**(Job 95510) S01E06 MASTERED**

(I: Interviewer M: Matt Fishwick)

Before we begin we’d like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land that we’re recording on, the Wurundjeri Willam clan and Taungurung people and give our respects to their elders past, present and emerging. We encourage everyone listening to consider the traditional owners of the land that they’re living and thriving on and consider the benefits that may come from a treaty with the first peoples. This is, was and always will be Aboriginal land.

*Music*

I: Matt Fishwick is an introvert who chooses to do improv, a nonbinary performer navigating life with a brain injury, hemiparesis, depression and anxiety. Please welcome Matt Fishwick, someone who describes themself as a completely average human. Hey, Matt.

M: Hello, Nicole, how are you?

I: I haven’t known you for that long but I can say that you’re anything but completely average.

M: Oh that’s good.

I: We met doing impro and I’ve mentioned in the intro that you have anxiety. A lot of people don’t understand impro and they say ‘oh I’m too anxious to do that, I couldn’t possibly stand up in front of a bunch of people and make something up on the spot’ so how do you think that impro helps you, how did you get into it?

M: I got into it by watching TV in the UK where I’m originally from and finding randomly a show called Who’s Line Is It Anyway?, the British short form improvisation show and I just loved watching that. It was hysterical and I just really, really enjoyed watching it. Then many years went by and I was looking for a way to be creative because I wasn’t really very creative in my childhood and in my 20s until I thought about moving over here to Australia. When I looked at things I thought well maybe I’m not confident enough or too anxious and stuff to do that kind of thing so I looked for impro classes or improv classes as it was described to me so I always call it improv rather than impro because it’s the first place I went and they all called it impro. I know there’s debate between impro and improv. What happened was I just did the introductory class thinking oh just give me a little bit more confidence and I just really, really enjoyed it.

I: So did you start it when you were over in Australia or …

M: No, I did my very first improv class May the 1st 2010 when I was 27 so that is a long time ago, coming up to 15 years now and I just carried on doing it because I really enjoyed it.

I: It’s also a place where uniqueness is celebrated, I feel like. Did you find that too?

M: I did find that. One of the things that did surprise me is that at the time I didn’t mention that I was disabled in any way because I didn’t want to be completely different than everybody else and everyone else was doing all the stuff that you do in beginning improv classes which is walk around the room, lead with your elbow and all that kind of stuff that is done, that was done at the time, probably still is for very beginner people. I didn’t mention it because I thought oh I don’t want to appear different, I want to be the same as everybody else. I don’t want to be singled out of that specific thing. So I’d just try and do it to the best of my ability.

I: How did that go for you?

M: Reasonably well, I did improv classes for a long time and then I moved to another area of the UK so I’m from the north of England, a place called Wigham between Liverpool and Manchester and I did my initial improv classes in Manchester with a group called Comedy Sports. Then for my job I moved to a place called Birmingham which is in the midlands and nearby in Coventry which isn’t that nearby but it’s close enough, about 60 miles or 100km away that I joined up with a group who were doing evening workshops during the week where I was.

I went there and they were very welcoming and started inviting me to perform in their monthly shows at a coffee place which was my first experience of performing and they were also welcoming and it was just a lot of fun, just doing short form games. I think that’s why I still have a love for short form games or some people call it games with hooks on them and little things like doing a scene where you just continuously use different letters of the alphabet to start and other wonderful little weird short form games. They had a great audience and people seemed to really enjoy it and they were very welcoming.

I: So you say before that you weren’t open about your disability. When did that change or has that changed? How do you deal with that now?

M: I’m more open with it now, I don’t hide it now but when I joined a group or when I joined a group to do classes, I’d just moved to Australia and I had no support system in the local ... well Melbourne ... and it was really strange. So I was kind of hesitant to mention it at first but it was something that as I grew more comfortable with the people around me I’d tell them and things. I didn’t want to be seen as different and not as good as everyone else. I mean that’s totally on me and I know more people are more open with it but that was just how ... because I grew up in the ‘80s in northern England so things weren’t as ... I don’t want to say like acceptable then. I mean acceptable is a very loaded term but people didn’t advertise how they were different.

I: So for those who don’t know what is your disability, I know I said hemiparesis but can you describe it?

M: Hemiparesis is I believe a type of cerebral palsy which is down the righthand side of my body which is the left side of my brain. So I have less dexterity in my right hand and my left leg so that leads to balance problems and other things. If I’m moving around I’m good but if I stand still without leaning oni anything and eventually my balance will ... and I’ll have to take a step or something. I do all my typing and everything with just my left hand. I think to a certain extent it was less noticeable when I grew up because when I was at school and even at university everything was handwritten. I wasn’t at a disadvantage that I couldn’t type with two hands, I was just writing stuff with my left hand as everyone else was using one hand to write. That changed when I got to university and did more typing but by then … I’m not too bad but I still have to hunt and peck at whatever I’m looking at. So I have to look at the keyboard rather than look at the screen, I’m not a touch typer.

I: Me either. When you found impro and that creative outlet did you have a moment where you thought this is what I want to do?

M: I did. It wasn’t something that I thought oh this is a way that I can do something to make money off, not as a job but it was something that I just really enjoyed doing. I certainly have spent more money on impro classes than I’ve ever made doing impro. The first show I ever did with the group who were in Coventry was a place called Wow Impro which no longer exists but they’ve gone on to do various things themselves. The first gig we ever did in a coffee shop, my payment was a card for a free coffee and I was thrilled with that because it was something like oh this is something that’s fun and you’re going to give me a reward for doing it? Doing those shows in Coventry, doing short form was just so thrilling and the audience was warm and lovely and they really enjoyed it.

I mean it was a free show so they didn’t have to stay so it was fine and everyone stayed, it was great. I really enjoyed doing it and it was nice to see people smiling and laughing because sometimes improv doesn’t have to be a long form format with long narrative arcs or however you decide to do long form impro. It can sometimes be silly for three minutes and then never having to reference it again which is thrilling for me because I can just make stuff up and then not have to think about it. So I’m more nervous doing this where I have to tell you facts about myself than if it were just improvising and just go I can just make stuff up.

I: People always say to me ‘oh I don’t know how I could ever do impro’ and I describe it like we’re having a conversation right now and you don’t know what I’m going to say and I don’t know what you’re going to say so life is kind of improvisation.

M: Oh that’s totally true, it gave me more confidence to speak out to people because I’m very introverted in real life which is really strange when you think introverted but also okay on stage.

I: How do you reconcile that like why do you think that is that on stage you let yourself go?

M: I think it’s because in normal everyday life there are expectations of people to behave in certain ways and also in my job I deal with a lot of facts, in my day job and has to be done certain ways. When I’m up on stage some people say ‘oh can you just grab the history of ... what’s the history of books?’ and I can just make something up. It could be real, it could not be real but I can just make up whatever happens, the audience likes to go with it and I like to go with it and if I say something and then somebody else mentions something else then we can incorporate those two ideas together.

I: Have you found that being your true self on stage or letting that side of yourself out means that the relationships that you make are deeper?

M: I think that still I am introverted in real life but I do like to talk to people and I’m very much interested in what other people say and ask questions more which I know you shouldn’t do in improv but it does allow people to talk about themselves while I don’t have to talk as much.

I: I don’t know where that came from, that you’re not supposed to ask questions because in impro I don’t know where that became a rule.

M: I think that became a rule certainly as it was explained to me, if I’m on stage or if we’re on stage together and you say ‘hi Matt, how are you doing?’ and I say ‘hey Nicole, I’m doing well, can you tell me the history of books?’ and then I just stand there and watch you. Then that’s all on you as an improviser whereas it’s like ‘oh let’s tell the audience about the history of books. Well in 1558 there was a print press. I know books existed a long time before that but as an example you can just start there’ and we would build that thing together.

I: So it’s like a shared responsibility.

M: It is a shared responsibility.

I: I feel like there’s a shared experience about none of us know what the other one’s going to do but let’s build the Titanic and sail it together.

M: Also it helps make friends because I don’t have that many so it’s good to be social in a context where I know we have that thing in common. If you’re in an improv class and it’s not your first one and you’ve come back it’s like you obviously enjoy improv and we can talk about improv and other things and you get to know people more.

I: I love that. I want that teacher, I’ll have to support the GoFundMe.

M: I have a t-shirt on which I supported a friend’s GoFundMe for putting together a new theatre in England and it says ‘I brought a brick’. When you’re building something you bring one piece of it and you give it to the other person and go ‘here’s a brick, what are you going to bring to this?’ and they bring another brick and eventually you build a cathedral or a church or whatever you want to build. They’re AndAlso based out of Brighton in the UK.

I: I think I’ve heard of them, actually.

M: Yes, they’ve done a lot of stuff online and during the pandemic I did a lot of online impro and I did something with the teachers from there, the schools based in UK timezone but I spent a lot of my time doing improv before and after work. It was more fun doing it before work because I wasn’t as tired but that was one part of the pandemic I really did enjoy, was the online improv.

I: I actually started impro in 2020 and when people were saying ‘oh I can’t wait to get back on stage’ I was like ‘what do you mean? This is awesome’ because I had nothing to compare it to so I’m like ‘being in little squares on a screen is awesome, this is great’. Then I had that moment of going to in-person classes and be like ‘oh I get it now, the immediate audience response’. I was like ‘oh I understand what everyone was missing’.

M: Yeah but again I really love the online improv. What’s better than sitting in a chair in front of a computer screen? For a long time I wasn’t a hugely physical performer doing a lot of different things so it’s like it makes everyone level and all you have is this little square then everyone has a little square. So it’s interesting to me that people love being on stage but I also love the Zoom improv and I still do Zoom improv with a friend almost weekly.

I: Is that Bela and Matt?

M: That is Bela and Matt, yes. I met Bela during the pandemic in an online improv class which I believe was taught by Jules Munns who is one of the people behind the AndAlso improv group …

I: Look at us tying everything together.

M: Tying everything together, yeah, callback, there you are, we’re done. That’s it.

I: So tell me about Bela and Matt.

M: So Bela and Matt is a silly little improv show, we call it the Bela and Matt show, it’s on Facebook.com/BelaandMatt. It is nowhere else because I’ve never figured out the technology to do it. Record it over Zoom and a free Zoom by the way so the episodes over time got shorter as the free version of Zoom introduced more restrictions so our episodes now tend to be fairly short. I’m in Melbourne, Australia and Bela is in San Francisco, the US so we’re two people sat in chairs over Zoom talking to each other as weird characters and separated by 19 or 18 or 17 hours, whenever the time zones change.

I: What is it about Bela that made you connect with him?

M: Well Bela is an amazing improviser from San Francisco. He’s six foot seven which is very tall but I didn’t know that for the longest time and it’s just something that … we do scenes together in the class and it was fun. Then we were looking for other things because the pandemic was still going on at this point. I mean it still is technically going on now, it’s still around but there’s less restriction in movement but back then we were all locked down in our houses doing stuff online to keep sane, we decided to just have a meetup and have a Zoom call just for fun and then it was like ‘oh why don’t we just record something as an episode?’. So they’re really low stakes.

We’ve done I think a few hundred episodes now but that kind of stopped in December 2024 for my medical condition of getting diagnosed with cancer so that’s stopped for now but when I finish my chemotherapy in a couple of weeks we shall be returning to Zoom because I’ve just been too tired to do that kind of stuff. Honestly at the time that we normally do it I’ve not been awake because we do it to meet Bela’s schedule because Bela has a family, wife and son and I do it around his schedule so it’s usually about 1pm his time which is 6am my time which is absolutely fine. If I have to get up early for anything I’d much rather it be for improv than going to work.

I: I’ve got to say like I know that we’re over Zoom but you look quite well. How are you feeling?

M: I’m feeling well so I thought I had a stomach ulcer which it turned out not to be. I was diagnosed with bowel cancer in my large intestine and on the 18th of December 2024 I was referred to a surgeon later that day and saw the surgeon and went for a CT scan on Monday, the 23rd of December. I went to him like an hour later for the results and he went ‘we need to put you in the hospital tonight because we need to operate on you because it’s blocking your intestine’. So I think it’s called a subtotal colectomy so I had most of my large intestine removed and then the little squiggly bit that they left they hooked to my lower intestine, I guess, or hooked whatever was there to end of my stomach. Either way the cancer’s gone and I’m going through I think they call it adjuvant chemotherapy just to make sure that it didn’t spread anywhere else. I’ve had four infusions every three weeks, four infusions followed by two weeks of chemo pills. I’m currently in the last week of my chemo pills for my fourth infusion so hopefully this is it and everything’s done.

I don’t know whether I can technically say I’m cancer-free at this moment but I’m sure when they do the follow-up scans, I’m sure everything will be fine.

I: That must be difficult, though, when you’ve got your support system the other side of the world.

M: I was lucky in the fact that my parents were coming over for a visit in January and when I was ill they moved their trip forward so they arrived a week before I was having my colonoscopy and they left at the end of March this year so they were here for most of it or for all of it apart from the last infusion so that was good.

I: I have to ask, apart from Whose Line Is it Anyway?, what kind of humour did you grow up on in England?

M: I have always grown up and been comfortable around adults because I’m an only child so I guess my sense of humour is based on my family. We tease each other mercilessly because we love each other and I think that’s one thing maybe certainly ... if I like someone I’ll tease them but if I don’t like people I don’t tease them, that kind of thing.

I: I’m ready to be teased.

M: Yes, absolutely, Nic. It’s amazing that I don’t know whether that’s just a cultural thing from the north of England or whether it’s just my particular family but we all take the mickey out of one another and tease each other. That’s my default setting and I don’t know whether when I came to Australia whether it rubbed people the wrong way or whether it was just something that people here don’t do, I don’t know.

I: I feel like there’s a particularly Aussie woke I want to say sort of thing about tall poppy and tearing each other down in a humorous way.

M: That’s the one thing I really ... so I learnt my sense of humour from my parents, also from ‘80s sitcoms so I had the UK give in to Foxtel in the ‘90s and there was a thing called The Permanent Comedy Channel which was … I think it eventually evolved into Comedy Central which I think is still a thing these days but in the UK they used to show old sitcoms, Taxi, Cheers, MASH, Roseanne, those kind of things and I learnt my humour from there. Also when I was 18 I was flicking around the channels and I found CNBC which is American market share channel and I decided one day of flicking around the channels and the Late Night with Conan O’Brien came on. I think there was two episodes, one on Saturday and one on Sunday, cut down episodes but that was fun and sketch comedy stuff as well like Kids in the Hall and Saturday Night Live.

I: Apart from yourself and Bela obviously if someone was wanting to get into impro and see what it was all about who would you suggest they watch or listen to?

M: Well if you find something that you enjoy like if you want to get into impro the main superstars these days have come out from Saturday Night Live and Second City in the US, people like Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, those kind of people. I also like Steve Carell, Steven Colbert. A lot of talk show hosts and film stars started in improv so if you find those kind of people online and you find you enjoy their films or their TV shows then have a look in your local area because there will be no doubt many people willing to take your money to teach you how to improvise. It’s amazing how when you find a group of people that you enjoy doing scenes with and you’re in a class, at the end of the class it’s like ‘what class are you doing next?’ and you go ‘oh I want to do that class because that person’s doing it, I want to do that class because this particular teacher is teaching it’. It’s like cool so that’s a great way to maintain friendships. All my friendships are improv-based.

I: Was there a particular teacher or piece of wisdom that you got that resonated with you and you understood impro more?

M: There wasn’t a specific teacher but I think there was advice in a book or online somewhere and it says ‘if you’re doing impro and you’re not having fun you’re the arsehole’ I think with the ... and I don’t know who ... I can’t remember ... I’ve read so many impro books and seen so many things online that I don’t remember who it was. But I’ve definitely seen it online and it’s like ‘if you are not having fun doing improv then you’re an arsehole’. There was probably a bigger quote attached to it but that was the genius I took away from it. So I do improv because it’s fun. Many people that do improv go on and say ‘oh I can teach a class now’ and it’s like I’ve got no intention of teaching a class in improv because that’s a different skillset and I do improv to have fun and enjoy myself.

I: Would you be happy doing what you’re doing at the moment or do you want to do something more creative? Are you happy with the percentage of your life that’s work and impro at the moment?

M: Oh I’d love to do impro fulltime but certainly not for me, it’s not financially sustainable. But certainly if I just kept the money that I’ve spent on improv classes I would certainly be a lot richer than I am now but I wouldn’t be as fun of a person. One of the things that did develop my sense of humour was listening to the commentary on wrestling shows so I was a fan of WWF at the time, now WWE so I watched the paid reviews and stuff and when I was ... I’m going to say little or a teenager, I was watching the compilation shows that they used to put out before Raw and everything so I never had the sports channel so I didn’t get the full experience.

But they’d put the wrap-up channel to advertise stuff on an ancillary channel and I’d watch that. A lot of the commentators were very funny and I think I learned my humour from that as well which is why I still like pro-wrestling, not as much ... I’m not hardcore like I have to watch every single thing like at the moment I watch the premium live events. But listening to the commentators certainly is a great way to build up commentary skills, certainly the colour commentators such as … one of the people in the ‘80s was Bobby The Brain Heenan who was a legend and he was very, very funny. That’s why I like to great improv like pro-wrestling in that it’s like you can have an over-the-top character and you can be really evil as long as someone comes along and defeats you.

I: I love that, I think that’s going to be the quote for the episode, is that ... that’s amazing, I love that.

M: The other thing that I’m excited about at the moment is oh we did a show, and I believe you were there, Nic, we did a show called Wrestleprov …

I: Yes.

M: … and yeah, we did a silly little show and I believe at the end ... I can’t remember ... I know I got my head cut off to lose like somebody threw ... I think Chris threw something into the audience. I can’t remember whether it was a plate or something and then it flew over the audience like a little boomerang thing and came back and sliced my head off. I lost from having my head sliced off which at the time I had a tumour in me so who knew? So I mean at the time it wasn’t hurting that much but I was doing an improv class later on with Katherine. I think it was the friendship one on Wednesday nights and I had to drop out of that because I was just having too much pain. So I haven’t done any improv, really, since then but that was the last fun thing that I did improvise other than the Bela and Matt Show, was having my head cut off in wrestling, comedy fake wrestling.

I: That’s with Impro Melbourne, shout out to Impro Melbourne.

M: Shout out to Impro Melbourne, shout out to Ben and Sam who are the geniuses who are behind it who let me just be a weirdo and Chris as well. It’s just a lot of fun. They’re still doing stuff now while I’m out with chemotherapy but I hope to return at some point for a glorious comeback.

I: I feel like ... and I was trying to think of how to say this but I think that impro is where you can find your set of weirdos.

M: Yes, that’s totally true.

I: If you think you’re weird you’ll find somebody that’s like you there.

M: Yes, that’s it. If you want to find your weirdos just go into a group of people and anyone who’s done improv, if you just say ... what’s it? ‘Circle up’, everyone will get in a circle and then you’ll be able to do a silly improv game like anywhere up, if you just shout ‘improvisers, circle up’ and literally they’ll go ‘okay, we’re just doing something weird now’.

I: Okay, listeners, if we haven’t sold you on impro by now I don’t know what can, honestly that sounds so much fun.

M: Yes, remember if you’re not having fun listening to this you’re the arsehole. That’s right.

I: What can people do to support your creativity?

M: Oh to support my creativity come and see an improv show or go and support improv shows anywhere. At the moment, probably by the time this comes out the Melbourne International Comedy Festival happens every year, go and see some artist in some comedy. Me personally, I’m okay for money, I have a day job that pays my bills and everything so I’m good but if you want to support this and other disabled artists this podcast is a great way to do it because I’ve been listening to all the previous episodes and I didn’t know these people. I’ve met Nic before but I hadn’t heard of or known about anybody who’s been on a previous episode. I think there’s five out now, right, Nic?

I: Yes, the fifth one came out today.

M: It did come out today and it’s the only one I haven’t listened to. But I’m a big fan ... the only person I did know is Beau Windon who I met doing improv classes many years ago who is now an excellent writer.

I: What sort of writing have you done? Can you tell me about that?

M: Oh yeah, sure. My journey to improv started at 27 but many, many years ago in an effort to be creative on my own I started to try and write little things. It started when I was I think 19 and I had an idea for a book during the summer off at uni, that was when I’d get up at 3pm, do stuff, write all night and then go to bed at 6am. I wrote 60,000 words of a novel. It was terrible, I never finished it because I had to go back to uni and just never got into that groove again but it inspired me years later to try something called NaNoWriMo which is National Novel Writing Month.

I: Oh wow …

M: But NaNoWriMo was a thing that happened every November where you had to write 50,000 words in a month and I did the first two or three handwritten in between on breaks at work and at night and everything. It was a lot of fun. Again nothing happened with it and then a couple of years later I decided ... I did it every year for a while and then my job became ... it became unsustainable to do it with my job because I was busy at that particular point of the year and I had less and less time. That’s when I thought oh maybe I can also look into doing impro because impro, when you go to major cities now there’s a lot of stuff that you throw a stone and you’ll find someone who’ll teach you how to improvise. But back then there was only a couple so I then started taking impro classes with Comedy Sports and then I took a sketch-writing class with Comedy Sports and started writing topical jokes for an open call radio show that they had in the UK called News Jack which was based on the news at the time. Everyone in the UK could actually submit jokes and if you got a joke on they paid you money. I have a BBC radio writing credit for six episodes of News Jack over like four years.

I: Congratulations.

M: Thank you, that is the only professional writing I have ever done. Every week I’d submit a sketch but my sketches weren’t good enough because obviously they’d get rewritten by the inhouse team. I had a spreadsheet at the time and I had a running total so I submitted for 60 episodes over the course because I think they did two series of six a year so there’s 12 episodes a year and I think I submitted for like five years. I think I submitted 60 times and I got six writing credits and then in addition to those six writing credits where you got paid I also got an email that told me they used my material in a recording but it was cut for time and I got three of those.

So I got nine successes that my stuff got recorded for the BBC and the sad thing is I don’t think those podcasts exist anymore. But they do have something in the UK now called ... I think it’s called The DMs are Open which I vaguely heard is the replacement for News Jack because in the UK stuff tends to be on for a couple of years and then they’ll replace it with something else. I don’t know whether it’s open to Australian residents but anywhere in the world if you are, if you find the open submission podcasts or comedy shows that will allow you to write stuff …

I: I feel like when you were saying before that your sketches weren’t good enough maybe they were, maybe they just weren’t your type of weirdo, you know?

M: Oh yes, that’s it, they’re not my type of weirdo. I did continue writing to when I first got here and then due to depression and other stuff the writing fell away and the imposter syndrome kicked in. I mean I’ve always had imposter syndrome but it kicked in more when I was here with less of a support system but then it was like okay, I’m building writing up too much in my head so I threw myself all in with the impro. It’s like well I’m on stage, I’ll have to be creative in some way so that was how I got my creative shits and giggles, by being creative on stage. Now that I’ve had cancer and that and I’m doing chemotherapy and recovering it’s a great way to listen to this podcast, it’s a great way, it’s opened up so many avenues that I didn’t know about because I’m not hooked into the writers and the poets that you’ve interviewed but I know of opportunities now that I can look for.

I: Thank you so much, that’s so nice. With depression do you find that ... I mean it could probably be a podcast episode of its own but do you find that getting up and performing and putting yourself out there helps or what’s the relationship with depression and creativity?

M: Well I mean even if I’m feeling really depressed and I get on stage, that I can at least find something fun in the three minutes or the five minutes or the 10 minutes or whatever that I’m on stage. So it’s like a little boost of happiness like serotonin in my head. It’s just fun to do so I always like to do stuff that’s comedy-based because ... I mean I adore dramatic improv and have tried to do some in the past, it’s been fun but I’d rather be more funny than serious.

I: Thank you so much for your time, Matt, it’s been so lovely to be able to chat with you long form. Thank you so much for spending some of your time with me.

M: That’s alright, Nic, I’ve really enjoyed listening to all the podcasts that you’ve done so far and I look forward to listening to episode 5 which I haven’t listened to yet which has just been released so I look forward to also listening back to my dulcet tones.

I: Thank you so much, Matt.

M: No problem. Thank you very much.

*Music*

I: Create and Amplify is assisted by the Australian Government through Creative Australia, its principal arts investment and advisory body. Please share this episode widely. ‘Til next time.

*Music*

[end of recording]