

**Interviewee Name:** Jessica Cochran

**Interviewer Name:** Annie Rolfe

**Date of Interview:** 26<sup>th</sup> of October 2022

**Location:** Online via Zoom

**Length of Interview:** 31:58 minutes

## **Transcript**

**Annie:** Can you tell us a bit about yourself? What do you think we need to know about you?

**Jess** Yeah. Sorry.

**Annie:** You're right.

**Jess** I'm a 32 year old disability performing artist, advocate writer, disability consumer consultant. I basically do a whole heap of different things. I have physical and psychosocial disabilities and have experience with mental ill health as well. I fell into performing arts actually accidentally, so it's been amazing but I've already been a part of international award winning films and stage productions and have absolutely fallen in love with it.

**Annie:** Wow, that sounds incredible. So what experiences have helped you become the person you are today to help us understand your work in disability arts and performance?

**Jess** I. um well, I've done advocacy basically for as long as I can remember, ever since I was a teenager and started experiencing mental ill health as the very beginnings of things and so I think back then I identified already that there were just so many holes in the system and someone needed to speak up about it and I started writing as an outlet as well and then when an opportunity came around to do a production in Fringe - Melbourne Fringe Festival in 2019, that involved a collaborative process to create a show about experiences in inpatient mental health units with disabled performing artists, my friend basically made me audition for it because I initially was like, "I don't act, I can't act" and that has really helped shape part of that too but I think my passion and my drive, my experiences good and very much so, the bad, have really driven that fuel and that fire within me to see that the amazing different art forms that are out there are sometimes the most powerful way that you can bring people into your world and into your story so that they can see

what you see and experience a bit of what you've experienced and I think that really helps them gain a better understanding of the powerful experiences that we've been through.

**Annie:** Yes. Yeah. Are there experiences, events or people that stand out in your memory as really formative in terms of getting you interested and involved in performing art. So you were talking about your friend before. There are other people or experiences.

**Jess** Yeah. I've obviously met so many amazing people along the way. There's just so many brilliant performing artists out there but I think those that have really helped the start of those processes are, my best friend Ferris Knight, who is a writer, we kind of joke that they do behind the scenes than I do in front. Heidi Everett has been an absolute[ly] brilliant mentor to me along the way and the person who actually guided us through comedy, a study that was done before I did Fringe even, Nelly Thomas, who got together a group of disabled women and non-binary folk to create comedy from our experiences. I think that initially showed me the importance of community and connection and connection over shared experiences or similar experiences and I think even just the power of those things to ourselves, for me, especially with Qualia, which was our fringe show, being able to rewrite that in my words and own my story instead of have that control and power taken away from me like it has been in the past so many times, that was so empowering and I think I, like that really helped me be able to tell that, but not in a way that was traumatising or distressing. It was me taking back that power, and I really needed that. From there it's just continued on.

**Annie:** That sounds amazing and what motivates your work today?

**Jess** My community, and the, not just the disability community, but those who are gender diverse, LGBTIQ+, all the various communities that intersect with each other and those that I've met and those that I see myself and my own experience in, in terms of accessing support systems and going in-patient/ outpatient programs. I think all of those people and those experiences and my own, they are that fire within me that drives me. You know, when I speak, I talk not just for myself but for the people around me and add a voice to the various mix of amazing voices that are continuing to work so hard to create change.

**Annie:** Yeah. So has your motivation changed for your performing and writing? Has that changed over time?

**Jess** I think it's become stronger and it's become more I think the fuel behind it has, has really grown because, you know, that change is happening so slowly or not at all but also as my

confidence grew in my performing and I could see and hear from audience members afterwards just how powerful or empowering it was, how people had seen part of their story in mine, but also how people who weren't part of our community but part of health care systems or disability support systems or government systems came and provided feedback and found it really powerful and wanted to help be an ally and create change. All of those things have really like just made it so much more of that thing I just need to do. You know, that fire there is growing. And I think as I've become more confident in myself and sharing my story and my abilities as a performer and the amazing community around me, then that's just driven me to keep going and times it by a million.

**Annie:** Yes, absolutely. Yeah, That's interesting. Talking about the different health care workers and their response. So has the visibility of your work changed, do you think?

**Jess** In what way?

**Annie:** Do you think there are more people accessing a greater, a wider audience than when you first started?

**Jess** I think the awareness of disabled performing artists has become much bigger. Like recently, we've had really massive shows in Melbourne that have [been] gone for a long period and I think during COVID we were, we became more visible too, because all of a sudden people were watching things through their screens and so we were able to share our art and be seen a bit more than usual, I think as that awareness and the awareness of the difficulties that our communities are faced have become more paramount and in the forefront of people's minds and more people have unfortunately experienced, you know, disability or long-term illness from, from COVID and long COVID that there has been a shift and the visibility of performing artists, models like Melbourne Fashion Week and Australian Fashion Week. Even Chloe Hayden, who is an amazing advocate in the neurodiverse space and has been part of shows on Netflix and everything as an authentically cast autistic person, all of that has really brought about a massive awareness and a heightened visibility of who we are, what we do and our skills both in performing arts but just in general.

**Annie:** Yeah, that's interesting. So where are you presenting your work at the moment?

**Jess** It depends which thing I'm doing. Writing, I do a bit of writing for various organisations but also a bit of freelance performing arts. I was part of Back to Back Theatre's production of 'Shadow', which was an amazing experience right in the middle of COVID. It was very interesting my first time as part of a film. I have not done much in terms of stage or face to face because my risk with COVID is too high, unfortunately. So that's been delayed but yeah, I do modelling as well and did a

photoshoot recently, which was my last shoot that I do before my double mastectomy and I'm getting ready to start sharing those images which are just out of this world. To be honest, I've been blown away by them and so I'm looking forward to being able to share those as well as write some stuff with them too, to help people understand the power within that photoshoot because it features, I think, not just me embracing my body and embracing that change, reminding myself of that, but even just things like my wheelchair, and my feeding tube are featured too so it was really important. Yeah.

**Annie:** Yeah. And is there any way you would like your work to be presented? I know you have a number of different arenas there, but.

**Jess** I'd absolutely love to join other disabled models on the catwalk at some point. That has always been a massive goal of mine, and I think I would really love to break more into the mainstream TV and movie industry and really help start or add more to that change of being authentically cast and showing that we, those roles are for us, they're made for us and help change that like mainstream system too. I think that's something that since I've become a performing artist, is one of those really big goals for me.

**Annie:** Yes. Yeah. So do you think and this is repeating a little bit, but just just to recap, do you think people in your past, when you were first starting your work, were they aware of disability arts do you think - of your work, your peers work?

**Jess** I was really lucky that when I started out it was within the disability community. I was surrounded by disabled people and there was a very big emphasis on our own voices and the support systems around us. Those that weren't disabled were allies, carers, but very much brought us into those roles and I think allowed us to have as much of that say as possible. But yeah, with my mainstream kind of shift into performing arts, it was disabled casts, disabled director. We did everything absolutely possible to make sure that our voices were both on the stage and behind the scenes. And so I was really lucky that I was able to experience the power of that and the the energy that that provided. As well as the understanding, too, because there was big emphasis on that, which is something that we, we need and yet that, that's something that I'm really grateful for.

**Annie:** What do you think the public would say are the key milestones or big major happenings in the history of disability arts in Australia?

**Jess** For me, It's. I think that the last few years has been where I've noticed that change and paid more attention. I think maybe with the wider community, that's probably an aspect of what they'd

say too, because of technology, because of how we've all been living our lives and the other various events that are going on that aren't in the performing arts world but are to do with disability, that's all really kind of shone a spotlight and allowed us to step into that too, or roll into that in my case. So I think that I've noticed that change happening now and of course, we've we've had amazing people in the past who have performed or advocated you know Stella - absolutely amazing person who I think has been a cornerstone in so many of our lives both here and around the world and then I think with streaming services, there's been a lot more featuring of the stories of, say, the disability movement in America and I think that sometimes it's not an authentically lived experience thing which has highlighted the issues that we need to address.

**Annie:** Yes.

**Jess:** And then there are other times, like with Chloe Hayden and the Netflix show that they're part of, that they've been authentically cast and we're able to go this! This is what we need, this can be done. So. I think that that widening of our ability to access different art forms in different ways has really heightened that awareness of both the good and the bad and how things should be done and how things really shouldn't be done. So I think now is, is where this change is happening and where I think I feel at least and I've heard others say that, that's, that's the shift that we've been waiting for.

**Annie:** Yes. Yeah. So policy changes and social changes, do you think have they had a part to play?

**Jess** I think, yeah. As much as there is still a lot of work to be done in those areas, as a lot of us know there...the shift that has been happening there, the times where systems have worked for us or helped us. I know for myself when when things were going okay and when I was getting supports that I needed, it actually allowed me to branch out work wise, not just in the performing arts space, but in general and you know go get more into life and, and enjoyment and feel better within myself and be able to do more things but then I also experience changes that took parts of that away from me and noticed how massive the shift was in my ability to actually do those things or do them in a safe way and where my focus and energies had to go to. So those changes, both the good and the bad, have allowed us to see the holes in the system to speak up about it and also show when it works, like just how much it does work and why we need to keep focusing on aiming to that for more and more people.

**Annie:** Yeah. Yeah. So is your art political?

**Jess** Yeah, I think in a way it really is. I speak and perform and share my experiences and share the challenges that I faced and it highlights holes in the system and so therefore, yeah, it's political. I might not be like right up there and kind of, you know, marching the streets and yelling all the time or just really highlighting it in, I think, a more front line sense but my art, a lot of the time has very much been focused on my experiences, is good and bad, and that is an important part of my art. I think it's what really drives it and so therefore I will continue doing that because I think that it's important and it's powerful.

**Annie:** Yes. Yeah, very powerful. Yeah. So do you think art should be political or is it about aesthetics, aesthetic quality?

**Jess** I think it can be both. I think that there is a unique beauty to someone allowing you to enter their story and their world. There is a rawness to it and a power to it that is something that is rarely experienced elsewhere. We watch movies and we cry. We watch something on stage and we feel the passion and the power and the emotion and the energy in the room, both on stage and in the audience and so I think that there is a unique power to that, especially when it is someone sharing their story or talking about various challenges they've faced or their community have faced and I think that it allows more people to actually access that information, those experiences. Everyone takes in information differently, some like to read books, others like to watch TV or watch performances and so I think given that the power I've seen and that I've experienced from performing arts, especially when it is from a lived experience perspective, that if someone wants to share that and it's political, then, then go for it. I mean, we need all the help we can get and I think there is a power to it that doesn't come from something that isn't authentic. It's unique.

**Annie:** Yes. Yeah. Yeah, that's great. So do you want to be identified as disabled? Neurodiverse having a medical condition or a mental health condition? Is that how you identify yourself?

**Jess** It's part of how I identify. It's part of who I am. They're all, they're all bits of me there. They all hold power in how I've come to actually be open and confident in saying that this is who I am. You know, they're not my whole identity. There are many other aspects to who I am. But yeah, I'm I am all of those things and more.

**Annie:** Yeah, it's, it's, it's an interesting question that we ask all our participants and whether people identify with pride or whether they say I'm an artist and I happen to have a disability. It's just interesting to see how everyone responds to that question. Yeah.

**Jess** Yeah

**Annie:** it's individual

**Jess:** and I think my, my, my language, even person first or identity first has changed over time as well.

**Annie:** that's interesting.

**Jess** Yeah. I think as I, as I gained more knowledge about the language because to me it was very much a continued learning experience and as I gained more, I think knowledge of allowing myself to really look within and, and get a feel for who I was that I became more confident in going, "Yeah, I'm disabled".

**Jess** It's a part of me, it's part of my story. I completely respect everyone's, you know, how everyone else identifies and, and how they say that and use that. I think we need to all be able to feel safe and using the language that we feel most comfortable with but for me, each of these things are a part of me. My experiences have helped create who I am today. I would be a completely different person if I wasn't a disabled person or wasn't queer or any of that. And I think they're an important part of the challenges that I've faced, in things I've tried to access or survive and they've led me to communities who are brilliant and amazing. So it's a part of me, a very big part of me and I'm really proud and honoured to be able to share that with people, too.

**Annie:** Mm hmm. So do you think there is a commonality or consistency in how artists who the public would identify as disabled think about these things?

**Jess** I think that it depends on how people share their art and what their disabilities are. A lot of people... I started off with my disabilities being invisible and it was a very different world and I know quite a lot of people who are performing arts based with invisible disabilities and it tends to be a bit different and feel different at times. So I think being someone who is now using a mobility aid, has an assistance dog and a feeding tube. It in a way, you really kind of once they force me into that space by identifying as disabled, but it was kind of added ammunition to, to feel more confident in saying that because I was less likely to receive, I think, negative stigmatisation or ableism. Not to say that I haven't received but yeah, I think there's these commonalities and those that work in the lived experience space, I think I find some people tend to be using more one side of language than another but again, it is unique to a friend's experiences or even how long they've identified as being someone who's disabled or has mental ill health. It grows with time and I think as you connect with more people and as you gain confidence within yourself and your story, you continue

to shift and change and I...who knows, I'll probably shift and change in areas again as I continue to find myself in performing arts.

**Annie:** Yes. So do you think there are differences in the way different artists with disabilities who identify as First Nations or LGBTQIA+, or culturally and linguistically diverse think about these things.

**Jess** I think those of us that are from intersecting communities like myself, it's the gender diverse and LGBTQIA+ community. I think we interweave our experiences. We cover both the disability space but also those other spaces because they all affect what we've experienced and how we've experienced it. Although the holes and the barriers that we've faced that people don't realise. I've had so many people who haven't realised how many challenges there are to being a queer and gender diverse and neurodiverse person in the disability and mental ill health space, or even someone with mental ill health and trauma in the physical disability space so I think we tend to share those parts of our lives and our stories through our art as well at the same time, to heighten that awareness that we need to respect people's intersectionality and the other areas and aspects of their lives because we need to see the whole person and look at how we see the whole person. And we need to listen to their story and not just focus in on the disability because it's not how it works.

**Annie:** Mm hmm. Yeah, that's. That's so interesting. Is there something that we haven't asked about that we should.

**Jess** Hmm. I'm not entirely sure, to be honest. I mean, it's a space I could talk about forever and a day. I think it'd be great going forward if we can continue to build the allies in the performing arts space and make more spaces accessible, more courses accessible. Those are massive things, and I think it's just more people to be able to grow in performing art space because I think it is a really powerful area for us and for the community. And I really hope that going forward we can see more people on our stages and on our screens doing what they love, whether it's sharing their story or whether it's, you know, dance and and creating other things that that lived experience kind of share your story advocacy thing, but showing us skills in other ways too, because there's some beautiful performing artists out there with disabilities who do other things, which is amazing and something I'd love to see more of as well. But we do need to have systems in place that are open to us and provide understanding and give us space to talk and be at the table and I think that we need change in all areas in order to make that happen.



**Annie:** Well, thanks, Jess. That's that's been amazing. Just to check in with you about your own practice. Did you start all of those different areas of your art all at the same time, or did one lead into another?

**Jess** Yeah, it was. It's been a growing process. I started writing when I was 12 as part of my first inpatient mental health stay, actually, and then I did modelling. I just did one workshop to begin with. After recovering from an eating disorder, a friend thought it might help me gain a bit more confidence in my body and I was starting to use mobility aids too, and I thought I was going to hate it and I actually really loved it and apparently was really good at it and that grew and then, Yeah. Comedy, then stage, then screen. So it's just been a rolling ball of things. So when people ask me what I do, they tend to get a bit of an extended answer now.

**Annie:** It's fascinating to see how much you've branched out into different areas. Yeah, yeah.

**Jess** I think doing my advocacy as well in terms of speaking with government systems and health care providers and working with organisations in those settings in terms of policy making and feedback, it gives me that kind of double-sided way of expressing my, my thoughts and feelings through performing arts and then also through the changes in the system. So yeah, it's it's been quite interesting to see those intermingle and to have to find ways to shift one experience into one setting and then into another but they've, they've all kind of held their own power for me and, and hopefully for, for change too but yeah, it'll be interesting to see where I'm at in a few more years.

**Annie:** And absolutely watch this space. Yeah, that's wonderful. Thank you so much for your time today when you're obviously not well at the moment, so I really appreciate that you participated. Thank you so much.

**Jess** It's been, it's been great to actually reflect on yeah my practices and the journey that has led me to this space I never thought I'd find myself in. So. Yeah. Thank you so much. I really appreciate what you're doing.

**Annie:** Thanks, Jess. All right.