

Interviewee Name: Jeremy Smith

Interviewer Name: Jordan Fyfe

Date of Interview: 25th March 2022

Location: Online via Zoom

Length of Interview: 26 minutes

Jordan: So, could you tell us a little bit about yourself? What do you think we need to know about who you are and where you're from, and what experiences have helped you become the person that you are today?

Jeremy: Well, so my name is Jeremy Smith. I'm a 45 year old white male with achondroplasia, also known as dwarfism. Just what I'm wearing today, I'm wearing a black T-shirt with a yellow logo on my chest. I've got shaved hair, a beard, and I'm standing in an office in front of a white wall with some office furniture in the background. So, I have been born and raised in Perth, also known as Boorloo here in Whadjuk Nyoongar Boodjar and really started my career in the arts sector, well, interest in the arts, I should say during school, carried that through and studied lighting design, the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts or WAAPA and then early years was more a stage manager, lighting designer, production manager and then worked at the Awesome Festival, which is an annual children's festival here in Perth and received a fellowship during that time through the arts, WA young people and the arts panel to further my skills in arts management and producing and did that went to Canada for a period of three months and worked over there, came back and then that's when I started, I guess, a bit of a new direction in arts management and producing focused. Took on a regional residency program that Awesome was running. went into arts funding for a period of five years over here in WA and then worked at DADAA, which is a leading arts and disability organisation here in Western Australia, based in Fremantle, and worked there as their Regional Arts and health manager and head of Strategic Projects. And then from there went into the corporate sector for a period to do a lot of work in social investments across the not-for-profit sector. Then went to the Australia Council for the Arts as their head of experimental and community arts practice. Came back to Perth in April 2020 at the start of the pandemic as the general manager of PICA and since August 2021 have been the senior producer of performing Lines WA. I've also got several board roles and whatnot, so interestingly too, and important to the context of

this conversation, have only identified as disabled since the age of 39, and that was as a result of participating in a project that was part of the Perth Festival in 2016. And, but yeah, now very essentially hold values of otherness and difference at the core of my work and my approach to work and like I said, proudly identify as a disabled man. Yeah. And regret not doing so much earlier in my life than career.

Jordan: That's interesting. I'll touch on that again later in another question. But are there any experiences or events or people that stand out in your memory that are really formative in terms of getting you interested in where you are now?

Jeremy: No. I'm quite a black sheep of the family. Neither of my parents or my sister are in any way artistically or creatively inclined. So, it was always during school. I remember as a child, the illustrated books of Brian Wildsmith really inspired me, and so I started doing a lot of pastel sort of work as a young kid during that time that I enjoyed and liked having seen replicated in his books. Always was sort of involved in drama and was the first male through in my high school to do dance and then was involved in the rock eisteddfod initially as a performer, but then moved across into being the lighting designer for our school in year 12. Won the lighting award. And that's when I sort of discovered WAAPA and the lighting design course and went off in that direction. Through my career I think there's a lot of people that I think have inspired me. I guess I think that none of them really probably identify as disabled, but there have been people that have given me an opportunity or a chance. Gary Chard, who was the head of Awesome, his wife Carolyn, who was the general manager of Barking Gecko and. And others as well that have sort of gone and seen, I guess, potential and afforded me opportunity and made space for me in sort of roles that I normally probably wouldn't have otherwise thought I could do. And so I think that's really stayed with me and then other people that I worked with at the Australia Council, both within that organisation and through the sector relationships that I was able to form and establish. Yeah, yeah. I guess that's a very sort of long-winded answer because there's no real one single person apart from that project that I sort of talked about earlier, which I was involved with in 2016, that obviously was quite transformative on a range of levels because. Yeah.

Jordan: Do you want to tell us more about that project?

Jeremy: Sure. It was during the 2016 Perth Festival. Wendy Martin was the artistic director during that tenure and one of my very dear friends, Marnie Richardson, and another friend Meri Fatin, were asked to produce a project locally by the Empathy Museum, which is a UK based organisation. And it was called *A Mile In My Shoes*, where they send essentially an empty shoe box out to a location. This time it was Perth obviously, but in doing so they record local stories of people that they would like normal punters to listen to while they're walking literally a mile in their shoes. Because part of the project is that you donate a pair of your own shoes, you get given a shoe box, put on their shoes, walk around while you're listening to their story, which is them telling their own story via an MP3 player. So, Marnie Richardson approached me and asked me to tell my story of being a person that was living with achondroplasia. And as I said before, that project, I'd never really never identified as a disabled person. And it was the first opportunity that I'd had really to have a very frank and earnest conversation with my parents about what it was like with going through the process from birth to growing up to obviously pre times that I could sort of physically remember and then just other bits and pieces talking to friends and colleagues about it as well. And that was a real sort of step change in the way that I sort of thought about my life and my stature and my way of being. And when I thought it was high time that I sort of started embracing that. And realizing that there were a lot of barriers that I faced which I really normally hadn't previously considered or acknowledged. And yeah, so it was a really instrumental and very pivotal project. And interestingly, it was at a time when I did that project a couple of months afterwards is when I moved to Sydney for four years and worked at the Australia Council. So that was a really big shift in my own sort of personal circumstances. Around that time too, that was sort of a new beginning was sort of, I guess it was on the eve of me turning 40 and so. So yeah, there are a lot of people involved in that project. Like I said. Wendy Martin and raised from Perth Festival and Marnie Richardson and Meri Fatin that were you know to this day would have played a really life changing role in my own life. Yeah.

Jordan: What about what motivates your work now? So that was a few years ago. But what what's motivating what you're doing right now.

Jeremy: a fierce advocate of difference and trying to eliminate actions and attitudes that other people you know, I get a bit tired sometimes of the silos of diversity when people refer to the many different facets that make up difference. And so, I'm just always really

conscious of the things that I do, actually wondering if it is my turn. Is it time for me to make space? Is it time? How am I always making space and creating opportunities for either the next generation or people that may not have as loud voices as me, or may not have been privileged as me through opportunity and work and other experiences and whatnot. So that's a lot of threads to my consciousness, I guess, in terms of how I approached both life and work. And I think that I really love the aesthetic of disabled artists. I love their perspectives. I love the diversity within disability arts and I love the attitudinal change that audiences can experience from seeing work and participating in work and being part of work from artists that identify as disabled.

Jordan: What do you think about, because that's kind of on the topic you're talking about, what do you think about what spectators think of the work that you're doing or that you're helping other people do?

Jeremy: It is. That's a very broad spectrum, I guess, because it really depends on the type of work. I personally collect a lot of what I call outsider art, so primarily visual art by disabled artists or queer artists or artists from diverse backgrounds and whatnot in First Nations art as well. And actually seeing, people coming to my house and sort of see their experiences with some of the piece that I've got at home is one thing that I enjoy. And then having a conversation about that, being that friends or family or whatever. And then obviously, you know, seeing audience responses to live presentations of work or performances of some variety, be it music or whatnot. I think, you know, I think people now start slowly moving away from pity and to actual celebration of work and saying work for art, for art's sake. And rather than sort of the labels that are applied to people about, you know, be it a disabled artist, or be it a First Nations artist, or be it an artist who is from a refugee or diverse background or whatnot. So, I do really think that that's something that I always try to instil. And I think that obviously sometimes the element of surprise sort of I also sometimes enjoy to where people may be going into an experience and not necessarily appreciating the story behind the artist or the people that they sort of seeing, yeah. To sort of temper that. Not sort of have that preconception or preconceived idea of what it is that they're going to experience.

Jordan: And who do you think are some of the best people that are working in this space right now? Some of your favourite, at least.

Jeremy: Oh, God. Are we talking Australia or globally or.

Jordan

Jordan: Start with Australia. But you can go globally.

Jeremy: No, no, no. And having to identify? Which is always a tricky thing in this context too. So yeah, I mean, Caroline Bowditch, I love and respect most dearly. I think she's an incredible artist in her own right, but also the work that she's doing through Arts Access Victoria and now through Alter State, which is so exciting, is really, really wonderful. Dear friend and colleague here in Perth is Bruno Booth. I'm really excited by the work that he is doing. He's very interdisciplinary and works across media and form. I love the work of, Oh god, here we go, this is really putting me on the spot. A lot of new sort of studio spaces that have popped up around the country and the real collective impact, I think, of which have gone for more, I guess therapeutic outcomes to more outcomes of excellence and whatnot I think is really exciting. who else? I mean there are so many. God. Daley Rangi, who's another performance maker over here and based here, but works nationally quite extensively. And I think there's been champions in our sector, too, that, again, may not necessarily identify as artists. The people in the likes of Morwenna Collett, Liz Martin that she's a practicing music musician herself, obviously, but you know that they've put themselves into roles that have enabled change and allowed opportunities for difference to flourish and what not too. Yeah. And then there's obviously a lot of organizations whose work I do to really hold in high regard to people like obviously Back-to-Back have received so much acclaim in recent times. You know, I do I value that I hold myself to is this like nothing about us without us? So I think organizational leadership is something that needs to really be considered not just within the arts and disability space, but across all areas as well. And that whole concept of making space for leadership and, and for people to, to succeed and cede as well.

Jordan: Great. Do you do you also do you think that the public's perception of disability arts has changed over time? And what do you think that their perception is currently?

Jeremy: Yeah. I guess it's interesting. I mean, I guess. The visibility of disabled artists has changed and grown and increased, which is fantastic. And I think, as I said before, I think some of the preconceived ideas and perceptions and expectations are being diminished, which is good. And I think that you know seeing more and more works of scale by either individual or collectives of disabled artists is really, really exciting. And I

think the whole acknowledgement now that how diverse the disability art space is, because the obviously the more acknowledgement of neurodiversity as a part of this area of practice. And then when you've had sort of significant events like the Big Anxiety Festival, really shine a light and increase the profile of a lot of more contemporary and more interdisciplinary artists that are working in that space. Yeah, I think. And then obviously having the public interface with a lot of those sorts of programs as well. And I think that whole concept of storytelling as well is something that's really grown when over here in Perth, obviously back in, I can't remember what year it was, 2019 or 2018. Black Swan State Theatre Company produced *We Belong Together* in partnership with Perth Festival and DADAA, which was a really transformative and really significant work for a state theatre company to, to, to develop and do and hopefully has many future presentations both here in Australia and abroad as well. And I know that the audience response, you know, they brought that back for a second return season where they have that in their studio underground space at the state theatre centre, but then brought it back to the main stage in the Heath Ledger Theatre the following year and allowed a lot more people to see it, which is incredible and great.

Jordan: Do you think that disability arts is political? Should be political? Yeah. What are your thoughts about that?

Jeremy: Definitely becoming and should be, yes, definitely. I think if there's anyone that can be political, you know, it's all those, the outsiders, I think. And that's a really important thing to instil change and create disruption and provocation and uncomfortable, well make situations uncomfortable that should be made uncomfortable. Yeah.

Jordan: And we talked a bit about identifying as disabled now. And why do you think that that is important to do that with pride? And do you think that other artists should do that as well or other people in this industry should do that? Or do you think it's up to the individual?

Jeremy: It's very much up to the individual. I mean, as I said before, I regret not having done so sooner. And I was always constantly getting outed by the people because I am physically disabled. I guess so. But then still, I have a lot of conversations with long term friends and family that sort of are surprised that I would just identify as disabled

because they don't perceive me as disabled. And so it's a really complex and sit.....situation. And I know that a lot of people have previously very privately confided in me that they are, I guess, disabled in one way, shape or form. However, don't wish to publicly identify it so and so. I completely respect that decision. I mean, I say to them that it's one of the best things that I did, and I would encourage them to put themselves in a place that they feel comfortable with, that part of their identity and own that and celebrate it. And, you know, because there's something to be said, obviously, for collective impact. And when people identify that way, which again sort of disrupts that perception that people may have of people that are either in leadership roles or that disabled person potentially could not lead an organisation or could not achieve great things that people are actually doing, is something that I think it speaks a lot and speaks volumes to the way that society perceives and treats and behaves around disabled people. I mean, even the whole concept of invisible disability in the neurodiverse space and whatnot as well is something that's very complex for people to identify and grapple with as well.

Jordan: Okay. Okay. So we were talking about, um, people who identify with other differences like first nations people, LGBTQIA people, etc., etc.. Do you think that people who, yeah, who have other differences, do you think that they think about the politics of identifying?

Jeremy: And I think within their own silos and I think more and more we need to sort of unpack and acknowledge what intersectionality looks like because I think increasingly there are like, I'm disabled and queer. And so I think there's other people as well that have got multiple bows or strings to their bow. Yeah. So I think that it's rarely one sort of experience that defines any one person. So yeah.

Jordan: Intersectionality is the word I was looking for. Okay, great. Well, I think we've covered just about everything. Do you have anything do you have anything else? Any final thoughts that you want to talk about?

Jeremy: No, I think it's really great that this project is happening and very important. And I hope it sort of creates a really significant and important archive as well. So I think, you know, and has a really broad range of representative views from the sector as well. So, you know, it has changed a lot. I think our common friend is Simone Flavelle and we

were having a conversation just the other day, just Wednesday, I think actually in her backyard about where things have come from. And I remember when I first encountered DADAA and the work it was doing compared to what it's doing now and then the other collectives that have since spun off and developed and yeah, it's a really rich and deep and, and complex area of practice and yeah, but there are a lot of people now forging new and brave pathways that you know, and that's part of the thing too, is that I think I often get approached to be on boards and other things like that, and I think that people will soon fatigue of hearing my voice. So I guess it's, as I said before, making space for other disabled artists that may not necessarily be part of those conversations or receiving that experience, you know? Yeah.