

Interviewee Name: Simone Flavelle

Interviewer Name: Jordan Fyfe

Date of Interview: 12th of September 2022

Location: Online via Zoom. Simone chose to include only the transcript on the website.

Length of Interview: 44 minutes

Transcript

Jordan: So, start by telling us a little bit about yourself. What do you think we need to know about who you are, where you're from, and what experience have helped you to become the person you are today to help us understand your work in disability.

Simone: I was born on Noongar country in Perth in 1963 and grew up with lots of adventures in the southwest and the Perth hills. I left school and went to Curtin University and graduated with a B.A. in English and with a major in theatre before being accepted into WAAPA for a Diploma of Performing Arts, which I completed in 1986. I worked as an actress in Sydney and Perth between 1987 and 1993. I returned to Perth to live and co-founded the WA Youth Theatre Company (WAYTCo) with several other WAAPA and VCA graduates in 1991, working as a facilitator and director of work driven by young people from 1991 to 1994. In 1993, WAYTCo were asked to facilitate a theatre workshop with adults with complex needs, living in an institutional setting at Rocky Bay in Mosman Park. That was a short-term project, but they invited us to come back. We wrote a grant for support from the Australian Council for the Arts and were funded for The Empty Chair Project in 1994, a 40 week community arts and cultural development project. On June the third, 1994. Disability in the Arts Disadvantage in the Arts Australia (DADAA) was incorporated following a report commissioned by the Department for Culture and the Arts.

Simone: In December of that year, Val Shiell, who worked for Rocky Bay as an Occupational Therapist and was a founding board member, invited me to sit on the board of DADAA WA. I held this position for about two years, whilst at the same time there was an arts and disability project with the City of Melville. A colleague who started at Rocky Bay in 1995, was invited onto the board of DADAA in that year. David Doyle has been Executive Director of DADAA for nearly 20 years. The two of us worked with

Val Shiell at Rocky Bay for two years, as a performance and writing Coordinator and David as visual arts and music Coordinator. I still see a lot of the adults we worked with, nearly 30 years ago. A long time ago. That was two years of working out of Rocky Bay and being on the board of DADAA and growing DADAA until we could appoint someone as an executive director in 1997. DADAA was based out of Artsource for a few years (1995-1997) and then out of a building on Victoria Quay (1997- 1999). I worked with DADAA officially from 1997.

Simone: The initial project in 1993 really spurred me to explore this work with (disabled) people with a disability and the arts. I felt completely privileged to have had the opportunities and experiences that I had had to date and was fortunate to direct and co-directed a number of works written by artists, disabled artists, some of whom I still work with, and also co-directed a number of mini arts festivals with DADAA from 1996 to 2001. In 1999, I had my first son, Hugo who has cerebral palsy and is blind in his right eye. I left DADAA at the end of 2000 and I worked as drama teacher at Perth College in 2001. The very first day I started, I found out I was pregnant and Angus was born later that year. In 2002, I was contracted to develop policy and procedure for DADAA, and then I was contracted again in 2003 to work in partnership with the Disability Services Commission on a long term partnership to provide arts, digital and community inclusion interventions with over 600 adults with intellectual disability living in group homes and hostels across the Perth metro region.

Simone: I had a renewed commitment to the work, following Hugo's birth in particular. In 2005 Angus was diagnosed with ASD and both of our sons required complex allied health interventions. I came back to the work with arts and disability experience and a depth of understanding from a lived experience as a parent. I worked with DADAA until October 2019, spearheading digital strategies in partnership with the Disability Services Commission and a large number of adults with intellectual disability living in government accommodation. In 2015, I began working with Julia Hales again. I had worked with Julia from 1995 to 1999, supporting her professional development to audition for WAAPA's one year program and collaborate with other disabled artists on performance projects. In 2015 I was able to support her get into the Sync Leadership Program, an Australia Council for the Arts Initiative. A grant followed to support the development of 'You Know We Belong Together', on which I became an originating producer for the Perth Festival in 2018. I also supported Tina Fielding to develop Sparkles, a 12-minute short film funded by Screenwest.

Jordan: It does. Was it all smooth sailing or was there tensions and conflicts while you were doing this work?

Simone: Of course there were tensions and conflicts. Major early ones were around telling the story to government to help decision makers understand the importance and impact of the work. It really wasn't until there was a State Minister who held both Arts and Disability portfolios in the late nineties that DADAA gained traction in terms of government understanding. In 1998, I was also the coordinator of the DADAA National Network, which is now Arts Access Australia, based in WA for a year, which meant that we were able to get a sense of what was happening in other states. There were tensions in that as well. I mean, Victoria obviously established Arts Access Victoria, much earlier. Queensland had Access Arts. At that time the major tensions on that national network were around competing for national funding. The best thing that happened for that national network was in 1995 the Australia Council recognised they needed to do something to address inequity and they implemented a disability access and inclusion plan.

Simone: I was in those early meetings in 1995, 96, 97, 98, because they funded the national network position. So, there were state tensions. There were national tensions. I think a lot of the tension came from the need. There's just such huge need and also helping families and service providers understand the role that the Arts could play in providing disabled people with choice and control, and also valuing a disabled artist or a person with a disability, valuing what they could contribute. So yeah, the tensions were there always and they're still there, but in a different way. People now understand what it is that we were talking about back in the nineties and WA was the last state to create an arts and disability organisation. Or maybe Northern Territory was and Canberra ACT. But we were definitely behind South Australia, Victoria, Sydney, New South Wales and Queensland in terms of establishing this type of service organisation.

Jordan: And what motivates your work today? How has your work now changed from how you worked in what you've told me so far?

Simone: The way I work has always been artist driven with the work that I directed written by disabled artists and I was really an outside eye. Back in 97 and 98, 99 in

particular. I think about that early work with Julia and learning how to always work on facilitating artists' narratives or the person who was developing the skill or wanted to have something to say. I don't believe my work has changed in terms of that part of the process, but it has with the advent of the NDIS and leaving DADAA. I now work with a very flexible disability support provider which focuses on individualised approaches. I now work with artists who come to me internally from that organization, and some external artists who've worked with me for many years. They've really shaped how I work and what we work on now is a much more career focused. More about professional development and supporting artists to apply separately or as collectives for work that they want to develop together. So that's how my approach has changed. Independent artists and busy in a different way.

Jordan: Are you currently presenting work where you'd like to be presenting work, or do you feel like there are places that you'd still like to access beyond what you've currently got access to?

Simone: I think there's always going to be... you know, spaces that need to be opened up for presenting, watching. You Know We Belong Together was presented in the Studio Underground Theatre and the second year on the Heath Ledger stage, both at the State Theatre Centre of WA. They've just recently performed at the at Southbank in London and at the Lyceum in Edinburgh at the Edinburgh Festival. So that is a great achievement for those artists, those performers and that company. For a major performing arts company, an MPA to have supported Julia and the other artists to create that work and support the touring of that work, I think is a great milestone. In saying that there are other spaces and companies that have a long way to go. You Know We Belong Together is performing at the Opera House next week (2022), in the drama theatre, but that is a rare example of what can happen when it all works and all comes together. There are many performance spaces and theatres that have inaccessible dressing rooms, green rooms. There are spaces that really need to address their access before they can actually include. But, you know, a lot of adaptations have been made with various artists. We just did the performing lines Kolyang Lab up at the Blue Room Theatre...

Simone: ...and there were five artists in that lab who used wheelchairs and had to go up and down one at a time in the lift. And there's no toilet that they could access

upstairs and we had to improvise. So those sorts of things really do need to change. That's a heritage building, like a lot around Fremantle. Victoria Hall, for example. These buildings need access issues addressed so that artists can comfortably be included in the arts ecology. It's not as difficult for a visual artist with a disability to have their work presented in mainstream space, such as the Art Gallery or PICA or Lawrence Wilson PICA presented Patrick Carter's exhibition YEDI / SONGS for the 2021 festival over here in Perth.

Jordan: No, this is great insight. Thank you. Do you think that in the past people were aware of the work that you were doing, all the work of your peers? When you first began.

Simone: When we first began. Look, when you say people, who do you mean?

Jordan: Well. Yeah. The general public.

Simone: Some of the general public. We had a lot of support from philanthropists to start with. We really grew the organization off the back of donations, Lotterywest and small grants from the Department of Culture and the Arts. There was an awareness and it was a very charitable approach. I don't think they really understood the value of the work. I think it was very much about, you know, these poor people with a disability, you know? Isn't that lovely that they get an opportunity, you know, that sort of understanding just because of where the practice was at that stage in WA in particular.

Jordan: And do you think that that perception has changed?

Simone: In some circles here. I think in the arts sector it is changing. And that's through many years of artists presenting their work. I think in the disability sector, there's been a lot of development however, there's still an attitude that it's hard for people with disability to get employed let alone as artists. Also that the arts is not necessarily a strong employment prospect...for anyone.. I know a lot of disabled artists who are getting employed now and they're declaring against the disability support pension that they are receiving income. So back to your question. I think there has been a shift and I think there's still some way to go.

Jordan: Do you think that art in this space is political? Do you think the art should be political? And how do you think the people in the disability arts space that you work with think about politicizing art.

Simone: Some of the artists I work with, I support to make political statements or they're mentors or collaborators they're working with do, and they're very clear about that, that they want to do that. So for example, a few artists I work with recently had an exhibition as part of City of Fremantle's Ten Nights in Port Festival. It's a photographic exhibition and it was called Claiming Space. And that grew out of one in particular feeling like he wanted to inhabit spaces that were inaccessible to him. So, he created a bar that is attached to his chair and he had a photographic series of him in various spaces around Fremantle with people gathered around as a social experiment, if you like. The other artist's work less politically driven but together, their work was considered a political statement. Another artist, a Noongar man with Down syndrome, makes work about longing for family and country and being sad about things. About going from a hospital setting out to the bush. He doesn't consider that political. He considers that story. He wants to tell a story. So I think there's that type of artist who makes that type of work without realizing what they're doing is political, even though we may talk it through with them. .

Simone: His mum is very much part of that process. I think that performers, when they present themselves and they have obvious disability are making a political statement because people are not used to seeing performers with a disability on our stages and screens, There are other performers from around the country, but particularly in the Western Australian context, there are performers who spring to mind where just by being on stage or screen they are making a statement. Maybe eventually that will diminish as we see more representation of disabled artists on stage and on screen. We're seeing it on the ABC now with journalists who have visible disability. I think the more people see that representation, the less political and the more about the work. So, the artist would then have to... identify that that's what they wanted to do and that's the position they wanted to take.

Jordan: I'm identifier. Identifier. Sorry. On identity, do you find that there is a consistency about whether people want to identify as disabled, neurodiverse etc.. With

pride or is it just about being another artist? And do you find that this position has changed over time or if there is any consistency about how people wish to identify?

Simone: The term 'Disability Pride' has been mentioned more frequently recently. There's a spectrum in terms of where people sit in and with their identity. I work with artists who have had a disability from birth who... that's just who they are. They don't consider it an issue. And then there are artists where it's been an issue for them and their development and they are now reacting to the issues that they've experienced in terms of barriers. And then there are other artists who want to be part of the mainstream. Everyone I work with wants to be included and/or wants to belong to the mainstream arts ecology. But it's how confident they feel within their identity. With their identity. I think there's such a spectrum, and work with artists who identify across that spectrum and in an organization that promotes inclusion and non-segregated settings. A lot of the work I do with artists is about promoting disability pride and belief in self and building the capacity of the sector to include. And training. I've been advocating for performance training since the 1990s and think they're (the training institutions) more ready now than they've ever been because it's been demonstrated that artists with a disability and their stories and artworks have an audience.

Jordan: Do you think that there are differences in the way that artists who have intersectional, who have intersectional identities, such as First Nation artists or LGBTQI artists, do you think they think differently about the politicizing of art. Do you think there is?

Simone: I could think of two artists, one I've spoken about, who wants to talk about his culture and his cultural experience, and he wants other people to understand his culture. I think he is very aware what he is sharing with audiences. The other artist is very conscious that she wants to share the fact that people with Down syndrome are sexual beings and in her case, you know, she is interested in women and has created a web series about this. So it's it's very interesting space because it's not consciously spoken about and everyone's very nervous about sex and intimacy in the disability sector. But it's normal for both of those artists. It's where they come from. Not everyone wants to do that. There might be some other artists who might be intersectional, but they might not want to make statements about it.

Jordan: And that's all. Is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you would like to talk about?

Simone: I think the advent of the NDIS has changed the landscape considerably. I think we've got to be careful not to keep people 'keep people in their place'. I don't think it's all about the artist with a disability charging into the arts world. I think it's about the arts world, whatever that looks like, learning how to make space and how to listen and how to slow down. How do we, honestly, ethically make space for people with difference when we have this competitive environment where people are struggling to gain some traction in the funding body landscape. Where people need to get things done quick, quick, quick, quick and demonstrate quick, quick, quick, and everyone's in a hurry. So, I think that's a challenge: real inclusion and the care that needs to be taken around people is considerable.

Simone: The Australia Council has continued to support the development of artists with a disability and companies like Back to Back and Restless have really led the way in terms of what can happen when you've done this work over many years. They've had great artistic achievement whilst at the same time creating major social impact with young people working alongside one another with and without a disability. So that's that's been a really interesting company to watch over the years as well as Back-to-Back and what's happened with them recently winning the Ibsen Award. I think there are some shining examples of artistic inclusion in our country. Perth Festival 2016 to 2019 with Wendy Martin as Artistic Director championing Artists with a disability, particularly established international artists such as Claire Cunningham, Jenny Sealey and Caroline Bowditch. I think these years of Perth Festival were milestones for WA. And that coincided with the implementation of the NDIS in Western Australia.

The establishment of the DADAA National Network in 1994/95, which then became Arts Access Australia and the ongoing support of the Australia Council of that network contributed to increased agency and visibility. And You Know We Belong Together for the 2018 Perth Festival, I think that was a major milestone.

Jordan: I'll let you look at them and then I'll, I'd love to know how you think that the NDIS has changed the landscape just a little bit more elaboration on that.

Simone: A lot of people and it still happens even with the NDIS, were told what they could do and couldn't do and that happened a lot with organisations that received block funding. With block funding and I know this firsthand from having both our sons in block funded programs, you don't have any choice and control. What the NDIS has done, if it's used properly, is provide people with that choice and control. It can also continue to trap people because they don't know what that looks like and it does take a little more effort to start with to support a person to have that choice and control. I can use an artist I work with as an example. She spent 20 years working on projects that were offered to her by non-disabled people in organisations. They were not driven by her and then she got to the SYNC Leadership program in 2015 (Australia Council for the Arts initiative) and around that same time, she received some individualized funding. She created a major work that has had great success and

Simone: a whole bunch of people in the industry were able to open the doors but what it did was give her the power to make a choice about where she went. What I've found interesting is that she's really helped me to learn about how to support someone to develop a career, and she now employs me as an exec producer. I work on the bigger planning picture and she has a more day to day producer. So she's teaching people from the sector how to best support and collaborate and work with her. Her story is a really interesting story. Without that individualized funding, she would not have that purchasing power to choose who to support her to operate within the arts environment to progress her career. That arts environment is reliant on people being super literate, able to be competitive, writing grants. She can sit alongside myself or someone else and describe what she wants to do/create, and then we can help her organize that in the context of what that government department might want.

Jordan: It does, yeah, that was great.

Simone: The NDIS offers people great choice and control. And that's really the model that I'm working with now, matching a much smaller number of people who want 1 to 1 mentoring, career and project development to arts mentors.

Jordan: Right. That seems like a good place to end it if you don't have anything else to say.

