as well. Um, well, thank you so much for coming onto the podcast Variety, and thank you for chatting to us.

Variety D 27:57

Thank you guys again for having me on it.

Miggy Barker 28:03

You've been listening to It's Ableism.

Cerys Bradley 28:05

I've been Cerys

Miggy Barker 28:06

and I've been Miggy.

Cerys Bradley 28:07

For more information about our guests and the topics covered, check out the show notes and our reading list

Miggy Barker 28:11

This podcast was produced by Little Wander, and the music was composed by Chuck SJ.

If you enjoyed this episode, you might enjoy:

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