Interviewee Name: Alison Richardson
Interviewer Name: Annie Rolfe
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Transcript

Annie: Can you tell us a bit about yourself and what led you to becoming the artistic director and CEO of Crossroad Arts?

Alison: Hmm. So it's been about a 25 year journey to be coming up here to Queensland, to Mackay. So I was always interested in drama and theatre throughout high school. And then I started at uni to study a dip. ed. at Macquarie Uni in Sydney studying drama and English high school teaching. So whilst I was doing that, I decided to finally join a local youth theatre company that was near where I lived and that was Shopfront Theatre. So that's in the Carlton near Kogarah in Sydney's south, and I was one of the oldest people there at 19 and I, from there I guess was interested in doing performing. I didn't so much get involved in the performing and theatre making side at uni that much through a teaching degree. Also coming from the suburbs, I think I was also a bit intimidated by people in those arts circles at uni and I was like, Oh, I mean having said that though, I tried to get theatre sports and improvisation going in the bar, so there was that type of thing, but everyone else just seemed a bit more sort of cool or you couldn't kind of penetrate that little circles so I decided to contact Shopfront Youth Theatre, and then that took me doing a bit of performing, but because I was studying teaching, I also then became an arts worker there.

Alison: So it was directing their weekly kind of workshop program. So I'd have 2 to 3 classes a week of young people, so 8 to 12 or 13 to 15 and we at the end of every term have to devise and come up with our own show. So it was a baptism by fire. You literally have no money, no budget, but a big, beautiful kind of black box space and theatre to create what you wanted in that with the participants, you'd have sort of eight sessions with them, 8 to 10 sessions. So you really were working out how to kind of facilitate their ideas and their expression and their stories and what they wanted to tell and also getting yourself really organised deadlines, timing, to try to get all these performances

that you had to do every term over the line in front of an audience. Yeah, So that was where I kind of cut my teeth and then on the side I'm kind of doing uni work, studying to be a teacher, but I got my real education at Shopfront while I was studying at uni. Yeah, so I was really lucky to have that around the corner pretty much and then I dipped in and out of shopfront over the years really.

Alison: So I've gone back and done a bit of marketing for them or a bit of producing or project, that kind of thing. But certainly I then got on, the person I met there, Katrina Douglas, she became the artistic director of Powerhouse Youth Theatre, which is another youth theatre in the western suburbs of Sydney in Fairfield and through that connection I made with her and then stayed good friends with her and still am I, after finishing my degree and didn't want to go teach full time in schools so I stayed casual teaching in schools, but then worked in different youth theatres, running workshops and things, and then there was a bit of, Katrina was needing someone to fill in for her for a little bit as the artistic director while she was away. So I did that at Powerhouse Youth Theatre and it was through that little period of time where one of the things she said to me was, “Oh, you need to find a tutor for this group of people with disability that we have here”. And I went, “Oh, okay, how do I, how do I find that person?” Because I mean, working at Shopfront, you're always working with diverse young people. It wasn't like it was anyone that could go there. So it was people from different backgrounds, different socioeconomic areas, different abilities or perceived abilities. So you're cutting your teeth with just a bunch of young people, basically, and. And then I had no idea where someone would be located that would specialize in working with people with disability.

Alison: So I kind of was like ringing my friend whose mom taught at a special school and I'm like, Do you know where I'd even find someone? She's like, No. So I kind of got me thinking that there wasn't many people out there doing this work. So then I thought, Oh, well, I guess I can just give it a go but which was the perfect timing for me, because I had been kind of working so much, running my regular drama workshops and things. I really had to go back to the drawing board and think about what what am I going to do that's going to engage this group of people with very different and diverse needs within the one group. Yes. So it's hard to find the golden activities and the golden exercises that's going to cater to everyone's access requirements. So that then brings on a lot of anxiety. Am I going to offend someone? What language do I use if I say walk around the

room? Is that going to offend someone who can't walk? Then what do I say? Do I say move around the room but then someone can’t move? So there's a lot of thinking, which was good for me at the time because I kind of pushed me out of my comfort zone to get me thinking. I then kind of tried to find resources which were minimal.

Alison: So you're finding very outdated books that say, you know, drama with handicapped people or like you're trying to look for something. So I kind of scoured the shelves that. Sydney Uni bookstores going I must be resources somewhere and so I went, Well, there's not really. So I found maybe two books, but yeah, it had those kind of outdated titles. Yeah. So the first lots of workshops, I was kind of feeling like I was a bit of an entertainment machine because you're kind of going, Oh, I'm not getting the maybe usual feedback and reactions that I'm used to from these exercises. Then slowly I went and watched two other people that were doing this kind of work that I eventually found. One was at Roselle Neighborhood Center. They were running a program called Ever After Theatre Company. And there was a lady there, Caroline Downes, and she was running workshops out of there.

Annie: Right.

Alison: Also with another guy called Marc Cara. And I went and watched their workshops and went, Oh, and particularly Marc, I kind of went oh you know, it's just slowing down and doing maybe one or two things in the class and doing them well and breaking them down to in small steps. And that whole idea of just not having to reinvent the wheel, but just adapting and modifying what you have been doing and breaking it down into smaller steps, which benefits everybody in the room.

Alison: And so I kind of went, Oh, so Marc's doing that, right? So that was the only place where I was going. Well, that I could see was doing this kind of work. Then Katrina put on a show called ‘Sucked In’, I think it was 2002 at Powerhouse Theatre, which had a few which was targeting people with disability, and that was quite new at the time, like no one else was really. Doing that. Besides that, I could see in Sydney, besides ever after theatre. So there's a few people in that that still are kicking around the circuit a little bit that were in that show and then I guess there was a bit of money there has to have me on for a year doing as they called it the community liaison officer and it was about more connecting with the community a bit more. And then I was able to

run something called ‘Club Wild’, which is an organisation in Melbourne that's about inclusive nightclub experiences, basically and I ran a mini one of those out in the west of Sydney through my job at Powerhouse Youth Theatre and I had collaborated. I mean, I'd chatted with and gone and visited Phil from Club Wild in Melbourne. So I knew about that and then I was doing a couple of small projects for people with disability through my role, but I was also doing work with Kids at Risk and

Alison: New migrants and refugees. And I thought, I'm spreading myself too thin, because if you actually want to make an impact and change something, I can't be across all three. So I went, Well, what's the one that doesn't seem to have, there is a gap, doesn't seem to have much happening because out particularly in western Sydney at that time, there was a lot around migrants and refugees working with that community. There was work being done with kids at risk. So I just thought, oh well, disability also because it was fun. So I was the class I had. I mean, I went, Oh, found my people. It was sort of like dressing. There was lots of fun and joy with the dress ups and the karaoke, all those kind of more superficial kind of things that I think draw people to that initially, particularly people with intellectual disability. I went, Oh gosh, this is fun. I've never seen anything like this. That uninhibited kind of non-judgmental environment that's really appealing. That I think makes you also feel more comfortable and uninhibited because what I felt was it was very non-judgmental. Yeah. And coming from working with other teenagers or kids at risk or what, there's that whole thing about school and that looks at me such shit. Why are you making us do that? Or I don't want to do that, or a real judgment of each other. And I was so pleasantly surprised and bowled away going, Wow, there's none of that.

Alison: They're all cheering each other. They patting each other on the back, they give it a go. So that was very refreshing, that enthusiasm. And so then I kind of thought, Well, why don't I try to focus on this group of people? Then there doesn't seem to be too much. So I ended up that funding ran out because it was only for a year, which is unfortunate, but it made me then do ten days. I funded it myself to do professional development in Melbourne because I thought, Well, that's where it all seems to be happening. So I visited like Arts Access Victoria, RAWCUS, Club Wild, Back to Back and those possibly a couple of other little ones in there so because this is almost 20 years ago and then I was all excited about the potential and what could happen. So I then Powerhouse Youth Theatre youth theatre. Well, you can use our space for free if

you need to do anything. We just can't give you funding so I started something called ‘Sliced Bread Attraction’ because sliced bread being the next best thing is sliced bread and that we're attracted to what we do. So I just started that. It was just me but I gave it a name and had a little website and stuff like that. And I was able to produce a show out of Powerhouse Youth Theatre theater, and that's probably the first show. Starting names just dropped completely out of my head.

Alison: I'll have to look it up. Anyway, it was about home and belonging, and I'll grab it out of my head in a minute. And that's really bad. I'm just going to write myself a note. Yeah, so that's probably the first one I did there and worked with people with disability to put on a show. Then from there fortunately, Accessible Arts New South Wales fortunately had some, two positions, part time positions for the Western Sydney project. So it was perfect timing because I'm like, Well, I'm starting to do this kind of work out here, but Where do I go? Who's going to fund me? Do I keep just to work out of pocket but with no funds or what happens? So fortunately, I got that job. It was two days a week. My colleague Jennifer Teo, she got the other jobs. Mine was a more creative role and hers was more what I mean. When their new roles, you kind of make them, you make them what they are, because Jennifer was sort of that as well but my title was a creative program coordinator and the two of us work together out of Black Town Council. So we had two desks spaced out out there. So we were in charge of like 11, I think, local government areas in two days a week. This is a bit impossible. So we ended up getting a third day so at least that helped a little bit with trying to make an impact.

Alison: But again, when they're new roles, no one's done them before. Everyone's trying to work out exactly what it is we are doing. You know, when you're only part time like that, it is tricky, we feel, over the three years we were there, we were able to achieve a bit and the nice thing that came from that was. So basically what Accessible Arts wanted us to do with that role was to partner with other organizations out in Western Sydney. Get a program or project happening, then step away but then so that they would then be taking it on but that is quite can be quite tricky to do because it's a lot of groundwork, a lot of community cultural development and then if that's not in line with that venue's strategic plan or goals, if you do all that groundwork and they don't have someone left in that position to maintain that community and kind of hold the baby, it just goes,

Annie: yeah.

Alison: So one thing that we are able to do because I said, well, there is a bit of a gap and I heard there's always been a bit of interest from a few people that I've known maybe with intellectual disabilities was this idea of hip hop. So there was something out in western Sydney in an area called Bankstown, which was a youth development service. They were running hip hop workshops.

Alison: There was this guy that was quite a known around Marky Mark, who has Down's syndrome. He does a bit of hip hop, Yeah so I started a hip hop group called First Flight Crew in my role there, even though we weren't supposed to be starting projects, I just said, Well, there is a gap, there is this need and I, you know, I think it would give visibility to our project because often advocacy bodies are unknown about what they do so I said, I think this is a tangible thing to do. Arts New South Wales were happy with that because then we were the face of the 'Don't DisMyAbility' campaign for one of the years. So 'The First Flight Crew' was on the front of all their publications, was on the side of buses, was on the little screens, in the buses and other high profile places that they then sent it out to New South Wales. Oh, now we can kind of see what accessible arts does. I think you need a balance of both so that the community can see what it is you're doing and not just like I have no idea what those people do ehind those closed doors. It had become a bit of an ivory tower, so we were able to do that, which was great so we were invited to lots of different places to perform over the couple of years we were doing that out on the streets of Sydney.

Alison: We did projects outside. We also just did them at different International Day events or regular kind of pubs and things like that so it was trying to push people out of the disability sector as well and give it high visibility so it wasn't just all within the disability sector. Yeah, and we had Morganics attached to that. So Morganics was the hip hop artist who was quite well known for pioneering hip hop in Australia. So he's got quite a name and does a lot of cultural development work as well. So he was obviously instrumental to the group because I don't teach hip hop, so that was good. The two of us worked on that for a few years and then the Western Sydney Project for Accessible Arts. Again, it's funding stopped so that I'm like, Well, where does this leave me? And during that time, while I was there, I connected with Riverside Theatre, which was a mainstream theatre company attached to Parramatta Council in the west of Sydney,

and they had a program called Workshops in the Arts for People with Disability or WAPD, and that had been running for quite a number of years, started up by the sort of volunteers that the the Friends of Riverside, they started it. Wouldn't it be nice to have this group and I think found $1,000 back in the day and started this group of people. It then became about six workshops a week out of Riverside.

Alison: Yeah. And they were, oh I thought gosh, this is quite a thriving program. And then they held a fundraiser whilst I was still accessible arts, and then they raised $36,000. So I said to the director, Robert Love at the time, I said, What are you guys going to do with that $36,000? He said, Oh. Probably more workshops not that we need more workshops now. And it got me thinking, No, yeah, you probably need someone to coordinate the program. So then fortunately again, there was funding through Arts New South Wales at the time because Strategic Industries, Strategic Partnerships Initiative or Strategic Industries Initiative, which was allowing funding for up to three years, that had to be matched, but they were able to fund. They call them projects, but it's still, if it's three years, it's a position pretty much which is unheard of. And I was like, Oh. Why don't I apply for that? So Riverside were happy for me to apply for that. So then I applied for that to create a position for myself there. And so we were successful in that money and then it was matched by Riverside, which is Paramatta council. And now when I look back on how much I was earning, which isn't that long ago, it was only 2000 about 2013/14 was not much money at all, but I had no idea of salaries because I was never on one. Yeah, So I was like, now when I look back, I'm like far out.

Alison: That was. Yes, interesting. But at least I was there and I did it. But I was like, Oh, okay. Is that what I actually could have been making? Yeah. So I was there as the I rebranded WAPD to be called 'Beyond the Square'. 'Beyond the Square' was an adjunct of Riverside, and I was called the creative director of that so that WAPD weekly workshop program stayed at 6 to 8 workshops per week, but I just extended the program out so we had an outreach program where we went to some regional areas and did some sort of film and theatre and drama workshops out there, and we had a partnership with ICE Information and Cultural Exchange, which was across the road there, a cultural development organization that mainly works sort of in digital film kind of area. We did filmmaking with them in partnership with them. And then I also we worked with Gerard O'Dwyer's. Gerard was my colleague for the for years, so he was working across the road at Parramatta Macca's and he was just in a film that won Trop. had it

won then? Yes won Tropfest short Film festival and he won best actor and he also identifies as having Down's syndrome. And I said, Oh, well, you're interested in theatre. Yes, I love acting. I want to do more acting. So I got this role and then I said, Would they hire Gerard? So Gerard and I worked together on “Beyond the Square” for four years, so he was there 16 hours a week and then he's still there.

Alison: But with COVID, things sort of haven't panned out yet until some rules change for him, but he is very much, can still be employed there if he's wants to go, can go back. So Gerrard then became one of the members of RAWCUS. RAWCUS was an ensemble I formed while at Riverside. So there was people in that that I'd known for a few years, like Digby Webster, who was also part of “First Flight Crew” and also who I met at Powerhouse Youth Theatre so I've known him for a very long time. They formed those eight people when I put a call out for people who are experienced in performance and writing, and I called it exercise book classes, because a lot of the guys that I knew were just constantly writing stories and thoughts and ideas in these exercise books, and they'd show me all these books. So I went, Oh, let's call it exercise book classes and then eight people who just happen to have Down syndrome turned up to that. There was no luck and you have to identify something Down syndrome. It could have been any one and. Yeah, it's just funny how that worked out and then along the way, so. RAWCUS, we were together working out of Riverside for, so I was about, for three or four years and we produced a show there called I could see in me.

Alison: And then after that, there was a big structure at Riverside and Council, and we all had to go for our own roles again and then unfortunately, I didn't get the role that I created for myself so the rug was pulled out from under me and it was really devastating for me and the community and the work I'd put in for years. So they just said it was, you know, the bureaucratic process of hiring people because it was local government and I went, but do you see what's happened here? So that was pretty devastating. They then realised what they'd done and tried to hold on to me but didn't give me a desk space and I had to go find one at another organisation Ice across the road. So I felt pretty devalued. My position then wasn't a creative position. They didn't really know what it was, so I don't know going into the interview, I think they weren't sure about what it was they wanted from the position. Therefore, when the scores because people at scored, the scores came back, the person who got the highest score got the role, but not necessarily I think, the potentially the experience they wanted. But then I don't think they

know what new what they want. So it was a big bungle so I then had to push all my programmes up and get them done and then hand in my resignation because I wasn't even sitting in the building anymore and felt really deflated.

Alison: The community then followed me, so RAWCUS didn't want to stay so we were in the middle of doing a show, so we ended up packed theatre in Erskineville. They, which is in the inner west of Sydney. My friend Katrina was the artistic director there who was the artistic director I first met at Powerhouse Youth Theatre. She said, Well, we can house you here while you get the show sorted and finished. Yeah. So then we had to do a crowdfunding campaign to fund the show so and it was also in collaboration with a company called Epic Arts in Cambodia so we needed to fly over there. So 260 people supported us through the crowdfunding campaign to get us over to Cambodia to work with Epic Arts, to then come back and do the show. And then we're fortunate enough to get three lots of funding for the show too. So we got Australia Council, City of Sydney and create New South Wales funding. So thankfully we got that, which is pretty unheard of really. And we weren't attached like we were freelancing and it wasn't through any kind of disability streams of funding either, which was exciting so then we put on this show called Speed of Life at PACT, which was amazing, and that was with RAWCUS and so the two, my colleague……

Alison: so by that point I was working, employing Dean Walsh to come and support us at RAWCUS as a choreographer so as the two of us working on that show together, and then he was involved more in the weekly workshops too. So it wasn't just me and the gang the whole time, because he's got a different skill set to me, which is great and then from that I kind of went, Oh, I don't. This has been a long twisting journey. I don't know, I'd like just a full time job, please. I don't know if I can keep doing this so that I then sort of put my foot down and said, I'm not going to go for any more project funds. I just need a position somewhere that I haven't had to fund and find the money for. That's hard to find, so that, I spoke with Arts New South Wales about IT and accessible art, saying, you know, there needs to be money for positions, not just projects but I think everyone's been saying that to the blue in the face and I can't see it changing. I couldn't see it changing any time soon. I thought, I'm not going to hold out for this to change because Dean Deans in his fifties, I was in my late thirties and he hadn't seen a change. And I went, Well, I can't just keep going on project funds, so I'm not.

Alison: So I just said, Yeah, we're not we can't put on another show. So RAWCUS and I, we and Dean, we kept the workshops going out of like Sydney Dance Company would house us there and we'd run our workshops out of there and we kind of kept the eye on the boil to see if anything would change or other funds would come through and didn't. And we're like, well, and then this that took that was two years of doing that as freelancing and then this email came in my inbox one day about this artistic director job at Crossroad Arts in Mackay. I went, It's funny, I haven't even heard of Crossroad Arts, and I don't quite know where Mackay is. All I know it all had to ingrained in Sydney, and I just kind of went, “Just ignore that because there's no email”, it's just the jpeg of the ad from some unknown like, right. And I went, Oh, I don't even know what that is or who that's from or what that is. So then I just sort of kind of put it on my mind and then it came through again with a proper email from a recruiter saying, Oh, I got your name from this person. And I went, Oh, right. I went, Oh, I better just get informed at least I wasn't sure if I was interested in uprooting myself. I thought, I'll get myself informed. So I spoke with the recruiter and I spoke with the previous artistic director.

Alison: And then just sort of swirled around in my mind for a while and then decided to apply and then got the job. So that was the end of 2017. But yeah, and it was that two year kind of gap and me going, No, I can't keep just doing this for no salary or no pay. Just bits and pieces. So I was running workshops here and there but you know, when you run workshops here and there for the past two decades, you're like, it's fine but you know, you wanted to sink your teeth into something, basically and during that time, actually, when all that happened at Riverside, I had, thankfully when that happened, got a Churchill Fellowship so I got a fellowship to research, inclusive mentoring and training opportunities now obviously so yeah, that was in Norway and Sweden and mainly then the UK. So that was really exciting so I spent six weeks over there chatting with lots of companies so that was good because there was a bit of a, I had a bit of a flow and what we're going to do and then it was nice to have that. Yeah, well you've got this and you can continue on in this way and then, you know, the whole thing about the Churchill is what is, what is that you're going to bring back to Australia and how you're going to disseminate that information.

Alison: So. I was working a little bit at Vivid Sydney at the time, doing access and inclusion, and I was able to get two of my friends who are also working in the sector to they have something called vivid ideas, so you can do talks and so we were able to do a

talk about our fellowships, which is good at Vivid as well and then just different kind of meetings I'd go to and conferences and things. I was able to disseminate information that way. Yeah. So then that. Yeah. So then that brought me up to Mackay once I got the job so I sort of uprooted myself. Didn't know anyone here, had never been to Mackay and started this journey, which has been pretty huge. So I think when someone's been the founder of a company for 20 years who my predecessor was, you know, it's timely that someone can come in with fresh eyes and go,

Annie: Yeah, yeah,

Alison: how can we improve upon things basically and re-engage community? And I think when something has just started from well a) no money or the smell of an oily rag with just one person to make the leap then into becoming a company and having a company structure is a different kettle of fish. So if they just keep kind of going along more as, well it was described to me as a family business kind of thing and not as an organisation with systems and processes and that all those things that become it's not the art and it's not the creative stuff, but you're developing the company.

Alison: That type of stuff was something I definitely had to do as well as the artistic side of the stuff coming up here and we've had to move twice because when I arrived we were up a set of stairs and had been there for ten years in an extremely hot building and expensive building, so I had to move. We spent a year there clearing out the place because it was a lot of stuff to skip loads of stuff and then we move to the uni and we were there at a place called Split Spaces, which supports start up companies of hot desks. So we moved to hot desk basically there, which was half the air conditioned, had breakout rooms, had an elevator. We went off it because it gets hot up here so it's very debilitating, can be quite debilitating and then we kept looking at looking though, for a venue to move to that was our own, not sort of within a uni where you can get hidden and no one knows where you are. Yeah, we want to be quite visible because of the nature of the work that we do. You can feel forgotten and overlooked and hidden and we went, No, no, no. We need to be really visible. We need our own space. We're a community org We need the community coming in, knowing where we are.

Alison: Not just like, I'll meet you downstairs at the basketball court building, building five. I mean, as you know, you just can't find people easily. So that we didn't feel was

that accessible, but we always knew it was just a stepping stone and then we, there's a lot of dishes shops along our main street because in regional towns, often the the guts can be ripped out so there was a disused, we were using disused shops and vacant carparks and areas and laneways for a to a show. We did quite unconventional tours where people were moving through the city looking at different art and music and video across the city and one of the spaces we used for our box office was this office that no one was in, and it was next door to a hall, so it's a masonic hall and we were in and out of here those two weeks, I mean, oh, this is convenient and going up these stairs or going into the uni or it's, it's so good and they had an accessible toilet and then I was like, oh my God, this could be it. Maybe we should move here. So we asked, this is owned by the Masons and then the hall is owned by the Masons. And they said, “Yep”, So we pay them rent like it's under market rate, but and then we pay just a separate.

Alison: fee to use the hall but we always wanted something where the workshops and things could happen on site so we're pretty lucky that the halls adjoining. That and it's got level access, it's on the main street. It's next to our F45 gym. It's across the road from the Dispensary, which is one of our premier eating places. There's the coffee club, there's Coco Cabana so we're just doing this little strip that is quite activated in the city heart where there's other sections of the city heart that are sort of not activated. To put it politely and, and have an accessible toilet. So most places we're looking at didn't have an accessible toilet. So that was great. So we've kind of very happy where we are. Most of the shows we do anyway aren't in traditional theatre spaces, so we do things offsite anyway. So that wasn't like, Oh no, we need a theatre because we do it in the theatre. And I'm like, No, no, no. I just sort of use different areas around the place. So that yeah, it was 2020 March when we moved in here and then thankfully we had our opening and we had 80 people in here and there was this whispers of things called Covid and we went, What is what is that? Thankfully, we're able to do have the launch because it was a bit of a long journey to get to that point.

Alison: Yeah, and then we were there for a couple of weeks and we closed doors and went home for lock down. Yeah, but we were so happy we got to the launch because it would have felt that whole time when you weren't allowed to gather, like we haven't really launched it. So that was really good timing in that way. And then, and then that's just been amazing being here because you will always get people walking past dropping in.

Annie: Yeah.

Alison: What is this place?

Annie: Yeah,

Alison: because we have two big photos out the front of our, one about Ambassador Brendan and one of another ambassador and performer Tash. So people sort of see them. They have visible disability and big quotes from them there. So I think it peaks people's interest or if they know someone that might have a disability too, they're like, Oh, what is this my nephew has? And we just chat to them about that. So it's been like. Yeah, it's paid off. You know, exponentially being here in this central part of the city

Annie: Do you think that people in the past, when you when you first started, do you think people were aware of disability arts?

Alison: It's always been it's always been that small sector, particularly when I first started. I am just trying to think what I knew of it because I hadn't met. Yeah. Like I hadn't met a person with a disability except you know, fleetingly or there was a girl in year 11 and 12 who was a wheelchair user and you'd you might meet briefly people but I certainly wasn't in the.

Alison: Community at all then and so all I kind of, you'd see something like the Merry Makers, a big dance group of people with intellectual disabilities doing a dance at the opening of something or on TV for something. Steady, Eddie. You'd see around doing stand up. I mean, maybe I would have seen like Stella Young, but probably might have been really on my radar. But no, I mean, yeah, So I'd been in that sort of youth arts community world and it wasn't so much that I had heard it all, really and then I was just handed that class and then it wasn't till I sort of followed my nose and saw what was happening in Melbourne that I went, “Oh, is this like a thing?” There's more of it, yeah. Meeting RAWCUS, that company and then back to back went oh the thing I mean but I was I'm 44 and that was when I was 25. So, you know, I guess I'd been doing youth arts from when I was 19 to 20 5 so 6 years before I was handed that class. And definitely in

those classes I'd have it shopfront there'd be kids now that you'd consider neurodiverse or having mental health, but it wasn't really, they weren't sort of. those kids in the class.

Alison: So do you think the visibility has improved? Yeah, I mean, there's definitely a lot more around and a lot more opportunities and then the visibility thinking about that with that question, I think people are more, I mean, definitely visibility for people with disability because of the NDIS. There's been a lot more talk about it and what is in the news always in the paper so people are more aware of the rights I guess are people with disability and the struggles and then the, you know, the royal commission. So there's that. But in terms of the arts, I was like, Well I think and I'm just yeah, it's it's tricky because with the arts thing it's kind of only if you're into theater or in Fringe stuff that you would often see it so it's more if you saw a film or TV or an ad or you saw a person with a disability represented so Target were doing a lot of ads with people, with kids, mainly with Down's syndrome. Then bus stop films came along, which is what produced the film that Gerard was in at Tropfest, and they have been going for about 12 years now and you know, they haven't they would have things on the ABC or winning Tropfest in itself because it's the world's largest short film festival that raised the profile of Gerard and bus stop, which was just starting out and so those films definitely have raised the profile across the world around what people with a disability are doing.

Alison: But the theatre stuff like. I don't know, unless you're going out to theater. I mean, ‘Back to Back’ [theatre company]. Obviously, when I was doing my Churchill stuff, research, people over there were like, Oh, why have you come here when you've got ‘Back to Back’ [theatre company]. in Australia? Like, they're very well known. And I went, Oh no, I know back to back. Like I have spoken with them. But they'd be always asking me about ‘Back to Back’ [theatre company]. Oh you're from Australia. Back. I said Yeah. So that was good because I mean they've got such a profile but if you're not a theatre going audience, I think it's if it's just like the representation that's been happening on TV just of late with Chloe that plays ‘Queen’ on ‘Heartbreak High’ and like that visibility and then the higher profile people. But they're not in the arts so much like Dylan Alcott and Kurt Fearnley and Grace Tame. I mean, they're not from the arts, but they're certainly raising the profile of people with a disability. It's just really hard to because the arts is so. You know, it's under supported in this country anyway. And then you add the layer of disability. There's always this low expectation around what it is

people are going to see. Yeah, it would just be not that good. So it's hard to push to try to get people to come and see things.

Alison: Yeah. Anyway, Carriageworks in Sydney were handed a bunch of money from Arts New South Wales to do an initiative called ‘New Normal’, and they were able to fund Dan Daw to do a production there. They're also able to fund Force Majeure, who's one of the residing companies at Carriageworks, to do a show. Gerard was in that as well, called off the record. And then there was another show which I can't remember the name of, but it was urban theatre projects were commissioned to do a show out of there as well, and they're a Western Sydney company. So there were three shows that came out of that new normal. I don't know what else came out of it, but it was the first bit of money that I went, Oh, that's interesting. That's gone to a mainstream venue. With high profile. I mean, Arts New South Wales called me into the office at the time because they knew I'd be upset that this money was just handed to Carriageworks and not to myself or my peer, Sarah Vassallo. So she was doing basically what I was doing, building dance with Murmuration Dance Theatre. So we're doing it very grassroots building community, not making much money, and they could see what we were doing but yeah, they just I just gave it to Carriageworks basically, and we were like, Oh, well, that money would go a lot further if it was given to us.

Alison: It's a bit of a shame. Then I went and spoke to Carriageworks saying, Oh, I heard you've been given this money. Can you just tell me a bit about how you're going to be using it and what the strategies? But because I had no connection to community, yeah, I was like, Who are you going to use? Like, you don't have anyone who has worked in the sector before, you don't have it. And they said, Oh, well, that's probably accessible arts’ job. And I thought, well, what they probably needed, what they would have been smart to do is employ someone there with that money that had a connection to community to run the new normal. Yeah, but they didn't and I just was like pretty disappointed with that. And so as was the community, the name wasn't people didn't like the name Normal so there was a bit of an outcry about that across the community, which just went to show that they didn't consult anyone and just handed a lot of money. And so it kind of goes to that thing of big flashy venues. And this is one of the questions here around defining success, like what does define success? Because are we all just trying to get something on in a mainstream venue and why? When I think embracing the

ideas and perspectives of the community mightn't fit in to what a mainstream audience want to see

Annie: Yeah
Alison: because if you if you truly working inclusively to the some of the stuff, it's not going to be programmed by those venues unless they're a bit more left of field and progressive thinking, which often is in the fringes.

Alison: So the fringe festivals or yeah, the more contemporary kind of organizations I guess, but. I was never aspiring to that. I was just chugging away, doing what I was doing. But. I think. Yeah, it's a shame when you're sort of presenting the same thing, but in a small to medium arts or as someone that's presenting something in the opera house, but everyone goes to the opera House and it gets all the media attention and like we've just done the same thing basically just down the road.

Annie: Yeah,

Alison: but theatre doesn't have the same name as Opera House. So yeah, it's what's valued by audience is often determined by what venue it's in and also ticket prices can reflect that too. I'm like, Oh, Is this $15 because we're trying to be inclusive to everyone and people just think we psychology of it must be that good if it's only 15 but wow, $60 show must be amazing. Not necessarily. So that thing gets that gets frustrating. Yeah.

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?

Alison: I know I was trying to think about that because the general public, again, I don't know.

Alison: I mean, I wasn't around when I was chatting to you on the phone for the Cultural Olympiad, so I think maybe people, yeah, like in the year 2000, I wasn't going to even any of the Cultural Olympiad stuff, so I wouldn't have known what was on until people have told me about it prior. I mean, post it all happening. But that, I guess, would have given visibility to what was happening in disability. It's just then what always happens is that it's just the maintaining of that because if funding is lost or a position

changes or positions lost, whoever was building all of that and trying to sustain it just gets lost and you just go backwards. But yeah, I mean, I was trying to think if I was just a person that's not in this sector, what I maybe would have just seen around that we'd go, Oh, that's kind of like interesting or milestone or the first time I've heard of it and I mean. The work that. You know Stella young I guess was doing, was quite visible and then I mean we it's not the arts, though, but the Disability Discrimination Commissioner Graeme Innes again not arts but they're both, they're all been supportive of it and talking about it. There was festivals around in Melbourne, but yeah it was hard for me to try to think about what that might be but I think maybe the NDIS coming on board that has enabled some more people to access the arts that haven't been able to before.

Alison: There was the National Arts and Disability Framework that was put together. I never know kind of sometimes what happens with those, those types of projects and initiatives. Australia Council had some funding, which was good. I went Wow, for artists with disability and I know like a separate stream and I said, Well that's good, that's a plus I guess, because at least they're recognising that that needs to be an area that needs to have some targeted funding to bolster up and then there were some mentoring initiatives involved in that as well. So when that came on board, I thought, Oh, ok this is where it maybe is starting to shift things a bit. Yeah, but across the whole of Australia, I mean. Yeah. Hard for me. Hard for me to say really. Other people would not like Kath Duncan's and all that would know, like they'd have a bit more of a because they've been in it so long and identify as having a disability. I think I kind of go, Oh, Gail Mellis those people have been in a long time, I hope would be interested to hear. Hopefully they'd be able to pinpoint it a bit more. Yeah.

Annie: So is that art that your group is undertaking? Is it political? And going to that question about how success is defined, should it be political or is it about aesthetic quality and appeal to a mainstream audience? Yeah.

Alison: I don't set out to make political work. I think you can sort of sometimes naturally lend itself to it, because if you've got a cast of people that have visible or invisible disability on stage, people start to read into it anyway. “Oh, are they making some sort of political statement here?” And it's like, No, no, they just happen to be the people that came along was wanted to be in the show. So we don't, we don't set out to do that and when we're working with people, it's their, If we've got a theme, it's those stories they

want to tell on that theme that might be autobiographical they may not. It might be purely fantastical. So it's going taking all of that and putting it together, going, Well, this is what it is, we're not aiming to, yeah, be political, but this is our voice and what we have to say and we're often a community that isn't given a voice so sometimes I guess some of it can look I guess political, but it's not that we go into it with that agenda as such.

Annie: Yeah, that's interesting.

Alison: Yeah because people would say, oh you know, if you, if you, if it's a cast of a mainstream theatre company like Sydney Theatre Company or whatever, then they cast someone in a, whatever, David Williamson, like a traditional play who's not a wheelchair user described as one, but they cast a wheelchair user and it's like, what statement are they making about that? So it gets people thinking about what statement it's like.

Alison: just happened to be in a guy in a wheelchair we thought would be good, but it's not ever going to look like that, you know, There's always going to be reading into it a bit more.

Annie: Do you find that there is a consistency about whether people in Crossroads Arts or in other organizations you've been involved in, do they want to identify as disabled or neurodiverse with pride, or is it about being an artist, a mainstream artist?

Alison: Yeah, it's different for everybody. So obviously everyone's an individual and it's different for everybody. And coming, you know, coming to Mackay even you just sort of take because it's a regional area it is, if I talk about inclusive arts or if I talk about, "oh, what's your access requirements?" people don't necessarily know what we're talking about, even if they identify as having a disability. It's like "what's an access requirement?" So we're like, "Oh, well, that's something that you require for your access, so you can ask for this" oh so there's it's a lot of education within the community itself that goes into that as well so I mean, even us, you know, if we say deaf and disabled artists, we haven't sort of got to that point yet, we're just still, we're saying artists with disability and people with disability.

Alison: I know that, you know, places like Arts Access Victoria, you know, it's led by Carolyn Bowditch, who has come from the UK where the term disabled is a bit more with a capital D, They're loud and proud about it.

Annie: Yeah

Alison: we haven't had that movement here, the arts and disability movement that was very much in the UK that if I mean if I just said like we have an inclusive arts advisory group here of eight people.

Annie: Yeah,

Alison: I don't think most of them wouldn't have thought about it that much, about how they want to identify, right.

Annie: Yeah.

Alison: Yeah. So that group wouldn't. They're not really into the politics of language and up here it's not really into the politics of language. So if I go to conferences or. Yeah. More metro areas. It's like a real life talking point. Yeah. And up here, it's like. They're like, Oh, I don't know. And it changes over time. So, so what area? Yeah.

Annie: So from your experience in Sydney was it before you came up you were talking about metropolitan areas being different did that change over time from when you first were in disability arts?

Alison: Yeah, I've been. I guess it's changed with. Oh. I mean, how people identify themselves want to be referred to and identified so the language has come sort of up and down, like the evolution of the language of it all and so it's it seems like it's sort of constantly changing around how people are identifying or more like particularly around invisible disability, I think as well. I think people are more like, No, no, look, I will say you are entitled to have a quiet space. You're entitled to get the notes beforehand and read them. They're all things that are access requirements that a lot of people don't know. They are if they have an invisible disability or mental health issue that they are able to ask for, that's still very new. So it's being able to ask for it, knowing what they are and

then being able to articulate it and not feel embarrassed or shy about articulating those things is quite new.

Alison: I think particularly around things like autism and Asperger's, which are becoming more frequently diagnosed and more education about. Yeah, so that's I've noticed is yeah, is a change and even other things like me being an ally like that was never a word until a few years ago. I went, Oh is that what I am? oh, okay. So I was just doing the work with people kind of thing. But that whole language and that whole discussion, yeah, it's been new.

Annie: What about intersectional identities such as First Nation artists or LGBTQ?

Alison: I think that's all very new to that wasn't talked about or discussed it or I reckon the last only the last few years as well, particularly around queer people that identify as well or hadn't thought maybe they identified something in disability may also think, “Oh well, I'm neurodiverse and queer and, and have dyslexia. All right”, so all that. You know and becoming more because it's when it's more spoken about I guess becoming more able to are more proud of who they are, so who they are. That's been a shift and change. I mean, the whole bunch of people that don't even think about this stuff at all, but just coming to workshops and doing this, we’re just doing a show like, yeah, did you know there's all this study going on on that conference I went to in Norway? Oh, like it was an academic conference.

Alison: and I was like, Oh, it's such an eye opener for me because I guess I've been on the ground doing the work so heavily that yeah, a lot. It was just a lot of a lot of theories and a lot of talking about it that I was thinking about our cast of RAWCUS and they all have Down's syndrome. I wonder if RAWCUS know that they're been studied like this so heavily. They have no idea, they’re just doing the show. But I went, Oh, that's just the quite, quite eye opening the level of theories around it and the resources around that side of things that I hadn't gone into that much. So that was interesting. Yeah, for me. Yeah, Yeah.

Annie: So is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you think we should?

Alison: Look, I mean, the main thing, one of the things, not the main thing, is just the it'll be interesting to track, I guess, the different trajectories and the up and down nature of disability arts in terms of where there's been significant growth and then why that's collapsed and then how is that built back up again and how the funding has influenced that and what government was in at the time and all that kind of stuff because, you know, there's. A lot of there's people on the ground that get things happening, but then reach a point where, like myself and other colleagues can't keep going without position funding.

Alison: Yes. So, yeah, it's just sad to see what the nice thing actually coming up here. So we have three lots of multi-year funding which are really grateful for and one of the Mr. Tim Fairfax Family Foundation and they fund capacity building and I was like, “What?” And they went, Yeah, yep. So I couldn't believe it so my role was funded by Tim Fairfax Family Foundation because they knew that that was a gap. They said a lot of things are funded for projects and this is what I've been saying all along. I couldn’t believe it. So I was like, Oh, because if all those people that were trying to do all this stuff that are trying to build community and a good at doing it and getting these things happening off the smell of a rag, like if they were funded to do it but you know, I guess that's the arts in general in a way, but. I don't like then when someone just like a mainstream venue with just swoops in, takes the talent that we've been building, nurturing and creating, then gets all the media attention gets all the accolades and we're all in the background, exhausted from our little piecemeal bits of funding going, Yeah, yeah. Well, as soon as your show is finished, they'll come back to us and do their workshops and all that training and development that there's bunches of people doing unfunded because there isn't any tertiary education,

Alison: Further education so these small little orgs that pop up filling that gap for people and it's under-recognized and and then yeah, it's certainly yeah, you get disgruntled when the bigger players come in and have no connection to community but want you all the phone numbers of all the people you've ever worked with and I'm like. Yep and you're on a salary and I'm not sure, like and then, of course, I do it because it's, you want the opportunities for the people you're working with but when it happens one too many times, you start to really get a bit frustrated by that. Yeah, absolutely.

Annie: Yeah. Education has come up before actually, as something that's not as accessible. Yeah. So that is interesting.

Alison: Yeah. Just the pathway where to go. Yeah. If people are interested in continuing education or just being involved in workshops or. Yeah. So but there's definitely a lot more happening than when I started. Like 100%. Yeah, which is amazing. So it's really great. There's a lot more opportunity. So I knew when I left Sydney and Ruckus were there, I knew they'd have other places to go to to get involved in things. Yeah, it wasn't like a dearth, nothing. So that was really good.

Annie: Yeah. Well, thank you so much for your time today.

Alison: Oh, that's all right. Yeah. No, thanks so much. Yeah, it's great. And good luck with it all. Thank you. Yeah, thanks. We'll be in touch. Thanks, Annie. Thanks.