



## **The Unspoken Project** **The Making of *THE VOICE MONOLOGUES* (2018)**

The Unspoken Project are an inclusive professional company working with disabled and non-disabled people to develop performances, workshops and other creative activities in the world of theatre with a focus on the experiences and ideas of people who communicate using AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication). The Unspoken Project is about expanding the professional framework of the theatre, and demonstrates clearly how a more inclusive conversation is a richer conversation, in speech, technologically-enabled speech, or otherwise. The company also offers a rethink of how we understand speech and sound on stage, and thus also of how we understand text and crucially, voice.

In this documentary for the Lend Me Your Ears Laboratory we meet Kate Caryer and Ky Hall, two of the company's directors, to discuss *The Voice Monologues*, a performance in which actors with unimpaired communication could use their skills and voice work to bring to life the writing of AAC users. The performance centres on what can be found in this collaboration across voices, and what is at stake in finding a voice, in gaining access to one's voice, in giving and lending voice and in voicing others, in speaking and being spoken through.

Caryer and Hall detail the process they went on throughout 2018 and 2019, from developing the piece's exploratory roadmap to recruiting for auditions, from casting the piece to experimenting formally with collaborators, and they share memories from a process in which all involved discovered just how much conceptual, aesthetic and human complexity a multitude of experiences brings to performance as a form. Unspoken share documentary materials from preparatory notes to audience feedback, and reason together on how what they want to offer with their work is 'a politicising and entertaining experience'.

*The Voice Monologues* functions on many levels theatrically, but what it especially does is radically re-define the oral as a right, beyond metaphor. As Caryer reminds us: 'if having a voice can represent being able to express opinions, then the first definition may be dangerous for those of us without biological speech. We still have, or should have, a voice: politically, socially, and more.'

### **[00:00:23 to 00:02:12] Excerpt from *The Voice Monologues* (2018)**

#### **[00:02:15] INTRODUCTION TO THE UNSPOKEN PROJECT AND AAC**

[First slide: Photograph of Ky Hall speaking into a microphone in a public place and a photograph of Kate Caryer with a group of people in celebratory mood.]

**Kate Caryer:** Hi I'm Kate Caryer

**Ky Hall:** And I'm Ky Hall.

**Kate Caryer:** I'm the founder and a director of The Unspoken Project Community Interest Company. Unspoken is an inclusive professional theatre company working with non-disabled and disabled people, especially those with communication impairments who use augmentative and alternative communication.

**Ky Hall:** I've recently become one of Unspoken's directors but before that I worked as Kate's personal assistant. We've been working together on assembling this information and reflecting on the work Unspoken has done so far for a few months across my transition from PA to director. We've been collaborating on this project in a very particular way that we explain. Because of Kate's disability and the particular way she communicates, explaining new ideas can be quite difficult for others to understand, especially if they're unfamiliar with Kate and her background. But because I've worked with Kate for a while before this, I am able to communicate these things across. Even though the show we're going to talk about today, *The Voice Monologues*, was a year before I started working with Unspoken and working with Kate, I can understand her quite well and I know her topics of



interest I've been teasing out of her. Usually, working together has looked like us brainstorming interesting ideas and topics of conversation, Kate would then write a bullet point or two explaining how that idea played out in *The Voice Monologues*, the main project, and I would then go away and expand and develop that idea into full sentences so that it makes sense on paper and trying to tease out the interesting details. Then Kate would review it and add any further thoughts to make sure I'm not misrepresenting her or Unspoken or the show.

**Kate Caryer:** Unspoken was asked to produce a kind of 'behind the scenes' documentary about one of the company's pieces of work, and explain how it was made, with close attention to the significance of hearing and speaking or orality and aurality. The piece we chose was *The Voice Monologues* because of how closely it aligned with these themes, but we will also introduce you to AAC [Augmentative and Alternative Communication] and briefly consider what it means to have a voice. We understand that some of the other people featured on this podcast could more casually talk through their piece, but we've had to write this as a script essentially so that it could be input onto my screen reader in advance: if I was to try and talk through our work more spontaneously I daresay we'd be here for a lot more than an hour. We also felt it significant that I take the lead on talking through our work as it is significant to platform a voice like mine: I could have asked Ky to read aloud but that would undermine our focus on uplifting – very literally – marginalised voices. So please bear with us as we can't be particularly spontaneous today but we promise we've put a lot of thought and effort into what we want to say so I'm sure you'll find something of interest today.

[New slide: A black and red banner 'Nothing About Us without Us'.]

The Unspoken Project was set up as a community interest company and inclusive theatre company to develop performances, workshops and other creative activities, with a focus on the experiences and ideas of people who communicate using Augmentative and Alternative Communication. The involvement of disabled people at all levels is crucial to our work.

[New slide: A selection of images illustrating AAC.]

Augmentative and Alternative Communication, or AAC for short, is my theatre company's focus but few people know what it is. AAC is a very complicated area, but I'll summarise the field. AAC is a general term for any method of communication for individuals with communication impairments. These include what is called 'low tech' methods, such as a simple piece of paper with the alphabet written on it, books or boards with symbols representing words. Simple sign language, such as Makaton, also comes under this category but not British Sign Language as used by deaf people, as this is regarded as a separate language. 'High tech' methods include electronic devices that actually speak the words out loud.

[New slide: A close up of a Minspeak programme keyboard featuring a symbol on each key.]

These usually require users to type words or use a language of symbols, such as Minspeak, which is what I use. Some devices track eye movements if a user cannot use their hands.

While many AAC users come to use such technology because they have little to no biological speech, some have a greater capacity for speech but find their communication is impaired in other ways, such as difficulty with reading, comprehension, or social difficulties and so on, [and they can] use AAC to enable them. Because of the focus of this podcast as well as my own lack of biological speech, I will be focusing on the relationship between biological speech and voice. But I still want to impress that many of these concerns are just as pertinent to those with biological speech whose communication is impaired in other ways. In fact, institutional support for such individuals' alternative means of communication is often even more lacking: certain providers consider AAC to be an excess luxury to people who already have biological speech. This viewpoint denies the many ways that people communicate, and all the components that combine to produce speech which can be understood.

I'm a communication aid user myself as you might have guessed from my technological voice. I use AAC because I have athetoid cerebral palsy with dysarthria (more simply, I do not have full control over my limbs or speech muscles). This means that while I can make oral sounds from my mouth, I can't form sounds that form speech. The sounds I make are more like this: [Kate demonstrates].



I use a Voice Output Communication Aid computer to speak, it has a Minspeak program called 'Language Learning And Living' which combines symbols to form words and phrases. It uses 128 different symbols which can hold a variety of meanings. For example, the icon of the apple could represent: 'red', 'food', 'fruit', or even an 'apple'.

*[New slide: An image of a red apple and associated words.]*

You could also say the apple is 'ripe', or maybe you would like to 'pick' it? So, to get to my fruit words I first press the apple. While there are 128 different symbols and many different combinations, the vocabulary available to me through this technology is still significantly limited compared to the vocabularies of people with biological speech and my level of education. My communication aid allows me to spell words that aren't programmed into it, but another aspect of not having biological speech is that spelling is exceptionally difficult. I can't break down words in my head and connect the sounds with letters because I don't have an intuitive understanding of what sounds make up words. As such, when I don't have a word programmed into my communication aid and can't spell it, I sometimes resort to what I call 'AAC riddles'. One example might be: 'I'm working on a project for dog and cat charity area arts centre' where 'dog and cat charity area' means Battersea, so I mean 'I'm working on a project for Battersea Arts Centre'. I also once told an assistant: 'We're on the same microwave', when I meant: 'We're on the same wavelength!' AAC is complicated and rich, it encourages me to think creatively every day and demands that I'm not shy about making mistakes because they're bound to happen, and I make sure to use my voice every day.

## **[00:10:54] WHAT IS A VOICE?**

**Ky Hall:** You might have noticed Kate described her communication aid as 'her voice'. This brings up the really interesting question 'what is a voice?'

The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'voice' as both a verb and noun.

*[New slide: Dictionary definition of 'voice'.]*

As a noun, 'voice' is defined as: '(the) sound produced by and characteristic of a specific person or animal'. This definition covers the main gist of what I want to talk about today, but I want to zoom in on two of its derivatives to discuss how we think about the voice and what its significance is.

The two derivatives we're interested in are: 1. '(the) sound produced by the vocal organs, especially when speaking or singing, and regarded as characteristic of an individual person. Also: the individual organic means or capacity of producing such sounds'; and 2. 'an expression of choice or preference given by a person'. This first derivative definition draws an equivalence between voice and biological speech, but the second highlights that the voice can be more abstract. If having a voice can represent being able to express opinions, then the first definition may be dangerous for those of us without biological speech. We still have, or should have, a voice: politically, socially, and more. This is where AAC steps in, providing methods to enable those without biological speech, as well as those with other communication impairments, a means to express their opinions. Put short, AAC gives people like Kate access to their voice.

*[New slide: Cartoon drawings of a speaking mouth and a megaphone.]*

Kate and I would hypothesise that for AAC users, their communication aids, eye gaze, picture boards and sign languages become their voice in a far more meaningful way than their own biological speech ever could. This seems to be certainly true in Kate's experience. One day I was thinking about my mother, whose native language is not English, but having lived here for over half of her life she described throughout my childhood and adolescence how she found herself changing from thinking in her native language to thinking in English. This led me to wonder about how Kate thinks, and she described to me that she thinks in words rather than in the symbols her communication aid uses, and she doesn't need to consciously think about what buttons to press – it comes automatically to her. I see a remarkable similarity here to my own thought process: I think in words, sometimes spoken but sometimes written; and my nervous system automatically created the muscle movement needed to form those words into something audible and recognisable. Certainly, some people think in



images more than words, and some AAC users may not be able to communicate something audible at all depending on the methods they use, but Kate and I have a lot in common for people one of whom has biological speech and one of whom doesn't: the main difference is that Kate moves her hand where I move my vocal cords, lips and tongue. Kate's communication aid is her voice and we think it's meaningful to say that she speaks in AAC. But it's clear that Kate cannot speak for other AAC users, and this is something that we want to explore further within the community in the future.

Despite its importance in giving those without biological speech access to communication, AAC is not as widely available as we'd hope: while the technology has advanced greatly in recent years, access to it varies across regions and services. The public systems that regulate access to AAC make it an uphill battle to get publicly-funded high tech AAC, as those with communication impairments have to prove their capacity to use these devices without being given an opportunity to learn or even practice using them before this assessment. As such, many AAC users are forced to use lower tech AAC which further limits their capacity to communicate, or are pushed to fund high tech options privately. This enforces a strong financial divide between AAC users, which the community largely sees as unfair and discriminatory. I want to say that it doesn't have to be this way, and even allowing AAC users to practice using different devices before their assessment could really help. Kate has been dreaming up a campaign around AAC that would push for various measures, and she thinks 'AAC libraries' of devices to be loaned out could really level the playing field for current and potential AAC users.

By failing to provide adequate means of communication to those with no biological speech, one can meaningfully say that society has denied a group their voice by diminishing their means to express their choice or preferences, creating a disabled underclass. This effect is not wholesale, as Kate is here talking today, but that is largely related to her financial stability and how undeniably obvious it is that she needs AAC. Kate was also simply in school at the right time to be introduced to Minspeak technology, which was groundbreaking back then, so she's become as fluent using it as most adults can be. Between socio-economic class and sheer luck, or a lack of it, there are many without biological speech who ultimately have had their voice repressed.

We can also think about how even people with biological speech may still feel 'voiceless' because they do not feel represented in society. Alternatively, some would say they definitely have a voice and have been speaking, but the problem is their voices are not heard, listened to or acted on. Regardless of the particular way people relate to the word 'voiceless', it is clear that some voices are repressed and ignored. We could suggest that some voices are hijacked. Kate thinks of how some parents of disabled children only discuss their own experiences and deny their disabled children a narrative of their own, even well into the adulthood of their sons and daughters. As a Literature student, I think of writers narrating the lives of marginalised groups they are not a part of for their own gain – such as the English poet William Wordsworth, who, around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, would feed the homeless people in his village in exchange for them telling him their life stories. He would then rewrite and publish such stories and profited from them far more than he ever paid those people. On the other hand, some voices are uplifted because of their privileged positions in society: think of the irony of public figures who claim they're being silenced – in an article published in one of the country's biggest newspapers! That these claims often arise when groups online dare to point out their views harm others only adds to the absurdity. It becomes so obvious that these privileged voices are not particularly useful or good to deserve their status, they are simply privileged for the sake of privilege. Who is granted a voice, whose voice is heard, and whose voice is acted upon can lead us to see much of the power imbalances we must confront today.

### [00:17:45] AAC ON STAGE

[New slide: 'All the world's a stage' quote by William Shakespeare, next to a portrait of the playwright.]

**Kate Caryer:** Addressing those imbalances brings much about how society operates into question, but my interest is in finding a voice in theatre for people with impaired communication.





Shakespeare famously wrote in *As You Like It*: 'All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players; / They have their exits and their entrances.' Indeed, if 'all the world's a stage', then I as an AAC user and life-long theatre lover have to ask: Where are AAC users on that stage?

There are a few plays about people without speech. Two examples are: *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg* written by Peter Nichols in 1967,

[Slide showing a still from the 2019 Trafalgar Studios production of *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*.]

and *Brimstone and Treacle* written by Dennis Potter in 1976 and televised in 1987.

[Slide showing a still from the 2017 Hope Theatre production of *Brimstone and Treacle*.]

(The latter is definitely not for the faint-hearted.) Both of these are very interesting plays, but because of the time at which they were written, AAC does not feature. *Joe Egg* is more of a theatrical device for her parents' relationship than a fully-fledged character. Sadly, I have seen similar representations of people without speech in more modern plays too, where the character is stripped down to barely existing past being a device, sometimes only represented by an empty wheelchair on stage.

[Slide of an image of an empty wheelchair on stage.]

However, I have also discovered a handful of plays produced, devised and written by AAC users which I am glad to report are far more positive. The two that I've come across so far in my research are [slide showing three photographs of Dave Young smiling and in rehearsal] Dave Young, otherwise known as The Shouting Mute, [slide showing photographs of artwork and rehearsal images] and Hugh Malyon. I want to share what Hugh has to say about voice and performance as I find it really interesting: 'I think voice is like gender or race – it is always part of the dialogue of performance it's just whether you chose to make it explicit or implicit.'

I'd also like to mention [new slide] the excellent stage comedian Lee Ridley, who you might know as Lost Voice Guy, the 2018 winner of *Britain's Got Talent* who uses AAC.

Overall, there is a significant lack of theatrical productions representing AAC users, both in its backstage crew, directors, and cast. I've thought for a long time now that we deserve much better than this.

[New slide: Poster of *The Unspoken Project's Speechless* (2016), shown at stage@leeds, University of Leeds.]

The Unspoken Project's proudest achievement was putting on our own production of *Speechless: The Musical* in 2016. This was a play I wrote myself, telling the story of a young woman called Rebecca getting a communication aid – and in turn finding her voice. [New slide of a rehearsal photo featuring three people working on a script including an AAC user smiling.] I worked extensively with other communication aid users and actors to write this story, often basing certain characters and scenes on actual experiences I and other AAC users had. As Rebecca was written to have no biological speech or real access to communication, it was important to me to represent her voice in other means. [New slide featuring a production still with characters of Buster and Rebecca marked in it.] We came up with the idea of Buster – Rebecca's imaginary friend and primary means of communication. I could say Buster is a form of AAC. Unspoken hired professional actors for this show and I will always remember how brilliantly the professional actors brought their characters to life and how well they collaborated as an inclusive company.

[New slide: Close-up of *The Voice Monologues* poster.]

The [main] project I want to discuss is *The Voice Monologues*.

### [00:21:35] THE VOICE MONOLOGUES: ZOOMING IN

This involved two different groups of actors: one group with impaired communication, and one group with unimpaired communication. Using the specific language of impaired or unimpaired communication got confusing in my drafts, so for simplicity I'll be referring to the group of actors with impaired communication as 'disabled', and the group with unimpaired communication as 'non-



disabled'. This isn't an entirely accurate distinction, as one of the actors with unimpaired communication is neuro-divergent, so is disabled in a different way. But as we are focusing so closely on performance and communication, in these specific contexts this actor can be considered non-disabled. So, for overall ease the two groups will be referred to as the disabled actors and the non-disabled actors.

Also, I'm going to use pseudonyms to refer to the actors and writers in order to protect their identities, especially the disabled actors who would not need the world to know the specifics of their impairments as it relates to acting. Anyway, back to it.

[*New slide: A still image from The Unspoken Project's video My Voice Is.*]

Back in 2013, Unspoken invited a handful of AAC users to discuss their relationship to their voice in a 30-second video. We got nine responses, which were compiled into a short video called *My Voice Is*. One day in 2018, [*new slide showing a performer on stage*] I became familiar with the brilliant voice work of Lin Sagovsky: she is a fantastic storyteller and has such an animated voice, which is something communication aid users like me struggle to replicate. For instance, this is me being happy and this is me being sad [*spoken in the same intonation*].

I began to dream up a show where actors with unimpaired communication could use their skilful voice work to bring to life the writing of AAC users. We reached out to AAC users through various social media groups relating to AAC, disability and performance, and asked them to write a monologue about their lives and their relationship to their voice. Of ten submissions, we chose five to be performed, thus developing and elevating the kind of work done for *My Voice Is*. Although we expected more interest and submission from the AAC using community, on reflection I'm glad we got even that much engagement given that AAC users are a hard to reach, and still harder to engage group. But the work that was submitted was incredible, and in the end we had writers from outside of the UK too which was brilliant and brought a new perspective.

By having non-disabled actors perform the monologues of AAC users, we hoped to increase awareness of communication impairments by making the lives of AAC users more understandable to a wider audience, and show the importance of these marginalised voices along the way. I later came up with the idea for AAC users to be present on stage too by having them perform famous monologues. AAC users and people who use sign language performed various monologues, from Martin Luther King Junior's 'I Have A Dream' speech to the theme song of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. With that, *The Voice Monologues* was born [*slides showing Martin Luther King and Will Smith as the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*].

[*New slide: Poster for The Voice Monologues (2018) at Soho Theatre, London.*]

To make auditioning as accessible as possible for our disabled actors, we requested the disabled actors applying to perform in the show submit a video audition. We received 33 submissions, which was pleasing compared to the lower number of writing applications. I was the primary judge for all of these auditions as I felt it was useful to have a performer who uses AAC themselves judge the auditions of the disabled actors as non-disabled performers may miss the subtleties of acting with impaired communication. I have a strong understanding of what makes a performance 'good' when one has impaired communication because of my personal experience of both acting and using AAC. We eventually recruited five disabled actors, but this was not without difficulty.

We had originally intended to have ten disabled actors and ten non-disabled actors, however we received very few applications that we felt were of the standard we wished to platform from performers who use AAC. In response to this challenge, we decreased the number of disabled actors the show would stage to five and widened our reach, asking for applications not only from AAC users but from others with a broader variety of communication impairments including deaf people who use sign language. Following this we were able to reach the number of disabled actors we needed. In the end we were more than happy with our actors while not compromising on quality.

This decision to expand our search for disabled artists to include deaf people who use sign language was debated among the directors and reflects many of the enduring conversations between deaf, AAC, and wider disabled communities. I want to share with you the contours of such tensions but



stress that this is a very ongoing debate and that it is necessary to listen to the disabled and deaf communities most directly affected when searching for some consensus here. By assigning deaf actors using sign language a famous text like the AAC using performers who self-identify as disabled, the show drew an equivalence between deaf people and AAC users, therefore implying to some extent that deaf people are disabled. Although from our perspective this was a pragmatic decision to fill the five roles for communication impaired performers the show needed, we recognise this has wider implications. I am aware that many deaf people do not consider themselves disabled for a variety of reasons, and they see British Sign Language as its own language, unlike AAC, which is a means to access the same language its verbal counterparts use, in this case Standard English. Nonetheless, I hope that *The Voice Monologues* could provide a chance to explore these tensions in a safe and inclusive environment, and that it allowed for discussions of the overlaps and similarities between AAC and British Sign Language. For instance, some AAC users use alternative forms of sign language in addition to other technologies, most common of which is Makaton but others exist. Further, I recognise that deaf people who use British Sign Language share with AAC users a dissonance from popular communication because of impairment. *The Voice Monologues* aimed to celebrate all forms of communication and express solidarity across these dissonances.

In the end, the disabled actors we hired to perform famous monologues had a variety of impairments which affected their communication. Daisy has severe Cerebral Palsy which prevents biological speech. Another two performers have learning disabilities which complicates their oral communication: Sam used Sign Along, and George used a tablet as a communication aid. Tom is Autistic, which makes it difficult for him to communicate in front of unfamiliar people. Anna is deaf and used British Sign Language.

**Ky Hall:** Having reduced the number of disabled actors in the show, Unspoken's directors felt it was necessary to ensure that non-disabled actors not outweigh the disabled actors, so began recruiting for five non-disabled actors after they confirmed five disabled actors. On reflection it would have been overambitious to try and get 20 performers of the standard they were aiming for, but ten was a much more achievable total.

[New slide: *The Timeline of the project.*]

**Kate Caryer:** We knew we wanted to cast professional actors for the non-disabled roles, so posted a call-out on Mandy, a jobs board for actors and crew. This received over 60 responses, many of which were generic applications that seemed to have been sent to any listing. And, while we don't have a problem with this practice as we know how tiring job applications in the arts are, we ultimately wanted to recruit performers based not only on their technical skill and experience but also how they would work within an inclusive company. Of these responses, we shortlisted 13 for auditions.

These auditions took place over the course of three days which were divided into five two-hour-long sessions. I felt it was important for me, the only AAC user on the board of directors at the time, to attend every audition for multiple reasons. Primarily, I wanted to see first-hand how the shortlisted actors would work with AAC users: if they would be patronising or talk over those with impaired communication, or if they could adapt their communication to collaborate with myself and the disabled actors we hired. I also wanted to be able to discuss the project with them in person to be sure they agreed with Unspoken's ethos and would uphold our message.

At the time Unspoken had two other directors, so we aimed to spread the workload manageably and they attended the sessions they could. My personal assistant then was also involved with the project and accompanied me to every audition and supported my decision-making process. Joining our auditioning panel for two sessions was David Warwick, an actor and director I'm well acquainted with.

We also assigned the non-disabled actors a questionnaire to assess their suitability to work on *The Voice Monologues*, asking if they knew what AAC stood for and what they would like AAC to stand for, what drew them to Unspoken and this project specifically, as well as if they have any talents with their communication or voice. The responses were interesting and helped us decide which non-disabled actors to hire. [Three slides follow with excerpts from the questionnaire, showing handwritten answers from some respondents.] One actor, Sarah, mentioned her interest in disability



arts stemming from her proximity to and experience of another disability and imagined AAC standing for Actors Against Cuts, linking together ideas of disability and austerity as the disability movement in the UK has for years, such as in the book *The War on Disabled People* by Ellen Clifford. A different actor, Ben, was excited about learning about AAC users as a group by working with Unspoken, as he was unfamiliar with AAC and was interested in how it would be used creatively. Another actor, Lou, mentioned he enjoyed voice warm up practices, drawing attention to the significance of communication that is vocal but not made of words.

Eventually, of the 13 non-disabled actors we auditioned, we hired five who we felt were talented, hard-working, good at communicating with AAC users, and who cared about our shared vision for *The Voice Monologues*.

Texts were assigned to performers in different ways. At the non-disabled actors' audition, each person read two of the monologues written by AAC users to the audition panel. There, we saw that some actors brought certain qualities to the text that we wanted to explore further, so we assigned an actor to each AAC user's monologue based on these audition performances and the other criteria. Ella, one of the monologue writers, was 16 years old at the time, and I had assumed that we would recruit a young actress to match this. In the end though, it was the acting of Beatrice, a more mature actress, that captured something utterly unique about this monologue. As such, my preconceived notions about what type of actors might best match certain texts were smashed as this older woman took on the words of a 16-year-old beautifully.

On the other hand, assigning texts to our disabled actors was a much more collaborative process. We had allowed the disabled actors to submit a video of them performing a monologue of their choice, and of the five actors we were most impressed with, George, Anna, and Sam had each picked a text that we judged to be skilfully acted and suited them well. As such, these three actors performed their original audition text at the final show. In the cases of Daisy and Tom, I felt that there were other texts that performer would be better at performing. I assigned Daisy to 'The Sound of Silence' by Simon and Garfunkel. I am particularly fond of the third verse [*slide showing the relevant extract from the song text*] which mentioned 'talking without speaking' and felt that Daisy could bring incomparable depth to the song, contrasting her lack of biological speech with how expressively she uses her face. To me, this is part of the joy of art; the ability to make multiple nuanced statements at once, recognising humour in assigning certain texts to certain actors without undermining the sombre tone of the song, and creating an altogether powerful show about communication.

As the show developed, I became increasingly interested in discovering what could be found in this collaboration across voices. Some actors wanted to talk to the writer of their piece, and we thought this would be a valuable opportunity to strengthen the cast relationships between writers and actors. To facilitate this, we held an all-cast social at my house in London over summer so that people could meet each other before rehearsals began. Tom came all the way from Cornwall to attend despite the distance and his anxieties, and he introduced me to a whole new way of using AAC, increasing my understanding of a large group of AAC users.

However, with a tight turnaround between rehearsals and the final show date, varying availabilities to attend events, and the writers being from across the world, it was not possible to connect all writers with actors unfortunately. But those who did meet found it mutually beneficial. Actors and writers were able to discuss the text together and refine the tone to perform it as excellently as possible: Ella, the previously mentioned young woman writer, directed Beatrice to be more angry and capture her teenage angst resulting in a brilliant performance [*slide showing a production still*]. We encouraged the writers to share with the actors what their favourite colour was so that the relevant actors could try to wear that colour on the night to represent the writers more closely. This made the writers feel empowered to be represented on stage and developed the actors' performances by allowing them further insight into their assigned texts.

In a way, I feel that the non-disabled actors became a kind of AAC for the writers with impaired communication, allowing them to express themselves with depth and warmth: imperfect, but creating something new in the space between thought and expression.





[New slide: *The timeline of the project continued.*]

After this, we held a series of increasingly formal script readings and practised the running order of the show. At the very first of these events, everyone was able to hear each other's pieces for the first time, and the atmosphere was remarkable. Everyone was friendly with each other, chatting and joking comfortably together almost immediately, I realised we were onto something incredible just from seeing these actors bonding. As we organised the next rehearsals, it became clear that people's schedules varied widely, so instead of trying to organise rehearsals for the whole group, we would need to practise in much smaller groups. Although this was a pragmatic decision, we quickly found this to be a far more accessible model for rehearsals as it allowed AAC users, such as the actors and myself as one of the directors, more time to communicate.

Then in November, we held two rehearsals in the theatre in the days leading up to the show. There, we ran into financial barriers to accessibility, discovering that an accessible parking space in Soho for one day cost £200! Thankfully we were able to cover this with the help of our funders at the Arts Council and I managed to negotiate a way to get to Soho without needing to use a space myself, meaning we only needed one parking space for two days, but the cost was still enormous for such a mundane thing. If we hadn't had the funding, I don't know what we would have done, and that demonstrates that even the most inclusive theatre company can't negotiate all the barriers to the arts disabled people face, because it isn't just about attitudes or misunderstandings. The arts reflect the inaccessibility woven throughout the whole of society, both reproducing injustices and allowing us to confront them in the same breath.

That being said, there was much about rehearsals to celebrate. It was especially pleasing to see one of the disabled actors, George, bonding well with the non-disabled actors over the course of those two days. His assistant, Jen, remarked in her feedback: 'The other actors went from finding speaking to George a little awkward and unsure, to being really comfortable and friendly with him, and him with them!' Out of these friendly interactions, Jen commented that she and George both learned from the experience and she hopes that the other actors did too, nodding to my point of interest in this collaboration across voices.

While staging *The Voice Monologues*, it became clear that theatrical performance looks very different for everyone dependent on one's abilities, impairments, and means of communication. Even the disabled actors who used communications aids performed and used their technology very differently. [Three slides follow showing production stills of the performers and works mentioned.] Tom created a video of his performance that could be screened by using a phone which he typed text into to communicate. Because this performer's autism causes anxiety around new people, performing the piece live in front of an unfamiliar crowd would have been totally inaccessible. However, by recording his monologue at home to be screened at the show, this actor perfected a single performance to the highest possible standard. Daisy performed live, but because her mobility is severely impaired mobility and she has no biological speech, she prepared the text of her monologue in advance on a specialised communication aid. She used facial expressions to great effect and provided a strong stage presence despite requiring support from her assistants to hit the switch which started the device speaking the piece. On the other hand, George's performance was characterised less by the specifics of his impairment, but still highlighted his alternative form of communication. His performance was the only one to find the whole cast on stage as extras while he took the spotlight. As extras, the cast passed around his communication tablet and held it up for him in order that he could push the buttons and dance unencumbered, artfully depicting the joy of being able to communicate both in words and through dance.

Performance is not a monolith, but performers adapt it according to their capacities and find their own style. Those with certain restrictions or adaptations performing can illuminate aspects of performance that might otherwise go un-interrogated and taken for granted by non-disabled actors, such as non-verbal communication and the skill to finetune a performance to the highest possible standard. Because of their differences, each performer was able to bring their own nuanced relationship to their voice to the stage, enriching the show in ways that even I was surprised by.



We are proud to have offered an opportunity and a platform to disabled actors and writers whose voices might have otherwise gone unheard and talents gone unseen, and we are glad to have provided a supportive space to encourage creative experimentation with different ways of performing. One of the non-disabled actors, Kiera, reflected on this in her feedback after the show, saying: 'I like their ethos in pushing boundaries & inclusivity in the arts. That they can have open & honest conversations [...] with [a] splash of humour!'

*[New slide: Quotes from participants about the performance.]*

We also helped others see the value of performance past just the words spoken, understanding it can be so much more. Jen, disabled actor George's assistant, mused that 'while George may have got a few of the words in the wrong places or what have you, the final performance he gave on stage was so full of life and George-ness!'. I also see this experience as a positive one for the non-disabled actors, to not only practise their skills and work in such a tight-knit company, but to explicitly learn from disabled people: whose writing they performed, who they performed alongside, and who they acted under the direction of. Further, we hope that the non-disabled actors were able to reflect upon the different kinds of performances offered by their disabled counterparts to develop their own acting practice. They also seemed to have learned a lot about communication disability and the people who use AAC, judging by their actor feedback. Beatrice had worked in the NHS for around 50 years and still said that she learned that communication disability is 'more varied and widespread than I thought'. Marina, another non-disabled actor, commented that working on this show made her think that 'technology has a long way to go and greater attention must be paid and invested in communication aids'.

*[New slide: Quotes from audience feedback.]*

One of our audience feedback reflected this sentiment, saying they were appalled at 'how primitive AAC devices still are and feel strongly that these voices need to be heard more widely'. Another audience member noted that communication disability is 'often ignored or overlooked when we talk about disabilities generally', and someone else said that 'it opened my eyes when I thought they were already open'. This was so encouraging, as that is exactly our mission statement at Unspoken. We are glad to have offered a politicising and entertaining experience to our audience, who overall came away with the message that having a voice is a right, and having biological speech affords certain privileges they have taken for granted. This is particularly reflected in the following quote from that first audience member: '[The performance] powerfully conveyed the message that we are all human and that communication is a human right too often denied to some people.'

Overall, the show was well received by the audience but there was some interesting feedback that painted a more complex picture. One of the two signed performances seemed highly polarising amongst the audience, it was many people's favourite act but many others' least favourite. I wonder what about this performance was so polarising and how much that relates to the tension between AAC and sign language I described earlier.

Also, the disabled actress Daisy said that she wished the monologues written by AAC users were performed by their original authors, especially as most mainstream theatre casts are made up by non-disabled actors anyway. Jen echoed this sentiment too: she chatted to members of the audience and reported that some found it odd to watch the stories of AAC users be read aloud by someone with unimpaired communication. I can see where these concerns and confusions came from and think we could have maybe explicitly addressed that tension to clear up any misunderstandings and explain our intention. However, I don't think I would change the concept of the show so fundamentally because I think the resulting dialogue between those with biological speech and those without was invaluable. While I understand politically the significance of Daisy's concern, I am unsure how to make AAC users performing their own monologues artful and not more like a conference. Perhaps we could have considered hiring disabled actors but who have unimpaired communication to perform the monologues of AAC users. We'd still keep the aspect of the show where people with communication impairments perform famous speeches, meaning *The Voice Monologues* would be entirely fronted by disabled people with all sorts of impairments, ensuring a balance of artistry and representation.



*The Voice Monologues* existed as a celebration of all forms of communication, and to show that we all have the right to communicate. It brought actors and writers with impaired communication quite literally into the limelight and demonstrated the strength of inclusive theatre by working with disabled and non-disabled performers to put on a high-quality show in an accessible West End theatre.

## **[00:49:05] EXPERIMENTING WITH VOICE**

*[New slide: An image of the comedy and tragedy mask.]*

In theatre, the voice is important not only to convey what you want to say, but also how you say it: it conveys layers of meaning. To explore this creation of meaning, I have carried out experiments in early July [2020] with a local community drama group. I know I've said this quite a bit already in other contexts, but it's worth bringing it up again that this is very based in my own particular capacities, specifically my fluency and speed at using my communication aid's program. If performance means something different to everyone and disability makes that hyper-visible, then this is what performance can mean to me.

So, because of the global pandemic, this community drama group I'm involved with was meeting on Zoom. Most of our sessions involved some kind of play-reading, and I volunteered to take up a part the last few times. Being a non-speaking person, I have discovered that I can do this in three ways: 1. screen read the line; 2. put the line in my communication aid; or 3. vocalise it.

With the three ways of communicating my lines I have discovered each method brings a different level of meaning and different level of involvement from me. Let's take a common example from Shakespeare to demonstrate each *[slide showing an illustration of the balcony scene from Romeo and Juliet]*: 'O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?'

In this first method, I highlight the line and get the computer to speak: this requires very little creative and emotional effort from me but it is quick and accurate. The screen readers says the line as it is written, albeit in a technological voice. On the downside, this usually lacks any emotion and sometimes the computer has trouble saying the line as it is meant to be said. So, this famous line is simply: 'O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?'

For my second method, I translate the line into something I can say easily using my communication aid. Due to a combination of my specific impairments, the particulars of how my communication aid is set up, and my desire to say the line relatively quickly, I aim for a rough approximation of the original rather than a word by word imitation. My example is no longer 'O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?' I suppose I could put the words word by word into my communication aid but this seems no different than getting the computer to read it out, except with much more effort from me and more time from everybody, so defeats the point. As such, this abbreviation method works quite well because I am involved in the construction of meaning, but my relatively vast vocabulary is still limited compared to the speaking person and I might not use the same word.

The third method is new to me because the sounds I can form with my mouth convey no 'real' or 'formal' meaning linguistically. Here, 'O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?' becomes: *[Kate demonstrates]*.

Despite lacking any formal linguistic meaning, I have found this method to be more emotional for me and those performing alongside me than the other two methods. I find this quite weird, I'd even describe it as verging on the medical model of disability, because it seems to suggest the sounds I can make biologically are more significant than my AAC voice, therefore privileging the normal form of speech over technological speech.

However, I recognise that I might struggle to be understood more broadly in life simply making sounds as communication without having a commonly understood meaning I am trying to convey, as is the case with reading lines in a drama group. Further, I do use the sounds I can make with my mouth together with my screen reader or communication aid in daily life. I'm choosing to see this method as a reason to begin using the sounds my mouth makes together with the words I choose to



speak technologically. I hope that this enriches my emotional connection to acting and makes me a more interesting performer!

[New slide: *Unspoken Project's website address and social media links.*]

Unspoken's next project brings the voices of those with no biological speech to centre-stage. By meeting two disabled adult characters with identical impairments but totally contrasting lives on their birthdays, we hope to demonstrate the significance of having a voice, even if that voice is not what our audience expects it to be. This filmed production will explore how different upbringings can impact on approaches to, and eventual outcomes for, people without speech in a darkly funny style.

We want to collaborate and commission disabled artists to showcase what life is like with and without a voice. Key to this will be outreach and engagement with this group. We plan to digitally and creatively capture the views of other AAC users, discussing anecdotes and finding any correlating themes.

Script by Kate Caryer & Ky Hall, edited by Duška Radosavljević

## Clips Summary

[00:00:23 to 00:02:12] Excerpt from *The Voice Monologues* (2018)

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Audio available at [www.auralia.space/laboratory3-theunspokenproject/](http://www.auralia.space/laboratory3-theunspokenproject/).

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