Anthea Williams:

Hi, this is Anthea Williams and welcome to 2RPH.

Anthea Williams:

This week on Activated Arts, we're talking about comedy and disability. I'm joined by Madeleine Stewart and Alistair Baldwin. Madeleine has been performing standup since she was 16 years old. She's also an actress and theater maker. Madeleine recently received the AMP Tomorrow Makers award for her work in creating Crips and Creeps, Sydney's first accessible comedy club.

Anthea Williams:

Alistair Baldwin is a writer and performer and you'll know his work from shows like Get Cracking, where he played Matthew in season two. He also writes for The Weekly and Hard Quiz, and was the Wheeler Center Hot Desk Fellow for 2018. Alistair is also one half of a comic duo, Nemeses.

Anthea Williams:

So, I think it's pretty much no surprise that the month I'm looking at comedy, is also the month where all of my guests have lived with disability from birth. And I'm kind of in that situation too. I've had rheumatoid arthritis since I was two, so I think that basically counts. So, I guess my first question is, do you think growing up with disability is what made you a comic? Madeleine, do you want to start?

Madeleine Stewart:

Yeah, I was actually asked this question the other day and it really kind of threw me because I thought like, is it? Is this why? It plays its part, but I think comedy is just naturally a way that people can protect themselves, I guess, if they feel a little different to the pack, I guess, when you growing up. I think I've always just been funny and being funny growing up, when you have a disability, it enhances your ability to feel included in a group and making friends. And I think that's probably where it began.

Madeleine Stewart:

But being a comedian, I think that started when I saw Adam Hills in [crosstalk 00:01:56] and I realized that the people in the community, who would usually look at me with pity, were staring at Adam Hills and like, "Oh wow, we adore him." And I'm like, I want that. And so that's sort of what got me into comedy, is that I already had this kind of natural skill of making people laugh and making people like me in that way, and then kind of wanting people to see me as more than a person with disability, if that makes sense.

Anthea Williams:

Yeah, that makes perfect sense to me. What do you think Alistair? Do you think that's what pushed you into comedy?

Alistair Baldwin:

I think it might be. My feeling is that so much of comedy is about subverting expectations, and being disabled, or being visibly disabled in public, people just project expectations on you, a flood of expectations. So it really, I don't know, they're doing a lot of the heavy lifting and then that leaves you all this room to really just completely cut them down in a funny way. Like, one of my favorite jokes that I do is, one of the ones that I guess, a defensive joke in public when strangers on trams or whatever will come up to me and point at my leg braces and ask, "What are those for?" And then I tell them, "attention. I'm so glad it's working." And so I think it's, I don't know whether it's necessarily, maybe I would have found comedy anyway, but in a field where it's all about subverting expectations, and in a society where people still have so many incorrect expectations and assumptions about disability, comedy and disability just go hand in hand. And it's no surprise that all of the funniest people I know are disabled.

Anthea Williams:

Totally. I know on the Nemeses, one of the Nemeses recordings, there's a moment where you talk about people who don't have physical or well, not just physical, physical and neurological, or aren't neuro diverse and what do you call them? You call them like physically and mentally boring. And I'm like, oh shit, I've actually used that line. My partner is neuro diverse as well. We've had conversations about if we'll have children, and the answer is we probably won't, but he's like, oh yeah, they will have a lot of stuff, they'll have arthritis and they'll be neuro diverse and I'm like, yeah, that sucks that they'd have arthritis, that's shit, I've been in a lot of pain, but why would we want a neuro-typical child? How fucking boring would that be?

Alistair Baldwin:

So boring.

Anthea Williams:

Can you imagine? We'd be so, we'd be sitting around the kitchen table with them going, we're so disappointed in you, your brain is just so linear.

Alistair Baldwin:

I have thought a lot about if I ever had a kid, and if it somehow ended up abled and I'm like, I'm not going to wake up on a Saturday morning to take it to football, or whatever. I think there might be a market, the local sperm banks don't let me donate, but I actually think there's a market if I pitch it as you want a really tired kid. So they're not constantly dragging you to swimming and ballet and footy and everything. Just manufacturer a little bit of a muscle wasting disease, nothing too heavy, but just the perfect sprinkling. I think that's actually the ideal child.

Anthea Williams:

So Madeleine, Alistair and I have a question to ask you.

Madeleine Stewart:

Oh gosh. Are you voting me out of the Big Brother house?

Anthea Williams:

I actually haven't planned this question previously with Alistair, but he is going to realize at this point that I did some research. So our question is, did you ride horses growing up?

Madeleine Stewart:

No, of course not. What the? No. I live in Campbelltown. I grew up in, there are no horses.

Anthea Williams:

Alistair, do you want to explain why I asked this question?

Alistair Baldwin:

Sure. Well, one, I feel absolutely blindsided. I often do ask other disabled people, whether they grew up riding horses, because it is a weird thing that I was made to do as a child, which is hippotherapy, a weird subsidized horse-riding therapy that happens in this country. That means that people who are disabled as children have about the same rates of riding horses as people who were child stars on The Saddle Club. And it is such a weird thing, and the reason Anthea knows about it is that I just read about it and growing up disabled, that anthology. But well before that, it's been a preoccupation that just for years I was put on a horse and told that it would be helpful, or curative, or whatever, and never quite worked.

Madeleine Stewart:

Like the steady clip clop of a horse's hooves. It's just the magic you need to be to [inaudible 00:07:04].

Alistair Baldwin:

Absolutely. The rhythm, the metronome. Maybe they were hoping that I would just, over time, fuse into a centaur. Then at the very least the horse half would be able-bodied. And then my brain could just be up here making it do human-y things.

Anthea Williams:

I grew up riding horses as well. I think I wrote-

Alistair Baldwin:

Oh my God.

Anthea Williams:

Yeah, I think I rode from when I was about six to about twelve. And it was only when I read your article that I suddenly had that realization of like, oh yeah, core muscles, that would have been quite good. It would have been good for things. And I'm terrible at doing things like catching balls and that kind of thing, because I just never practiced. But I do have a bit of confidence when it comes to like, oh yeah, I can get up on on a horse and do that. I know how to ride.

Madeleine Stewart:

Did you guys ever get sent off to those camps? My mom kept trying to send me to camp. You guys remember that? Like the special camp.

Alistair Baldwin:

Oh yeah.

Anthea Williams:

Well yeah, because I grew up in Dickensian England, yes. I used to go to the Crippled Children Society camps. And that's what it was actually called.

Alistair Baldwin:

Oh, that's [inaudible 00:08:12].

Anthea Williams:

Yeah, crip camp. And it wasn't saying it was the irony, like you would say with Crips and Creeps, there was no kind of empowerment of taking over that language. No, it was just the Cripped Children Society. I hated them. I absolutely hated them.

Madeleine Stewart:

My mom was always confused, like don't you want to go? It'll be so nice, and see other children like you. And I'm like, what the hell? Like I'm not here to be infantilized by these adults. I'm not going to sing Kumbaya and whatever. I don't know what they do there, but I don't want it.

Anthea Williams:

Look, I went once and I've got to tell you, I fucking hated it because everyone's got their great narrative of kids with disability, of course they;'re just naturally incredibly brave. Just breathing is brave, right? And I wasn't, and I could get myself hurt quite easily. Because you know, I had arthritis. I had the bones of an 80 year old in my little body, and I didn't want to hurt myself. And the people who were in my camp were constantly pointing at the children in wheelchairs saying, but this kid's doing it, so therefore they're far more disabled than you.

Madeleine Stewart:

Oh no.

Anthea Williams:

Just like people who had absolutely no training awareness of what actual disability issues or theory, et cetera. It was pretty hilarious.

Alistair Baldwin:

Amazing.

Anthea Williams:

But what I loved about your article Alistair, was you talked about how you actually were pleased that you spent time horse-riding because it was the time where you didn't have to pretend, being able to hang out with other kids who had disability. And I know that Vidya Rajan, who is your collaborator, has ADHD. Is working with people with disability something that you've continued to seek out in your career and in your life?

Alistair Baldwin:

Well, in the case of Vidya, I'd say we bonded far more over the fact that we're both from Perth, which I do consider a geographic disability, actually. So, in a way we've overcome that, and we've really come into our own on the East coast. No, but I think it is, I mean, it's lovely to work with other disabled people. Partly because it's just, I don't know, you have a shared understanding, and so you're not having to constantly explain why something is messed up, and why clearly we'll do this or that. I think when I've sort of worked on comedy things that tackle disability with a largely abled thing, I think they're surprised that, for me, I think the funniest way to talk about disability in a comedic way is to talk about abled people and to generalize about abled people. Because I really think we should just de-center them and talk about how weird Zumba is as a thing, and how we can't let them think that being a Zumba instructor is a real thing that they should really be doing with their lives. I think it's gross, and I think that should stop.

Alistair Baldwin:

But able to, so weird. And so I think it's the way to de-center abledness is to talk about them like they are this cohesive thing. Because that's how people talk about disability when, as you were just saying, disability is so diverse and you can't just have a neat roadmap for well, if you're not in a chair, you can do this, if someone in a chair can do this or whatever, it's not nuanced at all. So it's nice working with other disabled people because you don't have to explain stuff and they're not on edge when it's like, what if we made fun of abled people in this? Whereas, I don't know, a lot of abled people, when I make jokes about them, are shocked that there are jokes to be made about being abled. They're just completely taken off guard because they feel themselves as truly neutral.

Anthea Williams:

Yeah, yeah. They really do, don't they?

Madeleine Stewart:

They're just so weird. How could they [inaudible 00:12:12] that we're going to make jokes?

Alistair Baldwin:

And I can say this. My parents are abled, so I have the right to say that they're fucked up.

Anthea Williams:

Is that what was behind Crips and Creeps? Can you tell our audience a little bit about that, Madeleine?

Madeleine Stewart:

Oh, Crips and Creeps. I started Crips and Creeps in 2019 and it started because, in Sydney there are no accessible spaces. If you do a comedy, you're going up the stairs, okay. Or down the stairs. Or if it is accessible, it's like a really gross, seedy bar where there's always one drunk guy on the back with a cigarette being like, tell it, honey, you know? I was sick of asking comedy places to like, oh, could you get Auslan maybe one time, or could we maybe do this in an accessible space one time, so my friends can come? And then I was sick of that. So I just made my own. Yeah, it's really lovely. What's really great is obviously we're accessible, we do Auslan interpreting, it's wheelchair accessible. I only employ marginalized acts because, as we've mentioned before, normal people, normies are boring, really, aren't they? You don't want to listen to their jokes. They've not got anything to talk about.

Madeleine Stewart:

What I find really interesting though, is that I thought there would be heaps of people with disability coming along to the event. And look, there are quite a lot, but I find that it's a lot of young abled people who, or they've never been part of this kind of community, or part of the queer community. And they're just sitting there kind of like, [inaudible 00:14:01]. They're just learning, and they enjoy that the most, that they are subliminally being taught how to behave correctly through humor.

Anthea Williams:

Yeah, that's awesome. Hey, Alistair, how did you get into writing for TV?

Alistair Baldwin:

The short answer is that I applied to do a bachelor of screenwriting at the Victorian College of the Arts, which is actually the thing which pulled me out of Perth. So for that, in a lot of ways, it's like horse riding. It really just fixed that geographic disability. And then I was fortunate enough to be selected for this program called talent camp, which is essentially developing screen creatives from marginalized backgrounds over five days. And at the very end of it, they brought in some producers, and there was one that worked at Guesswork, which makes all good comedy shows in this country. And so I sort of said, I'm a big fan and I love comedy, and hosted comedy night, and I do improv, and it's the only thing I care about. And she was like, maybe we can get you a work placement.

Alistair Baldwin:

So I was able to do a eight week placement in the writer's room on the first season of The Weekly, not the first season, the fourth season. It was my first season. So in many ways it was the first season, of the iteration that matters. And by the end of it, they were like, do you just want to stay for the rest of the season? Since then, I've been going between there and Hard Quiz at that same production company. And it's a really great thing. And I just love writing jokes for other people as well. It's quite nice to break out of my own identity and just write for Tom Gleason, who is very tall and ginger. So he [inaudible 00:15:50] experienced feeling like an other, but he's just so fun to write for, for example.

Anthea Williams:

Oh yeah, he's got that brilliant kind of assertive voice that must just be really entertaining to get to say some of the nasty things that he says on that show.

Alistair Baldwin:

Oh, it's the best. I've always said that Tom Gleason is like a straight drag queen, because he will read you to your face and people adore him for it. But yeah, and that's sort of the path, but almost concurrent to that. I was also just tweeting a lot of stuff about abled people and Kate McLennan and Kate McCartney saw that, so they asked me to help write some jokes for season two of Get Cracking. So my main advice for anyone who wants to break into TV comedy is to get on Twitter, if you aren't already. It's sad that that is my main advice, but it truly is my main advice.

Anthea Williams:

Yeah. I love that episode of Get Cracking.

Alistair Baldwin:

The concept was so amazing because I think the Kates initially approached Jess Walton, who's just an incredible writer, to come up with an idea for a segment that would exist in a normal episode of the show. And then Jess came back with an outline for a whole episode. And the Kates were like, well, of course we're doing this. And that conversely meant that they could approach me to come up with ideas for segments and jokes and stuff like that. I owe it all to the Kates, but I also owe it all to Jess who was like, I'm actually going to give them more than what they asked for and create job opportunities for, I mean, we only got [inaudible 00:17:26] cast on that episode, apart from the Kates and, we hired a guide dog puppy. We did it all. It was wonderful.

Anthea Williams:

Yeah. And Kate Mulvany, I had never felt so seen. I actually, of course, know Kate from theater world. And I just rang her as soon as I saw it to say, thank you. Well Kates are like a national treasure in training. I don't think she'd get to be called a national treasure in your forties, but it's clearly where she's going. And I loved it when she called them muggles, I was just like, so brilliant. And I also just loved the Kates. I thought you've got to be brilliant people to make yourself look that terrible on screen. The way they treated your character, Matthew, was just too funny.

Alistair Baldwin:

Oh, it was fantastic. Yeah, the great thing about the Kates is that they, yeah, really ready to be the villains of that show.

Anthea Williams:

Yeah. And Madeleine, you started doing comedy when you were 16, which sounds really young. How come you started so young? How did that happen?

Madeleine Stewart:

Well, I think Alistair and I might have something in common.

Alistair Baldwin:

Oh no. [crosstalk 00:18:35]

Madeleine Stewart:

I think we both did Class Clowns, which is Melbourne comedy festival. It's a competition for teenagers to do comedy. Poor Justin Hamilton had to sit through my first comedy set. It was a sketch. It was awful. And then the following year I decided, lose the other people, they're dragging me down. I'm going to do stand up. And then I went really well. I was a national grand finalist. I know I'm too old to be like, I was a national grand finalist when I was 17, but I'm still holding onto that, okay?

Alistair Baldwin:

Oh, Madeleine. That's my exact story, was that by virtue of being in Perth, it was very easy to be the best person in the state. For the people who had heard of Class Clowns, which, not to throw shade in the comedy festival's marketing, was not that well known as a thing in WA. So there was no heats, it was just the state final. It was me and three other people. So I still, as a 25 year old, am claiming my 16 year old national grand final.

Madeleine Stewart:

I think it's really weird though, going from something so lovely and wholesome, like a lovely little comedy competition with all these celebrities helping you out, to suddenly you're doing gigs in pubs, and you're not old enough to be in the pub. So you have to get an adult from inside to claim they'll watch you, and make sure you don't drink booze. It was kind of weird. And then it also like brings up the idea of being a young woman in comedy, being in pubs, all these adult men being male comedians. I don't know how else to describe them. They're just gross. But I feel like sometimes my friends, other female friends, will be like, oh, there's so much sexual harassment in the comedy world. And I'm like, oh, not so much for me. And then I'm like, is it because I'm disabled? No one wants to sexually harass me? Is it a good thing, or?

Anthea Williams:

Oh babe. The stats don't bear that out. I really wish the stats [crosstalk 00:20:42]. Yeah.

Madeleine Stewart:

But I find in the comedy, like the rest of the world, obviously, but in comedy world, everyone's really, really nice to me. And I don't know whether it's because I'm lovely or whether it's because I'm disabled. So I'm going to start treating people awfully, and being a massive bitch, and just being like, now we'll know.

Anthea Williams:

I think it sounds great. Let's see what you can get away with.

Alistair Baldwin:

Absolutely. But people don't notice. I feel like I've really had to perfect being a dick because people just don't see it when it's coming from a disabled person. They're like, oh, they're so sweet. And I'm like, no, I'm being really mean to you, right now. You and me, let's all three do a... Let's do a heist, you know? [inaudible 00:21:34]

Anthea Williams:

Oh yeah. Hey, so what's next? Alistair, do you want to start out?

Alistair Baldwin:

Sure. Well, at the moment I'm in development with two projects, which people always say they're disability themed and I'm like, I've just put disabled people in it. Because for me, they're my neutral character base. And for me to write an abled person is more effort. So they are disability themed in the sense that there's more than one token disabled person in it. So I think I really am keen to hopefully help with on-screen disability representation in TV comedy. And because I think, even in dramas, I don't know if people are used to seeing trauma and suffering, but I want people to know that we're actually, preternaturally funny as well.

Anthea Williams:

Yeah, I think that's interesting that you say like, is my work disability themed or not, or am I just writing what I know? I know I read one article because you have a lot of essays that you've written, which I really appreciate. You talked about how it'd be great to just have disabled characters as characters who happen to have disability. And I completely agree with that. And how storytelling often uses disability when they lack plot, or they don't know how to use plot. What was the phrase you used for that? [crosstalk 00:23:07] Narrative prosthesis?

Alistair Baldwin:

Yes. It's this thing that exists in critical disability theory or whatever. And I did my honors thesis in screenwriting about it, but narrative prosthesis, which is just when narratives use disability as a metaphor or to prop up the plot. So for example, this weird statistic that obviously there was next to no disability representation on Australian screening, but of the disability rep that did exist over 70% was on Home and Away, and Neighbors. And I'm like, yeah, but that's including amnesia. That's including learning to walk again after a boating accident because your evil twin brother put dynamite on your boat. That's all these, as we would call, soap disabilities, which someone suffers through for six weeks and then is cured of. I mean, almost no one is like disabled forever in Summer Bay, but most people are in reality.

Anthea Williams:

Yeah, absolutely. No, I thought that was really interesting. I loved reading that article. In the show notes, I'll put links to both of your websites, but I suggest people go to the writing page. There's just a whole lot of essays and articles and some great comedy to listen to on Alistair's page. So yeah, some really interesting stuff. What about you Madeleine? What's next for you?

Madeleine Stewart:

I'm writing a solo show at the moment and I feel like the more I tell people, the more I want to do it. Yeah. So it's [inaudible 00:24:44] so brave. It's kind of like a coming of age kind of show where I realized that I'm I'm 26, 27, I don't know how old I am now. I've lost count. And I'm just kind of realizing that I leave in this ableist world, because when growing up, I wasn't part of the disabled community until I was like 21, 22. And that's the first time I actually met and started collaborating with people like myself, and being more aware of all these things going on in our society that I was like, oh. I just assumed they were part of life, but no, we can change things.

Madeleine Stewart:

And so the show is kind of coming of age where I talk about mostly my dating, and the idea that disabled people aren't sexy and, that kind of idea that we're never seen in the media as sexy people. We're always seen as inspiring and courageous, but it's never [inaudible 00:25:43]. Obviously comedy material loves a bit of [crosstalk 00:25:47].

Anthea Williams:

Hey, it's been so great to chat to you both.

Alistair Baldwin:

It's been wonderful to chat to you.

Madeleine Stewart:

Thanks for having us.

Anthea Williams:

Yeah, thank you so much for coming on.

Anthea Williams:

This is Anthea Williams, and you are on 2RPH with Activated Arts. And now, Hannah Coleman, what have you got to tell us about this month?

Hannah Coleman:

First up, I have Happy-Go-Wrong, which is Andi Snelling's solo physical theater odyssey about her experience with Lyme and vector-borne diseases. And it's on right now at the Adelaide Fringe.

Anthea Williams:

Awesome.

Hannah Coleman:

This is a show I've actually been wanting to see for a few years and, not to be a Fringe stargazer, but this thing is picking up five-star reviews everywhere it tours. It's at the Bakehouse Theater, which is wheelchair accessible, including an accessible bathroom at the venue. And there's a warning for smoke effect use. And I can't experience it, but I wish I could.

Anthea Williams:

Well, look, I have a few events that you can experience. So I'll tell you about those. Both from our lovely guests today. First of all, Madeleine Stewart is doing the Wheelhouse Online Show, which is happening as part of the Melbourne Comedy Festival, but they do have an online event as part of it, if you're not in Melbourne, or if you can't get out to see it. And that's happening from the 13th to the 15th of April and then the Sydney Writer's Festival has Alistair Baldwin appearing at three events. The first is Laughing at the News, then Growing Up Disabled in Australia. Many of you will have read the book [inaudible 00:27:22] by Carly Findlay, which is fantastic, and they're doing a piece around that. And then finally, Queer Stories. I'm so pleased to be able to plug that event. I just adore it so much. But all of these things will eventually be on the podcast that the Sydney Writer's Festival puts out, they have an amazing podcast. So you can get online accessibility that way. So what is it that you can see this month?

Hannah Coleman:

Well, what I could attend this month is the virtual tour of Reasonable Adjustment, which is an online version of Justin Edgar's commission for Unlimited. Reasonable Adjustment, or RAD were a disabled, armed resistance movement fighting against Thatcher's austerity and its major cuts to disability funding. They orchestrated a series of armed uprisings throughout the early nineties, including a shooting at the BBC and a bombing of Euston Station. It's a fascinating and thrilling history that collects photos, video articles, and artifacts of RAD's activism. But the real thing about this is that the RAD doesn't exist. It's all made up, though it's really sophisticatedly constructed. It's raised quite a bit of controversy, as a lot of people who saw the exhibition thought it was real. So, the virtual tour offers seven different access options, including captions, BSL, a transcript for deaf blind Braille users, and a low conflict edit. So there's a warning that there is ableist language and descriptions and images of violence, and that's at reasonableadjustmentexhibition.com.

Anthea Williams:

Amazing. Hey, thank you so much, Hannah. I can't wait to hear what you're going to see, and not see next month.