

AMY TRIGG: Hello. In the autumn of 2015, I was sitting in a car with my Mum trying to make excuses not to go into the big building to my right. We were in central London, and I was due to attend my first improve class. What am I doing? Why I am doing this to myself. Mum why aren't you listening to me. God!

This went on for half an hour before I realised that I was in fact not a 4 year old.

I went into the class and my molecules were rearranged.

Time for a bit of back story.

My name is Amy Trigg, I am 25 years old, and I was born with spina bifida. I have always wanted to be an actor. That's a lie; for a while I wanted to be a spy, or a con artist, but my parents couldn't find any local classes so I got sent to ballet instead.

In my GCSE dance class a boy pointed at me and said: why is she even here? She can't dance. She's in a wheelchair. I immediately fled the dance studio, and cried beneath the school stage, because it felt more dramatic than the accessible bathroom.

10 years later, I would remember that moment as I sat onset filming a dance solo for a film. I dearly hope that boy goes to see that film and tells his children that he once danced with me.

I auditioned for over 13 drama schools, I applied for mostly musical theatre courses but then someone made a meaningless comment about those courses wanting beautiful humans and strong dancers with long legs and me being a slightly awkward vulnerable 4 foot 11, 17 year old I immediately changed all of my applications to the acting course.

Except for one, I kept my audition for Mountview Academy of theatre arts musical theatre course. I cried after my audition, because I wanted it so badly. One month shy of 18th birthday I got on to the musical theatre course at Mountview with a DADA scholarship.

Drama schools are not the most accessible of places. Mountview did not have a lift in its main building until January of my first year. It was a slow stair lift which for

health and safety reasons had a massive flashing light and an ear piercing alarm, my petition to get the alarm changed to something like "Amy is coming", went ignored.

There was no accessible bathroom in the musical theatre department. So I had to use the toilet upstairs in the offices. Which was actually fine because it meant I could go to the loo without someone next to me belting Defying Gravity from Wicked.

The building was not especially Amy friendly. But the people, they were. I had lessons on how to support myself vocally from a sitting position. I had private dance classes to work out how to adapt different styles of dance, and the man in the canteen always had a toasted tea cake ready for me. They got me.

It was not easy though. There were times when the scars of secondary school reared their ugly heads. The comments made in my GCSE dance class sometimes crept into my mind like a disease. Years of being bullied meant I thought it was okay to eat lunch alone in the accessible bathroom.

News flash, it is not okay.

I had hypnotherapy to work on my anxiety and stage fright. I battled with personal demons, were left raw by the gruelling curriculum. But I got to act, sing and dance all day every day. How lucky was I?

And then I went into the real world; have you guys mean there? It's awful. And wonderful and confusing. I got a lovely show case, and booked my first small TV gig quite soon after.

And then it went quiet. We quickly realised that I was only being seen for disabled characters. Of which, there are very few. Throw in the fact that most theatres are inaccessible back stage, even after multi million pound refurbishments, and you have a recipe for fun employment.

In my first year out of drama school I was told I did not look disabled enough. So there I was, 21 years old, being told I was either too disabled or not disabled enough.

The parts I was being seen for, they were mostly not gender or disability specific, and I often went to general auditions which basically means that I, a white female

wheelchair user who was 21, would audition alongside a blind 42 year old black man for a part that did not even exist, yeah inclusivity: sign me up.

I then became quickly aware of the amount of non-disabled actors playing disabled characters. I would make a list here but we literally don't have time. Apparently I had been living in some kind of Amy dream land where I was not super aware about these things until they directly affected me. Classic white girl syndrome.

So, we're now in summer of 2015, keep up Janice, I read Tina Fey's Bossy Pants and Amy Poehler's Yes Please. Both are amazing memoirs, written by strong female comedic actors, writers and producers. And you should immediately buy them.

Both Amy and Tina talk at length about improvisation. Queen Tina Fey describes wanting to be a part of this improv sketch group, but the group not wanting another woman because they just weren't the parts. And her Royal highness Tina Fey was like dude, we're creating the parts ourselves, it is improv. and long story short she got on the team, and I thought hold up dame Fey, I can create my own parts, I can be a doctor or a lover or a reindeer and not just an emotional tool or tick box.

Game changer, so I signed up to that scary first improv class, and everything that Tina and Amy told me would happen happened.

My molecules were rearranged. I started saying yes to things. I stopped apologising for existing. I embraced being weird and playful and odd and childish and grown up. I got better at communicating with people. I felt more comfortable in my own skin. I smiled with all my teeth and said what I wanted to say. I did things before I was ready. I signed up to a stand up competition because I thought it would be fun and scary; it was, I won.

London improv venues are mostly above pubs with no lifts, which means my opportunities as a performer are somewhat limited. So, I built my own arc. In 2016, I set up Essex based improv group Ladies in Convenience, our shows are BSL interpreted, and we are currently working on integrating audio description into our performances.

Our venues are wheelchair accessible, and we try to keep ticket prices low. There should not be a hierarchy for access. That's what I have learnt.

In all my time improvising I have never done a scene based round my disability. We've never ignored the fact I'm in a wheelchair and arguably all of my characters have been disabled, but it is never been the main focus of a scene.

So, what has happened since that first improv class? Well I played one of my dream roles, Laura in the Glass Menagerie here at this, beautiful theatre I toured the country playing Sally in the Who's Tommy with ramps on the moon, I originated a role in a new comedy Goth Weekend at the Stephen Joseph theatre and live theatre Newcastle, I shot a dance sequence for a film, spoiler alert. I am a dancer in a wheelchair. I have certainly got a long way to go. But it allowed me to play the characters that I have always wanted to play. Which makes this sometimes restrictive industry easier to swallow.

I want to do a lot of things. I would love to play Sally Bowles in cabaret. And I would be totally down for playing a strong disabled lead in an episode of Black Mirror on Netflix. Just putting it out there!

In order for all these things to happen, I need people to 'yes and' me. 'Yes and' is an improv term for accepting and building. It is about working together, seeing things from a different point of view, and building on new ideas. So, basically, I need a theatre company to agree that Sally Bowles could totally be a wheelchair user and I need the writers of black mirror to agree that we need a banging episode of Black Mirror with a kick ass disabled lead. And I am happy to play them.

Let's continue to 'yes and' each other. Accept each other for who we are, whether doctor, lover, or reindeer, and not what we have previously been expected to be. It is going to be great; thank you. {Applause}.