

Interviewee Name: Janice Florence

Interviewer Name: Erin Scudder

Date of Interview: 24th of October 2022

Location: Online via Zoom

Length of Interview: 65:20 minutes

Transcript

Erin Scudder: So just to get started, could I invite you to introduce yourself however you would like to.

Janice Florence: I'm Janice Florence and I work - I'm an artist, a performance artist for many, many years. And I run a company called Weave Movement Theatre, which is a company of disabled performers, and we bring in non-disabled performers sometimes. And we've collaborated with a lot of respected artists. And also I work at Arts Access consulting with the arts industry about improving access for artists and audiences in various, you know, various a whole range of access needs.

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: And I've been involved in training in the arts industry as well.

Erin Scudder: Yeah. So how did you start out as an artist? Like what was your maybe, I guess, entry into it?

Janice Florence: Well, look, I've always had a bit of trouble with - you know, I studied arts and I did a teaching diploma and I did a library diploma, and I've worked in libraries quite a lot. So I worked in the school library to start out because I did the school librarian qualification, which I did at what used to be the Melbourne State College, which is now, I think, the education faculty at Melbourne University. And, anyway, and then I moved on to public libraries and then I ended up in the TAFE library. But all the time I was doing art stuff and I - so I initially was involved in sort of New Theatre, which is kind of was a left wing theatre company which went for a long time in Melbourne and Sydney. And a lot of people got their start - like Barry Humphries got his - do you know Barry Humphries?

Erin Scudder: Yes I've heard of him. Yep.

Janice Florence: ... in that indie theatre. And it was a left wing - you know - like it was a left wing theatre - probably after the Second World War I think. And so then I moved to the country and did some amateur dramatics and also some music. We had a little band - bush, you know, folky sort of band, and then I, then I did a - then all through that I was interested in dance, and I went to dance classes, and I did ballet when I was a child. And so at one stage I - probably in my early thirties - I discovered this Graduate Diploma of Movement dance, which started off being through the Institute of Early Childhood Development, which came, became part of Melbourne University, by the time I got that diploma, finished it. And it longer exists, unfortunately, it was a really interesting diploma and a lot of people who were doing stuff in all sorts of fields of movement and dance came out of it. And, you know, it had, it had physiotherapists and teachers and well people who wanted to perform. It had all sorts of dancers, you know, it had all sorts of people in it. So I really discovered a whole new area of movement dance from that because it was run by two women who - one was English, and she had a background in what was called modern movement education or dance in England, which was based on Rudolf Laban's practices. I don't know if you've come across him. He was a famous innovator in Germany and Europe in the sort of thirties and forties. He was also a time and motion expert in factories, which is really interesting.

Erin Scudder: Wow.

Janice Florence: Anyway, he's sort of had quite a big influence on actors and dancers and - and also another woman called Henny Exener, who also studied Laban in Austria and came here to escape the Second World War and was part of an avant garde dance company in Sydney called the Bodenwieser Dance Company, run by this woman called something - Gertrude Bodenwieser, that's right. And so I did that, and that really opened up a lot for me. And then I did some - I went to the States and did a, with some - you know I sort of trained with Anna Halprin, who was another sort of dance innovator and and - and Joan Skinner, who was another dance innovator. And so all that stuff happened and then I - I had my accident, actually, not long after I came back from Anna Halprin, and she was based around San Francisco and - Joan Skinner, I'd sort of done her work in the diploma course, but I more did work with her after I was in the

wheelchair in Seattle. She was based in Seattle at the University of Washington. And yeah, so then I had my accident not long after that. And, but, you know, because the course was based around a lot of styles that had improvisation within them, I was actually able to adapt. Because they were open, you know, they weren't do this step and that step.

Erin Scudder: Yeah, not so prescriptive.

Janice Florence: Yes, yeah. And so then I was in a company with people and I was in a little community around improvisation in Melbourne, run - which was based around this guy called Al Wunder, who came here from America because his wife was Australian and she also taught in the Graduate Diploma course. So I was very much involved in that community, and he had a whole improvisation practice that lots of people followed, and - then through that I got into contact improvisation, which is another form that started in America, and - this is lot of history, but anyway ...

Erin Scudder: No, it's great! It's so rich.

Janice Florence: Yes. And so then Martin Hughes, who - he and his wife, Fiona, started a - when Al had to move out of his studio in Richmond, they started one in Fitzroy - and Martin was a great contact improviser. And he also, you know, he's a trained dancer and he - so he started up, we started up a performing group based around contact improvisation called State of Flux. And with me - I was the only disabled person in it and it was four other dancers and they all had various degrees of training and - contact, it's a really interesting form based around physical contact and momentum, and weight giving, and things like that. So that went on for ten years and we taught and performed. We ran an improvisation performance night for ten years at the Cecil Street Studio where we brought in other people to perform every month. And then we, then we - yeah, that went on till 2007 and then I - and then - but Weave started in 1997 because Arts Access (and I didn't work there then, but I had a lot to do with them) asked me and Martin to lead this series of workshops or to lead up to a master class with this company from England called Candoco, which is like one of the original disability dance companies, who were going to be here. And so we did that and we did the masterclass and then the people who were then part of Weave decided they wanted to keep going. And so I sort of fell into the role of Artistic Director and had to learn lots of

stuff over the years. So yeah, that's been going ever since and, you know, lots of people have passed through. And oh Caroline, the CEO at Arts Access, was in it in the early days and then she went off to the UK.

Erin Scudder: Yeah, yeah.

Janice Florence: Yeah so lots of people have passed through it and gone on to do other things and ...

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: Yeah. So that's how it all got started. And then Weave, you know, we've kind of, you know, we really rely now mainly on project funding, but we're a charity, we can get donations and stuff and so yeah, that's, that's how it all happened.

Erin Scudder: That Diploma program sounds amazingly interdisciplinary.

Janice Florence: Yeah, it was such a pity that it all went back to the VCA then, and it was all kind of you know people who wanted to be professional dancers.

Erin Scudder: Yeah, right, yeah.

Janice Florence: And Wen - and Wendy who did - who was in State of Flux with me and also did the Graduate Diploma - she did go on to teach at VCA and she (in the dance course) and she did teach, you know, stuff around the kind of thing we did in the diploma, but yeah, it was a shame it stopped.

Erin Scudder: You don't get that same sort of involvement of people from all the different disciplines.

Janice Florence: Yes, yeah, yeah.

Erin Scudder: That's such a rich history! It's a rolling, amazing tapestry.

Janice Florence: Yeah and so I'm not, I haven't got the classic training and background and I've always felt a bit - 'ooooh am I a real, you know, artist' - but I mean, you know, I've done so - and I did get recognition from the Australia Council. I won - I got their inaugural Disability Arts Award thing. So yeah.

Erin Scudder: Yeah. I feel like that's a topic that comes up a bit. I went to see Meremere by Rodney Bell at Alter State...

Janice Florence: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

Erin Scudder: Did you go?

Janice Florence: I didn't see it actually. Yeah, it's online. I mean to watch it.

Erin Scudder: Yeah, it was great. And I also went to The Gathering where he was the guest speaker ...

Speaker1: Oh yes, yeah.

Erin Scudder: ... previously. And he also, he said, he also said he felt a little bit uncomfortable sometimes that he's not coming to dance with the classical training and, sometimes but - yeah. That's a bit of a, like a, feeling that - anyways, his performance -

Janice Florence: Well there's a whole area connected with that, you know, that it's so hard for people to get into tertiary training, if you've got a disability.

Erin Scudder: Yes.

Janice Florence: Yeah. And so in a way I've - because we've had a lot of artists in to teach and to direct stuff with Weave, we are regarded as a sort of a training platform as well as -

Erin Scudder: Yes absolutely -

Janice Florence: Yeah.

Erin Scudder: It should be, yeah, something that's valued and thought of ...

Janice Florence: Yes.

Erin Scudder: ... as just as valuable training. Amongst all of those experiences and events, are there particular people or relationships or experiences that really shaped your - like the artistic practitioner that you are now? Or some favourite experiences?

Janice Florence: Well, I guess the Graduate Diploma was a real revelation to me about different ways, like - because, you know, before that I was sort of caught up in the ballet thing and I'm not, nowhere the right size or shape for, to be a ballerina. And it's worse when you're in a wheelchair.

Erin Scudder: So relate to that.

Janice Florence: Ballet is very exclusive in that way. And you need to be an athlete, really. And so, yeah, it was sort of - oh, but I had before that I'd, I had developed a bit of an interest in African or Ghanaian dancing.

Erin Scudder: Oh, yeah.

Janice Florence: Oh - no that was because of the Diploma, actually, because there was a teacher who was into - oh no she taught - what was it called? - dance anthropology.

Erin Scudder: Oh yeah.

Janice Florence: And so, yeah, she brought in this group that was playing Ghanaian music in Melbourne and we did a little bit of, you know, the steps. And then this Ghanaian guy came out here and taught. So I was interested in all that.

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: And I'm just reaching but um -

Erin Scudder: We were talking about like highlights or particularly -

Janice Florence: Oh yeah. So all of that stuff, you know, it was all the sort of American innovators in dance.

Erin Scudder: Right.

Janice Florence: And Laban, you know, he has got this whole system around dance, which is based around dynamics, you know, like they call it - this - he's got all these names for - it's pressing, pushing, floating, gliding, punching. So, yeah, so all of those innovators who I didn't really know about that that was just a huge revelation.

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: And I got into the Skinner Releasing practice through that because a couple of the teachers went to Seattle and worked with Jane Skinner. And - and so that's how I first got into that. And that was when I first got out of rehab after my accident and then, see that - and because I was in that sort of community of improvisers and experimenters, they all - I mean, some of them were, you know, were bit sort of 'oh what do we do with her now' - but, but they did accept me back into that community. And I went on going to classes, you know, and - and so a friend, who is an old, is very old friend now - toured Skinner releasing and she - I went straight back into class and, I mean, in Skinner rel-, in Skinner releasing they put the, you get put into a sort of relaxed state by the tone of voice and - and then you're given these internal images and the music as well and the sound - of sort of mainly natural images about your body and - which is meant to get ... release your body for dancing, you know. And so - and then you do dancing! You know, whatever. And so and now I've sort of done a few of those practices. And so then yeah, so then I kind of gradually found my way back into movement, really through those classes and through me experimenting with things. And through, then through State of Flux, where there were three guys who were daring and, you know, would pick me up and throw me around. And I mean, I c- never do that now. But I was, you know, then I could! And yeah so, you know, I just was - through state of Flux too I was given an opportunity to really broaden out my idea of what I could do. And really that whole idea of contact went into the beginning of Weave. I mean, it had to

be adapted a lot, but it went into the beginning of Weave too. So those things were really formative.

Erin Scudder: It sounds really like just very, very liberating as well to sort of encounter those things that change your ideas of what dance is. Because I think dance also, yeah, it can seem like such an institution, like unless you started, you know, with wealthy parents and ballet classes from age two, there's no way that you could be a dancer. And I'm really interested, for example, to hear more about that guy you mentioned, the person you mentioned who was in the Diploma, but also did - you said - looked at movement in factories?

Janice Florence: Oh Laban yeah, well, he was a famous teacher. You should look him up. Rudolf Laban.

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: And he, he did - yeah, at one time in the Graduate Diploma - because of that connection - I was working as a librarian then, and they actually had us identify our most common work movements with his movement qualities. And then we made up a dance out of that.

Erin Scudder: Oh wow.

Janice Florence: And, with libraries, I identified - oh what's, what's it called - oh, it's not poking - anyway, something like that and pressing. It was dabbing! Dabbing. That's what it was.

Erin Scudder: Oh yeah.

Janice Florence: So yeah in those days we used to stamp ...

Erin Scudder: Yep.

Janice Florence: Get cards out of a box and, and also pressing, you know, it was kind of pressing, pushing trolleys and stabbing the books into the shelf sort of thing. And so yeah, so they were, yeah. So they brought in that connection.

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: With that work thing. So he probably used, I don't know, you know, but there's a Laban course in London now that people in dance, you know that people - Jo D- Dunbar who, I don't know if she's on your list, who's a deaf dancer -

Erin Scudder: I think she is on the list.

Janice Florence: Yeah, well she did that course. And she could tell you more about it.

Erin Scudder: Yeah, cool, I've just written down the name.

Janice Florence: Yeah, you should.

Erin Scudder: I'll look him up.

Janice Florence: Yeah look him up, yeah.

Erin Scudder: So we talked a bit about, we talked a bit about. Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you.

Janice Florence: Oh no that's alright, can't, yep.

Erin Scudder: We talked a bit about highlights and things that have -

Janice Florence: Oh that's right. So yeah. And going and, look, doing that course with Anna Halprin ...

Erin Scudder: Yep.

Janice Florence: ... was, you know it was in San Francisco. It was all - it was all, everything was new agey and you know, but Anna herself had been an avant garde dancer and it was drawing with it as well. I mean, it was very liberating. It was liberating because sometimes it's liberating to go into all that sort of flaky stuff.

Erin Scudder: Oh yeah, yeah. Gets flowin. Little bit of woowoo.

Janice Florence: And yeah. And so, yeah, that was, that was great. And then Joan Skinner's work, as I said, it really - going over there and working with her. But now she, she died, she actually got dementia and she died in recent times and there's now someone continuing on with her work. So yeah, experiencing that and also I think - are you American?

Erin Scudder: I'm Canadian originally.

Janice Florence: Okay Canadian okay. I think Americans have got - a lot have got a better attitude about 'I'm going to do it whether you like it or not', sort of thing. And the people, the people who, who were in courses I was doing, I mean, didn't matter whether they were, you know, really big and, you know, overweight or whatever, they still thought it was fine for them to call themselves a dancer. So I think that was kind of liberating for me, too.

Erin Scudder: Yeah. And what about - was there anything that was kind of the opposite, like a barrier or an obstacle or a point at which you felt kind of held up or not accepted?

Janice Florence: Well, I think just the whole well, you know, from - I had dance classes from the age of three, and I then I, I mean, the first one was sort of a, a, you know, tap, tap and ballet sort of thing. I mean, the woman who ran that course used to supply children to be in pantomimes and things. I was never a pantomime though, but - and then I stopped for a while and then I, someone at school told me they went to this ballet school which became - like it was the basis of the Australian ballet, you know, it was called the Borovansky.

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: And what grew out of that was the Australian Ballet. So I went to that ballet school for a while, but what stopped me was that I was all, I'm, like I'm nearly six foot, you know, and I'm, I'm, I've always had big thighs and so I, I completely - there's no, nothing. You know, I couldn't do anything, to go on. So until I discovered - and I did, I went to sort of jazz ballet classes and things when I got a bit older. But until I really - all the African dance and stuff, you know - but until I got into all that and the Graduate Diploma, I had - I didn't have an avenue to continue on with my interest in dance. And so that was a - and it still is in a way, you know, like you still see a lot of people in dance who are small and thin.

Erin Scudder: Yes.

Janice Florence: And, I, and of course now I've got a disability. I'm way beyond the pale. And so there was always those things I really absorbed and became internal things for me and ...

Erin Scudder: Limitation and exclusion, not just around disabled bodies but around - other bodies.

Janice Florence: Everything! I mean, I feel like I'm used to it, you know, I've been used to it since childhood. So, and then the other thing is surviving as a small company, you know, like it's - along the way sometimes we've had operational funding. But a lot of the time we haven't. So I do, I just get money from projects and I do things for nothing, you know. Organisation. And because of that I do a lot of work that isn't anything to do with anything artistic.

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: So that's been, you know, kind of - I sometimes I think all the artistic stuff's been drained away, and I'm just an administrator. But I do, I'm still performing, so I do enjoy it. And we just had a session in the season, I should say, in the Fringe.

Erin Scudder: Oh yep. Tell me more about that. I was going to ask what you're currently working on.

Janice Florence: Yes. So we, so we've been working with this Japanese Australian performance artist called Yumi Umiuare for really like on and off for six years now and - she, I mean, she's international, you know, she performs internationally. And she's a, anyway, a force of nature. And she - so we started - we did this piece with her in 2016 called White Day Dream at Fortyfivedownstairs. And then we sort of continued on and then we started developing this piece and it - and we had some money to do it. And we went into the pandemic then and - just about when we were going to start - and so throughout the pandemic there were times when there wasn't a lockdown and we rehearsed and we tried rehearsing online, it just went on and on and on. And then finally we got to the - last year and we - there was a window of opportunity to put it on, and we were up to the stage where we could put it on. And then on the night of the dress rehearsal before the opening night, it was, there was a lockdown declared and we couldn't. So anyway, what we did this time was to - we, we couldn't, anyway, look, we had really limited resources and so we got a spot in the Fringe hub where you don't have to pay for the venue. But it was a very small venue and there's lots of rules and regulations in the Fringe hub. And so we cut down the size of the company, but we had a lot of film, of the rehearsals and of that dress rehearsal. So it was a combination of live performance and film. And, and it was changed, you know, which was good because there are a lot of current references within last year to what was going on and still a bit - but yeah, so it actually - and we didn't have a hugely long rehearsal period, but we had all those years of doing stuff connected with it. So we - there are only five in the company instead of about nine, which there had been originally and one non-disabled guy and so we put it on and it, and it actually went far better than I thought and got a couple of really nice reviews.

Erin Scudder: Ah that's great. So good.

Janice Florence: Yeah, it's good. Yeah. And so now we've got a creative development [grant] which - through Arts House - I applied to their Culture Lab program last year, and I've worked a lot with Arts House through Arts Access. And they're interested in improving access. And so they've actually got a whole program now for d/Deaf and disabled artists. But I applied to their Culture Lab - because I, because we've had - they're trying to target people who haven't had a lot of funding in the past.

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: So, we can't really go for it. So, anyway, I, we didn't get it for that project we wanted, but they said they were interested in our work and so they really basically wanted us to work with an artist they approved of. And someone on our board who was in Weave originally suggested, this young dancer who's around, who's done a bit of work with - who's sort of big flavour of the month - and done work with, with disabled artists. We asked her and she said yes. And so we're doing this creative development with her in the beginning of November, which if Arts House likes it, might lead to then something being put on there.

Erin Scudder: Right. In terms of - you mentioned Fringe and the venue there and - in terms of where you've performed or presented your work or the work of Weave over the years, like, are you happy with where, like the venues or the spaces in which you've been able to perform your work? Or are there spaces where you'd like to be present and performing in there?

Janice Florence: Yeah look, you know, it's always a bit of a hunt for an accessible space. It has improved a bit - to rehearse in - and we found a few places, but you know, like one of them, Northcote town hall, we used to rehearse there a bit, but now it's got prohibitively expensive and they had a big curated program and, you know, they're an important arts centre, they think, and so they charge just really prohibitive fees for any hiring of their rehearsal spaces.

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: It's a shame because it is accessible.

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: Yeah, so we've had problems over the years finding places that are affordable and accessible.

Erin Scudder: Mm hmm.

Janice Florence: There's a couple we kind of - there's a place in Brunswick called Siteworks we've been using, which is pretty accessible. Not that amazing but it's all right. And they're going to, now it's going to be knocked down and they're going to build a super duper new place, which will probably be accessible, but it'll be out of circulation for a couple of years.

Erin Scudder: Yeah, yeah it will be.

Janice Florence: So, yeah, it's always looking around for places, and that suit all the people in the company to come to.

Erin Scudder: And the work that you've -

Janice Florence: And also performance spaces, yeah I mean, we've used - Dancehouse has been, you know, we've had a long relationship with Dancehouse.

Erin Scudder: Yep.

Janice Florence: I have personally had a long relationship with them and, and with State of Flux and with Weave, you know, for rehearsal space and for - we have performed there, I sort of really like performing there in a way, but it's not - anyway. Yeah. Because of the audiences they get to, they're a bit more interested in experimental work.

Erin Scudder: Right.

Janice Florence: And there but there's always still, you're coming up against that 'oh, you know, they're real dancers and they're all so, you know, trained in a proper dance institution.' But, no, but they've, they've been good to us and they, this year earlier we had another creative development and they gave us a space for free with the creative development.

Erin Scudder: Good.

Janice Florence: And there's another one we're hoping to have, which they're st - also going to give us the space for free.

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: And it'd be good to perform at Arts House because, you know, there's a lot of good technical support and it's just ...

Erin Scudder: Right.

Janice Florence: ... and they've got an interest in being accessible.

Erin Scudder: So what do you feel that is the level of awareness around the work that you create or the level of audience engagement? Like, do you think it's - that your work is well known, or is there more work to do around that?

Janice Florence: Ah, look see that's the problem. We don't have resources. You know - we get we get money for a project and then maybe there's something for a publicity person in that. And, and other than that, I, like I have at times had operational funding. But, and for three years North - the woman, the woman who's in charge of arts and culture at Northcote Council gave us that. But then they cut out their operational funding after she left. And to get it from Creative Victoria's just a huge amount of competition from non-disabled companies. Look, they have improved with it, you know, they've got grants directed at deaf and disabled artists, but not operational grants.

Erin Scudder: Yeah, right.

Janice Florence: Another one I've gone for now that -

Erin Scudder: Yep.

Janice Florence: - and that's the other thing, you know, constantly grant writing you know it's, it's exhausting.

Erin Scudder: Yeah, just trying to resource, resource the process of trying to resource operational support. Is really hard.

Janice Florence: Yeah, yeah. And we have gone for the operationals, but we didn't get it both times. And it's such a, it's a huge grant to get together. You know, you have to have a business - and look, the board helps a bit, but you have to really business plan and strategic blah blah. You have to get all that together. I just I haven't got the energy or the time.

Erin Scudder: That's a huge amount of work.

Janice Florence: Yeah. Yeah. And so when we've had, you know, like operational funding, we've been able to have another person to - like a company manager sort of - to support me. And they've been able to do social media and stuff, which helps spread the word.

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: And that, you know, it's really. Yeah. So the other company, which I suppose you might compare with us, is Rawcus and they always get that operational funding and they've got staff you know so they can you know, spread - you know, do publicity and -

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: Yeah, constantly, you know, and - yes, we did get this audience development grant, but it kind of fell apart because of the pandemic. So yeah, it's hard to get recognition. But look, in a way, the, the Fringe was good. I mean, there's lots of things about the Fringe which are really annoying, but the - because it wasn't I mean, that setting isn't really accessible because we had to get our stuff into the space in 20 minutes and out of the space in 20 minutes every night. And we had this big item of this giant rabbit mask which had to be got in and out of the space every night. It limit - we had a couple of volunteers to help, who we got to help us and, and and the cast, basically who wasn't disabled or didn't have physical disability, had to get the stuff out of the space and take it upstairs in a lift to a storage space every night, you know. And

then we tried to have audio description and - and - and the technical manager said oh, no, you can't do it because blah, blah, and we haven't got this and that. And it's not the kind of space where you can do it. So we couldn't do it, you know? And the, and the Fringe is supposed to be having a radical access year this year.

Erin Scudder: Okay. So I guess, I mean, that's -

Janice Florence: The, the good thing, I was going to say, was that at the Fringe there's reviewers circulating around.

Erin Scudder: Yes.

Janice Florence: And whereas they probably might not normally bother to come to our show, we got - had two really nice reviews out of out of being there. So that was a really good thing about the Fringe.

Erin Scudder: Yeah. When you, when you do have the opportunity to make work or to design new work, what kind of content do you feel supported to make and what limits, if any, do you feel are placed on you in terms of the creative, the content that you're able to make?

Janice Florence: Oh, you mean - sort of creatively, or subject matter, or?

Erin Scudder: Yeah, do you feel topically limited or like there's certain -

Janice Florence: Ahh - only probably by my preferences.

Erin Scudder: Yep.

Janice Florence: Yes. Look, I've got a bit of a thing about directly making shows about my disability experience. I don't know, maybe it's an inhibition, but I feel it only goes so far.

Erin Scudder: Yep.

Janice Florence: I also feel that, you know, not all disabled artists want to make that kind of work. You know, we might want to make some - we've got some other artistic interests.

Erin Scudder: Yes.

Janice Florence: So I guess. You know, we - there's a certain - we've, we've chosen certain artists because of probably some - you know echo, or connection, we feel with them.

Erin Scudder: Yep.

Janice Florence: To work with. And sometimes it hasn't worked out well, you know, sometimes their attitudes about disability haven't been good.

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: And sometimes they're willing to adapt and sometimes they've been good. So I feel - it might be limited by people's expectations. Sometimes I feel that maybe even the funding bodies have expectations about doing things with meaning on disability topics. So we often have to inject something into our funding applications.

Erin Scudder: Yeah, right. So it's not enough to be a disabled artist proposing a certain project. The project itself also has to -

Janice Florence: Some - I'm not sure how right I am about that. Look, the Creative Victorian - yeah and even with other artists with disabilities, Creative Victoria now has panels of d/Deaf and disabled artists assessing grants that are directed at different disabled artists, and so hopefully it will change a bit.

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: And also I wonder how much that's ingrained in some d/Deaf and disabled artists as well.

Erin Scudder: Yeah. Internalised?

Janice Florence: Who are kind of more - I mean, I'm pretty ideological about - but this is part of it, you know - but who are more ideological in the conventional sense? [Who] might feel that you should have something that's more obvious. Yeah, I do think that might be it might be an expectation.

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: Yeah.

Erin Scudder: In terms of how you identify, because this has been a question that everyone we've interviewed has answered quite differently. What kind of words, like - are words related to disability, you know, up front, front and centre in terms of how you describe yourself as an artist? Or are there - you know, is Disability Pride involved in how you describe yourself as an artist, or is there a different way or a different set of terms in which you'd prefer to be introduced or known?

Janice Florence: Well, look, you know, I mean, I work at Arts Access Victoria, and I work with trying to improve attitudes and access and - so I suppose in that sense - I identify, I do identify as, I am, you know, I'm a disabled artist. That's what I am. But I just kind of feel I am me.

Erin Scudder: Yes! Excellent answer.

Janice Florence: I would like that to be recognised. But, you know, like, of course, what I am has been formed by having a disability as well. But, you know, I sort of had started on this path of - sort of more individually based movement and dance anyway. You know, I - and in a way, I was, I was lucky, you know, because I'd started on thinking about movement and dance in that way and having some resources and, yes. Anyway, so in a way, I've been able to sort of continue that journey, but with different parameters.

Erin Scudder: Yeah. You have that interesting experience of before and after ...

Janice Florence: Yeah.

Erin Scudder: ... and the sort of continuity of interest in movement and dance that runs through that.

Janice Florence: Yes. Yeah. And also, look, I think, you know, I've always been interested in performing, but I also think my sort of joy in movement is an internal thing. And I think some of the things I've pursued like Skinner releasing and - I mean, she was a dancer with Martha Graham, you know, which is a famous dance company - and she did it because she got a bad back from the practice with Martha Graham. So anyway, look, a lot of it was aimed at improving performance, but - anyway - it also is some sort of body connection.

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: And with dance movement, human movement, you know, that makes you feel good.

Erin Scudder: Do you think your motivation or your - the joy or, like, the drive to be involved with dance has evolved or changed over time in a way that may or may not have significantly involved the acquisition of a disability? Like has your motivation for dancing changed? Or your interest?

Janice Florence: No. Look, I think I'm just look, even, no, you know, even when - I can't, of course, you know, dance an Irish jig or something - but even ... ah I also love music and, you know, I've had a lot of music around in my life, all of my life, because my mother played the piano and sang. And, and then I did ballet and I was introduced to classical music. And so, yes, I love music, and I like moving to music, and music makes me want to move. And - but also, I - there's another thing I've done called Body Mind Centering thing, which is another sort of - evolved by an American dancer called Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen. And she - it's all, it's totally kind of wacky to understand, really, but it's based around knowledge of your internal anatomy ...

Erin Scudder: Oh wow.

Janice Florence: ... and body processes and you sort of look at pictures of it, and I'm usually very squeamish. Sometimes it's drawings and diagrams, but, but then you sort of take it in and then you somehow put that knowledge into movement. You know, it's sort of totally internal. And I kind of love doing that as opposed to the performance stuff because it's just me. It's just for me. And yeah, so it's really -

Erin Scudder: That's really interesting, that idea of dance not as a performative thing, but as a sort of internal-facing art.

Janice Florence: Yeah, yeah. And look, for some people those things work, and to some people they just don't work. I've tried them with people over the years in Weave and sometimes it's to do with cognitive disabilities, and sometimes it's to do, to just - my partner, he's got sort of a form of cerebral palsy and he just doesn't cotton on to images, internal images at all doesn't mean a thing to him.

Erin Scudder: Interesting.

Janice Florence: But other people do, you know. And for me it really works. And so, I guess, you know, yes, the dancing thing has been a personal thing, but also I do like performing and also we bring a lot of text in to our performance. Because we've - and I like writing as well, and I have done a bit of, I did do part of the creative writing course at RMIT.

Erin Scudder: Oh, cool. I've heard such good things about that.

Janice Florence: Yeah. Yeah. And short story writing was one of the subjects I did. And so Weave has evolved to accommodate different people with different access needs and also talents. You know, like, there's a guy who's got an acquired brain injury, whose written and published his own novels for 20 years or something. And they're really surreal. But we think we've got a plan to try and base some of our - we have used some of his dialogues and things in our work before. And there's and my partner who's trained in theatre at the VCA. And so more, like I said, it's a bit of a combination of movement, theatre, and, and so we work with people who can also work with that combination.

Erin Scudder: Yeah, it feels like you're pushing it back in such a brilliant way back towards that, that Diploma multidisciplinary.

Janice Florence: Yeah, but also contemporary dance has evolved in that direction as well. You know, they - and that's why we've been able to get contemporary dancers to work with us because they use texts and dialogue and stuff. Sometimes in new ways. Sometimes dancers really hate talking, but - in performance - but, yeah, so it has also been a sort of developing thing in contemporary dance.

Erin Scudder: In terms of the big picture of Disability Arts in Australia, specifically over the last 50 years, what do you think are some of the key milestones or big major happenings?

Janice Florence: In Disability Arts?

Erin Scudder: Yep. In Australia, since 50 years. 50 years would be early seventies. Yes.

Janice Florence: Yeah. Well, look, I wasn't paying much attention in the early seventies because I didn't have a disability. I got my disability in the late eighties.

Erin Scudder: Right.

Janice Florence: Yeah. So - I - but I, as soon as I got my disability, I was - I actually volunteered at Arts Access for a while and I became aware of a lot of - so like there was a guy called Aldo Gennaro in Sydney who - he, he worked with a group of people with intellectual disabilities and learning disabilities. And that was a big deal because he, he - there's a film of his work because he ended up putting on a piece at the Opera House in Sydney. And that was a - and there's a lot of controversy because he acknowledged like sexual relationships between the people in the group. And yeah so I think his films called "Coming Out."

Erin Scudder: Oh yeah.

Janice Florence: Anyway, so that was a step and then - Arts Access started. Oh, yeah, that's right. Yeah, I sort of - when was that? - I sort of knew about Arts Access because a friend of mine worked for them before I got my disability. Yeah and so I know they were - they were experimenting with various things. I mean, I think, you know, it all started with a bit of a therapy attitude. Then it progressed into regarding people as artists and - so I think Arts Access has had a big hand in it as well. And then there was a whole lot of stuff that started happening in the UK and, and America, and I think that influenced what was happening in Australia and it influenced me because - Ar- - I think Arts Access brought out two contact improvisers who are in wheelchairs - after, I was looking into it by then and I was in a wheelchair in the - when was that? It must have been, well, it must have been late 80 something, early nineties maybe. And so that started influencing people here as well. And Candoco started in Britain and that was big time. And so I think people started taking on those ideas and I did and - yeah. I'm just trying to think of - ah Back to Back, yeah. Back to Back [theatre]. Yeah, that was - so it must have all just been, it all kind of started at that time in theatre, you know, because I don't have big knowledge of visual arts or - yeah. And on the other hand, there've always been artists in the visual arts and in writing and stuff who've got some kind of disability.

Erin Scudder: Yeah, that's something we're going to be looking at with - in terms of the archival research we do and how people self identified.

Janice Florence: And yeah, I mean, you know, Frida Kahlo and Van Gogh and Beethoven and you know, and - oh - anyway, yeah so I think Back to Back started a little bit before we started and, I mean, there's still the disability-led paradigm, you know, which was still going where the people who were non-disabled led the people who were disabled into sort of knowledge and, you know - you know, led them into becoming artists. So, yeah. But anyway, look, you know there's loads of incredible visual artists and I think that's started to be recognised. I mean, Art Project Australia probably had a lot to do with that as well as Arts Access. I think the whole disability-led thing is a - a bridge that's still to be crossed. Sort of, yeah.

Erin Scudder: Like having disab - disability led organisations?

Janice Florence: Yeah. Yeah. Theatre companies, and ...

Erin Scudder: There's work to be done, remaining in that space?

Janice Florence: Yeah. Yeah.

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: I sometimes think that might have been a bit of - ahh - lack of credibility for Weave. I don't know, for sure. In the early days, especially.

Erin Scudder: Interesting.

Janice Florence: And look the Australia Council giving out that award. That's probably another - another recognition.

Erin Scudder: Yeah, that's a, a sort of - do you think it helps to increase awareness of Disability Arts among - in the, in, amongst "the mainstream"? I guess I would say?

Janice Florence: Hopefully, I don't know. Look, the ceremony was still very much attended by people interested in Disability Arts.

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: I hope so. I don't know really.

Erin Scudder: I just want to quickly check because it's ten past four. I don't have too many questions, but do you have a few more minutes?

Janice Florence: Yes, that's alright. Yep.

Erin Scudder: Okay. The next question starts with a yes / no question, which is annoying, but I've got a bit of a follow up. So the reason it's a yes / no is because we'd like to, you know, sort of gather everyone's response to this and compare them to each other statistically. So the question is, is do you think your art is political?

Janice Florence: Yes.

Erin Scudder: Yes? And if so, in - in which ways? That's the first follow up. If so, so yes, the answer is yes. In which ways - and also, to what extent do you think art should be political? In general.

Janice Florence: I think it's political in that it's led by a person, a disabled person. I think it's political in that we look for sort of equal collaborations with our artists we work with. With, I mean, with, what do you call it, I don't know, lead artists, you know, directors, teachers. I think it's political in that it's political to see people - disabled, d/Deaf and disabled people - on stage doing a good job and having a good time. And I also I'm very interested in politics and why - a broader politics as well. And we always bring something of that into it. Like there was a character in the last one, the Rabbit "Wanna Be a Rabbit" thing, which was a sort of around a mad professor experiment-, experimenting to make hybrid rabbit humans and sort of using the slave workforce. Anyway, so I was a, I was an experimental object in this plot. And I - my ambition was to be important. And so the professor suggested I become a politician, and so there was - so I became this politician, and this was sort of a bit around the lockdowns - but - who represented the Pyjama Party.

Erin Scudder: I think I would vote for that party. For sure.

Janice Florence: Yeah. So anyway, who was kind of advocating for people who just wanted to stay home and wear pyjama pants and, and they - meanwhile they were sort of saying - oh, and getting parcels, exciting parcels on their front door every day and having a big explosion in consumer stuff and using the hybrid human rabbits to churn out the stuff. So that was. So there was a bit of a message about ridiculous economic systems and politics in there as well. So sort of there's an often broader political messages in there too.

Erin Scudder: Yeah. How, how do you - I'm, this is a question more from me because I'm interested in the different things people mean when they use the word politics. You said you were really interested in politics - what does politics mean for you?

Janice Florence: Well, it means look, I mean, it sort of means - at the moment I really think it means survival of the human race. Around climate change. And it means all this sort of, yeah. I guess it means having a good society or a bad society. To me.

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: But I mean, I don't, I don't like things that are - what's the word? - pedantic, you know, I don't - I, I think art is spoiled by having something that's really pedantic.

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: I think the Arts, really - look, sometimes ideas I have actually come out of movement that somebody does, you know, it doesn't come from the idea. The idea comes from the movement and I think, oh, that looks great.

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: And then, then the meaning sort of evolves or a narrative sort of evolves out of that.

Erin Scudder: Yes.

Janice Florence: You know, so I don't - it doesn't come from, oh 'I think we need to tell people this.'

Erin Scudder: Yes, that's kind of like 'packaging up this idea in an artistic format.'

Janice Florence: Yeah. And then but I also - my thing about seeing people on stage doing good things and having a good time is because I, you know, Graeme Innes, who was the Human Rights Commissioner for Disability a while ago, then formed 'the soft discrimination of low expectations' and I think that's - you know, I hate all those expectations, that low assessment of anybody who's disabled. And so I guess it's a real rebellion and push against that.

Erin Scudder: Hmm. That was actually the theme of the disability conference I just went to that Keith Mc - 'went to', attended online - that Keith McVilly led a couple of weeks ago. So it's called Raising Expectations. It was based around that quote.

Janice Florence: Oh. Oh, okay.

Erin Scudder: Yeah. It was fabulous. The recordings are online.

Janice Florence: Oh right. Yeah, look that's interesting. Yeah. Is it still, is it available in recordings?

Erin Scudder: It is - I think you can still register online and by reg - even though the conference has happened - by registering online, you can then access all of the recordings.

Janice Florence: So what was it called?

Erin Scudder: It's called The Virtual Disability conference 2022. I think they run it biannually and it's the theme this year was Raising Expectations. Yeah, it's worth a, it's worth a look. The - it was opened by that, the Greens Senator Jordan Steele-John.

Janice Florence: Steele - oh yeah, right, yep.

Erin Scudder: Yep.

Janice Florence: Oh good. That's great. Yeah.

Erin Scudder: Yeah, it was really nice, hearing that quote a lot throughout the day and kind of thinking about it a lot.

Janice Florence: Well you - as a disabled person, an obviously disabled person, you encounter it every day.

Erin Scudder: Yeah, and I feel like. Well, speaking from my own personal experience, I feel like I've internalised it a lot as well.

Janice Florence: Yes. Yeah.

Erin Scudder: It's a, a challenge.

Janice Florence: Yes, it may, it's sort of - it is a challenge. Yeah. And I mean, sometimes you do have to change your expectations of yourself.

Erin Scudder: Mm hmm.

Janice Florence: It's just that sort of systemic, you know, low estimation, I guess, is what.

Erin Scudder: Yeah that's - yeah. That's pretty much - I think we've gotten through all the questions. But the final question is, is there anything you think I should ask that I haven't asked you yet? Or, anything you'd like to say for the purposes of the project?

Janice Florence: I'm a bit brain dead after that performance season. I mean, I've gone into all the stuff about financial support and ... ah look, you could ask me this question, but I wouldn't know what to say I don't think. You could ask if people had a model for their art practice.

Erin Scudder: If people had a model for their art - if you have a model for your art practice? I see, like - like -

Janice Florence: Or an ancestor or something like that.

Erin Scudder: Oh, that's a great question. Yeah.

Janice Florence: I don't know what I'd say -

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: I mean I -

Erin Scudder: I guess maybe an ancestor or maybe a template or -

Janice Florence: Yeah. Oh, ancestors, you know. I mean, I've taken stuff from a lot of people, so I don't. I don't know that I have an answer to that question, but some people might.

Erin Scudder: Do you think you've covered - like - have you mentioned - are those some of the people that you've mentioned while we've been chatting, especially early on?

Janice Florence: Probably yeah.

Erin Scudder: Are there some more?

Janice Florence: Ahhhh - I, there are people who are interested in looking into the ancestry of disability performance, now. You know, like freak shows in circuses and all that kind of thing. Court jesters, I suppose, you know, going way back. No, I mean, I can't - I guess I was modeling myself a bit on some of those contact improvisers from America that I met.

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: Yeah, look, I've taken a lot from a lot of people. But there is one - sorry?

Erin Scudder: The court - sorry. I was just going to say the court jester one is an interesting one because obviously there's a history of real people there, but it's also like an archetype, right?

Janice Florence: It is, yes. And look, I think we do always incorporate humour into our work. And I think there is a bit of that in me and also in my partner and has been in the company.

Erin Scudder: Mm hmm.

Janice Florence: There's always a degree of humour, but I do think that humour is a way of coping with disability as well, you know. And often it's absurd humor. And I think the world approaches you in such a sort of absurd way, in a way, that a way of dealing with it is through absurdity.

Erin Scudder: Yeah. Yeah.

Janice Florence: And yeah, so the court jester figure probably is a bit of an archetype that's incorporated in our work.

Erin Scudder: Interesting. I really love that question. I'm going to try to put it, put it into words that I can express more eloquently. To other people.

Janice Florence: Oh okay.

Erin Scudder: I mean, like for me, because I feel like I'm stumbling over it -

Janice Florence: Yeah, no, that's - yeah.

Erin Scudder: But I love the question. And yeah, I think that -

Janice Florence: I know that there are people who just - Kath Duncan. You know, you probably - she's sort of a bit interested in that.

Erin Scudder: Yeah. Like there's some questions in here - there's a lot of sort of possible questions that we can ask. It's not completely prescriptive. And one of the questions does concern, you know, like who - who have been your mentors, or people who have been really important, or - but I think your question is a bit, it's like a bit slant on that. It's a bit different? It's more like - yeah - 'who do you look to in terms of artistic ancestors or artistic archetypes?'

Janice Florence: Yes, look and sometimes when I'm - this, this is me being a really bad person - when I'm in the middle of a discussion about, you know, disability politics and stuff, I really feel like I'm making fun of it, you know, and [01:15:46] I sort of - I [01:15:47]

know I shouldn't. And it's, I take it very seriously, really. But it's just part of me that sort of wants to make fun.

Erin Scudder: Yeah. The humour is an important factor.

Janice Florence: Yes. Yeah. But look, an interesting ancestral story is that I - my mother used to tell me about this cousin of hers in England who was a performer and who was on the stage and who travelled around England with a group of what was then called dwarves.

Erin Scudder: Right.

Janice Florence: Performing Snow White and the Seven Dwarves.

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: And I kind of feel I've got this ancestor who did Disability Arts.

Erin Scudder: Yeah. That's really interesting. I think especially generationally. And coming from another time, I feel like there was a lot of also, like, oh you know, 'you don't talk about illness, you don't talk about disability. You certainly don't take pride in it.'

Janice Florence: No, that's right. Yeah. But It was happening.

Erin Scudder: Yeah, you really have to, like, sometimes read between the lines to see.

Janice Florence: Yes. Yeah, yeah. And, and I feel there's probably been a lot of people in the performing arts with mental health issues.

Erin Scudder: Yes, Yes.

Janice Florence: In the past. Who wouldn't want to divulge that.

Erin Scudder: Yes. Yeah. And there's a whole, you know, very reasonable fear around disclosure and ...

Janice Florence: Yeah, yeah. Of course. Taboos.

Erin Scudder: Yeah.

Janice Florence: Yeah.

Erin Scudder: Well it's been I - look it's four twenty two now. I've taken up heaps of your time.

Janice Florence: That's ok. It's been really interesting for me to sort of sift through all that stuff in my mind.

Erin Scudder: Yeah. It's always like, like, challenging, but also extremely rich, when I'm speaking to someone who's had such a long career because it's hard to know what to touch on when there's so much.

Janice Florence: There is a lot. Yeah, yeah.

Erin Scudder: It's harder, and yet it's just so amazing, yeah. All of it is so interesting.

Janice Florence: Yeah. And it sort of rekindles my enthusiasm for it all when I think about the things that got me going with it.

Erin Scudder: Fabulous. Well, thank you for your time.