# **0:01 Carers Queensland announcement:** You’ve heard of the National Disability Insurance Scheme, but how much do you know about it? Find out what it means, how it works and how to apply for access at Carers Queensland’s free workshop, Understanding the NDIS. Find out more, check for events coming up near you, and book your spot online at carersqld.com.au. You can also call us on 1300 999 636.

# **0:31 Voiceover:** Choice and Control, a podcast celebrating people with disability, brought to you by Carers Queensland, NDIS Local Area Coordination Partner in the Community.

# Music, theatre, cabaret, there's nothing like a night out with some live entertainment, and if you're in Brisbane the Undercover Artists Festival coming up from September 16 to 18 could be a fantastic opportunity. Not only is it fully accessible, with Auslan interpretations and audio descriptions, but every act features people with disability, and the whole festival is disability-led. To find out what's coming up and what that means, we caught up with festival director Madeleine Little

**1:12 Madeleine Little:** The festival is three days of disability acts in the performing arts. So we’ve got theatre, dance, comedy, poetry, music, cabaret, there's lots going on on that list, and certainly disability led performance is at the top of the agenda. So we’ve got tracks to the festival: we’ve got the creative track, which is professional-standard, high quality disability performing arts works. We’ve got our community track so for our community arts organisations and activities for the community to get involved in that may not be at that professional standard but are still really important to us and our community. And then we’ve got our career track as well, where we’ve got a couple of wonderful workshops for people to engage in for their professional development. And then we’ve also got, Arts Access Australia is bringing Meeting Place to Brisbane for the first time which is awesome, so we’re hosting them in town. That’s the National Arts and Disability Conference that happens every year.

A disability-led creative work is one when artists with disability or a group of artists with disability have the final say over their work. So they get to make all the decisions, they're in the driver’s seat, and it's really important because it means that when it comes to telling our own stories you know we’re in charge of all of the decisions. We get to have a say in how our stories and our voices are represented and make sure that it's done in the right way. But it's also about, you know, we don’t have that many opportunities to lead our own work, and for people to see what we can really do. So it's about spotlighting the fact that, you know, we do have the talent and the skills possible to make really great work happen, but making sure that our program, our creative track program, is disability led means we’re really shining a spotlight on this creative process. A disability-led creative process can create high quality work that’s just as good as anything else you’ve ever seen, sending a message to the rest of the industry that there's no excuse not to let us lead our own work anymore.

You know if we look at our program just as a small snippet or a small representation of the whole sector, we’ve got the fabulous Lauren Watson who is an aerial theatre artist, and both Lauren and her wheelchair go up into the air and do incredible things that I couldn’t imagine doing myself. Not just because I’m scared of heights. But then we’ve got, you know, the fabulous crooners Tim McCallum and Tony Dee with a jazzy cabaret number and instead of treading the boards they're wheeling the boards and bringing us some high-quality smooth jazz entertainment. And then you've got the straight up theatre with a bit of physical comedy and physical theatre elements from Andi Snelling who’s lucky enough to be our only interstate guest at this point. She’ll be rollerblading around the stage and creating some really high-quality theatre. And then we’ve got, oh gosh, Oliver Hetherington Paige and his comedy cabaret, The No Bang Theory all about autism and taking down Sheldon Cooper from the Big Bang Theory, and his quest to get laid, pretty much. It's the funniest show and I’ve been lucky enough to see a rehearsal of it.

I could talk in depth about all of the performances, like Naavikaran and Brown Church as well, just bringing some really beautiful, I think she calls it a choreo-poem, which is poetry and dance and theatre and spoken word all kind of wrapped up in this theatrical spectacle. We’ve got so much going on, and I think that’s a real great insight into the rest of the disability art sector too, is that there's such a diverse range of stories, voices, art forms, styles, that there really is something for everyone. And I think if you're open to diverse arts experiences, without the disability tag attached, then there's no reason why you can’t come along to Undercover Artists Festival and see something just as amazing. It just might mean that you end up with a different perspective on your way out.

# **5:09 Jodie van de Wetering:** I caught up with Oliver about the No Bang Theory, and this was one of the things we spoke about: how important is that representation done by people with disability and led directly by the people with the lived experience?

**05:24 Madeleine:** Oh it's crucial, because if I think about, you know, the young people growing up who see what we would assume to be role models in the industry, it's really important to have someone you can relate to, you can see someone on stage and go ‘okay that’s something I can relate to, I can aspire to be like that person’. And if you only have characters like Sheldon Cooper out there who isn’t even explicitly stated to have autism but shows a lot of the stereotypical traits, you know someone like Oliver growing up it can get very frustrating because obviously your experiences aren’t being represented appropriately and it affects how other people see you in the day to day world. So you know if I think about myself going through a drama degree at uni and being told that I wouldn't have a career in the arts because there was no one like me in the mainstream arts sector, the importance of having a person with disability telling their own story on stage, and being fully who they are on stage, not having to diminish any part of themselves to fit in, it's invaluable. I can’t stress enough how important it is, and the impact that it has not just on disabled people who are gaining an opportunity to represent themselves appropriately for the first time, but for the wider society as well, to be able to open their perspectives and see that disability experiences are so much more diverse than they could’ve imagined. And to throw any preconceptions out the window and just be ready to listen and to take on some truth for the first time. It's really empowering for all involved.

# **06:55 Jodie:** How did you first get involved in the arts Maddie?

**07:00 Madeleine:** To be very honest when I was eight years old I wanted to be Hilary Duff, and that is the answer to that question. I got involved in choir, in musicals and drama and things like that at school, and then the time came eventually in high school to start putting down your university preferences, and the only thing that I liked enough to continue studying was drama. So I chose to study a drama degree, and kind of expected that I’d have to go into teaching because that’s what everyone told me I’d have to do, ‘oh, what are you going to do after that, you're going to become a teacher right, so you can make use of your drama degree?’

But I was lucky enough to be part of a student theatre production in my second year, and to be given like a lead role and a role that wasn’t explicitly stated to be a disabled character. That was a really empowering moment for me, and I thought okay maybe I can have a go at this. I got involved with Indelibility Arts as an ensemble member, have made a few shows with them, and from that point onwards I just decided to keep going and if you can’t find that many opportunities you have to make your own.

Studied a Master of Arts at USQ as well to really research accessible theatre practice and how we can make work accessible for artists as well in the making and staging processes, as well as the audiences. Yeah through that I’ve been making my own work and dabbling here and there in different theatre projects since, although it has quietened down a lot since the virus that shall not be named. Very thankful to be in this role now too where I can just help make other people’s projects happen.

# **08:37 Jodie:** I was going to ask, how has the Covid situation in southeast Queensland affected the festival?

**08:34 Madeleine:** It's unfortunately meant that we had to cancel a couple of our programmed events. So unfortunately the Sisters of Invention won't be flying up from Adelaide with their touring party of I think 15 people, or something like that. And unfortunately Eliza Hull is stuck down south as well, so she’s not performing at our closing night concert anymore. And those little cancellation decisions are probably more heartbreaking than people realise, because there's a lot of effort that goes into making and constructing a program for everyone. But a lot of effort from the artists as well. And then you know you just think about how every single day we’re checking the updated guidelines, are there any changes, making sure that we’re abiding by all restrictions and checking in with our artists, making sure that they're going okay. I mean there's no easy answer to that one, it's just you have to take it day by day and be prepared to be flexible, even if it is a lot of unknowns. But we’re quietly confident the festival’s going to go ahead and be a smash hit, with or without masks, we’re going to have a good time.

# **09:44 Carers Queensland announcement:** If you're looking for maximum flexibility and choice, self-managing your NDIS plan might be the right option for you. Carers Queensland’s free Introduction to Self-Management workshop covers the benefits of self-managing your plan, how it works, and the practical side of arranging supports and managing payments. This workshop is offered in person and online. Find out more, check for events coming up near you and book your spot online at carersqld.com.au.

# **10:14 Jodie:** Getting back to your own story Maddie, I think everybody who sets out for a career in the arts is told how hard it is to make a go of it, you need to have a backup plan, you need to have something to fall back on when it all goes wrong, but do you think you got more of that because you had disability to contend with as well?

**10:34 Madeleine:** Yeah absolutely, absolutely. And I can think of a couple of different occasions in school where the teachers were kind of tip toeing around it, but said ‘oh your scene was really’ really good, you’ve got a real knack for this, but I would put something else down on your university preferences list just in case’. And it's like ‘oh, why just in case?’ And the answer that I got wasn’t that it's hard to crack into the arts for anyone, it was ‘well, they don’t normally accept people like you into these degrees’. And so thinking specifically about the acting degree where there's an audition component, I didn’t end up applying for the acting degree at QUT because I was told that they don’t normally take people like me, so it’d be 10 times as hard for me to get in.

So yeah there's definitely that element of what I know now to be ableism, which is just that expectation that it's just going to be harder for me no matter what, rather than asking the question ‘well, if I am good enough why can’t I? If the skill is there then what's the problem?’ And if someone says to me ‘you know you're just not right for this opportunity’, great, you know that’s fine, that’s how the arts works. But if I’m not right for the opportunity because I have to sit down a little bit more than my peers, then there's a problem there and I think we need to unpack that.

# **11:55 Jodie:** And how great now that the festival is there providing opportunities and also showing how much talent there is in people who have been traditionally excluded?

**12:06 Madeleine:** Absolutely, absolutely, and that’s the beautiful thing that we’re seeing. Particularly if I highlight Swinging and Spinning with the Crooners, Tim McCallum was on The Voice and had a lot of really great exposure opportunities, the grand final AFL National Anthem being one, and Tony Dee who was part of the We Are Superhumans campaign with the Paralympics quite a few years back, great campaign, really out there, but they've both been busking. Tony Dee is often seen around Brisbane CBD just busking away all the time, and you go ‘oh your voice is way too good to just be relegated to busking all the time. You should have more opportunities, you should be on the stage a lot more’. And I think yeah you just nailed it, that’s what this festival is all about is providing those opportunities that hopefully lead to further opportunities for artists once people see that their work really is just that good.,

# **13:04 Jodie:** Is the tide starting to turn? I feel like I hear a lot more about the arts and disability intersecting than I used to, but that might also be because I am an artist with disability, so obviously I’m watching people like Josh Thomas and Hannah Gadsby very closely. Are things starting to change?

**13:22 Madeleine:** I would say visibility is slowly improving, but perhaps the processes in the industry are not quite there yet. So if I think about, like Josh Thomas and Hannah Gadsby who you’ve mentioned, both incredible performers and comedians, but a lot of their exposure has come not necessarily through disability being a core component of who they are. And there's an element of what we call ‘passing’ there, which is that privilege of, can you blend into a predominantly non-disabled environment and have people be able to pick you out of a line up? No, not so much. So there's an element there for possibly some of the more visible disability experiences like wheelchair users or cane users, visibility might still be slowly improving, but those barriers are probably more significant.

And there needs to be a lot of work done in the background because I’m hearing lots of arts industry people just say ‘oh we don’t know how, it's going to be too hard, it's going to cost too much’. It's like ‘no, if you can adapt, if you can make it work, it's actually not that hard, you just have to adjust your thinking first so you can adjust the process and boost the broader range of exposure and disability experiences, and the visibility of those’. It was certainly something we wanted to adjust with Undercover Artist Festival, so with our expressions of interest earlier this year in particular, it was really important that we simplify the language, we make it about the art, and it's not expecting an essay of a response justifying your work. It's just why do you think this should be in the festival, what's special about this work and can you give us some examples of your work. So you're not spending five to seven days working on this application that’s 30 questions in length. You can just get straight down to it: who are you, what is your work about, why is it important, and that’s all we need to know in the end. That and how much it costs. But even then I think you know a lot of time and energy is spent on these really complex budgets, for the very limited number of opportunities. It's so easy to just go ‘can you give us a ballpark figure of how much you think it might cost? And if you're successful we can work on the budget later’. That’s one tiny way you can make those applications more accessible. And I think the sooner the rest of the sector cottons onto that, I think the greater the response will be to a lot of these opportunities.

# **15:58 Jodie:**  Other than the festival, what's next on the cards for you Maddie?

**16:03 Madeleine:** Sleep! You know I honestly don’t know, I hope to be working with Undercover Artist Festival for a while. The festival happens every two years, so the hope is that I’ll be around for a little while longer.

I’ve written a play recently, actually last year, with a co-writer Alistair Baldwin, he and I wrote a play called Table Twelve. It's a comedy, I call it a rom-com, it takes the kind of rom-com style of many of the movies that we loved in the early 2000s. It’s about these siblings of two disabled people getting married and all of the chaos that comes with them planning a wedding with some accessibility elements and some disability politics thrown in there for some good fun, and the two main disabled characters really not wanting to like each other too much because they’ll give in to what their family wants, but they end up liking each other, spoiler alert. So you know hopefully we might be able to do something with that play. But very much just looking to a small period of rest after the festival and then kicking on with the next plans for what's next for Undercover Artist.

# **17:13 Jodie:** And we’ve spoken about the accessibility for the artists involved in the festival, but what about for the community and the people coming to shows, what's the audience-facing accessibility like?

17:25 Madeleine: Yeah absolutely, we’re very proud to have Auslan interpreters for every show and event, with the exception of Rachel Missingham’s Auslan Dramaturgy of Shakespeare workshop which is delivered in Auslan. We’ve also got audio describers for all of our works, and captioning services as well. Realistically you know if you think about the main arts sector, they go is there a demand for this service? And oftentimes they complain that there's not enough of an uptake. Whereas our view is that art should be for everyone, and art should be accessible for everyone, you shouldn’t have to book in for one specific night to be able to access something that’s accessible.

So if you come along to anything between the 16th to the 18th of September, you're sure to find something that meets your access requirements as well as your taste in art, which is very exciting to be able to have the option to choose what to go to and what to enjoy, and to know that everyone in the space is accessing the same art is really special.

# **18:26 Jodie:**  The Undercover Artist Festival runs in Brisbane from September 16 to 18, for more information visit undercoverartistfest.com.

# Thanks for joining us at Choice and Control, a Carers Queensland podcast. For more information about the National Disability Insurance Scheme or Carers Queensland, contact us online at carersqld.com.au. You can call us on 1300 999 636 or head to Facebook and look for Carers Queensland NDIS.

**Mentioned in this episode**

* [The Undercover Artist Festival](https://undercoverartistfest.com/)
* [Australian comedian Hannah Gadsby](https://hannahgadsby.com.au/)
* [Australian comedian Josh Thomas](https://joshthomas.com.au/)
* [Carers Queensland website](https://carersqld.com.au/)
* [Carers Queensland upcoming events and workshops](https://carersqld.com.au/events/)
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