



**CRIPtIC**  
2021

## CRIPtIC Arts Podcast, Episode Two Tom Ryalls

Well, hello. And welcome to another of our CRIPtIC Podcasts. Yes, we're telling you all about what's gonna be happening at the Barbican Pit Theatre on November the 19th and 20th this year, when CRIPtIC Arts presents its Pit party which is a showcase of new, emerging, and up and coming deaf and disabled artists. It's a smorgasbord, folks! It's a hodgepodge of different styles and techniques and it's wonderful. But it's a bit difficult to explain. And so, that's why we thought what we do is introduce you to each of our artists, and let them do the hard work of explaining their piece to you and we can have a little chat, too. I'm Mik Scarlett. I will be producing the CRIPtIC showcase Pit Party thing and I'm also interviewing all of our guests. And with us today, we have the one and the only Tom Ryalls. Hello, Tom. Thank you so much

Hello.

[Mik] for coming on.

That's okay. It's lovely. I didn't even have to leave my house.

It's right. (laughs) This working from home thing is really fantastic.

Pretty sensational until you forget to like, get ready in the morning when you realise you're on zoom being filmed and you have to (indistinct).

And it's funny that isn't it. Yes.

[Tom] Yeah. (Mik laughing)

We won't say that happened today, but there we go. It's one of the annoying things about the word podcast is you think, oh, radio, and then of course we spring it on you that we're videoing it to make sure it's accessible. Yay!

Yeah. And I do might do my hair in 30 seconds. (Mik laughing) You did a fantastic job looking very glamorous.

[Tom] Yeah.

So Tom, uhh what I might do with everyone, all the guests is I asked them to give me the, you know, when you're an artist, everyone's always saying, well, we've got a long bio and a short bio. Well, could you give us your short bio, tell us who you are and what you do.

Yeah, absolutely. I guess the first thing to say is that umm I'm got a bit of a dull life. I'm a writer and a theatre maker, but then I'm also a fundraiser. So I'm also a head of development for a theatre company. So I kind of like live between the two a little bit as a writer and as a theatre maker. I make a lot of very kind of loud brash shows, I guess. umm I'm really interested in the intersection between class and disability a lot of the time. And what I always say is that what I want to do with my work and the stuff that really excites me is the kind of work that asks people to imagine a different future and kind of enables them and teaches them to do that a lot of times. So things that kind of move away from realism and go, what if it was a bit more like this and how fun could that be?

(Mik) Ooh See that's a, see already, lovely viewers, listeners and readers. You are thinking, Ooh, this sounds good. (Tom laughing) I've seen the test sort of sharing of the early, early, early work and it's gonna be great. Uh and (Mik laughing) I can't wait to see. Now you have an MA in writing musicals. So, I mean what's your favourite musical?

Oh, that's really hard question. umm If you're asking me for like my heart favourite musical, I will always cry out. It's probably Rent, but my, one of my favourite written musicals I think is a really great piece of writing, is a musical called Next to Normal. Umm It's a relatively small cast musical. I don't think he's ever had a big production in the UK, but it was a pretty big deal in America for awhile. And I think it's, it's, it's a story of a very internal story about one family, but it manages to

create these huge sort of heights of tension um using just six characters, which is something that musicals don't always do. You know,

(Mik) (Indistinct) that usually 21 people on a stage and a kick line, but I really love the fact that it's this more internalised drama, I guess.

Oh, there you go. Maybe that's something we should talk about trying to bring to a stage. It sounds fantastic.

(Tom) Yeah. But what was the first musical? What was it that made you go musicals? This is it. I love it.

I got it. Wasn't even a musical. So basically I didn't really grow up doing a lot of theatre. I wasn't really into it didn't really care. I was really good at maths when I was a kid. So it's like a science y person. And then when I was (smacks) probably about 15 or 16 Glee came out before it went to sky one and it became too expensive to watch. But I basically, I had not come out by this point. So I used to sneak over to my friend's house called Jasmine and we'd secretly watch Glee. And then in the first season, the gay character on Glee Kurt in the first season sings Defying Gravity. And I was like, what are musicals? These seem interesting. And I was like, let us get involved with this. Um And so yeah, the first event, the first musical I saw were my mom took me to London when I was like 17, and I saw the Lion King and then I saw Wicked

(Mik) Oh wow and then musicals were stuck with me for awhile. Basically can't get rid of me.

So what was it that made you think, oh, CRIptic, Pit Party. That sounds like something I want to apply for?

Uh I guess the show, there was a show that I'd been wanting to make and I couldn't find a single environment in which somebody would let me make it. Cause it was just, I CA, you know, it's not necessarily like a piece theatre it's very, um it's just quite tacky basically. And theatres tend to shy away from tacky, especially in terms of worker that's about disability, because we're always expected to write about, you know, the atrocities of our lives and our trauma, and, you know, those things do exist, but, you know, we're also can be like really calm and tacky at the same time. I'm living evidence of that. So um when CRIptic came around, I was like, oh, actually I think the scope of this project and the ambition of it um is such that actually this is something where this project could sit and could happen. UM The idea behind it is that I'm sort of becoming a self care guru and interrogate in what the healthcare industry is and whether it's actually useful or whether we might need another solution other than like an expensive scented candle and a subscription to Headspace um and things like that. You know, we might just need like tackle the problem that it solves and then have a revolution. Um And so, the way that I'm interrogating it is about, you know, situate in my neuro diverse mind at the centre of self care. Cause as soon as you do that, you go, oh actually a lot of this is kind of rubbish, isn't it? Um And so, you know, it's a bit of a wacky project and uh yeah. CRIptic was the first place I saw today. This feels like a home for it.

I was going to ask you about your piece, but actually

(Tom indistinct) no, that's great because you started, when we were sifting through the works, I mean, you know the title, you've got to tell us the title.

Yeah. I've, I've got really bad habit of writing really long wordy titles, for shows. So my last one was called, Can you see into a Black Hole? And this one is called Self care for the Hyperemetic, Hi. Wow. Self care for the Hyperactive Anticapitalist or How to start a revolution.

Um Yeah.

Which immediately got our attention and just looking at the synopsis, it was like, yeah, this is going to be great. and Like we said, already seeing our kind of private sharing, but we had to work out what, what it was going to be like. It was going to be great. How did you get, where did the concept come from?

I guess there's like two things that happened. I've always personally struggled with self care and like what people call self care or wellbeing as to fight that like yoga is the idea of like having to do movements slowly and focus and be quiet is like an intensely stressful experience. Me. So yoga is just like my worst nightmare I can't imagine anything worse and things like that, but everybody was like, you know, preaching about it, etc. And then when we hit locked down the first time, so last year there was this sort of, kind of expansion very quickly, over the like cult of the idea of self care and wellbeing. But what it was doing, I notice was putting patches on very systematic problems. So, you know, we should have seen things like systematics, financial space, systematic financial support for people, especially disabled people, etc. But I support the shield in a naturally what a lot of people were often were like a free online yoga class. And that was, you know, very generous of them, but it doesn't actually solve the problem. There's no long term solution to that. And so one night I think I was on Twitter talking to a friend. I was like, God, I really, someone

should really make a thing about this because I feel like we're all wellbeing is like a big topic in the Arts right now. And we're only encouraged into these wellbeing practices. And what if actually, they're the thing, they're actually stopping us dealing with the systematic problems. Like maybe there's like, there's a way to explore this. Um And yeah, the title came, the title was the first thing that came to me. I was like, what is this show? And I was like, oh, I need to do this new, you know, live it instead of research, it kind of thing. And the title came to me and that was that. I was like, I need to find someone to do it. And I pitch it to a few places and they were very like. What even is this?

(Mik laughing) Oh yeah, I see the, I see your reservations. I do see them. And then I pitched CRIPtic and CRIPtic were like, cool.

(Mik) Yeah. Yeah. And how's it going? How's the, how's it taking shape because of course, you know, it wasn't that long ago that we all said yes, and November coming up, like a speeding train now, isn't it. So.

(Mik laughing)

It's great. So the process that I'm going through is basically getting people to teach me different kinds of self care. So I did like a yoga intensive, and then I learned to run and run a half marathon and things like that, just to interrogate, you know, what the effect is, and I'm documenting those things. So yoga is filmed and the half marathon. We did audio recordings and then I'm using, you know, my real experiences of these things. So like, you know, how much I fidget in yoga and how much it just makes me feel like I want to cry and things like that to create the pieces. So we've actually kind of created most of the show.

The thing that we're now working on is a kind of technological element. So the show involves a kind of live film that happens at the same time, which is almost like watching an Instagram live kind of thing. And so I'm doing this kind of self care class on stage and I'm being filmed and it's being projected onto the stage. But with this custom overlay, which is a bit like an Instagram live thing. Um So that's yeah. Element that we're working on now. But yeah, I mean, I've had a great time learning about different kinds of self care and, you know, sniffing expensive candles and seeing if all of a sudden my mental health is all done, actually believe it or not, it's not like, can you even believe that it's.

It's funny, isn't it? How we do, you know, I mean, I'm, I've got spinal cord injury, which is quite different to be neuro diverse. And yet we have the same experience of people saying, have you tried yoga? Have you tried eating vegan? Have you, you know, the amount of people that have told me that to cure chronic pain that are mindfulness, I've done it. (Mik indistinct)

My brain is full of bees. Like not very mindful is it.

Mindfulness is great. As long as you've got that amount of skill and effort to put into trying to empty your brain. And it's like.

Yeah. So one of the things that we, when we were doing the yoga experimentation, I was looking at the movement director called Sal Lofthouse. Who's teaching me at all. And she does a lot of work like warming up actors and stuff like that. And what the kind of conclusion that came too, is that actually these like yoga warmups that we often do as performers are not necessarily about preparing them for performance. It's about creating stillness in them and focus. And it's about making them appear more neuro typical. So as soon as you try and work with neuro diverse actors, for example, and do all these kinds of like self care inspired warmups and those kinds of things, you're actually not taking them into a neutral you're taking them to a neuro typical. And so you actually see like, as you, the applications of all these things do actually have huge tension with the experience of like disability and neuro divergence.

It's quite current, isn't it with, is it the article in the Telegraph today saying if you teach babies young enough, you can stop them being autistic. And it's like, yeah, no, no, what you do is you teach them to mask, which surely is something we just tried to stop people doing. And now, so, I mean, it's very timely pace, so this is good.

We like.

Yeah! Hopefully so.

So tell me, I'm quite interested about what barriers have you faced in your career because as a disabled creative, you know, it's not the easiest to brides.

I mean, I guess to me, I have a, I guess I came to understand myself, the disabled is quite late. So I was diagnosed with epilepsy when I was eight years old, 10 years I had seizures and I would see through my sleep, in some sense, sometimes I'd stop breathing. So this like had like a huge impact on my life. There's so many things I couldn't do, but I was raised epilepsy this condition, which exists mainly in the medical model, by which I mean, because it often poses an immediate threat to life because you're going to stop breathing in a seizure. The focus on it is how you

medicate it a lot of time. And so there was this big push away from the social model. So sorry, like don't make Tom think that Tom's different. Don't make Tom think that Tom's disabled. Like there was like this whole taboo of not using those words. So I guess I kind of spent 10 years really shying away from that kind of identifier.

But then when I got older, um I was having some trouble sleeping. Like I knew there was something happening in my brain. So I finally managed to get access to professional health and went to see a psychiatrist. And then they were like, you know, all of these things happening in your brain, that normatively wouldn't happen. So they were like, you probably had ADHD all your life. And I have problems with my work in memory and my brain doesn't quite process audio correctly and things like that.

So actually, like part of my struggle as a disabled artist is that because I was so indoctrinated into not identifying as disabled, I learned to mask everything so well. And so I was actually like burning myself out, just trying to keep up with people because I was like, so, you know, trying to hide it all. And actually I'd really successfully like learnt strategies to hide it all, but it just meant I was constantly at like 150%, 150% capacity.

And so now I'm going through this process over the last few years of like, understanding how not to do that in trash my brain, and actually recognise like my access needs, because I finally escaped from that kind of like, don't call your child disabled cult, which I will say it's very, like, I'm very appreciative of everything that doctors did to me. They kept me alive 10 years and I don't want to be like anti medical, but I just think that's something like beyond and above that, you know.

(Mik) It's funny how, you know, obviously you're, you're young enough to be my son, if not my grandson. And yet we have exactly this type of experience, you know, I was brought up, I was very obviously disabled. I had a paralysed right leg. I had cancer as a baby. And yet I also had all that. Don't use that word. You're just different, more special or, you know, kind of, you know, Before we go what I want you to do is Try and... I'm sold But I want you to try and sell it to our wonderful audience why should they come and what will they see when you step onto the stage

I think the, it's gonna be a really fun experience in the sense that I am gonna do a live self care class It's just like an anti capitalist self care class it is wacky from the beginning, it starts with um... a twelve thousand year story, it starts four thousand years ago and bring us to the present day and then all I've got to say is that I have written a quick change into it there is a tear away and I do end up in multicolour spandex and a crop top so like fundamentally the artistry of the crop top is you know, phenomenal in and of its self. I think you will have a great time and I just think it will be really joyful fifteen minutes of your life.

It will. And the whole evening is gonna be fantastic. It is gonna be a rollercoaster, you know there is gonna be rap music and soul, there is gonna be joy. And there is gonna be some challenging stuff too. But you are gonna come out feeling wonderful, having had a wonderful night of enjoyment. And that is why you need to get along to the Barbican website and buy your tickets now. For the Friday, the 19th or the Saturday night on the 20th. If you can't get to London, you will be lucky. Because it is also going to be aired online for a week on the Barbican website. And with that I say adieu to you all. Thank you so much Tom, Thank you very much!

(Tom) Thank you so much for having me.

(Mik) Brilliant you have been great. And we will see you next time for another one of our wonderful CRIPtic Arts Podcasts