

## **Podcast „We need to talk about...!“**

**On July 7 – 10, 2022 , the "Gathering in a better world" took place as part of the Theaterformen Festival in Braunschweig. Eileen, Laura and Eva were on the place and share their impressions and experiences, as well as an interesting interview with an artist and a look behind the scenes. The podcast to listen in, read along and experience.**

### **1. Episode: We need to talk about...a gathering in a better world!**

Hello and welcome to our podcast „We need to talk about...“. We are three students from the HBK in Braunschweig. Hi I'm Eva, I'm Eileen, Hi it's Laura. Today we need to talk about A GATHERING IN A BETTER WORLD. We have been there last week and would like to share our impressions with you.

A GATHERING IN A BETTER WORLD focuses on the perspective of disabled artists. Three international artists performed in the local theater, the Staatstheater Braunschweig. This shared experience of new perspectives took place on three levels of the main house (Großes Haus). The Event program was for people of all ages and everyone was welcomed. A GATHERING IN A BETTER WORLD created a space for dreaming and figuring out a better world together. As part of an international project of the Goethe-Institut, the Festival Theaterformen invited Jess Thom / Touretteshero, Edu O. and Alexandrina Hemsley / Yewande 103 to fill their own spaces in the theater.

In this way, three perspectives of life, which are shaped by the individual experiences and practices of the artists, are expressed. A diverse program makes the expertise of people with disabilities visible and puts their perspectives in focus.

The Motto of the event is exploring a path to a better world! Weave the net that connects us, come to a dance performance or a talk by artists with disabilities. Create a spacesuit and participate in a spacewalk or attend a film screening. People of all ages are invited to watch, experience, and test a better world. According to disability rights activist Alice Wong, disabled people make up the oracles of today. Together, we dare to look towards a future that is inclusive for all.

We would now like to describe the different levels to you, so you can imagine what happens there.

### **First Floor: Jess Thom**

Jess Thom is an artist, theater maker and activist from London. She is the co-founder of Touretteshero and may be leading a secret double life as a superhero. Jess has had tics since childhood, but was not diagnosed with Tourette's syndrome until she was 20. Encouraged by her friends, Jess decided to turn her tics into a source of imaginative creativity and the Touretteshero project was born.

Touretteshero is a creative nonprofit organization, that uses innovative methods to celebrate the humor and creativity of Tourettes - one of the most misunderstood syndromes in the world. Touretteshero was founded in the year 2010 by Jess Thom and Matthew Pountney with the goal of creating a world of equality through art for both, disabled and non-disabled people.

On the first floor of the Theater you can join Jess' space shuttle for a journey to a better world. There are lots of different stations with creative offers like handcraft, Videos and chilling areas to think about different questions Jess' asks. It's like entering Jess' head, eating biscuits and learning something about Tourette syndrome. We were warmly welcomed by Jess herself and she was around all the time. She is such a funny and likeable person, so we felt very comfortable in her "space shuttle." Everyone is invited and welcomed and it's a colourful play area for everyone with a deep and important message about how to get in this better world. We got the chance to speak with Jess about Tourettes, about her artistic work and the message she wants to convey. So stay with us and listen to the interview with Jess Thom in the next episode.

### **Second Floor: Edu O.**

On the second level of the theater everyone was invited to watch Edu O.'s designs and performances. He collaborated with other artists, his team, to create this space.

Edu O. is a Brazilian choreographer, dancer, author and performer from Salvador, Brazil. He is also a professor at the dance school of the university in Bahia. Edu O. works from a queer and disabled perspective and deals in his work with eroticism and fetishism and encounters of physical difference. As well as queer intimacy, the deconstruction of intimacy and its norms and limitations.

In this room everything was very gloomy, especially in the direct comparison to the first level. There was little light, the room was decorated with upsidedown pieces of furniture, empty boxes and you could see taut nets of ropes through the room. After a few minutes you encountered Edu O., who positioned himself at the beginning of a narrow corridor, which was populated by imposing photographs of him and his team, as well as a large roll of paper. Someone began to sing in a deep calm voice, in Portuguese, I think. I didn't understand the language, yet it sounded beautiful and somewhat melancholic. Edu O. began to move across the paper, his hands and arms carrying him. His disability was consciously made visible. He moved himself along, without the wheelchair he had been sitting in at the beginning. Arriving at the end of the aisle, he fell into the singer's arms - the embrace was intimate and emotional. The unrolled role of paper was trailing behind Edu O., Filled with aggressively scribbled words written by others. "Nunca Mais Abismos" was written at the end several times on the paper roll and was distributed everywhere in the room. Translated, that means "Never again abysses" or "No more abysses." Abysses means the distances that separates people from each other. The artist's personal, alternative history becomes apparent, making the experience of disability commonplace. Visitors and performers link together in a grit of collaboration and affection to form a collective body in which disability and accessibility become aesthetically pleasing elements, expressed through the taut nets I mentioned in the beginning. Abysses are to be overcome, much more, no longer an issue at all.

When we left the room, you could clearly see how the design elements had changed, how the artists had left traces. Not only physical ones, but also in our minds.

### **Third Floor: Alexandrina Hemsley**

The third level was arranged, designed and performed by the artist Alexandrina Hemsley. While walking in the room there were several options to sit or even lay down. It was very comfortable when we found a cozy place for ourselves from where we had the opportunity to receive her space calmly. The room beamed a relaxed atmosphere. It felt like when you walked in the room all the festival visitors became quieter and calmer. Alexandrina Hemsley, also stood in the middle and warmly greeted all the visitors, making them feel at home in the room right away. When all visitors sat down or lay down, Alexandrina sat down on the floor and opened her space. In four corners of the room there were banners with slogans like "there is a whole ocean here for becoming in". Alexandrina Hemsley's work moves in the flow of dance, choreography, creative writing, mediation and advocacy. Driven by an interest in rupture, connectedness, displacement, and emotionality, Hemsley hopes to find ways to express felt as well as lived realities. Hemsley works with intricate improvisational scores and lively performance environments.

This includes working in organizations, working on anti-racism and anti-disability issues. Out of motivation, to work with dance and health and to create tender, compassionate encounters through creativity, Hemsley founded the organization Yewande 103. Yewande 103 is an organization that responds to racist, ableist and gender-based violations and prejudices that have that perpetuate white supremacy in dance and the broader cultural sphere. Yewande 103 represents Alexandrina Hemsley's more than 10 years of work in the field of contemporary dance as a choreographer, performer, writer, mentor, author and educator. "Yewande" is Alexandrina's middle name. It was passed on to the women in her family by her great-great-grandmother, who ran away from slave traders in Nigeria. She hid herself, survived and lived until she was 103 years old.

After the opening, the film of Alexandria began. Started with a Behind the Scence video of her artistic performance "Fo-utain". In further their film "Foutain" was represented. Through the artistic representation of the water, but also through the choice of music, a relaxed atmosphere has spread in space.

Now we've introduced you to the artists and given you an idea of the program. In the next episode you'll hear exclusive insights into the work of the artist Jess Thom, so stay tuned.

Creation date: 14th of July 2022, Contribution length: 10 minutes.

## **2. Episode: We need to talk about... Touretteshero!“**

### **(Interview with Jess Thom / Touretteshero)**

Hi and welcome back to the second episode of our podcast. Now we need to talk about Tourettes and Jess Thom and Laura will introduce you into the interview with Jess Thom.

At the festival we met Jess Thom and had the chance to talk to her in person within a relaxed setting. During the Corona pandemic, Jess Thom was isolated for 24 months - during which time she imagined her home as a spaceship with her friends, colleagues and cat as crew. In her space at the theater, each visitor was given a small book that they could interact with. You can try out many things, craft something and experience for yourself. She told us about her own personal insights into dealing with Tourette's disability.

*Jess:* I'm sure there are loads of conditions and different impairments that are misunderstood and I also think that lots of people misunderstand disability, so, they think that you're a disabled person just because your body or mind is impaired in some way, or because you have a particular impairment or condition. Actually, what makes me a disabled person is a failure in the world to consider diversity of bodies and minds. And so, I'm not just interested in raising awareness about specific conditions or specific... yes Biscuit right but being I'm interested in everybody understanding the role they can play in making it less a disabling world. So, creating accessible spaces and attitudes and systems and that stops it being an individual... disability being something that's just about an individual and starts being about the type of world we want to shape together. And I suppose with this piece of work in journey to the better world. It's really inviting everybody to think about this sort of future we want to shape and in trying to do that in a way that considers a diversity of bodies, minds and experiences. Because we can, we can remove those barriers that people experience. There are elements of

tourettes that are difficult, because that – just because they are, like pain or moving around a lot and getting really tired. But lots of the things that make my life really difficult are to do with people's attitude or to do with non-accessible spaces. And those are the things that we can all partake in Biscuit. So this piece of work is an invitation to think about what you would need in a world that would make it easier for you to live in, happier for you to live in. But also thinking about what other people would need to.

It can be really easy, if it's not part of your living experience, to not realise that there are barriers that..., so let me assume that everybody sits still and quiet in a theatre. If you can make your body do that, you probably wouldn't think about people who can't – even if that is not the most comfortable way for you to enjoy a show. But I prefer all the relaxed performances, so, performances that take a relaxed approach to noise and movement and extend a really warm invitation to everybody. Sometimes there are really playful places like this and sometimes they are more serious. But I think that art and culture should be for everybody and that we should – I don't want anyone to miss out because of pre-conceptions Biscuit about who art is for or how it should be enjoyed

Biscuit So Tourettshero is an arts organization and a superhero persona Biscuit that has been going for 12 years. So since 2010 we are an organization that celebrates the humour and creativity of Touretts and campaign for more socially just world and promote and celebrate disability culture. So while we put Tourette Syndrome with, we center disabled people and neurodivergent people regardless of what their impairment is. And we believe that creativity and connecting people to ideas and to each other is very powerful. And we're interested in finding ways to do that playful, joyful and imaginative. Tourettshero started as a creative response to my own experiences living with the touretts syndrome, which is a neurological condition Biscuit. That means I make movements and noises Biscuit. I can't control the Tics. Biscuit So you can hear me saying „Biscuit“ and „Headshot“. I have tics that mean like by my chest and that affect my mobility. And I to start with, I found it really difficult to think about and to talk about touretts without getting upset. But then I had a conversation, which changed my relationship with my body and my mind and with my tics. And that was the start of Tourettshero the origin of Tourettshero.

That was a conversation with my Co-Founder Matthew Pountney, and he described my tics as a crazy language generating machine and told me that not doing something

creative with it would be wasteful. And that idea really took roots for me and transformed how i thought about my body and my expericenes and helped me to start to value the subjective escape Biscut that my unusual neurology gives me. That was the start of Tourettshero.

That was the interview with Jess Thom, so stay tuned for insights from Olivia Hotz's organizational perspective in the next episode.

Creation date: 7th of July 2022, Contribution length: 5:52 minutes.

### **3. Episode: „We need to talk about...behind the scenes!“ (Interview with Olivia Hotz, Organization)**

Hi, and thanks for staying with us in the third episode of our podcast „We need to talk about...“ Now we need to look behind the scenes. As part of the festival, we learned a lot about accessibility through the individual artists. What does accessibility actually mean? And what is connected with it? Through one of the organizers at Theaterformen, Olivia Hotz, we were able to get a deeper insight into the topic. We asked Olivia for answering some questions for us. She wrote us an email with the answers and now we will read the answers for you out loud. So I will ask the questions and Laura will read the answers.

*Us:* How long have you been at Theaterformen and also the contact person for the topic of accessibility?

*Olivia:* I joined the team for the first festival edition of the artistic director Anna Mülter in February 2021. I am employed on a temporary basis and supported the team for the first two editions for half a year each in the production department.

*Us:* Have there been other events in the past that you have helped organize in the context of accessibility?

*Olivia:* During my studies I repeatedly worked at inclusive theater festivals, e.g. Grenzenlos Kultur in Mainz.

*Us:* How long has accessibility been an issue for you and why?

*Olivia:* Today, I am increasingly concerned with accessibility, also through my own lived experience, and I am constantly learning, especially through exchange with other disabled people in the cultural sector. Accessibility was only a marginal topic in my studies, but I have gained experience and knowledge in part-time jobs.

*Us:* What difficulties / special challenges did you face in making the event accessible?

*Olivia:* I am looking at different challenges from the perspective of organizing the stage program. We have different offerings for disabled audiences (audio description, translation into German Sign Language, alternative seating, relaxed performances) - each of these requires careful planning, but consists of very different planning steps.

For many of the offerings that the festival has been focusing on since 2021, there is no manual yet. So structures and planning processes have to be tested and established step by step. The fact that the festival takes place in two different cities complicates planning, as each year plans are made for different theater spaces with different know-how and different resources already in place. We exert as much influence as possible in the existing structure, for example adapting signage or working out guidance systems for blind people that can be permanently installed in the spaces. But the cooperation with the structures of the individual houses exists only for a limited period of time. Accordingly, our sphere of influence as an independent festival that is a guest in a permanent house is naturally limited. Working as a guest also means that there is relatively little influence in the productions, as they are not developed in collaboration with the festival.

*Us:* How satisfied are you with the implementation? Are there any points that could have been improved?

*Olivia:* All accessibility offers were accepted by the audience. In some cases, we received positive feedback from people who had used an offer. Of course, improvement is always possible. We reflect internally, but also receive feedback from the disabled experts who advise us throughout the year.

*Us:* Do you receive criticism / suggestions for improvement? How do you deal with it?

*Olivia:* We received positive feedback through the channels I manage. The people who contact us are grateful that there is a direct contact person they can turn to.

We want to thank Olivia Hotz very much for answering our questions and for her time. Stay with us for our fourth episode, the outro and for the news all around the GATHERING IN A BETTER WORLD.

Creation date: 18th of July 2022, Contribution length: 4:17 minutes.

#### **4. Episode: Outro „We need to talk about... the next time!“**

Hello and welcome back to the last episode “We need to talk about...”. Today we talk about the next Steps of the Festival. A GATHERING IN A BETTER WOLRD is a cooperation with the Goethe-Institut. The first GATHERING in Braunschweig will be followed by others in Johannesburg, Montevideo, Shanghai and Kyoto.

The festival Theaterformen will be held in Hannover next year. Starting on the 22 of June until the 2nd of July 2023 we will be able to see exciting performances at the festival. Hopefully A GATHERING IN A BETTER WORLD will be featured as well.

Also, feel free to check out the Instagram account @gatheringbetterworld or the website for more information. So thanks very much for listening/ reading to us and staying with us and we hope we hear each other soon.

Stay safe, yours Eva, Laura and Eileen!

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