Amy Amantea Pt. 1 | Discover Stories Episode 74

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Tanya Griffiths 00:50

Hello, and thank you for tuning in to discover stories with Re-imagined Radio. My name is Tanya your host and a student intern with VAMS while completing my Social Justice Practicum. Today I have the absolute pleasure of talking with Amy Amantea. Amy is a white settler on the stolen lands of the Squamish, Musqueam, and Tsleil-Waututh First Peoples colloquially known as Vancouver BC. Living with blindness, neurodivergence, chronic pain and chronic illness, Amy aims to increase representation of disability within the Canadian theatre landscape. Her background is in acting having attended VFS and private acting academies. Before her sight loss, Amy has had to reinvent herself as a performer and integrate access, advocacy and activism into her work. Amy also works as a consultant and strategist around access in the arts, exploring both traditional access conventions through service providers, as well as creative access provided directly from the artist and immersed into the work. Amy's most recent work is Through My Lens in partnership with Theatre Replacement, which explores her intersection of photography and blindness. This work was presented at the FoldA Festival in Kingston in 2023. At the Hold On Let Go Festival in Vancouver in 2024, and the Undercurrents Festival in Ottawa in 2024. Hi, Amy, thank you for joining me in this conversation today.

Amy Amantea 02:23

Oh, thanks, Tanya. I'm really, I'm really tickled to be invited.

Tanya Griffiths 02:28

Oh, amazing. You've, you've been on the podcast before. And we're just so happy to have you again. Because there's just so much I feel like we can learn from your experience as well as your advocacy and the ways you weave these two together within the arts.

Amy Amantea 02:44

Yeah, it's um, it's an interesting thing as an artist, because art, you know, art is supposed to make us have conversations. Sometimes conversations around really difficult things. And I guess when I was a typical tab - temporarily able bodied person - before my experience of disability, I didn't really think about you know, what advocacy looks like in my art practice. But certainly once I had lived experience of disability, that changed everything for me. And then it was all about advocacy and education and lived experience and sometimes so I sometimes call my practice "edutainment," you know, how much am I educating and how much am I entertaining audiences, but I can't separate, you know, the advocacy and the education from the art because those things are all ingrained in me.

Tanya Griffiths 03:40

Yeah, absolutely. And just even the idea of including an another person who represents a even bigger community, that, in many ways is marginalized. And when I'm talking about this and talking about the disability community, just being included in the arts, and seeing them or experiencing their work is just such an affirming experience, I also take it

Amy Amantea 04:11

Well, I think, you know, when I again, when I go back to my days as a tab, it was really easy to see myself represented on stages on film, you know, in television. You know, I was 24 when I lost my sight, so I you know, essentially lived a whole life before sight loss. And as a white, you know, cis, woman I could turn on any TV or any movie and see other you know, white cis people in their 20s. So there was representation of that demographic, everywhere, of those intersections everywhere. But then once disability came into my life in multiple intersections, as you read in my bio, there was no representation or I should say, authentic representation of blindness, of disability that I could point to and say, "Hey, look, that is what my life is like. That is what my story is like, that is what everyday life is like for me," not always like, "Oh, poor them, they have a disability. And that's because of this tragedy, right?" Like, we get up, we go to work, we live everyday lives, like every day people do, because we are everyday people. You know, we're 27% of the population. And so this idea of authentic representation and seeing ourselves reflected in our stories, that is so important for every, for every human being for every equity seeking person. So if we don't

know that we belong, and we don't feel like we belong in these stories, then we don't - like I would never have thought that I would have belonged on stage had I not found that there were people telling their stories from the disability community. And I imagine there are other people that live with various disabilities who are saying the same thing. Well, my stories aren't being told. So I obviously don't belong here. Now, the world's telling me my stories aren't important.

Tanya Griffiths 06:06

Yeah, yeah. And you're also paving the way for more stories to be included in this landscape.

Amy Amantea 06:15

I hope in my small way, I'm opening doors through like one the work that I do. Two, the artists that I that I work with, in general, because I also think that sometimes what happens is when people don't work with us, and by us, I mean, like, folks in the disability community, they forget about us. You know, I see that even in, you know, if I go into an organization, to work in accessibility, and they, for example, give me my intake package, and it talks about, you know, what we do in case of an emergency, for example, and they say things like, "Oh, well, you can't take the stairs, and the muster station is across the street, you know, opposite of curbs and into the grassy park area." And you're like, "That's nice, you know, how do I, you know, evacuate the building, if I use a wheelchair? Or if I'm blind? How do I find these things?" And they're like, "Oh, we never thought about it before, because we didn't have people with disabilities working for us." And that is, that's essentially part of the issue, which is, when we're not in people's spaces, they forget about us. And how do we make people remember that we are a part of the fabric, a part of the community, even if we're not in their workplace at the time, that they're writing policies that they're creating, whatever that they're creating. And so, in working with individual artists, you know, how do you make your work accessible if you don't live with a disability? How do you think about creative access in your work? How do you invite people from the disability community to come in, work with you and be actors in your work and you know, invite that process in - because you know, that perhaps you may have an audience member who identifies with disability, you know, you don't know who's going to come to your audience. But also, those of us who work in theatre, I lovingly call us misfits because we all were looking for a place to belong, right? We all came from different walks, we all know what it's like to be a little bit othered, we're all looking for a place to belong and love the word misfit in like, the most loving way. So why would we want to, like withhold the joy of theatre from anybody. So thinking about these kinds of things, I always say access begins with A) we

think about it from the beginning of the process. And that's so much easier when you're working with individual artists than you are with like the big machine of a big arts company, of course. So I think I hope through some of this work it percolates. And, you know, artists are like, "Oh, I worked on this one project with Amy. And even though she's not performing, she's helping us with like the access or the creative access piece, we can take that knowledge into the next work and the next work and the next work and people we work with." And so it helps to, you know, grow and plant those seeds. That's my hope. And some of the artists that I work with are so interested in in the access work, and even more the creative access, which is not necessarily hiring, you know, an ASL interpreter or hiring audio describers, or like the service providers, but working with community to build in something that is maybe more experimental, like, it's just why we call it creative access. So sometimes I call myself a creative access thought leader, because I'm really good at trying to come up with a creative thing to try and see if it works. Yeah, I'm wondering also so that people who are tuning into this podcast may have a better idea, is there an example that you can give us where you weaved in creative access into the work of an artist? Oh, I mean, absolutely. Creative access can look like anything you want it to look like. So I think probably folks know what you know, a service provider where you would hire a third party service to come in and provide the service. So we see that lot with ASL interpretation. And we see that a lot with audio description services. And those are great, I am not saying don't do those things, but you have to have the budget to do them. And there has to be enough service providers to do those things because there are lots of projects and lots of people that want access. But for example, I was told recently, that there are approximately 300 registered ASL Interpreters for the Deaf folks within like the Metro Vancouver area. And that's not a lot. Yeah, VocalEye which is a fantastic service, I also am the Associate Director of VocalEye - wearing another hat - but they're a fantastic service, and they provide live description for live arts and cultural events, fantastic service, and they would come in and provide that service and a whole bunch of other access supports. But they have, you know, four describers. So how do you do that work without, you know, that organization is going to is hitting capacity was what I'm saying that the service organizations hit capacity. So what can the artists themselves do to say, "Okay, you know, I have control over my project, what can I do to be creative about it?" So here's some examples of creative access. So you can build in some description within your, your project itself. So, you know, this happens all the time, we would call this like a low vision friendly or a low vision supported performance. And that essentially means that it's, you know, easy to follow by dialogue alone, about 90% of it, right? So we know that we might miss a few things visually, but 90% followable by dialogue alone. And that's because you know, you can tweak the dialogue. So instead of me saying, "Here, take this" you know, I'm saying "Here, take my umbrella," because as an audience member, I'd be like, "Oh, what

are they passing?" Right? So if you just say, "Take my umbrella," done, I know that description, right? You can provide pre-show notes in an audio format that I can access on your website that would say, you know what the set is, what the costumes look like, who the characters are, relationships, right? Like a five to seven minute audio piece, you can have each of the characters record that in their own voice. So I get familiar with their voices, right? There's all sorts of ways of doing this.

Tanya Griffiths 12:28

Yeah, but really, it just comes down to involving folks - like involving folks within the disability community to join in on the experience. And and yeah, as you just put it, even description just goes a long way.

Amy Amantea 12:46

Yeah, it looks like nothing about us, without us. You know, there's a recent performance that I saw with open description. So essentially, how to how to describe her and you know, there are, there are describers of all different levels, they are describers that are highly trained, and highly competent in different genres. And then there are folks who are brand new to description. And then there are artistic teams who are like, you know, what, I'm gonna give this a crack myself, right, that would be a creative access thing. And you know, describing services like VocalEye would bring equipment to the show, right. So as a blind audience member, I would get a handheld receiver, which is about the size of a deck of cards with a single earpiece. And I would wear that, so I would hear the description in one ear, and then all of the other music and dancing and dialogue in the other ear, and the audience would not hear the description that I'm getting. But if you were doing open description, you know, your describer, or whoever you're choosing to do your description, would sit at a desk with a microphone. And as your play is happening live, they would say, you know, "they passed the tequila, they blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." So everybody in the audience is hearing the disruption happening. So that's creative access as well, right? There's a staged reading that I'm working on right now. And we don't have the capacity to pay for CART services. So live open captions. So we're trying this experiment of a open transcript. And because it's a live reading, it's pretty much low vision friendly, because there's nothing to look at right? There's no set, each of the actors are going to introduce themselves and do an image description. And the stage directions are going to be read out. And the open transcript is just a copy of the script page. So the whole page is going to go on a projector. And for folks who want to read the page and follow along they can do that. So instead of it being one line by line, you know, piece of dialogue where somebody has to hit the next button for every line, which would mean an extra tech person under union

contract, you know, probably another $1,000 because those things are required by feeders to have in place. This can be done by the one tech person we have because it's not, not so much extra capacity to hit that button, you know, for every line they can hit for every page. It's, it's an experiment. And so that's how we market it to the audience, which is like, this is a creative access experiment, let us know how it works for you. If it doesn't work, we've given it a try, if it works, and then people are like actually, it works pretty well. But you can, you know, if you could make this font bigger or whatever, you know, they give us feedback. And then next time we try it again, which means we're doing access in a way that's affordable. That's easy to do. And the more easy and affordable it is. And I know that those sound like kind of the excuse markers, like, "Oh, it's too expensive, and it's too hard to do. So we're not doing it." But the more like accessible, we make it for those of us who are doing it, the more people want to do it. And that's also important, right? More buy in, you get and you know, I hate that we live in a world where buy in is a thing. But there are there's a lack of resources everywhere, and a lack of capacity everywhere. So, yeah, creative access can look like anything you want it to look like. But that's me as a creative access, thought leader. I come in and say, "Okay, what is the project? Who are the communities? What are the things that I know that have worked in the past? How, you know, what's the goal of this? What do we want audiences to get from this? How do we get that message to them? And then think about all the different things that we have within our resource package? And what we don't have and how we can like, make this recipe and try and find something new." And sometimes it's just about seating, right? How do we make accessible seating? Yeah, all sorts of things. So, it's it's a fun, it's for me, it's really fun, because it allows me to be creative. It allows experiments, it allows trial and error. But it allows also to work with community because if you don't work with community, we can potentially do more harm than good. And it allows for relationship building with community because you're doing with, and then the community is like, "you know what, I like this, you know, these creative people. I like what they're doing. They're involving me in their project, I'm going to stick around for their journey. And I'm going to come to every show, because every show is different and unique. And they're involving me and relationship building is one of the best things we can do with community"

Tanya Griffiths 17:15

Oh, yeah, that's so beautifully put, I totally agree. And that part where you just said, we're doing with instead of just doing for, I think is such an important part, in many projects, and in many in many involvements when it comes to values of diversity, equity, inclusion and justice. And I think that the, the way you're doing this, and the use of creative access, oh, I just, I've just grown to love the term creative access, because it is, it is very creative. And I

love that you see yourself as this creative access thought leader, because you so are, and, and yeah, just the entire process and hearing about it from from this end, I think is already very enriching to know that there's, there's already these measures in place and these projects that are coming to life. It's amazing to hear about this. And also it talks to your lived experience and also your experience in theatre, which is actually one of one of my curiosities today. Can you tell us about the beginning of your love for theatre?

Amy Amantea 18:41

Yeah, I'd love to. So I think I came out of the womb with a love for theatre. I've loved theatre and performance, and I have a very outgoing personality. So I loved to those things. My entire life as long as I can remember. My parents actually met doing "Bye Bye Birdie" in high school. And I don't actually think that my father was a big theatre person. I think it was one of those things that he had to do to like, boost his grades and thought drama would be easy. You know what I mean?

Tanya Griffiths 19:16

Yeah, absolutely.

Amy Amantea 19:17

But my mother was a was a theatre person. And then, you know, when I was a kid, I had all this energy and I wanted to perform and I used to, like, you know, put on my dad's oversized T shirts and tie his belt around my waist and it would walk around like it was a tight might, you know, my tight dress and I grabbed my microphone and I would sing. One of my favorite songs was Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Want to Have Fun", literally top of my lungs on repeat over and over and over and over. And I think my parents kind of recognized that this girl needed to be in the arts. So at a very young age, I was put into, you know, like summer theatre programs or, you know, every weekend you go to, you know, theatre class or whatever. When we moved to Vancouver, they had this theatre program for young kids and I must have been I don't know whether it was like seven, eight, something in that area kind of thing. And it was taken down at the local library over the weekends. At the holiday time we were performing the Charles Dickens you know, the Scrooge performance and you know, there were lots of kids - are probably 20 kids in this class with our 20 characters in this performance. But you know, you had a hat, right? So if you were Scrooge, you had the top hat. And if you were Tiny Tim, you had a little tat, a tam hat, or a crotch. And if you were, you know, Bob Cratchit yeah, so everybody had like one prop as the identifier of the character. And so we would switch out. So you might have like four different kids playing

Scrooge or four different kids playing each character, we would just switch in and out and do a couple of lines as that that character in each scene. It was really, really fun, except I had the ability of being able to remember multiple lines and multiple things, like I had the whole plane memorized. So I'd be sitting on the sidelines, and there was no curtain. You know, we weren't behind the steel, like we were just all sitting at the side. And we'd like pop up out of our chairs and jump on stage, like it was so low bar, right. So you could see me sitting in my chair, so excited watching my fellow performers mouthing all the words to myself, right. And I just wanted to get up there and perform. And so you know, through my childhood, and then once I got into like elementary school, when we would write performances and put them on at our big local theatre here in North Van where I live, was Centennial theatre. And then into high school, obviously I took drama throughout high school. But we also had a, what we called "The Drama Dungeon." And we had like a extracurricular drama program. So I was involved in that. And then like, so I just never stopped it was my favorite place to be was The Drama Dungeon, it was my favorite people to be with, my favorite world to live in. So I just, I just loved it so much. I never stopped. I always wanted to be an actor. And when I experienced my sight loss at the age of 24, I really thought to myself, "Who would want a blind actor?" And I thought that that would be the end of that dream for me, because I never saw any representation. All I had was like Al Pacino in "Scent of a Woman" and I was like, "Wow, Al Pacino is not a blind guy, right?" So it never occurred to me that this kind of thing could exist. And then I found Realwheels Theatre accidentally, because I was going to describe performance by VocalEye and there were all these people of various disabilities in this show called "Sexy Voices" that they had written and performed with "Realwheels Theatre" about sex and disability. And I was like, blown away. "What?! There are people with disabilities on a stage in a theatre with an audience? How does this happen?"

Tanya Griffiths 22:47

Yeah.

Amy Amantea 22:48

And I then I got connected with Realwheels Theatre. And today, I'm their Board President and have been for the past six years, very involved with the organization, done professional shows with them. So like theatre is just in my blood, it's in my blood. It's really all I can say, yeah.

Tanya Griffiths 23:01

I really love and appreciate how even after the eye surgeries that led to your vision loss, you found a way to come back to theatre, you know, and it was it was like meant to be it's like one of those stories where it was just like, just so woven into, as you said, like your DNA and that sense of like aliveness that you feel, and also what I experienced when you're talking about it, I just feel all this passion and this love for this art. So it's really just, it just makes me so happy, like just hearing this and how now you are paving the way for many other folks too to be involved and to be part of this growing community.

Amy Amantea 23:54

It also gave me a real appreciation, my journey of sight loss, knowing what it was like to perform and sit in a seat in a theatre without disability. And then when I lost my sight, sitting in a theatre, which essentially was an expensive two hour nap, right? Because I had no idea what was happening on stage. It was so boring for me. I couldn't tell you where I like to follow the plotline. So yeah, you know, what are they doing like - yeah, I can hear the dialogue. But I, you know, there were just so many holes in the story because I couldn't see what was visually happening. And we live in a site centric world. So to keep audiences interested, we often build in a lot of block managers that aren't, you know, there aren't they're necessary for us to move, but we have to move because people get bored, right? So we design theatre in a visual way, right? And there's all these interesting visual light things that we do that tell stories and set you know, it all comes together. So it was a two hour expensive nap. It's nice and warm and a theatre and dark and a theatre and you find yourself falling asleep. And that's when I discovered description through VocalEye. And all of a sudden, the access piece changed for me. So I also know what it's like to be in a space that's inaccessible and feel like, "This sucks. I hate this. I used to love this. And now there's nothing here for me. Why am I spending my money? Why am I during this, this is a place that I don't belong." And knowing how that sort of felt toxic to my soul. And how much I hated that feeling until I found, again, like, rather accidentally found this, like, soul affirming thing that allowed me this way back in and then it was like, "How do I tell everybody that this exists?" And then it was like, "How do I tell everybody with a disability, that if you've never experienced theatre, and you've always wanted to, there's a way, there's a way, there's a way, there's a way and let's find it together." Because I just don't want anybody to sit on the sidelines and think that since they haven't been able to, that they shouldn't be able to. Because the system wasn't designed with us in mind - well, let's change the system. Let's figure out how, how the system can work for those of us who haven't typically been invited in theatre. Because once it's created for all of us, those who have the most privilege, you know, they still get to access as much theatre as they ever

have before. But those of us who have typically not been invited into theatre spaces, also get to enjoy theatre and theatre is meant for everybody.

Tanya Griffiths 26:31

Yeah. Yeah. I am honestly just in awe in the way you say things in the way that they all come together. And just the the deep advocacy and all in everything that you share. I think it's so well, obviously, this is also your work. So that makes sense. But yeah, just just knowing that it exists, and that at the same time that you're working towards these goals. And I think every time you work with an artist, it's like a step towards that. And even when you're when you when these, like, for example, those creative access pieces don't necessarily work out or like you get feedback, and it didn't get as much, I don't know, like the greatest results or whatever. I'd still like learning and you're still you're still, you know, doing the work.

Amy Amantea 27:35

And there's value in that.

Tanya Griffiths 27:36

Yeah, there is.

Amy Amantea 27:39

And when you do it with community, they know that you're thinking about the access piece, not like you're saying, "Oh, we've made this accessible," And it turns out that you haven't, because you've done it for them and not with them. It's like, "Hey, friends, let's try this and see if it works. It may not. And if it does, like let's see how we build it. And if it doesn't, let's see what we learned from it. Are you willing to take some free tickets and come on this journey with us?" Right, like, this is how we do it together. And we might find some really interesting ways of growing some really interesting creatively access, accessible theatre - which could be fantastic. And it also means that you could potentially find a lot of consultation positions for people who live with disability in the community who want to get involved in doing this work, right. Like that's also a thing we can provide work for folks in our community.