Interviewer:

Activated Arts for 2RPH. Today we're talking about Sia's film Music. We're talking about casting and we're talking about representation. And I'm thrilled, I'm joined by Bridie McKim and Sophie Smyth. Sophie is an actor, singer and writer. She specializes in musical theater, and her show The Aspie Hour has toured across Australia to great acclaim. Bridie is well known for her role in The Heights, playing Sabine, and for Esha in the new show Bump. Both my guests identify as living with disability. Sophie is autistic and Bridie lives with cerebral palsy. Thank you so much for coming in.

Sophie Smyth:

Thanks for having us.

Bridie McKim:

So good to be here.

Interviewer:

It's great to have you here today. Today, we're going to talk about Sia's film Music and I think it's fair to say that when the trailer for Sia's film came out, the disability community was not particularly impressed. One of the main characters in this film is a young woman called Music and Sia cast her with her long time collaborator, Maddie Ziegler. I'm a massive fan of Sia's music, and much as I was really disappointed by her responses to the community, I thought that I'd take her up on her request to see the film before you judge it. So let's start at the beginning. Sophie, how did you feel when you saw the trailer for Music?

Sophie Smyth:

I had quite a visceral response to it. It made me feel really sick. And I know it's just a snapshot of the film, but what it came across as was, the character was kind of mocking autistic traits. And then of course I sort of got involved in the Twitter drama that Sia was responding to tweets and stuff like that, and it sort of escalated from there. But yeah, the initial trailer made me feel really yucky.

Interviewer:

I personally think it's a bit of a big ask for people not to judge a film by its trailer, even though I requested that we all see the film before we have this discussion, because that's exactly what trailers are for. And you do get to see a lot of performance within that trailer. And actually the trailer almost makes out that Music is the main character in the film, and she's not. She's very much a supporting cast member. But I think you get a really clear sense of what it's like. What were your thoughts Bridie?

Bridie McKim:

I actually think I saw Sia's response before I watched the trailer because her response and all the online interaction obviously became quite prominent. So I read that and then I watched the trailer and I just felt super disappointed.

Interviewer:

Yeah, I understand that feeling. I certainly know that when I saw some of the tweets that Sia a had written, I thought that they weren't real. There is one tweet from a woman called "Helen Z" or "HelenAngel" on Twitter, where she said "Several autistic actors, myself included, responded to these tweets. We all said we could have acted in it on short notice. These excuses are just that: excuses. The fact of the matter is zero effort was made to include anyone who is actually autistic". And actually "autistic" became a hashtag around the trailer and around the film and Sia's response was "Maybe you're just a bad actor".

Interviewer:

I saw that on Facebook and I thought "Oh, I'm not even commenting on that until I Google to make sure it's real". And then I Googled it and found out that it was real and I was really disappointed. But we did our due diligence. We watched the film.

Interviewer:

Sophie, I know that you actually live with autism. So I'm going to ask you first, how did you feel when you saw the whole thing?

Sophie Smyth:

I went to see it a few nights ago. I went alone and I tried to find an accessible screening that either had closed captions, which I like to watch films with, or was a relaxed screening. I couldn't find one, which I think is not a great start. I had sort of a delayed response to the film. I think it took me over a night to process it. And then the next day I had a meltdown about it.

Sophie Smyth:

I just felt like the film was really quite dangerous. And I had a meltdown ironically about the way that meltdowns are portrayed in the film and the way that physical restraint is used, which I think is really harmful. And I had a meltdown because I was stressed about what if I have a meltdown in public and people try and physically restrain me. And I know that autistic people have been murdered this way. And so I got really stressed about that and I didn't really have a good time at the film.

Sophie Smyth:

I think taking aside the casting choices, it was a fine film. I think there was some beautiful moments. Visually it's beautiful. The music sequences are beautiful. I thought the script was a bit weak, but it's really hard to separate the casting choice from the actual film.

Interviewer:

Yeah, I can understand that. I wasn't aware of those instances of people coming to harm because of restraint, but that's a really interesting thing to think about. And certainly we'll get to talking about the consultation process that Sia went through.

Interviewer:

I agree with you. I think it was a bit of a mixed bag. There were moments of absolute beauty. There were moments of amazing design. It's visually fantastic. And some of the music in it, which really feels to me like it's Sia's voice rather than the voice necessarily of the characters, but I really enjoyed some of those moments. And I also felt like it was interesting to see someone be given so much license on a first-time feature to make something so imaginative. So if I took apart all of the elements that I found incredibly problematic, it wasn't like there was nothing in the film I enjoyed, but at the same time overall, I felt like the script was incredibly weak.

Interviewer:

I really didn't enjoy Kate Hudson's performance at all. I felt like I was watching a lot of types and a lot of people who were really pushed to be particular stereotypes and actually didn't really get to escape from those stereotypes at all. So in some ways the stereotypical treatment of the characters was actually pretty uniform throughout the film, which is not a good thing, but I'm not saying there wasn't any beauty in there. Bridie, do you have a different opinion? What were your thoughts?

Bridie McKim:

I mean, pretty much ditto to all of the above. I watched the film, I enjoyed parts of the film. It's generally a well-made film and visually beautiful. The script itself is quite boring and predictable. And I feel like I've seen a similar narrative like that, about 45 times in 45 different films. And to be honest, I couldn't help but watching the film through the lens of what Sia had said on Twitter. And I know as audiences, we should ideally be able to separate the person themselves from their creative practice, but after reading all that, and then watching her film that apparently she spent years making and put her heart and soul into, it was hard to separate.

Bridie McKim:

And through the conversation she had on Twitter with individuals who are on the spectrum, and then seeing that through the lens of how she created the character music, I found it super jarring. And then I couldn't help but think about, and Sophie explained it so beautifully, authentic casting and authentic storytelling, inclusive practice is so important because there are real world consequences to that type of work. And it's not just a conversation for the sake of representation or for the sake of people feeling included. It genuinely affects people's lives and I couldn't help but continuing to think how a film like that would affect people on the spectrum.

Interviewer:

Sophie, what did you think about the music moments? What did you think about the moments where we saw what I felt like was more Sia's voice, but the moments where we went into this kind of internal world for the character of Music?

Sophie Smyth:

They're alright. I mean, visually, beautiful; costumes, beautiful; dancing was great. I found it a bit jarring to begin with to figure out what was happening. And also I kept on thinking about the autistic people who might see the film, who the film is allegedly made for, as Sia said, I think, "a love letter to the community", but I kept on thinking about how those scenes were really exclusionary. They were bright, there was flashing lights within the first three seconds of the first one. They were really overwhelming for my senses. I don't have a lot of sensory triggers personally. I'm quite good with bright lights and sounds and colors generally speaking, but I know that a lot of people are not. And I kept on thinking about how hard it would be for them to watch it.

Sophie Smyth:

But they were good. I think once I sort of figured out what was happening, I could kind of tune into to what she was trying to achieve with it. But I also will say that I think that Leslie Odom Jr was completely under utilized, being really familiar with his work in Hamilton and being...

Bridie McKim:

I agree.

Sophie Smyth:

a huge fan.

Interviewer:

He was remarkable in the film.

Sophie Smyth:

His voice is so good. And he was really underutilized.

Interviewer:

Yeah. I think he was the absolute highlight of the film as well. He is a remarkable performer and his performance in this is subtle and heartfelt. And really he's the person who manages to walk through these various worlds that are created in the film and almost find a way of making it seamless. His performance really was remarkable.

Interviewer:

But I'm going to ask you again Sophie, do you feel like this film articulated an experience that you have had or that other people you know who are autistic have had that you haven't seen articulated before?

Sophie Smyth:

Possibly. I didn't find that it had articulated my experience, I think because it was so steeped in stereotypes that it didn't feel authentic. It didn't feel... Maddy's performance was not nuanced. It was very one-note. And I think it is because she doesn't have lived experience being on the spectrum. And so all of her mannerisms are really broad brush strokes of what neuro-typical people think autism is, which is the issue with autistic characters in film. 95% of disabled characters are played by able-bodied actors. So 95% of the time, it is a neurotypical gaze. So it's a neuro-typical version of what they think autism is and it's not authentic.

Interviewer:

I think we need to move on now and talk about why representation matters. And certainly a lot of the actually autistic actors who have come out and spoken, particularly someone like Mikey Rowe in the States, has talked about how 95% of characters who have disability are played by people who don't. He's talked about how difficult it was for him to get cast because of bias. And yet once he did get cast in roles, the remarkable responses there has been to his work. And yet it's hard to get cast. I recently cast a short film with a young boy with cerebral palsy and I was never going to make that film without a young person with disability in it, having grown up with disability myself. But I know some people did say, "why don't you get someone who's more experienced" to which you have to ask "when are you going to get experience?" If you're expected to experience when you're 12 years old, when do you get your first gig? And you know, this was a short film. It wasn't a giant film or a giant role on Broadway. And even then there is that pressure. I have to say my producer and my funders were amazing. I had absolutely no pressure from them to cast someone who had experience.

Interviewer:

And like Mikey Rowe has talked about, once that work was actually made, the response to it has been incredibly positive, particularly around the performance of that young actor. So I think a lot of the fears people have about casting people who actually live with disability are unfounded. Bridie, what's your thoughts around the importance of representation?

Bridie McKim:

Whenever I think about this topic, I always just think about that amazing quote: "You can't be what you can't see". And in this instance, the statistics speak for themselves. As both of you have said, 95% of disabled roles are played by able-bodied actors. That's a huge number. That's huge. And I just think it's so vital that we allow people to have the opportunities to see themselves represented on screen in some capacity. And I think our audiences deserve to see diversity on screen and our audiences deserve to see their real world and real life experiences reflected on screen.

Bridie McKim:

And as a disabled actor myself, it can be tough because this conversation is so important, and in a way it's still relatively new in some senses, so it can be tough. But I just think it's so important because I always think of myself as a 10 year old, just being enamored by film and loving it and being so wrapped up in the magic of it. And wondering if I could ever have an opportunity to work on something like that. And whenever I saw a disabled character on screen, I'd always get so excited and watch it all and just be completely enthralled, and then I'd go and stalk that actor online and they're able bodied. And I think some people would think that, "Oh, that's fine. Anyone can play someone else, and even though I identify with that character, it doesn't mean I have to identify with that actor".

Bridie McKim:

But the history of disabled representation on our screens is that this amazing actor will play this disabled character. And we see them transform. And then more often than not, they'll be granted a great award and they might get an Oscar. And then we as audiences almost have the catharsis of watching this amazing actor who sunk so low to play this disabled role, walk up completely able-bodied to accept their Oscar in front of the entire world. And the ramification of that is that disability doesn't have real life or real world effects. It has to be a nuanced discussion. It's not black and white when it comes to representation and who's allowed to play who, but I think it's a conversation we need to continue to have. And I think what has to go hand in hand with that is accessibility in creative practice and accessibility for our audiences. And for me, that's where this conversation needs to go.

Interviewer:

I think you're absolutely right. I think of all the things that Sia has said around the casting of Maddie, possibly the thing that I found most damning was when she tweeted:

Interviewer:

"I actually tried working with a beautiful young girl, non-verbal, on the spectrum. She found it unpleasant and stressful. That's why I cast Maddie".

Interviewer:

And honestly, at that point, I have to say, "but isn't that exactly what we're asking for?" At another point, she talked about how it would have been cruel to continue working with someone who was on the spectrum in the role. We're asking for a world where we don't have to conform to people who are neuro-typical, who don't live with disability. Were asking for a situation where there is a social model, understanding of disability and where if someone finds the production process really challenging because they live with disability, the production process can be changed. And honestly, I feel like someone like Sia, who clearly is an incredibly successful woman in her own right, if anyone could actually go to the bat to make that happen, it would be an artist with that amount of clout.

Bridie McKim:

And generally, that is the excuse of a lot of productions. We don't have the money. We need a big name so we can get this sold, so we can get bums on seats, and Sia didn't necessarily have those barriers that a lot of filmmakers have. And when I read that comment saying that she tried to cast an actor with autism and it didn't work, I just couldn't help but think: did you try anyone else? Surely there are other actors with autism. There are so many incredible creatives and actors who are on the spectrum. And if you're going to make something about this, wouldn't you want to center the autism experience within the development of it?

Interviewer:

I think there also has to be a conversation about depth as well as access. Because I think what I'm hearing from you Bridie, is that access is really important and we need to create access. But I also think there needs to be understanding that the work gets better when it's inclusive. Certainly, I don't think my short film would have been nearly as good if I had cast a young person who was [inaudible 00:18:42] pretending to live with a disability. I think having that young person as part of the creative process, but also on set in the room, actually added a gravity to the piece of there wouldn't have been otherwise.

Interviewer:

I think people always forget about the positives you're going to get if you actually cast and work authentically. They only think about the change and the things that might be negative, and they never think about the fact that working with someone who actually lives with disability is going to create depth, gravity, new ideas. You're not just bringing on someone for representation, you're bringing them on as a collaborator. And that's a really important part of the artistic process.

Interviewer:

Sophie, I know that you've come across some works in the past that have really inspired you, that have actually engaged people who are living with autism. Do you want to talk a little bit about that?

Sophie Smyth:

Oh yes. I have a note here to talk about that. Yes. Loop, which was a Pixar short film, which centered around a non-verbal autistic woman. And like Sia said, the environment was quite stressful. So they just decided to change the environment. And they went to the girl's house and they recorded what they needed to record in an environment that was safer for her and that she was able to do the work better and then made those accommodations for her. So it can be done. And I think that Sia obviously is a person who has a lot of influence and judging by the musical sequences in the film, she seems to be a really hands-on creator. And I think that she had the money and the influence to change that environment if she wanted to. I just don't know if she really wanted to, because it can be done. It can be done. And as you say, the work is better when it is done.

Sophie Smyth:

And a lot of the time, sometimes it isn't a money thing. I think that there are a lot of ways that even just auditions could be more accessible. For example, I find waiting rooms really stressful. I find that the social capacity for me to have to use prior to even getting inside the room is really stressful. That's something that could be fixed without any money involved, in that I could just be waiting outside in my car and then they could just call, and then I just go in and then I'm not at a disadvantage. Disabled people are saying that there are ways that it can be done, but it just feels like no one's really listening.

Interviewer:

Yeah, absolutely. What do you think about the conversations that have happened around this film? I personally feel that much as there was some possibly more fringe media to begin with that was being pretty harsh on Sia, I feel like the mainstream media has been very, very easy on her. But I would like to hear what you think.

Sophie Smyth:

Yeah, the conversations that have happened around it and see as responses, they don't seem to be making the situation any better. She's admitted to ableism on the project and to nepotism as well, which is an interesting thing to admit to on such a big national interview. And I think that she probably admitted to it because there isn't any repercussions for her.

Sophie Smyth:

But she also hasn't apologized to the community. And from what I've seen online, in terms of the autistic people I've interacted with on Twitter and the autistic creators that I know on Tik Tok, she has blocked them. And these are people with huge followings. There are two really beautiful young women with autism that I follow on Tik Tok. I'm obsessed with Tik Tok, which is not the point, but I follow these...

Interviewer:

Give us their names.

Sophie Smyth:

So, Chloe Hayden, who's an Australian girl. She is known as Princess Aspian I believe, and there's another girl called Paige. And I can't remember her last name, but she's Canadian. And they've both been blocked by Sia on Tik Tok because they're making these really great, informative videos about the situation and talking about why it's so harmful. And these voices are just being blocked out and it's happened on Twitter as well. It's just really disappointing because she's not willing to have a conversation about it. She's not willing to admit that maybe she made an error and it's making the situation worse.

Interviewer:

I'd agree with that. I didn't have a huge problem with her talking about the nepotism of the casting, partly because I think it's obvious. Partly because I also think that it's okay that sometimes artists have people who they really want to work with. We do work collaboratively, but then it's just about making sure that you're telling the right stories with those people.

Interviewer:

I think it's interesting that [inaudible 00:23:38] didn't interview her on the project because he has a son who's on the autism spectrum. And I would have been really interested to hear what he thought about it.

Interviewer:

I think there's a real issue with some of the way that she's talking about autism. She seems to be afraid of the word disability. And she said that she doesn't use the term 'disability'. She says 'special needs'. One of my favorite articles about this film is on the shot by a man who's actually autistic, John [inaudible 00:24:08] and I'm just going to read a bit of a quote of his because I think it's great. So he's talking about the language and he says:

Interviewer:

"to those of you who don't know the issue with that, let me explain. We are disabled. That is it. That is what we are, and the term we use. Disabled does not inherently have a negative connotation. Any perceived negative connotation is because either the user or the person hearing it sees it being used as an insult or to demean. Terms like 'special needs', 'differently abled', 'special abilities', are all super condescending and feel like they come from people who don't feel comfortable thinking about disability, especially when people frame our disability as some sort of super power. If we were to make a version of Get Out for disabled issues, instead of race issues, "I don't use the term disabled" would definitely be somewhere in that movie".

Interviewer:

I just thought that was so brilliant, and I laughed out loud. And I just think that as soon as you read a writer writing so wittily about terms, you understand why it's so important to have people actually live with disability in the room, because we're not holier than now. We are funny. We do understand performance. One of Sia's tweets was "Grr. Fuckity fuck. Why don't you watch my film before you judge it. Fury".

Interviewer:

So we've watched Sia's film. And I think it's pretty clear that our actual opinions of it haven't changed since we saw the trailer. Much as I hate to say this, I don't recommend that people see this film. I don't think that you vote with your money and put it behind a work that was made in this way. There's a lot of beauty in it, but ultimately it's a film that wasn't well researched. Autism Speaks, the organization that was consulted with, is not a well-respected organization. I think you can put your money elsewhere and go and see some other great Australian films. What do you think, Bridie? What do you think Sophie?

Sophie Smyth:

I think exactly that. I think it's more important that we focus on work that is by autistic voices or disabled voices, and we amplify those instead of this one.

Interviewer:

Yeah. Bridie?

Bridie McKim:

I think if you would like to see something that is about a disabled experience, do your research and find a project where the disabled creatives had been centered.

Bridie McKim:

And can I just say something quickly about authentic casting? What I would love to see within the coming years are disabled actors playing roles that aren't overtly disabled roles. That is my real-world experience. The other disabled people I know, the biggest part of their identity is their jobs, who they are, the type of people they are. And it would be amazing if we could see disabled actors play characters that reflect the real world lives that we live. I just can't wait for that to happen.

Interviewer:

I completely agree with you. And one thing I really like about your work Bridie is that actually often you do get to play roles where you are just a complex teenage girl being a complex teenage girl. And I love that. I often say that my disability is one of the least interesting things about me...

Bridie McKim:

It really is. For all of us.

Interviewer:

Exactly. And I agree. I look forward to seeing both of you play doctors and lawyers and cricket coaches or whatever it is that you want to play in the future.

Interviewer:

Sophie, Bridie, thank you so much for sharing your opinions. I'm so grateful you came on board.

Sophie Smyth:

Thank you.

Bridie McKim:

Thanks for having us.