Anthea:

Welcome to Activated Arts on 2RPH. This week, I'm talking all things consultancy with some brilliant artists, producers and advocates. Tom Middleditch is the artistic director of A\_tistic. He's a writer, a director, a performer, and a neurodiversity and inclusion consultant. Tom is also the inclusion coordinator for St. Martin's Youth Arts Center.

Anthea:

Tom, thanks so much for joining us on Activated Arts.

Tom Middleditch:

Not at all, thank you for having me on. I hope I live up to that bio that... Did I write that? I keep forgetting when I've written bios and then somebody is saying nice things about me and I'm like, "Oh, that is pretty nice." And then I wonder if I wrote that. Is that ego? Oh, no.

Anthea:

I stole it from various sources.

Tom Middleditch:

Borrowed, like a good artist.

Anthea:

Borrowed. Exactly, exactly. Steal like an artist. Now I'm right in saying your theater company is pronounced A\_tistic?

Tom Middleditch:

Yes, yes. Good on getting it right on the first try. A underscore tistic, because we can't do it without you. And that is the only time that I will bring that pun up because I seem to get a lot of genuine derision. I mean, of all of the really controversial and intense conversations I've had with artists over neurodiversity and the state of what neurodiversity means in the modern day, that pun seems to get most people the most wound up.

Anthea:

It's pretty humorous.

Tom Middleditch:

It's great. It's so much fun. And I think it's because A\_tistic as a name is just kind of, it's modern, but it's got a gap, they've got an underscore. What could that mean? And then a dad joke pun is just there.

Anthea:

Just there on the top of your tongue. I love it.

Tom Middleditch:

Yeah.

Anthea:

Hey, [crosstalk 00:01:56] so tell us a little bit about the company. What is it that A\_tistic does?

Tom Middleditch:

Sure. Well, A\_tistic is a collection of five core artists and we operate similar to how Monty Python operated, where we all go off and we all do our own independent stuff. As artists of our sort of work, we all have lives and careers that we do and working across multiple industries. But when we come together, our specific interest is increasing the neurodiversity capacity, presence and vision within the Melbourne and Australian arts scene.

Tom Middleditch:

So the way we do that is through a number of channels. First is our performance outcomes where we create a show, we put on the show and then we have a show and that's a good process we're found to have, the creation of art be part of it. The second thing is that we work in consultancy. So that can range from things such as doing relaxed performance consultancy, which is a majority of the work that I find myself doing these days to doing consultancy for novels that feature neurodiverse characters, where the author has done research, but wants to make sure that there's a sensitivity read there, to consultancy around whether or not a script is using the right terminology or having the right discussions around neurodiversity.

Tom Middleditch:

And the third avenue we go down is workshop facilitation. We have a wide variety of workshops that we offer because the idea of how do you increase neurodiverse inclusion and understanding is, dramaturgically, it's a really intense and interesting question and our workshops tend to be pretty free form, but often we'll have a really, really specific goal with all of them. So for example, one of the workshops we did was about neurodiverse inclusion within the drama classroom. And that was run in conjunction with Drama Victoria. Another workshop that I do is with Back To Back Theater about inclusive practice, which is entirely focused on how do we include people in this workshop right now? And how do we make the process of that inclusion be the content of the workshop? So the challenge then becomes how do you make inclusion content and by doing so create groundbreaking stuff? Because if you're including people who haven't been included, by definition, you're doing something that hasn't been done before, hence groundbreaking.

Anthea:

Yeah, awesome. That's a remarkable broad spectrum of works that you're doing for five people. Congratulations. I think that's really, really cool.

Tom Middleditch:

Thank you.

Anthea:

Hey, so when we first started talking about you coming on the show, you said to me that you saw relaxed performances as a type of dramaturgy. Can you just tell our audiences in case they don't know what a relaxed performance is and then tell us why that is dramaturgy?

Tom Middleditch:

Sure. So a relaxed performance as it is traditionally understood is a performance access type where a show is made accessible to autistic children generally, by having the lights lowered, the sound lowered, the general social permissions of a space eased up and by creating spaces where autistic sensitivities are able to be de-stressed, so a quiet space within a theater.

Tom Middleditch:

Basically a relaxed performance asks the question, okay, our audience do not all have the same brain type. They do not all have the same neurotype so their capacity to take in this show right here is not going to be the expected way that we've created it for a neurotypical audience member. So with that in mind, how do we give this audience a similar experience or even the same experience of this art without pushing them into zones that become socially or physically impossible for them to maintain themselves?

Tom Middleditch:

Now, one of the changes that I have worked on trying to implement when I do consultation for relaxed performances, well, there's a couple of things. First I do adult shows mostly, because obviously autism doesn't end when the funding ends and you go through your life as a neurodiverse adult and it'd be good to be able to see some art.

Anthea:

Yeah, absolutely.

Tom Middleditch:

Yeah. So most of my work has been done with companies like the Malthouse and Darebin Arts Center. And the works that I have sought to relax are for a predominantly mature audience. And now I lost my spot in my head. Sometimes I'll just trail off. It's the ADHD thing. I'll have a really exciting sentence and then it will run away from me.

Anthea:

You were talking about how you do relaxed performance and you work a lot with the Malthouse and you work with Darebin Arts Center and you work a lot for adult audiences.

Tom Middleditch:

Yes, yes, yes. That's in a way why we could think of relaxed performances dramaturgy. For a start, if you're trying to create a relaxed show for an adult audience member, the one thing you don't want to do is take out all the really intense stuff, because then the message you're sending is you are a deficit audience. We're going to make a deficit show. You don't deserve to have a show specifically tailored to your phenomenal perceptions, so we're just going to take things out or not consider it or consider this an imposition. And I think that's quite a prevailing attitude outside of the work that I do that a relaxed performance is a compromise of artistic vision, which obviously makes artists a bit nervous about engaging in access work that's quite as intense as that.

Tom Middleditch:

So what I do is I come in and go, "Okay. I know what you are trying to do with your show. I know the language to use to make you understand that I know what you're doing. Let's talk about affect and let's talk about how we can make that affect accessible, aesthetic access, if you will." Say, we've got a show that has a lot of lights and sound, what I will usually do if I've been brought on to fully relax that show is I will sit down with all the designers after the show has started up and we will do a tech run where we go through every single program state. We talk about what it's trying to achieve. I talk about the ways that it can negatively affect an audience and we alter it so that it will not affect an audience in an obsessively negative way, but will instead give a relative experience similar to the version that they had already arrived at, that is accessible to a wider range of people.

Anthea:

Yeah, that's brilliant. And I can totally see why that is dramaturgy. That is great.

Tom Middleditch:

Yeah. You need to have an understanding of art and theater in order to speak to the artist's intentions.

Anthea:

It would be a great test as artist and also to go, "Okay, so this is the effect I want to have. How do I do that with brains that don't work like mine?"

Tom Middleditch:

Or operate differently, we could say. One of the concrete examples I like to use is... Now, I should also stress, this is my experience with relaxing. There are not really any scientific studies about the effects of specific theatrical techniques on various minds, which means this is a dramaturgy, but also an art at heart. It's not as physically defined as an Auslan performance or an audio described because that is a specific craft that can be taught directly, whereas this one is still developing form.

Tom Middleditch:

So when you've got something like a snap to black, that can be disconcerting for a sensory sensitive audience, because what you're doing is changing the shape of the room as it's being perceived. And a sudden change in the shape of a room is disconcerting. So the simple way to do that is any snap to black is changed to a half second or a full second fade, if you need to have a snap to black at all. And that's where you get into the really technical and dramaturgically aesthetic discussion of, "Okay, what is this snap to black doing? Have you just put it in there because, oh, we need to change a setting and we don't want this to be seen? Does it serve as a punctuation within the scene? What are you doing with this? And can this same effect be achieved with a sensory friendly alternative?"

Anthea:

Yeah. Brilliant. Now I know you said that you worked on artworks, novels, theater, et cetera, that featured neurodivergent characters. What do you think about artists who are neurotypical portraying the neurodivergent?

Tom Middleditch:

Ooh, okay. Obviously there's a huge discussion around this. I think the question of casting is always political and we cannot talk about total freedom within art. Anyone being able to play anyone else without engaging in some delusion of equity across the land. Autistic artists, ADHD artists, neurodivergent artists, have been historically disadvantaged from gaining access to the social realm in which these decisions are made. So there is a significant lack of autistic performers and ADHD performers and all those sorts of performers in the scenes.

Tom Middleditch:

Now, that being said, I do think that neurotypical actors can portray autistic characters, however, in the same way that any actor can portray any role that is open to critique. And it's open to much more severe critique because they are portraying a disadvantaged group. I remember having a discussion with someone around a show that had been made to explore the life of what I perceived and a lot of the audience perceived to be an autistic character, but the creators of the show perceive to just be a precocious child. And I remember they had reached the point where they wanted to tour and the touring bodies had said, "You're going to need to put someone who is on the spectrum into this role." And they were torn about that because this role had been written for the actor that they had.

Tom Middleditch:

We'd had consultation around that, but they asked the question of, "Would it be all right to cast a neurotypical actor in this role?" And I said, "Yes, so long as we can also cast white people in black roles." And they said, "I don't think I agree with that." Then I said, "Then you're not doing representation. You're just making the representation be in a place that we can't see." I think I probably garbled that sentiment there, but basically-

Anthea:

No, I get exactly what you're saying. What do you think about it when novelists and writers write neurodivergent characters?

Tom Middleditch:

Well, I guess the logical end point of making it impermissible to write characters that you don't have direct experiences on is that you can only ever write solipsistic novels of your impression of other people's experiences. And I don't know about you, but I don't want to read novels where one person reflects on their own experience, devoid of the world around them. That sounds boring as hell and more like a manifesto. And far as I can tell manifestos only ever really get followed by violence. And no thank you to that.

Tom Middleditch:

I think given the age that we live in and the idea of accuracy and correctionness being forefront in artistic expression, people are available to be able to consult directly for specific characters and specific experiences. And again, it's a kind of dramaturgy. You're trying to ask the people, "Hey, does this character float the boat?" And I think a lot of people are scared if they go to the communities, there'll be told, "No, you're representing this in a bad way. You got to take this away." And maybe there are people who would say that, but I think those people would say the same of any bad person who was not a out and out by a really obvious Disney villain of some sort.

Tom Middleditch:

There's the fact of the matter is all lives are complicated and all attempts to make them less complicated just make things more complicated. And that's what's really interesting about it. So personally, and I do realize me saying I think it is, it is well worthwhile authors contact autistic people or people they wish to represent whose experience they have not researched to make sure that they haven't done anything completely untoward, given that's a service that A\_tistic offers, I'm unsure what the ethics of that are. But I do think it is in the best interest to make sure that at the very least you haven't gotten anything massively wrong.

Anthea:

So what makes for a good artistic consultation process in that world?

Tom Middleditch:

I would say the number one thing that will make for an effective consultation is that the consultant is directly in contact with the person with the most power to make decisions.

Anthea:

Yeah, that's great. That's such an important point.

Tom Middleditch:

Take recent example, music. You get the very distinct impression that whoever they had on board doing consultation for that did not have direct access to the person who could make changes along the lines of the advice that was going to be given. And that was raked through the mud for the general ineptitude that they approached the topic with. The other reason to connect them to someone with direct power, it shows you're serious about the consultation. It shows that, "Okay, I don't know what I'm doing with this, but here's a person we're giving money to, to tell us how to do it." If they are not being brought up to the top at the very start, you're presenting them as I consider doing due diligence to understand what experience it is that I am trying to aesthetically profit from as beneath me. How could an audience come along to a piece like that and go, "Yes. That creative is someone who cares about my life in a manner sufficient for me to take part in this narrative that they want to tell me"?

Anthea:

Yeah. Absolutely. I completely agree with you. I think it's great that you frame how positive that consultancy can be, because I agree with you. Sometimes you are going to have a work that's going to only be written by one person and they might be a person who lives with disability or a person of color, but they also might want to have a broad spectrum providers in there. And I think we need to figure out how to make that possible and respectful. So I think that's a really excellent point.

Anthea:

It's been brilliant to chat to you today, Tom, thank you so much.

Tom Middleditch:

Oh my goodness, it's gone so fast. Wow.

Anthea:

So fast.

Tom Middleditch:

Thank you for having me on.

Anthea:

Thank you.

Tom Middleditch:

Welcome back to Activated Arts on to 2RPH.

Tom Middleditch:

We're now joined by Matthew Field. Matt is the CEO of Attitude Foundation and he has a long history of working in the community media sector. Thanks so much for joining us.

Matthew Field:

Hi, Anthea. Thanks for having me.

Anthea:

So, Matt, can you tell our listeners a little bit about Attitude Foundation and your work there?

Matthew Field:

Yeah, absolutely. Love to. So the foundation was started by Graeme Innes who had just retired his role with the Human Rights Commission. And I think Graeme saw the need in Australia to start a foundation that was really focused on the issue of attitudes towards people with disability and to address what he described as the tyranny of low expectations that some people hold within the community towards people with disability. And so it was Graeme's view that the media has a powerful role to play in shaping and forming those attitudes. So, yeah, media was the vehicle, the conduit that was determined as being kind of the best approach to getting to the broader community and addressing some of those problematic attitudes that the community holds.

Matthew Field:

So, yeah, so it was started in 2014 with some support from the corporate sector. The organization was funded to produce a documentary series, which is called Perspective Shift. So Perspective Shift is three half hour part documentary series that focused on people with disability working in the art sector. So we had three arts practitioners with disability, Prue Stevenson, who's a visual artist. Jana Castillo, a dancer. And oh God, I've forgotten his name-

Anthea:

Daniel Monks.

Matthew Field:

Daniel Monks, sorry, who's an actor. Yeah, so the idea behind the series was to really ensure that the entire production from woah to go employed a best practice approach to inclusion. So we ensured we had people with disability working at all stages of the production from pre-production, casting, scripting through to the actual shoots themselves and the editing process, as well as ensuring that the participants were able to speak in their own voices and told their own stories.

Matthew Field:

So, in that way, the idea was to produce content that would be appealing to the broader community to really sort of challenge some of the prevailing views around disability out there in the community, but also to provide for the broader media sector, a best practice approach to content creation in terms of behind the scenes inclusion, but also portraying realistic and authentic characters as they are, and not relying on some of these typical stereotypes that exist in the media more broadly.

Matthew Field:

So, yeah, so that was the sort of the Genesis of the organization. And I joined about a year and a half ago with a background in community media. Yeah, and now we're really looking to sort of take the next step with the organization and to broaden our reach and to increase the sort of the amount of content that we're making, et cetera.

Anthea:

Perspective Shift is a really beautiful series. I absolutely loved watching it. And it is so clear that each artist is getting to speak in their own voice about their stories. And they've some really remarkable stories as well. And it's also lovely that you see some of the family members and other artists around those individuals and some of the change and understanding that they've been through as well. It's really beautiful.

Matthew Field:

Thank you.

Anthea:

Yeah. I also noticed on your website, you had guidelines for the media when portraying people with disabilities. What would you like to see change in the media?

Matthew Field:

Yeah, I think probably the most problematic, there's sort of the tropes and stereotypes that exist. And I think it's really important to frame this around that this is not... These are well-meaning in their intent, but they're tropes that really hold people with disability back. And the most common trope that you see in the media is the inspirational tropes. So the person with disability overcoming their disability, heroically overcoming their impairment and taking their place in the community.

Matthew Field:

Now that's a well-meaning idea, but it's a really damaging stereotype because the reality is, and the story that we're trying to convey is that a person's impairment is their personal journey. Everyone has their issues and whether they be an impairment or whatever it might be, but they aren't necessarily holding us back from, or shouldn't hold us back from participating in society. And that actually many people with disability live with that disability. They cope with it, or they do what they need to do, but ultimately it's the role of society to bridge the gap between where they are and to allow them to fully participate. So we're really trying to address that.

Matthew Field:

The other common one is pity, where we see a person with disability is being afflicted. And again, that doesn't necessarily always hold true within the community. So by creating media that tells these stories in the own words of the participants, we can really kind of convey this idea that disability is really just another dimension of diversity. And if we look at it in that way, if we don't look at it as a story of inspiration or a story of pity, we just see it as the full spectrum of the human existence and the human experience, many times includes an impairment or a disability. Sometimes we can see that sometimes we can't. Sometimes people are born with it and sometimes they acquire it.

Matthew Field:

And so really the Attitude Foundation's concerned with developing content that tells that story. But yeah, so we have resources on our website for the broader media sector to really kind of assist them to understand that these well-meaning tropes are actually hugely problematic.

Anthea:

Do you do consultancy when people are looking to portray people with disability and maybe they are writers who don't have that disability?

Matthew Field:

Yeah, we do. We've just started doing a little bit of that work now that we have a body of work behind us. I think it's helpful for producers of content and broadcasters to know that we are producers of content ourselves, and many of us within the organization have a background in broadcasting. So we understand the sector, we understand the challenges and we understand the broadcasting and production environment. So we're able to provide that support from a position of experience.

Matthew Field:

And, yeah, so we have started to do a little bit of work with some content producers. Probably won't name them just yet, but yeah. And what I'm seeing really that increasingly there's a desire within the media sector, particularly within the national broadcasters to engrain better practice within their commissioning, within their production and within how they schedule and ensuring that there's a greater representation of people with disability in roles that aren't necessarily related to disability.

Anthea:

Yeah, [crosstalk 00:24:55] it's been lovely to see sometimes we're going to cast a high school girl chatting about boys, and we're just going to cast someone who happens to have a disability because high school girls chat about boys with disability or without.

Matthew Field:

That's right.

Anthea:

Yeah, absolutely.

Matthew Field:

It's really empowering for people with disability to see.

Anthea:

Well, Matt, it's been wonderful talking to you. Thanks so much for coming on.

Matthew Field:

No problem. Thanks, Anthea.

Anthea:

Now we're up to our what's on with brilliant Hannah Cormack. Hannah, what are you seeing and not seeing this month?

Hannah Cormack:

This month I actually had the chance to wander around in a gallery space. Amazing, but it was an online 360 degree virtual tour. That's at the Footscray Art Prize. And the work that I really wanted to highlight there is by Riana Head-Toussaint. And it's her video work First Language, which kind of looks at the inherent movement language she's developed as a wheelchair user. It's a video work that has a straight format as well as an audio description format. And you can view that either in-person at the Footscray Art Prize exhibition, which is at The Footscray Community Art Center or online at footscrayartprize.com. Full disclosure, I was involved in the original commissioning of this work, First Language, for the I Dance Festival, but it was really enjoyable to revisit it in this setting of wandering through the virtual gallery.

Hannah Cormack:

And the great thing about being able to wander around in the exhibition meant that I stumbled across other works as well, such as Audist College by another amazing deaf artist, Chelle Destefano. So I really do recommend popping in either virtually or in-person to view both of these incredible works.

Anthea:

Awesome. I've so been enjoying seeing these virtual galleries that you've recommended, it's really been exciting. And what is it that you are not seeing?

Hannah Cormack:

Rising Festival is hosting a retrospective of works from Back To Back, including Small Metal Objects, which I've always wanted to see. That's going to be on at Queensbridge Square, May 29 to June 1st. Now, Anthea, you've actually seen this one yourself, haven't you?

Anthea:

It's remarkable. I love Back To Back. They were on a couple of months ago. I think they're a fabulous theater company.

Hannah Cormack:

Now I know that this work has hearing augmentation supplied through a headset as part of the work. And I don't know if there are provisions for deaf audience or not, or if captions or Auslan interpretation is available. I'm also not sure if AD is available or not, but hopefully the information can made available on the Rising website.

Anthea:

That's such a pity that that's not accessible. The Rising Festival looks so remarkable. I was hoping I was going to see some of it even from Sydney, but is that not going to be possible?

Hannah Cormack:

Not that I've been able to gather from the website so far, and it's a pretty exciting website. I must say I did enjoy being able to scroll through and find the information quite clearly in general, but I didn't come across any information that indicated there would be any kind of live stream or remote viewing options.

Anthea:

That's a pity. So what else is happening?

Hannah Cormack:

What we do have coming up is Art Activated 2021. And the theme for this year is building back better. So it's going to be a hybrid live and online event. Some aspects will be live, some will be online and some will be both. And that's happening on August nine, 16 and 23.

Anthea:

Awesome. I think some of our shows coming up are going to tie in with that festival as well. So more for that coming up for our audience. Thanks so much for joining me, Hannah.

Hannah Cormack:

Thanks, Anthea.

Anthea:

See you next month.