



## Making disability and art work

Tyson:

Hi, my name is Tyson. Welcome to the Making it Happen podcast, presented by Access2Arts. In this podcast series, as a team, we are seeking to examine the roles of the producer in the South Australian deaf and disability arts sector. Access2Arts is a disability-led arts development agency, and the peak body for arts and disability in South Australia. Access2Arts acknowledges that we and our home are in Kurna country. We respect Kurna elders past, present, and emerging, and through them, to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Please enjoy the podcast.

Welcome to the Making it Happen Podcast. I'm your host, Tyson, and today we have special guest Diana Divine, who has made an incredible career in the disability arts sector, and has had a significant impact. Welcome, Diana.

Diana:

Thank you so much, and thanks for saying that. That's really nice of you.

Tyson:

First, please describe your career and work in one sentence.

Diana:

Sexy art that nobody asked for.

Tyson:

Nice. Perfect. What inspired you to become a producer in the disability art sector, and how did you get started?

Diana:

So, I first started off in burlesque. I first started off in burlesque when I did a class with Peaches 'n' Gin in 2015. It's a burlesque school that used to be around back in the day. And yeah, I was really drawn to the amount of expression and autonomy that you get with burlesque because you are so in charge of what you're bringing to the stage in that kind of cabaret variety sector. And when I was developing there, I kind of just wanted to be performing more, so I started producing my own shows and just making my own opportunities for it.

And then, found that I actually really enjoyed the production side of things sometimes more than the performance side. And I just thought it was very suited to what I was trying to do. And then once again, I had so much agency, so much control, I was incredibly independent. And these were all things that I kind of felt that I had been lacking in my life, especially as a disabled person, as a queer person, even as a young person. So, yeah, it was just very appealing to what I felt was missing to me at the time.

Tyson:

And how long have you been doing this?

Diana:

So, I have been producing since 2016, so I'm in my eighth year right now. It's a lot. Yeah, it's a lot. It's been a very weirdly fast journey despite it being almost a decade of work, but it definitely feels like things got out of hand in the best way, and just suddenly developed into, "Oh, you like doing this stuff and we think you're good at it. Here's this opportunity. Here's that." And I feel like a lot of doors just very suddenly opened up for me when I started producing and kind of showing my capability as an arts professional, more so than necessarily just in the performance sector.

Tyson:

Yeah, amazing. Regarding collaboration impact, can you share an example of a project you worked on in the disability arts sector and how you ensured everyone involved could participate?

Diana:

So, one of my favourite projects I've worked on so far was Embrace Festival. It was a multidisciplinary disability arts festival that I put on as part of my residency with Carclew last year. So, Carclew is a local youth arts organisation. And I had an emerging creative producer role with them for 2022. And we were allowed to put on pretty much whatever event we wanted to. It was part of the application process. And essentially, on a whim, I decided let's do a disability arts festival because that has always been a dream to put on for me, and yeah, got approval. So, we had a team of about five people, I think all except my supervisor identified as disabled. And we were pretty much prioritising the comfort of our artists and staff over literally everything else.

It was very much a situation of by and for, so we tried to extend as much of our understanding of our own experiences and also experiences in the disability arts sector as well, to try to compile that knowledge and just make as many considerations as possible. What we really strived to do was keep an open dialogue with our artists, so if anything changed or if they had second thoughts or reassessed the situation or gained more information, it was always welcome to change the plan, which I think is one of the main things in the production side, the logistical side of events and performance is flexibility and knowing that best laid plans.

Yeah, I think it really ties into the concept of crip or disabled time, depending on what you want to call it. And the idea that time does not work in this even way for a lot of chronically ill and disabled people because we don't know how we're going to be on the day-to-day, which can be very challenging to navigate depending on the structure of the show as well, I think. But yeah, luckily, Embrace was very open and once again, very independent. And myself at the helm, so I felt really confident in just doing the things that people needed me to do, which I know is absolutely a privilege in that context.

Tyson:

That sounds amazing. What were some of the highlights within the festival?

Diana:

So, my personal highlight was actually seeing Endo Days because I had missed that in all of its Fringe runs, all of its independent runs. And I had been given tickets by Libby, who's a friend of mine, who runs Endo Days. Every time she had a season running of that show, chronic illness, obviously, got in the way and I wasn't able to attend. Yeah, I reckon I got about three sets of free tickets that I had to miss. And then, finally got to witness it as part of Embrace Festival. It was the opening night show, and she also opened Prompt Creative Centre with that show. So, it was really special night and I'll always remember it.

Tyson:

Oh, that's amazing.

Diana:

Yeah, thank you. Another amazing experience I had with Embrace was my friend Jamila Main, who also performs in drag as Ivy Drip, they put on a snippet of Benched at the Embrace Fest Gala. And I was very lucky to be their companion on stage. So, it's an interactive kind of immersive theatre piece where you sit on the bench with Jamila, and I got to do that. And yeah, it was, once again, really personal. It felt like almost the festival kind of melted away, and it was just me and this friend that I really treasured and respected sharing this moment and this story. But yeah, it just felt like the entirety of Embrace was an embracing feeling. It was community and safety. And yeah, just good vibes, I suppose.

Tyson:

Yeah, for sure. Oh, that's fantastic. And how was it received by the disability community and the broader community?

Diana:

We had a really great turnout from the disability community, specifically the disability arts community. So, we had support from people like Tutti. We did a silent auction of Tutti artists' work, which sold beautifully well. It was amazing. Some great works were sold. I was quite sad to miss out on a couple of them. We had people from Tutti coming down. We had people from various support agencies with us. It was really positive. Everything that I heard was quite positive. We hosted it at Nexus. We hosted the Embrace Gala, I mean, at Nexus, which is a pretty accessible venue. And what they lack in built-in access, they make up for in understanding and, once again, that flexibility. So, it felt like a very, once again, safe, welcoming place to be as a disabled person.

Yeah, I just had a very fantastic feedback, great chats. I met so many new friends. I got to meet some of the Sisters of Invention, which so cool. And yeah, just a few little disabled celebrities. I got to have Kelly Vincent and Mama Alto do keynote speeches, which both just blew me away. Kelly Vincent is one of my idols from back in my uni days, a decade ago, so it was really special. I felt like people from all kind of generations of activism as well were coming together. There was an amazing range of ages, experiences, even presentations of disability. It was just really fantastic. Yeah, I would like to think that we had a positive impact on the audiences, and I do know that we had a positive impact on our artists, of course.

Tyson:

Yeah. And is it planned to happen again in the near future?

Diana:

Oh, yeah. Yeah, so it'll be coming back in 2024 over the October long weekend.

Tyson:

Oh, that's amazing. All right. Regarding inclusion and accessibility when organising events and projects in disability art sector, what steps do you take to ensure they're both accessible, welcoming for individuals with disabilities, and how do you promote inclusivity throughout these initiatives?

Diana:

Yeah, cool. Yeah, so when I'm putting on an event, I usually try to consider things immediately, like pricing, that's usually my first go-to, because I always feel like that is one of the largest barriers we face as disabled audience members because it's expensive to be disabled, basically. So yeah, I'll usually try to include an access seating discount. So, whether or not they have a concession card, because we don't all qualify for DSP, they can still get a concession price to be able to come in. It also means that it's no scary phone calls and mess arrounds, basically, trying to call up ticketing to book in your accessible seating.

Yeah, I think that's part of signalling that this is an accessible and welcoming environment is listing that readily, having it inbuilt, not an afterthought or something you can... Information you can get if you seek it out. I really try to make that information as inset to the rest of the... If it's a listing on a ticketing or if it's a Facebook event or whatever, include that information just as I normally would. I also think in the age of COVID, having clear mask policies or preferences. I mean, my mask policies are still fairly lax, but it's still like, "We would prefer if you wear masks while not eating and drinking." We offer masks at the door, but we don't say, "You have to wear a mask." But still having that on offer, and once again listed as part of the event, as part either ticketing or your event page, listing that you have this preference, masks will be available at the door, makes people a little more understanding of what you're trying to do.

So, it means the people who like to wear masks will rock up with their masks ready to go. It means that the people who don't really mind will probably be willing to put one on. And it also means that the people who don't want to or cannot wear a mask, know that they're not going to be in for a massive fight if they aren't able to wear a mask. So, I think it's just saying what you mean, putting plans into place, and then saying that you have those plans, and actually specifying what the plan is. It's the same thing as writing, "Accessible venue. It's fully accessible." It's like, well, what does that mean? What is it accessible for? What things can we access? Who can access it? All of this stuff. But who can access it? How do we access it? It's not just immediately fully accessible because we say so.

You can't paint a wheelchair on a parking spot and call it a wheelchair-accessible spot. But yeah, I just think there's a lot of just clear communication to show that you are actively thinking of this stuff. Because I know for me, as an audience member, that's kind of all it takes sometimes, it's just people saying, "Here is our access information." Whether it's perfect or not, whether it is accessible completely or not, it's probably not going to be, it just allows us to plan, basically.

Tyson:

Yeah, the intent is super important, isn't it? And having that dialogue, that open dialogue makes it a much more accessible and safer space for everyone to-

Diana:

Yeah, I think just setting this stuff up is, it's not even a question. It's just this is what it is. And obviously, being open to people giving feedback or asking for further information and all of that, making yourself available, that sort of thing. But even also, there are smaller signalling things you can do to create that more accessible culture. Even just things like image descriptions. Even if you know 100% sure that you have absolutely no users that use image describers and screen-reading technology, if you have it, you are showing that you think about the possibility of it and that you are welcome to access this however you best can.

Yeah, it's just that signalling. We as a company care about this. We as producers, we as artists, whatever the medium is, it's saying, "I've thought about it." And it takes two seconds, usually. Half of these communications are an extra sentence in your ticketing link or two sentences for an image description. They are relatively low-effort access measures, and it promotes that culture if nothing else.

Tyson:

That's amazing. You cover it so well. Regarding challenges and advocacy and promoting diversity, what are the main challenges in promoting inclusion for people with disabilities in the arts, and how can we overcome them?

Diana:

That's a big question. A big question with probably a bigger answer. I don't think I actually necessarily have the solutions. I do think I have just coping strategies is probably the best way to describe it, because unfortunately, as a disabled producer and as a disabled performer, I have very much felt like I need to convince people to care or convince people to care enough to act. And once again, as we just said, the actions are not big. They don't take a lot of effort. They don't take a lot of time. But sometimes I think because it doesn't take a lot of effort and time, it's seen as not very important or disposable, which is also the sentiment that disabled people in general are made to feel, which yeah, it's really unfortunate.

So, at this point, it's about, for me, I suppose, creating the spaces myself and showing proof of concept, almost. Like, look at how successful we can be as artists. Stop underestimating us. Stop disregarding us. Start trying to include us because we are valuable artists. We have incredible things to say and should be included. We shouldn't have to wait until there's a show like Singin in the Pain or a festival like Embrace to feel like we're at the forefront. So yeah, unfortunately it feels very early days in this kind of, specifically, art liberation of disabled folks.

But yeah, it's very much just working one community at a time, one city at a time, one industry, whatever it is, and just kind of doing what we can with our immediate circles and watching the incredible ripple effect that happens from that. Even just one of my friends who got into burlesque, who I did a little bit of mentoring with, I was talking to a student the other day who said that this person was her burlesque mum and was advocating for her and supporting her through being a disabled burlesque performer in this industry. And that was kind of like, at the end of the day, what it's all about, really.

Tyson:

Yeah, that's beautiful. Yeah. I think we'll get there in due time. We just keep pushing forward.

Diana:

That's exactly right.

Tyson:

Yeah.

To conclude, what advice would you give to someone, especially someone with a disability, who wants to work as a producer in the sector?

Diana:

I would say talk to people as much as you can. Reach out. Some people may not want to talk back, that's fine, but a lot of people will, especially fellow disabled producers. I know I am personally always happy to chat to people. I know most of the people in my community are really happy to mentor, guide, give advice, whatever have you. But yeah, I think finding support from within the industry, doing things like attending shows and events to just kind of be a regular face in the crowd. I know that that is really difficult as disabled people. We can't always be physically present, but that also counts for things like being active on social media.

Look up artists that you admire. A lot of the time they're very happy to connect, especially when it's to do with arts careers and taking your first step. And then of course, classes, workshops. There are quite a few really good producing workshops either online or in person. I know I mentioned Libby and Prompt, they do workshops from time to time. They do drop-ins. They also have producer sponsorship programmes where they mentor you and build you up. There are a lot of programmes out there, and if there's not, I guess call me up and let's make one.

Tyson:

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Well, before we finish, is there anything else you want to share with the listeners before we wrap up?

Diana:

Just that I have such a special connection to, specifically, the disabled cabaret community and variety community, performance art. And whenever I've done a show that is specifically geared towards our disabled audiences, I have had the best time. I've always felt so supported, loved, I've felt like they're being patient. I felt like they're on my side and want to see me succeed, which is not always how a performer feels. And yeah, I just want to say that being a disabled artist is all well and good, and being a queer artist is all well and good, and being a burlesque performer is amazing, all of this stuff. But combining those communities together and those identities has just created this incredible safety that I am so grateful for.

I feel like the community does so much for me personally. And if they do this much for me personally, I am just so excited and amazed by how much it must be doing for everyone else involved in it. And it just makes me so happy, and it feels like one big group hug. And yeah, I'm just really thankful that it exists. I'm so thankful for, specifically, the South Australian disability arts community. It is huge and thriving. We have so many organisations and individuals. And yeah, I'm really proud of us and I love being a part of it.

Tyson:

This podcast was produced by Access2Arts, with support from Arts South Australia.