

Emily Maxwell (00:03)

So, hi Ophira, thank you so much for joining me today! I am so excited to chat with you and to host this recording for Luminato.

Emily Maxwell (00:12)

So, for folks who don't know me, my name is Emily Maxwell, my pronouns are she/her. I am the Accessibility and Programs Coordinator at Luminato Festival.

Emily Maxwell (00:29)

I am a white woman in my late 20s. I have red hair that is grown out because of the pandemic so it's now just past shoulder length. I'm sitting in my apartment with my living room behind me, so basic living room furniture - couch, coffee table, television, and there is a brick wall behind me.

Emily Maxwell (00:47)

And I'm very excited to be joined by Ophira Calof today, who is one of my role models and someone who I'm so excited to have been able to connect with over the last year. So, I'll now pass it off to Ophira!

Ophira Calof (1:03)

Oh my goodness, thank you so much for having me, for that introduction, for literally all the things.

Ophira Calof (1:13)

My name is Ophira and I use she and they pronouns, and my background is not nearly as nice as Emily's background. I am currently sitting on a couch and there's just a blank kind of beige wall behind me and sometimes blankets are going to make their way into the frame! I use a lot of hand gestures too.

Ophira Calof (1:40)

For a visual description of myself, I'm a white person with sort of short dark somewhat spiky hair today, I'm wearing dark plastic glasses and a white and navy blue neck brace.

Emily Maxwell (1:57)

Thanks Ophira! So today we're going to just sort of interview each other and talk a little bit about the work that we both do and just sort of go back and forth and see where the conversation leads, and with a focus obviously on disability in the arts.

Emily Maxwell (2:16)

And so, I guess my first question for you is: I would just love to hear more about some of the upcoming projects you have, I know you've been working with CBC for AccessCBC which is super cool! I don't know what you can share about it, but anything you want to share about what you're working on would be amazing!

Ophira Calof (2:35)

AccessCBC has been a really neat project to work on because I'm kind of working on it in two different capacities. So, I work with the ReelAbilities Film Festival, right now I'm working with them as the comedy coordinator, the curatorial committee team lead, and sort of working on programming within the festival and departments as well. So, I've kind of been part of more the coordination of AccessCBC on that end because it's a partnership initiative, and have also been working on it as an individual consultant and freelancer.

Ophira Calof (3:15)

And it's a brand new initiative from CBC that provides mentorship, training, and financial opportunities to Deaf and disabled creators. It was really really cool to kind of get to be part of the conversations with CBC shaping the program, imagining what it could be. It has both scripted and short documentary streams that each are kind of their own pathway, their own experience.

Ophira Calof (3:48)

And we put out the call for submissions and I think - like in my head I was telling everyone like, "Oh, there's probably more people who are going to apply to this than you think there are" and in my head I was thinking like maybe like 60 people or 70 people, you know, because I think the estimates were lower. And it turned out that 200 people applied.

Emily Maxwell (4:14)

Wow!

Ophira Calof (4:15)

Which just really really goes to show how many people are out there and ready with work samples, and, you know, just looking for a platform and an opportunity and you know, a little wedge in the door. So that's been like a thing that I've been thinking about a lot is just, with such a huge - with so many people who are right there and then so many people who might be interested if they were given support, you know - what are some of the other initiatives and programs and opportunities that we can do and build to really get some of our stories out there?

Emily Maxwell (5:05)

Yeah, that's amazing! So along with working at Luminato, I founded a not-for-profit organization called The Disability Collective, and we are an organization and group of disabled artists who aim to just showcase and celebrate disability in the arts.

Emily Maxwell (5:26)

And when we had our first event last year, it was a virtual showcase. We put out a call for submissions and we were, you know, a brand new collective, and like no one knew who we were, no one knew any of us, and so we were like hopefully we'll get 10 submissions. And then we got I think close to 100, and and it's a similar sort of experience of - oh my goodness, there are so many people, so many disabled artists who are looking for this space, and so now, you know, we have to create this space for everyone because there is such a need for it, especially, I think here in Toronto.

Emily Maxwell (6:05)

You know, we're very lucky to have Tangled Art and Disability, and they're a wonderful organization, but it just seems like there's - there needs to be more room and more space and it's really cool that, you know, such a huge global company like CBC is helping to create that space for artists. So that's really amazing.

Ophira Calof (6:30)

I feel like to me, I know that sometimes, you know, initiatives for me and my work - I can sometimes feel isolated and like okay, I'm like trying to do this thing and feeling a bit alone in it, and I'm all about the like, yes all of the things, all of the connections, all of the opportunities that can be mutually supportive, and interdependence and building of community, it's very exciting.

Emily Maxwell (7:00)

Absolutely, yeah! I have said from the beginning that my favourite thing about The Disability Collective is how honoured I feel to just get to meet so many amazing people, and connect with so many people. And it's been life-changing because, you know, up until now, I've always been the only disabled artist in the room, like that's just sort of how my life has been, and it's really...to go from that to then being in a room with only disabled artists, it's like...whoa! It's so amazing and it's exciting.

Emily Maxwell (7:38)

It's also part of - I'm really excited to be joining Luminato, I mean I only started a few weeks ago, but they have so many amazing access programs and really try to integrate accessibility from the first level down, so it's not something that just gets tacked on at the end, it's something that is a conversation throughout. And they have an Access Advisory with a bunch of disabled artists who sort of consult and help them to you know, just continue to make their practices more accessible, and it's very exciting to see companies do this and makes me hopeful that more and more will continue to do it in the future. Yeah, so I'm just excited in general. [Laughs]

Ophira Calof (8:25)

This is fair and something that you brought up is one of the questions that I was actually hoping to ask you, is it a good time?

Emily Maxwell (8:35)

Yes, of course!

Ophira Calof (8:36)

Amazing, so to preface this, my experience with disability in the arts was kind of a gradual situation. I was, exactly like you said, the only disabled artist in the room, constantly really was craving community, looking for some support and advocacy for both myself and for you know, for audiences and for the idea that maybe other people could be in the programs that I was having such a hard time in, and I kind of took to the internet and started searching people out, and I'm a very shy person, so it took a lot for me to like, just like, send a cold email to someone and be like, "Hi, I saw that you said something cool, and I think maybe we have some things to talk about, like do you want to get a coffee? I don't know! Please be my friend, I want it so badly!"

Ophira Calof (9:37)

I was just really curious because The Disability Collective just seems like, you know, you came into being with a team which I think is super unique within disability art spaces, really models like interdependence in such a cool sort of collective leadership way, and I'm curious about how that happened.

Emily Maxwell (10:02)

Yeah, so it's sort of a mix of situations. So, I'm really lucky in that - it's going to sound funny, but I'm very lucky that my partner is also disabled, and I say really lucky because honestly - and, you know, not to come across as "Oh, I could never date a non-disabled person," but it has made so many things in our relationship easier in terms of our ability to connect and understand each other. And also, you know - so I come from a stage management background, and he is an actor, and so we just had so many conversations about how it felt to be disabled in the arts, and it got to a point when the pandemic started and I think everyone had time to sort of take a pause and think about you know, "What am I doing with my life?" And like "Do I want to continue down the path I'm going?"

Emily Maxwell (11:05)

I just got to this point where I was like, "I don't want to be in these rooms anymore, where I'm constantly having to fight for my own access needs. I'm being told by people that I shouldn't be disclosing my disability to anyone because I won't get hired," like I was just tired of it, and I didn't want to deal with it anymore, and it started as a conversation in an IKEA parking lot with my fiancé, saying like "I think I need to do something about this."

Emily Maxwell (11:37)

And so he was on board, and he was like, "Yeah, let's, you know, let's do something!" And we have a friend who I went to theatre school with, who also is disabled, and so I reached out to them and said, "Hey I don't even know what this looks like yet, I don't know what this is going to be, but I just, you know, I'm trying to start this thing, do you want to be a part of it?" and they said yes, and so it started just the three of us.

Emily Maxwell (12:05)

And then as we started posting online about, you know, what we were hoping to accomplish - and I am a bit of an overachiever so I was like we're going to do a virtual showcase and we're going to have all these artists and it's going to be amazing! And it turned into - like we had 30 different artists from across the world and it was like a two-hour live event, and it was really difficult and complicated, but I'm really glad we did it, but like sometimes I look back and I'm like, "Wow, that was really the first project we decided to take on?" [Laughs] "We couldn't have done something a little bit more simple?"

Emily Maxwell (12:45)

And through that we met a few other folks who are based in Toronto, and are disabled artists, and then they sort of joined the team, and so now it's become - we still have a sort of like a core team of four members, but we also, I mean - we've gotten to work with so many incredible artists all over, but like you said, I mean having a team has been - it's beautiful. It's just - that's the only way I can describe it.

Emily Maxwell (13:19)

it is so great, you know, even when we have our meetings, like it's just such a safe space. We all just get it, you know, and it's really nice to be in a group where everyone sort of has the same priorities, and like I said, it's really been life-changing.

Emily Maxwell (13:44)

Like, I recently got a new diagnosis, and found out that I'm autistic, and that has been a really interesting journey to go through, and like - if I didn't have this team of amazing people, I think I'd be having a much harder time with it, because, you know, I brought it up in one meeting and everyone was just like the most supportive, the most lovely.

Emily Maxwell (14:03)

It's also nice to feel that, you know, if I'm having a day where I can't work, or I need a break or, you know, crip time is so real - there are other folks who can sort of pick up that slack if needed and we trade things back and forth and give each other breaks and give each other time and so, yeah, I feel very very lucky, and I know not everyone has that experience, and a lot of disabled artists as you said can feel very isolated, and like they're, you know, having to do it on their own.

Emily Maxwell (14:40)

And part of what we're hoping to do with The Disability Collective is just provide community for folks, so even if it's just people coming and saying hey, can we just have like, you know, like a coffee chat where we can just like talk about these things, or you know, we've helped some folks who are are dealing with not having their access needs met at other companies and we've helped to sort of mitigate those conversations and help provide them with a safe space to talk about those things. Yeah, it's been really wonderful so far.

Ophira Calof (15:15)

I love all of that so much. It makes me think of - I don't know if you're familiar with Mia Mingus's work around Access Intimacy, but just this experience of just being able to be, and just like be present with people, who - I feel like "get it" isn't even quite a strong enough word - who are just like, living on the same frequency, and like, and maybe sort of, you know, experience differently, but that feeling when you're in a team where someone can just kind of see it - that, oh, you know what, let's take a break or, oh, you know what, like - I'm going to shift because I just feel that the person beside me needs the pillow, or like that kind of relational support is so huge and beautiful and wonderful and exciting, that it's - it's sort of the seed for community to grow from.

Emily Maxwell (16:27)

Yeah, and it's, you know, it all sort of stems just from this like deep care that we all have, and it's - I mean even like you said, last week we were in a meeting and I was having a moment where I just got very overwhelmed very quickly, and all my team members immediately said like, "Great, let's take 15 minutes." Like, you know, no worries, it wasn't - I didn't have to advocate for it at all, like I didn't have to ask for it, it wasn't me saying anything. They just, they know me, and they know what I need, and they were like, "Cool, let's just take a 15-minute break."

Emily Maxwell (17:04)

So, yeah, I mean those sorts of things are really remarkable, and it also makes me hopeful that we can continue to grow this community and continue to foster these relationships with other disabled artists, too. And speaking of disabled artists, I'd just love to hear from you, like why do you think it is so important to showcase art from disabled artists?

Ophira Calof (17:33)

Well, so many reasons!

Emily Maxwell (17:36)

Yes, I know, I could talk about this for hours! [Laughs]

Ophira Calof (17:42)

Yeah, I mean, okay I'm going to start from one angle, because it's something I've been thinking about recently, is that I think traditionally, there's been a sense that disabled folks can only access art through a therapeutic being. So often, you know, art is framed as like art therapy, or like, "Oh yeah, it's, you know, good for you to get the opportunity to express yourself," and I think those things are valuable for sure, I mean, I definitely use art in some ways as like coping strategies, even in like actual tangible, therapeutic ways. Things like improv really helps me after a surgery, like, be more aware of my surroundings, like, I think there's definitely something to be said for that, but also disability art is art.

Ophira Calof (18:40)

For all of the reasons that art is important, disability art is important, and it's especially important because, to me, the experience of being disabled and navigating access, and especially navigating access within community where you might have moments of access friction, or people who have different access needs that are, you know, that might not seem to really go together, that you're trying to find a way for us to all exist together.

Ophira Calof (19:16)

The act of being a disabled person and existing within disabled community, to me, is inherently creative. And more than creative, it's innovative, and sort of imagining a world that...that doesn't fully exist yet, and we do that every time that we sort of "crip" something, you know, crippling an aesthetic, crippling a process, is imagining a new way of being, a new future that holds space for more of us, and I mean, if that isn't the point of art, you know?

Ophira Calof (20:01)

And of course, I mean the representation is so important. Being able to, in that conversation about imaginings and possibilities, it's also just so important to be able to just sort of see or experience a reflection of yourself through media.

Ophira Calof (20:20)

When I first got my neck brace, I had been training in opera performance, and my immediate thought was like, "Oh, I guess I can't be an opera singer anymore, because I've never - like, opera singers don't even wear glasses on stage so there's no way they could wear a neck brace on stage, well guess I'm done with that."

Ophira Calof (20:41)

And it took a while of me sort of experimenting and playing around, so for sure like even just on a representation front it's important. But I think disability art is a gift to the arts.

Emily Maxwell (20:53)

Oh, definitely. Yeah, and I love what you said about like - accessibility in itself is creative, like and it has to be, right? And it's ever-changing, and ever-evolving, you know - it can't stay the same forever because people's needs change and the world changes and we adapt. I always say I think that they go so hand-in-hand because you have to have a bit of an imagination to be able to, you know, to find accessible ways to do things, and yeah that's amazing.

Emily Maxwell (21:30)

And I agree, I mean I obviously think disability art is very important. [Laughs] And also just, you know, I think provides a point of view that is important as well. And like you said about representation, we're currently working on a show for young audiences, and I just get so excited thinking about all the little kids who might be able to see a version of themselves that they haven't seen before, and how that might have impacted me from a young age and you know, so that's very exciting.

Ophira Calof (22:15)

I feel like theatre for young audiences is so important, especially when it comes to disability and nuanced conversations about disability, you know, not the...not just, "There's the token kid in the wheelchair that we're all nice to, because they're in a wheelchair, that's what you're supposed to do for people in wheelchairs." Yeah, love that.

Emily Maxwell (22:42:09)

It's true that representation for disability is so far and wide, right, because it's not as if there's one version of what being disabled is or what disabled "looks" like.

Ophira Calof (22:55)

Yes!

Emily Maxwell (22:56)

It's a huge variety and part of the reason why representation is so important is to make sure that we're trying to represent as many of these, you know, disabilities as possible.

Ophira Calof (23:10)

So that also the weight of representation, of all of these nuanced experiences does not land on like - one show, one book, one movie, one tv show, which is not really possible, not possible for one person to represent a multitude of experiences.

Emily Maxwell (23:34)

100 percent. [Laughs]

Ophira Calof (23:36)

You know, this kind of makes me think of a question that I had that, okay it's a little bit cheesy, so bear with me - but I feel like often in these conversations about, sort of the idea of sort of representation and all of the work that has to be done, because as I think we've kind of scratched on a little bit, like there's so much work that has to be done.

Ophira Calof (24:06)

You know it can sometimes feel - at least for me, like almost like a game of whack-a-mole, you know - like something comes up, and I'm like, "Okay, that's what I'm focusing on now - oh, there's this other thing! Okay, I'm going to focus on that, like - oh, wait a minute! There's something going on here, okay, over there, off I go!" And I feel like we don't always take the time to just ask disabled creatives, like, "What are your hopes and dreams? Like what do you want to do?" And you know, obviously those things can and will change, but what's an overall intention or goal that...that you hope for, for yourself or for the Collective, moving forward?

Emily Maxwell (25:00)

Yeah, well, I mean I can totally relate to what you're saying about whack-a-mole, and my team always, I mean, lovingly teases me, because I'm always like, "Oh, we should do this, and this, and this!" Or, you know, something will happen in the world, and I'll be like, "We have to do something in response to this."

Emily Maxwell (25: 19)

Or, you know, we just announced a project called 'No Body Left Behind' and it's about, sort of the disabled point of view of being in the COVID-19 pandemic, and the recent lifting of, you know, mask and vaccine mandates, and how a lot of disabled, and immunocompromised, and chronically ill folks are very stressed and nervous about this.

Ophira Calof (25:41)

Yep!

Emily Maxwell (25:43)

And I was saying to everyone, I was like, "We have to to say something, like we have to do something," and so, you know, we do try to like plan projects as far in advance as possible, but also sometimes something comes up and I'm just like, "We've got to do it!"

Emily Maxwell (25:58)

In terms of like a big goal, my personal goal and dream is to have a a fully disabled theatre company one day. And so, that doesn't just mean, you know, that all of the actors and artists involved are disabled, but also all of the administrative team, all of the box office team, everyone who is, you know, director, choreographer, lighting designer, costume designer, all those things. I just want it to be all disabled folks creating, you know, disabled theatre. [Laughs]

Emily Maxwell (26:39)

And that's like, our big dream goal, if that could happen one day. And there isn't anywhere in Toronto that's doing that at the moment, and so I think it's necessary. And I've always said it doesn't have to be me, right? Like, if someone else is like, "Oh, I'm a millionaire so I'll just come along and do this" - cool! I'll be like, "Can I come help?" It doesn't have to be me, specifically - I just would like this space to exist. I want there to just be a space that is for disabled artists, focused on disability and art, where then, you know, non-disabled folks can be invited in, to come watch - but it's very much a disabled space, because I think so often we are invited into non-disabled spaces, and I really want to flip that. Or I want to flip that! [Laughs]

Ophira Calof (27:32)

Yes! [Laughs] Love that!

Emily Maxwell (27:36)

Yeah, so I'm just like, you know, and so I just imagine, like - I don't know, I just imagine all these rooms just filled with all these disabled folks who are just working and creating and existing together. And, you know, I don't want to do like 40 hour work weeks, I want to have more flexible times. I don't want to do eight shows a week, I want it to be, you know, more in line with what I think is actually reasonable. [Laughs] I don't want to do 16 hour tech days, I want it to be specifically like, focused on, you know, creating art in a way that feels really healthy and comfortable and safe for everyone.

Emily Maxwell (28:23)

So yeah. that's like the big dream. I mean obviously it's a very big dream, but I do think that there's a need for it here. And what you were saying earlier about the submissions for AccessCBC, which is so phenomenal, I think also helps to prove that there are folks who are wanting a space like this to exist. So, I'm really hopeful that it will happen one day; it might be a few years down the road but you know, I think it's good to...to strive towards something. Do you have sort of an ultimate dream goal?

Ophira Calof (29:09)

I mean, I think there's there's a fair bit of crossover in what you described, which first of all like, oh my goodness, sign me up to help, love it so much.

Emily Maxwell (29:21)

Please, we need you! [Laughs]

Ophira Calof (29:25)

I mean, it's so necessary and just that there's almost I mean, when speaking of access intimacy and sort of these experiences of navigating non-disabled spaces and the...it's almost like a relaxing of your body that can happen when you're in a space that you feel held and supported and, you know, exists on more crip practices.

Ophira Calof (29:52)

And just the possibilities of what can be built and created when people are not in fight or flight mode, because that's kind of - in being in spaces that are kind of harmful for you, and maybe sometimes more than kind of, it's hard to create, it's hard to just be, and exist, and dream, so yeah, love that so much.

Ophira Calof (30:24)

I kind of - to me a lot of my goals involve sort of similar ideas. Right now I'm looking into film and TV a fair bit and really want sort of a crip production, where you know, crew and producers and directors and casts and creators are you know, all disabled and sort of bringing that process, sort of crippling a film set, a production in that way and thinking of that, both in terms of the ultimate piece that, you know, the content reflects the delivery.

Ophira Calof (31:08)

I was watching some Netflix the other day, and all of a sudden there was like a lightning storm and strobing lights and I was like, there was no need for this, like you created a thing that's going to give me a migraine and you didn't even like - you didn't even think about it, and it's so unnecessary to the creative. So, you know, all of those little things too, but especially process, as you mentioned.

Ophira Calof (31:38)

But my ultimate dream is to create some sort of a space where disabled artists can live and work and you know, where there is a theatre, where there's a recording studio. Again, we're talking like big, big, big dreams, but why not? I mean, if we're going to talk about dreams. And where, you know, where there's PSWs who live there, too, and there's massage therapy, and there's a pool, a warm water pool, and just space where people can be supported and create, that's the big dream that I have made like over the years different like, plans of, "Okay, this is how it can happen, and this is how it can be sort of sustainable, and here are different models," and then I realized that it is a giant, giant project, and I say, "Okay, we're going to put that aside for a little bit and focus on today's to-do list."

Emily Maxwell (32:50)

But that sounds amazing! I mean, you're basically describing paradise. [Laughs]

Emily Maxwell (32:56)

But I also, I just love the idea of disabled folks getting to like, you know, be in a bit of a creative commune, but also where there's support and access, and combining those two together is so important. Maybe we'll buy a building together one day, and we'll turn it into, you know, both of our dreams!

Ophira Calof (33:18)

I love it!

Emily Maxwell (33:20)

Yeah, I mean, I'm always just like - "How can I be around the most disabled people possible?" [Laughs]

Ophira Calof (33:30)

Relatable question.

Emily Maxwell (33:34)

Yeah, I guess we have similar ideals, and like you know, and goals and I think that's really amazing and I feel like there are probably so many disabled artists who would love similar sort of things, right? Like it's - we were talking about earlier, just the community aspect of it, I think it's so important, and also is like a constant reminder to me as to why this work is so important, you know. And having people message and say, "Well I've been waiting for something like this to happen in Toronto for years" and those sorts of things are, you know, I don't take that as like, a compliment, I take it as a reason to continue, and you know, I also want to continue for my own reasons. [Laughs] But it's really - it's so inspiring to hear people really just resonate and respond to the work, and it just makes me...I don't know, it makes me happy, I'm like all my friends! [Laughs]

Ophira Calof (34:41)

It's almost like a mandate, right? Like a little bit of a, you know, "Okay like this is what I've been craving, this is what other people have been craving, so I guess, you know, here's kind of the way forward."

Ophira Calof (34:57)

I think for me, ideally, it's also building these places and then having the opportunities for people to be able to engage with them the way they want to, including for me and for you, right? Like, I ultimately love telling stories. I love telling stories with disabled people, in spaces that feel supportive for all of us, and work together. So, if these spaces and frameworks exist, then maybe I can focus on stories and telling stories and in that kind of way, and you know, if there's someone else who just wants to act, they don't want to like build the whole thing, they want to come in and act - creating that opportunity as well. Yeah, so much to think about.

Emily Maxwell (35:47)

Yeah, totally, and it also makes me think about - like something else that I want to focus on is also how to provide support when it comes to things like theatre school, or any sort of, you know, art school. I had a really terrible experience in theatre school and I had to drop out because I wasn't having my access needs met, and you know, I had an IEP and my teachers were refusing to follow it, and like, it was - all these things happened, but when I look back on it now I'm just like - it makes me very upset for other people who have to go through the same thing, because I was very lucky and privileged that I had a lot of contacts within the industry when I started school, and so I was able to leave school and start working.

Emily Maxwell (36:40)

And so, I was very lucky to be able to do that, and I know a lot of folks don't have that same opportunity, but it makes me think - also like, you know, how can we help, I don't know, schools to think more about these things? How can we help students to feel more comfortable asking for things that they need? And you know, again, like safe spaces - maybe it's saying, "Hey, you don't need to go to theatre school, come live at our commune!" [Laughs] But you know? I always think about, like - how can we get in early on?

Emily Maxwell (37:19)

And we're also talking about theatre for young audiences, and I think it's important to try and, you know, start these conversations and these practices from an early age, in the hopes that then it will, you know, continue as folks grow.

But yeah, I mean, again, I could sit for hours and talk about all my goals and aspirations. [Laughs]

Ophira Calof (37:46)

I mean, I can talk about, like, artistic education forever. I have a lot of thoughts, but something that that also sort of sparks for me that's been - that I've been thinking a lot about is also what is this idea of expertise, and this idea of sort of a teacher and a student?

Ophira Calof (38:12)

There is often the idea that expertise exists within a medium. So, someone is experienced in theatre if they've done a whole bunch of theatre shows, someone's experienced in film and TV if they've made a whole bunch of films and TV shows, and you know, so on and so forth. The people with that experience are often seen as the teachers, and the givers, the bestowers of knowledge, and people who haven't made a movie, haven't, you know - maybe they've been in, you know, some plays growing up but haven't been paid for a role or maybe have once or twice but not as much as the other person - are the students and that's the way that sort of this - and on the surface it's like, "Yeah, of course, you know, the people have their experience" but when it comes to, you know, let's say crippling a process, who has more experience on that? Somebody who's been working in a mainstream industry for a long time and maybe did that one play once that had a blind character that wasn't written by a blind writer, but it really opened up, you know, their mind to the experiences? Or the disabled student, who has all of this lived experience and is perhaps at this point kind of an expert in finding their own creative pathways?

Ophira Calof (39:42)

So, there's kind of that thought, and then there's also, you know, for me, I essentially sort of acquired my disability when I was in the school, so I didn't know what I needed. I was navigating to a bunch of new symptoms and experiences in the moment, and nobody who had been designated to teach me had anything to pull from of how a disabled body could exist on stage. They had nothing. And so I think like, thinking about this idea too of like, who are the experts that we look to? What do we value as expertise, as knowledge, to be taught and shared and how can we like, crip that, and how can we like, take out the hierarchy of that, or the assumption that one person knows and one person does not know, and move more towards an ego-free version of exploration and discovery and impossibility - which I know sounds very Utopian and not at all like an academic institution, but it's a thought.

Emily Maxwell (41:02)

But I think it's really important to talk about, too, because I mean, even with the Collective, like we always try so hard to never make it feel like there is any sort of hierarchy there, because it's also, you know, like, we're just such a team and that's the goal always, and even though I have the title of Artistic Director, that doesn't really mean anything specific, like we all kind of do everything, and we all work together and support each other.

Emily Maxwell (41:30)

And it really, you know, like, the titles we have, have more to do with what our specific interests are within the work that we do, but everyone got to choose their title. So, we were like, "What is your focus for The Disability Collective? Like what are your dreams?" and we sort of put this whole list together, what everyone wants to do, and then sort of you know matched words that made sense for folks, and that's how that came about. It wasn't out of any sort of like, well so-and-so's at the top, and then directly under are these people, and then...it's not that at all. And we try to make sure that it doesn't feel that way in any of our conversations. No one has a final say; it's always a consensus.

Emily Maxwell (42:14)

It's also interesting talking about, like, the student-teacher dynamic. I feel like I often have like, imposter syndrome sometimes when people ask me to consult on something, like as an accessibility consultant, and I'm like I don't have any formal training necessarily in that, and then people are like well your training is just living, you know, 20 plus years as a disabled person, and I'm like, well, yeah, I guess. And that doesn't, you know, by no means makes me an expert on every disability, but it does provide me with - as you said - the lived experience that can help make, you know, my point of view more unique than asking someone who's been working in the industry for, you know, way longer, but doesn't have the lived experience I have.

Emily Maxwell (42:59)

Well, thank you so much for this conversation. I know we're getting close on time so I want to be mindful of that, is there anything that you would like to add or do you

want to let folks know where they could find you?

Ophira Calof (43:13)

Oooh! [Laughs] So, I live at...

Emily Maxwell (43:16)

I mean, not actually find you, but like - [Laughs]

Ophira Calof (43:21)

The world of the internets! Yes, for sure! Well first of all, I just want to say thank you so much for having me, for this conversation, I am such a fan of yours and the Collective, and just all of the work that you're doing and it's really...it's just really nice - especially in a time that there's a lot of things that do not feel really nice - it's nice to have space for this conversation, to feel those sparks of like, "Yes, this is happening, and this is happening!" and yeah, so thank you for that.

Ophira Calof (43:59)

In terms of keeping up with me - so I have a website that I'm like moderately bad at keeping updated, but you know, working on it, and I tend to also keep things up on my Instagram, so my website is - because I have one of those names - it's just ophira.ca, because you know, why not?

Emily Maxwell (44:26)

I mean, epic! [Laughs]

Ophira Calof (44:30)

My Instagram is @ophira.c, and truly, I love connecting with people, whether it's over email, over social media, it's something that I genuinely like to do so putting that out there.

Emily Maxwell (44:47)

Amazing, and I'm sure we'll link everything so that folks can find that easily, and if folks want to learn more about The Disability Collective, we're at thedisabilitycollective.com or @disabilitycollective on Instagram. We have some cool projects coming up, so stay tuned!

Emily Maxwell (45:04)

Thank you so much Ophira, this has been such an amazing conversation and I am - as I said, you are such a role model for me and I'm a huge fan and just love chatting with you always! [Laughs]

Ophira Calof (45:19)

Likewise!