Amy Amantea Pt. 2 | Discover Stories Episode 75

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Amy Amantea 00:39

And I think it also allows us when we work with multiple disability communities, the opportunity to discuss and explore what conflicting access needs look like. Because just because we make things accessible for one community doesn't mean that we haven't made a barrier for another community. And so what does that look like? And what do we do when that happens? And exploring all of those different things. Because sometimes adding all of your accessibility into one show makes it a barrier for different communities. And so you know, this is this is when you go back to the like, so why is ASL performance on a different night than the audio described performance, for example, or open description, because if the open description is available, right, so if everybody's hearing the description, and you have captions, then you also have to provide the description in the captions, which deaf people might not want, because they can see, so it might just be too much for them to read. But from an equity perspective, if it is heard out loud, for the audience to hear, then the equitable thing to do is to make sure that that's captured in the captions, right? Or that the ASL interpreters or deaf interpreters are interpreting that piece as well. For people with partial sight, they may see deaf folks doing sign language or ASL interpreters during sign language, and not be able to tell what that is and ask themselves, "What is that character doing? I can't make out what that movement is." And so that could also be a barrier to them understanding what's happening with the show on stage, because it's like 90% of the blind community has a little bit of partial sight. So, you know, is that a conflict? Or is it not? Right? Like, you know, so we don't know until we start exploring, what is this piece of work we're looking at? And does it serve the work? And does it serve the audience member? Yeah, or the community that we're inviting into the space, right. And so sometimes you have to say, you know, this show tonight is deaf and hard of hearing

friendly. And the show tomorrow night is blind and low vision friendly. And the show on a third night is a Relaxed Performance, because Relaxed Performances may not be great for blind folks with guide dogs, when you have people coming and going and moving around in a space - that can make guide dogs nervous. So you know, it's really about trying to find that balance. And it's not about segregation, because it's about making sure that folks who have access needs get what they need.

Tanya Griffiths 03:26

In a non confusing manner.

Amy Amantea 03:28

That's right. Yeah. So I think we have to let go of this idea of segregation, because it's, it may look like that from an outsider's perspective that why aren't we all doing everything together all the time. But the conflicting access needs means that nobody gets what they need. And what kind of harm are we doing then?

Tanya Griffiths 03:47

Yeah. Because perhaps for somebody who, you know, is sitting there with no disabilities, it's like, well, if you just have all three, then you can just like, hit all the stones at once. But it wasn't made for their comfort, either. You know, like it wasn't made for them to feel good either.

Amy Amantea 04:07

And this is this often what you have to explain to theatre companies who don't have any experience with disability when they say, "Oh, we want to do performances that have, you know, a Relaxed Performance, ASL and you know, audio description, whatever, and let's do it all on the same night." It may not work that way, right? So yeah, I'm explaining to them why and the how, and, and again, this is like, with community. So you get these communities together. And you say, "Well, this is the idea of putting these all together. Tell these folks why or why not?" Right? Don't let us all speak on your behalf. Yeah. Because that doesn't work either. Right? So because there might be an opportunity where all these things will work perfectly together. Maybe you've got a theatre that holds 1,000 people and you can have one section for Relaxed Performance guests. You know like, I don't know, I don't know what the circumstance is, that's why we have creative access, because we just don't know what our resources are for what show, what the circumstances are. The variables change every time. So if we just think about it, like a one size fits all ticking the

boxes kind of checklist, then I think that we risk doing more harm than good. And we risk destroying relationships instead of building relationships. And that's not my jam. I'm not into that. I'm into, like, knowing who's in my community and knowing who wants to be part of my community and meeting folks and working with folks. And yeah, building love, building friendships.

Tanya Griffiths 05:41

It's just so interesting how, even just within our conversation, I just have a better idea already too, of also been able to be more cognizant of the factors that are taking place and just being more aware, I guess, of how to make my work as well, or, you know, the way I communicate to other people as inclusive as possible. And creating bridges instead of keeping up those barriers, or being complacent to just how things have always been done. And I know you've you've sort of hinted at this, I mean, you've you've talked about this, essentially, but I guess any more direct sense, I'd love for you to answer the question of what changes would you like to see in the Arts industry regarding the inclusion of artists with disabilities?

Amy Amantea 06:49

Well, I suppose this seems like an overly simplistic response. At the core we need, we need some funding that's reliable and sustainable that goes to artists that have lived experience of disability that want to do projects, it goes for organizations that want to bring in accessibility, because it's one of the questions that I get asked the most is, we really want to bring an access, but we don't have the financial resources to do it. Or even the financial resources to bring in a consultant that can help us build in the creative access piece. So at its core, we need that. We need organizations and artists to think about putting in an access line in their budgets for everything that they do. So that's it, like a change in cultural practice that needs to happen. You know, we need changes in - I mean, everybody should have an EDIAJ. Committee that should have people with lived experience with disability on it. But like, from a cultural perspective, we need to be having conversations about lived experience. I mean, we need to have conversations about all equity seeking groups. But my lens is disability, right. But there needs to be active training, which comes from disability. Community members, not like let's hire a third party organization that are a bunch of able bodied people teaching us about disability. So I, you know, I do a lot of training around disability etiquette and disability justice, for organizations, I will cater that training to whatever they need, whether it's about accessible hiring, you know, I don't know changing systems within the workplace about, you know, what, what accessible documents look like, what accessible hiring packages look like, what proper language

could be within the organization, how to treat people with dignity and respect. Because we don't know what we don't know, that's not an excuse. That's a "let's learn how to do better" in an environment that has no judgments, right? You can ask your ridiculous questions that you don't have language for in the space that I'm in, and I can show you what the language is to, you know, to be dignified, or and to hold dignity when we're with colleagues. I think we also need to make the process of finding how to get this money easier. When I apply for grants, the process isn't accessible. From a screen reader perspective, it's so labor intensive. It just would be nice if I could get on the phone and talk with the Grants Officer and be like, "This is my project. This is my idea. Can we chat through it? Can you write it down for me? Can you write like, can you be my advocate within the inside of the organization as the grants officer on my behalf?" Because able bodied folks you know, can go back and forth to the portal, can fill things in can stop like I don't I have the the ability to do that. One, I can't access the portal, but I just you know, and they give you a steal, you know, you can apply for a stipend to have an able bodied person to help you with your, with your grant writing, which is great, but it's like $200. And like grant writers get paid 1000s of dollars to write grants, it's like $80 an hour to write a grant. So nobody's going to help you write a grant for 200 bucks. So like, those are, those numbers are not proportional for the kind of support that I would need to write a grant. So I mean, so those are the kinds of things that I think are still very big barriers. I'd apply for many more things that I have dreams about doing small projects, big projects, like why don't we have grants for really small projects that are like 1,000 bucks, 1,500 bucks, 3,000 bucks instead of having to apply for $25,000 all the time. And I also think this should go for every artist, but I also think that artists with disabilities shouldn't have to pay additional taxes on this money. This money, like we get our money. This is just my own soapbox. But you know, our arts money that comes from our government funders, whether they be federal or provincial - this is this is public money, right? This is taxpayers money, that's supporting the arts. We all as taxpayers pay taxes on our money. And so if the federal government gives me $25,000 to do an arts project, I have to pay taxes on that money, personal taxes, but I haven't earned that money. I don't get $25,000 - that money goes to pay for the theatre and, you know, the equipment, the whatever, we rent cameras, or lighting or whatever, we have to rent, the other actors, you know, the director, the costumes, like you have no money at the end of it, you're mostly out of pocket at the end of it. Like, we're not making a lot of money doing this, you know, if I, if I make $1,100 for a show that runs for a week or two weeks, but don't forget, I've had to, you know, rehearse it for two months before I've done it, I'm gonna workshop it right? Like, this is not a lot of money. But I shouldn't have to pay taxes on that money. So when you get that $25,000, if I apply for it personally, I have to pay whatever tax bracket I'm in, let's say, I don't know what it is. But like, so they tell you to take the first 20% of that, and, and put it in a separate bank account. So I lose 20% of that money right off the

top. But it's my own, like personal taxes, because I'm not a theatre company. So I just don't think that that is right, essentially. And is a big barrier for artists, especially artists with disabilities. Anyway, so that's me on my soapbox. And I just I don't really think that it's necessary to do that. It's like skimming off the top if we really want to make arts viable and accessible and high quality and, you know, available for everybody. And we really care about arts in our community, we make that as easy as possible for everybody to be able to access it, whether we're creating it, being a part of it, or consuming it. End of sentence.

Tanya Griffiths 13:21

Yeah, no, I think, I think, Wow, I'm just I'm just getting to learn all these all these parts of your advocacy and like, all these parts of you through this conversation. Yeah, these are huge barriers. Absolutely. If it's not, if it's not applying for the grant, it's what happens after you get the grant. It's like, being aware of the, of the implications as well of being offered a grant. And having to pay that out of pocket, which absolutely, no, I I totally see why it's just not viable. Like, it makes it harder for folks if anything, because that's another thing to worry about afterwards. So it's not really just about like, "Hurray, we got the grant," it's like, "Okay, also, one more thing, you have to pay taxes on it as well."

Amy Amantea 14:23

I mean, there are so many things to think about and, especially if you're doing it for your first time. And you're navigating the system all by yourself, and you're like, "Oh, right. As a blind person, I have to keep track of every receipt." Well, I don't read receipts because I can't see receipts. So maybe I need to hire a producer. Well, that's another expense, right? Maybe I need to hire a bookkeeper, I need to hire an accountant. And I wouldn't have thought about doing any of those things had I not had other artists who were like, well, you can do these things. I was like, Oh, I can? I should? What did these people do? What is a producer do? So if you don't know some of these things, because you're new to applying for grants or have, you know, blessed don't have a master's in theatre or a bachelors in theatre, because many of us in the disability community may not have had the privilege to go to theatre school, for all sorts of, you know, reasons that have systemic barriers attached to them. I certainly don't have a Master's in Fine Arts or Bachelors in Fine Arts, I have a PhD in the Hard Knocks of Life. I'm not an academic. And so I don't know the ins and outs of all of the positions of everybody that works in theatre until I work with people and I go, "Oh, that's what they do. I get it now." You know, and a lot of these people are wearing these multiple hats, you know, in small sort of creative teams and doing all this work themselves. And it's like, so if you have a disability, and you're already, you know, your Crip Time or your Disability Standard Time, you know, you're already working at it on a different

time continuum because of disability and stamina. That's a lot. It's a lot to get all that organized. And all of that, you know, who books the space who pays the actors? Who makes like, it's a lot, you know. And that's just hard. It's a lot. And so you can see why somebody might say, "You know what, I have this great idea, but I just don't, I don't have the ability to do the follow through." And I don't know who I could ask for to help me do that. Like, I don't, I haven't built a network of people who I could reach out to that want to be a part of this that, you know, so I could see that being super overwhelming.

Tanya Griffiths 16:44

Mhm, yeah, no, it is, it is very overwhelming. And I imagine that when you're especially in that space, and you're having to balance and put on all these different hats, you're also just like, constantly, not just overwhelmed, but just, like tired. And it becomes less about this project that you care so much for, and especially if you have a disability, it's just like, well, how can I, how can I cope with all this and take care of myself? Yeah, it becomes that like, misalignment of like, wanting to do this, but also just like, This is too much. And I didn't really know what I signed up for, or yeah, just that - especially feeling alone in the process, too.

Amy Amantea 17:31

And how much might that deter you from doing the next thing? So this is why I think like, it's great to have like a $1,500 grant, where you can like just sort of, you know, get an experience of what a small projects might be, you know, maybe you want to do a two day workshop on teaching people how you write poetry, right? Small, easy, something that you can just sort of build on, but we just don't have those same kind of ways of being able to slowly grow in to the process, we kind of expect people to be able to do all or nothing - at least that's what my experience has been.

Tanya Griffiths 18:08

Yeah. Yeah. And I mean, like, through this conversation, you've already like talked about all these different hats that you yourself are wearing. And at the end of the day, you're also just part of the gig economy. So how, like, how does that like, how does that play out in your life? How do you find that to be?

Amy Amantea 18:29

Well, the gig economy is a tough thing. And I think I'll, you know, a lot of artists are doing multiple things at multiple times. Some of them are doing, I mean, it used to be the old

joke, right? Like, we would go to Los Angeles, or you would hear that, you know, actors were also, you know, waiters or waitresses at the time, that was the term, it servers, right? Yeah. And you know, you are, you'd be at a restaurant and they'd say, "Well, I'm an actor." Oh, okay. Right, right. "I'm just, I'm just waiting to make a big." And that used to kind of be the old trophy joke of it. But the truth of the matter is, is that, you know, you just can't make a living on being an actor alone, or being a performer or an artist alone, sometimes. Especially in a city like Vancouver where it literally costs so much to be able to just have your basic needs covered, if we can even do that. So, the gig economy can look like a lot of different things. For me, I have a level of privilege where I've been able to get a part time employment job and lots of people do this as well. But I'm employed by a large arts organization, so I still get to work in the arts. So I'm employed part time, but at least I know that I'm guaranteed part time hours as employment as opposed to self employment hours. Now those hours and that money would not be enough, if that was my only job, would not be enough to live off of. But I know that if I didn't have any self employed gigs, that I would at least have something coming in. So that always means that I have to make sure that I have tried to save enough money, month by month to keep myself afloat, which is also really hard to do. But that's, that's what I have to do I have to choose, you know, do I go out for dinner with friends? Or, you know, do I have the bowl of soup instead of the big meal, you know what I mean? Like, you just you have to, I have to make my choices differently. And I look for every opportunity to just pinch and save and, you know, upcycle, instead of buy, like, I look for all of those opportunities. But in terms of like the the gig economy, I'm always, always networking, and I'm always looking for that next opportunity to work with people and you won't find me, I don't have a website. Well, that's not true. I have a website for my Through My Lens project. But I don't have a personal website that's about my, you know, my accessibility consulting work. And I've always wanted to have one, but those are expensive to create. And I would need to make sure that it was accessible. So it's even more expensive. And it's harder to find somebody who understands how to create a website accessibly. Yeah, so if anybody out there knows how to create a screen reader accessible website, and wants to work with me on mates rates, and I'm not talking about like, nothing, but just, you know, be flexible, that would be nice. But you know, so, I have been lucky in that I've worked with enough folks that they continue to come back for other projects, and they tell people about me. And so through word of mouth, for the last 15 years, I've been able to sustain myself through word of mouth. Now, that's not always going to be the thing for me, but there are very few folks that do what I do. And I'm not trying to toot my own horn here, but not everybody in the disability community - just because you have a disability doesn't mean that you can or should be a consultant. And sometimes people put out like these open calls for consultants, you know, with lived experience of disability. But that doesn't mean that people, you know, for example, just because you're

blind doesn't mean you know anything about standards within the blind community in terms of, you know, anything, right, like, you may not know, the standards of tactile walking surface indicators, or what accessible pedestrian signals are, what audible pedestrian signals all are, what are the what are those features? You know, so if a municipality was saying, we need a consultant to consult on, you know, accessible street crossings, you know, we need some blind folks. Do you know what any of those features are? Or are you a user? So it depends on what kind of consultants you need. So if you are a user, an audience member of arts, and you want to give a, you know, an audience perspective, that's a different thing than what I do. I mean, I obviously can do that because I am an audience member. But I I, I'm the next level, or next levels. I'm the strategist, right? Like I said, I'm the I'm the accessibility strategist and the creative access thought leader on that - with 15, more than 15 years experience now in, in all of this stuff. I travel the world, I stay on top of what's current best practices and language. I'm deeply invested in community, not just locally, but internationally across Canada, across the US across the UK, with artists that are everywhere, right, I want to know what they're doing. I want to know how they're exploring access. I traveled to see other artists with disabilities' shows in different parts of country, in the world. And like, I - this is what I do as part of my work. It's never not on my mind. Accessibility in general, when I travel, I'm like, where are the tactile walking surface indicators. What does their accessible signage look like here? You know, so whether it's something about physical infrastructure, which is really where I got my start, I didn't get my start in the arts, I got my start working with municipalities. So I know a lot about building code and CSA standards and all sorts of things, which also is a benefit when you're doing site audits. And is this theatre accessible? What do we need to make the physical building accessible, right, so I can bring all of that into play. So gigs look like what gigs look like, and I am flexible enough to be able to say to an organization, "What are your needs?" And they will say, "I need X, Y and Z" and I will say, "Okay, this is what I can provide you with and I can cut customize this piece for what you need." And everything I do is customized. And people would say to me, well, why don't you just make like, training modules and record them and sell them or like, you know, make a program and it's like, I can do that. But then people say, well, I need this part, but not this part. So I'm customizing it anyways. And you know, if we truly believe that accessibility and the disability experience is diverse, which it is, because we're all individual human beings, then there's no one size fits all module. It's all about customization. And every organization that I work with, or every artist, or every human that I work with, is at a different part on this accessibility continuum. Right? So one of the things that I always say when when people are like, so what do you do? You know, how do you work? I say, Well, I think about accessibility as a continuum. And continuums don't end, right. But I asked people to think about where they are on a continuum. So if we think about accessibility and inclusion, how much do you

know about accessibility? You know, in your organization? How accessible do you think you are? How inclusive do you think you are? Pick where you are on that continuum. I know a little, I know a lot, intermediate wherever you think you are, and make purposeful, meaningful steps to move forward. And that's where you start, right? If you're committed to just moving forward with purposeful, meaningful steps. They can be small steps, they can be big steps, you know - those steps can look like whatever they look like. But they're purposeful, and they're meaningful. And they, you know, build relationships, and they don't induce harm as we take them. Right. And sometimes we take these huge leaps, and we do harm. Well, we do that because we think that big leaps get us to the finish line faster. Well, there's no finish line, right? Because the world keeps changing. So this is why I think that in talking with organizations, or artists or whoever I'm working with, that sets up sort of the working structure in that I will customize anything that you need in this moment. And that doesn't mean that if you say you need X, that I won't give you Y and Z because that comes up in our conversation. Because that's what I do, right? Like if the contract says you want X, and it turns out we need Y and Z Well, yeah, I'm giving you Y and Z. I'm not gonna say to you, well, that's not in contract. Because that's not how I work - I have bills to pay, absolutely. But I care more about the work, I care more about the knowledge that's transferred, I care more about the fact that the community gets something that they need out of the experience. But work means so much to me that I would almost do it for free, if I could, right?

Tanya Griffiths 27:48

Yeah.

Amy Amantea 27:49

I work on a working scale, a sliding scale, so that I don't have to say to folks, "Well, if you can't pay this, I won't work with you." That's not how I roll. Because I know that even if I take a loss on something in terms of, you know, how many hours I put in versus air quotes, what I think my time is worth, or what I could get on another job, all of that stuff you think about, and it's so hard to think about what your time is worth as a self employed person, like everybody grapples with what you know, what is my time worth, versus, you know, what I know, versus all of those things. We all grapple with that. I know that the person that I work with will have a quality experience. And I know that that quality experience means a bunch of things. One, it means that they'll come back to me. Two, it means that they'll recommend me. Three, it means that I've made an impression on behalf of the entire disability community. And I know what that sounds like. Because I know I don't speak for the community. But I feel this pressure of if somebody who works with me has a bad

experience with me that it looks like well, "I worked with somebody with a disability. So therefore all people with disabilities are bad to work with." But if they work with me, and they have a good experience, then maybe it's the opposite. "I've worked with people with disabilities before I worked with one, I worked with Amy, it was fantastic. Therefore, I would love to work with more people in the disability community." And that's kind of like, that's the impression I want to leave is like, don't be afraid to work with us. We're professional. We're, you know, we're, you know, we're honest, you know, we know our stuff, you know, all of those things I want to leave as an imprint on folks so that they, so that we can reduce some of the stigmas that have systemically been, you know, placed upon our community. And then they also can come to me because I also always say to them, if you're looking for folks that do different things in the disability community, I've got a list of folks that I work with: graphic designers, you know, active listeners, whoever I've got a group of folks that live with disability that have different skill sets that I've worked with before that I know how they work, website auditors. I built teams of people that I work with that I hire to do work with me, and then I hire out. And I recommend for other projects. So I'm building this little, this little working community, through the stuff that I do. And that really, really feels good. And that's why I think that I network so hard; it's not just with people that I know that are going to contract me to do stuff. It's also with my community who I know that I can contract out who I know, do good work, who I know I can rely on, when they say "Well, Amy recommended so and so." When I asked for something, like I was looking for active listeners the other day for a project, and I reached out to a friend who I thought would be a great active listener. And they said to me, "Oh, I would love to do this, please keep me in mind for future projects, I'm not available, but I can recommend these two people." So I reached out to two people. And those two people said to me, "Well, you know, if you're a friend of the person that put us in contact, like, we know, you're great, because that person is great. And they would never recommend somebody who isn't great." And so all of a sudden, I have these two new people in my network, that are fantastic humans, who not only are great at the work of doing an active listener, but also have a whole bunch of other things that they do, which are other great skills that can be hired out for different things. So, you know, I sought them out for one, one specific position. And now I know more about them and their lived experience and their background. And I keep all of that confidential, because I know all of their intersections of disability and their experiences of whatever it is trauma, or you know any of their identities, because those things are things that I need to know in order to, especially for active listeners, if people don't know what active listeners are, they can be there at a theatre production. If the production has content that may be harmful, some people use the word triggering, but harmful to people. I firstly, I'll just say our first experience active listeners at a show that was about the experience of Indigenous residential schools. And they had Indigenous folks who had been in the residential school

system. And they had Indigenous folks who were trained counselors, as active listeners. And so if Indigenous folks were in that room watching this show, and were remembering things, feelings were coming up, trauma was coming up for them, they could leave the theatre, they could go at any time, they could talk to somebody who had a shared experience, or they could talk to a trained counselor. So an active listener is not a trained counselor, but there's somebody who has a shared experience. And so that means I know up people's intersections, so that when a show comes up, I can say, "Well, Person A has shared with me in private, that they identify as trans with a background of child abuse and substance abuse. And that works for this show. Whereas this other show talks about suicide and imprisonment, right?" So you want to have somebody who is able to relate to the experiences that are relevant to the show, who knows how to protect themselves, and having conversations, who knows that this is not a counselors position, because they're not supposed to, they're not to give advice. They're just to be able to sit in a space where they understand how another human being may feel. And you know, and have that sort of shared experience of, we can sit and not talk, we can sit and talk - whatever you need in this moment. I am here to be your person right now. But you have to know a lot of personal things about a human before you can say to them, I think you're a good fit as an active listener for this show, which means you have to share a lot about yourself. And that means I'm the container to hold a lot of information that's really personal about a lot of people. And you can imagine what kind of trust that takes. So for these two people who didn't know me, before, two weeks ago, from a friend that knows me really well who put us in touch like you just like you can see the level of trust that takes and it's built a lot of really beautiful things. So I hold their identities in, in my trust bubble. And I invite them to work on shows that I think they might be good for. And I always make sure that they know what the show is about that they get a script. But I'm building this bubble of active listeners and I pay them well to do this work. And sometimes people utilize them during a show and sometimes they don't. But I believe that this work has value. And I believe that there are community members who have these experiences, these lived experiences have various different intersections in our lives that are offering to share or be a listener or hold space for other people. And if we're asking those people to do that for free, I think that's harmful. Right? But I'm going to work with these folks who want to be active listeners, I'm going to build a training program. This is, you know, this is where I need like a $3,000 funding model, you know. I'm going to pay for these people to get their mental health first aid certificate. So they at least have that part of it to help them feel competent. If should they want it? It's not compulsory, you don't have to have it to be an active listener. But what a nice thing to have in your toolkit of toolkits of things, right. So this is like, just like another project. And it's not a side project, but it's another gig that I'm working on to try and one, promote it when I'm working with festivals and theatre companies about the content that they're putting on our

stages, but also to get our community members work. Because we're all working in the gig economy. That was a long story to talk about the gig economy.

Tanya Griffiths 36:19

Yeah, but I enjoyed it.