Interviewee Name: Michèle Saint-Yves
Interviewer Name: Annie Rolfe
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Length of Interview: 64:56 minutes

Transcript

Annie: Can you tell us a bit about yourself? What do you think we need to know about who you are and where you're from and the experiences that you've had so that we can understand you and your work, where you're at now.

Michèle: Um. I've had a very unusual upbringing so I'm 54, about to turn 55 and I, I was born in Papua New Guinea when it was an Australian territory.

Annie: Okay

Michèle: And I lived most of my childhood in the Pacific.

Annie: Right.

Michèle: Got sent to boarding school in Scotland.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: Which was for a number of years. So then we relocated to Scotland when I was about nine, nine or ten and travelled all over Europe while we were there but, so, then we moved here to Australia, to Darwin and then my parents went back and I stayed and I stayed, came to Adelaide for uni and I've stayed in Adelaide since but I'm mentioning that background because I was a red, white haired kid amongst lots of local indigenous kids.

Annie: Right

Michèle: Because my parents were not like the other expats. They lived in the local villages.

Annie: Right.

Michèle: And didn't live in the Honiara or live in Suva or live in. They lived out and then when I got sent to boarding school, I thought, oh, I'd fit in because I'm like the Scottish of red hair, you know? Yeah. No, I. No one could understand a word I was saying. I couldn't understand a word they were saying. I had kind of Pidgin English.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: So Pidgin English was my first language. At the age of four I also knew Malaitan.

Annie: Wow.

Michèle: So English was kind of my primary equal with Pidgin English, but Pidgin got first, apparently. So, no, we couldn't understand each other. And I had boils all over. Every time I moved so I only ever saw my parents once a year.

Annie: Wow.

Michèle: So for about four years. Four or five years, I only saw them once a year. And, and I would have all these boils and everything and I'm saying this because. I've always been on the edge or dislocated.

Annie: Right.

Michèle: I've always been a, thinking I'm part of normal society or mainstream and, and then never being part of any so I've always, I've always been on like the edges of Venn diagrams. I've never been in the centre on something. I've always been on the edge, but is also living in going back to Pacific and being in poverty situations except us weren't, but the villages we were in and then going to an upper class landed gentry boarding school. Super, super privileged. Super rich.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: And what it gave me was this, I was not only on the outside of it all, but what it did give me was the ability to move across all sorts of stratas of society so it gave me great insight and great adaptability and no one ever made me feel… I couldn't give a stuff about what status you were or what job you did or how wealthy you were like, So when I became an adult, none of that meant anything to me, and it's and it has turned out to stand in good stead when I got acquired my disability. So I'm also a lesbian so I also had to manage all of that.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: So. I hope so. So I've been in the nexus of lots of other marginal communities, so my work is very much about otherness.

Annie: Right

Michèle: About seeking to understand the otherness of the other.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: For a mainstream, “mainstream” community or audience. So I've told you that background, because that's very much how it's informed my work. So I, I do theatre, and I've professionally done that for about 12 years now but I also write in the literary space.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: And I also make films.

Annie: Right.

Michèle: So I've been doing that for about 20 years but theatre professionally for about 12 but I executive produced about 20 years ago, but didn't actually make it myself.

Annie: Okay.

Michèle: As in my creative output so I also nearly died from malaria so I've and I've had all sorts of health issues because of being in the Pacific. So my immune system has always been compromised.

Annie: Right.

Michèle: Then I got malaria in my twenties and I nearly died from that. And that has stayed with me and then I acquired my brain injury, my first symptoms appeared 20, 21 years ago and it turns, it took me three years. I was misdiagnosed for about three or four years and then I kept saying, It's my brain. It's my brain but it took three, four years while I was listened to and got the right tests and it was, it was, I got an acquired brain injury. So -

Annie: From malaria?

Michèle: No, no, I have no clue why. It's still don't know why I got it.

Annie: Okay.

Michèle: Some say it was congenital and just there was a situation where the symptoms just appeared. Some say it would have been from some head accident or something.

Annie: Yeah.

Michèle: Or it just developed. So I've absolutely no idea. So it's not a traumatic. So that's why it's not a traumatic brain injury. It's yes, it's an acquired one because we've no idea how I got it.

Annie: Yeah.

Michèle: But rendered me ultimately I lost my career. I was a political lobbyist and organisational development director, consultant director for so that was my career for about 20 years. So I lost, I lost my career. I lost my relationship. I lost my house.

Annie: Wow.

Michèle: All in a period of two years. 18 months. Yeah because I just I eventually became bedbound and then that's another story but then I got and it was while I was bedbound, I couldn't do anything except write on my lap with a pen, pen and paper and for only 2 hours a day did I have any functional ability with my brain and, and that 2 hours a day I couldn't watch TV. So there was absolutely nothing I could do except lie down.

Annie: Right.

Michèle: And for 2 hours a day I ate. I had to eat in that time.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: And I used it to start writing to try to describe my symptoms.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: Using metaphors and images and so I could communicate with specialists.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: And that's when my writing that's really where my creative career started was, it was, I always wanted to do it, but that was when I first started writing my own stuff and, and I went and enrolled and I knew I wanted to go into theatre and enrolled in a four year part time course to get a professional writing full performance degree.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: AC Arts. It's Adelaide College of Arts, and I, I did that while I was partly bedbound and through my and through my I finally got craniotomy and I took six months off studying, then picked it up.

Annie: Right.

Michèle: And I got, four years later, I was no longer bedbound I was no longer bedbound straight after the craniotomy basically, and then it was just recuperation.

Annie: Wow.

Michèle: And it was actually through that my whole why I'm talking to you now, from being bedbound and having writing is the only thing.

Annie: Yeah.

Michèle: I could do for 2 hours. For about nine months.

Annie: Right. Okay. So are there, are there experiences, events or people that stand out in your memory is really formative in terms of getting you interested and involved in theatre and writing?

Michèle: Yeah. I remember in the Pacific, the, the in the local communities they had festivals like ceremonies and things. Yeah and I must have been exposed to it in Papua New Guinea because I have a very vague recollection of the amazing masks.

Annie: Right.

Michèle: That the Highlanders in particular.

Annie: Yeah.

Michèle: Have and they're, I don't know if you've seen them but they're, they're extraordinary and when you see them up close and in, in full on ceremonial, the performance.

Annie: Yeah.

Michèle: I know that, that inc- you know, I have a feeling that affected me but it really hit me when I was about four or five and in in Solomon Islands and we were invited along with the villagers, to, to make these papier maché masks.

Annie: Right.

Michèle: And to participate in one of the ceremonies performances with these amazing masks and I just remember, just being, absolutely loving it and being blown away by it and I think my thing around theatre started then.

Annie: Right.

Michèle: And performance started then. I think that's where it really began but in terms of, in terms of as an artist with disability, I think seeing Galle Mellis' "Take Up Your Bed and Walk".

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: I think for me that was a, that was an entree for me about here's a kind of, I can make theatre like that. That's the kind of theatre that I'm interested in, that it is possible to do it in an integrated and innovative way and it's not your proscenium theatre.

Annie: Yeah.

Michèle: Yeah. And. It isn't actors, actors playing disabled and I remember. Yeah, I just remember that as being - so, yeah, I remember. I remember that being in terms of being an artist with disability, that was quite, quite an important piece to see. I, in terms of literature uh I, I think, I remember reading Heather Taylor-Johnson's first novel [”Love and Other Catastrophes”] and there was a character in there who, that's the first time I read something that had beautifully described some of my symptoms.

Annie: Wow.

Michèle: And I remember going, and I didn't know her, but I ended up, she was at a launch of a friend who was also launching a book

Annie: Right.

Michèle: And I went up to her and I said, “Heather, you don't know me, but I can tell and I read your first, and that character work, oh my God, that's the first thing I've ever read” and we've been friends since and we're in the same sort of writing community now and I remember that and I also. I had one other, but I can't locate it at the moment. {NB: video addendum of film by Rolf de Heer and Heather Rose called “Dance Me to My Song.”}

Annie: That's okay. It's such an interesting background and and interesting events and places you've been and experiences you've been through to all weave together for your work today. It's very interesting. So what motivates your work today?

Michèle: It has shifted. So I was really motivated in terms of seeking compassion for the otherness of the other, which I talked, talked to you about.

Annie: Yeah.

Michèle: Very motivated by that and my first theatre work was very motivated about my sexuality. It wasn't my disability that, that was because I didn't see anything in theatre that reflected that so and the only disability theatre I knew was kind of siloed disability theatre so we've got some great disability companies here in SA.

Annie: Right.

Michèle: They’re kind of within their dis- like Tutti and No Strings [Attached Theatre] like got disabled people in it, but they're not, but they're for that communities or those communities and those families.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: And, and same with Tutti and I've experienced this in Australia. It's quite and I, hear in Britain is quite similar. It's quite siloed in terms of the, the disability theatre, and also they have disabled often have non disabled practitioners assisting.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: Those communities and I that's not, that's not really my bag. That's not. I didn't feel I fit and I and it wasn't. I was very much wanting to hit the mainstream, the mainstream general audience, and create theatre that was in those spaces and for those targeting those audiences but I wanted to kind of follow on from the shoulders of what Gaelle had shown in "Take Up Thy Bed and Walk" and then I got into a two year residency with UK Unlimited and ANAT and Access to Arts. We got exposed to British practitioners and it just, it just opened my practice and my mind incredibly and as a result of that and my Dad being diagnosed with Alzheimer's and seeing him go through that I, I then went, "right, I'm going, I'm going to make my next work that embeds Access right, right from the dot, right from the word go and I'm going to do I'm also going to make it dementia and neurodivergent friendly". So usually you only get we have AT Autistic Theatre as well in Adelaide. So again, it's particular community, a particular disability also and I went "no, I'm going to bugger it, I'm going to be ambitious, I'm going to try and create a work that is truly inclusive of all of all of the kind of disabilities. I'm going to apply to a theatre company that takes risks and that is a mainstream, mainstream space."

Annie: Okay.

Michèle: Target's mainstream and I'm going to pitch it to them.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: And see how I go and so I was very deliberate in after my sort of sexuality ones which were, which were, there was no except for me, there was no disability intent in any of those.

Annie: Yes. Yes.

Michèle: This was the first. So it took four years of development of creative development and collaboration with various disability communities and I got into the main season of this theatre company, Rumpus Theatre.

Annie: Wow.

Michèle: And they did and they put it on as their one of their main shows in their 2021 season and we embedded access. We made it dementia friendly. made it neurodivergent friendly. Noth - I don't think. I think, I don't think there's anything like it in the world. I don't think anything like it in the world has happened like this.

Annie: That's amazing.

Michèle: Certainly not in Australia. You certainly see aspects of it like Deaf theatre or autistic theatre or relaxed performances or what I call they're all add ons. So Auslan interpreter or like they're all add ons, they're not -

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: Embedded into the very fabric of the piece it, it featured, it was based, it was, it was kind of creative nonfiction and fictional biography based on my parents and I.

Annie: Okay.

Michèle: So it had an acquired brain injury character and an Alzheimer's character, and they were played by non-disabled actors and I deliberately did that because I did not know of any actors who could deliver for 90 minutes, maybe an hour and three quarters.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: To deliver a poetic lyrical, a very emotional play, and I did not know any actor disabled who could do that in South Australia that we could afford so but I also went I'm the director, I'm the creator, I'm the playwright. I was also partly performing in it and I made sure the actors underwent training and for me it was a choice of their operating within my field of permission.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: Because I had those roles. I had the creative decision making so and we had an Auslan performer integrated on video into the Deaf, a Deaf, a Deaf practitioner who who signs.

Annie: Yep.

Michèle: So she was integrated into the performance, but via film so yeah, it was a very deliberate choice to go “no I'm comfortable with this” and if anyone, they're operating in my field of permission and I'm quite happy to have a discussion with anyone who challenges me about that and that's fine.

Annie: Yeah.

Michèle: So we got so it went on and we targeted and it was to mainstream audiences and we got 14% of ‘identified with disability’ patrons.

Annie: Wow.

Michèle: In the show and that was through traditional marketing and for the target group we were going for in South Australia, it's actually 14%. In the population of that age range are actually disabled so we completely matched

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: The representation but I came out of it, and I have to tell you, because we actually won South Australia's premier award on Friday night.

Annie: Congratulations.

Michèle: So we actually won the state, they call them the Ruby Awards so for “No Time” won the Ruby Award for Outstanding Work collaboration.

Annie: Fantastic.

Michèle: So that was a big night Friday night so that's just something to tell you about that show so that was so, it was a, it was so really successful, groundbreaking, very influential work. Left a legacy of all sorts of products for Rumpus who, who are now using them and we also developed an app that is sitting with me at the moment because it needs more testing. We didn't have enough people test it and I want to try out a couple more companies that, that, to, to make it, to help with disabled people's audience engagement with, with theatre so that’s early days it's kind of a skeleton prototype and that needs to develop and ultimately we want that to go to some non-profit like Access 2 Arts or something where they can license out to productions to upload their stuff.

Michèle: But that's a bit of a journey to go. But that was one of the things we made during “Clock for No Time”. So there were all these legacy products as a result of that show that are available for mainstream productions or independent theatre productions. So we were really keen to show that you don't have to be a mainstream, main stage company to be able to deliver accessible theatre. I wanted to demonstrate that low budget independent productions, professional, but low budget independent you can with planning and preparation and the right tools, provide accessible productions. There’s no, there’s no, it’s not about money.

Annie: Yeah, yeah.

Michèle: There are ways to do it and I think we, I think we proved that but as a consequence of doing that, there were some questions that still remained for me and this is what motivates me now so there were some questions that raised for me that I felt like I wasn't getting the kind of impact I was hoping for, in terms of probably the best way to describe it is Mia Mingus's access intimacy. So I wasn't getting that sort of buy in and impact of audiences into experience of disability that I, that I was really hoping to have. That's my feeling that might not be true. But there's one thing. Yes, definitely got the emotional impact and psychological impact and conceptual, thoughtful impact of the performance at the time. Yes, definitely but in terms of that legacy for disability justice and a community to go out and act.

Annie: Yeah.

Michèle: Having that impact.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: Or really taking on board in their own personal life.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: That sort of change.

Annie: Yeah.

Michèle: I don't think I delivered that so that's what's motivating me now is how is how can I create a performance that delivers that sense of access intimacy.

Annie: And how will you know? What will be the the outcomes?

Michèle: So, yeah, yeah, yeah, exactly. So that's so we got a practice research grant. I'm working with the designer, one of the designers for “Clock For No Time” - Bianka Kennedy who is with me, my plus one at the awards. So she and I are working. We got a practice research-based grant and we are in the middle of the residency at the moment for it, but we finished one of the residencies at MoD, the Museum of Discovery at UniSA, and we had our one week in person and we've brought in Eugenie Lee, I don't know if you know her? She's a Sydney based artist with disability.

Annie: Okay

Michèle: She works in experimental installation kind of visual arts, and she does performance, endurance, performance around pain. And it's a 1 to 1 and she does it on a 1 to 1 basis so she was really keen to have more of a collective impact because it's very because she only does it one to one and it's like 4 hours.

Annie: Wow.

Michèle: It's intense for her but she wanted to know how can I do it for the same investment impacted greater number of people? And we're kind of going we've got the greater number of people, but we want to come down and have more of an impact so we thought, why don't we get together in the framework of pain, potentially in the framework of pain, look at how we can deliver access intimacy through an artwork, through art, and that is the grant that we've got at the moment so we're really early stages of it, but it really exciting.

Annie: Yeah.

Michèle: Development so far and conceptually and I think, I think we're finding a way. I'm also a, I also as part of my political lobbying in order for political lobbying, I was a very big on social policy evaluation.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: And I also when I first started out in my career, I actually worked at Community Arts South Australia Network in South Australia and
I developed community impact of art evaluation measures –

Annie: Right.

Michèle: Back in the early nineties.

Annie: Okay.

Michèle: Which Australia Council took a lot of our work. My work influenced them a lot. I was working with Deirdre Williams.

Annie: Right.

Michèle: Head of CAN SA at that time and then I just when I became a political lobbyist, I just did heaps of evaluation stuff.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: So we are very keen already on doing what methodologies and what processes and what measures, what outcome indicators are we looking for and how do we measure that? So we're already asking ourselves that question, and that's part of this residency at the moment.

Annie: That's fascinating.

Michèle: And we've had a chat to Tully, Tully Barnett at Assemblage at Flinders Uni.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: And Tully came in as a guest presenter and Tully is also very keen and is doing research in that area. So we're going to probably liaise with her and do some some additional work around the evaluation. So yes, we, we absolutely want to measure it. So we've got that right from the design right from the get go so that’s what’s motivating me at the moment.

Annie: Absolutely. So I'm just going to cast us back to when you first started in writing and theatre. Do you think that people were aware of your work or of Disability Arts, theatre, writing?

Michèle: Of mine or generally?

Annie: Both of yours and more generally.

Michèle: No, no one knew of mine no, no, no, no. That was no, that's no, that's a it's still surprises people. So on my count, no. When I started out, no one knew. No. So generally in South Australia. Yes. But again, very. Very particular disability community for that particular disability community.

Annie: Yes okay.

Michèle: Tutti Arts for intellectually for intellectual development. No Strings Attached for brain injury and intellectual development or so very tended to be, very when I started out, we knew about them, but they tended to be very about that disability community.

Annie: Yeah. Okay. So do you think, the the profile or the visibility has improved?

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: Of Disability Arts generally?

Annie: Yeah.

Michèle: Yes. Yes. Yes.

Michèle: Like. You just you just look at how Tutti and Restless and we now have Autistic Theatre A.T. Theatre. You just look at their reach internationally and nationally in terms of festivals and their audiences have grown enormously and the community work that Tutti has done has spread, has spread, spread much more into youth arts, spread much more into other across disability.

Annie: And what do you think in the last few years, last few years, what do you think made the difference?

Michèle: Well, we have an enormous advocate in South Australia who's Gaelle. I think that makes I think that makes a big difference. Yeah. Like the advocacy has been really different, but I think we've benefited from, I think we've benefited from the general representation culture over the last few years. So I think we've benefited from nothing about us without us and that just doesn't apply to disability, that applies to the LGBTQ community.

Michèle: Yeah. The people of the global majority applies. And I think we've all collectively benefited.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: From that cultural that that that, that massive cultural shift in terms of how who who and what and why theatre or performing arts is done.

Annie: Yeah. Yeah.

Michèle: I've probably, I think having organisations like Access to Arts, I don't know what it's like elsewhere, but they, to have them funded, to have them ongoing funded as a as an organisation, have organisational funding is good but I really, I really think it’s, it’s advocacy and, and that cultural representation has really been yeah and I certainly see that right in the writing, side writers with disability –

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: Have enormously increased their quality of writing and the number of people writing. So collectively there are there’s a whole pool of crafted writers with disability who say they have disability, who are actively setting up programs and networks to raise the whole talent pool of people with disability and so we’re getting the result of that is that we’re being recognised, more and more prizes we’re getting more books or pieces published in anthologies, getting our own like I want to I won a competition last year and got my first poetry book, solo collection published and now I’m getting into journals. I just have taken me eight years to try to get into so, so it’s, it’s just -

Annie: Yeah.

Michèle: It's just the whole, through those three or four really key leading writers with disability. They have just created so many other opportunities for other writers that it's just lifted our whole talent out of [inaudible].

Annie: That’s amazing, yeah, yeah.

Michèle: And now Varuna and stuff like that now have disability specific fellowships. So again, it's, you know, it's, it's disability leaders who are doing leadership in terms of disability justice in other words it’s a, it’s a whole community that needs that, that they are leading.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: Not about them. Leadership for them is a whole collective communal lifting and, and I think that's made a, I think that's made a really big difference the last few years, like Andy Jackson. Gayle, Gayle Kennedy like there were just, Heather Taylor Johnson. There are just that I can, There are others but they're the ones I can. In terms of literature, they're just right, just….

Annie: So what do you think the public would say are the key milestones or big major happenings in the history of Disability Arts in Australia?

Michèle: I'm a bit limited because I really only know the last decade. So I can't I, I would probably say. I'd probably say having national networks and state bodies. I don't know when that was established, but it feels like it's only been the last ten years. I'm not sure, but it feels that way. And then for some of them to get organisational funding.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: Multi year.I think makes a big difference because yes, you have that organisational support. Yeah but I would, I would say the disability, the Australia Council disability leadership thing that just gives it, that they introduced a few years ago. I think that has just given it a lift and a profile too.

Annie: Yeah.

Michèle: In South Australia I think with just so most arts going audiences like you would go to festivals or go to state or go to general theatre in, in South Australia. They know about Restless, they know about Tutti, not so many know about No Strings, but they will because they're going to be as part of State Theatre next year. They're going to be in the State Theatre season.

Annie: Yeah.

Michèle: They're just but they definitely know Restless and Tutti.

Annie: Yeah. Yeah.

Michèle: So they were milestone, the kind of milestone, yeah.

Annie: Yeah.

Michèle: We have some real milestone companies that have just made a huge impact in the art scene.

Annie: So is your art political and do you think -

Michèle: Of course.

Annie: Yeah. You've already talked about it.

Michèle: I don't know how art can't not be political. Like, it's just a misnomer to me. I don't there's there's nothing not political in life. It’s just a complete misnomer to think you can differentiate politics from your life.

Annie: It's yeah, that's that's interesting.

Michèle: It's like it's like there's no economy and it's like the opposite. There's no economy. Stop talking about the economy. It's no such thing as an economy. I have an MBA, so I'm like. And I'm and I majored in finance and economics. There's no economy. Stop talking about the economy because it doesn't exist. It's like stop saying politics is separate to living your life. That is not possible.

Annie: Yes. Yeah.

Michèle: Even if I was like a classic stereotype male, white, well off, you'd still be political like this.

Annie: So do you think it's how we should define success in art?

Michèle: Yeah, it's highly problematic how we define success?

Annie: Yes. Yeah.

Michèle: That's generally in society, not just…

Annie: And so do you think it needs to be political to be successful? Or –

Michèle: No.

Annie: No. So it can be about aesthetics quality and appeal to a mainstream audience?

Michèle: It's usually not successful if it's being trying to be overtly political message as a thing, as an artwork.

Annie: That's interesting,

Michèle: Least successful. I think as a, as a recipient, like as a person, as a patron.

Annie: Yeah.

Michèle: There are very few people who can have overtly political state and make a great piece of work, very few, very few I've seen who've been able to do that.

Annie: Yeah.

Michèle: Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely not. I don't think that's a measure of success. I think it's about transformation. I think that's success.

Annie: Changing the way people think?

Michèle: No, because I don't think we're just thinking bodies. We're not made up that way. So as we've seen through COVID, you can have all the amount of thinking and reason and logic you like, but it doesn't change anyone's belief. But I believe this is what of the things going on. So yeah. Thinking does not define [success] seeking to change people's thinking. I think that's been well and truly put aside. So we're more complicated than that. I think it is about transformation, and that's what I'm that's what I'm really keen. I've always been keen on, obviously as a political lobbyist.

Michèle: Like all my work was about trying to transform systems and
I think it's probably the same with my, my work now. It is about systems. Even "Clock for no Time" we did it, I did it in a very systematic way. It was about trying to change the system and culture of our theory.

Annie: So when you say it's about transformation, you're talking about transforming systems and culture rather than people per se?

Michèle: Yeah, yeah but you're going to do that – again they're not mutually exclusive because it's, it's about trying to change the people. We need a critical mass of people or people or a small amount of people who are influential enough to make inroads and start changing the culture and the system when they all get together as connect. So obviously so obviously it is about changing the people, but it's about trying to create a transform, some transformative experience for them that creates a legacy for them to go and seek to change things in their, in their systems that they operate in.

Annie: Yeah. Yeah. So do you want to identify or be identified as disabled or neurodiverse or having a medical condition or mental health condition?

Michèle: No, I, I, I say I'm an artist with disability. And if it's just me.

Annie: With pride?

Michèle: Oh, gosh, yes, yes. But it was weird. I I'm a medical. Okay. So I'm also a medical scientist. I'm a neuroscientist. So I did six years. I did six years to understand my own condition. I actually went and did six years of studying.

Annie: Of course as you do.

Michèle: To to in neuroanatomy to try and understand what was going on.

Annie: That's amazing.

Michèle: With me so um, so I, so I and my Dad was a doctor. My Mum was a theatre nurse.

Annie: Okay.

Michèle: When they met, but dad stayed being a doctor. But Mum went into family planning and primary health.

Annie: Okay.

Michèle: So I very much came with the medical model and that's very much how I started out in the approach to my own situation, because I then became a neuroscientist and so I qualified from that only two years ago.

Annie: Okay.

Michèle: So I very much was in a medical model and it was in the UK. The UK/ Australian two year residency thing I talked about – Unfixed - that happened in 2015, 2016.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: That was the first time I had publicly identified as being living with disability.

Annie: Okay.

Michèle: I had never – so I had done theatre already – but I had never attached that to, to my practice, to my identity as an artist and I, and I saw this opportunity and I applied and, and it was my coming out really, it felt like coming out again.

Annie: Yeah.

Michèle: And it was revolutionary for me. It completely changed me as a human being, that residency.

Annie: Right.

Michèle: And it was hugely educational. So I learned an enormous amount about disability models and so completely changed my perspective. So I, I myself underwent a transformative experience. So I know what it feels like is trying to get
you know, what it feels like, you know, what happened to you. Try and get that outside of here, out there into paper.

Annie: Yeah.

Michèle: So yeah and then we had lots of discussions between the UK and the Australian artists because in the UK artists, they're far, far ahead in the social model and the social model is a Marxist based model basically and they, they have a huge Disability Arts industry over there like it's in, it's self-regulating. Like it's enormous. It's like, Oh my gosh. And they were and they call themselves disabled artists, the people in the residency and we go, all the Australians went, "Oh, no we're writers or artists with disabilities" don't call ourselves disabled artists and the UK people loved it. You see, I knew and they went, "Wow, why is that?"

Michèle: And we have we had these amazing conversations and, and, and it just reaffirmed and I came out the other side of that with, "yeah, I'm not, I'm not a disabled artist. I'm not a, I live with disability, but I'm an artists with disability".

Annie: Yeah, yeah. So part of this next question is those differences in culture that you were just talking about, but also do you think there are differences in the way different artists with intersectional identities such as First Nations or cultural or linguistically diverse or LGBTQIA+ think about these things.

Michèle: Sorry you're going to have to -

Annie: So I guess how people with intersectional disability, intersectional identities, how they identify as artists or artists with disabilities or disabled artists.

Michèle: What are you asking me specifically?

Annie: Uh, I guess how other artists would see it.

Annie: Let's see how to, how they define themselves, how they identify.

Michèle: I don't know. I don't know. You'd have to, I couldn't answer that for them. I do know I have a, I have a few first nations friends who work in the creative industry and they certainly call them, they certainly say they're a First Nations artist because their whole cosmology is completely different to ours, to mine, to white folk, white, Western folk, so and I certainly have lots of queer artists, friends, definitely and they vary so some of them do say, like, I'm a lesbian artist, I'm a queer theatre maker. They certainly do put that in front but its in the sense because that is the output of what they make.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: So they say when they say they're a queer theatre maker, that's because they're making theatre that is, centre's the queer community and is for the queer community. However, I have known one who says there are queer filmmaker in certain in that space. I have seen them in a more mainstream or not queer community, and they don't say that, they say theatre maker,

Annie: So it can change with the individual. Yeah.

Michèle: Because they're in that space, because they're doing things and activities that isn't related to the queer community.

Annie: Yeah. Yeah.

Michèle: So I think on the context, it shifts how a lot of queer community artist friends talk. Depends on the context and depends on the output they're making in their art. So the lesbian artist friends of mine makes art for the lesbian community, and it's very lesbian themed. So yeah, but I've also seen so they clearly state now I'm a lesbian artist because that's what they do and that's cool.

Annie: Yeah. Yeah.

Annie: It's been fantastic and so interesting to talk to you. Is there something that we haven't asked about that we should? To know a bit more about you and your work?

Michèle: Yeah, I think. I think, um. As you appreciate my background, I think there's a whole, there's a very conscious strand and on my part to deal with, the, the, my colonial legacy. So, I'm, I'm very conscious and have and I'm working and have worked incredibly hard in my adult life to address my inherent racism and, and confront and deal with uh, being part of a, of a directly colonial class and system.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: And I was in fact born in a colonial, a directly colonising family and I was meant to continue that and that's why I got sent to boarding school. It's why my family were out in the Pacific when it was all territories owned by the British, by Britain when they were protectorates or they were French protectorates or Dutch. So we were brought out specifically to be the next colony, continue the colonising and my family was direct. It wasn't and it wasn't like a secondary assistive thing. It was -

Annie: No.

Michèle: Directly of that class and my and we go right on my Dad's side that goes back centuries and centuries. And I was raised how my dad was raised. So was my brother so we were very much this direct legacy we were meant to implement and be a part of and bizarrely, our family was huge on Scottish independence, but somehow didn't seem to translate that to - So for very smart people, it was a real weird dissonance. So I was brought up in a very Scottish independence and understanding why that was important, but also being part of the British colonial class. So. I've actively sought to try and address and deal with that in my writing in particular, not my theatre so much, but in my writing.

Michèle: I've really seeking to grapple with what they call decolonising your practice. I don’t like the term myself, but it'll do because people seem to understand what that means. So it’s a good shorthand but it’s way more complicated than that so so so that's in my literature side, that certainly is a strand and I think it has been affected by the disability consciousness. So I think through understanding the social model and moving away from the medical model, it gave me a way when I started being questioned about some writers talking about their body being colonised by the medical establishment and it just shifted something for me around colonising of the body as a disabled person. Oh gosh.

Michèle: And it just that just sent me off in a really direction in my writing around, confronting my own legacy and I got into a residency at Vitalstatistix that was with, led by a few First Nations artists from Australia and from Canada, from the US and that, that was about 2017, so straight after the unfixed one. And because the unfixed one opened that up for me, because there were discussions around colonising and I was reading a lot reading a lot more disabled writers. So there was, I was hearing this expression colonising the body and, and then the First Nations people were talking about colonising of their body and what that means because a lot of them were dancers

Annie: Right.

Michèle: It was so the two so it was actually through this that it kind of got me off. I'd always focused on trying to. In my adult life since I was a late teenager dealing with my internalised racism and being very conscious about this but this was on a whole other level and, and, and it is tied very closely to that consciousness around disability politics.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: And so that has led me off in the, in the decolonisation area at a whole other level in a completely different way and it's mostly seen in my writing.

Annie: That's fascinating. Yeah. Important work that you're doing.

Michèle: Yeah. It's just, you know, when you work in that literary space, unless you get a big prize or something, very few people read it, but, you know but it’s out thee. It’s

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: Someone might come across it if they're doing a particular research.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: They might come across it but you know, that's not the point. It's a point. The point is it may affect other people, but it's the work on one's self you know and having discussions in my communities about it. And as a white person confronting other white people and not and not giving that labour to First nations people.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: Yeah. So I'm very conscious of confronting white people and mmhmm and, and owning my own story as a starting point.

Annie: Yeah.

Michèle: You know, it's very tough when at that residency sitting opposite. Here am I, as a daughter of, as a daughter of a, of centuries of a family who directly, who directly would have done medical research on the relatives of the U.S. First Nations persons. He was there. My Dad did medical research in the US and talk about unethical thinking practices on. So that's only my dad. Here I am, opposite the daughter of that opposite. Opposite a woman who was a daughter of their family's being. You can't. It isn't some esoteric thing.

Annie: Yes, yeah.

Michèle: Some, you know it’s right - living right here, right now in this room.

Annie: Yes.

Michèle: And so when I can I'm, I do that labour and, and, and try to educate and change white people and it's not just left up to first nations people to do that work. Yeah.

Annie: So interesting. Yeah.

Michèle: So, yeah, that's probably an area not much talked about unless you're talking to First Nations people who are, who are, who live with disability. You won’t

Annie: Yes. Yeah.

Michèle: I think it's very rare that you -

Annie: Absolutely.

Michèle: Come across someone who says, a white person who would say that’s actually, the two, the two are entwined for me. I can’t -

Annie: Yeah.

Michèle: So that's been that's that transformation I was talking about. It's been a huge process. Yeah.

Annie: yes absolutely.

Michèle: So I think yeah I think that’s I think that’s it. It might appear in my writing in my theatre work. I’m not sure. Hmm, hmm.

Annie: Well, Michèle, that's been amazing. I've loved hearing your story and, and your thoughts and perceptions. Thank you so much for your time. We might leave it there.

Michèle: No worries and then archive material anything you want like that, Is that the next stage or.

Annie: Yes. Yeah. So that would be good electronic links of your work if that's possible. Yeah.

Michèle: Yeah. Great. Annie. Thank you.

Annie: Thank you, Michèle. It's been wonderful.

Michèle: Thank you. Bye bye. Bye.

ADDENDUM:

Michèle: Hi, my name is Michèle Saint-Yves, and this is an addendum to my interview with Annie a couple of weeks ago. There was a third ground-breaking art related to disability in Australia, but I couldn't remember at the time but have since and that is the film “Dance Me to My Song” with Heather Rose and directed by Rolf de Here. It was 1998. I think the film came out. So next year is its 25th anniversary. There are many reasons it was ground-breaking. First of all, Heather co-wrote and starred in the piece and it was an ultimately joyous film and represented also the politics of being cared for. It's not, it's, it's a fascinating film and it stands a test of time in many ways. I remember it, though, as, as being one of those art, artworks about disability that really has stayed with me and really provoked and challenge my sense of what could, what could be made of in a film. Okay. Thank you.