

Kelsey Brown: Hello inclusion believers and welcome to the Access Champions Podcast, associate producer Kelsey Brown here filling in as the host for this week's journey into the galaxies of accessibility, diversity and inclusion. For those of you just joining us for the first time, welcome. For our veteran listeners, you'll know that I tend to stay behind the scenes. However, the team has shifted roles a little the past couple of weeks to allow our creator and host Phil Dallmann some well deserved time off to celebrate his wedding back in May. We've got another great episode for you this week. Phil sat down with the team from Actionplay, an NYC based organization dedicated to providing individuals on the autism spectrum access to education, arts and culture. Stay tuned to hear about how it grew out of the Miracle Project, highlights from their audition workshop and much more.

Kelsey Brown: As always, please give us a shout out on social media. We're at Accesschampion on Instagram and Twitter, Access Championed Podcast on Facebook or accesschampion@gmail.com. We're always looking to interact with you all, whether you have a new idea for a topic I guess we hadn't thought of or logo ideas as we look to expand our representation, we want to hear from you. So without further ado, Access Champion, Aaron, Sara and Ben from Actionplay.

Phil Dallmann: All right. And we are here with the Actionplay team. Aaron Feinstein, their founder, Sara Morgulis, uh, their director of programming and uh, Ben Dworkin their brand ambassador. Thank you guys for joining us.

Aaron Feinstein: Thanks for having us here.

Phil Dallmann: All right. Um, so, uh, you know, I'm a big fan of Actionplay and as I always, uh, disclose, as, as the executive director of Kaiser's Room, um, I love all of the sister organizations like you guys and like, um, CO/LAB and across the board-

Aaron Feinstein: Blue Laces.

Phil Dallmann: Blue laces, yeah. Um, it's just a great, uh, community. Um, but I, I'll say I, you know, I ended up, I didn't really know where Actionplay came from, so I ended up on your website, but I'd love to hear from you Aaron, a little bit of where uh, this organization started from.

Aaron Feinstein: Sure. Um, I started acting play in 2011. I, I come from Los Angeles and, uh, I was part of an organization called the Miracle Project which was just start by Elaine Hall. Um, I was the first director that was brought in for their first ever play that they did.

Phil Dallmann: Oh, cool.

Aaron Feinstein: So we created a, um, a musical from, from the ground up. And I remember thinking, you know, this is an incredible experience to devise with a diverse group of people, um, and really create something original.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Aaron Feinstein: And, uh, I Actionplay really to provide inclusive opportunities for folks in New York City. And I, I was really interested originally in museums and cultural centers. I wanted to make sure that folks could experience those spaces. Um, because I, I basically had a weird experience back in the day where I was at a museum with an autistic, uh, person who I was work- who I was working with-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Aaron Feinstein: I was in home therapists and it was just this whole wild security thing where it was like, they was very clear that folks, um, were, were not really aware of how to approach and to, um, help and to inspire and to work with folks on the autism spectrum. Um, and then what we started to do was we created a team and we really got into our own creation process and creating new works-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Aaron Feinstein: ... and creating musicals as well. Um, and that's something that, that's where Sara and I really started to collaborate and to work on making new original musicals.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Aaron Feinstein: And we love doing it.

Phil Dallmann: (laughs). Well, uh, and that shows, and that shows. And Sara, how did, how did you end up here on, on a Actionplay? The Actionplay team?

Sara Morgulis: So I had an acting background-

Phil Dallmann: Okay.

Sara Morgulis: ... and picked up some theater education while I was in college.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sara Morgulis: I was living in Florida and saw Autism The Musical.

Phil Dallmann: All right.

Sara Morgulis: Which is a documentary about the Miracle Project and the work that Aaron was doing.

Phil Dallmann: Fun Story. That was the first, uh, gift my mom gave me uh, when I landed the job at TDF handling their autism friendly performances was the DVD of, uh, Autism The Musical.

Aaron Feinstein: How cool is that?

Phil Dallmann: Yeah.

Sara Morgulis: It [crosstalk 00:04:46] me. So I saw it down in Florida and then I moved to New York to start my master's degree and googled the Miracle Project, saw that they had a New York branch and that it was two blocks away from where I was living. So I recognized, you know, this is an amazing coincidence, cold called Aaron and said, I want to come and volunteer.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Sara Morgulis: And that was almost eight years ago. And so for every Sunday, for the past eight years, Aaron and Gabriel, who is our music director and artistic director-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Sara Morgulis: ... and I have been doing the thing. And so I was so sort of seduced by the magic of the program. When I first arrived, it was Miracle Project, um, for the first couple of years that I joined. And then we, um, our program became part of Actionplay's programming and the magic in the room of having a theater director like Aaron and a music director or a music therapists-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Sara Morgulis: ... in the room, like Gabe and then other folks who are like maybe speech pathologists or um, occupational therapists, but also just a lot of really dedicated, was so exciting to me. And it was the most creative and collaborative and very messy-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Sara Morgulis: ... environment that I had ever seen. And very true and genuine to the folks who are walking in the room. So if someone came in and they were having a bad day, we wouldn't ignore it. We would sit down and write a song about it and write a song about, um, one of my favorite days that we ever had was, uh, creating a song called Everybody's Got Problems.

Phil Dallmann: Okay (laughs).

Sara Morgulis: And it came in 'cause someone was having a bad day. And then, you know, we wrote it in character-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Sara Morgulis: ... in the world of the show and then it became this amazing song that has lived on. Um, so that's a part of our signature program-

Phil Dallmann: Okay.

Sara Morgulis: ... which is our AIMS program, which stands for Actionplay Improv Musical Sundays. And that's a 25 week musical theater program that serves young adults and teens on the autism spectrum ages, I'll say 13 to 25 or so.

Phil Dallmann: Okay.

Sara Morgulis: And that's our main program that we've been running, um, every year. And we've branched off to different sites, which has been really exciting. And now um, over the years Actionplay has become much more sort of, or not much more, but it has grown in its mission of self advocacy and employment. And so we are getting really excited about serving our young people who are aging out of the system-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Sara Morgulis: ... and are ready to be employed and be hired artists and make money for their art. And um, that came about because we had created the AIMS program and out of that grew Actionplay chorus, which is a chorus of really, really talented singers that are part of our AIMS program.

Phil Dallmann: And correct me if I'm wrong, that chorus was featured on Night of Too Many Stars, right Aaron?

Aaron Feinstein: Yes sir.

Phil Dallmann: How did that come to be?

Aaron Feinstein: It's an amazing opportunity (laughs) that we got.

Phil Dallmann: (laughs).

Aaron Feinstein: Um, actually the, the real story of how that came about is I have a good friend, Norma Tacony who um, is part of the Lonely Islands. And he happened to mention me to Robert and Michelle Smigel who put on the event-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Aaron Feinstein: ... and they checked out the chorus and they invited us. And when it turned out, it was like weird al the first year. I mean, like every nerdy music dude thing that has ever happened to me, kind of like just shined all at once.

Phil Dallmann: (laughs).

Aaron Feinstein: I mean, I was like, this is seriously one of my idols. Um, and it was just such an incredible opportunity to, to perform- for, for to ... I mean, it was just such a, a unique thing because we, we got in the room and we got to perform Yoda with, with Weird Owl.

Phil Dallmann: (laughs).

Aaron Feinstein: And, um, and the chorus just, I mean, they electrified the room too.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Aaron Feinstein: Um, it was a really, really lovely experience. I have to mention [inaudible 00:08:47] because she was on the keys and, and on vocals and was incredible as well. It was, it was just a magical night. And we got to do it again-

Phil Dallmann: Yeah.

Aaron Feinstein: ... and we got to do with [inaudible 00:08:55] uh, and the roots the next year, which was incredibly.

Phil Dallmann: Yeah. And DD. Uh, you know, Questlove, just my, one of my heroes. Uh (laughs).

Aaron Feinstein: And what an amazing guy to work with.

Phil Dallmann: Okay.

Aaron Feinstein: He was just so chill behind the drums, like as like a music director he just was like so direct and so chill. And it was, it was unbelievable.

Phil Dallmann: That's amazing. Uh, Michelle Smigel is also one of my favorite humans. I, uh, was, we had a very fun experience one- my very first year at TDF, um, an unnamed board member at the Gala, um, maybe had a little bit too much wine, um, and I was left as a five month now employee, uh, sat next to Michelle Smigel and this- and said board member uh, while the board members spiraled, uh, into all sorts of a dicey nonsense. And Michelle and I just had the best time (laughs) as she noted. She was like, "You're so new to be dealing with this." Uh, but it was the best. We had so many laughs and so much fun. Um, but uh, I'll, I'll not, you know, she has a dear place in my heart for getting me through that (laughs).

Aaron Feinstein: Wow. Wow (laughs).

Phil Dallmann: She's a top 10 human in my book. Um, that-

Sara Morgulis: Our exp- I was just going say that our experiences of meeting with too many stars I think are super indicative of the Actionplay work and like our hopes and our dedication for the people that we serve and the people that we work with in terms of making the work is an elevated and awesome and impressive as we can. And that is something that we're really committed to. Like in all of our shows, we have a very professional, amazing band on stage with them-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Sara Morgulis: ... and that we work very hard to make the work as great as it can be because, um, because we believe in them and their talents so, so much.

Aaron Feinstein: I mean, we've had a lot of success too I mean, just in the sense of, of folks that have been through the program that are pursuing their passions. Not everybody is a performer um, but a lot of our, our, our, our alums and folks that have been through the program or like one comes to mind, um, who is now a, in his first year at NIFA's conservatory and the music [crosstalk 00:11:07]-

Phil Dallmann: Oh, that's awesome.

Aaron Feinstein: ... program. It's incredible. And he started in our program when he was 13. Um, we have another student who is in the Macaulay Honors program in history. She's like incredible history buff and she's in our show right now Welcome To Our- Welcome To My World, uh, which is the show we're actually premiering, uh, very soon, it might premiere before this podcast, but I hope you guys get a chance, check the video, um, 'cause we're super excited about that show.

Phil Dallmann: And that's at the Sheen Center, right?

Aaron Feinstein: Yup.

Phil Dallmann: Uh, of which, uh, we just gave a bunch of love on our, our year podcast, um, uh, because of their inclusion initiatives, um, Andrew Levine over there and Bill Riley, uh, are, uh, kind of champion in which started with, uh, them diving in t-Common Sense, um, which I was lucky enough to, um, be the community consulting on.

Sara Morgulis: So awesome.

Phil Dallmann: Um, but they are so, uh, it opened up their, uh, eyes and minds to, um, being uh, truly inclusive across the board. I know what they just did was, uh, with their most recent shows, some uh, parent friendly performances where there was

staff, uh, so, uh, parents could leave their kids. Uh, so it removed that barrier of childcare, uh, to seeing the art and all of the staff they were trained, um, professionals, uh, to handle a variety of disabilities or, um, any needs, uh, which was amazing. So I am a big fan of the Sheen, uh, as of the podcast.

Aaron Feinstein: That's incredible. Yeah. And I mean, and like, and like CI/LAB are our good friends and Epic and, and lots of different companies like us seem to be doing their work there.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Aaron Feinstein: So it goes to show that when we're invited into a respectful place-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Aaron Feinstein: ... you know, we, we also, we wanna, the wanna be there.

Phil Dallmann: Spread the word (laughs).

Aaron Feinstein: We spread the word, yes. So true, you know.

Phil Dallmann: Absolutely. Um, so, uh, you were talking, you mentioned, uh, your upcoming show. Uh, tell me a little bit about what is that process, uh, for you guys in, in creating a show?

Aaron Feinstein: Well, so we devise over a period of about 25, 26 Sunday mornings from 10 30 to noon.

Phil Dallmann: Okay.

Aaron Feinstein: And usually it's interesting, we kind of come in and it's almost like we start with like a pitch session of sorts-

Phil Dallmann: (laughs).

Aaron Feinstein: ... where people just start ... 'cause a lot of people have come in with ideas. It's not the first thing we do. I mean we throw it out there that we're going to start talking about ideas for the show, but then it's like the next one after we kind of get settled where the group starts to come in with just ideas of this sort of stuff that they would like to do. And we really have a conversation and we start to write from the beginning, collaborate about what the idea of the show will be.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Aaron Feinstein: Um, and then we build it and I'll, I'll ... Sara you want to talk a little bit about that process?

Sara Morgulis: Definitely. So it- it's such a mix of like sitting around and chatting and sharing ideas as Aaron said, in the ways that that can serve folks. And then also just like getting up on our feet and doing improvs and seeing what funny characters come out. Um, you know, someone in our, in our show is playing a grandfather because in a lot of the scenes that he was coming up with, he was playing older roles and we have realized that he was hilarious as playing sort of an older senior character. And so being, it's always a challenge and an excitement at the beginning to figure out how we create a story that is serving all of them the best that it can in the best light. And so that everyone has their idea out there. And so for instance, this year, the things that they were excited about where aliens.

Phil Dallmann: Who isn't?

Aaron Feinstein: Roy Orbison.

Phil Dallmann: (laughs). Okay.

Sara Morgulis: Autism.

Phil Dallmann: Okay.

Sara Morgulis: Um, so just like space in general, different time periods. Um, anime.

Phil Dallmann: Okay.

Sara Morgulis: Commix.

Phil Dallmann: Okay.

Aaron Feinstein: I mean, I mean, and this year it's like the first time we've done something that we, we've never done before. So typically our shows have never had an autistic character, really don't do anything about autism or anything within-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Aaron Feinstein: ... you know, the shows are about what they're about. Um, and it's an, it's an inclusive cast. We have teen, um, volunteers and folks that come in from performing arts high schools, um, throughout New York City, um, and, and it's an inclusive staff too. And basically, you know, so the shows are, they about things that are, that generate in the room. So, you know-

Sara Morgulis: It's clearly rising up against the man.

Aaron Feinstein: That's true. That seems to be one [crosstalk 00:15:27]-

Phil Dallmann: All right. I mean, that feels like a theme a across the board right now (laughs).

Aaron Feinstein: Yeah. Yeah. So this, this year, it's a show about an autistic young woman and who befriends and extra terrestrial, um, from outer space (laughs).

Phil Dallmann: That's, sounds awesome (laughs).

Aaron Feinstein: And, and it was generated, the idea was originally generated by a, a longtime, um, participant in our program. She kind of came in and she wanted to do an idea about an autistic girl. And she was like sitting on it for like a year. She's like, "I've been really thinking about," she wrote a theme song-

Phil Dallmann: Oh wow.

Aaron Feinstein: And then we put it into the group and then suddenly it turns into something else where it's this story. But now it's also about an alien as well. And there's a Roy Orbison busker and there's just so many elements to just like the whole group gets highlighted. And I mean, through the years, what we've found is that the folks in our group really are passionate about very specific ideas.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Aaron Feinstein: I'm sure you've, you've witnessed this, I'm sure you witness this. You know, and I think that (laughs).

Speaker 5: I have witnessed it. I have witnessed it.

Aaron Feinstein: Um, and I-

Speaker 5: [inaudible 00:16:35].

Aaron Feinstein: And I think that, that the, the passion, um, for, for specific topics and specific kind of, uh, ideas and loves really comes out in the show. Just the individual quality. And it's like what we like to do is kind of shine the light on every person, but at the same time it's this collaborative process. So it's like you can be really into something-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Aaron Feinstein: ... and somebody else can be really into something and both ideas will have equal time within the group and we- and we'll play with them.

Phil Dallmann: That's am- I mean, what a, what a great like devised ensemble, uh, creative work like that. That's fantastic. Um, we're going to take a short break uh, to hear from our sponsors.

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Phil Dallmann: All right, we're back. And uh, now we're going to chat with Ben Dworkin, the brand ambassadors.

Ben: Hi.

Phil Dallmann: Ben, I'd love to hear a little bit about how you got involved with Actionplay.

Ben: I'd love to tell you my story. Um, well, a few, a few years ago I met Sara Morgulis at, at South Oxford space where I was rehearsing for epic players, which I used to be a part of what-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Ben: ... but I stepped down from it to do other things.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Ben: And Sara and I had a small conversation and then we became Facebook friends and I've told, tell, told her about myself and, and then like one day I came by five 28th avenue where Actionplay was rehearsing. And you know, 'cause I needed to take care of an Aaron that I need- take care of something that I needed to take care of ... I needed to send a message to somebody-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Ben: ... but Sara was out in the hallway trying to help an individual in, in the AIMS program that was having a tough day. And you know, I was seeing how, how well it was being handled and like, and like I contacted Sara the next day and I empathized with Sara for what she has done, what she went through. And I told her that if she ever needed to talk about my experiences 'cause I have had tough days a lot and you know, I've wanted to share my experiences with her-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Ben: ... like in theater and in rehearsals like that. So we had a phone conversation and we had a very nice conversation and we realized that we have had, we have

a lot of friends in common, which I am very happy about. And, and we talked for like 10 minutes and we, um, I got invited to the Metropolitan Museum of Art where I was viewing the symposium for disabilities.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Ben: And I took a sample of the audition workshop and I was the one to volunteer as the test subject and (laughs) it was the most pleasurable experiences I've had. And well, the audition workshop is basically for adults who need help getting jobs in like film and TV and maybe theater.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative). As actors?

Ben: As actors.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Ben: And through that, that sample of the audition workshop, I have met my dear friend Kaia Amara, who I was, who was my reader and we had a small conversation, didn't, and we didn't really conclude it. And like months later Kaia contacts me through Facebook and says, "Ben, you're a good candidate for my new web series Up And Up and I really want you to be part of it." And then I accepted and Kaia and I had, had a strong friendship ever since. And-

Phil Dallmann: So you had a, a really great experience with that audition workshop. You ended up booking a job. That's great.

Ben: Well yeah, I mean, well, yeah. Well I got the offer for the web series before I took the audition workshop.

Phil Dallmann: Oh, so just the sample set you up.

Ben: Yeah. Well, when-

Phil Dallmann: Okay. That's great impact.

Ben: When Kaia and I started to work together, Kaia came to a very special event of mine in my apartment that I worked really hard to orchestrate with all my friends. It was the table read of my screenplay, which I have been working tremendously on and I have, it's now in rewrites-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Ben: ... and all my friends got together and to- read the screenplay and we had a feedback session and Kaia was one of the witnesses, one of the audience members that witnessed it. And you know-

Phil Dallmann: That's great. That's my favorite part of the writing process as well as when I get to have, not just actors but have my friends in the room.

Ben: Yeah.

Phil Dallmann: That's really great.

Ben: Kaia and I had coffee talks about Up And Up and then I, the moment came where I signed up for the audition workshop. I auditioned for it and Amanda Gardner and Steve and Anthony and Aaron really loved my work and I got accepted in the audition workshop. And then Kaia emailed me saying that, saying that, "You're going to have so much fun in the audition workshop and you're going to click with all your classmates," and just so happens she, everybody was right about it.

Phil Dallmann: (laughs).

Ben: And I got to meet a lot of new friends in my, in the audition workshop and I had such a great time and I committed to it the full seven weeks. And I was like one of the best experiences I've ever had. And through that I've met some new friends. I have met my friend Tara who is a splendid human being who checks in with me once in a while on the phone and makes sure that I'm doing well in life and make sure I'm maintaining a good life for myself. And you know-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Ben: You know, and I got to work with Jelisa is one of my classmates on Up And Up and you know, I've gotten so many connections. I got involved in the Queen's theater thanks to my classmates and I got to meet my new friend, David Suvette, who has been like a true champion in my social life. And you know, I've introduced him to all my communities and he has loved every minute of it. And I was actually hanging out with him Tuesday night at one of our film screenings. David and I were in a film together called After You've Gone, which was one of the best experiences I've had with David. We had a great team together and, you know, through th-

Phil Dallmann: That's really great.

Ben: Through this experience ... Oh.

Phil Dallmann: No, no, no, no. Go ahead. Go ahead.

Ben: Through this experience, like, I was really sad when the audition workshop ended 'cause I said to myself, "I really want to do more with Actionplay." So I asked Aaron and Sara if she- they wanted to meet with me to discuss possible ideas and lo and behold they offered me the job as brand ambassador and I was

so excited because I knew when they offered it to me, I really wanted to let everybody know that Actionplay is one of the top inclusive organizations in this, in New York City that has helped me out so much in my life and has helped so many people with autism that need the support through their acting life. And just hearing Aaron and Sara talk about what Actionplay has gone through since 2011 it just touches my heart. And you know, I have been telling a lot of my friends and a lot of my colleagues at Ernst & Young where I worked full time and I've told a lot of people about Actionplay and you know, I have been sounding like a politician-

Phil Dallmann: (laughs).

Ben: ... for a while and it has been a great experience and like I have a told ... like even when I told one friend-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Ben: ... at a hang out, like I was in tears 'cause Actionplay has done so much for me and I witnessing the course, the chorus performances and everyone having so much fun on stage doing so well. I listened to all these good voices in the chorus and it brings back so much memories of previous years when I've witnessed a lot of good talents sing, dance act and the way it's structured and the way it's done is beyond phenomenal. It is phenomenal and I really want everyone in this world to know what Actionplay can do and it has been-

Phil Dallmann: Well, I think you're doing a good job about it.

Ben: It has been a pleasurable experience and I, the first few months that I started working as brand ambassador, I have been thriving.

Phil Dallmann: I would say, well, and, and I should note that, uh, you were the one that reached out to me, uh, about the podcast after we met and uh-

Ben: Because I really want people to know what Actionplay has done for so many people.

Phil Dallmann: Oh, there's-

Ben: Like I listened to Emily Weinstein-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Ben: ... who was one of our Actionplay courts members saying Radiohead creep phenomenally. And I actually showed a friend at work during lunch today, this video of her singing and she was amazed. And, and this, this experience of me being brand ambassador-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Ben: ... telling every one of my community about this organization that has changed the way that I have seen disability inclusion in the arts is just my number one priority in life. And when I tell Aaron and Sara about all the things I do in my life in theater, they show tremendous support out of any, any inclusive organization that I've come across. Like, Actionplay has shown me Blue Laces and you know, has gotten me a closer relationship with the team at CO/LAB. And, and I like, it is my duty to make sure that our voices are heard and Actionplay deserves the recognition it deserves. And I've-

Phil Dallmann: Well, I want to say Ben as, as a, an outsider to, to Actionplay, uh, I think you're doing A, an outstanding job and I have been incredibly impressed. I mean, there aren't, I haven't interacted with many folks who have reached out and written such uh, a professional, uh, email in not only introducing the organization but pitching, uh, to be on the podcast. And the impact that you're going to have here by, by doing that pitch Ben is Actionplay is going to be heard by over 10,000 listeners across 46 states and 12 countries. Uh, so you're doing a, an absolutely tremendous job. Um ...

Ben: I mean, Actionplay has changed my life in the most fabulous ways. And you know, I just want-

Phil Dallmann: And you know-

Ben: ... people, people to hear what Actionplay can do 'cause-

Phil Dallmann: In your [crosstalk 00:28:36].

Ben: ... the work Actionplay does is phenomenal. And I, and I hope that every single individual that joins Actionplay can get the support they deserve-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Ben: ... because it's important to be in a safe environment in the arts where people can get the trem- tremendous support they deserve. And I have had so many good bonding experiences with the Actionplay team and I have had such an amazing experience and it has touched my life in so many ways and I really want to make our community stronger in the most unbelievable way possible to add to our team so that, you know ... it's, it's a sensation.

Phil Dallmann: Well, you answered my, sort of my followup question then, Ben is, you know, uh, as part of your role as brand ambassador, what do you hope for the future of Actionplay?

Ben: Well, to tell you the truth, I really would like Actionplay to offer more classes to adults that go behind the AIMS program 'cause I really want Actionplay maybe to do like staged device productions for adults.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Ben: It would be amazing if I got to do a production with let's say David's [Saver 00:30:09] and myself and prof- like mix professional talents-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Ben: ... and neuro- neuro typical talent with these individuals that have taken the audition workshop before.

Phil Dallmann: So really like an evolution of the aud- audition workshop and kind of a next step beyond that.

Ben: I mean, I'd like to, you know, raise a lot of money so that we can maintain focus on action, play inclusive productions.

Phil Dallmann: This is, since this is a, an audio based thing, I should note that both Sara and Aaron had the broadest grins, uh, with that statement (laughs) and fist pumps. And uh, absolutely. Let's raise that money.

Aaron Feinstein: I want to say something.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Aaron Feinstein: Um, you know the, the reason ... so, so Ben, the reason Ben came on as Action-Actionplay brand ambassador. Part of it is because Ben is by far the best networker I have ever met.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Aaron Feinstein: I struggle just with the same fear I think a lot of people do, which is you get into situations and you see a suit and a tie or you see somebody who looks a little imposing. And I, I literally, I can go, I get very nervous and I don't know what to say to them and I'm already going for the next glass of wine because I just am so nervous. And um, Ben, when I saw Ben's ease with just approaching people and talking to them about his love of the arts, um, and his love of inclusivity, it was just such a powerful thing to see that I was like, "I want this guy to work for us because he's the best at this."

Phil Dallmann: All right. That is abundantly clear.

Ben: I want to um, I want to um, I wanna uh, follow up on that note. Um, Aaron one night came to my sketch comedy rehearsal for a sketch comedy group called Our Bar. It's one of the most inclusive sketch comedy groups that always has sketch comedy shows the first Wednesday of every month at this Whiskey Bar on second avenue. And I joined a sketch comedy group a couple months ago and they had, were really inclusive of me. The first second they have met me, they saw the talent in me and my networking skills and they needed me on that team and I joined and it has been a thrill ride ever since.

Phil Dallmann: And Aaron was there for one of your poems.

Ben: And Aaron was there for one of my rehearsals and for my show.

Phil Dallmann: Oh great.

Ben: And, and Sara Morgulis is really, really connected with, with a husband and wife that are actors in this group named Adam and Alicia Carpenter and you know, they have, Adam was my first director of my first show I ever did with Our Bar.

Phil Dallmann: Oh, very cool.

Ben: The whole team is, at Our Bar is amazing.

Phil Dallmann: Isn't it such a small world, Ben, uh, in, in inclusive arts programming, everybody kinda knows everybody. Um, even an example, you, you met my friend Natalie King the other night from TDF.

Ben: Oh, I did. I mean I went to that theater forward seminar with pride.

Phil Dallmann: Yeah?

Ben: And I was dressed in a blazer.

Phil Dallmann: Whoo.

Ben: In a, in a professional suit.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Ben: And I really wanted to tell people about Actionplay and also because I really want to learn theater community 'cause I-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Ben: ... I hopefully want to run my own theater company one day and win with all these professional artists. And I was having coffee with my friend Gregor Collins

today and we were discussing having a salon where to discuss artistic and intellectual art and to hopefully get the ball rolling, just hopefully come up with an idea. And you know, CO/LAB like has ... would, CO/LAB is also Actionplay's like sibling.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Ben: One of the artists, the artistic Safa CO/LAB has said to me, "You have the potential to run your own company." And I could not believe she said it. I could not believe she said it. And it was amazing to hear it. And like I rarely have you know, conversations with the CO/LAB people sometimes but ...

Phil Dallmann: Well, I believe that Ben. You have to have the things that I think are most important. You have networking skills and you have passion and, and those are, uh, as an executive director. And I think Aaron can agree as a founder of another company, uh, those are two of the most important characteristics to have going into starting a business or starting an organization. Um, I, I'd love to hear from you, Sara, I'd love to hear a little bit from you about what you hope for the future of programming.

Sara Morgulis: Absolutely. I think that Ben hit the nail on the head in terms of how to grow our audition workshop. So I want to, um, take it back a tiny bit to the inspiration from our, for our audition workshop came from the young people in AIMS growing up, but specifically because the young person that Aaron and I, um, that Aaron brought up earlier, had an opportunity to audition for law and order SVU.

Phil Dallmann: Oh wow.

Sara Morgulis: So it was an autistic, an autistic actor being, um, asked to play an autistic character.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Sara Morgulis: And we coached him in on that audition and he won it, and so he did the part. And it was a big moment where Aaron and I looked at each other and said, "I think we can do this and I think we can make this a program and let's open it up to adults and really start growing more of our adult programming." So we did a pilot of it two years ago and then Ben was in the second cohort and I am really specifically interested in how to grow the other side of it. And what I mean by that is at the end of this audition workshop, we bring in casting directors and theatrical agents and do a showcase. And that part of it has been extremely successful in how to curate those folks in the room-

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Sara Morgulis: ... how to get their feedback about it and how to create connections between them and our actors. And we've heard a lot of feedback from those folks about how they are seeking training on how to improve their practices, their casting practices to be more inclusive.

Phil Dallmann: Okay.

Sara Morgulis: So what is inclusive language to put on their casting call? How do they create inclusive casting spaces? How do they create inclusive rehearsal sets and um, and actual sets. And so I am really excited for Actionplay to develop our work with them as well in order to create sort of like a more sustainable environment and make sure that incl- there are inclusive casting practices happening out there.

Phil Dallmann: Yeah. That, that's so important. Um, having been on the other side of the table, um, with folks who don't know, uh, or aren't necessarily, again, I always say not having malicious ignorance but just ignorance, uh, not necessarily moving that forward. I think that's great. Yeah. Um, Aaron, we're going to kick over to you 'cause we gotta let everybody dream their dreams. And as the founder, I'd love to hear, hear what you hope for the future.

Aaron Feinstein: I want space.

Phil Dallmann: Okay.

Aaron Feinstein: I want a, I want a space that we can have all of these things. I think a lot of times through the, through the years we've struggled with finding inclusive, accessible spaces.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Aaron Feinstein: Um, so-

Phil Dallmann: Yeah, no, that's a really tough struggle here in New York. I had, it's, it's, it's rough, especially ones that are falsely advertised as accessible. Uh ...

Aaron Feinstein: Yes.

Phil Dallmann: Funny anecdote, uh, one of our first podcasts interviews was with uh, a woman named Christina Trevino, who's the director of digital strategy over at TDF. Um, and I rented a studio because I didn't, I hadn't really figured all this out and I thought I needed to be in a studio. Um, and uh, it was Ripley Greer, uh, I'll say they have since sent me fix this. Um, but they advertise the studio as um, accessible. Um, and um, there is about a six inch lip, uh, into the studio and, and Christina is a wheelchair user. Um, luckily we are very, very good friends and we've done some off-roading together. Uh, a and a, so, you know, we managed

it, but I, uh, I couldn't believe it, but that was not def- definitely not the first time and definitely not the last time I've walked into a space that was 'accessible.'

Aaron Feinstein: Yeah. It's, it's, a lot of it is, is, is, is that it's difficult to find spaces within the arts where individuals can come in and, and really explore the multitude of things in the arts. I mean, we come from a theatrical background. Like I'm, I'm a theater director. That's what I am. I have an MFA in theater directing. I, I, that's, that's the background I come in. But I always thought of theater as this fuser or of all the arts.

Phil Dallmann: Mm-hmm.

Aaron Feinstein: So to me, I think what I really want is a space where people can come in. Uh, we can have our programs, our AIMS program, our audition workshop, really trying to change the conversation so there is more professional work, more inclusive casting, but do it under our own roof where we're really setting the tone. Um, and what I would aspire to is that it becomes a model that people can really look at for how to approach and build artistic spaces, uh, for folks who are on the autism spectrum and for folks with disabilities, because I just don't think they're included enough and invited into enough spaces.

Phil Dallmann: I couldn't agree more. I think that's fantastic. And uh, I think Ben is gonna raise all that money that you need. Uh, I, I have faith in him (laughs).

Aaron Feinstein: I do too.

Phil Dallmann: Um, thank you guys so much for taking the time to, to come chat and we're all very, very busy. Um, thank you so much for the work that you're doing. Um, and as always, thank you, all three of you for being Access Champions.

Aaron Feinstein: Thank you so much.

Kelsey Brown: Thanks again to Aaron, Sara, Ben and the whole team in Actionplay for taking the time to chat with us and really setting an example for programs to build a more inclusive world. As always, thank you to our executive producer Matt Kerstetter for doing his magic and making us sound great, Tommy Kor for his continuing work on our fantastic logo and Eric Walton for the killer theme song. And finally, I would be remiss if I didn't take a chance to thank our creator and host Phil Dallmann for the hard work he puts in to make sure we have great content to share with you each and every week.

Kelsey Brown: As mentioned, keep in touch at Accesschampion on Twitter and Instagram, Access Champion Podcast on Facebook or accesschampion@gmail.com. We'd love to hear your logo ideas as well as bots about our episodes, past, present, and future. Speaking of our future, we'd really appreciate your support on Patreon. For as little as a dollar a month, we've got some exclusive online

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content from our team and guests, as well as some swag and shadow opportunities for a little more each month. Check it out at patrion.com/access champion and thanks in advance. We'll be back again next week. And remember, inclusion believers never stopped running through that brick wall.