##### Amy Jordan

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This week on “Yes But Why?”, I talked to audio describer Bridget Melton. Active in the cultural accessibility community, Bridget works with various theaters promoting inclusion as an audio describer, advisor, and volunteer. Listen in as Bridget tells me about building a global access community, audio describing shows remotely, and going on a touch tour. I now present to you “Yes But Why?” episode 277, audio describer Bridget Melton works to make the arts accessible to all. Enjoy.

[instrumental calm music intro plays]

I'm Amy Jordan and this is “Yes But Why?” podcast. Yeah.

[music fades]

There's been this whole thing where people are like, the arts don't matter at all. And I was like, Cool. What did you do today? You watch Netflix and listen to music? Who do you think makes those things? Yeah.

How did you get “Arrested Development”? Did you think Mitch Hurwitz was just a random dude doing stuff for free? Because he's not. Like, was Jason Bateman acting for you just because he loves it? Nope. Not a thing. He's an artist. They're artists. They're creating art for you and you're enjoying it, and you can't live your life without it. So stop. So that's my laugh of like, you guys can't live without us. So good luck. But the thing that makes me angry is that there are some people who just are never going to see. They're never going to appreciate who really helps them. You know what I mean? The fact that delivery drivers aren't paid, like, $40 an hour at this point is ridiculous. Everyone should just give them 100% tip every single time because they’re, turns out, other than doctors, the lifeblood of the the country. Okay, great.

##### Bridget Melton

The headlines from Target. I just keep feeling that company is really listening and really trying to be in touch. All of their tuition assistance that they're doing now. And it's like, thank you, guys. Thank you for paying a living wage. Because moving down here from Chicago, I've been really shocked. Like, the City of Chicago years ago set a mandate that hourly wage was not to be below $15. That's the hourly minimum wage. And sitting in my office, I was like, okay, if they're all making $15, we need to raise all of these other people that were full time managers and such, but their hourly rate is barely bigger. Now, we need to have everybody rise. And they're like, no, no, $15 is the minimum. So they're doing good. And it's like, you guys, this is supposed to make all of us rise. Come on. Yeah. I do appreciate the pandemic helping give people a little bit more perspective into just how other people are living. And especially since it's all of us, it's all collectively as a human race. This is affecting all of us. This isn't just that one city having a teacher strike or just a writer strike happening over here, and you don't feel the effect everywhere. And the kind of, the great come together that the pandemic has afforded us, I’m grateful for that silver lining amidst all of the chaos and death of living through a pandemic.

##### Amy Jordan

Yeah, absolutely. Chaos and death. Someday we're going to write some really amazing theater about it, though. I'm waiting. It's going to happen.

##### Bridget Melton

So when the pandemic hit, I hid the upcoming calendar off of my website. I hid it in just bottom navigation. I was like, this is so depressing. I'm just seeing all of these things that I had really worked for. I had signed some really cool, major things. I was going to do my first opera, all of this stuff. I was so excited. And then it's just, like, “canceled due to COVID precautions”. “Canceled due to COVID precautions”. And then just crickets, nobody's calling me anymore. And I was like, oh, God, I've been building this up for years. And then now it's just gone. And this is what I do. I don't have side hustles. I am an audio describer. And suddenly, you know, everybody starts making that shift to virtual. And I was talking with some colleagues. I said, it just feels like once we hit fall of 2020, I said, it feels like every arts organization has been behind the scenes making their shift to the virtual realm and then forgot to tell their access providers because suddenly I was being bombarded with “We've made the digital switch, let’s get cracking on all these projects.” And I'm like, uhhhh. Fortunately, I now have a wealth of projects that I'm working on. And theatre has come back in a very major way. And I was struggling to keep up because I was like, “Why didn’t you guys tell us you were working on this? Why does access keep being your afterthought?” That was kind of frustrating.

But one of the nice things with the big global reach now is I'm suddenly no longer in my live performance silo. There were a few audio describers living in Chicago. There were a few of us that were kind of doing it full time, quote, unquote. And suddenly with the pandemic I'm meeting describers that are living in other cities. It doesn't matter what my location is now. I've relocated to North Texas, yet I still have deep ties with the Chicago community.

And I feel very fortunate that early on in my career, I met a colleague who was very open with rate discussion. And a lot of us felt that we need to keep talking about these rates because I don't want to win a gig by undercutting you. Because if I don't help our rates keep rising, we're just going to stay very, very stagnant. I think it's quite appalling that the going rate pre pandemic for live performance would be $200. $200. For- I’m going to view this show multiple times. I'm going to script the show, I'm going to rehearse this show. Then I'm going to come to your theater and do it live for you. And that’s $200? And then I would have some theaters that would be really proud- and they should be proud- they got their budget up to, like, $300. And I'm like, this isn't going to work in the pandemic now. We're all kind of, you know, artists are banding together and just being like, let's talk about rates. Let's be really open. I'm very open when I talk about my rates. I've got my rate sheet up online. I can work with people on budgets, but no, I'm going to stop devaluing my work. A lot of times when you work creative or you work in accessibility, people are like, well, this is for the good of mankind. You should volunteer your services, or you should deeply discount them. And it's like, there's a lot of work that went into me being able to do this. So, like, my rate for a five minute video might seem high to you, but it takes me hours to get your five minute video into shape for what you think is just a very simple thing. Like, you didn't see all of the work and all of the skills, training, that went into me being able to do it in that amount of time. So I do really appreciate the pandemic for just shining a spotlight on that and saying, we’ve got to stop. We've got to stop with this non-transparent-you-should-be-grateful-to-work-in-the-arts.

##### Amy Jordan

The craziest thing about when they're like, but you didn't do that much work. It looks so simple. You're like, literally, my magic is that I make it look like it's just coming out simple. Great. Amazing. But I did all of this work to get to this spot. You know who's terrible, the people who show you all the work that they do, or you can see them figuring it out and they haven't done as much work. Right. That's not great. Also, I think it's crazy and I feel like you're right, both the arts and any sort of work towards helping mankind-

##### Bridget Melton

Yeah, Human Services.

##### Amy Jordan

- that human life needs to be free or very discounted because it's helping people. I'm like, Cool, you know who also helps people? Surgeons. Should they work for free? Do you want a brain surgeon who works for nothing? He's a volunteer. Is that what you're looking for? He's helping you, isn't he? I don't think so. I don't know. The deeply unfortunate part about the whole reflection of the pandemic on the arts and accessibility work is that I don't know that it's actually going to get better as far as, like, how people view it. But instead, I feel like it's like the people who think that we shouldn't get paid are kind of always going to think we shouldn't get paid in the same way. That, like, not to be political, but, like, showing somebody fact doesn't mean they're going to believe them. Right?

They don't understand how art is worthy, even though they spend 12 hours a day on Netflix. And a lot of my friends have been talking about how this return, like opening the doors again, going back to live theater, going back to offices, is going to take away a lot of the freedom that people who were having issues like having accessibility. People in wheelchairs or people who have been trying to work from home for a long time because they have this or that and it would make it a lot easier for them to work from home to do their job. They're just as good a tech person or whatever their job is, salesperson. But doing it from their home makes it a lot easier with all of the stuff going on with them. And then they're like, now come back to the office and we're going to lose all of this connectivity that we had to the accessible community to be like, oh, you guys are just as worthy employees worth every career that you're in to do it, because it turns out we found out these last two years you were able to do it all the time from home. And why shouldn't they be able to? But now they're taking that away.

I don't know. I'm both hopeful and cynical about the whole how arts are going to be taken in by this next generation. Am I deeply interested in what the creative response to it is going to be? Yes, I'm super psyched to see what movies are made, what musicals are written, what books are created, just inspired by the new viewpoints that artists have. But we, as artists, have a larger empathy for the world. Anyway, we have a more open view of how the world should be seen, because the whole point of us being artists is that we are interested in different ways that you live, right? If I just cared about me, I would just work my job and come home. And that would be it. But I'm an artist. So I'm like sitting online researching oh what's this job about because I want to write a character who does that job, so now I need to know everything about that. Or, I want my new play to be set in this town, but I've never lived in this town. So now I’ve got to read all about what it's like so I can really dig in and that matters. And that creative extra work, care, empathy, is what makes artists sort of like a cut above the rest.

I'll say it.

Nobody listening to this is going to be offended because everyone's like, you're right, we are. At first I was like, Should I say it? And then I was like, Who's listening?

Okay, you guys, you know. You're better than everybody else.

##### Bridget Melton

And it's that creative research is something that I love doing. The background research of things is something I love doing on audio description because I'll be describing a video and it's like, I have either no idea how to describe this dance that I'm supposed to describe, so let's go hit Wikipedia and you tell me what this dance is, or it's like- I quite love the collective awakening of just being appropriate with how we are naming something, just being respectful. That’s a better word, respectful, with how am I naming this?What am I calling it? So I had described something for the National Park Service where I'm describing traditional dances of a Native American group. And I was like, I'm going to have to do a deep dive now into this group so that I don't call something, you know, a costume- unless they think it's a costume, in which case I'll use it. And just, you have to be so careful of your word choice. Careful of your pronunciation.

I was definitely laughing yesterday. I was describing a video and this woman's name came up and I was like, oh, her name is Nuala [New-aw-lah] based on how it was written. And then they start talking. And I said, nope, they're Irish. There's no way their name is Nuala. That's not a- and I love Pronunciation.com or PronounceNames.com. And it was like, oh, no, their name is Nuala [Noo-lah]. And I was like, oh, I'm so glad that I went online and did this research and I'll never make that mistake again. I do quite love just the the quick dramaturgy that audio description kind of forces you into so that you don't get egg on your face because otherwise it can be a little cut and dry sometimes, to do just descriptions, so it is fun to be able to flex some creative muscles in what is my word choice and and everything.

##### Amy Jordan

So you mentioned your audio describing career. How does one get into audio describing? You and I both went to colleges near to one another in the Dallas area, but maybe SMU has a great audio describing program and I've just never heard in my UD. But how did you get into it?

##### Bridget Melton

Audio description as a formal vocation has only been around since about the 70’s when it was kind of formalized. It's always been colloquially around people who are blind or have low vision, having friends or family describing things to them that they're seeing. And then kind of with the rise of let's do captions, let's get ASL interpreters out there, audio description is becoming much more prevalent, especially with all of the streaming services and kind of just the Wild West that TV has become in the past ten to 15 years.

There's been a big push for access in the audio description realm. So nowadays the paths you can take as an audio describer, you can be what's called an audio description narrator, which is essentially the voice over artist voicing a writer’s audio description script. You can be full service like me, where I am the scripter, voicer, producer of everything that I'm doing. You can be just a writer of it. You can be an expert user of it who is doing quality control. And I would like to note, your ability to see or not see visuals on any spectrum has no bearing on whether or not you're an audio describer or a voicer or a scripter.

You can absolutely be a person who's blind or low vision and be an audio describer or in quality control.

This is not something that only sighted people can do as a kind gesture to a specific audience, because also audio description is for everybody. I quite love being able to download a show on Netflix. I'll download it to the app, and then if I'm driving doing errands, now I'm listening to a favorite show just as a podcast, basically because somebody's filling in for me that somebody just walked in. You're like, oh, good. And it's helping with English as a second language learners. You're getting- the same way that captions can help, that your audio description can help it because now you're learning different words about what the emotional state is of somebody that you're seeing. It's great for people on the autism spectrum. If you need help reinforcing “that is the look that that person was giving/that is the feeling that they have", especially with shows that have a lot of subtext and things like that. Somebody might need help deciphering the emotional state of things. So at its core, audio description is just making the visual verbal. You're not passing judgment on what that character might be feeling. You are literally saying- so it's not “they have an angry face”. It's that “their face is scowling”, things like that. You want to say what it is not subjectively, what you think that thing is doing, which has been really nice with a theater background. I feel like it's much more accessible for me to look at visuals and just get to the core of what is that director trying to make me feel. Now I'm going to home in on what were the elements that made me feel that way, and those elements are what I'm going to describe. So it's been a really great way to get back into creative things.

So I majored in theater and I went to a private arts university. So I came out with quite a debt, and I just told myself- my family loves to make "would you like fries with your burger?” jokes right after I had graduated, because I graduated with a really expensive theater degree. What are you going to do with that? And I would like to point out getting a degree in the arts isn't because you necessarily want to go in the arts. College should be a time, not necessarily to learn a skill that is going to be your career for the rest of your life, is to learn a skill or something on a subject matter that just really interested you. That’s why you spend four years learning about it. It's not necessarily to become the next professional dancer or the next theater director, it’s so that you can deep dive into something that really interests you.

##### Amy Jordan

I also think it’s very helpful as a practice adulthood for those of us who do it in the 18 to 22 period. For the people who wait and go into it later, sure, being like, “you know what, I really want to learn about this, so I'm going to go to school for it.” Great. But for me, it was like, I need to leave my parents house and have an adventure. And so I'm going to do this.

##### Bridget Melton

College was never not in my future because I didn't know what else I was going to do when I turned 18 and graduated high school. But when I graduated, I swore I was going to pay my student loans using my degree. And so that has literally been something I've been following since I graduated. I've paid off my student loans. I'm good.

##### Amy Jordan

Awesome.

##### Bridget Melton

But my work study job was actually as the box office. I felt very fortunate to have a work study job that kept me still involved in my degree. I didn't have to leave my arts building and go do security, which I had worked very, very briefly. And that box office job as my work study job has literally just taken me through my entire 15 career thus far. And theater admin is a fantastic way to be involved in the arts, to get a paycheck and to just feel like you're part of something bigger in a way that I never quite felt with corporate America. Some places I did, but overall it's been theater has been where- arts organizations and nonprofits- are where I have felt like day to day I actually might be making a difference.

And when you spend enough time in box offices, you can hit a ceiling pretty fast. I found myself in Chicago in the middle of the 2010’s going, I have absolutely hit my ceiling in terms of where I could ever be promoted. I have hit the max of how much I will ever make at this job, because universally across America, it's almost like they just have a number for this is where box office people shouldn't ever be paid above this. And there just stopped being a challenge. I was even on my be-all-end-all software that I had literally jumped different box offices, hoping to God I would one day get to work with Tessitura. And here I am working with Tessitura. Like, cool. It's fantastic. I loved it.

And the Chicago art scene is phenomenal for pushing accessibility, for saying, no, we're going to keep bringing it. And audiences may not be showing up for it yet, because we still might be figuring out how we're offering the access and things like that. But by golly, we are going to book the providers. We are going to publish that performance as a ASL or a captioned or an audio described performance, and we're going to keep growing. And there's this phenomenal group in Chicago called the Chicago Cultural Accessibility Consortium, and I quite owe them so much of my career as an audio describer, because they provided us with that safe space. In ethereal sense, it’s this very calming space to be a part of. Because one of the things they say at the beginning of all of their webinars and things like this is we're all on this access journey together. Even if I'm presenting, that doesn't mean I am a full on expert who is going to stop learning. Everything is always evolving. And so I love that organization for how much they have allowed me to ask the ignorant questions. They just ask you to ask them in the most respectful way you can. And through that organization, through my work at some major theaters in Chicago, I had started my accessibility career because when you're in the box office, you really need a challenge and going to sales meetings and seminars is not the challenge you're looking for.

And accessibility was a thing where, let's be honest, nobody else in your organization wants to deal with accessibility. A lot of times it falls on those front line staff because they're the ones being asked by the patrons for these services, and they're the ones that are going to have to answer if the service is a flop, if you don't do it respectfully and if you don't do it thoughtfully, I had a boss who is wonderfully supportive of accessibility work. And he said, I'd like you to go to the Leadership Exchange and Arts and Disability Conference put on by the Kennedy Center, held in a different city around the country every year. And they have these ancillary workshops that happen around it and they were training people in the fundamentals of audio description. I was like, oh, I'd love to do that. And initially we did it so that we could bring audio description in house to our theater. We were a large enough theater that we could support having somebody on staff who knew how to do this. We had enough productions happening every year that needed audio description. And so they said, “would you like to be trained in it?" with the hope that me and a colleague would be audio describers for us, and we wouldn't have to outsource it. But even if we didn't want to do it, like, if that wasn't a skill suited to us, we would at least be able to evaluate the service. I don't use ASL, and so I can't evaluate ASL services. And so this was a way for us to say, hey, we know how to read English so we can evaluate captions, we have an audio describer now so we can start evaluating our service and really being able to meet our patrons who are using this service on a more even field because we'll know more of what goes into audio description and things like that.

So I got trained in it about five years ago, and I absolutely loved it. And I thought, this is what I've been missing. This is this challenge that I've been missing. And then the very second show that I called- I was in the right place, right time- it was "Hamilton" for Broadway in Chicago, and it's only the second show I had ever done. I had been a professional audio describer at that point for a month, and everything in my life had just been leading me up to this moment. I have a degree in theater. I've had such a varied career leading up to it. And so I felt fully confident that I could do it. And I spent three years on that residency.

One of the cool things is that because Chicago pushes the art scene, really pushes the accessibility, Broadway in Chicago offered it on demand, which is so cool because nobody does that. Nobody else has the ability to let a patron call the box office and say, "hey, I would like audio description for my performance”. And they said, “cool, you're going to buy the ticket and everything, and we're going to book that audio describer. And if any snafus happen, we're going to let you know.” And then they would just call me and be like, “Can you do this performance on the date?” “Yeah, I can absolutely. Let's do this.” And it was so neat to work with a major player like that that had access on demand, because then I got to really hone things. I was with "Hamilton" for three years describing that show and my script from the first performance to the last performance, like, just the amount of growth that happened during that time.

And during that time, I quit my full time box office job, and I said, this is what I want to be doing. It fit really well with the life changes that had happened for me, and I ran with it. I'm quite grateful that early on my husband had already he even bought me my domain name. Well before I even quit my job, he was like, “if you're going to be doing this, you have to have a website”. I'm quite grateful because not a lot of audio describers have websites, and I feel like that has definitely helped me book lots of gigs because you can find me. I feel like it can be really hard to find independent audio describers who are not part of a production house. Where you're going to book the production house, but you don't know that individual person that's going to be doing the work on the other end. And so it's been nice being a one stop shop, being a one person shop so that I do have the freedom to be able to meet and network with other audio describers and kind of build up that tribe.

The pandemic has been great for that because I used to be in a silo of doing- I did live event performances in Chicago, and the pandemic took that away. And so now my colleague and I in Chicago, we teamed up to apply for the Democratic National Convention that was in August of 2020. And we teamed up for that because we knew the other audio description- They were really looking for people - it was held in Milwaukee, happened mostly remote, but it was being held in Milwaukee and we’re, like, awesome. We're short train right away. We know the breadth and wealth of audio description and describers that are here in the Chicagoland area. We better team up because otherwise we won't have a chance. And we ended up getting it. And we were like, oh, my gosh, this is the coolest thing. And then the pandemic chipped it away, and chipped it away, and chipped it away to where we're each sitting in our own individual recording studios at home, live describing this remotely. And that was the first remote description I had even done. The pandemic gave me that experience.

And just kind of since the DNC, my career has really taken off, my world has gotten so much bigger because suddenly we're all in the digital world trying to find each other. And suddenly I know lots of people out in LA who are describing in the TV and film world. I know a lot of different arts organizations now around the country who are trying to use that Chicago Cultural Accessibility Consortium as a model in their city. CCAC doesn't just do- they're not just like a performing arts, it's a whole collection of different people that care about accessibility that all work in the cultural sector. So museums, arboretums, and any cultural setting and aquariums and everything. So it's really fantastic to- you’re getting out of that theater bubble. You're not just talking in your theater vacuum anymore.

You're now talking with people that have really interesting issues about, around, accessibility that you never dealt with in the theater. Or that, because you are from a theater background, you’re like, “I've got some really creative solutions for you for how we can solve that problem that you're having.” I think that's one of the nice things that being in the arts really, we were talking about earlier, has really prepared you for is just the wearing of many hats, that doing something with nothing, and really trying to to forge a path where there isn't one. Because you're like, I've got to make a living, and this is what I need to be making a living in. So I'm going to do it. And I was really, really scared in the beginning days of the pandemic that I had literally just watched my business crumble around me. And it was really heartbreaking. The only thing for five months on my calendar was the Democratic National Convention, and it was the shining beacon for me, in a lot of ways. But the big one was this is just the only gig I've got coming up.

And then the fall hit, and it was suddenly- because audio description is being- with the push to the virtual world- audio description, I feel like, is coming so much more to the forefront of people's minds. It's not a sexy thing and not visible, like ASL and open captioning to where people notice that. You don't really notice the audio describer. A lot of sometimes it's a separated service for people, to where they might be calling into a different Zoom call than everybody else. Or right now on YouTube, it's a separate video than everybody else because it needs a separate audio track. And YouTube is working on it. They can do it faster, but they're working on it. And I'm really excited for when it comes out so that you can have a secondary audio track that you can select the same way that you select to turn on or off captions or to turn on or off the different languages of subtitles you could have. YouTube right now is working on a secondary audio channel. They BETA’d it, and it's really cool. And when you think about if you open doors for one kind of access, you're benefiting so many audiences. A ramp doesn't just benefit somebody who uses a wheelchair. It benefits moms with strollers, people with walkers, people that just can't walk upstairs. There's so many groups that benefit from access than your intended audience.

##### Amy Jordan

While part of me wants to ask more technical questions like, how does it work? What I want to know for you and your creative journey is, you've mentioned a few times as you've been describing this opportunity that you found to work in audio description that it finally gave you what you were looking for in a larger sense, creatively. You've been building to your whole creative life. You've been doing different things. But when you saw this job, you were like, oh, this gives me what I'm looking for in a larger sense. What does that mean to you? What was your hopes and dreams for when you went to college? Such that when you got the audio description option, you were like, yay, this is what I wanted to do. Because I can see it even in your face and in your voice, you can hear you love it. You're like, into it. You're excited by it. So how did you get there? What was that you were looking for when you were younger? That this was the puzzle piece that made it perfect.

##### Bridget Melton

So when I went to college, I knew that, like, I knew that I was never going to be the next movie star. I didn't want it bad enough. And I don't quite honestly think I was good enough to be one of them. But a lot of it is just your drive. I didn't want to be that. So when I majored, I went to SMU in Dallas, and I majored in theater studies. There were two tracks you could do theater studies or acting. And I was like, I don't want to be pigeon-holed. I want to make a living. I want this to be my life. I don't know what that looks like, but I know it doesn't look like going with one skill. And that was a big reason that I chose the college I was going to. I chose it because it was a BFA, not a BA. I don't think that that has honestly made a difference at all. That extra letter. But as an 18 year old, it helped me justify the cost of my degree. And one of the big things that also got my parents on board with it is because we learned Practicums. My first two years, acting and theater studies tracks were the exact same classes, and I'm learning costuming on a very practical level. I'm on costume crews, and it was like, I just got to spend four years trying on all the different hats of theater. I learned that I'm never going to be a lighting designer. It doesn't make sense in my head. I'm never going to be a sound engineer. It doesn't make sense in my head. And I felt very fortunate my junior and senior year, we got an amazing directing teacher that he really pushed for us to direct lots of little scenes, really pushed us towards the psychology of things, the technical craft of, like, how to direct somebody's eye to different places. How are you taking this audience on your journey in a way that had been missing from my acting classes. Those just felt so introspective. And here I am, somebody in directing class, somebody's telling me how to do the misdirection, how to affect people in a way that my acting teacher just didn't make sense the way it did in directing class. And so when I graduated, I actually followed this teacher to a theater in Florida. And I was a production stage manager, because at that time, I really thought that's what I wanted to do. I was like, I like the organization of this. This might be the niche that I've been waiting for. I didn't get into any of my-

##### Amy Jordan

Me too, I did that too. I did stage management.

##### Bridget Melton

Yeah. I didn't get into any of the masters programs that I had applied for. Thank you for everybody, for turning me down. They all said I was too young, and I get it now. I did not get it as a 22 year old, I thought, I'm not young. I spent four years getting this degree. And then when I was in Florida, I was working with a class of actors that were all my same age. And I was like, I get it. I get why you said I was too young. I didn't have the life experience. I didn't have the perspective that I would have now. Granted, I also have the smarts now to say maybe a master's in stage management is not what you need or where you should spend your money for my career. But I'm quite grateful that they turned me down because it forced me to get out into that world. It forced me to- I was so proud standing on my graduation stage and being like, I have a full time job in the art that's waiting for me. I'm moving there in three months, and I've signed a $19,000 contract for nine months, and I thought I was balling. And I don't know why. Because it was impossible to make car payments and rent payments and all that stuff. That taught me so much about about how I present myself at a job. Because one of the things that I tell my school whenever they do a bid for money, or “would you like to donate to this campaign?” I say, yes, I will, because every time I donate, it does make my degree stand higher in national rankings. So I want my degree to stay relevant, but I always give it to them with the caveat of, when are you going to do a business for theater class? Because the acting students got "Business for Actors”. I graduated and had no idea how to find a job other than a traditional administrative job in the arts. I knew box office because that's what my work study job had been. I knew how to apply for that. I knew how to get it, knew how to do it. And that's where I safely spent my career, because again, I wanted to pay for my student loans with my degree.

And so I spent a long time in box office, and I loved it. I loved creating that welcoming environment for everybody and then learning audio description. It was like, oh, here's that niche. Like, I get to do a lot of voice over stuff because I'm narrating the audio description script that I have written. I'm getting to do that dramaturgy work. I'm getting to flex- I suddenly have a reason to do vocal exercises, and I haven't for ten years. That's cool. I'm getting to learn all of these video editing skills that I just didn't have time for before because I was always tied to a full time job in the arts, and that was good enough for then. And so it's like, suddenly all of the different pieces of my degree, of my life experience, get to come together to where even the improv classes you took in college, that really helps with live extemporaneous descriptions. Where I'm watching the Presidential inauguration in real time with everybody else. I don't know what I'm about to see. I don't know that Bernie Sanders is about to come out in that green trash- that green sleeping bag of a jacket carrying his little mittens and that Manila envelope and just sit there. But it's like, I get to be on the stage that is bringing that visual to life for other people.

And it's really, really cool the insider access you can get to things, or when that moment happens. During the inauguration and the Fire Chief got up there, and not only is it amazing to see her standing up there as a woman, she's Black, and then she starts signing! And you've got the ASL interpreter is in my Zoom view who is- the Asl interpreter is there signing, I believe it was the Pledge of Allegiance, maybe they're signing that, but the Fire Chief is also up there signing it herself as she's verbalizing it. And then I'm audio describing. And it's like, this is the most amazing access moment. And I don't think other people had that because the ASL feed, live streaming feed, is different than the audio description live streaming feed, and I don't think anybody listening to the audio description had ASL accessible on their screen. So it's like, you're getting this glimpse right now. You have no idea how cool this is. This is amazing. And I just love, like, I'm getting that kind of performing kick that I always kind of craved but didn't know where my place was in the performing world. Audio description just checks so many boxes off, and it's also something I can do while I'm living a life. I am my own boss. I've been very fortunate that even moving across country, I'm still, because of the internet, I'm still connected to my access tribe up in Chicago. I desperately want to start one down here in North Texas. So anybody interested? Let's talk.

##### Amy Jordan

Yeah.

##### Bridget Melton

You go to different theaters websites- I’ve been out of the Dallas art scene for 15 years now, being up in Chicago. And it's like, there's a whole new generation of people down here that I don't know, haven't met yet, or people that I came up with in college. Like, suddenly they're movers and shakers in the Dallas theater scene. And I'm like, let's get some access going because I don't see audio description being offered. I found one theater in North Texas that's offering audio description. And if I'm wrong, please prove me wrong. I'm seeing people having open captioning, seeing people having ASL if they're offering something. And I'm like, there's so much more in the access world that we could be doing. When we move back to live events, something I really want to see every theatre doing, and I don't want it tied to the blind and low vision audience, touch tours. They're the coolest things.

##### Amy Jordan

What’s a touch tour?

##### Bridget Melton

Traditionally, they happen prior to an audio described performance. I want them for everybody. Because who doesn't want to meet the actors, pre show, hear them speak a line of dialogue, which is especially helpful if they're using an accent. You're hearing them speak a line of dialogue. You're hearing them describe themselves visually, you’re feeling costumes, and you're getting to walk the set.

##### Amy Jordan

I do want that.

##### Bridget Melton

I know! And I've definitely had people apologize to me. “Oh, I misunderstood what this was, and I accidentally signed up for it. I don't need audio description.” And I'm like, don't care. Let's walk the set together. Ask me all of your questions, because all I've been doing is studying this show for about 40 hours. So let's talk about the show. And sometimes even audio description isn't for everybody. I definitely have patrons who, on paper, would benefit from audio description, but they're like, no, I've got the life experience, I know what that visual is, even though I no longer can see it. So I don't need to hear you. But I want to come to the touch tour beforehand because I want to hear you describe the set. I’ll walk the stage as I'm describing the set so that an audience member can get the feel for, if that voice is way back there, that's what it sounds like when they're coming through the door, things like that. And so they really benefit all audiences.

And a lot of places have already offered things like that, you just never called it a touch tour before. You know, art museums are already offering things like that when they do a deep dive into a different artist’s works or looking at their portfolio. And so it's like, those things already exist. You just don't necessarily call them the same thing from creative sector to creative sector. And one of the things I like about the pandemic is that it's getting us all in that virtual realm, and we're all talking about it finally. And we're all making those connections to the different cultural sectors being like, oh, I know how to help you with this.

##### Amy Jordan

Yeah. I think we talked earlier about this idea that the pandemic has opened our eyes to lots of different artistic things that we need to involve, especially for the accessible community. And I love this. Just learning all about the touch tours and the audio description. What a great thing. Now I'm like, I want to see a play twice, and I want to see it first just on my own and then second with the audio description and the touch tour. That is amazing. What a deep dive into what is happening in the play and how appreciative of just all of the work that's gone into it. To feel the texture of the costume; no costumer has had that before. Like, nobody's appreciating the hard work they put in to make sure they got the proper velvet or whatnot, you know what I mean? Like, we're all just glancing from super far away. And you're like, yeah, he kind of looks like Moliere, but, like, you get up there and you get to be like, this costume designer worked six weeks to make sure that this ruff was exactly the same as 1796 or whatever. You know what I mean? Like that to appreciate all of the work put into it is so awesome and so great.

And I love the way you described how all of the things that you were interested in came together to be a fun career. I'm gonna say this is like a boon for all theater people who who are like, I like to do a bunch of things, but I don't know what job I could do. This is the job. This is such a great- when you were describing, like, I get to do the dramaturgy. I get to do the vocal performance. I get to do connecting with the audience. These are awesome. These are things that we are getting into theater for. And then you pick a path, and sometimes you lose three or four of the fun things that you really love to do. I had friends in college who would love doing the dramaturgy stuff. Love doing all the research. And then they became actors, and nobody cared what they thought about the dramaturgy ever again. And they were like, well, I did all this research, and they're like, no, no, talk to Louise. She's the dramaturg, she knows. And he was like, well, I read 16 books before I was in this, and they're like, yeah, we don't care what you know. And it's like to get all of those different parts coming together, like a dude, that is so awesome.

##### Bridget Melton

I feel like no matter what job you're in, you can get stopped by your title. You get stopped by your job description. And I definitely butted heads with a lot of people because it's like, I get that I'm just a box office person, but there is no just the box office person. I'm the front lines for all of your patrons.

##### Amy Jordan

It's like, box office is to waiter in the way that people are like, oh, I'm not tipping the waiter because he didn't cook it. I'm like, okay, listen, how are you getting the food? Who spoke to you? How are you getting into the play? Who spoke to you? Who made sure you got into that seat properly? Like, these people are important people. And I don't think that we appreciate the cogs in every machine the way that we should. It's like, yeah, pull a cog and see how it works. Does not work. Literally required is all of these moving parts to come together?

Now, one thing that I want to ask you is our final question. And I usually ask this, and I don't know the answer, but I feel like I was going to ask you how you are creatively fulfilling yourself. But I feel like based on what you've just told me, that maybe the work that you do is just super creatively fulfilling. Like, if you have another, are you, like, painting or taking dance classes on Zoom or something that fulfills a creative coffer that you're not already filling? Or does audio description and the myriad of work that you have to do to get it done filling you up with like oh, gosh, I get to do all this fun stuff.

##### Bridget Melton

I love all of the new skills that I get. I'm being paid to learn this new skill because the client has asked for it. And that is super fun. But in, like, spare time, I do love to sew, I embroider. I took screen printing because I really wanted to understand what this art was and how to create it that I'm always drawn to. And I love screen prints. I love the idea that you can create something that you can have multiple copies of it. It's a more affordable entree into collecting art. And I had actually met this group called Spudnik Press Cooperative up in Chicago. I ran into them because I was working at a Cultural Center and we had a big Expo of different arts organizations in Chicago. And I was like, oh, you guys offer screen printing classes? I've always wanted to do those. And it turns out it's a whole group of people that all graduated with these fine arts degrees. And they were like, how do we do this? How do we live and stay connected to our art when we're individual people? And so they formed this collective with studio space, classes, and all the stuff. And it's an incredibly vibrant community. And so I love learning just random art just for fun.

One thing I have not learned, and I think eventually in my retirement, I might take a dance class. But right now, I love still being marveled by dancers. I don't want to know the name of that dance move. I don't want to know how hard it is. I just want to appreciate that this is an art form that is not mine. And I love watching it.

##### Amy Jordan

Yeah.

##### Bridget Melton

The first time I saw a professional ballet and heard their feet, I didn't know you heard feet! You can hear a pointe shoe hit the stage. And I had no idea because I've only ever seen Baryshnikov’s “Nutcracker” and things like that on video. Yeah. I still really want to be amazed by other art forms. And so I try to not delve too much into ones that I don't know yet.

##### Amy Jordan

That can be hard. You're like, I want to know how sausage is made. And then you're like, no, wait.

##### Bridget Melton

I really don't. Yeah. I was describing a magic show. It's called "The Magic Play", and it was a world premiere in Chicago. It was actually the very first show I ever described. And I got so- I was like, I don't know how to approach this. And then I was like, Wait, I don't have to learn how he's doing the magic, because that's not the point. As an audience member, I don't know how he did the magic. I just know that magic happened right in front of me. And so that's what I described. And that was a big like, okay, good. Because I don't want to take away that suspension of disbelief.

##### Amy Jordan

Yeah, it’s like, and then the door opens and he's gone. You don't have to be like, what happened was-

##### Bridget Melton

-there’s a turntable inside of that.

No, cause I don't know.

##### Amy Jordan

No, no, you just have to be like, oh my goodness! And that's what the audience needs to react.

##### Bridget Melton

And the magician was starting to tell me some of the things and I was like, “Brett, please do tell me how you did this.” I don't want to know, just know that this happened and that's all I should describe. I don't editorialize. I can't give you anything. I was interviewed on a fantastic podcast, “Know Your Narrator”, and we did a deep dive into the visuals of "Hamilton" that never make the cut. You can't fit them into “Hamilton". And Disney+ put out “Hamilton", it put out audio description. There's a lot of people in the community, expert users, that that's not their definitive "Hamilton", and I agree with them. There's a lot more that you can fit in. And it was a really fun deep dive into all of the visuals that you can't describe in a show. That's what pre show notes are for. That's what audio introductions are for. That's what after-the-fact podcasts are for, is able to talk about the amazing things that happen in shows that don't exist, that can't exist, in your audio description script because there's just no time you got to fit it into the pauses.

##### Amy Jordan

Bridget, thank you so much for sharing with me and my audience this brand new creative career that I had never heard of until we crossed paths randomly on a Facebook mom group. And thank God for that. But the idea of this as a career is so amazing. I hope it opens the doors for so many people who are listening who are like, Oh my God, that's exactly what I'd love you to do. Or even just people who maybe are listening to podcasts and thinking like, I thought I could never see a play again. And it turns out I can and have this amazing, rich experience because there is a whole community of people that are preparing and creating and helping to augment the art that's up on the stage. That's so amazing. Thank you for sharing it with with us. Thank you for talking to me and explaining so many things that I'm sure that you were like, all right, I have to explain this for the 4000th time, but you've been so great. Thank you so much for being on the podcast.

##### Bridget Melton

Thanks for having me.

[techno distorted music outtro plays]

##### Amy Jordan

Thanks for listening to “Yes But Why?” podcast. Check out all our episodes on YesButWhyPodcast.com or check out all the content on our network, HC Universal, at HCUniversalNetwork.com.

 [music fades]

**[Transcript by BridgetMelton.com]**