

Interviewee Name: Janelle Colquhoun

Interviewer Name: Racheal Missingham

Date of Interview: 9th of November 2021

Location: QUT Kelvin Grove, Z9-311

Length of Interview: 26:59 minutes

Transcript

Racheal: Hello, Janelle.

Janelle: Hi, Racheal.

Racheal: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself, what you do, who you are, where you are from and how your experiences have helped you become the person you are today in the music industry?

Janelle: Okay, so my name's Janelle Colquhoun. I'm originally from Brisbane and lived in Sydney and Melbourne for a while, then in Germany before returning to Brisbane. I studied music at the Conservatorium of Music and then went on to sing at World Expo 88 as a street performer before joining the Australian opera and singing there for two years and then I went to Germany and joined the Frankfurt Opera after singing with a number of other opera companies and singing there, before I went blind and then I returned to Australia, back to Brisbane and started up an entertainment agency specialising in professional artists with disability and have produced over 1400 different events and still perform in different shows and music concerts and still produce.

Racheal: Are there experiences, events, or people that stand out in your memory in terms of getting you interested and involved in music? How did it all begin?

Janelle: So I grew up loving music and always wanting to perform. So as a child, I was always performing. My father loves brass, music and jazz, so I listened to lots of brass, music and jazz growing up and I learnt to play the trumpet and I just always wanted to be on stage. That was my only passion to perform on stage and be a performer. So first of all, I thought I was going to be an actor and then when people said, you know, how well I could sing, then I decided instead I'd be a singer. So first of all, I thought I'd go into musical theatre, and so I was working on that and then when I went to a singing teacher, she said, you can sing opera. So I decided if I could sing opera, then I would sing opera.

Racheal: What was your favourite memory of singing opera?

Janelle: So I've probably got two favourite moments. One was when I was singing with the Australian Opera, and it was Dame Joan Sutherland's farewell season and

so I was in the chorus and it was a fantastic opera and fantastic experience being there with Dame Joan Sutherland, who I was completely in awe of and so one night, because I was understudying one of the roles which got to be her maid of honour and so one night, the lady I was understudying went off sick. So I got to be up there on stage, singing in a trio with Dame Joan Sutherland and performing with her and having her, you know, point to me when my skirt was a bit caught up because we're wearing big hooped skirts and point down to me to let me know that my skirt was caught up and just how lovely she was. She was so lovely to work with and as it turned out, because on the final night, which was being recorded for distribution video sales around the world because she was so nervous on the last night, she didn't sing so well. They actually used the recording of the opera from the night that I was performing.

Janelle: But because the other lady was the one supposed to be singing the role, she always got the credits for singing. So even though in the actual video, it's me singing this role with Dame Joan. You know this other lady has her name down as being the one singing it. So that was an incredible experience but my other incredible experience was when I was back in Brisbane, when I was already blind and being asked to sing the high priestess in "Aida" in the ANZ Stadium and so it was like, there was something like 8000 people in the audience and because I was singing from underneath the stage, just singing into a microphone, because there's this just fantastic part where you just my voice and a harp accompanying me and then the chorus comes in for a little bit and so just hearing my voice go across this great big stadium and it was just like, so goose bumps, and because I got to sing with the orchestra for the rehearsal before that, as well as singing for this other rehearsal, so, you know, I got to sing it twice and it was just this most incredible experience

Racheal: That's sound fantastic. So what motivates your work today?

Janelle: So I still have this great passion to work in theatre, in the performing arts because all my friends are in the performing arts. So I absolutely love working in this industry and want to continue working in this industry and since I went blind, I realized there's so many other professional artists with disability who are struggling so much to get work because of people's attitudes and, and they're basically discrimination. So I started to try and get other people work as well as myself because I had the contacts in the music industry and in the theatre industry as well to a small extent and so I started just producing shows and applying for contracts to produce and working with government departments to put on shows for them and concerts. So, yeah, I just... I want to help other people also in my situation, who, you know, have got a disability, who are struggling to get work because of this discrimination against using them in the industry and so I started working in that area and then also have taken groups of artists with disability to a festival in New Delhi, six years in a row and then for the last year and this year because obviously it went virtual. So I've organised for performances to be videoed to be sent over so we can still be part of the festival virtually.

Racheal: Sounds like a great opportunity for people with disability or artists with disability. Thinking back historically, what were the key milestones or big major happenings in the history of Disability Arts in Australia?

Janelle: So because I came to it late, because I was off working in, you know, the mainstream art. So there's a great big gap in my knowledge of the disability, theatre and, and work. So do you want to just know about the theatre or like shows or about music concerts as well?

Racheal: Think about your work.

Janelle: So, so well, I've got, you know, obviously two streams the stuff that I've produced and then also the stuff that I performed in myself, so I know in... I'd have to send you the dates because I'm not going to remember all the dates of when all these things happen. But I performed in an Access Arts IHOS Opera, which is a Tasmanian, you know, small opera company production called "The Divine Kiss", which we performed in the Brisbane Festival and then toured to Tasmania as well. We performed it in Hobart, and that was everyone performing in that had a disability. So there were three blind opera singers performing in it. Myself, one of them, you know, a guy with autism performing in it, a lady with cerebral palsy, performing in it, and then some other disabilities also performing in it and so that was an incredible experience. Then I also did Stage X, which was a, a... done at Southbank Parklands, so I knew that Access Arts had performed in this Stage X, previously. It's called Stage X- Five to Midnight, where they block off the whole of Southbank and so it was all turned into this area for performances and, and, you know, live music. So there was all these stages set up for music, but there was always roaming performances and other performances. So I know Access Arts had done one where they'd put all these jars of body parts.

Janelle: So like a doll's arm or, you know, a fake eye in coloured water. So it looked like there was all these body parts. So I know they did that and so then I'd applied together with Liz Navratil, who's, you know, was a great theatre maker in Australia, and she had cerebral palsy and so we both applied to perform in this vessel as street entertainers. So Lizzie ended up walking around pushing a shopping trolley because she, you know, struggle with walking. So she was pushing around a shopping trolley, so she had her balance, but looking like she was a bag lady on this site and because all these people would stop and say, How did a bag lady get into this, this gated off, you know, when you had to pay a fortune to pay for these tickets? And I played the Cosmic Cosmetician, so I basically covered my eyes with stars and put on this crazy costume, basically saying I was getting the messages from the Gods on how to do make up. So I made up all these people on stage, so I was put up on stage and made-up these, you know, put makeup on these people, and I had to practice for ages to get makeup on people, right? So all my family got made up prior to that performance but that was fantastic and because no one realised that I had a disability and no one realised that Liz had a disability because we're kind of doing things that worked with what we were doing.

Janelle: I also have performed my one-woman cabaret a number of times, so in the Queensland Cabaret Festival and in the Undercover Artist Festival a number of years ago. So performing “Blind Date”, a Kabaret Klassik. So where I'm making, you know, jokes about disability and blindness and singing, and there were songs specially written for me by my good friend Donald Hall. So that was another fantastic experience but I'm sure I've done other shows too. I'm just trying to remember there was one when we did the opening of the [Brisbane] Power House with Access Arts where there were three blind ladies. You know, we're all singing this classical piece that was specially written for us, which had video projections in the background of The water lands of Brisbane and, and then there was another time when the Wataboshi Festival. That was a big Disability Arts festival that happened in Brisbane, and we performed a number of different things, so a couple of specially written commissioned pieces for it. But I also did a jazz concert where I did a tribute to Ella Fitzgerald, who also ended up with disabilities. At the end of her life, she was going blind and had her legs amputated and then we also did this....

Janelle: The three of us blind singers did this concert where we basically, you know, had this great, you know, all these trio songs that we'd specially rehearsed, which are really tricky but then in between, we made jokes which none of the audience were expecting. I think they were expecting three very boring, blind ladies to just be standing up there singing and instead, we made all these jokes in between and completely freaked everyone out. They thought, just they weren't, you know, all the comments afterwards were “we weren't expecting that. That was just brilliant”. So that was really nice. But I've produced lots of shows too. So I've put on lots of concerts in the Brisbane City Hall for 15 years. I produced them for the Brisbane City Council, and so lots of times for Disability Action Week I'd put on a whole concert of, you know, performers with disability. I'd get some of my performers, musicians with a disability to perform in other concerts during the year, depending on what the concert was and whether they were suitable for the concerts. I also produced shows in the library, so they were both children's shows and music shows, and so regularly I'd put on, you know, some of my musicians with disability. They'd go in there and do a show like one of them did the history of rock and roll music. Another, did, you know, a tribute to the fifties music. I also send lots of performers into the Queensland dialysis units in the hospitals to entertain people sitting on dialysis while they're having dialysis.

Janelle: And so I'd send people with disabilities into those as well because obviously there's no reason someone can't stand there and strum their guitar and sing, you know, it's just always a case of, you know, what their disability is and how it impacts them. What else, though? I've done lots of shows for disability services Queensland when they were still a, you know, a separate, uh, government department. So I used to put on concerts for them every year and lots of launches. I'd provide someone with disability to perform at it. So whether it was a mime artist, so I had. And then there was also the Queensland day in the park where they'd always asked for a number of artists with disability to perform. So, you know, my deaf mime artist performed at

that a number of times. I had other people with ADHD who were walking around in kangaroo costumes. Another guy who had epilepsy and he was doing clowning and that sort of thing. So, you know, another blind performer who was singing and playing guitar and working with a bush, a bush poet. So I'm sure I've got tons more things. I'm just running out of thoughts at the moment.

Racheal: It's very....that's a wide variety of work you've done in the last 15 years. With some of the work that you have done, do you consider your work to be political or do you think art should be political in creating change in how people see art?

Janelle: I think some of it has been political and some of it hasn't, especially when I used to put on events for Disability Services Queensland. I notice what would happen with them is I'd send in, let's say, Jeff Usher, who's a blind, you know, jazz pianist and he played one year and they'd say, "wow, he's absolutely fantastic. We'll have him again next year," and I would have to say to them, no, there are like, I've got at least 50 different performers with a disability who can come and perform at this. You need to know there's not just one person in Brisbane that there is a whole lot of people in Brisbane. So I would get quite political when, you know, I was trying to open their minds to see that it wasn't just one person who was really high profile professional that there was a whole lot. Some of the things I definitely go out of my way to have political comments, so the Stage X when I was the Cosmic Cosmetician doing the make-up and my cabaret. They had certainly had political elements, but I think a lot of times what I just want to do is basically put on what's considered a mainstream show. So rather than people looking at it as disability stream and thinking it, you know, on the, on the, you know, this is only good for a disability audience or people who are happy, you know, happy to go to disability events, which I noticed with the Disability Arts Festival, that it's kind of the, already the converted go to these festivals, not just regular mainstream audiences.

Janelle: So what I'm always trying to do is educate the mainstream audiences that these people are just as good as anyone else and convince them, like the people like Stevie Wonder and Ray Charles, have, you know, the same sort of performers here in Brisbane and you're not thinking about Stevie Wonder or Ray Charles as disabled but you're thinking about them as these great artists. So I'm trying to convince people that they should be thinking that there's lots of people just like that, and it's not about going, and I think some people just think they're going to watch someone banging a tin against their wheelchair spokes when they think Disability Arts. Whereas of course, that's not the case. It's the case of that there's people performing at really high professional levels equal to any mainstream performer, but they're not getting the same chances.

Racheal: Exactly right. In terms of professional artist, how should we define success in Disability Arts or even mainstream arts for those people who have a disability.

Janelle: Well, that's really hard actually. Actually getting the job is, I think, you know, one of the hardest. I've just done this, this Sunday. I'm role playing a patient for

medical students. So being able to convince them that even though I'm blind, that I can still act, that I can still do this, this role playing over a Zoom call to medical students, you know, from anywhere in Australia, I think that was really challenging to convince them of that. So, so obviously, I feel my success is that I've convinced them that I can still act, that, you know, make my the character I'm playing isn't blind, but I'm going to be acting like a character who's not blind, and I think I can do that and so, you know, I consider that success getting something like that, getting, getting into festivals around Australia or overseas. I consider that a success because obviously it's a lot of a lot of my a lot of people wanting to get into them. So the Disability Arts Festival in New Delhi, because there haven't been many other people around Australia applying for that, that's been relatively easy to get into but there were some other festivals overseas, which there was a lot of people competing to get those spots and then, of course, having to get grant funding to get there. So I think that's always success when someone with a disability can apply for funding to go to a festival overseas and actually get awarded the funding because I think, and being a peer on the Australia council.

Janelle: So knowing how it works. I know and I just know how difficult it is when a person with disability is competing with all the people without disabilities and trying to convince them, you know, why it's so important that this person does get this, this opportunity? You know, I think the more times we're getting out there and performing, you know, disability stream or mainstream, but especially mainstream, I think, you know, success I see is when let's say I can get, let's say, my, my cabaret. Getting it accepted into the Queensland Cabaret Festival was much more of an achievement and feeling of success, than getting it accepted into the Undercover Artist Festival, which was specially for Disability Arts, which, you know, was only attracting a Disability Arts audience. Whereas of course, the Queensland Cabaret Festival was, you know, mainstream. It was open to the public. So it wasn't just the disability stream audience seeing me, it was the mainstream audience seeing me and so obviously, when I was producing for the Brisbane City Council, both in the City Hall and in the library, getting my artists into those places where they can be seen, you know, as mainstream, as equal to anyone else up there on stage, I think that's for me, that success, getting that acknowledgement that people are just as good, if not sometimes better than the other mainstream people out there.

Racheal: Exactly. Is there something we haven't asked about that we should? That we really need to know about, to understand you, your work, this type of work? What are we forgetting or overlooking – if anything?

Janelle: I'm not sure. Like obviously, I'm really passionate about doing this, and I think that's what motivates me to continue and which will continue to motivate me. So I was putting in a lot of hours, so a lot of unpaid hours to get my artists out there, to get me out there. So to, you know, a lot of people used to say to me, Wow, Janelle, you're so successful at applying for grant funding or applying for festivals or performances and being successful. But what people didn't know was that maybe I'd applied for 20 different things in that year and I was successful at six. So of course,

you know, me getting six is highly successful because it's so much more than someone else was getting but obviously I was applying for 20. So my success rate, you know, was only, you know, okay but I think the other people weren't applying. So they they were seeing, you know, them getting nothing when they hadn't applied for anything. As you know, me doing so well, but it was just a case of me really spending hours and hours to apply for lots of things and spending lots of hours, like working with my artists. So, for instance, it wasn't just a case of.... I remember one artist. He had to get over to Griffith University to to do a performance, and he doesn't drive. So I had to talk him through because he, you know, had a learning disability. So I had to talk him through catching one bus, changing to another bus, where he had to change, you know, getting to the campus, which street he had to walk up to, you know, who he's going to meet when he was there? Just talk the whole thing through, which probably took me half an hour of going through it all with him, just so he was confident to be able to go and do it on his own, which I'm sure a lot of agents wouldn't just bother with the time.

Janelle: So whereas I was prepared to spend that time because I really wanted him to have that opportunity, I really wanted the people who are going to hear him to have the opportunity to hear him. So it was like lots of extra time put in and lots of hours of, like I said, completely unpaid work just so things were going to be right. And just even for this film we've just created for this Disability Arts festival in New Delhi, it's hours of work trying to find someone to video, to video it, to talk about editing, to confirm with everyone that they're available on the day, to work out which songs we're singing to make sure and get the right lyrics, which obviously I didn't get all the right lyrics, unfortunately and, you know, just spending all that time, which is completely unpaid, but that I'm happy to do because I wanted us to be part of this festival and to have this group of people who, you know, I'm very proud to, you know, see, performing being part of this festival, this International Festival over in India.

Racheal: Ok, thank you Janelle for your time. I'm going to wrap up the interview. Is there anything else you want to add before I go

Janelle: To kind of, you know, just like one person who would be great if you want. Maybe I can send you information because she died a number of years ago is Liz Navratil, who was this great Disability Arts theatre maker in Australia. So I can probably send you her biography and CV so you can see what she did because it was just amazing the list of things she did and created and so there's a few other people like that who maybe I can share with you so you can get a better picture of the Disability Arts in Australia.

Racheal: That would be great. Thank you, Janelle.