

FLEX

A cross-medium love story exploring disability as superpower through live mocap and multicamera VP techniques onstage

FLEX. F-L-E-X. This is a piece about Hypermobility Spectrum Disorder (HSD) and is based on a true story:

Rewind to 2004. Our Artistic Director RWS is putting up a poster on a bus stop for a show she is directing at University. Around the corner comes an out-of-control driver who then hits six people, all standing at the bus stop, RWS included.

Cut to: 4 years of diagnostics to understand why RWS can't walk anymore. Everyone is confused because there is nothing in the imaging – no breaks, no damage to the tissue – no one can tell RWS why, for the next 4 years or so, she is really struggling to walk.

What she does learn is that she is hypermobile.

So she spends the next 16 years or so rehabilitating and learning how to manage hypermobility, which is a biopsychosocial disorder. It basically means that the connective tissues of the body don't work properly – they're a bit stretchy – the ligaments stretch too far, allowing bones to move out of place, limbs to stray too far, and causing issues with proprioception. The effect of this is that hypermobile people can lose trust in their ability to judge things, they can go too far in conversation, not just physically in space.

So. Fast forward from 2004 to 2019 when she is cycling down Whitechapel Road, and she comes off her bike. This time she hears her foot break, so she knows something has happened. She gets taken to hospital and they spend 12 hours looking at different kinds of image to understand what has happened, because in none of the images can they see a fracture.

Except. This eagle-eyed consultant finally does say "What are these little flecks (F-L-E-C-K-S) of bone?" And he concludes that actually what they must be is evidence that a trauma has happened, but that the bones – because the ligaments around them are so stretchy – having broken, have then flicked back into the right position. So he concludes that I have indeed sustained the most serious foot injury you can get – called a Lisfranc Injury, which would normally result in instant surgery, potential loss of foot functionality – "but," he says, "the thing is, because you flicked the bones back into position, if you just stay still, you might be okay."

And, six months later, and she is back on her feet, having been through a little miracle there.

And, that moment, she realised that her hypermobility, which causes such fatigue in her life, such other injuries, such other problems - this condition has saved her from something quite serious here. And not only that, but surely, all those years ago in 2004, does it not mean that she could have been paralysed or even killed in that accident, but that the hypermobility masked what had happened?

So, at that moment, RWS had this huge epiphany that in fact disabilities can be superpowers, and that ties into her general motto or mantra in life – which is that any obstacle in life, what opportunity does it represent? And that is the feeling we want to give audiences when they watch this show onstage or through a digital/immersive platform after the event. But. How to do this?

Well, RWS had always been clear that she wanted to create a solo show supported by four hypermobile dancers to tell this story of extraordinary stretch and flex, but what she didn't know until she was in lockdown encountering new storytelling forms and media, she suddenly realised that motion capture is clearly the way to explore HSD onstage. Because, in motion-capture, one places a point over the joint of an actor, on their flesh, and then into the game engine is mapped a skeleton, which can then be dressed by animators. And she thought "Well, this story is about connective tissue and how it connects to bones, so this is the perfect form for this story. Moreover, if we're telling a story about disabilities being superpowers, where better to do this than in a game engine, using virtual production techniques.")

The narrative-driven formal innovation, transmedia potential + artistic ambition of FLEX has attracted the R&D support of major partners such as the RSC – a clear indication of the project's viability + potential.

FLEX's development so far:

- Jan 2022: Seed commission from RSC Literary to develop overarching story
- Feb 2022: 3-day R&D to stage 3 scenes with 3 actors but no tech
- May-Jul 2022: VP Futures 8-week intensive training scheme with Epic + ILM
- April 2023: live ICFX shoot at Target3D as part of Creative Convergence

ROX (nicknamed 'Zero'), the character

Rox has always been inspired by stories – devising them, staging them, experiencing them. She's also always been fascinated by science and technology – especially the making visible of things that we've not previously been able to see. Throughout her life are moments where she could have chosen one or the other, or where she ended up choosing both. And now, as she writes the play that forms the centrepiece of this IP universe, she's racing against the science of her body and mind to get it finished. Every time she's close to completing a thought, the circumstances change, the 'technology' of her brain glitches, or her body breaks down.

FLEX the play is a live virtual production show combining live multi-camera cinema with realtime in-camera visual effects, motion capture and animation. Central protagonist Rox discovers, through the 'live onstage' process of writing a mesmeric multiverse of scenes, that her life's biggest obstacle has been her biggest opportunity, that her disability is her superpower, and that her soulmate has been right in front of her, the whole time. The show is a cross between a Katie Mitchell live cinema show and Simon McBurney's THE ENCOUNTER, with all the upbeat quirkiness of THE FLIGHT ATTENDANT.

The central dramatic moment of the show is a near-fatal accident after which Rox discovers that her social difficulties are caused by a disorder of her connective tissue, Hypermobility Spectrum Disorder, a bio-psychosocial condition that pervades every part of her life - explaining her fatigue, her apparent clumsiness, her multiple accidents, her lack of trust in her own judgement... She also discovers, however, that this disabling condition has actually saved her life: the accident would have killed her, had her hypermobile, hyperflexible muscles not allowed her broken bones to miraculously 'flex' back into place. The 'dis-abling' condition is, in fact, a superpower. Rox's version of events and the story in Unreal begin to align and we get a technicolour explosion of epiphany and successful romance both onstage and in Unreal.

The other support we've managed to secure for 2024:

- In-kind producing from the RSC
- Support in kind from Target 3D and StoryFutures
- New Ideas Fund funding towards the creation of a digital character

Timeline:

- Oct 24 – Mar 25: Script Dev + Asset Creation
- Jul – Aug 25: Illusion R&D + VP Test + Sharing to attract Co-Producers
- Sep – Oct 25: Demos + Pitching to build support
- Oct 25 – Mar 26: Dev with Co-Producers towards in-principle Programming
- 2026-2027: Dev with Co-Producers towards Green Light and Production