

BBC Radio Essex interview with Sajida Asif, the artist behind Stagertext's 25th anniversary artwork, talking with Jake Peach from the BBC.

JAKE PEACH: But right now on the show, hopefully, you'll enjoy the programme this afternoon and will be able to hear it loud and clear. But imagine if you can't, because of hearing loss, and doing activities that many of us enjoy, like going to the cinema or the theatre or going to your favourite concert or gig of an artist that you really love could become impossible. That's where Stagertext charity comes in, all their work, right across the country. They're the leading theatre captioning and live subtitling charity, dedicated to making live performances accessible to d/Deaf, deafened or hard-of-hearing audiences. And it's a special year for them this year, cos they mark their 25th anniversary, including their work here in Essex. And to celebrate the milestone, Stagertext have commissioned Sajida Asif, who's a deaf artist, to paint a celebratory picture. Sajida shared with me what her picture is like.

SAJIDA ASIF: So, basically, the painting, it represents the transformative effects of text-based deaf access, basically captions and subtitles for arts and culture. So the whole point is to celebrate that, also to raise awareness. So, yes, we're celebrating the 25 years of Stagertext, which is amazing and hopefully they'll have many more years! But it's also raising the awareness of the importance of captions and subtitles and how it has such an impact for people like me, who experience deafness, all kinds of deafness as well, yes. Because it, really, it makes theatre and the arts, when we don't have support like captions and subtitles, it becomes very difficult for us to engage and enjoy it. So the painting really celebrates that and, in terms of how it looks, visually, you'll just have to wait and see in November!

JAKE: We're using, obviously, captions to do this interview right now. You're saying, of course, this is very important in the arts, cos I guess a lot of... It is getting better, but a lot of gigs that we go to, theatre shows, there'll obviously be a British Sign Language person helping there to conduct a lot of, help alongside a lot of the performances. But, given your story, Sajida, what was the inspiration behind the particular painting that you have put together? Cos I believe Stagertext have been a big support along the way for you as well, haven't they?

SAJIDA: Yes, absolutely. I mean, when I initially saw this commission, it just attracted me so much, because when you've experienced deafness, and all kind of ranges of deafness, and what comes with deafness – which I'll talk about in a minute – you know, your world becomes quite small. So when I saw Stagertext and I saw this commission, I realised this is, this really connects with me. And my life, you know, it's changed a lot since... I wasn't born deaf, so I became deaf later, and I have, you know, different types of deafness. So I have profound deafness in my left, so there's no hearing, and I have partial deafness in my right. And then, what comes with that – it came a year later – was severe tinnitus. So a lot of things just close up for us and if it wasn't for, you know, charities like

Stagetext, we would... I was definitely, in the start, I was kind of isolated and really not enjoying entertainment, going out.

JAKE: Mm.

SAJIDA: Because one of the things that happens when you become deaf, or you experience and kind of deafness, is that you end up – not intentionally – but you end up kind of closing yourself in to smaller spaces because socialising or going out and enjoying entertainment becomes so difficult. So that's why this is so important to me and straight away, I thought, you know, yeah, this is absolutely important to me. And my life, my daily life, I use subtitles, so I wouldn't, I wouldn't enjoy any kind of entertainment, even at home, without subtitles, so that's really why it's important and why it's so important to raise awareness. Because there will be people like me who experience deafness, but they won't be aware that they actually can actually access entertainment, theatre, the arts, and there is support out there, all sorts of support. Even the support right now, with our, you know, interview, and just reading captions – people won't be aware of this, not everybody will be aware of this. So that's really kind of the base of the work, the artwork, kind of making people aware that Stagertext supports the arts and cultures, why it's important, and also really kind of drawing people in to try and enjoy theatre and the arts much more than currently what is happening, you know. Any kind of support is fantastic and there's always obviously room for improvement, but, yeah, that's, that's kind of the base of all this work, really.

JAKE: Yeah, and as you say, Sajida, it's getting better, isn't it? And when you go to gigs, concerts and theatre shows, there's been a lot more conversation about that for sure and Stagertext are a big part of that, so it's great to see you supporting their work and sharing your story with us here on the show today. We'll come back to you in a second to hear more about your artwork and sort of the passion behind some of what you've been putting together in just a few.

<music>

JAKE: Jake Peach looking after things on BBC Essex at the moment. We're listening to my chat with deaf artist Sajida Asif, who's been commissioned by the charity Stagertext to paint a picture to provide and celebrate for their 25th anniversary. Stagertext are this huge national charity that really go the extra mile and are basically like the leader in when people go to concerts, providing captioning and subtitles to make it accessible for everyone to enjoy. Sajida gave an example of a time when she kind of felt left out because there wasn't the support available, like Stagertext provides.

SAJIDA: Yeah, I think initially, maybe a while back, I think when I was attending shows, one of the things is in the evening. So when you experience tinnitus and obviously deafness as well, you become very tired and fatigued in the evening. So when you go in the evening, you're listening to a show, all sometimes that background music, you know, the orchestral music, when it's extremely loud, it just makes it worse. So you're sometimes focused on all the noise and the

exhaustion, rather than what's being said. So I've had, I've definitely had experiences where I've gone in really excited for a show and I've come away super tired.

JAKE: Mm.

SAJIDA: But in those shows, there was no captioning and that's why it was even... It was super hard to concentrate on what's happening on the stage and listen, but also then, you know, kind of pushing back your tinnitus and your tiredness, your fatigue, especially if you've gone to work and you've come home in the evening, trying to enjoy something, you can't access it. I certainly couldn't access it like I could when I first started teaching and I didn't have some of these issues. That also highlights why it's so important, if you have to kind of push back all the noise, and you can just read the captions. It's amazing. It's an amazing experience, which is why I felt this project was just an amazing project to get involved in.

Another thing is sometimes when you, when you first become, you experience deafness and you go out and about, often you can't hear things and people are laughing at things and you don't know what they're laughing at. And you might say something and it sounds silly or people will laugh at it because you've said the wrong thing, because you've not heard correctly. So, it's all these kind of reasons that actually pull people back and they sort of kind of withdraw away and suddenly you realise they're not coming out to kind of little outings of groups or shows any more. And it's because everything becomes such a task, it's such a mission just to go out and socialise.

JAKE: That's what I'm taking away from this, is that, I think that's taken for granted with this, the exhaustion, the energy and focus to try and interpret it the best way for you, personally. And I think, as you maybe have touched on throughout our conversation, is that it'll be slightly different for, every person'll have slightly different needs and how they perceive it and when you're going to shows particularly, I guess they'll be trying to follow a universal format that everyone else will understand, but also have maybe, their own approach to it in a sense. And when you're talking about conversations, as you're saying, yes, it's horrible, isn't it, to miss a context or a punchline of a joke, because that's what we thrive on, isn't it, every single day that we're out there in society, I guess, particularly when you're in the workplace. So it's really enlightening to hear you portray that and put that across. But back to your artwork. I know you've been cryptic with this because there is a big reveal to come, so that's absolutely fine, but when we do see this and it is revealed, where can people see this in all of its glory?

SAJIDA: So Captioning Awareness Week will be the 10th of November to the 16th of November and there's going to be an auction that takes place, so Stagetext will be in charge of this. They will have a giant auction. The painting will be sold at auction and all the benefits, all the proceeds, will support Stagetext and, hopefully, again, supporting, continue supporting arts and culture and



people like me. So that's Captioning Awareness Week. But they are going to create, Stagertext are in the process of creating a shop where they can actually purchase prints. So, in November, when there's going to be the big reveal, that's really kind of when people can see the work, when it's going to be auctioned off. But the prints will be available via Stagertext's shop which they're working on at the moment, because, at the end of the day, it is a charity that is supporting people, you know, with deafness.

JAKE: It's been such an honour and a privilege to chat to you, Sajida, and to articulate your story and journey, which has had some of the low moments, but how you've come through that and are thriving now, particularly expressing yourself through your art, but particularly just in everyday conversations that you're able to enjoy these concerts and shows ever more. Sajida, thanks for chatting to me on BBC Essex today. It's a real honour, thank you.

SAJIDA: Thank you so much for having me, thank you.