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**TX: 12.03.03 – DON QUIXOTE WITH A DIFFERENCE**

**ROBINSON**

Now when was the last time you saw an actor with learning disabilities in a mainstream drama on stage or screen? Quite some time ago, if ever, probably. But a new production, currently on tour, is bringing together a company of actors with learning disabilities called mind the...gap and an able bodied group - The Northern Stage Ensemble. They're taking an adaptation of Don Quixote to 18 towns and cities. Egon Cossou caught up with them in Warwick.

**ACTUALITY - THEATRE PRODUCTION**

Windmills now. That curtain enchanter he saw I was winning, fearing defeat at the last moment he has turned giants into windmills.

**COSSOU**

Going through lines just before going on stage. It's a nerve wracking tradition as old as theatre itself and there's no exception for the five strong collaboration between mind the...gap and the Northern Stage Ensemble.

**ACTUALITY**

Now follow me.

**COSSOU**

Jez Colburn plays the lead and he has more than just pre-performance nerves to deal with, Jez has Williams Syndrome, a congenital condition affecting the memory. So he learns best by listening to audio tapes of his lines. He's not afraid of a challenge and is used to confounding those who have low expectations of him.

**COLBURN**

Sometimes you have to understand that just because you've got a disability it doesn't mean you can't do things because people have been perceived if they have a difficulty that they can't do things and they'll never learn things and they'll never be able to do this, that and the other. But I forget about my worries and I just go on stage and just do what I've got to do.

**ACTUALITY**

But what's it for? I want it back.

**COSSOU**

Not much. I find everything quite easy. I find the people from Northern Stage quite cool because they're very good actors - we get on, we do the work together.

### **COSSOU**

Mind the...gap was founded in 1988 and has consistently found mainstream drama schools reluctant to take on learning disabled students. So since 1998 it's run its own apprenticeship scheme. Artistic director Tim Wheeler sees the current tour with Northern Stage Ensemble as another important step towards achieving equality.

### **WHEELER**

I think that it shows that it's possible that non-disabled and learning disabled performers can work together as equals. And that they can produce really high quality performance that's enjoyable, that really uses theatre in its best possible way. It also shows directors, producers, writers that there are actors that they can draw upon now who have learning disabilities who can take part in productions. We wanted to do - was to open up to a wider and general audience, Northern Stage bring an audience, predominantly younger audience, to their work and we're sharing in that at the moment.

### **COSSOU**

Mark Lloyd is a non-disabled actor who joins this collaboration from the Northern Stage Ensemble. That company caused a stir when it decided to depict Romeo and Juliet as a disabled couple and then promptly cast two non-disabled actors to play them.

### **LLOYD**

I think we were naïve at the time, as I think 99.9 per cent of the companies in this country are, as to the capabilities of people with learning difficulties. But now working with mind the...gap and making this relationship that question isn't there anymore because working on this piece has opened my eyes and you can feel from the houses we've played to so far the general sense of eye opening that's happening within the audience.

### **COSSOU**

Mark has real enthusiasm about this joint tour but admits he's had to overcome some serious reservations about working with the learning disabled actors.

### **LLOYD**

Artistically a few, personally loads, I mean I have no friends who have any learning disabilities, I don't mix with people with learning difficulties, I don't know how to handle myself. We went to a meeting about two weeks into rehearsals and I spent the first 20 minutes hiding under my collar in a horrendous state, not knowing what words to use, how to address people, what terms do we use, how do we behave? And it was all those worries and fears personally that I had coming into this.

### **ACTUALITY - MUSIC**

#### **COSSOU**

Now it's curtains up and time to see if all that rehearsing pays off.

#### **ACTUALITY**

I lay myself at your feet. Permit me to call you lady.

Shove off.

#### **VOX POPS**

It was excellent. I didn't expect it to be a disabled production so I was quite surprised when I realised that but I really enjoyed it.

The actors are actors really and people have - everybody has their different contribution to make and I don't think it's important really who they are - if they fit the part, if they cast the part, that's the most important thing. I thought it worked very well.

I thought they carried off really well. I thought Dolly the Barmaid was superb actually, I thought she was terrific and really got into it.

### **COSSOU**

An enthusiastic thumbs up from the audience and one Jez hopes will lead towards real advances for learning disabled actors.

### **COLBURN**

I reckon it would be cool to have more disabled people on TV and I think it would be brilliant to have more disabled people on film and I'd love to play a police officer in the Bill. You know me with a disability playing an ordinary character - that would just be really good.

### **ROBINSON**

That was Egon Cossou reporting. And if you want to see a performance of Don Quixote it's on tomorrow in Ollerton in Nottinghamshire at the Dukeries tomorrow evening.