Anthea Williams: Hi, this is Anthea Williams. Welcome to Activated Arts on 2RPH. A few years ago I did a Churchill Fellowship. I was looking at how theater companies develop artists and how they develop new work. Has been three months traveling around Canada, Britain and the US. When I was in Minneapolis, I was introduced to an amazing theater there called Mixed Blood. And I was completely astounded by it. So, this month, I wanted to look at how arts organizations create inclusion. And I could think of no better example than this company with a policy of radical hospitality. The history page of their website starts with the phrase Dedicated to removing any and every barrier we find.

Today, I'm talking with Robert Ley, and Regan Linton. Rob tells me that before Nixed Blood, he had no theater experience, but rather was an expert in marketing and research. But of course, every arts organization needs that. Rob was instrumental in setting up the company's disability Advisory Council, and programs and tactics that followed. Reagan is an actor, writer, director and theater artist from Denver, Colorado. She is the artistic director of Family Theater Company in Denver. This theater company re-imagines, established works, while exclusively casting actors with all major disabilities. She regularly works in Mixed Blood and has just had a weekend of tech rehearsals for Alice in Wonderland. Rob, and Reagan, thank you so much for joining me.

Robert Ley: Great to be here.

Anthea Williams: To start off, Regan. Can you tell us about, a little bit about Mixed Blood Theatre?

Regan Linton: Sure. So, I was introduced to Mixed Blood when I met Jack Reuler, the artistic director, um, actually about probably 10 years ago. I was currently in graduate school at University of California, San Diego, at their school theater there Graduate School of Theater and Dance, um, as the first wheelchair user to ever go through that program. Um, I'm a wheelchair user from a spinal cord injury that I sustained when I was 20 in college and paralyzed permanently from my chest down. And, um, after that, kind of thought that I would never have access to theater anymore, partly because you just didn't, especially 20 years ago, you didn't see folks with disabilities onstage, um, you still don't hold-

Anthea Williams: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Regan Linton: ... on but. Uh, but, uh, when I met Jack, while I was in graduate school, you know, Mixed Blood had a history of doing work that was particularly focused on including populations of people, communities, and people whose voices are not typically represented on the stage. And, he had kind of recently at that point, rededicated his efforts around disability, realizing there had been more of a focus around gender, there have been more of a focus around race, but disability was largely still being left off the table. So, when we met, we started, uh, a very dear friendship and collaborative work relationship and since then, I've, I've kinda come to work at Mixed Blood. But I, from my perspective, I would just say Mixed Blood is a, a groundbreaking theater that is really on the cutting edge of what inclusion and diversity, um, and accessibility truly means, and probably way ahead of a lot of the other theaters around, around the United States.

Anthea Williams: And how is that reflected in the work that they make?

Regan Linton: It all comes down to representation, right? Who are the voices are representing? Who are the bodies you're putting on stage? What are the perspectives that you're representing in the work, and I think Jack and the entire company have been very mindful of making sure that things are authentically represented, that their diversity represented and, that it's, it's stories that we need to hear, stories that are representative of the communities like that, which, you know, Rob can talk about more, but that surround Mixed Blood in Minneapolis that are very diverse, and you have all sorts of different perspectives. Um, but, unfortunately, you know, a lot of the time when we get on stages, not just in the United States, but you know, all over the place, are very predominantly white, non disabled, cisgender, the, the typical norm that has dominated the theater for, you know, 1000s of years if you go back to ancient Greece. So, I think Mixed Blood really has a focus on what are, what are the necessary stories from the very diverse populations that exist today in our world, and how are we telling them and representing them authentically on the stage?

Anthea Williams: Yeah, fantastic. Thank you for that. Um, so Rob, can you tell us a little bit about what radical hospitality is and how Mixed Blood works with its local community?

Robert Ley: Certainly. So, Reagan really nailed it though. Like I said, start off with that in terms of what separates Mixed Blood if you will, I mean Jack Reuler founded this odd college, because he was taken with the, the vision of Dr. Martin Luther King, which I think is at the time, you know, 47 years ago is a big deal for a white guy to do that in the Midwest. And so, the theater was founded, as Reagan said, on really representing people in the theater, um, would not formally been represented enough. Uh, your question was about radical hospitality. Well, I was hired on through a grant to help bring in persons with disabilities creating work, as well as, uh, in the audiences. We did some research first. And my background is sort of marketing and advertising. And so, hold some strange old friends and stuff, we did focus groups, you know, behind the mirror that one way mirror.

Anthea Williams: Mmm.

Robert Ley: And we did some focus groups with persons with disabilities, or were associated with organizations that supported persons with disabilities. And we found a couple of things, we found out the number one thing that prevented people in our market from going to the theater was cost, whether it was cost of just to get into a theater, but also cost, um, to get the, for example, a blind person or person with limited vision to get seated up to the front. Well, that was really brilliantly expensive. So we learned a little bit about that. Another thing we heard was transportation, and not just, you know, the, the wheels to get them there. But also, how to get from that cab, if you will, to into the theater and into their seats too. So we really got a lot of information about those two things were loud and clear. And so, I really have to hand it to explode theater, they found a way to eliminate costs, but then we're getting into the darn theater. And so that's how Radical hospitality was founded. And I, I wish I could take credit for it, but I was just along for the ride.

Anthea Williams: Yeah, I was amazed when I met Jack, when he told me that on any given night, at Mixed Blood 50% of the tickets are given to people as comps and anyone who identifies as having a disability can contact the theater company and they will organize transportation to get them to and from the theater in have their needs met on the way. And I loved that Jack told me that he basically went to his board and said, "I don't only wanna make theater for people who can afford to buy theater tickets. So, if I'm going to continue in doing this, we need to make theater tickets free for anyone who can afford them." Now, Rob, I know that you set up the disability Advisory Council, can you give us a little bit of idea of how you set that out? And why it was set up in the company?

Robert Ley: Certainly. Yeah, it was clear from Jack's vision that there was gonna concentrated effort was required in terms of why and there was a grant available that I fell under, shortly after my accident, I have acquired disability as well from a motor vehicle accident. So, soon after I got out of hospital (laughs) I, I had my own consultancy, and I was hired to do this. And so, there was a two year plan put together for getting this up and running. We started off with research. And again, using traditional advertising marketing methods, we researched A, persons with disabilities and B, a persons with organizations that served them. We really got input about what was important to that to these audiences. And, we've ... our focus was really three things. The first is, what goes up on the stage, who's represented, whether a script calls for a person with a disability or not.

The second one is the audience experience. And that can be really shorthand to accessibility, how to get in the theater, and, and make sure that person is comfortable. The third is to attract a larger audience. And I ... you know what? I gotta tell you in many ways, that third one is the most challenging, has been the most challenging. There is so much inertia and person's mind. If you live with a disa- disability, and you really are having a hard time paying the bills for years and years and years, it's really hard to get across. But guess what, you can now come to the theater.

Anthea Williams: And can you tell me how the counselor advises the company?

Robert Ley: Certainly give you some examples.

Anthea Williams: Yeah, great.

Robert Ley: Um, so, this is kind of new to me not being a theater person, Jack get, gather scripts and run them by us and ask for our thoughts. What do we thought ... we, we think of this script entity or non theater person whether you have a disability or not to be asked your opinion on what you think of a script that's actually to go on one of the better theaters in the, in the Midwest of United States that's pretty (laughs), that's a, that's, that's quite an honor.

Anthea Williams: (laughs).

Robert Ley: So that, that was kinda cool. Another thing that was very important to help to understand what are the physical barriers, what do they look like? Whether you are blind or hearing impaired or in a wheelchair, or something else, no matter what your disability is, what are the intricacies of that disability? Misplays in this 160 year old, former firehouse in the Midwest, that's really an old building and structure, it's actually had, actually had fire engines that were run by drawing horses bef- in the past.

Anthea Williams: Mmm.

Robert Ley: So, hard, not the easiest place to remodel, if you will, but there was a remodel. Now, during the remodel, the Disciplinary Advisory Council was asked to take the plans was asked to give opinions of certain parts of it and, um, we like to think that, uh, we provided a, a service that is enduring to this day explore where there are now elevators to the upper level where the casts have their dressing rooms and, and other, other facilities, uh, including, uh, restrooms. Um, they're just a cou- couple of examples of what we would do. But again, the most challenging piece was to really reach we all were tasked to reach out to various organizations, whether they represented, um, persons with ce- uh, cerebral palsy, or, um, Foundation for the Blind, whate- whatever that might look like that we can reach out to those organizations and say, "Hey, co- come and see some theater here at, at Mixed Blood.

Anthea Williams: So, it sounds to me like it was actually all encompassing. So you looked at the building, you looked at how to get people in as audience members, but you also looked at how to get people with disability involved in all the decision making, whether it was allowing them to be performance by getting them into the dressing rooms, or whether it was allowing this counseling will be part of the decision making process of the theater company about what was gonna go on the stage. That's remarkable.

Robert Ley: Yeah. I said Jack was an interesting guy, for many reasons. But one of the things he said to me said, "Rob, the experience that you have as a theater goer, is affected by who is sitting and seats all around you in the theater itself." And so the disability Advisory Council 1/3 of our job was to make sure that we could get audience members into the theater and feel comfortable and feel good about it and ready to see live theater. And that is as important as who's, who's writing the play, who's, who's performing it and who's directing as well.

Anthea Williams: I certainly love it when you get to see a work. Uh, so often, particularly in Australia, where we have a lot of subscriber seasons, you might get a work that is diverse in some way, like it serves a particular community, but you'll get the same subscriber audience there. And then you might have a night with a theater company has done a whole lot of exits and you get people on the, and the audience who look like people on the stage and it's a completely different show. And it's usually a much, much better show. And you just think, yeah subscriber audiences are missing out and theater is not creating that kind of communication needs to have when that happens. So, I think that is so true, I just love the point that you've all made of, it's not just about creating access, it's also about leaving communities know that you've created access, because if you have been excluded from a theater for decades, you're not gonna pick up the brochure to find out that now they do have audio description, or they do have some kind of access that meets your needs because you just assume that you're still gonna be excluded from that building, you need to figure out how to invite the audience as well as accommodate them.

And look, I just wanna our listeners to know that we are focusing on exploiting disability today. But actually Mixed Blood is inclusive with a great number of communities. There's a Trans Advisory Council, they do a number of health projects in their local area. When they ... when I talk about radical hospitality, it's not just about disability, it's about making sure that this company actually reflects its local community and all their diversity and everyone from that community feels welcome in the theater company. And I think that's quite remarkable. So Reagan, as a theater maker, and as a theater maker with a disability, what's it like to work in a company with this philosophy?

Regan Linton: I mean, I think just building on what Rob was talking about, I think so much, folks with disabilities who are really like if we break it down, and we go way back in, you know, 1000s of years into, like, how did this identity of disability even come about? It was because society was built in a certain way and certain human beings had unique characteristics that didn't work in the cookie cutter model, cultural norm. And so, they kinda got pushed to the side, you know, whether that was something, um, physical, whether it's something cognitive, whether it's something, um, emotional. And so, really, we're just talking about people who are unique (laughs) in different ways, and making sure that they are represented and not cut out of the mold that, that has kinda been created as the, as the dominant norm.

So, I think for me, you know, especially coming as somebody who was not born with a disability, I acquired my disability in a car accident, and, you know, felt like I had some awareness of disability prior, but, I mean nothing like I have now having lived it, I realized that people are all over the spectrum of awareness and understanding. But, it's also, you know, the exclusion is baked into the system. And so, if you're really talking about like starting to make a change, like Rob was talking about, it has to be at every level, it has to be looking at the building, you know, because I think a lot of people when they think, "Oh, disability inclusion, it's often oh, well, how am I gonna get my grandmother who I need to push in my wheelchair in to see the show?" Right?

Anthea Williams: Yeah.

Regan Linton: But you're not thinking about the actor who is deaf, who needs monitors backstage so that they can view what's going on, on stage at the same time as the hearing actors can hear what's going on on stage. Um, you know, you're not thinking often about like quiet rooms, or different spaces for neurodiverse, or folks on the autism spectrum, you know, so it just I think our understanding of disability has grown so much. I think as a society, we no more what we need. But, unfortunately, a lot of these structures, including a place like Mixed Blood was not built originally to accommodate those things. So, I think one of the things I love about Mixed Blood is, first of all, like being somebody who loves castles and historical buildings and things (laughs), it's not like one of these brand new, quote unquote, accessible, you know, buildings that just has, like, I don't know, you, you probably know the kind of architecture I'm talking about, which is-

Anthea Williams: Oh, great.

Regan Linton: But it, it just kinda lacks some character, right. And those are also spaces that often historically, people with disabilities haven't been able to enjoy, you know.

Anthea Williams: Yeah.

Regan Linton: And so they just kind of that, I think, after a while, there's an assumption of like, "Oh, these phases have never been open to me." Which is why Rob also talks about, you know, the efforts that you have to do to go out to those communities, because the assumption on their part is gonna be, "I am not gonna be welcome here. So I'm not even gonna to try." So, you know, those connections have to be rebuilt. And I think that's ... so I guess the nature of your question, what I love about Mixed Blood is that they've, they've taken all of these different approaches to this idea of inclusion and accessibility, and truly being radical. I mean, it is not an easy, uh, financial model to say "We're gonna give away as (laughs) many tickets as we are to folks to make sure that they have access to this artistic experience."

But, if you don't commit, if you don't say we're gonna start somewhere, if you don't say, you know what, we're gonna renovate this building, you know what, we're gonna get the interpreters in here, you know, what we're gonna find these actors, we don't, we don't know them yet, we know they're out there but we gotta go out and build those connections. And there's been a lot of that, that is the true work of like, shifting the systems and, and making things more accessible. It takes a lot of commitment, it takes a lot of energy. Um but that's the only way that really, I think long term, we're, we're gonna change the industry, theater industry, or the theater community, and a- and all, you know, entertainment communities in order to be truly accessible, and not just tokenizing, not just bringing in a person to say, "Oh, it's in the script we need, someone will pull you in." And then never cast you again, or never hire you again, or, you know, making sure that it really is about the true diversity of humanity, as opposed to you are the exception. You are-

Anthea Williams: Yeah.

Regan Linton: ... as a person with a disability, as a person with just uniqueness, you are the rule. And we're making sure we can accommodate every single human who wants to have this artistic experience.

Anthea Williams: That is so fantastic. And my right, was thinking that Mixed Blood is a regular disability leads season of plays?

Robert Ley: That, they did that for about three years are called Center of the Margins Festival. And, that was really quite remarkable, I thought, I mean, they would, they had one play that was called A Gruesome Playground Injuries that was-

Anthea Williams: Oh I know.

Robert Ley: ... there's to do, deaf people, but it was all, all the actors were deaf, or both, I should say, or three or whatever. And, um, of course, Mixed Blood is, is blessed with super titles, uh, large screens with everything the entire dialogues, um, uh, presented to anybody, uh, who is in the audience. So, that, that sort of was the, the, the, the, the, the nub of the, of the commitment to making sure that, um, yeah, plays about disability were, were focused for a couple of years anyway.

Regan Linton: Yeah, and I'll just add that I think, you know, again, coming from the artists perspective, me as an actor and looking at theaters across the country where I can work, there are a lot of theaters who, you know, rightly so and necessarily so have kind of incorporated race or gender into how they program each season, you know, making sure yes, we need to represent female, um, identified, uh, directors or playwrights or we need to represent people of color, um, across the board at every level of our organization. Again, disability is still often left out of those conversations. And I think Mixed Blood is one of the companies that has incorporated disability in to say, "No, yes, and we also need to make sure that disability is one of those voices, one of those populations, communities that we are consistently season after season, representing in our work, whether it be on stage in the playwright selection in the director selection." Um, and, and I appreciate that because you don't find that elsewhere, except, except if it's a disability specific company, that's the only other place that you find disability incorporated regularly, I think.

Anthea Williams: I think that's what [crosstalk 00:20:27] I found so inspiring about visiting Mixed Blood. Um, so often you go to a company and there's a couple of communities that they are serving incredibly well, but other company, you know, but they can't, or they feel they can't serve all communities. Whereas Mixed Blood was doing such a remarkable job of serving every community that it could see. And, when it wasn't serving their community, it went to their community to figure out how it could serve their community and what that community needed. It strikes me that it's now on the website, talking about how it is a community organization that serves its community through theater, rather than a theater that serves its community. And I think that's completely remarkable. And yet, the artwork is completely remarkable. If you look at the plays that Mixed Blood have been putting on, and also the plays that they've been devising it's some of the most unique and cutting edge theater that you're gonna come across. I'm right in thinking that our time Regan.

Regan Linton: Yeah. I mean, I, I think, you know, there's this, this idea among many people in the theater and arts community that like inclusion and artistic rigor, and creativity are mutually exclusive, right? That like, "Oh, well, if you include disability, then you're gonna have to sacrifice something, right? That it's gonna become more of a service, a service model, as opposed to an artistic model," which is just not true. And I think once companies, um, or artists start, start incorporating people, again, whether it's disability, race, gender, any number of different social identity qualifiers, you find, "Oh, it just makes the work better, more interesting."

Anthea Williams: Yeah.

Regan Linton: These are ... it's really just about perspectives and, and different ideas, again, being a what I would call like an adaptive actor, right? I constantly I'm adapting based on the fact that I move through the world on wheels, and how does that change every single role that I come across? How does it make it more interesting? How does it make it more rich and textured in a way that you wouldn't assume this particular character is gonna be represented? I think, you know, it just makes the work better, and you don't, it's not about sacrificing. So that's what I think, you know, Mixed Blood's work has maintained that artistic rigor, and just gotten better, because of the, the inclusion that Mixed Blood has committed to.

Anthea Williams: We're running close to the end of our time. And I was gonna ask, what do you think the, the lessons are that can be learned from a company like Mixed Blood? But I think you've both done a remarkable job of already answering that question. Regan, I can't let you go without telling us a little bit about your company, family theater company. Can you tell our audience a little bit about that.

Regan Linton: Absolutely. So, uh, family, it, it's originally was called the Physically Handicapped Amateur Musical Actors Lead, which is a total mouthful. Uh, and now, that was 1989, when the company was first founded by multiple artists with disabilities. Um, now, the company just goes by PHAMALy with a ph at the beginning. And it is a disability affirmative theater company, that, again, as you mentioned, at the top exclusively cast actors with disabilities of all different kinds. So, that's physical, cognitive, intellectual, emotional, and truly, in the same way that Mixed Blood has done, PHAMALy obviously, is a disability specific company. So that is part of the mission to say, "Hey, we are representing these artists on stage and, and their stories. But really, it's just about representing the breadth of humanity. And PHAMALy does original work, but also it's, it's bread and butter for many years was doing musicals, mainstage musicals and plays that any other company would do but, it was, you know, using or, or utilizing building on the lens of disability and all of these different unique actors filling up the show, but normally, you wouldn't see cast. And so, it shifts, you know, it shifts and re-imagines, um-

Anthea Williams: Mmm.

Regan Linton: ... work that are, frankly, pretty tired a lot of the time a few years ago, we did Annie, you know, a few of my friends were like, "Ah, Annie, you're doing Annie." Um, (laughs) but, through this new lens of artists who you don't typically get to engage with in a piece like that, it was brand new. So, it's, you know, I think PHAMALy and Mixed Blood had very, even though they were several states away from each other had very similar sensibilities over the last 30 to 40 years in existence. And, um, and yeah, it's a really extraordinary company. And currently, we're doing a, a brand new adaptation of Alice in Wonderland that has a new soundtrack written by a local music groups that's also disability led called Wheelchair Sports Camp. So, that's what we're, you mentioned tech at the top and that's what we're currently in, in tech for.

Anthea Williams: Fantastic.

Robert Ley: [inaudible 00:25:02].

Regan Linton: Yeah.

Anthea Williams: So I wish I could see it. I would love to be able to see that production.

Regan Linton: Well, there is a, there's a streaming version that will play in September. So-

Anthea Williams: Oh, fantastic.

Regan Linton: Yeah.

Anthea Williams: Yeah. Great. That sounds wonderful. Thank you both. Rob, Regan, thank you so much for coming on.

Robert Ley: Thanks for your interest. It's been a pleasure.

Regan Linton: Yeah, thanks.

Anthea Williams: This is Anthea Williams and Activated Arts on 2RP. Hannah Cormac, I've just had an awesome conversation with Mixed Blood. How are you this week?

Hannah Cormac: I've had a great time tuning in to the first day of the Arts Activated conference. And, I'm really excited to catch the rest of it on August 23, which is going to be, uh, featuring the keynote speaker Suzanne [Ball 00:25:57]. And I also just wanna let people know that even though they may have missed the first day of the conference, getting a ticket means you can access the recorded sessions, including the keynote from SJ Norman, which was fantastic.

Anthea Williams: Yeah, I listened to that yesterday. I thought it was wonderful. So Hannah, what are you seeing in not saying this month?

Hannah Cormac: This month, I managed to log on to a new exhibition that is online, called 2021. And this is a 100% disability led initiative. It's online exhibiting 22 artworks by 12 artists and their perspective on 2021. The curator M. Sunflower has worked exhibited alongside pieces from Clover Pallier, Jeremy Hawkes, Asphyxia, Robert Duffield, Jessica Phippen, Will Hazzard, Ian Hazzard, Wart Burg and Sigrid MacDonald. That's a hell of a lineup. And it's online right now at 2021exhibition.net.

Anthea Williams: Awesome. We had Asphyxia on one of our very first shows, and I wrote her book, Future Girl last year. She's a remarkable artist and writer.

Hannah Cormac: She has some amazing pieces in the exhibition about horizontal life, which is something that I relate to a lot being a horizontal person myself, and they're, they're just some beautiful pieces. So, I really encourage people to go online and check it out.

Anthea Williams: Awesome. 2021, I will.

Hannah Cormac: Now what I don't get to see this month and I really wish I could, is a new work Stars in 3D, which is a virtual reality dance event and is the launch work of the new chameleon collective. And it also features artists from sprung integrated Dance Theater, Singapore's DADC company, as well as cameo performances by Leslie, Dream Team, CD tribe and Extreme Stars. The chameleon collective is spearheaded by Leslie, who is the artistic director behind the Eye Dance Festival. And it's an ensemble that supports emerging disabled dancers move into professional practice. Starting in three days, premiering at the Winter Festival and National Science Week at Canberra College in Canberra, on August 21, and 22nd. There'll be 3D individual cardboard VR glasses for people to wear, which is a great hygiene provision in terms of COVID. And this event has also learned interpretation and captioning.

Anthea Williams: That sounds like a remarkable artwork. I'm really disappointed that you can't experience it.

Hannah Cormac: I hope that other people though, get a chance to go out there and catch some of this remarkable new fusion of dance and technology.

Anthea Williams: Awesome. Hey, as always brilliant chatting to you Hannah about what you're seeing and not seeing.

Hannah Cormac: Thanks for having me.