Theresa Stern: Welcome to Central Bark, a podcast from Guide Dogs for the Blind. I'm Theresa Stern, and I'm your host.

Hello everyone and welcome, welcome, welcome to Central Bark. I am over the moon excited about today's episode. Today I am being joined by Aria Mia Loberti and her beautiful guide dog, Ingrid. Aria, as agreed upon on our last episode, has come back. Now that the actor's strike has been resolved, she's come back to tell us about her experience starring, thank you very much, in Netflix's series, All the Light We Cannot See. Aria, welcome. We're so excited to have you here.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Thank you so much. I'm so excited that we get to continue.

Theresa Stern: I know, right? Oh, my gosh. So tell us all about it. Let's just start from the super, very, very beginning. First, what I felt was really impressive about this film, obviously I loved the book. I bought the book for my dad for Christmas a couple years ago because I just loved it so much, but-

Aria Mia Lobert...: Oh.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. Yeah. Had you read the book prior to this adventure?

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah, I had actually. My mom had read it, I think, before it had even won the Pulitzer, back in 2014 or whenever. It had just come out, and she shared with me and I really enjoyed it, but I never wanted to read the epilogue because I was just so heartbroken by it. And I was like, as soon as you read this and it's going to be too much. So I took it with me every place I've ever moved for five, six years, or however long, and-

Theresa Stern: Oh, my gosh.

Aria Mia Lobert...: I was like, someday I'm going to have the strength and the willpower to read the epilogue. And I did not read the epilogue until the night I got cast, actually.

Theresa Stern: Oh, is that right? Wow.

Aria Mia Lobert...: It was finally my completion of the story. But I loved the book, I had read the first whatever it is, the first 500 pages, the story over and over again. And my mom had been particularly moved by it, so it's been a very special book to my family for a long time. And if you go way down to my Instagram page, way down, you can see pictures of my dorm room from college in a bookshelf, and it's on the bookshelf every time.

Theresa Stern: I love it. It was calling to you from the very beginning. That's so crazy. Awesome. Yeah, so I just love that Netflix or the producers, they were really intent on wanting to have an authentic portrayal of a person who was blind. And so I think we've all heard they did a huge casting call. And tell me about that, how you heard about it and your experience with all that.

Aria Mia Lobert...: I actually had not been aware of the casting call when it was happening. And it happened from July through to October ,when they, spoiler alert someone. And I heard about it in October from a former O and M teacher, who I hadn't talked to for years and years. I think last time we'd worked together, I was like 11 or 12, and she texted me and said, "I know you're in your PhD right now, and I know that you're an academic, but I don't really know what's up with you. And I remember you saying that you want to do something creative, or this just seems like something want to do. Would you audition? I can imagine you being this girl." And I wrote back and I said, "No, I don't act."

Theresa Stern: Oh, really? Okay.

Aria Mia Lobert...: I'm not going to audition. That's going to go to an actress. Are you kidding? So she's like, [inaudible 00:03:56]. And a couple days later, she reached back out to me and she said, "Did you change your mind? Are you going to do it?" And I thought to myself, okay, my mental health had been really, really bad for a while because we had just gone through COVID.

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And I had graduated from college, and I knew, and I didn't know what I wanted to do. And I was one of those people that would just like, "Okay, I'm going to stick with academics because I'm good at it. People always validate my intelligence." I love what I study. I love history and mythology, and I was studying those things and I'm like, "That's okay. Okay. So I guess I can do that as a career", but I didn't really know what I wanted to do. And I went to grad school in England, but we were on a complete lockdown, so I never really got to go outside.

Theresa Stern: Oh, God.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And I never really got to experience it. I never went to an in-person class, never got my college commencement, never got my graduate school commencement. Moved back to America for my PhD and had been there for a month, and I just really wanted a career change, but I wasn't really sure what it was going to be. And I think a lot of people in their twenties going to relate to this, it's this idea of already you've gone to college, you've worked really hard for this thing, and you're already in the career itself. And I was very privileged and very, very, very grateful and lucky that I was at the top of where I needed to be. And probably one of the top programs, if not the top program in the US for what I studied. And I was so unhappy.

And I looked at the text of the teacher and I'm like, "You know what? Maybe this will give you a little bit of joy because you love the book, it's over there on your bookshelf."

Theresa Stern: Right. It's right there. It's calling to you.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yes. Just go, and maybe it's an hour of having a little bit of fun.

Theresa Stern: Right.

Aria Mia Lobert...: I did not know anybody, and when you go on an audition, for those of you who have not done such a thing, because I didn't know, you usually have to have someone who reads with you. The other lines, the other character in the scene, and I did not know this. And I got in touch with casting, and they sent me this little script that I had to perform, which is the scene that, it's Marie and Daniel fleeing Paris with the line of refugees on the country road.

Theresa Stern: Okay. Yep, yep.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And that was the scene. And I was like, okay, I don't have anyone. So I recorded all of the Mark Ruffalo lines on my iPad, and I left myself a little space of time between each one so that I could say the Marie lines on camera.

Theresa Stern: Okay.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And that's how I did the audition.

Theresa Stern: Oh, that was clever.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And I never thought anyone would see it. And then a lot of people saw it.

Theresa Stern: Of course they did, because it was awesome.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Oh, no, thank you.

Theresa Stern: Two days later.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Two days later, I got the callback, and then it was three weeks of callbacks and then they start.

Theresa Stern: No way.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah.

Theresa Stern: Oh, my gosh. Wow.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Nuts.

Theresa Stern: So when you were doing... I could tell you're still blown away by it.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah. I mean, it's just this thing I did in my bedroom. It's weird.

Theresa Stern: Right, right. Definitely meant to be a kismet thing, for sure.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah.

Theresa Stern: So what were the callbacks like? Did you have to go into LA, or did you do more over the internet? Or how did you-

Aria Mia Lobert...: It was all Zoom because at that point, yeah, no Zoom because-

Theresa Stern: COVID.

Aria Mia Lobert...: COVID, at that point was still a little too dicey, so I don't even know how many, but two and a half, three weeks of callbacks. And there was some with the American casting director, so it was a global search. They had a casting director in every region of the world, basically, looking for this character.

Theresa Stern: Is that right? Wow.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And I started with US, and then moved into the UK casting director, who was sort of in charge of all of the global components, putting them together with Sean, the director. And that was when I told my mom, I didn't tell her that I had auditioned initially. I told her when I got called back for Sean, because I'm like, "Okay, this is exciting. You get to tell her you made it, to talk to a movie director. It's so cool."

Theresa Stern: Right.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And I would tell them about every callback. And there was one where I got off the phone with Sean, it was like 8:00 PM and he gave me a script. It was eight pages long, and he said, "I want you to memorize this and prepare it as best you can. I'll meet with you at 8:00 AM the next morning." That was a really fun, crazy... I did it. I'm really proud of that one. That was exciting.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. That's a lot to memorize.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah. No, it was really fun. And he would give me notes to do things in different ways. And it was very... I was just having so much fun. I wasn't really thinking about ever getting it. I was just having a good time.

Theresa Stern: Well, yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And this went on for two and a half weeks. And I remember thinking, "Okay." We got off a phone on a Thursday night, and he said to me, "This is a really, really big decision. A lot of people are involved in this decision, not just the people on the Zoom calls. This is going to take me a couple weeks. Suffice it to say, you did a really good job, Aria, pat yourself on the back, but you did a good job. Thank you so much." And I was like, "Oh, okay." So that's kind of, it's over.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: They'll go hire a famous sighted person.

Theresa Stern: Exactly.

Aria Mia Lobert...: It's fine. But maybe I didn't know how Holly worked. I did not know that you don't get called back if they don't like you.

Theresa Stern: They're serious.

Aria Mia Lobert...: [inaudible 00:09:42] everybody.

Theresa Stern: Oh, okay.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And I got a text on the following Sunday from the casting director for the project, and she's like, "Can you get on the phone in 10 minutes with Sean? And it's going to be a Zoom call. We want to just record it. We want to ask you a couple of things." And I was like, "Oh, oh. They're going to turn me down now." But I will ask them if they can see somebody like me being involved in community theater, and maybe they'll give me the confidence to go audition for community theater.

Theresa Stern: Right, right.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And I called my mom and I told her what was happening, and she's like, "Okay, I'll help. We'll put something together." And so I practiced a little speech about thanking them and hoping that they'd still consider an actress who was also blind or low vision, and asking if maybe they thought that I had a chance in community theater. And I got on the phone with Sean, and this video is now available on the internet, which is funny. And he said, "There are lots of moments in people's lives where their lives change, and big moments, and acting is very moment to moment. And this is one of those moments for you, but it's not your life changing. It's you, at your very core, changing and congratulations, you got the part." And that was it. And I couldn't talk.

Theresa Stern: I bet. Like, wait, really? Oh, gosh. And how amazing to get to call your mom afterwards.

Aria Mia Lobert...: He did that though.

Theresa Stern: Oh, he did.

Aria Mia Lobert...: He did. And I couldn't dial, I was terrified. I was just shaking. And Ingrid was in my lap and I was sobbing, and the video is online, and you can hear it in my voice and you can see it in my face. I'm just a mess. And he called my parents on the phone and told them himself, "I'm here on Zoom with your daughter, and she just got the role", and there's a recording of it, and they're just completely incomprehensible too. And that was November 7th, so almost exactly two years ago to us recording this.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. Wow, wow. And it's getting me teary, just knowing, I think having that sort of accomplishment and affirmation for... I mean, just sort of sticking yourself out there, Aria, and going, "I'm going to give this a try." And then to have it work out, and then to be able to share that with your mom. I mean, I know you have a close relationship with your mom. I had a close relationship with my mom. I know how much they put into us and worry about us, and our being visually impaired and that kind of stuff too. And then just to... Oh, it's making me all teary thinking about how amazing that was.

Aria Mia Lobert...: I remember, on the phone, she was just really overcome, and she'd been in the shower, so my dad had to pull her out of the shower, and he's going to be so embarrassed that I said that. And I remember my dad on the phone just repeating to Sean, "She's a good kid. She's a good kid." And I was like, "Oh, no." But yeah, it's really funny. And then I made like three dozen cookies and I ate them all myself.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, absolutely.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Because I wasn't home. I wasn't with them. So we just FaceTimed and I ate my cookies. And they went out and bought champagne, and we just sat on the phone all day like that.

Theresa Stern: That's just beautiful. Yeah. Oh, my goodness. So you got the part, obviously, and then it was time to really get to work. So I just don't even know what questions to ask because there's just so much that must've gone into that. Yeah. So you had to, I guess, figure out where you were going to be filming, figure out the script, figure out all the staging. And I believe you worked with a guy named Joe Stretch, Stretchy, is that right? Did I say that right?

Aria Mia Lobert...: Stretche. Yeah.

Theresa Stern: Stretche, yes. That also helped with some of the accessibility on set. Can you tell me a little bit about his role and how you were able to come into this business that isn't used to working with people with disabilities and really make that all kind of come together?

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah. No, I think I'll answer your question in two parts. The acting part and the access part, because they were so different and such different head spaces to be in. But I think we'll take painting as an example. Painters, in order to get good at painting, they have to paint for a really long time. And actors are the same. You can't just drop in and act, like you have to hone your skill. And I had never been in acting class. I had never done this before. And I think that was really scary to me, was just the idea of being a newcomer, and people spend their whole lives learning how to craft their art form, and I didn't.

And I realized, we touched on this in the last podcast, of this idea of having to be a sighted person, for all intents purposes, in order to get by, because people don't want to give opportunities to people who are blind or low vision because they're a little bit scared. As soon as you disclose accessibility, you can be faced with some challenges because people just don't understand that the access needs are very, very easy and straightforward.

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Aria Mia Lobert...: So I realized that through all of that training and skill that I'd done myself to look like, how do you get by so that society accepts you, that was actually learning about acting.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. I could see that.

Aria Mia Lobert...: I think this role is a testament to the fact that, I hope, now we're in a world where no one ever has to do that again. Where they can just be themselves and be truthful and authentic, and that they can celebrate their culture and celebrate asking for help where and when they need it. Because I would like for no one else to have to make that choice, where if that's the only way you can feel accepted and loved by the people around you, that you have to be someone that's not yourself, and you have to shut down your whole culture and identity that you want to be proud of, that the world just doesn't think is worthy of pride.

So I think if anything can happen, that is what I want to happen. And that was a large part of the prep for this role, was realizing I had prepared my whole life, whether it was through actual advocacy for whatever and being in front of people and speaking, or whether it was, I had 13 years of classical Russian ballet training, that really helped.

Theresa Stern: Oh, I'm sure. Yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Or what I just mentioned about sort of conveying sightedness convincingly, I guess, to get by.

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Aria Mia Lobert...: I also studied with, for a few months before we filmed, from mid-November through to maybe the end of February, with a wonderful coach at Julliard named Bob Krakower. And he and I, we never read a scene. We never had me, quote-unquote, do any acting, but we went through everything meticulously and we discussed everything. And so as a newcomer, that was really validating to me. And as an academic, he found my way in, which was you study, study, study, study, study. I studied the time period. I studied the radio, the city, the invasion of Paris as much as I could about what it would've been like. And Joe's support, Joe Stretche, who you mentioned, came in with the preparation for the historic components of blindness.

Theresa Stern: Right, right. Yep.

Aria Mia Lobert...: So that was really important. So meanwhile, I'm learning about the social atmosphere at the time, which was awful, and learning about the city and the construction. And Joe's coming in and we're talking about like, okay, so the cane is new. It's a few years old. It's brand new.

Theresa Stern: It's brand new. But yeah, exactly. I even had to look it up to see when they started using canes. Brand new.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And painting them white was brand new, and the technique wasn't developed. There weren't O and M teachers, and this girl in the middle of a Nazi fricking invasion would certainly not have access to an O and M teacher, or a braille teacher. So I'm like, "Okay." So I had obviously studied cane skills to qualify for a guide dog, since I could walk. And that did not really help that much because the technique was so different. So I guess, of course, I knew how to use a cane. I knew how to feel connected to the cane and to use it as a tool, but the hand placement on the handle is very different.

Theresa Stern: Different.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Your pointer finger is turned in to the rest of your fist, so it's a completely different tactile experience.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, that is totally different.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Your fist is lower down. The cane was supposed to, to be historically accurate, the cane would've been at my hip height.

Theresa Stern: Okay, like a support cane?

Aria Mia Lobert...: And we made it a little bit longer because it looked so awkward and it didn't visually convey the sort of tactile component that we wanted the viewers to understand. So thankfully, we made that a little bit longer, could just fall a lot better too.

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Aria Mia Lobert...: The materials were totally different, so all of that, I know Sean, the director, worked really hard to convey on screen, but the sighted population might not really recognize that that's part of portraying the authentic experience. It's like I was able to use my background, which is very different from hers, and create something because I already had experience with something, the same way you would if you were portraying your ethnicity or your culture in another time period.

Theresa Stern: Right. That's right. Yep.

Aria Mia Lobert...: The braille was a whole other component, like, oh my God, the braille was very complicated to get right. I, again, studied braille, but only really in my youth. So it's not quite my thing, and I'm not good at it. I won't pretend to be good at it, but my character is extremely good at it. She's one of those [inaudible 00:19:35] braille champion, good.

Theresa Stern: Yes. I'm with you on the not so good at it part, yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Not so good at it. No, and I think a lot of us aren't. It's definitely still very celebrated and very important, and a lot of people do, but I think a lot of people-

Theresa Stern: Oh God, I wish I was, yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: I'm like, I wish I had better, but I'm just not. And I'm an audio person. I also have a lot of usable vision, so it's not my thing, but for my character-

Theresa Stern: Me too. I know.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah. I'm like, okay, so she didn't have a teacher that's visually impaired, but she reads everything in braille. Her braille is going to be good, but she's not going to know not to scrub her finger on the dots.

Theresa Stern: Well see, that's the thing, right? I watched you and it looked good.

Aria Mia Lobert...: It's like scrubby and messy, but it's fast. And I didn't want it to look like if you see a competent braille user today, their hand just glides back and forth without any pause. I wanted hers to look really, really messy. Which I hope it added another layer, but also is something that a sighted person wouldn't really know or have time to think about. But because Joe was behind the camera and I was in front of it, we got to really craft what that would look like, what habits she might have or have formed, and maybe what access to... How did she learn it? And would it have been her father with a workbook? Would she have had support from a doctor, which Joe said it might've been likely that she would've had some of that. So, yeah. So trying to put that together is only possible when you have someone in front of the camera and behind the camera who is doing it truthfully and honestly.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, yeah. And understands all the nuances, where somebody who's maybe sighted or not, been around people with visual impairments would just say, "Oh, well, that's how it's done, and that's how it's always been done." Yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah. But the historical layer was so fascinating. But one thing that I think was really interesting, was sort of this idea that accessibility on set was going to be some profound thing that people would have to really do. And the reality was I didn't need accommodations on set. I didn't need any accessibility tools on set, but what I really needed was the support of people like Joe and Molly, who were able to answer questions, kindly and accurately, but also say what you've been taught from a hundred years of movies about blindness or what you've been taught about books about blindness, isn't accurate. Because sometimes, one of Joe's examples that I've heard him talk about in interviews, is sort of like they asked him if I would need a stunt double to walk downstairs.

Theresa Stern: Oh, good lord.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And so he was like, "First of all, if that were not authentic to the experience of this character, we wouldn't ever have her walk downstairs because why would you do that and then fake something." But this is not a character with a physical disability. This is a character who's blind. And where in our culture and our society have we been taught that somehow, a couple of cells in your eyes connects to the moon of your legs or your physical probability? I don't know personally, but it's there. It's definitely there. And the fact that it's there is what matters in the space.

And so sometimes it was things like that, or the idea of not every blind or low vision person needing or reading braille was also something that people were learning. I think they were also really intrigued by the fact that 85, I believe it is, it could be even more, it could be closer to 90% of the blind community does have some usable vision. And that the experience of Marie-Laure is really the minority, in so far as she does have no vision at all. So I think that was really interesting to learn. And then when Little Nell came on set, she's just seven years old, and her vision is totally different from mine. We're both low vision, but-

Theresa Stern: She's low vision too.

Aria Mia Lobert...: She can see colors. And I can't see colors. And so people were just like, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa.

Theresa Stern: This is different.

Aria Mia Lobert...: She can see the red sign? And I'm like, "Well, yeah, she can." But you can't see the red sign. I'm like, "I know, because we're different human beings with different parts, they work differently." And so that was really, really funny because you could see everybody learning in real time. And a lot of times it was a lot of people asking for help and me just having to say, "No, I don't need help right now."

Theresa Stern: I'm good, thanks.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Sometimes it took a really long time because people are conditioned to want to help, and sometimes the way they want to help cannot be helpful.

Theresa Stern: Can be less helpful. Yes.

Aria Mia Lobert...: But it was really, they were very compassionate and very excited to try to do the best that they could. And they really didn't have to do as much as they thought. Basically, they had to give me pdfs of scripts, and that was the extent of my accommodation request.

Theresa Stern: Well, it's funny what I remember asking about, "Well, I wonder if I could do acting." And people were like, "Well, you'll never be able to find your mark or whatever." Was that an issue or-

Aria Mia Lobert...: No, that's really interesting. So Joe has worked with a lot of blind and low vision actors on the show See. Unfortunately, many of the leading characters are portrayed by sighted people who are conveying blindness in their performance. But a lot of the supporting and background cast were blind, low vision, some of whom I believe might be GDB clients.

Theresa Stern: Oh, really?

Aria Mia Lobert...: And he talked about the gamut of experiences on that show, with some people would sort of sausage shaped piece of fabric that was stuffed with sand, very small, like the size of your index finger, maybe twice over, that would be placed on the ground as their mark.

Theresa Stern: Oh, yeah. Okay.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And that was a popular one. Others were just doubling or tripling the tape, so you can feel a little bit better.

Theresa Stern: Oh, so you could see it's thicker. Yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah. For me, I don't see color, but I see contrast.

Theresa Stern: Contrast.

Aria Mia Lobert...: I have a lot, like I said, it's the usable vision. And so we just used a lighter color tape on darker flooring and a darker color tape on lighter flooring, so I could pick it up visually, and we would also double layer it. But a lot of the time, I memorize things really fast. And again, coming from my performance background with dance, different from acting, but-

Theresa Stern: Aware of your body.

Aria Mia Lobert...: But aware of your body and aware of your body in space. And a lot of times in a ballet, you can't have marks on a stage. You have to remember exactly where you were.

Theresa Stern: Ah, yes. Okay.

Aria Mia Lobert...: So that was so funny because people would be like, "Oh my God, we walked her through once and she just remembers it." Yeah, thank ballet.

Theresa Stern: We have to. And we have to, we to remember things probably more often than-

Aria Mia Lobert...: More often than not, yeah. And I think that's another thing that is really a misconception, is your brain has to work so much more because you're filling in for gaps that people would just be able to see. If I forget my iPhone on the kitchen table, I can't just look over my shoulder as I leave the house and see the iPhone on the kitchen table. I have to be like, ah, whatever. Yeah. So I think that's a thing, sometimes people forget. That was interesting because it becomes very useful on a film set when you need that skill because maybe your mark is in the shot and you can't have a mark. Also Mark Ruffalo and the term mark, every day I made a pun about that. And I would just like that to be appreciated because nobody laughed.

Theresa Stern: Who's Mark?

Aria Mia Lobert...: Like I found my mark.

Theresa Stern: Wow. Now, how about really getting into the character of Marie-Laure? I mean, she's such a strong woman, that's such emotion that you were able to really, I thought, bring out of that character. Tell me a little bit about her. Do you relate to her?

Aria Mia Lobert...: I think she's a really extraordinary character, and she's the kind of character that people spend their whole careers looking to play. And I get to play someone like that my first time out, and you follow her through years of her life. And I get to portray years of her life, and these awful things that happened to her, quite frankly. And we don't have really anything in common, other than just a sense of hopefulness that things are going to work out okay, but even that is so different. She comes about her hopefulness in a really different way than I do, but we don't have much in common at all. And I think it's partially a product of being children of different centuries.

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Aria Mia Lobert...: She's extremely patient and I'm not. So that's something I really value, is part of this character's mantra is sort of like, everything will work out if you just wait. And I'm like, "Oh my God. No, no, this is not true. You have to do your thing."

Theresa Stern: Do something.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And so that was really interesting to see the strength, the strength and her patience, and the time and the care she puts into fighting for the French resistance is also really special and something that the film expands upon quite a bit.

I also really appreciate the relationship with Hugh Laurie's character, Etienne, who is sort of the inverse of Marie. So she's quite open, and she's really proud of her identity and very open-minded about it in a time period where people like her were very, very persecuted. And she still tries to cling on to her sense of personal fortitude and cling on to that part of her identity. But Etienne is hiding himself, both inside himself and inside his house. And he does not really take any pride in himself and in what he's doing. And he's quite scared, and she's not. And they get to come together and bring out this beautiful strength in one another, and I think that's a really special relationship. But probably the most defining relationship of the character is, of course, the relationship with her dad, who is played by Mark Ruffalo, who is my favorite Avenger, just putting that out there.

Really, that was something that we took probably the most time crafting. We got together long before we started filming, and we started to talk about the nuances and the layers we wanted to convey, and we just really just got to know each other so that the chemistry could be really organic. And he talked to my parents, because he was also doing the same work with Joe about how would you raise a blind child? But then he talked to my parents about their lived experience raising a blind child in this century, I guess.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah. And he really took everything to heart. And his relationship with, or I should say Daniel, his character's relationship with Marie obviously begins when she's very young, and the young Marie is played by an actress called Nell Sutton, who you will be hearing a lot more of because she's-

Theresa Stern: Yes. She was excellent.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Exactly. She is my favorite part of the whole show. She is absolutely fantastic. She's also blind, and she is already a really strong advocate for the community. And she is just, seriously, the nicest, most beautiful, radiant person on the entire planet. And she conveys that beginning of that relationship so beautifully with him before I come in and take over the mantle. But I really appreciate the time that every actor put into their craft to make those characters come to life, because those of us who read the book envision them really vividly. And so it's really special for me as a fan, just to see them on screen, but to be there and living in it with them was really, really cool.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, yeah. No, I agree. My husband and I binged these series last weekend, and it was fabulous, of course. But I was just like, "Oh, I don't want it to end. I want more of these characters." Because they were just so deep.

Aria Mia Lobert...: What was your favorite scene?

Theresa Stern: Oh, gosh. My favorite scene. Oh, dear. This is going to be hard. Well, I loved the... I don't don't want to be a spoiler alert, but I did love the last scene with Werner, the little kissing scene. That was awesome. It was very sweet.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Since we're spoiling.

Theresa Stern: Yes, since we're spoiling.

Aria Mia Lobert...: I'm glad you brought that up.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, go, go, go. Yes.

Aria Mia Lobert...: I'm really glad you brought that up because that was one of the things that I talked about with Sean and Joe that I'm really glad this character gets to do for people, is we, I don't think, have ever really seen a character who's blind, and we've seen very few who have disabilities in general, who get to not only be objects of desire, but get to feel desire themselves.

Theresa Stern: Yes, yes.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And I am really glad, I know it deviates from the book, but... Put a spoiler alert on the top of this, please. It deviates from the book, but I think it's just really special that we've taken that leap for the first time, and it's part of that empowerment because so often characters with disabilities and characters who are blind in general, not only they're not played by people who live the experience, but they're fetishized.

I think a lot of, I'll speak for young girls and young women, I won't speak for young men. I don't know that experience, but I feel as if you can never be an object of love.

Theresa Stern: That's right.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And that you, yourself, feeling any type of desire is very deviant. And so I think it goes a really long way to show that as Werner's character throughout the whole series is really, he's in love with her long before they meet. And that's part of the passion that they share. And they've been connected from the voice of the professor since they were children, but that she's able to act on her own feelings like any teenager, any young adult would, is part of showing this character as a fully, well-rounded human. Which we really have never gotten to see on screen.

Theresa Stern: No, we have not.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And we were glad that we got to do it and convey it so beautifully, with such a touching story. And do it with class and grace.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. Now, it was very classy. And it wasn't like he was kissing you, you were kissing each other.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Each other, yeah.

Theresa Stern: You know what I mean?

Aria Mia Lobert...: They're equals.

Theresa Stern: You were a woman in that, so where a woman came before blindness, I guess. And that's probably one of the things you just don't see. If there's a blind character, it's all about blind. Yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: It's all about blind. It's all about somebody grabbing onto their face and feeling, if they were going to do it with a sighted person, I could only imagine some stigma that would've come in with that. And I love that she feels, this is a little Easter egg for those of you, but she feels his eyes first, to make sure that they're closed so that they're having the same experience,

Theresa Stern: Same experience, yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Which I think is very touching.

Theresa Stern: It was beautiful.

Aria Mia Lobert...: But no, I think he's such an interesting character because he is, in many ways, the one who is blinded by propaganda and by war. And he doesn't have any claim over himself. He doesn't have agency because he's forced into this horrible path. And she has had complete agency over her life in a way that we never get to see a character with a disability have. And that's the biggest component of the story, is that this person with full agency and this person without it get to come together and unite, and they draw out the beauty and hope in each other. And it's just really special.

Theresa Stern: I like the driving scene, and I won't say anything more about that either.

Aria Mia Lobert...: The driving. Okay. So that was actually a lot of ad-libbing, and it was so much fun. And it was actually in the whole series, the only stunt that I didn't do myself, because no actor is really allowed to drive a car on set for safety reasons. So it doesn't matter that I was blind, just like nobody's allowed.

Theresa Stern: Nobody could do it.

Aria Mia Lobert...: That was the only stunt I didn't get to do. But it was really fun because we had a lot of chickens, real chickens. They were not digital, AI chickens. They were actual chickens, and they were really fun, and they kept trying to crash the scene, and the driving was hilarious. We had the best time.

Theresa Stern: Very fun. What was your favorite scene?

Aria Mia Lobert...: Oh, my gosh. I think I have two favorite scenes to both perform and watch.

Theresa Stern: Gotcha. Yep.

Aria Mia Lobert...: So my favorite scene to perform was actually the grotto scene. Please put a spoiler alert around this episode. Oh, my God.

Theresa Stern: Yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: That was my favorite to perform because that was, like I said, everything you see on screen is truly me.

Theresa Stern: Oh, my gosh. Scary.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Other than driving the car. And so we were doing something that typically, usually, I did not know this, actors are not permitted to request to do their own stunts. You have to be protected. So the stunt double will come in, and this is because you can't risk anything. You can't risk, sometimes even like a cut or a bruise. You can't risk spraining ankle because you are completely irreplaceable. It's one of the few careers, I think, where that is case.

Theresa Stern: That's right.

Aria Mia Lobert...: No one can come in and if you're out, the show can't happen. So that's something that happens on every movie set, it has nothing to do with disability. And I had a conversation with Joe and Sean early on. I was like, "I really want to do my own stunts", and please. And Sean explained that to me and I said, "Can we try?" And he was like, "Okay, we can push the boundary a little bit." And I'm like, "I want to do them all", and I want this to be a place where we can champion the power of people with disabilities who've been completely limited and basically forced out of the industry and not given opportunities at all, because people think we're incapable. So if you can take a chance on an unknown actress and show that this authenticity is true, I think this is another step we can take to bring it to fruition and to power, to prove that anybody is capable. And he said "Yes", which is completely unreal.

Theresa Stern: He seems amazing, by the way.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah. No, he's a really great person. He's everything you want him to be, basically. And he's very much a dad. So the set was extremely safe. There are a lot of stunts in the show. I learned how to shoot a 1917 Colt revolvers.

Theresa Stern: Oh, that's right. You did get to do that.

Aria Mia Lobert...: I get drowned. I do some fight sequences.

Theresa Stern: That was scary.

Aria Mia Lobert...: I get bombed and I fall. So we took a lot of time to make sure that I was safe and comfortable. But I also have a lot of ballet experience, like I said. Professionally, I've done a lot of different kinds of dance. Apart from that, I have some martial arts training, and I taught yoga for years. So I'm like, I'm in really good shape to do this type of work, and I want to make sure it's done really well. But also, it allows me, as the artist, to convey the physicality of the character in a different way.

Because we've already learned her blindness would be very different in the forties than blindness would be today. She's totally blind, and I am not. So how can I convey that in her movement quality? Because getting dunked in and out of a rising tide by a vicious Nazi, it's very, very different when you can't see. And the beauty for Sean as a director, I think that obviously it was really difficult. It took four days. It was harrowing and hard to do and to watch, but it gives a little bit more freedom for the shots that we could do too, because you don't have to cut away to switch a double in and out, and -

Theresa Stern: That's right.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah. It's so unique that any actor is ever allowed to do something like that. And I'm grateful that they allowed me to do it, because it allows me to stand up for everyone in this community a little bit more. If someone's going to come and say like, "Oh, you could never act because you're low vision." You could be like, "Yes, I can actually be drowned by a Nazi, so, you know."

Theresa Stern: I can, it's all good.

Aria Mia Lobert...: So hopefully-

Theresa Stern: I got it. I got it.

Thank you for-

Aria Mia Lobert...: Hopefully, it's something that can-

Theresa Stern: For pushing the envelope on that. Thank you for doing that for everyone.

Aria Mia Lobert...: It was really fun.

Theresa Stern: And dealing with drowning. The drowning thing, that was a hard scene to watch.

Aria Mia Lobert...: I want to mention my favorite scene to watch, which I didn't get to-

Theresa Stern: Yeah, yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: The scene with the Resistance ladies.

Theresa Stern: Yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: The Resistance ladies are amazing. I love it.

Theresa Stern: I love them. Yes. Yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: It was a fun day. We ate a lot of pastry. It was great. And they were delightful. We didn't have a lot of women on set, so it was great to have them there.

Theresa Stern: Yeah, it was mostly men, wasn't it? Yeah. Yes.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah.

Theresa Stern: Oh, my gosh. Very cool. So how about Ingrid? What did she think of all this crazy film making stuff? You guys were all over the world doing this too, right?

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah, yeah. She thinks it's about her.

Theresa Stern: Okay. Well, it is.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah, it really is.

Theresa Stern: We'll let her think that.

Aria Mia Lobert...: She really loves traveling. We touched on this a lot in the previous episode, of she just loves traveling. That's what she, that's her passion. And so moving back to Europe, because I had just been there, I didn't last very long in the US again. So moving back to Europe, she was very happy to do it. And I'd never been to Hungary before. We did most of our shooting, we did about four months of filming in Hungary and about a month and a half in France.

Theresa Stern: Oh, wow. Okay.

Aria Mia Lobert...: So it was really fun to get to see how much she enjoyed that, and she got to learn these new cities and towns, and meet so many new people. She and Mark Ruffalo have a very special relationship. Mark absolutely loves her. And he is an off-duty person now. So basically, if Ingrid, I just take her out of her harness because if she sees him, she will get very, very easily, and then he also will want to feed her salami. So they have a very special relationship. And it was also really exciting, I think, for her to get to just be on set, because so many people just love dogs, and they got to learn about what her job was, which there was a little bit of a learning curve.

Theresa Stern: Of course.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Everyone got to learn what she does. And my best friend, Molly, got to come out for a majority of the filming, actually. New countries, new people, new jobs.

Theresa Stern: That's so amazing. Yes, yes.

Aria Mia Lobert...: The director, a testament again to why Sean is amazing, said, "What can we do to make you more comfortable? Can we fly out your best friend? Would that help?"

Theresa Stern: Yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And I'm like, "Hell, yeah." And she was down for it, and so she came out for a bunch of filming. And she's actually a former puppy raiser for Guiding Eyes.

Theresa Stern: Oh, that's so amazing.

Aria Mia Lobert...: So she was very integral in teaching a crew about Ingrid's job and no petting while she's, even if she's not with Aria, like when Aria comes out of set and she wants to get back to her trailer, she's going to need Ingrid to be attentive. So teaching all of those things is very helpful. And in episode four, I tried to get it put into the audio description, but apparently it takes you out of the story to say, "Ingrid, Aria's guide dog is in the episode." So I appreciate that they didn't pull you out of the story, but spoiler alert and Easter egg, because Ingrid is in the victory parade with Molly.

Theresa Stern: No way. Okay. I'm going to have to look at it again. I wasn't close enough. I thought the audio description was actually pretty good, but I would've liked to know. That was really good. Yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Oh, it was the best audio description I think I've ever heard. And they were like, "You can't say Ingrid in the audio description." I'm like, "It's okay. I get it." But it'll be a good Easter egg. And I'll try to find a good still or something to share, but she's in there. It's at the end in the Victory Parade.

Theresa Stern: Oh, is that [inaudible 00:44:05], yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: She's there twice. So she and Molly come up the stairs of the fountain, of the well, right outside the front door when Werner walks out with the soldiers. And then again, Molly is with the two resistance ladies.

Theresa Stern: Yes, yes, yes.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And you can see Ingrid standing, that's the better shot of Ingrid. You can see her standing with Molly and the Resistance ladies in there. They have their wine, and they're like "Hooray", and Ingrid's in there.

Theresa Stern: Love it. Ingrid, she's a little scene stealer, that Ingrid.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Little star. She's enjoying doing all of the fashion magazines, really.

Theresa Stern: Gosh, yeah. So tell me, a lot of stuff has come up, this sort of as a catalyst, I guess, for probably some more things going on for you. So can you tell us what else you've been up to?

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah, I can't say too much about anything. There's been a lot of press happening, a lot of fashion-related articles and photos, which has been really exciting. And a lot of that has been able to happen during the strike because it's not promoting the show. So it's just the beauty of these pieces of clothing, and also celebrating inclusion through that storytelling is really exciting. Now that the strike is resolved, to go out there and talk about the show and talk about the project, and there are a lot of fun things coming up. I think we're talking, it's November 11th today, so in the week to come, there'll be a lot of very exciting things happening. It's very, very busy. December is already looking very busy.

Theresa Stern: Oh, boy.

Aria Mia Lobert...: And it's been a real thrill. I also have another project coming up. Again, I can't talk too much about it, but it's called The Spiderwick Chronicles and it premieres in the spring.

Theresa Stern: Okay.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah.

Theresa Stern: That was a book as well, wasn't it?

Aria Mia Lobert...: It was also a book. It was also one of my favorite books as a kid. And the character I portray in the series is a new creation. I can't tell you a lot about her, but it's also a very physical, very stunt heavy role. And it was a real honor to work with some extraordinary younger up and coming artists to put that series into the real world. And I'm really excited to share it. And yeah, I also, Molly, who I mentioned, my best friend and I have written a book together. And so it's with our literary agent now, and hopefully we'll find a good home when it's meant to. And it features a low vision protagonist who's 11.

And I'll put Molly and Sean in the same category, in the sense of when you want to tell a story truthfully and authentically, I think it has to be done both ways. So you have to have an authentic perspective portraying the characters and telling the story of that culture and that identity, as well as any stigmas that identity might face. But also the people who experience those people in the real world, who often have these stereotypes and stigmas forced upon them in relation to those types of people, it's so important to be able to bring both to the table and to be able to break barriers in both directions. And I think Molly and Sean and his team are examples of how good, true, authentic storytelling comes from both sides of the equation.

Theresa Stern: Yes.

Aria Mia Lobert...: I can't wait for readers to be able to experience the young character and her friends that we've created. And I've also been working on a solo book project myself during the strike, so-

Theresa Stern: Oh, my gosh.

Aria Mia Lobert...: I'm really excited to be able to break into that territory because I didn't have anyone to look up to in TV or film or books, and there's a chance I could be able to break down that barrier in all three. And I'm really grateful.

Theresa Stern: Yeah. I mean, if you think about it, you could be sort of the key to unlock all this unknown potential that is out there in future generations. And so, thank you for being that.

Aria Mia Lobert...: I really want people to have a door open.

Theresa Stern: Yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Thank you. I want the next person to be able to not have to jump over as many hoops and not have to prove themselves. I want us to live in a world where we can be taken for who we are, and that who we are is never a limit on what we can do and our power. And I want that to be something that, maybe it requires a little bit of trailblazing upfront, and maybe it requires people like Sean and all of the crew, the gang over at Netflix, who took a chance on an unknown too, because these are monetary decisions. These are not simple choices and they could have gone with a big name actress to sell their show, but they did this because they knew it mattered. And allyship is really important, but it's up to everyone to start breaking down these barriers because they don't have to exist anymore.

Theresa Stern: So Aria, like I said, I really enjoyed watching All the Light We Cannot See. And I really thought that the audio description was amazing, I really enjoyed it. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Aria Mia Lobert...: I am really privileged to be able to work on a project like this because I think it is probably the best example of audio description I've ever heard. And it's a testament, again, to having people who are blind or low vision on both sides of the camera. And Joe's input as well as my input, and Molly and I get to sit and listen to the audio description together way, way back in March, so that we could give feedback. And Joe did the same, and he was involved with the writing process. And the writer of the audio description is a woman named Liz, who has been doing this as her career for a really long time and is a wonderful ally to the community. And she and Joe went through and just meticulously crafted the piece that you hear in that audio track. And it went through several rounds of revisions. I also want to give credit to the voice artist who did it, her name is Fern, and she's also part of the blind community. And so that was really great that we also got to have another-

Theresa Stern: I loved her voice, by the way, too.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah, she has a perfect voice for this. It's really great. They tried their hardest to put in every layer of detail and nuance they could. But as some of you may know, audio description tracks have to be limited because you have to do it in between the dialogue or in between important sound effects. So that means that you're really limited on space. So sometimes we would want to describe a costume or something in more detail than we got time to, and with that in mind, for the first time, I believe in history, there is an audio description introduction that goes with all the light that is available on the Netflix Tudum website. But I have on good authority that will be on the Netflix app. So in the app with the show, with all of the other featurettes, it's something that we're all advocating really strongly for. So that will be happening imminently, I'm sure.

And it is a, I believe, 12-minute, maybe longer a piece that I got to narrate myself, which is exciting. And it's all about the description of the town of Saint-Malo, of Paris, of the scenes in Germany, all of these things that we didn't have time for, right down to the shapes of buildings and the texture of the cobblestones. And then pieces, costume pieces and set pieces that we couldn't describe, detail of the attic set, because that is chock full of stuff. So the audio description introduction allows you to get a list of the things that the audience members would be seeing on screen in the background that might not be relevant to the story, but which the visual audience would be able to see. And then character descriptions, so nuances of hair and eye color and physicality and movement quality.

And they also were really kind enough to use my experiences on the sets. When Liz was writing this introduction, she asked me a lot of questions about what was it like when you were there? What was the texture of this that might not be conveyed visually? And so there are things in that introduction that people who have full sight would still not be able to see, so it makes the experience better for everybody. We also try to make kind of soothing, so hopefully, but you can find it online now and on the Netflix app on their platform soon. It's really exciting, and I'm really grateful. But the beautiful thing about the screenings is, I believe, something Joe and I advocate strongly for, and I think folks in the GDB community advocated strongly for, was for screenings that were geared towards the blind community in particular, should not have an audio description headset provided.

The audio description track should play on the loudspeaker, because if we think about how these things are run, if we're going to a movie theater, a majority of the world is sighted, even though the blind community is quite a large minority, it's still a majority sighted. So they wouldn't put the audio description track over the loudspeaker because they want to be in service to the majority. But if you're really reaching out to the blind community to have them come down in droves for a screening, and the screening is designed for them, a majority of the audience members are going to be blind or low vision. They took it to heart, and they catered to their majority. And I'm really grateful because I think that's a big important step for inclusion too.

Theresa Stern: Absolutely. Absolutely. Really, that sense of belonging. I don't need something special in order to-

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah, you don't need to ask.

Theresa Stern: Enjoy this with everybody else. Yeah, yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Yeah. And also, with this audio description being so good, you don't need to be like, "Well, the audio description didn't say what he just did", to the person next to you.

Theresa Stern: Totally.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Because it was good. It's thorough.

Theresa Stern: It's so straight. Yeah. Yeah. You're awesome. Thank you. Thank you for-

Aria Mia Lobert...: Thank you.

Theresa Stern: Just making everything... I could get all teary, but-

Aria Mia Lobert...: Thank you. I'm glad we get to celebrate this.

Theresa Stern: Just can't wait to see what comes next.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Thank you. Thank you.

Theresa Stern: Yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: I'm just so glad. I'm so glad for this community and what they've been able to give me, because I wouldn't have been able to-

Theresa Stern: Well, just know that we are all right here supporting you all the way.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Thank you.

Theresa Stern: Sometimes I imagine you're going to have a lot of stuff going on and a lot of people talking about you and a lot of just new experiences, but just know that we are all here.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Thank you.

Theresa Stern: Carrying you through.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Thank you. I feel it.

Theresa Stern: Yeah.

Aria Mia Lobert...: Thank you.

Speaker 4: For more information about Guide Dogs for the Blind, please visit guidedogs.com.