

**Interviewee Name:** Matthew Shilcock

**Interviewer Name:** Jung Yoon

**Date of Interview:** 18<sup>th</sup> of August 2022

**Location:** Matthew's house

**Length of Interview:** 42:34 minutes

## **Transcript**

**Jung:** Can you tell me a bit about yourself? About what we need to know about your where you're from and what your experience. Become a person who you are woman as well as how you get into in the art industry.

**Matthew:** All right. I am Matt. I was born and raised and live in Adelaide, South Australia. I am a contemporary dancer and moving more into dance making. I live with a condition called osteogenesis imperfecta, which is very similar to osteoporosis in its effects. The differences that I was born with this condition. I came out of the bone. I came out of the bones. I came out of the womb breaking bones. And as a child, I just broke everything. And that led to me having quite a sedate and, you know. Not an exciting lifestyle. So as an adult, through medication, I started to find a lot more strength and I just wanted to do everything. So I found dance because at the time I couldn't afford physiotherapy, and dance was just like a cheaper and more functional option at that time and found out that I really enjoyed that. So then becoming a performing artist as a career was just a really. A strategic and practical step in me being able to afford to continue to do dance classes. So I've been a dancer for about 12 years now. And yeah, during that time I've worked with a lot of people with a lot of varying disabilities. And this has really helped me understand my own body's needs. My identity as a disabled artist. And it's helped me to have a better relationship with what my needs are, how I feel those needs, and how I identify myself.

**Jung:** Do you work with a lot of the artists with intellectual disability as well as just neurotypical artists?

**Matthew:** Yeah. I work with artists with and without disability, and I've worked with quite elite dancers like Australian Dance Theatre and a few companies from around the globe. And I've also worked a lot more extensively with companies and artists with disabilities, both in a company sense and both in an independent sense. And I'm discovering more as my practice grows and as I grow a bit older, that I'm more excited about working with artists with disabilities. I had an amazing opportunity for 18 months to work with the Australian Dance Theatre as their associate artist, and during that time I found. I felt so lost because these amazing guys can do pretty much anything I asked them to do with their bodies. And so if I was like, Okay, yeah, the choreography now calls for a backflip, and then three people would just do backflips and be like, Oh, okay. I don't know where to go from there. And because I didn't start dancing until I was like 23 years old, I haven't got that sort of classical

training or that dance language to be able to draw on, to be like, okay, we're just doing a pirouette here or blah blah blah over there. And so a lot of my practice has been about learning how to communicate my choreographic ideas. And so I found it to go back to my associate at ADT. I found it challenging to work with these super able bodies because I found almost like when you were speaking to a person who fluently speaks a language and you're really just learning. You get lost in the conversation. And I found myself getting lost in the conversation of dance. So I'm finding myself interested in working with people with disabilities because there's more problem solving there and the pace is slower. But the rewards for me are a lot higher because I'm seeing artists get more out of themselves and what their expectations are.

**Jung:** You were saying your artistic journey is slightly different to those able-bodied artists. So how did you become..... Be part of..... Obviously, you had a lot of challenges. How did you? Is it.... I don't know how I can explain appropriate words, but how did you overcome or how did you navigate yourself to your own way of building your career?

**Matthew:** My artistic journey certainly has been different from an able-bodied dancer and if I was to tell a doctor that I have a career as a dancer and I live with brittle bones, that would tell me that's a very stupid idea and that I should do something else but the interesting thing is that... kind of the more peril that I've put myself in over the years throughout my practice, the more I've discovered more efficient ways to overcome injuries and to prevent injuries as well. So, for example, learning to fall appropriately and minimize the risk of my body in hitting the floor and impact like that has really helped me to be safer in my everyday life and learning to move in very different and pedestrian ways has helped me to navigate space better when I am injured. So for example, if I have my leg in a cast, I know how I can move efficiently and immobilize that area of the body to reduce pain, to reduce the time it takes me to get around and to be able to achieve my daily functions more efficiently. So my practice as a dance artist has really benefited the way that I interact with just everyday life and the challenges that my disability brings to me and the challenges that my disability bring to me of course, inform my movement and how I behave and interact with the world on stage. I'm finding myself a lot more interested as I'm growing older in this threshold of where the practice exists. In order to fulfill your needs as a disabled person and where your disability informs the practice to create unique and individual art and that sort of threshold, I'm so interested. In exploring with other people that live with disabilities other than myself, because I only know my own experience and my own experience is quite boring to me because I live it every day.....but..... Yeah. Sorry on this. That's about as far as my train of thought can go with that one.

**Jung:** That's right. That's right. Yeah, it was very interesting because it sounds like your own experience. How about, say you know how people with able-bodied, they are highly trained. This is very similar to what my field I was very highly trained, technically trained visual artist. So when I was young from 14, I would I knew I was trained to draw perfectly and exactly imitating the figures and everything. So technically, I was really highly able to do and express. But when I met this artist with

a disability, they do have something very unique and authentic and something I can't even copy and express because they developed their own way of expressing as a language... it is I feel like like fake because that was how I felt like I know how to draw really nicely, but I was not very authentic. I was, I feel like I'm really a technician compared to when I met the artist with the - visual artist with real artists. They express the world the way they just come up with their own ideas, which is not mimicking others. Not copying others is not highly technical, but it's just they come up with their own, own way. That was - I was almost jealous of their talent. So I feel like you are, you should.. It's not appropriate to comparing with able-bodied artists, but you sounds like more creating your way of dance, which is not a way they can even imitate, copy so you'll use, I don't know, like very fascinating to hear about how you just kind of integrate your, that way of dance into your daily life, almost your life is dance as it is. So the next question will be what motivated your dance and your work today? And then also additionally, it has it been changed? Has your style of dance or art has been changed as well?

**Matthew:** There's been a lot of change in what motivates me in my practice today and what motivated me in my practice 12 years ago when I was first beginning. The biggest change, I think. Now is. I'm just so tired. And when I first began, I had a lot more life and I had a lot more to prove and to and less to lose. And I was so excited to discover this, this thing called dancing, because it's this thing that I knew existed, but I had no relationship to it. And I didn't think that I would ever be in this world and the idea of having a career as a dancer was just so alien and also this really exciting idea that I could have a career that not only worked with whatever my body's needs were at the time, but almost the career thrived with me understanding and be authentic to those needs. So. I've had experiences where I'm standing at a bar for 8 hours pulling beers and I've got two broken feet and I'm just spending this entire time in agony. But I need to pay the rent. Whereas with dance, if I've got two broken feet. They inform what I'm doing on the stage.

**Matthew:** If I'm, if there's a tap dance routine that I need to learn, obviously I can't do that with two broken feet. So then I look for new, exciting ways to achieve that function. And in an art setting, not only is that completely valid, but it's really appreciated and valued. So to go from a world where I was pretty much the only disabled person that I knew and very much an outsider growing up. But then to be invited into a world where not only am I not an outsider, but I'm valued, and I'm validated and encouraged to explore. Things that I had no concept that they existed or that I could be part of that world was. It was quite extraordinary. But now it's 12 years on and I feel old and I'm a little bit jaded and my interests are a lot more in, in others and in the next generation of artists. And how can I distil the experiences that I've had into a methodology that I can bring to the people that are going to be treading the boards after me and I guess, what can I leave? The next generation with.

**Jung:** Thank you. So yes or what - and the other one is a – what.....because obviously you've probably answered the questions. Now working with disability are more than mainstream theatre. So what motivates your work in the disability art space?

**Matthew:** What motivates my work in the disability art space is remembering this excitement about discovering and rediscovering my identity and finding a new relationship to myself as a person and to myself as a disabled person and my identity as a disabled person discovering and invalidating my own perceptions of what that meant and discovering a validation in, in my identity and what that means and all the things that I can do and etc., etc.. and that discovery that level of self-validation and feeling less vulnerable while at the same time being vulnerable and being comfortable in being vulnerable with an audience and with my collaborators and as a person. Not feeling, not feeling weak. There's such a difference between vulnerability and weakness that I could only have discovered through my career in art. And those are the things that I want to pass on to others. And it's my passion in my practice to develop some tools that I can use to, to guide people on a journey of that, and everybody can come to their own. It's important that everybody comes to their own realizations and understandings of what these things are, and that, that journey is relevant and specific to them. But I'm. I mean, I can only be informed by my own experiences and yeah it's about I mean, I guess what every artist is doing is just distilling their own unique experience and just communicating that and sharing it and it's the beautiful thing about art is it's up to the, the viewer and the beholder to then interpret that in, in relation to their own experiences and, and have their own unique experience with that artefact that exists both as a viewer of the artwork and in terms of being an artist and learning from the artists that exist before you and these long, long lineages, these long lineages of people who are doing exactly that thing and learning going through a beautiful life journey and then leaving behind an artifact that is then going to inform somebody else's journey. And it's almost like... we're just leaving footprints that lead to self-development and idealistically a more in tune and developed humankind.

**Jung:** Thank you. I just wonder, you just said being vulnerable, being vulnerable and the weaknesses are different. Can you explain? What, what are the differences?

**Matthew:** For sure. The difference between vulnerability and weakness, as I see it is weakness is something that we perceive, and it's often informed by the opinions and prejudices of others and vulnerability is it can only, it can only be felt and it takes true strength to be vulnerable because when you're vulnerable, you're exposing your fears of these weaknesses. And I'm only just discovering now that this is like one of the strongest things they can do. But at the same time... to be openly vulnerable and to be comfortable in being vulnerable removes entirely these perceived weaknesses, and it's only through vulnerability that the weaknesses no longer actually matter. And that's where the strength comes. Like if from, for instance, for me, I'm, I'd say my fragility is... as I've grown up believing it's this weakness, it's this thing that is absolutely that stops me from participating in, like, manly man activities like wrestling and football and, and... therefore, it almost nullifies my masculinity, but through vulnerability I have discovered my masculinity again and to be masculine, I don't need to play football or mud wrestle or hold a machine gun to be. I can be perfectly masculine within my environment and the environment that I create and that is a strength to move in life from a perceived image where, okay, I have to be the Terminator like that is masculine. And then to rediscover like I can, I can be

masculine in my own way. I can hold my own power and design my own environment around me. And my masculinity can be fatherly and I can be a leader without having to march through the jungle with a machine gun. That has been really powerful in terms of me being comfortable with myself as a person and... may not feeling scared to be myself and to be out there in the world.

**Jung:** Right so next question. We've got two more questions. One is, what do you think the public will say was the key or key milestone or major event in the history of disability art?

**Matthew:** Wow. Just one? My God.

**Jung:** ... What would the public say would be the key milestone of disability arts? That is such a huge question because in my...., and I openly admit pretty limited knowledge of the entire scope of disability arts, I think that every artist who does or does not identify as having a disability contributes and there's so many historical figures and artists. They have made such huge impacts in the world of art that are now being identified as like, Oh, did you know Frida Kahlo? She would identify as disabled at the moment or she would be considered as this. I think that not only have those people done so much in their time to further the acceptance of disability and disability arts and, and that label...but I think as well....now as we look back and in the future as they look back on us so much that's happening will be understood in a different light and just like how now a lot of things that have happened in the past are being understood in a different light and so it's so hard to identify these key milestones because the way that we perceive these things and their significance changes but to look back at like times in the seventies and the eighties where a person would chain themselves to a bus because it's not as accessible and people finally were feeling confident enough and validated enough to fight for their rights as human beings to be accepted and integrated into society. To look at this present day... and how many places and how many places where

**Matthew:** yes there's things like disability action plans and there's thought about how things are accessed by different people and the amount of DVDs that have an audio description track and things like this. It's really cool and there are so many people that would say like, it's great, but it's not enough and that's a very perfectly valid point but it's a process and even if it's a 40 or 50 year process from then until now and then, I think that process is speeding up and I think that thoughts are changing. And if we looked at 50 years ago, there was a lot more institutionalization and a lot more this is what a disability is and this is not what a disability is and you're considered this if you tick these boxes and stuff like that and in a way, the society that we're living in now is still very much aligned with those practices and the thoughts but it's slightly better and in the next ten years it will be slightly better again. In the ten years after that will be slightly better again and so it's almost impossible to identify milestones because it's this globalist, nebulous process of constant change and constant reconsidering what's happened before and can even if we don't think about the future, it's still happening from our actions now and our actions past and the way that we're thinking about things. So I apologize for not entirely answering the question, but it's, it's certainly a difficult one to ask in the greater scheme of things.

**Jung:** I perfectly loved your answer because we can't say there is like event or something major things. This changes like accumulating every little move just lead all the way up to here.....

**Matthew:** for sure

**Jung:** ....and it's not enough. We still have to bus speed up a little bit, but still lots of lots of little changes actually accumulate to make the next ten, 15 years changes.

**Matthew:** Definitely. Definitely.

**Jung:** So last. Good answers. Next question.

**Jung:** So, do you think your art is political or do you think it should be political?

**Matthew:** Is my art political? It's often not my intention to be political, and certainly in my younger years it was not at all. What I've discovered and learned as I've matured is that simply being on stage as disabled person is a political message whether there is an intention or not by the artist and... it takes a level of maturity through art to truly understand that and it's certainly not the first thing you would think about when you were when I when I was first started dancing, I wasn't thinking about like, 'oh, what is the audience thinking when I roll up on stage in my wheelchair at this point and then in my next show when I'm not in my wheelchair anymore? What do they think about that?' I don't particularly care, to be honest... Being who you are authentically on stage is a political message, whether you intend to make a message of that or not and so to further on that point, should art be political? It is whether that's your intention or not and whether you're aware of it or not, you can make messages that will greatly offend someone or greatly inspire someone to make change and when we look at art throughout history in being that kind of political tool for discourse whether that's rising up against the bourgeoisie or like how ballet has historically been this political tool for like leaders of countries to be like, 'hey, these are our people, you know, we are this profoundly strong country. Just look at our dancers, so don't mess with us.' There's always been art and politics and there's also always been politics in everything else. That's whether it's artistic or not, I think it's really important for an artist to understand their place in the world. Even if it's their intended position or not on a political spectrum or a non-political spectrum if somebody is making a choice to be rampantly apolitical as I certainly do, that is also a political stance and it's also a very strong message, and it will be received in either positively, negatively or a mixture of both. That's a very roundabout way and that's all I have to say about that.

**Jung:** I really like that. So how would you define the success of being an artist in disability art? How would you define a success in art for the arts or delivering the quality as the audience expected or kind of accepted by the mainstream art industry. So What would you define – this is just an example. How would you define success in disability art?

**Matthew:** Defining success in anything is always very subjective and very difficult and this is just as much is defining the success of a disabled artist. Of course, being paid money is sort of the most socially recognized identification of success and that

becomes tricky in the arts world because if you're making money, then you're a sell out, know, sell out over there, blah, blah, blah. Made so much money. There are a lot of. No. I won't go with that for. For me personally, I. Never cared too much about what an audience thought of my work. I'm quite a selfish artist and my identifiers for success were what an artwork gave back to me. And that's not always financially. A lot of that would be so in my earliest years of creating work and working with Restless Dance Theatre... every single work excited me so much because it was like when you're playing a video game and you unlock a new character, or you unlock a new special move or something. Each work unlocked a little piece of the puzzle to understanding who I am as a person and the potentials of my body and my self-development and that was the most exciting thing I could have ever hoped and then, of course, as I matured and the bills got more expensive, then I started to really think about salaries and contract negotiations and such and such and some, but not all of my identification and identifying factors of success became monetary whether I'm paying the bills and also the scale of my projects and the budgets involved and it's really important. I guess my focus open now a lot as I moved from being a dancer to being a dance maker and collaborating with others and making sure that everybody in my team was paid it an award rate and that the budget is balanced and that's sort of when I start to think more about the audience as well. And people coming to see the work. What do they start to think about? What are they inspired by and. How do they feel when they leave the theatre? Sorry. I lost my train of thought. Could you repeat the question for me, please?

**Jung:** I think you already answered all the questions because you defined success as a being an artist, as a person and then you also defined a success as a director, art maker. So, you have to become more practical. You're talking about the subjectivity in success, and then also you talk about the practicality in success. So that question was how you would define success in terms of your view, but also in terms of being an artist with disability. Is there anything else you want to add?

**Matthew:** Let me just one example I'd like to give of that that second letter point. So, as I had been emerging into more of a dance maker role as opposed to a performer, I have also had an opportunity to go on residencies and work with different artists on sharing my methodologies for creating and one of my happiest and what I would define as the most successful experiences in that is I worked with a dancer as I was first developing my methodology in communicating dance. Not using a dance language, but also developing a way that I can that I can choreograph when I'm not able to use my own body and. We created a solo, we created solo that we filmed and as she used to apply for a dance company in Germany and the work that we created was a lot derived from and embodying her intentions about what that looks like when she works for this dance company and how she feels when she works with them and all of these basically what the defining factors of success are for her, and we explored what that is, and we created a solo where the movement was just generated from her embodying those feelings of what these things look like and we filmed it, and she sent it through and she got that part and she's been touring with that company for a number of years and even teaching that exact solo in workshops and so that's one of my career highlights, and it really embodies those values and

those identification factors for success. I would see that residency as a success because I managed to work with someone to create a beautiful body of movement, and also, that person had a good time doing it and that person then went on to take that piece of movement and create more career opportunities with it and so yeah I guess in short, I would identify success from my own career as seeing artifacts that then go forward to inspire and to exist and to change.

**Jung:** So that was the last question. Is there anything else we need to know about you or about disability art or is there anything you want to share?

**Matthew:** I guess... Yeah. One other thing I would add is this, like we talked a little bit before and we touched on this throughout history there are significant people and artists that we now discover that we would have identified them as disabled and it's an interesting threshold in that sometimes the label as a disabled person benefits us and sometimes it holds us back. So like, I think Abraham Lincoln is someone who was recently identified as someone who would now be considered as a person with disability and I wonder if his influence and all the things that he was able to achieve, he would be able to achieve if he had this label slapped on him where it's like, "Oh, you're disabled person". Yet at the same time, there are many people living with disabilities that are extraordinarily successful, influential and impactful in the world. Yet as a person with a disability, I'm often frustrated, and I know many I've had this conversation with many other people with disabilities. So, it's not like just me, but there is that identity in that feeling of being held back by society because you're a person with a disability that sometimes that barrier exists mostly in our own minds and our own perceptions and it's certainly something that I've learnt to come to terms with and learnt, and am still learning to push to the side and just do something. sometimes successfully, sometimes no... And as we as a society begin to validate more and explore more the significance of people with disabilities and how we integrate together and the amazing breakthroughs we're making in terms of accessibility and integrating in society and becoming more inclusive, there always does still exist those kinds of barriers. Like as a disabled artist, you're often billed as a disabled artist and not just as an artist. Yet, we've already established there is amazing quality of work being generated by those with disabilities and there's amazing authenticity in the experience and communicating that experience and expressing that experience of life. That is often not related to the disability itself and it can be quite frustrating when you're trying to communicate something else, anything else, but you're viewed by your disability. Yet at the same time, sometimes that perception is purely internal. I have absolutely no answer there for that but it's an interesting provocation that I'm still exploring and I think it's an interesting provocation and it's a useful thing for a disabled artist or any artist or anyone in general to just have in mind when interacting with that kind of threshold or that world.

**Jung:** Thank you

**Matthew:** Thank you