Anthea Williams:

Hi. I'm Anthea Williams. Thanks for tuning into Activated Arts. Today we're going to talk to Asfixia and Sarah Vine Vassallo about their work in the arts and joining the deaf community or acknowledging disability later in life. I've called the show coming out. And at the end of my interview with Sarah Vine, we discussed the language used by the disability community. In the what's on section, Liz Martin and I discussed some great films that are actually starring people with disability. And yes, that is a reference to actually autistic, which was trending on Twitter last week. Here we go.

Speaker 2:

Asfixia is a visual artist, a circus performer, a puppeteer, a writer, and it's a great pleasure to welcome her and Allana, her six years long term interpreter and collaborator. Thanks for coming on the show.

Allana:

That's my pleasure. I'm delighted to be here. Thank you for having us.

Speaker 2:

It would be awesome if you could let us know a little bit about how we're running the interview.

Allana:

So I'm deaf and communicate with Auslan, Australian sign language. So you're hearing the voice of my interpreter, Allana Gilbert. Allana and I have worked together for several years now on multiple projects and everyone says her voice matches the way that I sign.

Speaker 2:

That is really interesting. Is that the main thing you look for in an interpreter?

Allana:

It's important, but not the only thing. I do a lot of public speaking. And this means I want someone who will represent me in every way when I go to a gig, give out the same warm professional energy I aim for, project her voice strongly and confidently when I'm speaking from a stage and also have the ability to sound natural and spontaneous. Not only that, but at times we traveled together and spend a significant amount of time together. So it's also important to me to choose interpreters I enjoy being around and have a good rapport with. Allana fits the bill on all these fronts.

Speaker 2:

Yeah, I can imagine that would be really important. I've done a bit of touring and it's so important that people get on so I think that's great. Asfixia's book, Future Girl has come out and I thoroughly have enjoyed this book. It's a why I novel. Every young person who I know who's in the age group is getting it as a Christmas gift this year. But I actually thoroughly enjoy it as an adult woman as well.

Speaker 2:

I think it's absolutely remarkable. It was such a treat to read a book that was also an artist journal. I'd love it if you could tell the audience a little bit about the book and how the ideas for the books came together.

Allana:

Well, really, I wrote the book that I wanted to read. There is disappointingly little out there with deaf characters. And when they are represented there is often only superficial or unrealistic information about how deafness is experienced. Future Girl also includes a deep exploration of resilience in the face of environmental catastrophe, which is something I've been passionate about for years as I have worked to learn how to grow food and leave on a few resources.

Allana:

I use my art journal to get down my own story on a day to day basis so it felt natural to me to use this format for a novel. I had such an enjoyable time sitting inside Piper's head to imagine how she might visually represent her own life experiences through artwork. I also found the process of creating the artwork enormously challenging. As I often found, I had several elements I wanted to include on a page but could not get them to come together to form a cohesive whole.

Allana:

I noticed as the book progressed, that I got faster at this and by the end I found I could work much more intuitively. I loved watching my skills improve as I worked. It took me eight years to create the book and I cried when I finally held it in my hands and saw how perfect it was.

Speaker 2:

I can imagine that. It's such an intricate work. You must have been really proud. Can you share a little bit more about those ideas for those who haven't read it? About what the setup of the story in the book is.

Allana:

Oh, sure. So Piper is a deaf 16 year old who lives in Melbourne in the near future. Her mum wants her to be normal to pass this hearing and get a good job. But Melbourne is lurching towards environmental catastrophe thanks to peak oil, so Piper has more important things to worry about such as how to get food. When she meets Molly Acoda ... Coda means child of deaf adult. She finds a door opening into a new world.

Allana:

Suddenly, deafness is something to celebrate rather than hide. Piper meets the deaf community and dives into learning Auslan. She falls in love with the language as it is so beautiful and expressive. She also learns how to grow food and build resilience in the face of chaos, which is not unlike that created by Coronavirus.

Speaker 2:

Yeah, that makes sense. Asfixia, I believe you learned Auslan when you were around 18. Like Piper, the main character in Future Girl, learns Auslan when she's 16. How similar was your journey to hers? Like Piper growing up, did you feel pressure to pass as not deaf. And did you keep a journal?

Allana:

Yes, that's right. I learned to sign when I was 18. This is a very common story in the deaf community as in their late teens and early 20s, many young deaf people have the opportunity to consider whether they want to handle their deafness in the same way that they were taught to by their parents. And that is a time when many will make different choices for themselves. Like Piper, I had never even seen sign language until I was 16 and believed I didn't need it.

Allana:

Like Piper, I found my world opened up when I embraced Auslan and stopped trying to pass as hearing. I give Piper many of my experiences I had while growing up such as the awful time at school when everyone was chanting my name and I had no idea. However, Piper has a very different personality to me and the way she responds to the world around her and her attitudes are unique. They're not based on me at all.

Allana:

And yes, I did keep a journal. I started when I was 12 and have always had one on the go since. I'm now up to Gen number 64. I found my journals an enormously helpful way of processing information and reading them back over later. And reading back over them later has given me insights into patterns in my life that I would not have recognized otherwise.

Speaker 2:

Yeah, great. The book even has some journal ideas at the back of it for people who want to start their own journal. So I think that's really beautiful. What has the response to the book been like?

Allana:

I've been quite stunned by the enthusiasm for the book, selling five times as many copies as I even dared to hope to sell before the book was even launched. Some of my favorite responses include people who said they simply couldn't put the book down and yet they had do so they could race outside and plant a vegetable garden. I love that the book has inspired people to do something that is so very good for our planet.

Allana:

As growing our own cuts down on so much resource use as well as building resilience. I love the people who have told me they've dived into art journaling in response to the book, knowing that they like me, have discovered a creative tool that will benefit them their whole lives. Best of all, I love the outpouring I received from deaf and hard of hearing people who tell me how strongly they relate to Piper's experiences of deafness. And what a huge relief it is to read that on a page at last.

Speaker 2:

Well, I'm not surprised that the book has had such a strong response. I feel like it articulated the death experience in a way that I never really understood before. It really gave me a new sense of understanding. So I'm grateful for that. And I think it's also really great the way that you do this with images as well as story and words. Like it's a really exciting form that you're working in because it's so multi layered.

Speaker 2:

And I can understand that people are leaving to go and garden because I had no idea how to make compost before I read this book either. And you know, not only do what you tell us, but you also have that beautiful diagram in the book. And I guess you know, that really leads me to my next question. You've worked in so many art forms. From ballet to circus, illustration to writing. How do you decide what medium to use when you're creating each work?

Allana:

I think I love every form of creative arts there is out there. Every time I learn a new one, I get a buzz of excitement and I love expanding my repertoire. For me, I don't so much think in terms of which medium will it be but more how can I best make use of the skills I have to express this idea? The more skills I have, the more they overlap and intertwine with very pleasing results. That's how I ended up with Feature Girl, an unconventional combination of art journaling with novel writing.

Allana:

I do the same thing on my small thumbnail. Combining visual art paintings and installations with plants. Whether it's a tomato or a flower, I consider how it will combine aesthetically with the plants and installations around it once grown. In this way I use my skills in painting composition to create a garden that is an artwork and I absolutely love the finish effect.

Speaker 2:

I believe at one point in your circus career you are working with circus oz. I think I read that you started using your deftness when interacting with an audience. Did this transform your artistic practice in any way?

Allana:

Actually, I was training at circuses and also performing in the women's circus. I never made a conscious decision to use my deafness when interacting with an audience. I think the idea rose one night before the show opened at the women's circus when I was playing around on a cloud swing. I was wearing an angel costume and it so happened that music to a song I love to sign to was playing in the background.

Allana:

I improvised swinging back and forwards moving my buddy in the limited poses I knew for a cloud swing and signing along to the words of the song. For me it was just playing around in a moment of fun, but other performers were watching and afterwards several of them told me that they were blown away and that it looks incredible and I had to do something with this. I decided to make a trapeze act and wrote my own song which I signed to while I was on the trapeze. When I performed it, many people in the audience were moved to tears. After that it felt natural to incorporate signing with my performances.

Speaker 2:

Do you feel like you had a coming out moment as a deaf artist or as a deaf person? And if so, what was that like?

Allana:

Actually for me, coming out as a deaf person was about embracing sign language as a way of life and stepping away from the pressure to pass as hearing. I'd already done that by the time I started combining Auslan with circus. That moment was eye opening for me because until that point, I had viewed Auslan as a means of communication and a language that gave me personal pleasure when I was dancing around to music at home and signing songs.

Allana:

I'd never realized how much others would be affected by watching me do that. It was like discovering I had some kind of magic power that could be used to great effect on a stage. Of course, I didn't really find that out until later when I performed my first trapeze act and saw the response in the audience. So it was more of a gradual awakening. I would not so much say that my life changed, but that I found my career path.

Allana:

I was glad to be deaf because it gave me the right to use this incredibly expressive and beautiful language, which gave my chosen interest, which my hearing peers simply didn't have the option for. I have ended up with a huge niche market in terms of being able to perform for the deaf and disability communities as well as for mainstream audiences.

Speaker 2:

That's lovely to hear. That's a really interesting insight about embracing a language as a way of embracing a new way of being. And the empowering things that happen when you stop trying to pass for something that you're not. I think that's really important and it's something that's come up quite a few times on these interviews as well. So now we're going to hear a little section from Future Girl.

Speaker 2:

But before we do, I just want to let listeners know about his Asfixia's website, which is www.asfixia.com.au. And the reason why I'm pointing it out is not just because it's a beautiful website and it's a great place where you can go and see Asfixia's work. It's also got some amazing resources in it. So when I wanted to learn some Auslan ahead of this interview, that's where I went. It's a remarkable side. So you're going to read us a little bit from the book.

Allana:

Yes, I'd love to. I'll read from the scene in the bike shop at a point in the book where Piper can sign but isn't fluent yet. She's soaking in her first taste of the deaf community and deaf values watching Robbie who is also deaf. A customer enters, an older guy with craggy skin and a salt and pepper beard. He seems Robbie at the counter, assumes she's staff and asks her a question. But Robbie is oblivious. Kelsey interjects saying something to him, and the guy looks taken aback.

Allana:

He puts his hand on his heart and sorrow, his mouth moving constantly. I wish I was wearing my hearing aids. He speaks to Robbie who continues to ignore him and Kelsey responds. Suddenly Molly slams the spanner onto the floor and stands up. He's mad. He stomps on the floor sending vibrations through the shop and Robbie looks up. "Kelsey," Molly signs heated. "You can't speak for Robbie." "What did she say?" Robbie signs.

Allana:

And at the same time, Kelsey speaks. Her mouth is open in surprise, a little indignant. Molly holds his palm up to Kelsey, wait. To Robbie he signs, "This guy is heartbroken that you can't hear the beautiful music playing right now." He advises you to get a bio-engineered ear. Robbie rolls her eyes and scuffs. She's not taking it seriously. Kelsey said she doesn't think you can afford one right now.

Allana:

Going by Molly's expression, this is an appalling thing for Kelsey to have said. There are people have suggested the same thing to me a million times. Robbie raises her eyebrows and signs something too quick for me to catch. I look at Molly wondering if I'll catch his interpretation to the customer but I don't. Something about how she won't get one because she's fickler post. The customer speaks impassioned, "But then she will never get to hear beautiful music," Molly interprets for Robbie.

Allana:

Kelsey speaks and Molly glances at her with irritation. He signs her words too but clearly he doesn't like what she said. Oh the rain. I love lying in bed listening to the rain. It's so soothing. I've never heard the rain beyond an irritating underlay a white noise. And I can't say it feels like my life is impoverished without it. Music is not something I think about much. They're one of my favorite memories of grandpa is him singing to me when I was little. I never understood the words but I liked the way he held me and the rise and fall of his voice, his chest reverberating against my cheek. That was soothing.

Allana:

Robbie pulls herself up tall and signs slightly sarcastically overly slow and clear, which makes it easy for me to understand. "Do you really think you were the first person ever to suggest this to me? Then now you've had this brilliant idea I will go home and book in the surgery. I was thinking that you should get your wristlet implanted," Molly interprets for her. The guy looks down at his wristlet clearly considering the idea.

Allana:

He answers her seriously oblivious to her sarcasm. I wonder if Molly got that through in his voice when he interpreted Robbie's words. "I don't want my bracelet implanted," Molly signs to him. Michael he's done and it became badly infected, very painful. Robbie throws up her hands and slams the side of one hand down on the palm of the other. I glanced at Molly and liberate him easily this time. "Precisely," he says, his face sharp and pointed.

Allana:

The guy frowns confused. Molly changes the subject by asking how he can help, serves the customer and returns to me. He's in a mood, handling the bike parts roughly, clenching the tools too tight.

Speaker 2:

Thank you. That's a great part of the book. Thank you so much for reading that. Unfortunately, that's all we've got time for. But I just wanted to thank you both for coming in. Thank you so much Allana and thank you so much as Asfixia.

Allana:

Thank you for having us.

Anthea Williams:

This is Anthea Williams onto our PH for activated arts.

Speaker 2:

Now we are joined by Sarah Vine Vassallo. Sarah vine is a choreographer, a director, a writer and a performer. She also specializes in integrated performance and is the artistic director of Memorization Performance company. Sarah vine, thank you so much for joining me here on Activated Arts.

Vine:

Yeah, thank you for having me.

Speaker 2:

Tell us about your journey as an artist and how you came to work in integrated practice.

Vine:

I was quite fortunate in a way to start very young, working professionally and started working 14, 15 years old as a dancer. And then in my early 20s, I was getting over it. I already had a 10 year career and had really always loved acting. Then I really dived or transitioned into acting. And I studied Meisner technique at the actors pulse. That was really great to have all that body knowledge and body memory in terms of being a mover and a dancer and then find my voice. After that, I actually hit quite a severe burnout.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Vine:

So you know, now we're what? Mid 20s and have just really been going flat out for 15 years or so. I sold everything, bought a combi and moved to Bombay and took a year sabbatical. After about a year I was like, "Yeah, I'm ready, I'm ready to get back to it." And I guess in some ways I wanted to investigate that relationship between this kind of more traditional dance method that I was doing and acting and what was that intersection.

Vine:

And that led me to start a contemporary dance, a contemporary dance theater practice. Along the way, along the journey, I was invited to tender for an arts and disability program for what was Detec at the time for our community arts program, working with a group of people who had very high needs and were of the older population and had really never had any kind of access or opportunities for the performing arts.

Vine:

They were one of the last cohort of people to go through institutional system. I watched a rehearsal and I thought the rehearsal was okay. But I was also like, "Ah, we could do more," you know. Like, I think these guys are being underestimated. I put in an in a proposal to create a 12 week performing arts programs where I would you utilize my network of professional artists in singing and dancing and acting and drumming and all kinds of skills to engage these guys in some performing arts classes.

Vine:

We did public outcome. It was a really big learning curve and really eye opening in the sense of finding ways within my own practice to work with people that think differently, that looked differently, that feel differently. And in some cases with these guys were non verbal or had very limited mobility or whatever it might be, but to find ways of accessing their creativity. I ended up actually working at accessible arts. And yeah.

Speaker 2:

So just for any listeners who don't know what Accessible Arts is. Accessible Arts is one of the partners in this show. And I didn't know that he used to work for the-

Vine:

Yeah.

Speaker 2:

They do a lot of work supporting professional artists who live with disability.

Vine:

Yeah. Look, it was amazing opportunity and I was the performing arts manager there. So I looked at what was happening in the sector for dance and theater and music in terms of professional pathways for artists with disabilities. Meanwhile, I was quite severely developing a chronic illness. It was very much in the background, in the sense of any of my day to day relations with people. But at the same time, I was also not really understanding the illness and now living with it for you know, 10, 12 years, understanding what chronic means is chronic like it's. Like it does not go away. And it's so unpredictable. And yeah, I feel like I've got my head around it now. But then it's always still changing.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Vine:

Within that role at Accessible Arts, it was kind of late to working there that I then actually started working on a program that was for people with mental illness. And I had also lived with an anxiety disorder since I was six years old. I'm a survivor of post traumatic stress disorder, which now appeases anxiety disorder. And I didn't really know that, that was even a disability.

Speaker 2:

Yeah. So you're in a situation where you're working in a institution that is about supporting people who live with disability. And you're coming to terms with understanding that you live with disability as well.

Vine:

Yeah.

Speaker 2:

And not only do you live with disability, you live with more than one type of disability.

Vine:

Yeah.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Vine:

Yeah.

Speaker 2:

And how was that revelation? How quick was that understanding?

Vine:

I don't think it was very quick.

Speaker 2:

Yeah. Yeah, I can understand.

Vine:

Like I feel like I'm pretty smart and stuff but it was not that quick, you know. Um, and I guess what you're saying, like, what you were supporting others. So a big part of my role was supporting others. And so I wasn't really lending that support to myself.

Speaker 2:

Yeah. And how long did the integration process take? Or is it still happening?

Vine:

I think it's still happening. Yeah.

Speaker 2:

So can you tell the listeners a little bit about murmuration?

Vine:

Yeah. So look, I would say that murmuration would be probably part of the biggest integration of myself and acceptance of myself and understanding of myself in this disability culture and really understanding and saying like, "This is my mob, these are my people. Like I am the most happiest and safest in this diverse space." We function out of three streams. So performing, learning and making. That can be put in any order but the idea is that we're making new work, we've worked with a great cohort of artists all around Australia with disabilities and a number of artists that are really powering on and shining on and it's really exciting to see their growth as well as ours.

Speaker 2:

Realizing that you actually were living with disability yourself. How did that realization affect your work

Vine:

I definitely had an imposter syndrome going on. I actually reached out to a colleague who had an experience of being outed. And I just thought she's the person I need to talk to.

Speaker 2:

It's interesting that we use language like outed. Sometimes I say that if I'm having a good day I can pass for not living with a disability. In the disability community, we absolutely use language that comes from other minorities. You know, we talk about coming out as particularly people with invisible disabilities coming out of living with a disability. We talk about passing, which is often a term used by people of color, you know, if they can pass for white or if they have passed for white in the past.

Speaker 2:

They're all really loaded terms, but it doesn't feel like this other language to use. And I think that's really interesting. And I have to say, I used to feel like that was language that I used. And while I've been sitting up for this interview, every single person who I've spoken to has used this type of language as well.

Vine:

Really?

Speaker 2:

Yeah, yeah. Do you feel like you had a moment where you started using that language? Or do you feel like you had a moment where you came out as a person who was living with disability?

Vine:

I didn't relate it to myself until which time I really realized I can no longer not say this.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Vine:

And then that was the out, that was the darkness and in particular around my mental illness as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, there's so much hiddenness and darkness and secrecy around that. That trauma always leaves on a little bit, you know. And so I felt that I was, even though I've gone through all this healing with that, I felt like I'm going back there. I don't want to put myself back there. I don't want to hide in the shadows, you know.

Vine:

And so I knew that's my I have this visual idea of coming out of the darkness into the light in that way, in my own truth. And that's why I also like to say it's a coming out, but it's coming back to me.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Vine:

You know. Yeah.

Speaker 2:

Yeah. Interesting.

Vine:

And I hope the communities don't mind that we borrowed this language. But I think there is a shared experience in that. I really do.

Speaker 2:

Yeah, I think so as well. Well, you know, another trope that has come up again and again and I've been talking about this is people talking about wondering if they're disabled enough and wondering if the taking up space. Actually it's about making more space. It's about that there needs to be more space and there needs to be a great complexity and the understanding of what disability is. And I think that's primarily what the disability community is asking for. They're asking for people to accept a difference.

Vine:

That's so true.

Speaker 2:

Yeah. And different ways of working.

Vine:

It's so true. The other thing that I thought of when you said that I love, and it's a bit of a murmuration mantra, (laughs), is that it's the thing that we do will have in common is that we're different.

Speaker 2:

Yeah.

Vine:

I love that. I celebrate that, you know. I want to always kind of come back to that, because that's actually something that brings us together.

Speaker 2:

Hey, that's such a, that's such a great note to end on. Thank you so much for coming in.

Vine:

Thank you for having me.

Speaker 2:

It was great to meet you.

Vine:

You too.

Anthea Williams:

Hey Liz Martin. How are you this week?

Liz:

I'm great Anthea. How are you doing?

Anthea Williams:

I'm really, really good. In light of the casting debates that have ignited this week since the trailer of music and film by Sia dropped. I think it's really exciting that we both want to highlight films that are made by actors that actually have the disabilities they are representing. Now look, for anyone who hasn't followed this debate Sia has put out a film about a nonverbal young woman on the autism spectrum.

Anthea Williams:

And that young woman is played by her long term collaborator Maddie Ziegler. Understandably, a number of actors who live with autism have been really disappointed about this casting choice. And unfortunately, Sia's response on Twitter has basically been in a masterclass of how not to respond to criticism. Now, I don't want to get into this any further today because the film isn't out yet but I promise I'm going to do a show about casting later in the series. But in the meantime, what are you recommending this month Liz?

Liz:

Whatever we'll be watching this Friday night is a film called the Peanut Butter Falcon. It's a 2019 American comedy drama and it features a young man with down syndrome who runs away from his assisted living facility and follows his dream to become a wrestler. It looks super fun at this stage of any scene, the shorts. Not his shorts, the short to the film. But on Friday night, it's going to be the feature film at the inclusive Film Festival, which you know West council here in Sydney will be running. And so I'll be there checking it out. You can also watch it online.

Anthea Williams:

Yeah. Look, I'm I have to confess, I'm actually going to host it at night. So that's when I'm going to get to watch it for the first time. And I'm really looking forward to it. It's got some of my favorite actors in it. I think it's rated at like 99% on Rotten Tomatoes. And it just looks like a beautiful, beautiful film. So that's the Peanut Butter Falcon and I'm going to see that on Friday night too.

Liz:

And Look, I feel like I'm overly involved in everything this week. Because what I want to alert our listeners to is the short films that are currently available on iview. But the ABC is celebrating the international day of people with disability by putting up the screen ability films. So screen ability short films are funded by Create New South Wales and they're part of the Sydney Film Festival.

Liz:

They've been making these films for about three years. And they're all beautiful short works. They're all available on iview so you can watch them for free if you're based in Australia at the moment. And my film Safety Net is one of the films that is available. Of course, I think that film is brilliant and I'd love everyone to watch it but there's lots of other brilliant films in there.

Liz:

A beautiful work groundhog night by Emily Dash and Bus Stop films, some beautiful work by Daniel Monks who is an amazing actor. His film Broken is part of the group but look, there's diving in. There's multiple films and you can watch them all for free online through iview currently.

Speaker 2:

That's so fantastic.

Anthea Williams:

It's a great works for everyone get involved. Go and see some work about people with disability actually made by people with disability. Liz, you're allowed to laugh out loud.

Liz:

(Laughs).

Anthea Williams:

I think we're done.

Liz:

[inaudible 00:28:44],

Anthea Williams:

All through today's show you've been hearing snippets of songs from Jerrah Patston's new album, Sounds Like Rain. So to take us out for the month and for 2020 he has his song Some Food Courts Are Better Than Others. (Music).