

LBS3E4 - Act Naturally, with Alex Bulmer and Shayla Brown

Shayla: Learning how to, how to advocate for the character's. Authenticity was always something that has been really important to me. Saying, Hey, I don't think that this would actually happen, is something that I, it's, it's hard to say and it's hard to be like, um, yeah, this doesn't feel right, but like, I've learned how to do it.

And that was important to me because I never want to feel like I'm some caricature of blindness because I'm not, I'm a person.

Alex: that is such a difficult position to be in. I Shayla, I, I, I hear you. You have to make sure that you're, that you're not playing blind. You're playing a character who is blind. And I would agree entirely with the strategy of thinking about other people. And that definitely has got me through those difficult times because you don't want other people to see a stereotype or a caricature, and if you don't speak up, these things will just keep happening. So I often feel like I have a responsibility also to the next blind actor that may come along. So it, yeah, it's a, it's a lot to hold, I have to say.

Naomi: theater, tv, cinema. Media in general is an opportunity for people to experience a story that's different from their own and take on the perspective of someone new. I recently listened back to my interview with Alex Bulmer and Shayla Brown, and it was such a pleasure to revisit the insights that both of them had from their places or stages of experience in the theater industry. Alex has been working in the theater industry for a little longer than Shaila, and yet something that surprised me was that Alex has had, while some negative experiences, positive experiences as well. I remember she talked about the barriers to entry in the theater industry.

So for example, the ball exercise. and how the people that she was working with at the theater school were not open to her trying something different or making an adaptation. They were trying to stop her before she could even get in the door. Shayla, on the other hand, had a mentor, somebody to help her break down barriers related to ableism. But on the other hand, she's just started in her career and so Maybe with time she may have more of that positive feedback that Alex had in the example of students coming from Brantford School for the Blind. Whenever I talk with guests on this show, it's always a good reminder that unfortunately we have a long way to go in terms of understanding that disability, blindness or other forms of intersection, are not barriers to participation in these different activities. It's

instead, as you'll hear in this podcast, the attitudes of people around the person that constitute or make up the biggest barriers. I hope that this interview reaffirms the importance of representation in the stories that we hear from people.

I certainly learned quite a lot from Alex and Shayla; I learned about the theater industry. I learned about how it's not difficult to make adaptations to allow anyone to participate and act. I hope you enjoy listening to this podcast as much as I enjoyed speaking with Alex and Shayla.

Welcome to Living Blind. I'm your host, Naomi Hazlett, and this podcast is brought to you by Balance for Blind Adults, located in Toronto, Canada. This season of Living Blind is sponsored by Accessible Media Inc. Here at Living Blind we explore the perspectives and lived experiences of people with sight loss, and delve into barriers, challenges, and real life strategies for living life to the fullest.

Before we bring our guests in, I wanna bring up one news item. By Popular Demand, the Living Blind Podcast is now on YouTube. Subscribe to the Balance for Blind Adults YouTube channel so you never miss an update; and share your thoughts in the comment section. For those who prefer to listen on podcast, not to worry, this will not change how we produce the show going forward.

And now, let's get to Alex and Shayla. Alex Bulmer is an award-winning actor, playwright, and a BAFTA nominated screenwriter, Named one of the most influential disabled artists by UK's Power Magazine, she has over 30 professional years of experience across theater, film, radio, and education. She is the co-founder of the Fire and Rescue team, former artistic director of Common Boots Theatre, and was recently Lead Curator of the Co-mmotion Festival 2022 with Harbor Front Center. Shayla Brown is a stage and screen actress based in Toronto. She made her professional theater debut in Toronto in the world premiere of George f Walker's Orphans for the Czar, in which she played rayisha, alongside Eric Peterson and Paolo Santalucia. At the age of 19, she has already shown great promise, appearing in Sarah Polley's upcoming feature film 'Women talking,' as well as the Apple tv original series, See. Shayla has also appeared in various productions in her home community of Midland Ontario, most notably in Drayton entertainment's production of Joseph and the amazing Technicolor Dream Coat, where she was a member of the children's chorus.

And together they join us for this installment of living Blind: Act naturally.

Naomi: Welcome to the show, Shayla and Alex.

Alex: Thank you.

Shayla: Hi, thank you.

Naomi: So I kind of wanna start from the beginning today. How did both of you get into theater and performing arts? What was that like for you in terms of your journey?

Alex: Who would you like to begin? ,

Naomi: Either one. How about you, Alex, why don't we start with you?

Alex: All right. Chronological order back in the day. Um, . I, uh, I, I had always wanted to be an actor. That's how I had started out. And I started theater school at Ryerson, knowing that I had just, uh, a couple of years before that been diagnosed with an eye condition called retinitis pigmentosa. And the interesting thing about getting into Ryerson, It was the third of three schools that I had auditioned for, and I decided after the first two not to say anything about the fact that I had an eye condition because at one of the auditions for another one of the schools, um, I had made the shortlist. And when I told the head of the school that I had an eye condition and he said, oh, you couldn't possibly train to be an actor because we do so much ball work. And I said, well, what does that, what does that mean? He said, well, you need to be able to throw and catch a ball. And I just thought, what, you know, if I was trying to train to be a baseball player, I can appreciate that skill.

But it is just one of those sort of significant moments in my experience of being a blind person in this profession where you have to deal with a lot of limited attitudes. And so I didn't say anything about my eye condition and I went to Ryerson. But in, in my second year, my eyesight started to really have an impact and I decided to switch into training to be a voice teacher.

So, um, that took me over to the UK and I was introduced to a fantastic disabled led theater company in the UK and that really opened up my mind and so many opportunities. And, um, I'll, I'll stop there, but that, that's sort of the beginning of my story.

Naomi: And before we kind of dig into some of those experiences that you've had Alex, Shayla, how did you get started in the theater industry?

Shayla: Um, I was very young and, uh, when it's summer vacation, when you're young, you look for something to do and the only thing that seemed to appeal to me was theater camp. And so that's what I did, and I did my very first production, I think I was like eight years old. I was a sheep in a production of "The Boy Who Cried Wolf", and I fell in love with it then, and then I just, I just kept wanting to do it to my parents like, "oh God, what, what does that mean? Why? What does she, she wants to do that. Okay, great". So I auditioned for a production of "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat", which was put on by the Kings Wharf Theater, uh, with Drayton Entertainment. And that was like a professional theater company who also has children's choruses participate in their production sometimes. And so I auditioned for that and I got in and I really was given an opportunity to find my independence there. In a way that I feel like I, I hadn't been able to find anywhere else because people are always very hesitant about working with blind people, but there, they weren't, and they were like, "no, she's got it, she's fine". And that was a very affirming moment in my life, was like just in the middle of this busy tech rehearsal, I remember an adult cast member, well-intentioned, tried to help me across the stage and the director stopped and said, "no, no, she's got it. She can do it herself". And that was a really small moment, but it made a big impact on my life and I, I guess that's when it was like, yeah, this is all I can see myself doing and I, I can't see myself doing anything else.

Naomi: It really sounds like for both of you, there were barriers to getting started. And it sounds like both of you had more of those barriers coming from maybe sighted people or able-bodied people not understanding how someone with partial sight or vision loss could be an actor. And I have to say, I mean it's in a sense, it's sort of funny, the story you shared with me, Alex, about catching a ball, I mean, it just seems like such a strange requirement of the profession. So I'm sure maybe you can talk a little bit more about what sorts of barriers are out there in the theater industry that you just feel like are completely unnecessary or arbitrary or getting in the way for, of people really getting into this craft.

Alex: Yeah. Well, you know, that, that story is funny. Um, it was, you know, not so funny at the time. But it's, you know what, it's a, it, it, it reveals something that is a, a problem that I have experienced time and time again, both in the profession and also in the education industry. You know, the performing arts education. So that little, that little story about the ball, you know, I know what that exercise is for

because I've used it and adapted it so that it is inclusive for blind people. It's not about whether you can catch a ball. It's actually, it's, there's a few things that that exercise is trying to achieve. It's trying to achieve focus a sense of an ensemble. Um, that's, that's really what that exercise is for. So you've, you just, once you get to the core of your, of what you're trying to do, whether you're teaching, performing arts, or in a scene, if you understand what it is, you're really, what the intention is, then that opens the door to, um, I guess the word is adaptations, but I kind of like to think of it in a, a slightly more creative way as it, it opens creative pathways that you otherwise would not have thought of. So, but I, but I've come across that everywhere and I've, as I've worked with teachers and directors thinking this way, I think in every single case, they all agree that, um, that the inclusion of a blind person or a person with a disability, once they get their head outside of the box that has limited their, um, thinking, they discover ideas that, that, um, they otherwise wouldn't have thought of. And, and it's, uh, it, it's an opportunity is what it is.

Naomi: Mm-hmm. . So I wanna go back to you Shayla, for a bit. So you mentioned that first spark that kind of turned into a passion for, for acting, when somebody invited you in, you know, someone recognized that you could do this work. Can you tell us a little bit more about where your career as an actress went from there?

Shayla: Um, well it actually didn't really go anywhere until, uh, the pandemic when someone, I know David Connolly, he emailed me and he was like, "Hey, they're looking for people to do this like TV show on Apple who are blind. Do you wanna do it"? And I was just like, "you know what? I have nothing to do. Sure, why not"? Um, and so I auditioned like six times and I got like a day player job on that show. Um, and I, I was filming TV was never my plan, but then when I started doing it, I was like, "oh, I actually really like this too". Um, and you know, it helps that the environment on "See" is um, different to a lot of other TV shows because of how, how hard they work to make sure that the blindness is, um, you know, incorporated well and all the blind people are treated amazingly on set. Um, so that was a really great first experience with film and television. And then like, things just kept coming I guess, because, um, you know, you make one connection and boom, you kind of, you, you keep getting stuff. Um, the same casting director who had done "See" reached out to me and they were like, "hey, we're looking for people to play these teen roles in Women Talking". And so I auditioned and actually I didn't get it. Um, but then a few months later I heard from the director, Sarah was like, "I liked you so much that I wrote a role for you". Which was crazy and still blows my mind to this day. Um, but that was my first like supporting

character in film and television. And you know. Things just like I wasn't expecting to do film and television either. So like things just like happen for a reason and you just gotta keep saying yes.

Naomi: Yeah, for sure I. Do you feel like there's a difference between live theater and film? Can you tell us a little bit about your experience with maybe the similarities and differences between the two or maybe other formats that you've done?

Shayla: Um, yeah. The biggest difference for me is that, um, theater requires you to be a bigger version of yourself. Um, whereas film actually came more naturally to me because I'm not, I'm not naturally like, "look at me, big physicality person". And in fact, I used to like hate that. I used to be like so small within myself. And in film, I was just able to let my face tell the story. And even that is scary enough because like as a blind person, I only know what my face does when it's in a certain emotion. I don't know if that's the same as everyone else. And it really makes you think like, is this actually what they're looking for or is it, is it just me? But you eventually learn that your instincts are amazing and they will guide you to where you need to find yourself emotionally. Uh, but for theater, it's, it's, you know, you've gotta, you've gotta be big. And I wasn't that naturally. So like, I guess I just like picked a really big challenge for myself because, um, you know, theater and film is a completely different set of tools. I think.

Alex: Yeah, I would agree totally. Um, in my experience of the two I, what I like about, um, film and television is that it's a little easier I find with film and television to, you know, get, get in and off the set. You know, you can sort of get yourself into position and then the cameras come on and you're usually having to navigate yourself through space, through a, a relatively short amount of time before the director says, you know, "cut". Whereas with theater on stage, your need to be able to navigate can go on and on and on for quite an extended amount of time. So I find it actually far less stressful with film and television. Um, and it's funny cause I did "See" as well for the first season, so that's kind of fun to hear that you were in it as well, Sheila.

Shayla: Mm-hmm. Yeah, I would, I would agree. I think that like with film, they've got production assistants who can make sure that you get from point A to point B, whereas a theater, its like, "yeah, you just gotta like learn how to get back to your dressing room from backstage, which is also really dark and there's also like a bunch of obstacles, but like, have fun. You're gonna be fine". So learning

how to, how to do that, um, as a blind person was like a completely other thing that like no one else had to worry about. I mean, and I, I'm also a guide dog user, so it was like, how are we, how are we adapting this and how are we making sure that I'm getting to where I need to be? That's a whole different set of things that no one else considers.

Alex: Yeah, exactly. . It's not just what's on stage, it's how we get around, you know, how, how we get around those, all those buildings that the work happens in. It's true.

Naomi: Yeah. That's a good point. I, I guess, I'm wondering if there's any kind of ways that you have to adapt. You know, forgive me, I'm not a theater person, but I think my understanding it's called blocking or basically moving around the stage, making sure you're positioned in the right spot. Alex, maybe you can start by telling me a bit about how that works?

Alex: Yeah, well, I guess, um, some, just a recent experience was I, I was, um, I played Friar Lawrence in "R and J" last, uh, summer at Stratford. And so it was really interesting the, the set designer communicated with me months before the rehearsal process started because she wanted to know, how to design a space that would be best suited to enabling my mobility. So I took the, the Zoom camera and walked her around my apartment and just showed her a few things. Like I, I prefer a square table rather than a round table, because the angles of a square table give me more defined direction. I have rugs in certain parts of my apartment so that, you know, I get under floor, tactile information under my feet. Just things like that. Um, and so, so she designed the set and that it was lucky that I was, they set it in Friar Lawrence's home so she could design it to, to be. Designed for, uh, a person who was blind. So we had the square table and we had rugs, and it didn't look, you know, to, to an audience. They wouldn't think, oh look, you know, they, they designed their show cuz there was a blind person on stage. You would not know that. But it was just so interesting. And, and also she created a garden around the edge of the space with, um, a, with a pebble garden. So there was like, on both sides there were plants and then at the front there were, it was a pebble garden and it was a round circuit. They had a, a curve to the set. The stage had a curve so that, you know, if my feet hit that pebble garden, I knew not to go any further. And there were other interesting things we had, we had, we taped down pennies. The audience couldn't see, but there were pennies taped down on certain items on the set that also gave me directions when my hand reached for the pennies, and that sort of just reminded me, oh, yes, I need to head that way. And the other actors,

they put extra metallic material under the other actors' shoes so that I was more able to hear their footsteps. So just stuff like that, it really helps and it's, and it's fun.

Naomi: How about yourself, Shayla? Is there any ways that you've adapted moving around, whether it's in the theater or on a film set?

Shayla: Yeah, I was in theater camp this summer and that was fun. And uh, this was my first like professional theater camp experience, which was amazing. But, um, I was put in an environment where it was very safe to ask for those, uh, accommodations, which sometimes you don't always feel like you're given the space you need to ask, but in this case it was. And so like simple things like I, I have a little bit of vision, so can we have tape on these, this set of stairs. And um, there, there was this like, I guess kind of like a spiral staircase where the stairs are kind of like curled together. I don't know if I'm explaining that correctly. But, um, it was kind of like that down the center of the stage, and I had to go down it several times. Uh, luckily with a guide because there's no railings. And, um, yeah, I wasn't doing that by myself without a guide. But also, like, I found that because the stairs were white, I couldn't see where the next step begun. So just like little things like making sure there's like a contrasting color of tape so that I can, I can get around. Um, and then also, I think that when you have a blind person in the cast, it can create some really interesting ways of moving around. Um, I was in a production at Crow's Theater this April and we got to like incorporate things from not just theater, but like I brought up how sometimes when we run as blind people in like a cross country running setting we use a tether. And we got to incorporate that into one of our scenes. And then in that production I was also like, um, basically what was going on in the, the scene was a dangerous situation and we were like, "would it be correct that if this situation was happening, your scene partner could just like throw you up on his back and start running"? And I was like "yeah, you could do that". So like, we got to create some things that like we never would've tried if I wasn't there. And like, um, I think just incorporating those blind things, not just from theater, but also like from sports, all the things that you learn in life, they, they do come in handy in the theater and I think that's so cool!

Naomi: Mm-hmm. , I think what I like most about your answers, Alex and Shayla, is that. About how creative you can get. It's not that making these adaptations or taking any way anything away from the production. In fact, that creativity really seems to just be adding to the dynamics and the performance and the set design and pretty much everything.

Alex: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, that, I think that's why I, that's why I use the word opportunity. It's a, it's an opportunity. It's, it's, you know, it's creative gain. And I, you know, I, I, I, I think that happens in many cases with people, you know, but per, perhaps we're not as aware of it because people who don't have. Who aren't blind, you know, can function without thought, let's say. But still, I think every artist, every actor brings something of themselves to a production. So I kind of, I like to normalize it a little bit and think, you know, we're doing this for everybody, but we just happen to bring some really cool new opportunities to the process.

Naomi: Yeah, for sure. I. in particular Alex, I know that you not only have acted, but you've written and created productions. So can you tell us a little bit more about how you brought yourself to creating productions of your own?

Alex: Yes. Well, I guess the first one was I started making short films back in the nineties, and uh, I was interested in what I could do with, with, with the camera in terms of blurring the screen and, you know, putting fog over images to try and just play a little bit with, um, differing levels of, of seeing. Um, and then I wrote a play called "Smudge", which was at the Terragon in, in, uh, 2000. And it was based on my experience of site loss and I just found, I, I, you know, I, I found the creative outlet, you know, speaking with, with my own voice and speaking to my own experience. It, it really, it was a, it really helped, I think, get me through what was a very difficult time and, you know, kind of continues to be, I think. I don't think acquired blindness, you know, has a, it's a, it's a challenge for your whole life, but creativity and, and, and finding a voice uh, within that experience has been incredibly, um, motivating for me. And right now I'm writing a play called "Perceptual Archeology, how to Travel Blind". And it's about my experience of traveling across Europe and North America as a blind person. And I was really interested in, you know, how, how we navigate unfamiliar spaces and experience, uh, this notion of, of travel. Um, so yes, writing film, and, uh, creating theater has definitely been both therapeutic and also really creatively, um, exhilarating.

Naomi: Mm-hmm. . And just remind me where the Tarragon Theater is.

Alex: Terragon Theater's in Toronto. Yeah. The Tarragon Theater's in Toronto, Ontario.

Naomi: Okay.

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Sheila, I know. I'm not actually sure whether or not you've written anything yourself, but either way, we were talking about how being an actor and being in theater, you always, no matter who you are, bring part of yourself into the role. So I'd like to hear from you what your thoughts are. I mean, , I'm not sure how much of yourself you bring to a role, uh, like being a sheep, although you can definitely tell me otherwise. But you know, on a serious note, how do you kind of navigate that experience of being an actor, being in a role, but then also bringing yourself and your experience to the table?

Shayla: Um, well a lot of it is, um, when a blind character has been written for you or written and someone who is cited has written it you do have to come in and, um, try and fight for their integrity a bit because sighted people writing blind characters, from my experience, it's hit or miss. Um, and so learning how to, how to speak from my own experience and how to say "no, we don't, that doesn't actually happen", was something I had to learn pretty quickly. And it wasn't easy because, um, as well as being the blind person in the room, I was also often the youngest in the room. And that's, you know, that's very hard because it, there is a power structure in the theater industry, um, whether we like to talk about it or not. And like, speaking up for, for yourself is really hard. Um, and making sure that these blind characters are given authentic voices can be hard. But I think what, uh, made it easier for me was knowing that it wasn't just about me, it could be someone who's coming to the theater and seeing themselves in this character, and I don't want to frame that in some sort of light that is not realistic. That would be a betrayal to my own community. And, um, so learning how to, how to for the character's authenticity was always something that has been really important to me. Saying, "hey, I don't think that this would actually happen", is something that I, I've always, you know, it's, it's hard to say and it's hard to be like, um, "yeah, this doesn't feel right", but like, I've learned how to do it. And, uh, that was important to me because I never want to feel like some caricature of blindness because I'm not, I'm a person.

Naomi: Hmm. Has that been something you've experienced as well, Alex?

Alex: Oh, yes, yes, um. Yes, I have. And it is, um, that is such a difficult position to be in, i, Shayla, I hear you. Uh uh, it's, um, It's, yes, it's very difficult to feel like

you have to, um, you have to make sure that you're, that you're not playing blind. You're playing a character who is blind. Um, and there is such a difference between the two, but I have definitely experienced that and it's a very lonely place to be. And I would agree entirely with the strategy of thinking about other people, and that definitely has got me through those difficult times. Because you don't want other people to see a stereotype or a caricature. And, and really, you know, uh, if you don't, if you don't speak up, these things will just keep happening. So I often feel like, Uh, I have a responsibility also to the next blind actor that may come along. So it, yeah, it's a, it's a lot to hold, I have to say. It's a, it's a lot of responsibility and, um, you know, it's, it's admirable, but I also, um, it's, it's so important that we are respected - that is the, for what we're trying to do. We're not trying to be troublemakers, we're not trying to be difficult, you know, it's, it's so important.

Naomi: I have a question for both of you about kind of getting that reception from other people. Can you tell me about the kind of feedback you've gotten about your performances, about your work, whether it's from sighted or blind people, reviews, or just people coming up to you. Can you talk a little bit about how that work that you're doing, whether it's just the everyday work of acting or the work of advocacy, how does that resonate with people in your experience?

Alex: Well, I'll give you a, um, a, a, an answer to that just because it's just popped into my head. Um, because it meant the world to me.

Uh, at "R and J" last summer, um, I was on stage and I, I heard. I heard the sound of a, of a, of a talking phone, in the audience. And then I heard another one and another one about, oh, , I think there's some, some blind people in the audience. And then somebody told me that a school, they thought that they'd seen what looked like school aged Young people at the play. So I thought, oh, I wonder if the Branford School for the Blind had come. So I phoned the Branford School and I said, did you send some students to the show? And the teacher said, oh my gosh. We sent, I think they sent 28 students at that particular trip, and another 25 or something came the following week.

And I said, well, I wanna, I'd love to speak to the students after the show. So I did. And it was so amazing for me to hear the impact it was having on them, because they never, and you know, it'll never be the same for any, any blind people that saw Shayla. You know, most of them have never even thought that they'd be on stage.

Um, the idea of, of being a professional is, was just, you know, mind-boggling you know, just, it just totally opened their minds to possibilities that they hadn't thought of. And the teacher told me that they were going to, um, the next, this, this year, they were going to adapt a play, the way that we'd adapted Romeo and Juliet.

So we'd adapted it to have integrated description in the script and so that the kids were really excited about finding a play and then imagining blind people in the audience and then and adapting it. So that's definitely a highlight of a response to me as a blind actor on the stage.

Naomi: I wanted to just pause for a second, ask about integrated description. So from what I understand to access a theater production; if you are a blind person, you can ask for an audio description of what's happening on stage, but. What you said just got me very excited because it sounds like you had the actors themselves integrating descriptive language.

Is that right?

Alex: Yes, that's right. So you, when you adapt a play or, or I've done this also just with um, New writing, but I find it really exciting when you, when you actually have a play and you adapt it, you um, yeah. You create dialogue that does the work of setting up the action and clarifying the action. And it needs to be done effectively.

So it's not clunky, but you can also do it in a stylized way. I mean, I've done it in so many different plays, but I, every time I do it, It's a different approach because every play has a, you know, has a different, um, a different style and a different aesthetic. So, but yes, that is exactly what I'm talking about, that the actors are delivering audio description.

And you also, the sound designers can be involved in that process too. You know, you can, you can come up with sound designs that also help to clarify what's happening, what the action is.

Naomi: That is very cool. It is fun, as I'm sure the audio, yeah, the audio and the sound effects. And it sounds like there's a lot of thought that can be put into that whole layer of the experience.

Alex: Yeah.

Naomi: And, and Shayla, have you received any feedback about your work as an actor? Uh, have people approached you and let you know what their experience of your work has?

Shayla: Um, I haven't, I don't think I've run into any blind people yet, but I think learning how to deal with the feedback of the cited is its own specific beast.

Sometimes, not all the time. Um, but when I was in previews for the show I did at Crows in Toronto. There was a note that, um, well, things had gotten mis-communicated anyways, so the way the note was handed to me was, uh, and this was not the way it was actually intended, but you know, the damage had already been done.

The way it was handed to me was, she doesn't look blind enough. Um, because I, I, I'm a fast walker. I adapt really well, and you know, I wasn't using a cane or anything. I was just doing my thing, getting around. Um, and I remember throughout the rehearsal process of the show, um, they tried to incorporate some sort of stick to use as a cane.

And it was like, no, that was stupid. I hated it! So I think, um, something that I took away from that is, man, we really have failed in our educating people on disabilities and like, just like how we live in general because. People really don't know that we don't stumble around and walk in sunglasses. And you know, all these big stereotypes, like people genuinely think it's the truth!

Uh, and it drives me insane. And you know, of course at the time I was like, are you kidding me? That is ridiculous. But like, it, it goes to show how much we've, we've failed at representation in the previous, you know, we've, we've really failed. If this is what they think that blind people are, supposed, to look like.

Um, so I think that's something for me was like learning how, how to deal with that kindly and like also making sure that people know that no blindness doesn't have a look. And the way I, my physicality is, and the way I get around is just as valid and it doesn't mean that I'm not blind, like. I am just as blind as, you know, as can be.

Um, but maybe I don't look like what you'd expect, but my, my experience is just as valid.

Naomi: I'm sorry to hear that's been your experience, Shayla. It's, it's frustrating to hear that sighted people are saying, oh, you're not, you don't look blind enough because you don't, you, you are who you are and that's enough, but it's, it is too bad.

Those stereotypes are still out there in the world. I feel like this is a good point to transition into one of my last questions, which is, and maybe I'll start with Alex. What do you want the theater and film and radio, the performing arts industry to know about blind actors, about inclusion, about anything else that you have to say to people working in that industry?

Alex: Um, well, uh, that we are actors. , um, and consider us actors who work with blindness as part of our, as a tool. That's one of our tools, just like a sighted actor uses, um, site as one of their tools. So think of it that way, that, um, that blindness is our tool. And, you know, I think it's, I think it's great that, um, Well, I think it's not just great.

I think it's essential that, uh, theater companies and film companies are starting to actually cast blind people in roles that have been written for blind people. I, I really believe that that is the way it needs to be, now, from now on, there's no more excuses because there's, there's not just one of us out there anymore.

There's actually quite a few people who are. Who are in the performing arts and are blind. And so those opportunities, um, need to go to blind actors. But also I think it's really interesting to consider us like, um, Ravi did for r and j. You know, Freyer Lawrence isn't written as a blind character, so consider the possibilities also of casting us as characters that aren't written.

for blind people because, um, that might open up other interesting possibilities. Or it might just be, it happens to be the actor happens to be blind and it's, you know, it, it might not be, uh, it might not have any other impact on the play, but, so I think it's, it's not to be limited in just one of those camps, you know, just think of us as actors and blindness as a tool.

Naomi: That makes a lot of sense. Shayla, any additional thoughts from your end?

Shayla: I mean, That sentiment has always been my thing too, is that like, yes, I do want to represent my community authentically and I want to play these characters that are written for blind people because there isn't an excuse anymore.

And like we've gotten to the point where, Casting choices are very important, and yet disability is still, like, sometimes it still does happen where someone who isn't disabled is playing a disabled character and there isn't an excuse anymore because there, there are a lot of us waiting for our chance that you, you could look for.

Um, so going with someone who isn't disabled for whatever reason, because they have a big name, because you know, whatever. That's not acceptable anymore. And yeah, give us a chance because I think we're pretty great! Like I think that when you put a blind actor in a character who maybe necessarily isn't written as blind, but you know, that's the choice you go with, it creates some really interesting choices that you never would've thought of if it hadn't been for that person coming in at the time they did.

And, um, so like, I'd say my, my message is to don't be afraid to be brave and try this new thing. And yeah, you're gonna have to like communicate with these people, but you know, that's what we do anyways as performers is we talk to each other. So like, don't be afraid of those conversations that seem tough to have.

Naomi: Yeah, I think that's great advice for the industry as a whole. I'm thinking about people who are listening to the podcast and thinking, "I'd like to give acting a try!" And I think both of you have given a lot of great pieces of advice and tips. Anything else you'd like the listeners to know who are maybe thinking, you know, I'd like to be an actor.

I have vision loss. Where do I get started?

Alex: Hmm. Um. Yeah, I mean, I, I, gosh, there's so many ways, to be honest. You know, theater school is great for some people and it's not great for others. You know, like it's, um, I don't think there's one way, to be honest. I think, um, I would advise reaching out and contacting people who are in the industry, who are working, who you, who you admire or contacting some schools finding out about what different schools do. Cuz every school will, is a little bit different. And you know, some schools are more physical theatre, and some schools are more text-based. Um, and then there are also, you know, non um, there are less formal ways.

Of getting training maybe, maybe you can apprentice somewhere or, um, find a mentor. But I mean, I went through formal training and it, it really worked for me. So I'm a fan of formal training, but it is not definite. It's not the only way, but I

think, be bold! And get in touch with theaters or, or film companies if you, if you know, uh, of any and you're interested and ask some people to talk to you.

Um, I've been asked that a a few times and I usually say yes, and I just, I think be, yeah. Don't, don't be convinced there's only one way. There's multiple ways. And make sure that it's the right way for you and let people know what your needs are. That's the other, that's a really important element. Is that if people don't understand what your needs are, then chances are things will go wrong.

I'm not suggesting that it's the blind person's responsibility to educate everybody, but I think it's really important to be, just be really clear and it's, "it's not a big deal, it's just that this is what I need." I will need ropes in X, Y, Z, or I, I will need everybody to put all their bags at the edge of the space so that I don't trip over them, whatever.

You know, that's, it's important. So be, you know, feel confident that you can, that you can speak your, your needs.

Naomi: Any thoughts on your end, Shayla, about what you'd want people just getting started out to know about being an actor with partial site?

Shayla: I think. Something really important that I learned was learning what you are and what you aren't responsible for.

Mm-hmm. , like, I'm responsible for learning my lines before I show up to that audition. I'm responsible for knowing the song and I am also responsible for making sure that I have someone to ask those accommodations for. But whatever those repercussions are, uh, I have had, I have, I went through the college audition circuit this year.

And I had asked for an accommodation and, um, they gave it to me. And then they were like, well, that makes us wonder, how will you succeed in this program? Because it was a dance call and I asked for a video so that I could learn beforehand so that I would not, so that I would know the dance by heart, but so that I would be familiar with what was coming and nothing would catch me off guard, which I thought was a safe thing.

Because you know, when you're cited, you have a reference point to look at, and I don't, and I thought that was fair, but then it, it made them start to question my

integrity of being able to make it through the program. So, uh, that really did make me understand why people sometimes don't disclose the disability, because it does make people question you sometimes.

And, you know, I didn't end up going to that school. So I think finding a community of people who are willing to work with you, and if it, if there's an audition that goes bad and like, you know, you didn't feel welcome, then it probably is a good thing that you're not there anyways, because, You wanna be working with the people who are really excited to work with you.

So finding a community of people who will lift you up instead of question everything you do is really important.

Alex: Yes, I would agree. Absolutely. Especially in the early days. Yeah. And, and they are out there and, um, I think that's really wise to identify, "okay, you are not gonna be, you're, you're not gonna enable me to move forward here."

Choosing the right community is, I think, Shayla, you're spot on.

Naomi: Finding your people. I like that.

Alex: Finding your people!

Naomi: As a parting message; excellent. Thank you so much, Shayla and Alex, for being on the show today. Um, Shayla, where can people find you if they wanna get in touch?

Shayla: You can find me on Twitter and Instagram @SopranoShayla. Yeah, I'm pretty, I'm on there all the time. So like, message me if you wanna find out more or like scroll through my page because I do post a lot. And, um, yeah.

Naomi: And Alex, where can people find you?

Alex: Uh, well you can go to my website, AlexBulmer.co.uk. Um, Oh, I have an Instagram, I think it's The Alex Bulmer.

I, I'm so bad with, um, social media, but I believe it's the Alex Bulmer and, um, look for my upcoming website called Perceptual Archeology that we'll be launching soon.

Naomi: Oh, that's exciting. Well, thank you so much Shayla and Alex, it was a pleasure having you on the show. And best of luck for both of you, for your future careers.

Alex: Thanks so much for having us!

Shayla: Thank you so much.

Alex: Take care, Shayla.

Shayla: You too. Take care.

Naomi: And just like that, that's gonna do it for another episode. We're glad you could join us! I really hope that you enjoyed this interview with Alex and Shayla, as much as I enjoyed doing it for you. This business moves quickly, so be sure to give them a follow so you don't miss out on their latest endeavors.

We've got links to their contact info and their respective projects in the description below. Special thanks to Alex Bulmer, Shaila Brown, our producer Jeffrey Rainey, executive producer Deborah Gold, and the entire team at Balance for Blind Adults. Feel free to subscribe and give us a rating and review on whatever platform you're listening on.

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For more information about Balance for blind adults and our programs and services, or to access the show notes in transcription of this episode, please visit us at www.balancefba.org. I'm Naomi Hazlett, and this has been Living Blind Act naturally. Thanks for listening, and I'll see you again in 2022. Happy Holidays!

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