

When Robert asked me to say a few words today my first question was, 'Do I have to keep it clean?' He quickly said no, which was a relief considering the play I was in was a sex comedy involving a giant pink dildo, a knitted cock and so many swear words that James used to say, if he hadn't said 'fuck' in more than a minute he thought he'd forgotten his lines... But I'll try my best to keep it clean as much as possible!

I first got involved with Birds of Paradise in 2011 when I was just leaving college. I contacted them after I saw their production of Mother Courage. It was the first time I'd ever seen disabled actors on stage in a professional context. As a young, aspiring actor at the time it was hugely encouraging. The main thing I remember was how welcoming and enthusiastic they were to help me out. They created a 'placement programme' for me where I sat in on various different rehearsal rooms, one of which was NTS's production of 'An appointment with the Wickerman' - which is where I first met Johnny McKnight. Although, Wendy Hoose didn't come into play for another couple of years after that. When we were touring with Wendy Hoose, Johnny would often be asked where the idea for the play came from and he would say he had wanted to collaborate with Birds of Paradise for a long time but he came up with the idea when he met me and thought I had a really great pair of boobs so wanted to write a sexy story about a girl in a wheelchair... Funnily enough I never tired of hearing him tell that story.

For those of you who didn't see Wendy Hoose, I should mention it did contain scenes of a sexual nature... Considering this was my first professional acting job I was (I think, understandably) nervous about performing the more risqué scenes. I remember driving to rehearsals on the day I knew we would be rehearsing both the vibrator and fingering scenes... My hands were literally sweating on the steering wheel. And to top it off, my mum sat in the very front row on opening night! Apart from the nerves I loved telling Laura and Jakes story - it was hilarious, moving and relatable to all kinds of people. It truly was a joy to perform every night.

The play ended up running for about 2 and a half years. I believe we did 74 shows in total, which also means 74 creme eggs... We toured Scotland, went to the Fringe, London and finished off in Madrid and Valencia. It's very funny listening to people discuss how to translate, 'mashed tattie legs', into Spanish. I was amazed at how well it translated actually, the laughs may have come at different places but they were still there. That's something Birds of Paradise do really well.

Laughing at themselves. Making people feel comfortable to laugh when they think they really shouldn't laugh. Creating an immensely human quality that means it doesn't matter who you are or where in the world you live, we can all enjoy these characters and their stories.

I really owe a lot to this show. It taught me to be brave as an actor, to embrace the fact that people will always have different opinions. It taught me to have courage and integrity when telling the stories I want and think should be told. To always fly the flag for accessibility - that it's possible to make it work for everyone and that it can be entertaining at the same time. And although Hollyoaks is very different to theatre, I still work with these words in mind.

Birds of Paradise continue to fight every day to get exceptional disabled actors centre stage, to tell their stories accurately and to tell them in a way that people actually want to hear them. I'm so very honoured to have been a part of their history and to continue to be their cheerleader. I can only hope that in the likely event that I one day get killed off in Hollyoaks that you employ me again in the future!

Congratulations on an incredible 25 years of success, I wish you 25 more and beyond. Thank you for everything.