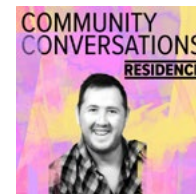


Community Conversations

Episode 2: Benny Shakes



Alison Denholm: City Arts' Community Conversations podcast explores the diversity of Nottingham's creative community. Series two shines a light on the lives and work of deaf, disabled and neurodivergent artists in Nottingham. Part of City Arts Residence project, it's hosted by Laura Guthrie and Jay Sandhu. The production is supported using public funding by The National Lottery through Arts Council England

Laura Guthrie: Okay. So Benny, you have been described as 'incredibly funny' and 'a reliable upcoming talent' by other people. How would you describe your comedy? Tell us a bit about the work that you do.

Benny Shakes: My comedy is redneck life and basically making people laugh and making them think "actually... he's got a point", and I'm very cheeky as well.

Laura Guthrie: Very cheeky?

Benny Shakes: Very cheeky on stage. If I can get away with it, I will do it.

Laura Guthrie: When you say you describe it as redneck, describe what that means a bit more. What does redneck mean?

Benny Shakes: Since I've been up in Nottingham I've had to, to fend for myself, learn how to do bills and that, and I watch a lot of YouTube so I know how to go around the street and get road kill and eat it

Laura Guthrie: [laugh]

Benny Shakes: - it's free food! So I do that in my comedy.

Laura Guthrie: You talk about eating... picking up, finding, and eating roadkill?

Benny Shakes: Yes. Yes.

Jay Sandhu: What's your... Benny, what's your favourite roadkill recipe?

Benny Shakes: Oooo... Grill it 2 mins each side. Red onions, a bit of garlic on a

bed of rice.

Jay Sandhu: Oh... that seems sold to me. I'd have that, Benny. That sounds good.

Benny Shakes: We've got venison, no not venison, whats them birds.

Laura Guthrie: Pigeons?

Benny Shakes: No, no, they are a bit bigger than a pigeon.... pheasant

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I've got a couple of them in the freezer, coz my friend goes game shooting and they throw them all of the pheasants away

Jay Sandhu: [laugh] I'll have them

Laura Guthrie: So some of your comedy talks about the roadkill...

Benny Shakes: Yeah.

Laura Guthrie: ... and some of your comedy talks about the lived experience as a disabled person and makes, you said that you want to make people laugh but you want them to also kind of realise that you are making a point.

Benny Shakes: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

Laura Guthrie: So what... describe a bit more about the kinds of work that you're doing. You're working on a show as well, aren't you at the moment?

Benny Shakes: Yes.

Laura Guthrie: Do you want to explain that?

Benny Shakes: It was called the Below the Belt, but now it is the Blue Badge Bunch. And that is to go around the country showing children different games on what disabled people cope with day to day. Like we've got.....they have to draw me with their feet and to show children that without arms people can still do day to day work, like driving, artwork, and they drive with their feet and there are some amazing people out there driving. There was one bloke on TikTok and he was a mechanic, and he'd done all sorts with his feet. So we're going around teaching children, but having a laugh at the same time.

Laura Guthrie: And is that going into schools or is it in you taking it into theatres for people to see, for the public to see? Or is it specifically in schools?

Benny Shakes: No, we're taking it into theatres, but I am taking it up to Newcastle. There's a special needs school up there and they are going to come up with their own game, so I can take it on the road.

Jay Sandhu: That's cool. That's really cool.

Benny Shakes: It's not just me who writes the show.

Laura Guthrie: Do you feel that theatre and comedy is a really good medium then, for raising awareness around disability and, and the lived experience of disability? Do you feel there's something specific about comedy and theatre?

Benny Shakes: Yes. Totally. The people who come and see us are there to listen and to understand. I mean, if we were in an open mic thing, sometimes they don't want to listen and all they want to do is get drunk and shout abuse at us. So I do believe that theatre and pro-gigs is where our message will get taken to.

Laura Guthrie: Mm-hmm. Do you ever feel a sense of responsibility, as a disabled person on stage or creating shows that are around this theme and about raising awareness, does it... How does it feel as a disabled person to be doing that in front of an audience of potentially predominantly nondisabled people? How does that kind of feel?

Benny Shakes: I feel totally responsible cause if I make a mistake I could like... then people might take the wrong message away with them. That's why when we got Arts Council funding again to join ten disabled artists together so we get the show exactly right.

Laura Guthrie: So it's a, it's a, it's a mix of people's experiences and... I think you are right. It can feel quite vulnerable, can't you? As, as a disabled person, if you're the person who is, however you're doing it, whether it's through theatre, comedy, visual art, poetry, if it's your message or it's your words, or it's your opinion and your reflection, it can feel, you feel vulnerable, you feel very kind of...

Jay Sandhu: You can feel like there's a lot of weight on you as well, can't you?

Laura Guthrie: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So working collaboratively with other people,

I imagine that can, that helps alleviate some of that, but also I guess it brings interesting things into, into the whole mix because there are perceptions and ways of living and, and experiences that, that you wouldn't know about unless you'd collaborated with these other artists.

Benny Shakes: Exactly. I mean, I didn't just go "oh, I'm gonna do a show all about disability". The day I started comedy was the day I said to myself "this is my chance" to, one, be good comedian, and eventually, to get, uh, my own show where I can show children. Cause let's face it, it's alright teaching the adults, but if we start teaching the children about respect for disabled people, when they become architects, employers, bus drivers, they can look back and go "yeah I respect you", I see the person not the disability.

Laura Guthrie: Yeah. And it's people's attitudes that are so important, aren't they? You know, how, how a child views another child who's a disabled child or a disabled adult. It's very much about how they're treated and how people approach them, how they talk to them, how they talk about them. You know... That's just such an important message really, isn't it? It's so important to get that element of it across.

Jay Sandhu: I was gonna say, it's really interesting cause obviously I've seen Benny's show and what he's teaching kids and I've obviously been a teacher myself, and it's really interesting cause when kids see it from a perspective, either from a person that is disabled or from a stage, they seem to take more from it than if it's just their teacher saying the same thing to them. So like, and I've noticed that myself since being, being at some of your shows, Benny, and obviously being a teacher, it is really interesting that you have an extra power almost by doing it from a stage, opposed to just doing it in a classroom.

Benny Shakes: Yeah. I Agree. It's not easy.

Jay Sandhu: No.

Laura Guthrie: Brilliant. Okay. So... Benny, you've been talking about the, the shows that you've done with children. So as a stand-up comedian you do comedy for adults as well. What kind of responses do you get to your work? What kind of responses from audiences, both children and adults?

Benny Shakes: I always get "oh you're so brave... you're inspired!" , and I'm like, 'excuse me, I don't like that word'. I need to do a joke about it, but I can't find one yet. Then I just go "I'm just doing my job", I'm just an adult. You're not inspiring when you wash your hands, are you? It makes me feel patronised. But luckily, I am getting some good, positive feedback. We went to Edinburgh,

when was it? August! And that was amazing. And we did... the numbers weren't great, but in my book we had a small room, if we had [00:12:00] 19 people in, to me that full house. [Yeah] And I'll tell you what, the last day of this show we, again we only had a handful in, but they were all Cerebral Palsy and it was amazing, we had fun. And even their mums and dads were "oh I'm glad my son's come and seen what you can do, maybe eventually he'll achieve his goals". And to me I've won just hearing that.

Jay Sandhu: Do you know what Benny, that's, that's so inspiring.

Benny Shakes: Haha!

Laura Guthrie: But it isn't... it's not... It depends on how you... it depends on how you say it and what you mean by it, doesn't it? Because what, what, what you are talking about there, Benny, is um, you are in a room, in a space where you are talking to people who really get where coming from.

Benny Shakes: Yeah.

Laura Guthrie: And they can see the irony and the humour in that and-

Benny Shakes: I get the mums and dads, I can take it off them because it... but when it's able bodied people...

Jay Sandhu: Yep. Has any young people ever mentioned this to you? Have you even thought about this like... a disabled person, maybe potentially not even someone with, that doesn't have Cerebral Palsy, but especially someone with Cerebral Palsy, might look at you on stage and literally go, "Cool. He's doing that, that's what I want to do." Have you ever thought about that or have you ever had anyone like mention that to you, or anything?

Benny Shakes: Not yet, not yet, but hopefully one day.

Jay Sandhu: I can see it happening.

Benny Shakes: But also we came away with two five star reviews.

Jay Sandhu: Oh, nice.

Benny Shakes: One four star review and we came, I think we were shortlisted for the new Diverse Award in Edinburgh.

Jay Sandhu: That's quality.

Benny Shakes: And we are the second best show in the East Midlands for erm... oh what are they called? The East Midlands awards?

Jay Sandhu: Oh! You're putting me on the spot there. I know which ones you're talking about, yeah.

Benny Shakes: ...East Midlands Comedy Awards. To me, I haven't won the... We haven't won the war but small victories for me.

Laura Guthrie: Can I ask you, Benny... So you talked earlier on about how you collaborated with other disabled artists to create the Blue Badge Bunch Show and you know, and what you were talking about earlier on about performing in front of an audience of, of disabled young people. How do you find those other disabled comedians? What's... How are you networked or how do you find other people to work with?

Benny Shakes: Again, over lockdown, while the normies were hiding in their cupboards, me and my mate Mark Nicholas did a Zoom chat and said we can't just shut ourselves away, we need to support other disabled people. Now, Mark, before lockdown, did a disability open mic called Laugh-Able. And he said, we both said, why don't we set up a Zoom meeting every fortnight for disabled comedians to support them, have a laugh. And I created, uh, Benny Shakes Things Up podcast where I interviewed the likes of Lost Voice Guy, Jo Coffey, Aaron Simmonds, Kate Lovelock... you've put me on the spot now... and many more, we interviewed Jay as well.

Jay Sandhu: Yeah, I'm on an episode.

Benny Shakes: Amazing. And that is how I created Blue Badge Bunch because them guys came along with the journey with me.

Laura Guthrie: I had another question, which was about sort of the same, sort of on the same lines, cuz obviously creating a, you know, a community of disabled comedians has meant a lot to you and it's done a lot for you and your work and, and like you say you do that very selflessly and so do all the other artists that work with you, what advice would you give to other d/Deaf or disabled artists who perhaps aren't in comedy but might be in some form of performing arts or... What would you... what advice would you give about finding a network? Where to look for it? What sort of approach to make to, to other people?

Benny Shakes: Facebook. I know people don't like Facebook much, but I find a lot of communities start on Facebook. Reddit is another place to go, I've been on there quite a bit lately. Internet. Word of mouth If you're an artist or a photographer and your mate's a photographer and you're both disabled one of you might know other disabled people, then set up a group in your area and people will find you and totally get your experiences. And don't give up. I mean, I've been working a lot lately on the game show and comedy, and this is the first week I've had to do some photography and I've loved every minute of it.

Laura Guthrie: That's cool. It's great when you love what you do.

Jay Sandhu: I was gonna say, it's nice to find those pockets, isn't it? To kind of take time that you wanna enjoy your time, as well as working on something productive.

Laura Guthrie: Yeah. Yeah. We, we can, um, I mean, in this industry, in the arts, it is, it is very, it is very ebb and flowy, isn't it? You can have periods where it's very, very quiet and you wonder when you're ever gonna work again. And then other times where it's just really busy and you're full on and your focus is so much on, on a project that you're, you're working on and, and you forget that there were times where you had very little to do or you were trying to find work or whatever that might be. It just is the nature of the business and if you can keep yourself going through those times, both the busy and less busy, and the key thing being you enjoy what you do and you get a lot from what you do, it makes such a difference as well.

Jay Sandhu: Yeah, it really does. I think that was about it wasn't it? Shall we wrap that up?

Laura Guthrie: Yeah? Yeah. They were all the questions.

Jay Sandhu: Sorry, yeah I was gonna say, did you have anything you wanted to ask us, Benny?

Benny Shakes: No I [can't make this out] I'm gonna get your name wrong, Laur? Laura? Lauren?

Laura Guthrie: Laura.

Benny Shakes: Laura! Sorry, Laura

Laura Guthrie: It's alright!

Benny Shakes: How do you find your art, and do you have to fight to have your place where you are?

Laura Guthrie: Yeah. Yeah I find it, sometimes I find it... My worst enemy is myself [laughs] so I find it very difficult to say no to things, so I can quite often find myself doing too much and I don't think that's great so I think I should be a bit more careful. But at the same time, I'm also really conscious of how lucky I am to be in that position because for a long time I wasn't in that position and I was scrambling about for work and, taking on jobs that weren't really how I wanted... what I wanted to do creatively. It was work and it was paying the bills. I think now, I mean, I'm 30 plus years into my career, so I think I'm, I'm at a stage where I'm really, really lucky and I'm not... I am sort of more able to choose what I want to work on, but I don't, [laughing] I tend to say yes to everything because I'm always worried that the next month I won't have anything, so... But I, I've kind of, it's taken me a long time, if I'm honest Benny, to find what I really enjoy doing and I've done a lot of work where I've worked with non-disabled people and created work alongside non-disabled people without a particular focus on access or disability. And whilst I've really enjoyed that, where I really get a buzz, and where I've really enjoyed my work is when I'm working with other disabled people creating work, which is not necessarily always about raising, specifically about raising awareness about disabled people's lives or issues, but which is at least creating a true representation, of the world you know where d/Deaf and disabled people's work is seen alongside all other work and given the same kind of kudos, really. And then on top of that, making sure that the work I do, or as far as possible is as accessible to as many people as I can make it. And that that is part of the creative process. So that's where I now know I get my real creative buzz and where I feel most at home, but it's taken quite a long time to get to the point where I understand that about the work that I do and the theatre that I produce.

Benny Shakes: Yeah. Not a race is it? It's not races, or sprint... or whatever that saying is.

Laura Guthrie: I don't know what the saying is, but I know you mean it's not a race.

Benny Shakes: Don't run before you can walk.

Jay Sandhu: Yeah.

Laura Guthrie: Yeah.

Benny Shakes: I wanted to come off benefits, I've looked at the figures and I might as well just employ the right people to build the foundation for the future.

Laura Guthrie: Yeah, I like that Benny.

Benny Shakes: We are employing a female, let me get this right, we're looking for a female artist who's got a physical disability to join me to do her own shows in another part of the country. Its so we are not burning too much diesel, but I've noticed since I've been doing this there's not enough physical disabilities who are female out in the industry. I could be wrong, but in comedy I can only count a handful. So we are going be looking for the next person

Laura Guthrie: Well, good luck.

Benny Shakes: Thank you.

Jay Sandhu: Good luck.

Laura Guthrie: I hope you find them. Thank you, Benny.

Jay Sandhu: Thank you very much Benny, for coming onto the podcast and yeah, we look forward to speaking to you again.

Benny Shakes: Yeah I look forward to it.

Laura Guthrie: And good luck with your show!

Benny Shakes: Yeah, thank you.