

**Interviewee Name:** Jenny Simpson

**Interviewer Name:** Jordan Fyfe

**Date of Interview:** 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2022

**Location:** Curtin University TV studio

**Length of Interview:** 30:35 minutes

## **Transcript**

**Jordan:** Can you tell us a bit about yourself? Anything that you think we need to know where you're from. What helps your experiences. And what helps you become the person that you are today and working in the work that you are doing today?

**Jenny:** Cool. I'm Jenny Simpson and I'm the artistic director and CEO of Awesome Arts Australia, and that's a company based in Western Australia. But I didn't always live in Western Australia. I grew up in the wheat belt in New South Wales and a little place called The Rock, which is near Wagga Wagga. It was a, it was a farm kid life, but I had very musical parents who took us out to nursing homes on weekends, and we sang and performed and listened to lots of great stories. They also helped run a music festival, so I was very interested in music. So, I've always had an interest in the arts, and I found the arts to be quite a powerful force in my life. Having music to turn to if I was having a tough time was always really important to me. I went to ANU in Canberra and did my Bachelor of Arts. I worked in the corporate world for quite a long time and then eventually decided that my heart wasn't really in that, that I really wanted to work in a role that gave back to the community and had some meaning. I guess I thought that when I get to the end of my days, I'd like to feel like I'd made some kind of a difference left the world in a better place.

**Jenny:** And yeah, the job that I had at the time when I made that decision was the district sales manager of Schweppes Soft Drinks. So, I figured selling sugar to children was not going to get me where I wanted to be by the end of my life. I was making a contribution to diabetes, which just wasn't good. So, yeah, I eventually came into the arts. I decided to apply for a role in the arts, and I really haven't looked back. It's the kind of role where you, I think people never stop learning, but there's always a lot to learn in the arts because you're constantly being exposed to new ideas. And the things that people come up with is always amazing. So that's led me into a career. Well, I was I

was a festival director, and then I got offered the job at Awesome Arts back in 2007. So my focus in the last 15 years has been about children and their families and their educators, and trying to find ways of engaging young people with the arts that provides meaning to them. So that's what my life is now, and I feel very, really lucky to be in that space, actually. Yeah.

**Jordan:** And you work a bit with people with disabilities in the arts?

**Jenny:** I do. Disabilities wasn't a huge... I wasn't hugely conscious of it in the early part of my career. I just I'd never really put much thought into it. And then I had a couple of really interesting experiences. I saw a show in Adelaide called "Echolalia" by a woman whose name is Jen McArthur, and Jen identifies as being neurodiverse. It was the experience of having of being autistic and how it affected her in good ways and bad ways. I mean, this show was utterly joyous as well as really challenging, and kind of it got under my skin. I couldn't stop thinking about what this experience was. So I met with her and I said, "I'd really like to program your show at our festival, but I don't feel like I know enough about autism or I've engaged with anybody in that community. So, I don't feel like it's my right to just go blundering in and make assumptions." So, I said to her, I was actually in New Zealand. She's a New Zealand artist. I said, "so I'm going to let this show percolate in the back of my mind, and I'm going to try and see what I can do, but I can't make any promises." And it was really weird how the universe just lines things up. Shortly after that, I heard a phenomenal radio interview with a woman by the name of Judy Sharp.

**Jenny:** Her son is Tim Sharp, and he's a world renowned visual artist. He created the character "Laser Beak Man". That interview is so powerful I could not keep driving. I actually parked my car and sat in the car and listened to it, parked off Canning Highway. I just could not believe her story. How phenomenal this young man's art is and what it means to him, what it means to her and what it's been to their lives. And then the weirdest thing happened. A short time after that, I happened to be in Brisbane at a festival, and the festival director introduced me to these two people with this beautiful exhibition, and it was Judy and Tim Sharp. It took me a while to actually be even able to speak to them because I was fangirling them so hard. Judy is an incredibly gracious woman, and Tim is an extraordinary young man. They were very kind to me. I was able to just sit with them for several hours at their exhibition while they were meeting lots of

parents and families and talking about Tim's work. So, I just got to hang out with them and just get a little bit of an inkling into what this life was and what the challenges might be. And at some point in time, I thought this festival was incredibly evolved because they'd advertised this thing called the Autism Day Out.

**Jenny:** I thought, wow, how does the festival have an Autism Day Out? What did they do? How do they connect with this community? I'm really interested. As it came to pass, they did nothing. It was just a marketing exercise and that troubled me deeply because I felt that it was going to be giving a whole bunch of families some expectations which might not be aligned with their best interests. And Judy expressed this to me as well. She said she was worried. So, from that sort of concern I had, I got thinking, I thought well, what does this mean to me? I direct a children's festival. This is a children's festival that clearly wants the autistic community to support it, but is going about it all the wrong way. So, what does the right way look like? And that was basically I became a bit like a dog with a bone then, it's like, what do I do to make our festival a place that is completely welcoming and completely OK for people to be themselves? I had an idea didn't sleep that night. I stayed up all night. I couldn't sleep. I went back to Judy the next day and said, "I've got a crazy idea, but I need you to tell me a few things. What's it been like for you as a parent when you've gone out to events? What have been the big challenges?" So, we had a really honest conversation and I said, "look, this idea I have - no one can understand what autism is for any individual.

**Jenny:** Everybody's different. Everybody's unique. Everybody has different likes, dislikes, and capacities. So, the person who is, in the context of children, who would know the most about a child would be the parent or the carer. So, what if I was to create a guide that gave as much information so a parent could make a decision about whether their child would love it or hate it, or somewhere in between?" And she said, "well, it's worth a crack. Have a go." So, I came back to Perth and I connected with DADAA, who were already good friends. I said, "I want to do this, but it needs to be completely informed by both families and people with lived experience. I can't second guess what this is for people." So, they created a couple of focus groups for me, and that's where I started having big conversations. So that was where the journey started. So, in 2014, in partnership with DADAA, we presented a great project where a whole bunch of children published their own books and launched them. We had "Tristan's

Monsters”, which is an exhibition at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, with a young man by the name of Tristan Goldsmith, who's an extraordinary artist.

**Jenny:** We had “Laser Beak Man” at the festival, his exhibition, Tim and Judy. I proudly had “Echolalia”, presented as a piece of theatre at the festival. So, in every single festival venue, we had artists from who identify as having disabilities in every one of our venues. And I wanted to know how that felt in terms of programming a festival and having the first iteration of the guide. So, we were really saying welcome, please enter into this with a spirit of curiosity and tell us what you think. It was so successful. I'm always more than happy for anybody to come back to me and say, “that doesn't work for me. That doesn't work for my child. You need to think about this.” That's always really helpful. Probably the thing that concerned me the most is that everybody just kept coming back and saying, “Amazing, this is great.” So that started us off, that started off the conversation within our team about this and about how we how can we be as inclusive and as accessible as we possibly can be. So, it's been a journey over the years, I've made sure that we've had every art form in our festival, artists with disabilities represented in every art form in our festival. We have the guide and we keep expanding it and honing it and working on it.

**Jenny:** And we've also had companies like Sensorium who make work for, for children mostly for children with disabilities – I was going to say young children but I think it is just children. So, and that's been really powerful as well. We've also partnered with Kalparrin on the Super Power Kids Project, and we've welcomed families into our festival in a variety of ways and had conversations with them. So that's been a really amazing journey for us because we've learned so much and our team, I think it was last year, we've been talking about, you know, what are our values and how do we see ourselves in this space, in the disability space? And we're very we're really consciously now working to the social model of disability. And we've put that on our website because we subscribe to this and it is how we want to be. And if there's anything we're doing that is concerning to you or not consistent with this, we'd like to have an important conversation and learn from you. So we've really opened ourselves up, which is quite different to the way a lot of festivals run. And it's been great. It's been really great. The hard thing is...just...So we've done – the guide we did was an ASD [Navigational] Guide, so I feel really confident that we're doing well because I've also worked with

focus groups from Autism WA, so we've been having a really good conversation with that community.

**Jenny:** Now we want to broaden that out to just a much more broader accessibility guide because people are telling us that that guide is really useful in a number of ways. So, the challenge for us is to make sure that it is. And I think the only way we're going to do that is to invite people to come in and experience what we have and then to listen about it, to it, to them. So yeah, it's been it's been great being in that space. I've learned so much. It's - I love - I've had so many experiences where it's just been incredibly empowering. We had a young boy a few years ago whose parents I know they'd never been able to discuss, he has Asperger's. They've never been able to discuss it with him. It was the elephant in the room in all their lives, and we had this beautiful theatre, a circus show. And the star of the show was a young, a 13-year-old boy [with Aspergers', and he told his story. So that young fellow who was attending the festival, he actually came out of the show and said, 'Mum, it's OK. Got Asperger's, live with it'. It's great to see him. He's nailing it at life. I'm going to nail it at life too.'

**Jenny:** And you know, his mum just cried in relief. And she said, you know, an arts experience was something that made him feel empowered and able to talk. He saw himself being successful like the successful artist. So, all our artists are professional artists. They are all successful. They don't get any free kicks. They've got to be as good as any other artist. And there are plenty of artists with disabilities who are top shelf artists. I have no trouble finding artists. So yeah, I think it's really great. We had the Down Syndrome Play Group came to this international dance work that we had over from Glasgow. It has a cast of four dances and the two lead dancers have Down Syndrome. They are superb dancers at the top of their careers. They could perform in any international arts festival in the world. And so these beautiful young families with their gorgeous children were like, "oh my goodness, look at how beautiful these performers are and how amazing they are." And sometimes people just need to have that reinforced back to them. I'm sure they know it, but to have somebody else say, we think you're pretty amazing too is a very powerful message. So yeah, so that's been the festival and it's just been a really great journey. That's a very long answer.

**Jordan:** Was it all smooth sailing? Was there any tensions or conflicts within the community?

**Jenny:** There always are, because you just can't assume that everybody is the same or they think the same thing or they want the same thing. Very few tensions within the ASD community. And I take that to be because sadly, I don't think there's very much available to them. So, when somebody comes along and says, "we see you, we're thinking of you and we want to engage with you," they're often so overwhelmed with gratitude. They're not very critical. I'd like them to get into a space where they can be more critical and go, Oh, that's normal. We should just have access to this everywhere. This is how it should be and to be more critical. So, we haven't had a lot of tension there. The probably the most tension we had was working with the Deaf community, and that was more to do with the politics within that community. There's quite a divide between a couple of philosophies. So, they were quite keen to know which side of the divide we were on and we didn't really want to buy into that politics. We just wanted to see people as humans who have a right to enjoy arts experiences. So that was hard to navigate. And still, you know, we, we're trying to find a way to navigate that with them because, you know, I think their politics did get in the way. But we have children, Deaf children attend the festival and we really actively seek feedback. Because it's not only about – a lot of people say, "oh, just get interpreters, get Auslan interpreters. You're right, that's how you do it."

**Jenny:** I think that's only one part of the conversation. I can't assume that Deaf people like contemporary dance because there's no words in contemporary dance because a lot of people don't like contemporary dance. So, I'm actually much more interested in those conversations about, well, if I've got a show to present and it's physical theatre or it's contemporary dance, it's a non-verbal show. There are still cues in that show that assist with the storytelling. They might be sound cues. So, you know, in what? What do I need to do to make the story of this work accessible and, you know, for people to be able to enjoy it? So, I think there's bigger conversations and that's been a tension with the Deaf community because, we've had a couple of people, tell us to just get interpreters and it's like, well, no, that's not good enough. Interpreters is the first step. There's a bigger conversation. I'd like to get your input into how we program. So that's been a bit tricky. But yeah, mostly people have been terrific. And the people, I think one of the hardest things a lot of families have to fight all the time.

**Jenny:** They are fighting the government. They're fighting for the right to get a new chair or a new piece of equipment. And it's really tough for them. So sometimes they'll enter a conversation with us in their battle gear. I can remember somebody on Facebook a couple of years ago somehow didn't see in our advertising that carers are free, assumed that they weren't. And so just delivered this tremendously ferocious tirade on social media about how terrible we were. I just privately messaged them and said, "Look, our print must be too fine. Like, maybe we've not flagged this well enough and I'm sorry if that's the case, but carers are most definitely free and we wouldn't have it any other way. So, I'm sorry that you've this has caused you stress". And their response straight away was. "Oh, oh, actually, I forgot you're nice people. You're not the government who I'm fighting for my child's rights". So, I think sometimes there are tensions that are other people's tensions because they're in a fight constantly for the rights of their families, and we can get a bit caught up in that. So our approach is always to be gentle and to listen and to take on board everything and be really respectful. And anything that started out as tension has really, you know, they generally get resolved.

**Jordan:** What about tensions from outside the disability community? Have you had anything like any feedback from people, negative feedback or anything like that?

**Jenny:** No, I think. I think people in all areas of the festival ecology are pretty willing to learn. They might have quietly question my decision to bring a company from Glasgow or to program an artist in residence in partnership with DADAA. I think always the artist's work or the artist's performance speaks for itself. I've never actually had anyone come to me and say. "You programmed them just because they've got a disability." Oh, bring it on if they do! I'll certainly tell them what these artists' qualifications/credentials are, and they're probably, better than most people's credentials. The artists that we work with are all trained professional artists, so they can match anyone in terms of their eligibility to be in an arts festival. I haven't had anybody express any resentments. Yeah, I get the feeling people are learning. I'd like people to actually come to the festival and say, "oh, that's interesting. That was an interesting programming choice. I'd never considered how much talent exists in that cohort of people in our community."

**Jordan:** That's great. And what about on that note, do you think that there is a public perception of Disability Arts within Australia? Or do you think that it's the perception is quite unseen, and it's good that you're promoting it?

**Jenny:** I think it's unseen largely, and to be honest with you, if somebody comes and sees an amazing show at my festival and it's an artist who has a disability, it doesn't faze me so much that they don't even know that others have got a disability. Like, I'd just like to get to the stage where we don't have to tell anybody they're just there. To me, that's the social model of disability in action. You know, we're not "accommodating" people. They are there in their own right. I think that's really important. I think in terms of our community, there's increasing awareness across the board. I have seen some phenomenal disability advocacy from young people in the last two or three years that has blown my mind. There are some fierce and talented advocates coming through and... The tipping point happens when individuals change the way they think. And I think we're approaching a tipping point. And certainly there are some high profile disability advocates. There are a couple of high profile ones, but there are a lot who are also working at that next level. You know, they're not on *everybody's* Facebook feed, but they're on a lot. So, I think I think we're shifting as a community into, well, firstly just accepting that people with disabilities should be doing everything else that everybody else can do. And I hope we get to a point where we don't notice anymore,

**Jenny:** it's like everybody's just doing it. We don't even have to consider whether they have a right to do this or they have to be accommodated. They just *are* accommodated. They are factored into thinking and design at the outset. When we plan things, we plan for everyone to be included. We don't plan this and then have to do all these fixes to make it accessible. So, I think we're moving that way. We've got a long way to go, but certainly the conversations I have, there's a lot more mindfulness about that. Yeah, community sentiments very slow to change, but it's I think it's it is and it's changing across the board, you know, really mean, particularly in sport like the likes of Dylan Alcott. I mean, even [legends like] Louise Savage. I went to the museum for the first time, when it opened and her wheelchair was in there. And I can remember the day she won the medal at the Paralympics and that [moment] I just could not believe I was standing there in front of [her actual racing] the chair. It was such a big moment because I honestly didn't think it was possible to go that fast and, the level of athleticism required and strength. And yeah, the fact that [Louise Savage is being celebrated] at the museum, you know, her wheelchair is in there. I don't know if it's called a wheelchair – a racing chair. Whatever that apparatus is called. It's – like she was a phenomenal



athlete. And so that was a moment in time when I was a bit younger that just made me stop.

**Jenny:** And so, I think people like Dylan Alcott are creating moments in time for people as well “oh, hang on a minute.” And the fact that he became Australian of the year and just said, “we’re coming for your jobs”. I think it's just fantastic. You know, he's got a great podcast and he's doing a lot of advocacy. He's got a lot of people around him doing advocacy. So, I think, yeah, it's changing. It's changing in the arts slowly, but there's a lot more grassroots work going on that's supporting artists with disabilities to come through because there's one thing me saying I program work that has professional artists who have disabilities. I've got to find those professional artists and there are plenty of them out there. But certain types of disabilities - There seem to be a lot of neurodivergent people doing visual arts. That seems to be something that works very well for some of them. But there still needs to be more grassroots work done to make sure that anybody with any kind of disability is able to make a choice to be, to be an artist or to train as an artist. We're not there yet.

**Jordan:** And in your experience with working with artists with disabilities, do you find that there's like a consistent consistency in how artists would like the public to identify with? Would they like to be identified as being disabled publicly or do you think that's kind of a very individual thing?

**Jenny:** Yeah, language is really changing. So particularly in autism, a couple of years ago, you needed to say somebody has autism, now there's a lot of advocates say “I'm autistic or they're autistic.” We have made it a conscious policy to ask. So, we basically say, how would you like us to describe you and identify you? So, then we know we're getting it right, so it's for us, it's always about permission. We have a board member who identifies as being autistic. And I was having to write some stats up for our funding and I just thought, Oh, I just need to make sure, you know? So, I rang my board member and said, “I'm going to be very audacious and ask you some questions, but it's important to me that I represent you correctly”. And they said to me, “I just can't believe you did that. I wish everybody did, because it's so much easier to deal with somebody asking you an open and honest question than having to correct people all the time”. And so our policy is to always ask - so somebody who doesn't want to be identified as being disabled, that's totally cool. We had Adam Kelly present his show, his beautiful show,

[ARCO] at our festival last year. When asked “how would you like to be described?” He said, “I am an autistic gentleman,” which I thought was very lovely. So, on opening night I was actually able to say “Adam is an autistic gentleman,” and he just smiled and nodded because that's what gives him joy and meaning. That's how he wants to be identified publicly. So yeah, we don't enter into the politics of identity as such. We just ask people. Yeah.

**Jordan:** Great. That's really all of my questions. Is there anything else that you feel that we should have talked about or haven't covered or um.

**Jenny:** I'd like to see more people from the disability community getting involved in arts management. There aren't many. There are a couple of notable people in Western Australia who are amazing. I think they might feel a bit lonely from time to time. It'd be really nice. So yeah, I have conversations with teaching institutions, you know, WAAPA is one that I teach at. It's always good to have conversations with them about what training is available because they train arts managers, and it'd be just really great to see our sector populated, like, more roundly. Something that has really impressed me is – I have become friends – you probably know - Alexandra Helens, she's the chair of neurodiversity at BHP, and I caught up with Alexandra on a call the other day and she told me that the BHP intern program has been expanded. Once upon a time, they were taking only people who are autistic and it was computer software type work, but now that intern program rolls right across any role in the organisation. And they've broadened it out to include ADHD and bipolar.

**Jenny:** I think that is the kind of leadership that we need across the board rather than assuming that if, you're autistic, you must be good at maths or computer programming. The fact that they've started with that, they've learned and now they're broadening it out and they're welcoming people into their organisation across the board and they've broadened out the categories of disabilities. I can only hope that that keeps broadening, but I feel that that like that is what needs to happen everywhere. You know, that kind of leadership where we, you know, we're going, right? Well, what are all the different jobs? How can we ensure that they're available and inclusive? Yeah. I was just so impressed by what she told me the other day and I thought, that the world should be heading in that direction, especially, you know, with these big companies that aren't necessarily great at that. So, yeah. I hope that's OK.

**Jordan:** Yes, that's great. That was very good.