Anthea Williams:

Hi, this is Anthea Williams on 2RPH with Sideshow. Today I'm talking with artist, Dan Daw. Dan blurs the divide between theater and dance. Dan uses his Crip body to occupy and be unapologetic in non-disabled spaces and investigates the function of care and interdependence in those spaces. Today I'm talking with Dan about his latest show, his production company, The Dan Daw Collective, Conceit, Development, and Joy as Resistance. I also want to give a few content warnings. In this episode, we use strong sexual language and there is some discussion of kink. So Dan Daw, thank you so much for joining us on Sideshow.

Dan Daw:

It's a pleasure. Thanks for having me.

Anthea Williams:

Dan, you were recently in Australia. You had an amazing show on at the Seymour Center as part of World Pride. It was a remarkable work. It was really unique and I think it would be great to tell the audience a little bit about you and your work practices through the show to begin with. So Dan, Conceit is clearly really important to you. I'd love you to tell us a little bit about how the show is set up and all the ways in which you allow the audience to enter the work.

Dan Daw:

I started making the work by looking at the idea of inspiration porn, and I was very aware of how my body was being seen on stage and how my body was being compared to non-disabled bodies on stage. And I became fascinated by audiences coming up me after the show and saying, "Dan, you're so inspiring." And I'm like, "Okay, cool, but what about that guy?" So I become really fascinated about what it was about my body that was inspiring.

And so in making The Dan Daw Show, we first started by looking at what is it about my body that inspires others? But then there came a point on the journey through making the work that I thought, actually, I don't want to make a work about how I inspire others. I want to make work about how I inspire myself and what power and what freedom and what joy that gives me in being able to go, okay, I'm able to do this for me this time. So Dan Daw Show is a response to that essentially in going what are the things in my life that make me feel most free and most Dan Daw. And I feel most myself when I'm on stage performing, when I'm making work and when I'm fucking, or if I'm not allowed to say fucking-

Anthea Williams:

You're allowed to say fucking.

Dan Daw:

Okay, I'm allowed to say fucking, yay, fucking. And looking at those things make me feel the most free, and I feel most myself when I'm in those states, when I'm in full control and when I have full consent over what happens to my body and how my body is being viewed and how my body is being touched and how my body is touching somebody else. My body is touching somebody else when I'm fucking or being fucked by them, when my body is touching the audience as well through the narrative, through the work, through all of that. So it's all very, very closely linked.

Anthea Williams:

Yeah, absolutely. And what was the process of actually developing the work? How did you go about starting to make it?

Dan Daw:

So it would end up being a five year process in total. And as I said, we went through a process of going, okay, where is the inspiration aimed at? And then when we diverted and realized, okay, it needs to be about me, it needs to be The Dan Daw Show and how I inspire myself, we started talking about my relationship to my disability and talking about my relationship to kink and how being a sub in a sub-dom relationship gives me so much freedom and so much power and so much joy. So we started developing the choreography by having improvised essentially kink sessions where Christopher Owen, the other performer, would essentially for an hour at the start of every day find different ways to dominate me or I'd guide him to find different ways for him to dominate me. And that was through those improvisations over a number of weeks that we started to develop for ourselves the choreographic, I guess, palette to draw things up on.

So we had this flip types and flip charts of so many sequences and moves and gestures that we then splice together into three ink sessions or play sessions we call them, that are the foundation of The Dan Daw Show. And around that, having conversations about what was happening in the work and what using it as an opportunity to talk about what we want from each other and talking about what we want from the world. So then that's how we started to develop the text for the work by being quite pointed in what it is I wanted to say to Chris and also what I wanted to say to an audience. We took quite a bit of time working out what the right words were to be said in those moments.

Anthea Williams:

Yeah, and the intimacy between you and Chris on that stage is completely remarkable. I don't think I've ever seen that level of intimacy on a stage before. I guess that's what comes out of that much trust, that way of working and developing a work for five years.

Dan Daw:

Yeah, as I said, in this show I've known Chris a long time, so we've actually known each other for 15 or 16 years. We first worked together in 2007 up in Scotland with Scottish Dance Theater. So I trust him implicitly. And so we are able to go to some places and to be able to hold each other in those intimate moments, to be able to be on my knees and drink water from his naked torso and do all those things that I never thought I'd be able to give myself permission to do in a public space. So that in itself is liberating to show how much we trust each other or how much I trust him.

Anthea Williams:

Yeah, it's really beautiful. So I'd like to talk a little bit about audiences now. There are a lot of trigger warnings at the beginning of your show and before the show came up, we told our audiences about it last month, and we talked about all the way that you allowed audiences to access the work. And I think the information you provided the audience, but also the way that you allow audiences to experience anything in the work that they need to ahead of time, every single show is remarkable. Can you talk a little bit about that and how you came to the decisions around how to allow the audiences to experience the work?

Dan Daw:

Yeah, we spent a lot of time thinking about the audience, and we always do when we're thinking about making work because also, especially with this show, kink can often be scary for lot of people and put a lot of people off guard who aren't familiar with that world. It can be misconstrued as this brutal violent thing where you do, you're just beating each other up and that's one aspect, but there's so much more to the world of kink. So it was really important to us the audience felt and feel safe when they come to our shows and that they can have all the warnings they need, all the support they need before coming to the show, but also during the show in the work, for those who haven't seen it, in the work, we start off by me giving a monologue where I talk about what's going to happen, and I'm very clear about me wanting those things being done to my body, because at points it is quite prolonged and I reassure the audience like, yes, this is what I want to be done to my body.

And this is with consent, this is with care, this is with access in mind. We thought about it as if well, we're holding the audiences hang quite tightly at the start, but then over the course of the show, we slowly let it go. So then by the end of the show, the audience is free to be with the work on their own in a way, because we've set up, it's okay to leave if you don't feel safe. You can leave, you can come back in and get what you need. So we set up those contracts and those safe words, which are real for us, and we want the audience to be able to feel like they can leave if it's too much. That's really important to us.

And also a big aspect is the pre-show access sessions that Zed Lightheart runs who's our access coordinator and runs the pre-show drop in, which is a chance for audiences to come an hour before this show to sit with him and look at the figure menu, to go into the theater and to look at the set, to look at the props, to look at where they might be sitting, to look at any lighting states that might be quite bright or to hear some sound cues that might be quite sudden or quite loud. So creating that real sense of we don't want anything to take people by surprise if they don't want it to. And that's really important to us.

Anthea Williams:

Yeah, I think it's really beautiful, and I completely agree. I did feel really held at the beginning of the performance and by the end I felt really free. And that's a really lovely journey to go on. So you were originally from South Australia, though you're now based in Manchester. I'd love to hear a little bit about how you found dance and how you started out as a performer.

Dan Daw:

So as you say, I am from South Australia originally, from Whyalla, which is five hours northwest of Adelaide. And I joined a youth theater company there, Defaces, when I was 13 years old. And I fell in love with theater, and it was as simple as that really. And it was through my connection with Defaces that I came across Restless Dance Theater. And then when I moved to Adelaide to study when I was 18, I joined Restless Dance Theater, and that really put me on a path toward developing my career as a dancer. And I studied theater at Flinder University, so I trained as an actor alongside my dance training at Restless. And then that spurred me on to working in Australia and then in the UK. And I moved to the UK in 2010. I decided I need to relocate and based on myself in the UK.

And then as I said, the rest is history and that's led me on to where I'm at now. And as things progressed, COVID put a halt to it, but I'm trying as much as I can to keep one foot in Australia and one foot in the UK because it's so important to maintain those connections in both countries because the UK is a big part of who I am, but this recent trip to Sydney affirmed that Australia is actually a big part of who I am as well. So it's really important I hold on to that sense of place and that sense of home.

Anthea Williams:

Yeah, absolutely. And you've set up your own production company now called Dan Daw Creative Projects. Can you tell me and the audience a little bit more about that, a little bit more about how you work and what else you're working on at the moment?

Dan Daw:

Yeah, so Daniel Daw Creative Projects started off as being an umbrella to I guess hold the work I do and the work I make. And I started that as sole trader seven years ago. And then just end of last year actually, we finally decided to become a limited company, which is a huge step and feels like I've become an adult somehow. And that really came about because who's Dan Daw? So I feel like I've found my people and feel like I've found my team to go, yes, this feels like the company of people I want to be working with and investing my time and leading with, feels like the best fit in a way that I haven't yet found in my career. So it's a real sense of, yes, here we go. We have lift off. These are beautiful people. Let's create beautiful worlds together. Let's do it.

Anthea Williams:

Yeah, that's lovely.

Dan Daw:

That's really exciting. So we are continuing to tour The Dan Daw Show, the interest keeps flooding in. We're taking it to Athens, to Munich, to Bern in Switzerland, and then we're bringing it back to Australia in June, but I'm not able to say yet where or what, but it will be The Dan Daw Show, but I can't say where. I'm not allowed to just yet. But watch this space and I'll let you know. We are just starting to think about what our next work might be. We're looking at making a large-scale work. I feel terrified and excited at the thought of making a large-scale work, and I'm interested in looking at my relationship to my working classness and looking at the working class guilt associated with wanting to be a part of something so massive and so exciting and so ridiculous and so expensive, but also inside of something that is those things processing the moral dilemma of saying all of this money on this production, but I could have just sent this money to my grandma.

And so it's this small dilemma of I want to be in something so ridiculously expensive and inside of that, I guess, interrogating the value my disabled body has, how I've not really placed much value on my body, but other presenters, other artists, other funders placed a lot of value. And it's about having those really, I guess, frank discussions around well being surrounded by something massive and going, there's a fucking choir behind me, but I still feel like I'm an imposter and what that is to grapple with on a daily as a disabled working class person.

Anthea Williams:

Yeah, that's an excellent question to start a development with. I guess that's why it's really important that people who are part of our community are making art in a scene.

Dan Daw:

Yeah, totally.

Anthea Williams:

Yeah. I've seen a glorious photo of you with a t-shirt that says Joy is Resistance, and that ties into some of the music in The Dan Daw Show. Can you talk to me a little bit about joy as resistance? I hadn't heard that term before and I think it's beautiful.

Dan Daw:

Yeah. Joy as resistance is coined by the Black disabled communities and really, really resonates with me and really resonates in the way I want to be in the world because I've had a lot of anger in the past and I don't want my response to be angry anymore. I want my response to be joy. And in many ways it's stronger to, in the face of everything to be joyful. So that for me is, I saw that and went, yes, that resonates, and how do I apply that to my white, queer disabled body? Yeah.

Anthea Williams:

That's awesome. I'm going to take that away and I'm going to have a think about that for myself personally. I think that's really beautiful because you're right. And so often when I think about the way people with disability are portrayed in the media, it's so limited, and actually we can have really joyous lives. So yeah, that's great.

Dan Daw:

Okay.

Anthea Williams:

Thanks so much, Dan. It was lovely having on the show.

Dan Daw:

Yeah, thanks for having me.

Anthea Williams:

This is Anthea Williams on 2RPH with Sideshow, and now we have our watts on. So Hanna Cormack, what are you looking forward to seeing and not seeing over the next few months?

Hanna Cormack:

She was perhaps the greatest disabled actress of all time, one of my crushes from history and the owner of the graveside I've spent the third most amount of time at, which is saying a lot for someone who was a teen goth. I'm talking about the divine Miss Sarah Bernhardt. We'll be getting some comedic historical re-imagining this month in Melbourne Theater Company's production of Theresa Rebeck's Bernhardt/Hamlet, which follows Bernhardt's scandalous turn playing one of theater's greatest male roles in Paris in 1899. Now this play is set before Bernhardt's leg amputation and her transition into the ultimate Crip diva [foreign language 00:22:57] where she would have four young men carry her around on a sedan chair. But at the time the play is set, she'd already been living for over a decade with a chronic knee injury and chronic pain. So I'd say this makes her a disabled character. And for this production, she'll be conjured to life by the iconic disabled actor Kate Mulvany.

I'm devastated, Bernhardt level devastated that I won't be able to see it. But I have my fingers crossed because MTC have started up a digital theater program, so maybe they might like to add this one to their future offerings. But for those who can get there in person, it's on at the Sumner at Southbank Theater until April 15th with audio described performances on the matinee of March 18th and evening of the 21st, a tactile tour on March 18th matinee, an open caption performance on April 1st matinee and also an interpreted performance on April 4th, and the venue is wheelchair accessible. Tickets are at mtc.com.au.

And well, I haven't seen it yet, but I will be tuning into the livestream of actually autistic, All About Women 2023 at the Sydney Opera House on March 12th, which is a panel discussion featuring Chloe Hayden, Grace Tame and Jac de Houting. They bring up the staggering statistic that nearly 80% of autistic women are miss or undiagnosed, and this panel is a chance for people to hear what it's actually like to be autistic by people who are. So I'm yet to see it, but like the panelists, I am actually autistic, so I'm really looking forward to see what the discussion brings about. But maybe that's a big conversation for a future episode. Tickets to the event available at sydneyoperahouse.com.

Anthea Williams:

Yeah, so they are two such good suggestions for our listeners, Hanna. I actually saw Bernhardt Hamlet when I was doing my Churchill years ago in New York in 2018, and I just love that Kate Mulvany has been cast in this role, though I had no idea that that actress lived with a disability. Can you tell us a tiny bit more about her?

Hanna Cormack:

Really? Oh my goodness. Sarah Bernhardt. Sarah Bernhardt was, she was this amazing outlandish figure, like the Bella Park Lady Gaga, and she was this actress who was performing in all the theaters in Paris and touring around the world. Sarah Bernhardt was the most successful actress of Bella Park Paris. In fact, internationally she toured the world with her plays playing both male and female roles. However, she was also this amazingly eccentric, outlandish diva. She used to walk around with a menagerie of pets like a cheetah and a crocodile. She used to sleep in a coffin to put her in touch with her great tragic roles, and she'd sometimes wear a stuffed dead bat around her neck. It wasn't until later in her life that she became disabled. She did have a chronic knee injury that was playing up for a long time that she had incurred whilst she was performing La Tosca, where she used to have to throw herself off a parapet each night. And the injury that accumulated in her knee in the way it wasn't looked after. Over the years, it developed into gangrene and her leg had to be amputated.

Fans actually carved her prosthetic legs for her to use, but she found them really uncomfortable, and so she just decided to perform with one leg or do a lot of her roles lying in bed or sitting down. When I became disabled, Sarah Bernhardt was one of those actors I looked to and was like, okay, yeah, I'm entering my Sarah Bernhardt phase. I can't do walking roles anymore. But let's see what else is there.

Anthea Williams:

That's fantastic. She sounds amazing.

Hanna Cormack:

She was absolutely a character, incredibly talented as well, and I cannot wait to see what Kate Mulvaney, if I get a chance to see what Kate Mulvaney brings to this character for this play.

Anthea Williams:

Fantastic. And I love that the panel at the Sydney Opera House is called Actually Autistic. I got to know that phrase and that hashtag during the controversy around Sia's film, Music, and the casting of that. Yeah, and as you know, we did a show on that. So if people want to look at our back catalog, you can listen to our guests thoughts on that show. We had the awesome Bridie McKim and Sophie Smyth come and have a chat to us about the casting of that. So if you want to look at our back catalog, I highly recommend that episode. Hey, Hanna, thank you so much for joining me.

Hanna Cormack:

Thanks for having me.

Anthea Williams:

To play us out today we have Between Mirrors with the beautiful The Boy in the Blue Dress. We'll have links to everything discussed in our show, in the show notes today. And you can also get a transcript from the 2RPH or Accessible Arts website. See you next time.

Speaker 4:

(Singing)