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

Top Middleditch:

Oh, thank you for having me on. I hope I live up to that bio that I... 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.", then I wonder if I wrote that. Is that ego? Oh, no.

Anthea:

I stole it from various sources.

Top Middleditch:

Borrowed, like a good artist. [crosstalk 00:00:54]

Anthea:

Exactly, steal like an artist.

Top Middleditch:

Yes.

Anthea:

Now, I'm right in saying your theater company is pronounced "A\_tistic"?

Top Middleditch:

Yes. Good on getting it right on the first try. A-\_-tistic, 'cause we can't do it without you! That is the only time that I will bring that pun up, because I seem to get a lot of genuine derision. 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- [crosstalk 00:01:34].

Anthea:

It's pretty hilarious.

Top Middleditch:

It's great. It's so much fun. And, I think it's because A\_tistic, as a name, it's a bit, "Ooh, 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 tip of your tongue, I love it.

Top Middleditch:

Yeah. [crosstalk 00:01:52]

Anthea:

So, tell us a little bit about the company. What is it that A\_tistic does?

Top Middleditch:

Sure. 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. So, the way we do that is through a number of channels.

Top Middleditch:

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've 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.

Top 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, a really intense and interesting question. And, our workshops tend to be pretty free form, but often we'll have a 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 cool.

Top Middleditch:

Thank you.

Anthea:

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?

Top 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. 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 becomes socially or physically impossible for them to maintain themselves?"

Top Middleditch:

Now, one of the changes that I have worked on trying to implement when I do consultation for relaxed performances, 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.

Anthea:

Absolutely.

Top Middleditch:

It'd be good to be able to see some art.

Anthea:

Yeah. Absolutely.

Top Middleditch:

So, most of my work has been done with companies like the Malthouse and Darebin Arts Centre. And, the works that I have sought to relax are for a predominantly mature audience, and... No, I lost my spot in my head. Sometimes I'll just trail off, it's the ADHD. 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 Centre, and you work a lot of adult audiences.

Top Middleditch:

Yes. That's, in a way, why we could think of relaxed performance as 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."

Anthea:

Yeah, you're right.

Top Middleditch:

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. 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, [inaudible 00:08:02] access, if you will."

Top Middleditch:

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's state. We talk about what it's trying to achieve, I talk about the ways that it can negatively affect an audience. So, we alter it so that it will not affect an audience in an obsessive 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.

Top 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 affect I want to have. How do I do that with brains that don't work like mine?"

Top Middleditch:

"Operate differently", we can say.

Anthea:

Yeah.

Top Middleditch:

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 [Oz Land 00:09:31] performance or an audio [inaudible 00:09:32], because that is a specific craft that can be taught directly. Whereas this one is still a developing form.

Anthea:

Yeah.

Top 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.

Anthea:

Yeah.

Top Middleditch:

If you need to have a 'snap to black' at all.

Anthea:

Yeah.

Top Middleditch:

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?

Top 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. 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.

Anthea:

Yeah.

Top Middleditch:

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 perceived to just be a precocious child.

Top Middleditch:

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. We'd had consultation around that. 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."

Anthea:

Right.

Top Middleditch:

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?

Top 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.

Anthea:

Yeah.

Top Middleditch:

That sounds boring as hell and more like a manifesto.

Anthea:

Yeah.

Top Middleditch:

And, far as I can tell, manifestos only ever really get followed by violence. And, no thank you to that. 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?"

Top Middleditch:

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, [inaudible 00:14:23] obvious Disney villain of some sorts. 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 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 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?

Top 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.

Top Middleditch:

Take a recent example: Music.

Anthea:

Yeah.

Top Middleditch:

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."

Anthea:

Yeah.

Top Middleditch:

If they are not being brought up to the top of 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 of [inaudible 00:16:52] 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. It's been brilliant to chat to you today, Tom, thank you so much.

Top Middleditch:

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

Anthea:

So fast. Okay.

Top Middleditch:

Thank you for having me on.

Anthea:

Thank you.

Anthea:

Welcome back to Activated Arts on 2RPH. 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, media was the vehicle, the conduit that was determined as being the best approach to getting to the broader community and addressing some of those problematic attitudes that the community holds. 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.

Matthew Field:

So, Perspective Shift really focused on... The 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. [crosstalk 00:19:10].

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 woe 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. So, in that way, the idea was to produce content that would be appealing to the broader community to really 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 or authentic characters, as they are, and not relying on some of these typical stereotypes that exist in the media more broadly.

Matthew Field:

So, that was the genesis of the organization, and I joined about a year and a half ago, with a background in community media. And, now we're really looking to take the next step with the organization and to broaden our reach and to increase 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 have 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 some of the tropes and stereotypes that exist. And, I think it's really important to frame these around that 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 trope. So, the person with disability overcoming their disability, heroically overcoming their impairment and taking their place in the community. 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 shouldn't hold us back from participating in society.

Matthew Field:

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. The other common one is pity. Where we see a person with disability as 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 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.

Matthew Field:

Sometimes we can see that, sometimes we can't, sometimes people are born with it and sometimes they acquire it. So, the Attitude Foundation's concerned with developing content that tells that story. So, we have resources on our website for the broader media sector to really 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 environment, the broadcast and production environment. So, we're able to provide that support from a position of experience. So, we have started to do a little bit of work with some content producers, probably won't name them just yet. And, what I'm seeing, 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. It's been lovely to see that. [crosstalk 00:24:57] 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 Hanna Cormick. Hanna, what are you seeing and not seeing this month?

Hanna Cormick:

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 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 Centre 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.

Hanna Cormick:

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 Destrefano. 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?

Hanna Cormick:

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.

Hanna Cormick:

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 [inaudible 00:27:37] interpretation is available. I'm also not sure if [inaudible 00:27:40] is available or not, but hopefully that 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?

Hanna Cormick:

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?

Hanna Cormick:

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 9, 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, Hanna.

Hanna Cormick:

Thanks, Anthea.

Anthea:

See you next month.