

Interviewee: Nick Hughes

Interviewer: Jung Yoon

Date of Interview: 19th of August 2022

Location: Restless Dance Theatre

Length of Interview: 46:24 minutes

Transcript

Jung: So I'm going to start with the can you share can you tell us about yourself? How do you what do you think we should know about you. Where you are from? What experience have helped you become the person who you are now?

Nick: Heavens, how long have you got?

Jung: We've got plenty of time.

Nick: I've spent my life working in the arts. I retired earlier this year. I'm, have a degree in... I'm English. I have a degree in drama and sociology from Birmingham University and I came out to Australia in 1973.

Jung: Stop there and then can you just say your name?

Nick: Yes.

Jung: Yes, sure. You forgot to state your name? Yes.

Nick: Yes. I'm Nick Hughes. I've worked for a long time as company manager of Restless Dance Theatre and retired earlier this year. As I was saying, I spent my life working in the arts. I have worked in many different capacities in the arts, but for the last 24 years as an administrator but I think that the fact that I had a lot of other roles first, like as a as an actor and as a writer and as a stage manager helped me as an arts administrator because I kind of knew the whole thing from the ground up.

Jung: Sorry. Why did you choose to be in the artist like in art industry?

Nick: Why don't I choose to be in the arts industry? I got really interested in theatre at school, and it was the only thing I wanted to do, really, I but I've always sort of been interested in the social surroundings of the arts. I learned at university that theatre is the social relationship between the performers and the audience. So that's kind of what I've always focused on the, the quality of that social relationship and so that's informed all the work that I've done and throughout my life, really.

Jung: Sounds like you were the between of arts management but like a social scientist.

Nick: Yeah, well, I mean, having a degree in sociology and, and drama, I was definitely focused that way and, you know, when I finished my degree, I went to work for a what would be called a community arts organization in London, working in a small studio theatre in the West End and yes, that's what I was always interested in, in the new and the different and not necessarily the commercial side of things.

Jung: And then how did you get involved in arts, Disability Arts?

Nick: Well. I saw the first production of Restless in 1991 called Icons, and it was at the Norwood Town Hall, and I was really surprised. My partner said, "You should go and see this. It's really interesting" and I had never seen a work that incorporated people with disability, but not only incorporated them, but let them shine and, and show themselves. No, I had never seen that before. So that was really interesting but then on a more mundane level, Restless advertised for a company manager and I applied for the job and, and, and they gave me the job but I didn't really know anything about disability arts or really very much about disability either. At that stage I came in as a, as as a virgin.

Jung: Then what? What about made you walk into this field without having any knowledge around this disability?

Nick: Well, because I was always interested in this type of work and also because I had seen some of the work of the company, I knew it to be really interesting and different and Restless by that stage already had a good reputation in South Australia, so I was intrigued and interested.

Jung: But was there any challenges or barriers because you didn't know much about disability and but you're very experienced and knowledgeable in art?

Nick: I was very lucky in that I walked into working with Sally Chance and Sally was curating a space at Restless. She called it reverse integration, where it was normal to have a disability in this environment, and it was the people without a disability who had to adapt and change and learn so it was an environment set up for people like me to learn about disability, and I was very lucky in that regard. I'll tell you a story. Not long after I joined the company, we went to Sydney as part of the Sydney Paralympic Festival and we were going to stay at the Y on the park near Hyde Park. And of course it was a hotel where everyone had a plastic key to get in and out of their room and I said to Sally, "But Sally, we're going on tour with, with all these people with an intellectual disability, won't they all lock themselves out of their room?" And she said, "nah, they'll be all right. They'll be fine". And I went, "Oh, okay". And during the ten days that we were there, not one person with a disability locked themselves out of their room and I did it six times and I thought that was a lesson to me, not to make assumptions about what people can't do, you know. So it was a long probably slower than it should have been process of learning for me but it was a great environment where the assumptions were that people can do things not that people can't do things, and that still runs very deep and is really important in Restless.

Jung: Thank you for sharing that story, you locked yourself out like six times. Okay. Some people tease you about it?

Nick: Oh, yes. The hotel staff more than anyone. Oh, you've done it again. Yeah.

Jung: But you've been, so tell me about your experience. You've been in the Restless and in disability arts for 25 years. Tell me about...you can't, of course, can't run through the, like, 25 years time, but can you share your experience being in disability art? And also what motivated you to be, stay in this space for 25 years?

Nick: Um. The work always remained interesting. Every work that we put on was different um the.., During the period that I was here, I worked with five different artistic directors, all of whom had different approaches and different emphases and different interests in what they did. So the work changed over those years. Sally, shortly after I

arrived, said that she wasn't going to direct any more works with Restless, and I went, Oh, but then she introduced me to Ingrid Voorent, who directed several works for the company, who had again, a slightly different thing, although she and Sally worked together and so different artistic directors, as I say, have had different interests. Some have been more interested in the workshop side of things and yeah, Sally did the hard yards for the first ten years of getting the company established. She had a very strong outreach program in that she would, she knew that in order to generate the, the social relationships which were at the core of the work, she needed to reach out and find new young people to be involved so that we would go to organizations that worked with people with disability and do projects with them. So it was a process of finding the funding that would enable that to happen. Sally has had an interest in working with young, very young people like she she does work with babies at the moment. So for a while we did an ongoing series of workshops called Growth Spurt, which was for 3 to 4 oh no, 2 to 4 year olds who are just being diagnosed and um using music and games with them and I found those fascinating because, I mean, there are different areas involved in disability arts and Michelle's work is, is different again. Michelle, coming from a professional dance background, is much more focused on producing professional dance.

Nick: When, when I first came to Restless, we did one show a year and it had quite a large cast. It was, you know, could be 20 in the cast and we would do one week somewhere like the Norwood Town Hall or the Odeon or the Space and then it would that would be at the end of it. We didn't tour. Whereas the, the, what, what Restless is now doing is it's, it's moved up several gears and it's, it's increased the quality of the dance which is really interesting and so that's, that's taken the work to a whole other level. So, I guess my answer is that the work was always changing and developing and going in different directions. I remember having a um, a conversation, a written conversation with someone in England about, it was about sort of therapy and art because Restless produces art. It doesn't do therapy and this conversation was about I mean, I mean, she said, well, what if you were doing a project, a poetry project with young people who had been through a war situation and surely the quality of the work is less important than the therapeutic benefits for the people who are doing the work and what came out of that conversation for me is what's important is why you're doing the work. I have absolutely no criticism of people who do disability arts for therapeutic benefits, but it's a continuum if it's got therapy at this end and art at this end and there

are therapeutic benefits of doing art. Anyone who produces art can have therapeutic outcomes but the reason Restless is doing the work that it's doing now is to make good art. It has therapeutic benefits for the people, but that's not why it's being done. So that's different.

Jung: Almost therapeutic is the core purpose of well-being. Whereas. Restless is a professional art but therapeutic in who can be a byproduct as well as a benefit of the individual people.

Nick: Yeah. Yeah, that's true but then when you do art for therapeutic benefits, it can have amazing outcomes. One of the reasons why I was really stimulated by Sally's work with the very young people, because, you know, you talk to mothers primarily, but parents whose children were being diagnosed with some kind of developmental delay and the difference.., they were really turned on by the possibilities of, of art engagement for their kids because they could see the therapeutic outcomes and, and when you're working in an artistic environment with people, you're dealing with the whole person. Whereas a lot of these people had had the experience of, of, of dealing with art therapists who tend to, to silo problems. You know, there's a speech therapist, there's a physiotherapist, there's, you know, all sorts of different therapies. Whereas if you're doing art, you're engaging the whole person.

Jung: Yeah, it's a more holistic.

Nick: It's a more holistic thing. Yeah. So I guess the answer to your question is I've been engaged because I've been fascinated by all the different dimensions involved and the different outcomes for people are extraordinary.

Jung: So but this is the very personal sort of context of how you've been motivated in this kind of field but at the same time, you manage your sort of role has to sustain this company for over 25 years. Did you experience what was the most challenging thing you have experienced? And then what was the most enabling kind of aspect to maintain this organisation?

Nick: Well, I guess the most challenging thing is when you're unsuccessful in getting the resources to actually do the work. You know, when, when I first came, we, we, we

didn't have ongoing funding to do workshops, but the core of the company was a regular weekly workshop so we were constantly running around to different funding organizations, trying to disguise basically a term's worth of this work as something new and different. Whereas actually we were trying to provide an ongoing basis so that the people could continue working and developing. So, yes, and, you know, losing the Australia Council ongoing funding, it was pretty challenging too. It was like a slap in the face really. I don't blame the Australia Council because there's never enough money and that particular round was particularly short of money. I blame the Liberal government who failed to put money into the arts for so long that that's why there wasn't enough money, it wasn't from any judgment against the company. We did score very well. It just wasn't enough money. What was the second part of your question?

Jung: How did you overcome? How did you, but still be able to go through the challenges and still sustain this program?

Nick: Because of the sort of company that Restless is, I became aware fairly early on that there was a huge groundswell of support and appreciation of Restless within not only Adelaide and South Australia, but within Australia and these days I would suspect that there are supporters of Restless all around the world but, but you know, the, the most the sustaining thing was, was discovering and knowing that the people at Arts S.A. [South Australia] were supportive, that the people at Disability S.A. were supportive, that the people at the Australia Council were supportive. I mean the people who work there all the time and, and knowing that also that there was several cohorts of ex-members and their parents and supporters who were also supportive so that the Restless exists within a network of supportive social context. So, I guess that, that was very sustaining on a personal level and things like they use.... Richard Bruggeman, who's been involved in, in Disability for a lifetime, used to run the Intellectual Disability Services Council, IDSC, which doesn't exist anymore but I do remember one time, I mean, we went through a period of um, we got, we got funded by, by the Dance Board, and then we used to fund the annual shows through an application to the Community Cultural Development Board and one year it failed and we had no money to do the main show for the year and so Richard Bruggeman reached into a little bucket of money somewhere and, and helped us out, you know, So, I mean, and that's just one instance and I like that when, when we lost our major funding from the Australia Council and we did a fundraiser, a fundraising campaign that raised, I don't know, Julie would be able to

give you the right figures, but more than four times our, our target, which was a reflection of the fact that all of those people valued the company. Neil Armfield once said that Restless is a, forget the exact words, but something like a hidden jewel in the crown of performing arts and... in Adelaide, and it is. It is and so there were lots of people who supported.... Yeah.

Jung: So in terms of your personal, personal experience based on your personal experience what was the most changes know? You see the evolution of disability arts through throughout parts of them till the point you retire. Can you describe any changes? What was or still we face as challenging?

Nick: I think the approach that Michelle has brought to Restless is fundamentally important because it's about people, artists with disability being recognized as peers within, within the industry, and that she has upped people's skills to a level where people go, "wow" not because it's people with disability, but because they're great dancers and that's, that's fundamentally different from what Restless used to do. There's you know, there was always the kind of the "Oh, they're so good, aren't they?" Patronizing attitude that people have towards disability whereas Michelle's work takes it beyond that into another, into another space and I think that that's really important and I've got a great deal of respect for, for, for, for that shift that Michelle brought to the company. Um, but you know, that would be my main answer to that.

Jung: Was it was the biggest momentum or with the biggest event is the end of the show as the leader?

Nick: Yeah. Yeah and the, the change that she brought was that, you know, we were very much focused on the Restless as, as a community organization, which it still is, but not, you know, like we used to say before Michelle came on. "Oh no it's Restless. We don't do unison" in the sense of all the actors acting, doing the same movement together. I'd like, I'd like to say a couple of words about the, the role of the dancers without disability as well, because they tend to be a little bit undervalued, and their work has always been extraordinarily important. As I said, Sally set up a system whereby it was the role of the people without disability to support the people with disability, and that support on stage happens in lots of different ways and a lot, most of it is invisible, little cues, you know, little...Michelle's kind of moved beyond that and because people

are now personally responsible for their own work, but still, the,, the dancers without disability, their role is crucial because it's it's people with and without disability working together and I think that's one of, one of the key things that makes Restless so powerful in the work. It's, it's like living inclusion on the stage. You can actually see people working as equals and that's really important, you know? And look, I'm tearing up. It actually reaches into people and moves them at a deep level when they see that, you know, and it gets beyond that kind of, "oh, aren't they wonderful" response and goes deep into people and that's... and the work's always done that and it works on in different ways. I just think that Michelle's work can reach more people to do that because it's of a better standard.

Jung: Thank you that was a very inspiring sort of answers and so the next point will be disability art. Do you think disability art should be political? Or, you know, it should be change in, creating changes in how people think, act or treat each other?

Nick: I think it's inherently political. I don't think it, it can be non-political but then I think I have a very wide view of politics. To me, politics is where people are trying to get their way in an area where other people are trying to stop them, really. So it is very wide but I go back to my view of theatre and performing arts as relationships, as relationships between the performers and the audience. That cannot exclude political awarenesses. It is inherently political. That's not to say thatand also it goes back to what I said before about why you're doing something. You can make a piece of art and not be politically aware, and it can still have a political content. You can make a piece of art and to be deliberately politically provocative and it's still valid as a piece of art. I.... shortly after I arrived in Australia, I worked for an organisation called the Popular Theatre Troupe in Brisbane, in Joh Bjelke-Petersen's Brisbane, and this, we produced directly political art. We played at Union rallies but we, and we also went into prisons and into hospitals and, and were deliberately provocative. We came to the Adelaide Festival in 1974, I think and... whenever Anthony Steel's conference was, no, it must have been 1976, it was the anniversary of the American, American bicentennial and we did things like... we did four days, 2 hours a day in Victoria Square to anyone who was walking through and we printed fake American passports and gave them to people you know things you probably get into trouble these days, but it was just, you know, so. So we would, we'd produce directly political art. I used to sing in the Trade Union choir, and we would sing at rallies and on the steps of Parliament House and all of that.

Nick: So I can see that there is always a point in art that is created for a political purpose. Sometimes when it's created for a political purpose, it's, it's also restricts its audience, you know, like I'm singing for the, for the, for a union crowd. The relevance of it is for that union crowd. It's not for everyone and so, so I guess what I'm saying is that the political dimension is, can, can be quite wide ranging or quite narrowly focused to political content of a particular work. It can be both, and all of it is valid. What's important is the relationship between the person performing and the person listening and the quality of the exchange that's taking place. I, so I, that's the kind of attitude that I come to a question about the political nature of disability art in that it is inherently political because you are dealing with people's prejudices sometimes against people with disability, people's assumptions that people can't do particular things and someone once said that Restless changes people's perceptions about disability every time it performs and I think I think that's true and I think that that is a political act because you are actually changing people's perceptions. If that's what's meant by politics, then it's inherently political and I would support and I've seen disability art that is decidedly political and meant to be political and I've seen disability art that isn't meant to be political, but I would argue that has a political content and it's all valid.

Jung: Yeah thank you, I agree. I agree with you. So I think my perspective, the political view is almost a third person's interpretation you know, someone who is presenting something regardless they intended or not. If the person received read something out of it as political messages is political that's yeah

Nick: yeah, yeah.

Jung: And the last questions will be how would you define the success in the context of disability art?

Nick: Well, I come back to...it...your....the measure of success of a particular work is defined by what you're trying to do. Why are you doing it in the first place? Success for Michelle's work is national and international stardom for the dancer's. Success, for the work that Sally was doing with very young people is the growth and development of that person throughout their life and the opening of possibilities and there's all things in between. It's a complicated question. For me, the success of an artwork is the quality of

the relationship between the performer and the audience and the human exchange, which is happening in that work and that to me, is, is, is the mark of success.

Jung: Thank you. So a very last question is, is there anything else you want to add about you, about disability arts and about your experience? Is it time for you can read your poem or anything?

Nick: Well, two things. I've got a poem to read, but also I'd like to briefly say a few things about the NDIS.

Jung: Yes, go ahead.

Nick: Restless and the rest of the disability arts sector in Adelaide before the introduction of the NDIS was always down the bottom of Disability S.A.'s "Unmet Needs" list. If you look at funding for disability, there are, there are more important areas of housing and basic daily living needs that people with disability need to be supported with. Since the introduction of the NDIS all of that funding, which used to come to disability arts in South Australia from the State now comes federally through the NDIS but disability art is still down the bottom of the unmet needs list. It's not given a high priority. The NDIS in its formation was captured by the allied health professionals in the way it's structured, and so the payment of allied health professionals is, is given a higher priority than people's engagement with the arts but I would argue, going back to what I said before, that when people engage with the arts, it's the whole person and there are enormous growth possibilities because I've worked in community arts mostly in my life. When I came to Restless, I developed . I tried to catalogue the therapeutic outcomes from engaging in creative activities and at Restless, as it applies to Restless, there's five of them: there's physical improvements and engagement. It's a dance company, greater health, greater joie de vive.

Nick: There's the social aspect and the growth of people's social. It becomes coming once a week or for those in the core company. It's an important social aspect of their lives. There's what I call emotional, you could call it psychological, but at Restless, it's a safe place and people can engage with quite difficult things sometimes and can grow emotionally. There's intellectual growth. In order to present a piece of performing arts, you have to hold the whole thing in your head. So there's improvements in memory and

a whole pile of other intellectual things and last but not least, there's artistic growth. You know, people's powers of creativity, the imagination so all of these things are stimulated and grow but you don't need a disability to have those benefits. Anyone engaging in any creative activity can get these benefits, but I've found them to be useful touchstones in arguing for the benefit of involvement in creative activities at Restless and in fact, now, while I don't know if they still do it, but when I was here, we ask all the tutors who run weekly programs through the NDIS to report against at least one of those five each term for each participant so that we can go back to them and say, okay, you need a report for the NDIS? Here's a list of all the growth that you have undergone in the last year so that you can argue for more. I just wanted to say that.

Jung: But did you, was it always successful to get funding for the individual participants?

Nick: It's such a lottery, you know. It depends on the person at the NDIA who the individual participant strikes when they're renewing their, their annual program. I've heard so many stories of people, you know, who had reasonable things and it gets cut in half and then they spend months of appeals and, you know, it's a lottery and it seems so unfair that that their processes are not more transparent.

Jung: Transparent and also is not based on logic. It's more subjective.

Nick: Absolutely.

Jung: It is about the individual planner who understand the benefit of us so some doesn't have any understanding.

Nick: I just think it's it's one of the biggest failings of the NDIS. Yes.

Jung: Done by person, which can be just very subjective.

Nick: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely.

Jung: Thanks very much for sharing this whole five category, because that's something I'm actually arguing my study as well. Like when you have a therapeutic input, that's a

fantastic but what I found is because the difference when you work with artists, when you work with a therapist, therapist is focused on the clients, just one on one about this person, but the artist brings about the social connections. So it's not about

Nick: It's a much wider engagement.

Jung: So it's almost the bring this person into their connection. Yeah. So that was the I found the biggest difference. So when you've done the therapeutic, maybe you feel good about it afterwards. You still have no connection with that work but when you get along with the artist, you become part of the group. That was the biggest. I found it and then, you know, the NDIS the whole purpose is to be part of the community. So I found that this is more fitting category than this. I love to hear about your poem. He's going to read a nice poem in the last.

Nick: Well, let's hope it's nice. So I wrote this sort of after a few years of working at Restless, I became aware that, you know, you kind of watch people grow up at Restless, we used to be a youth focused organization, less so now. Now it works with older people as well. But watching people grow up at Restless, you actually see their development, see their growth and you also you know, I've watched them become some of them, extraordinary people and also their parents and supporters. Some of them are also extraordinary people because they, too, have had to overcome quite difficult barriers and, and looking for the best for their child and so it's an area where you see growth and I became aware of this growth. So this, this poem is called "Surfing the Tsunami" and it's it.... I was trying to express my delight in seeing that growth.

"Impairments can be like riding a storm,
dancing a quake, surfing a tsunami.
Simple tasks become like wrangling a swarm
of angry bees or doing macrame
with spiderwebs. Doors are often slammed shut
by the assumptions of others. Mountains
have no path to climb. Blizzards have no hut
to shelter in. Yet people are sanguine
when life is hard. Barriers grow greatness
when they are surmounted with finesse.

Victories make heavy burdens weightless.”
Impediments are dissolved by success.
Barriers are folded like origami—;
confident riders surf the tsunami.

Yes. That's everything.

Nick: Yeah.

Jung: Thank you.

Thank you for sharing this. So beautiful. Oh.

Nick: Well, thank you for asking me. I appreciate being able to talk about these things.
Really

Jung: Yeah. It's honour to have you as a witness. It's been growing like a living history.

Jung: This is the point of collecting people's word and that's paved another kind of
pathway for the future generations.

Nick: Yeah.

Jung: Thank you.