

## Obituary: Nabil Shaban (1953 – 2025)

It is with great sadness that I heard the news of the death of my friend Nabs Sil (Nabil Shaban) on 18 October 2025. Nabil was a true hero of mine in so many ways.

We shared not only the same condition, brittle bones (osteogenesis imperfecta), but also a similar humour and refusal to accept limitation. He confirmed what I likewise knew and had grown up with: disability need not be a barrier to creativity or defiance. Nabs demonstrated to me, and countless others, what was possible.

Nabil Shaban was born on 12 February 1953 in Amman, Jordan, and came to Britain as a disabled child. Much of his early life was spent in hospital wards and care homes away from his family. A tough childhood building resilience. When I asked him how he had developed such a powerful voice, he said that it was a simple necessity born of loneliness and boredom, if he wanted to have a discussion with other children at the end of a long medical ward, he needed to be loud. He later reflected that these experiences, and that of the medical model, taught him that *'the medical profession and perspectives were flawed'*.<sup>1</sup> Medicine sought to pathologise him instead of understanding him as a whole unique person.

Nabil studied at the pioneering disability college Hereward College (Coventry), itself a hotbed of the call for disability rights in the 1970's, a place where he became active in mobility campaigns for disabled people as well as in theatre. Subsequently graduating from Surrey University (BSc Degree in Psychology and Philosophy) he began writing, performing and exploring political theatre. After graduation he refused to accept the lack of opportunities presented to disabled actors, and in typical DIY-style he and fellow student Richard Tomlinson created their own theatre company: Graeae Theatre Company (1980), Graeae being mythological sisters who shared one eye and one tooth between them<sup>2</sup>.

From its earliest performances, including the landmark production *Sideshow*, Graeae was radical and unapologetic<sup>3</sup>. A cast of six disabled performers toured North America and returned to the UK to find that 'suddenly everyone was interested — including the BBC'.<sup>4</sup> The company's mission was to *'dispel misconceptions about disability and counter images of defenselessness and accepted myths about disabled people'*.

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<sup>1</sup> Nabil Shaban interview, <https://disabilityarts.online/magazine/interviews/a-rebel-at-the-forefront-of-disability-activism/>

<sup>2</sup> Graeae Theatre Company History – <https://graeae.org/who-we-are/our-history/>

<sup>3</sup> *Sideshow*, *Unfinished Histories* – <https://the-ndaca.org/resources/audio-described-gallery/graeae-theatre-company-poster-for-the-production-sideshow/>

<sup>4</sup> *Sideshow*, <https://the-ndaca.org/resources/audio-described-gallery/graeae-theatre-company-poster-for-the-production-sideshow/>

Through Graeae, Nabil helped launch what would become the Disability Arts Movement, proving that theatre could be a space for political truth and confrontation as well as performance. As he once said, *'I became more Bolshy. My revolutionary spirit was strengthened. We shouldn't have to beg or plead. We demand, and if we don't get our human rights, then we make life difficult for those who get in our way'*<sup>5</sup>

I saw Nabil perform at the National Theatre some years ago, and he completely stole the show. His productions there included *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1998), *Emperor and Galilean* (2011) and *Peter Gynt* (2019)<sup>6</sup>. I was always amazed that his voice and presence could fill such imposing auditoriums. He was alive with power disguised as mischief.

To millions, he will always be remembered as Sil, one of *Doctor Who*'s most unforgettable villains as in *Vengeance on Varos* (1985) and *Mindwarp* (1986). Sil, the gleefully grotesque profit-obsessed creature, earned him cult status<sup>7</sup>. He later reprised the role in independent productions, delighting fans yet again. But Nabil's talent reached far beyond Dr Who and the TARDIS. He appeared in Derek Jarman's *Wittgenstein, Born in Fire* (Brian Loncraine), and *City of Joy* (1992) alongside Patrick Swayze and Om Puri<sup>8</sup>.

He was also a writer, poet, documentarian and activist. In a 1993 interview with *Magic Bullet* he discussed acting, Brecht and the politics of representation, railing against the practice of "cripping up" (non-disabled actors playing disabled roles) and insisting that *'If non-disabled actors can play historical epics, why shouldn't we?'*<sup>9</sup>

Nabil's activism was never separate from his art as when he took part in the Crass Collective linking punk's anarchist energy with disability culture. In 2007, during a debate at Tate Modern, he delivered what *The Guardian* called 'a fire-cracker display of railing against everything that stood in the way of artists like himself.'<sup>10</sup> He saw art not as a privilege but as a human right.

At college, Nabil was also a fierce campaigner for mobility rights. As one of the last generations to drive the blue three wheeled Invalid Carriages once issued to disabled

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<sup>5</sup> Nabil Shaban interview, <https://disabilityarts.online/magazine/interviews/a-rebel-at-the-forefront-of-disability-activism/>

<sup>6</sup> National Theatre Archives – <https://graeae.org/who-we-are/our-history/>

<sup>7</sup> Wikipedia, Nabil Shaban – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nabil\\_Shaban](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nabil_Shaban)

<sup>8</sup> CultBox, Doctor Who and disability activism – <https://cultbox.co.uk/news/doctor-who-actor-writer-and-disability-rights-advocate-nabil-shaban-dies-at-72>

<sup>9</sup> Nabil Shaban interview, <https://disabilityarts.online/magazine/opinion/nabil-shaban-on-brecht-acting-and-cripping-up>

<sup>10</sup> *The Guardian*, 2002 Weekend Interview – <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2007/dec/11/disability.arts>

people by the NHS and the UK Government, he fought for equality in transport and the right to independent movement. He shared with me amazing stories including crashing one of those blue three wheelers at speed (while ‘illegally’ carrying an additional disabled passenger inside) just as an ambulance went by. Nabil was shaken up and injured but his passenger, equally shook up, had to crawl away and hide because the carrying of passengers in these vehicles was illegal and being caught could have led to Nabil losing his vehicle and therefore his independence. In response to the vehicle’s unreliability Nabil innovated an art project which saw him drive across Britain, sending postcards to the UK Minister of Transport from every place he broke down, showing that his wit and defiance made even activism joyful <sup>11</sup>. It was during this adventure he visited the Magaret Grant and family including our Trustee Yvonne, asking to stay for a few days in Dundee. It is important to remember that he was driving on his own and that there were almost no accessible places for him to stay, such as an accessible room in a hotel. As such he stayed with friends including Yvonne.

He helped me personally understand that period (1970’s) and he contributed important research and film material to the BBC’s *People’s History of the NHS* (on which I was assisting<sup>12</sup>). Working with him on that project, and on my own art pieces such as *Motion Disabled in 2012*, was always a joy and privilege<sup>13</sup>.

Nabil’s 45-year legacy of cultural activism paved the way for greater disabled representation today. From Rose Ayling-Ellis and Ellie Goldstein on *Strictly Come Dancing*, and disabled children in BBC children’s TV, to actors like Liz Carr (*Silent Witness*) and Mat Fraser (*His Dark Materials*) we can trace a direct lineage to Nabil. Yet this progress is not enough: empty ableist ideals still echo around our culture. Disabled people should not have to apologise for the ongoing failure of cultural institutions to fully reflect us, despite legal obligations including the BBC Charter, the Equalities Act and the UNCRPD, to which Britain is a signatory. Nabil’s work reminds us that cultural inclusion is a right, not a privilege, but still exclusionary.

As someone who also has OI, I found him deeply inspiring. He made me braver and, more importantly, more indignant about the injustices we face. I remember a conversation during one of his National Theatre performances: as we sat and chatted before the *Emperor and the Galilean* show he spoke honestly about how, (despite his brilliance) he was still affected by the ableism that pervades the media world. While many of the actors from that National Theatre show were seeing their careers develop and were receiving calls from agents and were booked for work after the run and because of the show, Nabil didn’t

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<sup>11</sup> Personal recollections

<sup>12</sup> BBC’s *People’s History of the NHS*, Research contribution by Nabil Shaban with Simon McKeown <https://www.invalidcarriageregister.org/portfolio/history-nhs>

<sup>13</sup> Motion Disabled, <https://www.simon-mckeown.com/other-recent-work/motiondisabledfaces/>

have anything lined up. I took this as a deep blow: I felt angry on his behalf. A dose of reality that continues to drive what I do even now, today.

Nabil was involved in the very early days of the BBS, however he was really very happy doing his own thing, which was acting and theatre, film and television and setting up Graeae Theatre, which was a big undertaking. Over the last ten years or so I asked him if he wanted to attend our conferences however, I was always one step behind, as he was often in Ireland or elsewhere.

Although we didn't meet often, with life, injuries, international distance, Covid and work often getting in the way, he was always a kindred spirit. I was literally on my way to Edinburgh to see him for the weekend when I heard the news. I still feel lost. Tributes have poured in from the arts and disability communities nationally and internationally. The OI community nationally and internationally have lost one of their most important representatives.

At his core, Nabil was anarchic. He lived the question posed by Crass *'Do They Owe Us a Living?'* answering it with defiant certainty: *Yes, we are owed a life as equal contributors, unbound by class, status or disability.*

His death reminds us how deeply the cultural industries still fail disabled artists. For all his brilliance, humour and deep knowledge, he was too often ignored by the institutions that claim to represent society. Their ignorance is our collective loss. It is a significant creative loss and one we should regret and remember. We have lost not just a titan of a performer but a provocateur and someone who refused to let complacency or conformity dictate the terms of life. Nabil, with his OI, was fearless in challenging the gatekeepers who preferred a so-called able-bodied world. Nabil reminded us that disability is a complex source of knowledge, and, in his case, it made art richer, deeper, funnier and more human.

So, in Nabil's own spirit I want to keep arguing and fighting. Let us demand better representation, not as charity but as justice. As Nabil might say: *Of course they owe us a living, we demand it.*

Tonight, I will raise a glass to someone who brought so much joy, fury, laughter and brilliance into the world. We have lost a gentleman and a scholar, a campaigner and a hero, an artist anchored in a true anarchic spirit. A revolutionary who enabled the reformer to succeed.

He leaves behind his beloved wife Marcela, a vast circle of friends and comrades, and an artistic and political legacy that will echo for generations.

Nabil Shaban — actor, activist and friend.

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Image data

Images 1-4 show Nabil acting in part of a digital project entitled *Motion Disabled*. © Simon Mckeown with permission to use.