



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 a special guest, Matt, who has made a remarkable career in the arts and has had a significant impact in the disability arts sector. Welcome, Matt.

Matt:

Hello. Thanks for having me.

Tyson:

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

Matt:

Yeah, in one sentence, nurturing. There you go. That's my one word. My interest as an art maker is what does the artist, and whether that's a visual artist or a musician, or an actor or a dancer, get out of the process and the art, the product that they're making, and how does that help them to nurture their body's needs or nurture whatever needs they might have in life, and how does the artistic practise do that for the artist. That's my jam.

Tyson:

That's beautiful and a unique word and a very organic and positive word as well, which I think, fits beautifully with us as artists.

Matt:

Oh, yeah. There's battlefields everywhere, and we've got to fight every day just to get out of bed sometimes. So to keep from having to bang our heads against the walls, even though sometimes that

produces beautiful work, we just got to find ways that we can reduce the amount of front lines that we're on.

Tyson:

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

Matt:

My transition into producing, I guess, was just a very, it just occurred because it had to. So I started my artistic journey through dance or through acting first. I did a 18-month course with no strings attached to their disability to gain some skills and to explore what the world of acting might be like. And I found that I was quite drawn to the more movement aspects of things and that sort of led me to get involved with the Restless Dance Theatre. And so I spent a few years at the company, absolutely just loved what I was doing.

So I was born with brittle bones, and I grew up just breaking everything and movement and dance is not something that I had ever thought was going to be an opportunity or something for me to explore. I never got to play sports or physical games with the other kids and suddenly as an adult, I could have this opportunity to catch up on the stuff that I'd missed out on. And so that exploration into dance was very much about discovering these new things that I didn't know that I had before. And suddenly one, my body was getting stronger, but two, I was finding ways that helped my body get stronger.

And then, so in that way, the art practice became my own healing practice as well, and one thing fed to the other. As I was getting a stronger body, I was becoming a better dancer. As I was becoming a better dancer, I was getting access to more things that were helping my body get stronger. And I've still been breaking bones in all that time and so the ways I connected with my body have been very different in the last 12 years. And I've had to relearn how to walk or even relearn how to sit up or even relearn how to go to the toilet within that time. And the great thing that dance, as my artistic practice, brought me was because as a child I was breaking bones all the time as well and going through these things, but as a child I freaking hated it, not to say that I loved it as an adult either, but I found myself a lot less angry and a lot less sorry for myself because now healing from a broken back, for instance, just became a new challenge.

And how do I do this differently this time and how do I do this in a more nurturing way, how do I continue to dance without the use of my legs at this current time? Yeah. So I became a lot less angry about my body and my life as a person living with a disability.

Tyson:

Regarding collaboration and 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?

Matt:

Well, that's awesome. So I was on a residency in Finland in 2018, and I got to finally work in a space with other bodies that had osteogenesis imperfecta that had the same brittle bones condition as myself and the other people that I was dancing with in this space had different levels of it. So my level is quite mild, and I was able to have a spectrum of some people who were even more mild than I am and some people who were very short stature and very brittle, way more than I am. And the exciting thing about that was the processes that I was working on at that time, I was able to explore what it looked like to create a choreography on one body and then to change it onto another body, and we all would learn each

other's things and adapt to what fit and we ended up making some beautiful dance sequences that everybody could be engaged with.

And so there were moves that worked on all the bodies, there were moves that only worked on some of the bodies and then that just meant that the overall dance frames became, it had natural parts where solos would break out in trios and duets. And actually as a side note on this particular process, one of the women fell over in the shower and ended up having a very bad break in her femur, I think it was, and she came to rehearsals one day in this bright yellow cast, and she was worried about like, "Oh my God, I'm so sorry. I've just destroyed the costumes." And so what we ended up doing was we actually just had everybody in the cast wear a cast or wear a yellow bandage on a different part of the body so everybody had their own unique sort of broken part, and that just became part of the new costume -

Tyson:

Wow.

Matt:

... And it looked awesome too, actually it looked way better than what we had before.

Tyson:

Yeah, that's amazing. Oh, that's some great problem-solving and inclusion as well, adapting to the situation, being present with the artists. Wow. And they must really appreciate that, that adaptation?

Matt:

I think so, yeah, absolutely 'cause it's that thing like the things when our disabilities are also these things that make us so beautifully unique that no one could copy us and that's art. We are art.

Tyson:

Yeah.

Matt:

And just to work with it instead of fighting it and to not just embrace it, but sometimes to emphasise that uniqueness that we have is hugely healing just as people as well.

Tyson:

Yeah. The double down, isn't it? It created opportunity for you to double down and also almost like a devised theatre piece like create new tasks to find new scenes or content or approaches to the body of work.

Matt:

Well, heck yeah, that's a good point because anyone in the audience that day, they didn't know that Nona had broken her leg. They just saw a bunch of guys with casts in different areas of their body.

Tyson:

Yeah, yeah. Oh, that's dope. When organising events and projects in the disability art sector, what steps do you take to ensure that they're both accessible and welcoming for individuals with disabilities? And how do you promote inclusions throughout these initiatives?

Matt:

There's two levels to that.

Tyson:

Yeah.

Matt:

I think there's the inclusion in the process and so I'm always very interested in what people are living with and bringing to the process as artists and how we make the work and the process accessible to them in terms of you don't want to wake up and hate what you're doing every day and you don't want to feel like, "Oh, well, I can't lift my leg this high, so I can't be in this part of the piece." But I also, yeah, so I guess the first answer I'll give to this question is I'm always questioning right from the first time I walk into a room and meet the people like how does each individual come to this work and what are their needs and most important thing for me is what does an artist that I'm working with get out of this? I don't want people to be coming to the rehearsal studio because it's a job. I want to be like, yes, this is helping me to achieve some kind of dream in some way.

So I work a lot with intentions. When we start a process, everybody has some or develops some kind of statement of intentional desire that they want to achieve from being involved in that work and then we work out how do we form the work around that for that person. Obviously, if we're all having our own intentions, sometimes we need to compromise, but then the most important thing for me in terms of working with other artists is what do the artists get out of that work and then on the other side of that, what does the audience get out of it when they come to see it?

So I want to make sure every kind of physical access and sensory access is covered from the pretty basic stuff these days of Auslan interpretation, audio description, how do we weave that into what we are creating without it being just a thing that's tacked on the side so can people sign if the characters are speaking, do they sign while they speak, is there a shadow character who signs everything, how is the interpreter just being downstage in a spotlight, how are they incorporated into the rest of the theatre space? And audio description as well like how do we translate everything that's happening visually on stage to be accessible, but someone who can't see that thing?

And I really like it when there's little Easter eggs that you would only ever get if you were accessing that particular type of aid or psych. I like it when there's a nonverbal character. Then in the audio description, that character is assigned a particular actor who nobody else would even know that that's a thing, unless they're using the audio description. So then maybe there's like some jokes or some secret lines that only people who use the audio description can access and of course, I'm not the only person doing that, but to answer your question, I'm always trying to think about what cheeky little Easter egg does each member of the audience get that is their own little takeaway.

Tyson:

Oh, that's lovely, that's amazing. 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?

Matt:

I guess to be really generic and to say whatever everybody says like funding dude are definitely a barrier. Audio description takes time to generate, takes money to generate. Auslan interpreters need fees. You put all these sorts of things together at once and suddenly you might add another \$20,000 to your project, but that's not a good enough excuse to exclude those things and to not have it. And these kind of accessibility needs or these integrations, they're a lot cheaper to put in at the start than they are to tack onto the end. And so how we could overcome this as a society is to just be a little bit more open to how do we make work accessible and inclusive, and let's not think about it as a chore that we have to do, but let's think about it as a cool new tool to play with.

Devising choreography from Auslan is super fun. Thinking about how to... if you've got projection in your work and thinking about how you're going to describe that three seconds of projection might then be like, well, maybe I could take this part of the projection out because it's not adding to the narrative of the piece and maybe cutting that little part of projection out might save you a few thousand dollars as well.

Tyson:

Yeah. Wow.

Matt:

So then it just becomes something that's part of the process of creating.

Tyson:

Yeah. Yeah. Oh, that's great insight. To conclude, what advice would you give someone, especially someone with a disability who wants to work as a producer in the disability arts sector?

Matt:

I think the most important tool in your tool belt is your attitude and your approach to how you come to it. And for producers, it can be disheartening sometimes working in the access field when it feels like demands being made or you do something that you thought was really, really great and it gets shot down. And it's important to one, not take that kind of feedback personally because if somebody says, "Oh look, you did a really bad job at that," well, you know, you just learned ways that you can do it better next time. And also, we're dealing with people who have been receiving a lifetime of, "Oh, well, you can't go and see that because you know that's not accessible to you." And so, you got to put yourself in the audience's shoes in that kind of situation. You, as a producer, are most likely going to receive maybe even more than your fair share of negative feedback.

It's just, we're in a very new and exciting journey here when it comes to inclusion in artwork in general. And the approach that I would invite anybody to come into this kind of role is one of curiosity and excitement and because it's really cool stuff when you can give someone an experience that they have never had the opportunity to access before in their life, very, very cool thing. And one example that I would give to that, just last Monday, I was in the National Film and Sound Archive presenting a festival of dance films and we had a group called The Deaf Butterflies come and perform and as the name might suggest, they were either completely deaf or hard of hearing. And so they came and they did their bit and they watched a few films and there's a level of that experience that they're not getting because all of these films have absolutely beautiful soundtracks and although they're also visually stunning, there's a level of that experience that they're just not accessing.

And one of the guys, I think his name was Simon, and he's got a company in Sydney what they called SUBPAC, S-U-B-P-A-C And these SUBPACs originally were invented for gamers and it's a vest that you wear like a big plastic vest, which is version one of the product, and it's got a big speaker in the centre and that speaker can hook up via Bluetooth or RF or it's got an audio input as well. Long story short, the speaker can turn the soundtrack into a vibration that someone who's deaf can feel and suddenly the experience that these deaf dancers were having with these films was totally different and new. And it was so exciting, as an observer, to see their faces as they experienced this new element, this new way of having this dance film shown to them that they hadn't previously had. And SUBPACs, they're not cheap, they're about 600 bucks each, but I'm dreaming of being able to offer that as well as audio description in some kind of Swan Lake or something where you can feel the soundtrack, the masterful soundtrack that's been created.

Tyson:

Yeah. That's amazing. Yeah, that's where if technology sort of guided in the angle of aesthetic access and inclusion, we're going to see some great futuristic tools for revisiting old work and also incorporating and baking in new work as well.

Matt:

And any piece of technology gets cheaper. Like these SUBPACs cost a lot now, but five years down the track, it'll be a jacket and there'll be smaller speakers and it'll be a hundred dollars to get or something like this. Yeah.

Tyson:

Yeah. Oh, that's amazing. Finally, before we finish, is there anything else you'd want to share with the listeners?

Matt:

I think my personal provocation to anyone who's listening would be to enter each work with the question of what do I want from this? And let that become your personal mantra. So when it's 3:00 AM and you're ready to throw in the towel because everything's gone to where it goes, you can think about "What did I say I wanted to get out of this?" And you can start to visualise the steps that are taking you there, because undoubtedly if you put your mind and your energy somewhere, you'll end up there and keep in mind, have a way that your art practice nurtures you. You have to be receiving something from it and it shouldn't be monetary. Monetary is great and it'll come too, but it shouldn't be the priority. The priority should be like in what way does this practice help your health?

Tyson:

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