**(Job 94808) C&A S01E03 MASTERED**

(I: Interviewer P: Participant)

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.

[intro music]

I: Olivia Muscat is a writer, performer, artist and cultural critic and disability arts activist. Her show ‘Is Anyone Even Watching’ has been programmed by Arts House for their upcoming season and her first children’s picture book ‘My Name Is Jemima’ is set for release by Scribble this year. In 2024 it was shortlisted for the Text Prize for Children’s and Young Adult Literature, and took part in the Darebin Art Speakeasy Development Program. Hi Olivia.

P: Hello.

I: Thanks for joining me and the listeners today.

P: Thanks so much.

I: I guess my first question, something very exciting in your bio, ‘My Name Is Jemima’ is coming out this year. Can you tell me about that?

P: Yeah, so we’re less than three months away now which is wildly exciting. I’ve gotten to the point where I start talking about and they actually can’t stop smiling which is really nice because it’s been quite a long process for quite a number of reasons, most of them pretty boring. Now we’re finally so close to it being released and that’s very exciting and I guess I should tell you a bit about what it is. So ‘My Name Is Jemima’, if anyone listening happens to know me I guess, I don’t know why you would, but my guide dog’s name is Jemima. A few years ago I had this kind of idea in conversations with other people and just from my own experiences with children and adults to write a children’s book that is fun and funny and cute that also basically explains kind of the rules about guide dogs and why we don’t talk to them when they work and why we can’t pat them and why we can’t distract them from what they’re doing.

I think it’s so important because so many kids love Jemima and Jemima love so many kids and I feel like an evil which when I say, “You can’t give her a pat today; she’s working,” and that’s kind of the end of the conversation and they don’t actually get a follow-up as to why. What she’s working means and why they can’t talk to her because I know what they want to: she’s adorable. I got to pick up the first printed copy last week and it was the most exciting day of my life.

I: That’s so exciting.

P: It is. I just sniffed it like a weirdo. Just love new book smell and it was the newest book I’ve ever touched, that’s I went to the pub for a celebratory drink afterwards and a little kid came up to me and was like, “Can I pat your dog?” I just wanted to hand him the book but I was like, no, you can’t have it, it’s my copy. But I just wanted to hand it over and say have a read which is probably silly.

I: Now as anyone who’s tried to write a picture book would know, it seems easy but it’s very, very difficult. Can you tell me about the process of writing it and the age of the children that you’re speaking to?

P: Yeah, for sure. The first thing I did was Google how long is children’s picture book and that was not very helpful. But like, the consensus was like, 600 words. As you say, you like, 600 words, I could write that in my sleep. But when you’re trying to tell the whole story in 600 words and make it have meaning and to be funny and be understandable, it’s actually really hard. So I just had to go. I think I just did many, many drafts. Many, many drafts. I think there was something about this one, because I was so clear about what I wanted out of and for some reason there was a very clear Jemima voice in my head. It came quite naturally but even then it went through so many edits and I’ve rewrote it so many times. Even up until quite recently there were still being edits made to it and I was reading it yesterday for the audiobook and I was like, we can’t change anything now, can we? No, we can’t. Because there was still things I wanted to change.

I: I have to ask, what does Jemima’s voice sound like to you?

P: She’s sassy. She’s just so sassy. She is probably less sassy in the final version of the audiobook than she is in my head but in my head she’s making cutting remarks that people constantly but is also, you know, wanting to be everybody’s best friend so she is quite a diva. She’s just a diva. Just picture the diva-est person you know and that’s probably what Jemima sounds like.

I: She’s the Beyoncé of dogs.

P: She’s the Beyoncé of dogs, thank you.

I: Anybody who’s seen you, they will know that you have an amazing sense of clothing style and you dress very colourfully. Now you are visually impaired, blind — what word do you prefer?

P: Well I’m totally blind.

I: Totally blind. So you’re totes blind.

P: Totes blind all the time.

I: But yet you dress in the most colourful clothes so I was wondering how do you understand colour?

P: How do I understand colour. Now this is a question I get asked quite often and I never actually come up with a really good answer. I understand colour because I used to be able to see it I guess. So I have in my mind very vividly what colours look like and colours also have a lot of nuanced, so sometimes I just don’t get it, like I can’t picture the exact shade of something that somebody is trying to describe to me, and that’s fine. I think maybe because my relationship to colour was formed in childhood and then as an adolescent that’s when I lost the rest of my vision, my understanding of colour stalled at age 12 so I’m just like, yeah, I love pink, through all the colours at all the things all the time. Maybe that’s what it is.

But I don’t think so because I definitely went through a phase in my early 20s – early to mid 20s when I was dressing in jeans and grey knits. At the time I didn’t realise how unhappy I was with that situation and I think it was really this lessons of, this expectation from sighted people that I wouldn’t have a relationship or understanding of colour and messages from within the blind community itself of like, “Well why would you want to, well you’re not pretending to be a sighted person, why would you want to dress colourfully?” And one day I was like, I don’t know, I cannot tell you what flipped that for me or what made me realise that I was all complete – am I allowed to swear because I just want to say it was bullshit because it was bullshit.

I: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely.

P: It’s like, what made me realise that that was all bullshit, but one day – you know what, I think it was during the pandemic, how weird is that – and I was like, no, I can do whatever I want. If I want to wear yellow overalls and a pink top, I’m gonna, and if I want to wear a dress with rainbows or platypuses or ice creams on it I’m going to do that too. My understanding of colour I think bears very little on what I choose. Yeah, it’s really hard to describe, I’m sorry. I’ve given you a very all-over-the-place answer.

I: No, that’s okay. The idea that you don’t care, the first thing that came to my head was yass queen, nor should you care, and as somebody who very much appreciates your style it works for you so –

P: Thank you. I can’t say that I don’t care, like I’m not going on and being like, “Okay, I’m going to wear this dress and I’m going to put whatever tights on,” and I literally don’t care. I do spend a lot of time being quite meticulous about planning. I’m a night before gal. If you ever see me and I’m in jeans and still a fun top but pants, it’s like, yes, she got dressed this morning and didn’t think about it last night. But usually I spend time, I use AI now to pick the tights or shoes that I wear to identify if there’s colours that are picked out in the pattern. Stuff like that really. I label a lot of my stuff with audio or Braille labels as well so I know exactly what I’m wearing because I’m the sort of person who once I found a cardigan that I liked I bought it in 10 colours. So labels, very handy.

I: Me too. That sounds very similar to me. Could you tell me about your relationship with either your disability or just the label of disability and disability pride in general? You can sort of answer the question however you like but could you tell me, especially if it’s something that sort of worsened over time, can you tell me about your relationship with disability?

P: It’s a difficult one. It’s definitely evolved over time for sure. It’s tricky because now, like I still feel like it’s complicated and I still feel like if I tell you what I think disability or disability pride means to me that I’m going to get it wrong and I think that says a lot about belonging to such a big community with so many different people in it. Guess what? We’re not all homogenised. We know that. We’re not one big entity. But I think to give a really practical illustration of it I think when I was in high school – I don’t know about before this but definitely in high school – sort of after I’d lost my vision, so when I went from being vision impaired to totally blind I really remember this time where I’m like, “I’m not disabled. I’m blind; I’m not disabled.” That was very important to me and that was a very important distinction. It wasn’t really till I started engaging with disabled writers and disabled artists and makers and creators of all sorts and really kind of immersing myself in disability kind of community and culture that way and learning about the social mob with disability where now I’m like, yes, big fan.

I: For our listeners who are new to that concept, could you explain your understanding of it?

P: My understanding of it. Okay. The way I like to explain it for anyone who really hasn’t encountered it before is that using me personally as an example, so the social model of disability says that it’s not the disability that’s the issue, it’s the systemic social attitude and all sorts of barriers that are actually the problem. So I’m not disabled by the fact that I can’t see; I’m disabled by the fact that this world is kind of obsessed with doing things in a visual way. So if you put a printed sheet of paper in front of me and expect me to read that, I’m not disabled by the fact that I can’t see it; I’m disabled by the fact that you’ve given me a piece of paper that is inaccessible to me and I can’t read it that way. Because I can read, I read a lot, much to some people’s great confusion. So yeah, understanding that disability isn’t something to be ashamed of and isn’t a dirty word or a bad word or put you in this sad category of people. The attitudes that were around me growing up which is why I tried to distance myself from the work disabled or disability but once I learned about that – and that is the barebones definition of social model of disability. There is so much more to it than that but we could be here for ages. Book me for a two-hour seminar.

I: We’ve got time. Talking about your acceptance I suppose of being part of the disability community changed when you connected with a lot of people, how did you first connect with people from the disability community?

P: Yeah, I feel like, super dirty saying this now but it’s Twitter, X, formerly Twitter, when it used to be a nice place to hang out, really that is where I started making a lot of connections with people and learning what other people were writing and talking about and making and discussing. You could just other conversations with people and it was really nice. I’m quite sad and lost at the moment in a way because I don’t feel I have that sort of community in the same way. There is no medium that acts like that kind of community for me anymore. I’m not saying it’s not out there but I haven’t found a place that, A, I like, and B, is literally accessible to me that fills that kind of gap. But that was definitely first and then going to events and engaging with, yeah, it sort of started online and then moved to in person like attending, whether it’s workshops or talks or events. They were either about buying for the disabled community always just adjacent to it. Maybe it was just art things and there were just other disabled people there.

I: Speaking of art things, could you tell me about your love of theatre?

P: I love the theatre. Gosh. It starts all the way back in kindergarten when I have a cry because I didn’t get cast as Mary in an activity. Actually, maybe it goes back further than that. I’ve always loved it. I am a dramatic person. I’ve always gotten the chills if I’ve seen something live on stage way back to my mum taking me to see The Wiggles or whatever. Yeah, it started there, has evolved and literally has never, ever left me. I’m just obsessed with it in all its weird forms. I’ve got to say. But yeah, I must confess, I’m a musical theatre freak. That’s my number one thing. It’s been a complicated relationship, this love I have of theatre, because it hasn’t always loved me back, or I’ve got to say, the industry hasn’t always loved me back. It was a very, very long road to get to where I am now and I still don’t feel like I’m exactly where I want to be with theatre, but anyway. I left high school – I had the best drama teacher. We had run-ins at first, she was like, oh my God, you can’t do this, you can’t see or whatever, and was very blocky is no good drama person should be. Don’t block; yes and.

I: And then you are like, watch me, yes I can.

P: Pretty much basically is exactly what happened. Lucky for me I had my parents on my side. They were not like, well, you can’t do it, it’s too dangerous. They were like, why can’t she do it? She’s good at it. Going through high school we had this amazing relationship, she and I, and basically just did all the plays all the time. Then left school – not left school, went to uni open days and all that stuff. Monash, it doesn’t exist anymore but they are really cool performing arts degree and I would always speak to whoever was in charge and the vibes were not good. It was very much a, yeah, you can audition but we don’t know how we would include you. So I pivoted to a music degree and then I pivoted to an arts degree and have slowly found my way back to theatre over time. Not to say, I never stopped going to see theatre and enjoying it and loving it but it have to find my way back to it in a performing place.

I: Did anyone ever tell you explicitly what it was they thought you couldn’t do or was it just the vibe that they were going to make it difficult?

P: Definitely that a lot, the difficulty. People always seemed really concerned with safety, like it would be dangerous for me to walk about. It was just, I don’t even think they’d thought through. It was just a general, no, just take one look at you and no. Actually I ended up auditioning for the really cool performing arts program at Monash and actually got in. I was so disheartened that I didn’t take the place. I was so disheartened from my conversation with the dude that was in charge of it that I didn’t take the place. That’s also on me. I could have taken place. But at that point in time I was like, no, no one wants me, there is no room for me, no one wants blind people on stage because why would they?

I: And it’s also how many battles am I going to have to fight along the way.

P: Exactly, yes. Exactly. No, I do have that exact thought process too of like, this is just stage one. It would be three more years of this thing isn’t accessible or they won’t let me do this or they’re underestimating me here. I’m sure that would have happened. Absolutely sure. No doubts. The conversation we originally had, because I was interested in all aspects of theatre, not just acting, and was very open to where the pivoting to other theatre practices or at least trying them out and this conversation involved, he commented that yes, we’ve got someone in the course now, I don’t know if he said vision impaired or something but it was something like that and she’s directing a playwright now. And I just went, my eyes must’ve lit up, like that’s so-called, how good is that. That’s awesome. I don’t know if I even said anything or I just pulled are really excited face and he was like, “No, she’s got much more vision than you.” And I was like, right. A, you just met me. B, what? Shut down much.

I: I’m speechless. So could you tell me how you got into being a critic?

P: That is a harder one to explain. I feel like it became somehow very known in the blindness community, or at least the blind music community, that I was the theatre girl and I was super into theatre. Even though I kind of pivoted from it at that stage I was still in that work. Olivia, she’s the theatre girl, she likes musicals and plays and stuff. Through someone I met through that community introduced me to an audio describer who introduced me to Alison Croggin who was running witness performance at the time and they had talked about representing more accessible theatre and critiquing it. I was introduced to her and was a big fan of her writing from way back so that was an exciting moment for me. It sort of stemmed from there. So I did a bit of stuff for Witness for a while and sadly they had to cease operations because of lack of funding. I’ve done a bit elsewhere. I still do it here and there.

I think it’s harder to be a critic when you’re trying to make your own work so that’s something I’ve sort of stepped back from. I still do it a lot in my head. But yeah, it all sort of started from conversations on conversations on conversations and just taking up random meetings with people I didn’t know very well which was horrifically scary for me at the time but I did it and it was really great. That was nearly seven years ago. Feels like a lot longer. But yeah, that’s how I got into being a critic and I found it hard to ever – I still kind of find it difficult to call myself a critic but, you know, I’ve written reviews for lots and lots of plays and lots and lots of dance and even books, I got into books because, yeah, I did some book reviews for Saturday paper as well in the end which is its own thing. But yeah, it’s not a straightforward road to criticdom but that’s sort of the story behind it.

I: I think a lot of people would be interested in how you are critic for a play that you can’t see, so do you rely on the audio description or do you just go by what you hear? How does that work?

P: Yeah, always a good question. I think part of what my role was when I started working with Alison and Witness was to review what I was seeing and to a point review the accessibility stuff as well, so the audio description or the tactile tool, whatever it was. I think that came about because there was a kind of lack of standards around what that looks like and whether that needs to be good. Definitely it’s shifted. There’s a lot more awareness of it now. But back and especially there were two providers really doing it and it was awkward and they were competitive and volunteer-based stuff, it still needs to be good and held accountable and at that stage it wasn’t. Sorry, that sort of separate from your question but I’m getting to it, I swear.

I: No, but it’s good to talk about as well because myself, I’m in a wheelchair and a lot of the time you go to a place and if they have a ramp it’s like they’re patting themselves on the back that they have a ramp when that should be sought of the minimum of what they’re supposed to do. So it’s interesting for you to say even volunteer-based organisations, there still needs to be a good standard of accessibility in the arts.

P: It’s not good enough that, oh, because they’re volunteers and they’re doing a nice thing, yeah, but they need to do a good job. I remember reviewing one player they literally mentioned in that review that I turned off the AD during its because it was so lacking. But do you want me to just explain a bit for anyone who doesn’t know what audio description is?

I: That would be wonderful.

P: I mean, it’s pretty basic when you get down to it. Audio description is an alternative track that people usually listen to through headphones if it’s a live performance. In the movies you can get it as well. It’s just an alternative track that describes between the dialogue and the important bits what’s going on visually and there’s only so much you can say in those gaps, you can’t say everything, but it’s so you get, you know, the important stuff. Good AD is so good. It just changes everything. I can’t think of a theatre example because I rarely see a show with and without AD, it’s not a common thing. But there’s so many movies – I’m just going to use Emma, the 2020 Emma as an example because it’s one of my favourite movies – the first time I saw it I hated it and they didn’t have audio description and I was so bored. I was so bored in that cinema. I didn’t know who was who. I couldn’t tell them apart. I don’t know if I just wasn’t concentrating. Who knows. I’m pretty good at telling voices apart, but anyway, had a terrible time. A little while later I watched it with audio description and I was like, this is so good. A lot of the costumes. I know who’s talking now.

I know what’s going on and this is a fantastic film. Whether you agree with me or not, I don’t know, but for me it makes such a difference, a good audio description track. So that is mostly how I review theatre. I’ll go to shows with audio description which, you know, occur once or twice in the run – woohoo – and yeah, I went to a show, it wasn’t to show for me to review but I went to a show at Arts House last week and was the children show. There were some adults there but it was technically children show. It was very visual, very movement happy. It basically relied mostly on the movement but there was an AD track and I had a great time. It was so good. If I sat through that show without it I would have snoozed. Like, what am I even doing here? But because of the AD track it was great, I knew exactly what was going on, I got a laugh when everyone else was laughing. There’s nothing worse than feeling like you’re left out of a funny bit because you haven’t seen what happens. It’s such a sad feeling, like everyone is laughing and I don’t know what’s going on, what’s so funny?

I: I think that something that a lot of people, just wouldn’t even cross their mind how galvanising a good laugh is with other people. So that’s really interesting.

P: I love a life. I’m the biggest fan of a laugh. So when I get to laugh along with everybody else because of a visual gag, it’s just the best day.

I: It was interesting what you are saying about audio description kind of making or breaking a play sometimes because I feel that way when I listen to audiobooks where the speaker isn’t who I thought it should be or the voice doesn’t align with who I have in my head and you can really make or break a book for me.

P: Oh my gosh, there’s nothing like a bad audiobooks narrator. Sorry, there are part ones. But that’s kind of it with AD too. Don’t be coughing into the mic please. That was a level where were dealing – that’s what we were dealing with a few years ago.

I: Has that actually happened?

P: Snotting, coughing, talking in the background and not turning off your mic while the dialogue is going. Yeah.

I: See, for me I would have thought it should be a performance of its own.

P: I’m inclined to agree with you there.

I: Yeah, I just can’t get over that they care so little that that’s how they would react.

P: Thankfully we’ve moved on a bit from that and almost we go too far the other way as people get in their head about it needing to be a performance. Like technically it firstly needs to serve its purpose, like it needs to convey the visual information. Then if you can find a way to integrate it and make a part of the show or something or do it in a creative way, great. But you are right, it does need to at the very least meet the standards of performance of be professional and not gross.

I: Yeah. I find bodily functions and things gross so I would probably, if I was you, I would be gagging away.

P: Oh my gosh, I’ve not been a good audience member on those particular nights.

I: Can you tell me about ‘Is Anyone Even Watching’?

P: Yes, sorry, I got confused. I have two projects that start with the letter I. I didn’t talk about this in my colour think that I have synaesthesia and colour is very connected to a lot of things in my brain and I get confused with words.

I: Okay, we have to talk about that. Tell me about synaesthesia.

P: So I have – it’s the most common form of synaesthesia wherein my had letters and numbers are inextricably linked with certain colours. There’s nothing I can do to change it. It’s not like – as I’m talking I don’t see the words come up in colour but if it’s the title of something or somebody’s name or something important to remember or just a word I’ve chosen to focus on for some reason I see it in very vivid colour in my head. So I’ll use you as an example: because your name has an “I” and an “O” in, it’s got shades of red and yellow because “I” is always yellow and “O” is always red. The “E” in your name is there but because it’s not an “E” sound, it’s just like a lengthening “E” for the “O”, it shades the colour a little bit but it doesn’t appear as orange which is the colour of “E”.

I: That’s fascinating.

P: It’s so weird. It’s so weird.

I: Is that connected at all to your disability or no?

P: No, I think it’s entirely separate. I also have a special version which means I see things like time, days of the week, years, whatever, all things relative to time in a very spatial way which I cannot explain to you. I wouldn’t know how to explain it. But to me it’s like time is on this loop and I can focus in on particular days or months. March is red so everything is red at the moment. I have a very good internal calendar because of it.

I: Yeah, I was going to say, doesn’t make you somewhat more organised?

P: Yeah, it makes me able to remember dates and times of things. At the moment I’m having to write everything down in my calendar because it’s just bananas and I will forget things but yeah, if you tell me your birthday I’ll never forget it.

I: 21/10/88.

P: All right, it’s going in.

I: There we go. What just happened in your brain. Is it a colour?

P: Yeah, it was a colour. For the 28 and the 10 – the 10th and October both have different colours as well, and the 88, very pink. If I see too many 8s in my brain I get a bit of a headache from all the pink. It’s weird. It’s so strange. But yeah, because you said is anyone even watching I had to take a minute to go, is anyone even watching, I don’t want to be your friend, which one did she say? Okay, got it.

I: Well I’m going to ask you about both.

P: This is such a weird interview. I’m so sorry.

I: No, unless you’re not enjoying it let’s keep going.

P: No, I’m so fine.

I: So let’s talk about ‘Is Anyone Even Watching’.

P: So essentially what ‘Is Anyone Even Watching’ will be is a show during Fringe Festival this year I think. I don’t know if that’s public knowledge but whatever, and it is basically 50 minutes of me pretending to be Lizzie McGuire. Does that reference mean anything to you?

I: Yes. Yes.

P: Okay, cool. But what it really is is this show that I saw devised and still developing it, it’s been several years but I’m still working on it, it’s a show about what language is and what exclusion is and how people have historically used language to hold power over disabled people, particularly blind people, through things like terrible audio description or no audio description. So it’s a bunch of little vignettes I’ve created and it’s all themed around an early 2000’s sleepover or slumber party and a school camp. It’s either because I was kind of doing a bit of a development as part of Culture Lab and was exploring why I’m so obsessed with dance and being excluded from dance my entire life both as a kid trying to learn it and as an adult trying to see it in the future, like watch sometimes. I speak to so many blind people or people with low vision who are like, I’ve got no interest because no one makes it accessible, but no, I have obsessive interest because no one makes it accessible to me. What is it and how can we make it better and why does it suck so much and what is it about people that makes them think that a blind person can’t dance? No, blind person has trouble learning dance because you use stupid words to describe what you’re talking about.

So we did this performance where me and my co-performer Zoe, we came up with this routine of some really common dance moves that a lot of people would know if you say what they are on like a great final something and then really weird ones like we had cultural references like “Eww David” from Schitt’s Creek which was a particular fan movement and then we merged that into perving on the neighbours was the name of one of our moves. We made up this whole dance. I had to learn so many dance moves that I didn’t know because I’d never seen them and then I made up an alternative which is how I would interpret all the things we were saying and some of them were as silly as “pa pa bam”, like that was the whole instruction, so we devised this dance of how I would interpret all these words and we did the dances and honestly people thought it was the funniest thing and I was like, this is the best day ever.

Now that’s sort of snowballed into an entire show where we play with that concept so there will be dancing and there will be makeovers because that’s another thing people are freaked out by the facts I do my make up everyday and I wear a red letter quite often. How? Practice, that’s how. I know my face. Yeah, I fuck up sometimes. I made my eyebrow blue once, it’s no big deal. So yeah, makeovers and lots of movie things that people either have a reference for in their own lives or from pop culture. The scale still depends on whether we get certain bits of funding or whatever but honestly it’s just going to be a really fun time.

I: I can’t wait to see it.

P: Please come.

I: When are people able to come along?

P: Arts House has to launch their season two program but it will be probably October/November some time and I will be posting obsessively about it because I need more than five people in the audience.

I: I’ll be there.

P: There’ll be games, there’ll be Pictionary, all sorts. My goal is, because I hate audience participation, like do not pick on me, do not look at me, and I think that stems from an inaccessibility thing as well. You might have experienced a similar thing where it’s like, don’t pick me because I don’t know if I’m going to be able to get up on that stage and to not make a fuss. You know what I mean?

I: Absolutely, yep.

P: I’ve had a comedy experience, I was going to say recently but it’s probably three years ago now, a bunch of my friends and I went to see this comedian and he was looking for an audience participant and the room went really silent and it’s like, this has been a weirdly long time, pick someone already mate. My friend was like, “I think he’s trying to make eye contact with you,” and I was like, out loud, “Oh, that’s awkward.” It wasn’t a very big room and my friends that had whispered to me went up instead and that was fine and we all moved on but yeah, gross. That’s why I hate audience participation. So I’m trying to design the most accessible, optional audience participation the experience I can so if me saying things like someone can get to comply Pictionary and someone will do a dance or put on a costume or get a makeover, if that scares you, you won’t just be picked randomly. I need to make this clear to people.

I: Yeah, absolutely. I do improvisation theatre and we have to let people know that it’s okay to come to the front row because we’re not going to pick on you.

P: You’re allowed to sit in the front. We won’t point and laugh.

I: Now for another thing that starts with “I”: could you tell me about ‘I Don’t Want To Be Your Friend’?

P: Sure can. ‘I Don’t Want To Be Your Friend’ is a middle grade novel, the 8 to 10, 9 to 12, that kind of age range. It’s about two grade fives anyway and they aren’t friends. One of them has been blind since birth and starts her only experience of life and the other character has recently, suddenly, lost her sight. They’re put in the same grade at school by a series of fun coincidences and it’s basically about their kind of surprisingly unlikely road to friendship. It’s a book I’ve been working on and is going to be published next year, so that’s exciting. I’ve sort of started calling out the 2020s blind Hating Alison Ashley. Feels like a nice comparison to me but again, it’s quite joyful, it’s got some sad parts. There were bits of writing it that literally made me cry but I think it was just a very personal, like you put your feelings and yourself into your writing and of course you are going to cry sometimes. But yeah, it’s not just a story about blindness or disability necessarily. It’s there, it’s that big time, but it is a story about friendship and love and empathy and maturing enough to view the world through somebody else’s perspective.

I: One of the things I wanted to ask you was around writing about blindness. Are you doing that to educate people or are you doing it because write what you know or is it a bit of both?

P: So I’ve reached a point in my sort of writing artist journey where educating isn’t my main goal. My arts that I want to make is not for your education. But it’s a byproduct of the fact that I’m going to make out from my own perspective and my own experience and that’s where I’m at. Maybe go to another point in a few years or whatever where I’m like, I’m going to do something that’s completely formulated, like doesn’t feature blindness in any capacity, but I’m not there yet. I’m still at a very, like I want to make out about me and people like me because they haven’t seen it. It’s not fair. We need more. We’re still here where we’re like, we need more disability rep that’s authentic and good. We haven’t passed that point just yet.

It’s out there, it’s there if you know where to look for it and some that breakthrough make it to the mainstream but it’s not front and centre. It doesn’t share the front and centre with other important stories that need to be told. So the people get some sort of education from what I make, awesome, cool, SO like I don’t want to educate anyone ever, it’s more just I want to make what I want to make and I want to make things that feature me or people like me. Speaking of ‘I Don’t Want To Be Your Friend’, when I grew up, once I saw this blind girl on The Saddle Club and man, her story arc sucked.

I: I remember that.

P: Yeah, I’ve mentioned it in a few places and anyone who watched The Saddle Club will probably have a very vivid memory of that episode where the blind girl comes for one episode and guess what, she gets injured and is never seen again. Even at nine I was like, that’s not cool, that sucks, my mum’s not like that, she could ride a horse if she wanted to. She was very much an educational plot point for the main Saddle Club girls and like with ‘Is Anyone Even Watching’, please, anyone that’s listening and wants to correct me, please do, but I personally am yet to see a blind person on a mainstream stage in a cool, interesting, fun role. I feel like outside of my little echo chamber and echo chambers that exist, I mean, the UK has way more going on and probably the US and Canada as well, but outside those echo chambers it’s like, yeah, we still are there. We’re still not there on main stages and stories that aren’t about how sad it is or how crazy it is or inspirational levies to be a disabled person or a blind person.

I: I’m actually horrified because when you said that I was like, surely I can think of someone or something but nothing is coming to mind. That doesn’t mean that there isn’t.

P: No, absolutely not and I never want to make blanket statements because nobody can be across everything and I’ve been particularly offline in the last little while, quite a while, so who knows what I’ve missed. There are performers, they are out there, I’m not by any means trying to say I’m the only one because I’m definitely not. Yeah, it’s still an area where we are incredibly underrepresented so I’m very much in that. I guess that does mean I’m making work to educate, you know what I mean? It’s this thing it always comes back to, are we educating simply by existing and putting ourselves out there and speaking out? It’s an odd, complicated question. Yeah, I enjoy answering.

I: I remember as a teenager thinking that I didn’t want to be an advocate because I misunderstood it and thought that it meant I had to join Parliament or something so I was thinking I don’t want to be an advocate and then, yeah, sometimes you are advocating for a quality simply by asking for it.

P: Just trying to do your thing. Yeah. I don’t know if you felt this but, you know, doing what you do and being a creative person and a writing person, I always come across if I’m giving a workshop or speaking to other disabled writers or whatever it might be and it’s usually a question of, well, do I have to write about my disability? It’s like, no, you can write about whatever you want but people felt this pressure that in order to be taken seriously – there’s two angles of pressure. People will either feel the pressure to completely hide their disability, not even have their work have a whiff of disability about it and mask or hide in that way, or the pressure to mine their own trauma because that’s what or get views or get published or whatever it is.

I: Yeah, or that’s what’s unique about them so that’s what will make them stand out. The up.

P: If that’s what you want to do, all for it. Either of those things. If that’s what you want to do, it’s your individual choice. It’s what I always tell people. But if you want to write about aliens – I’m not a psycho person, I don’t know – but something set in outer space and happen to have a disabled character, go for it. If you want to write romance that only features disabled characters, go for it. If you want to write a weird literary fiction that takes itself very seriously and features disabled characters, go for it. It’s your life. But you just have to find a way to ignore that pressure and it’s so hard. I felt it. For the first few years of my writing career – I hesitate to use that word but it’s what’s come out of my mouth – you know, that pressure that that’s the only interesting thing about me, that’s the only thing people are going to want to read about. That’s all they are interested in. That’s what I’m going to write about and am going to do it from a really very dark, traumatic place. It took me awhile to unlearn all of the and I came from a previous place of, well, I’m going to ignore my disability completely and people won’t know and it’ll be fine. So I jump from one extreme to the other and I’ve had to unpick and underline both of those. I don’t know if you’ve gone through anything similar.

I: Yeah, but once you get to the other side it’s quite liberating to realise you can do whatever you want.

P: Yeah, right. Literally.

I: I was struck by the fact just then, and I don’t want to nitpick at you, but I was struck by the fact you sort of stop yourself when you are saying that you had a writing career. I have seen your writing and it’s pretty prolific. I would say that you do have a writing career so I was just wondering what your hesitation was.

P: That’s a good question. Imposter syndrome, probably the short answer, but also I think in a specific case because I was referring to a long time ago when especially at that point I was like, well, this isn’t a career, this is something you are trying to do. So I think that’s where that came from. I guess, yeah, I can’t really say that I don’t have a writing career because at this point there are several books and many, many, many articles and things with my name on them. So thank you for pulling me up because I do get imposter syndrome. Literally I was sitting there recording my own audiobook yesterday going like, yeah, this is real, you’re not a fraud.

I: You’re like the furthest thing from a fraud. It’s quite comforting to hear that someone like you has imposter syndrome because –

P: Oh, big time.

I: Yeah. Speaking of articles that you’ve written, I recently read one we spoke about I think 30 things that you’ve done now that you’re 30?

P: Yes.

I: I was struck by just the sheer amounts that you’ve done. I’m wondering how you fit it all in. So do you have, I mean, it’s a bit wanky to call it a creative process sometimes but do you have like a routine that you have to produce as much as you do?

P: Yeah, I mean, I’ve been living wanky-town this week because it’s grant writing season so no worries there. I’m a very spontaneous creative and I think I’ve relied a lot on that in the past where I’m like, well, it’s what I am and I feel like writing so I’m going to and for the two weeks after the I’m like, no ideas, too busy, too busy. Too busy with what, I don’t know. But in the past couple of years I’ve really hard to refine that and actually hone a creative process and kind of build one for myself because being spontaneous and doing whatever you want and sleeping in or staying up really late or whatever is all well and good until you have 5000 deadlines which is the place I currently find myself in. I’m definitely the sort of person who consumes, consumes, consumes, and that is what inspires me. Like my own life inspires me obviously. But I’m very – sorry, that was so wanky, my own life inspires me. What I meant was I write what I know and I take things from my own life answer that informs my creativity, and you know, the experiences of people I know and love and all those sorts of things.

But very much I am inspired by watching and reading and just taking in other art or other writing. So I tried to build that into my actual process. So now I have a schedule, I have a very strict working from home schedule that I’m loving honestly. I’m such an anti-calendar go with the flow gal but I’m surprised by how much I’m really enjoying my very regimented work from home day schedule. That gets interrupted because last week I was in a writers room and so I didn’t stick to my schedule and I didn’t go for my walk at 2 o’clock because I was in a writers room, and yesterday I was doing recording so, you know, didn’t stick to my schedule, and that’s fine.

I’m very flexible with that sort of thing. But within my regimented creative process I build in boring things like admin time and scheduling time, but I build in time to listen to podcasts about writing or read plays by playwrights so when I have to write my own play I have things in my brain of this is a bunch of plays that I’ve read, and not plagiarising them but just taking little bits from them or techniques. I’ve been reading a lot of books on craft. That was very much a January thing this year though. Now I’m very much into my, okay, I need to make things, need to be creative myself. I think for me is still very important to build in that time to watch an entire season of Starstruck in an afternoon or read Fleabag again.

I: I’ve never read Fleabag but I love the show.

P: I saw the play before I ever saw the TV show and it just wowed me. How do you write so good?

I: I hope I get to see the play at some point.

P: If you ever get the chance, please do because it’s phenomenal. Even reading it, I was, again, it’s so good. Yeah, so that’s kind of my creative process and am trying to be very good about – now this sounds super wishy-washy and a bit wanky as well, but literally get a good night sleep. It sounds so silly when I say it out loud but I’m such a night owl and I have such bad insomnia at times that part of my routine is forcing me to wash my face and to do my skincare at 10:30 and be fully asleep with my melatonin by 11, and then getting up at 7 o’clock and doing some stretches. For me, who really has trouble with sitting in my chair all day and has spent a lot of money on physio because of that, just do a little bit of yoga stretching. I’m not saying this is a routine follow. It sounds really silly as I say it.

I: It actually sounds very impressive because it requires a lot of discipline.

P: Discipline and it’s something that I kind of like naturally. So I have my little scheduling app, Structured, it’s my best friend and literally I designate every hour of the day basically except between 6 and 10:30. I can do what I want and usually what I want is reading a book or going to trivia. So yeah, that’s kind of where my process is at at the moment. You know, and a couple of weeks I’ll be doing two weeks of development. So again, that structure and discipline – I was going to say, go out the window, but it won’t go out the window. It will just be put in a different direction as it’s not just me at my computer but it’s me out of rehearsal room trying to do a dance and put a play together.

I: In the first episode that we did of this podcasts, Kath Duncan was saying that one of the most important things that she’s found as a disabled creative going for grants and things is to find like-minded people to support you so you can apply for grants as a group. Have you had any difficulty or do you have any thoughts about applying for grants as an individual as opposed to finding a group of people to apply with?

P: Yeah, if you’ve got a group around you is much easier to have a freak out because there’s someone there to freak out to. Honestly, just the support of having people around you. For me in my early years I was doing everything alone. Everything alone. It felt so lonely and I’m not sure how much I realise that at the time because I kind of thought that’s just the way it was. But yeah, it really makes a difference to surround yourself with people. Even if you’re not applying all together for the same project as a group but just having people who are doing that as well, yeah, just having people around you who are sort of going through the same thing at the same time is so beneficial. People you can say, oh my gosh, this question, and they get exactly what you’re talking about.

Even when you are literally applying for something as a group, kind of – we were talking before about minding your own trauma or your own life experience and whatever and feeling may be the obligation to do that because that’s what you feel is most interesting especially in an application, right: it takes the pressure off you to do that. Either there’s people they’re going we don’t have to do this, we can talk about what we are making and why we are making it, or just spreading it around a bit, just taking the pressure off an individual in a lot of different ways really. Look, I still do a lot of solo things and I think as a writer of books that stuff always still comes up. But even then, I don’t feel like doing anything entirely alone anymore. I have people around me who get it and who I can grants to and who I can send something to and go, this is actually answering the question or have I just talked about something completely different.

I: It sounds like you found your tribe.

P: Yeah, I guess so. Again, a very flexible thing. I don’t like to think of those things as concrete. That sounds quite pessimistic of me but things change and different people around you at different times and that’s okay.

I: This is one of the final questions. You can be as political as you want with this question, take it wherever you want. Obviously a lot of being a performer in the community art space or a writer, it’s not the most financially rewarded career and often you have to rely on grants and things like that what could the government or society more generally do to enable disabled artists to have more sustainable careers do you think?

P: Don’t make some fight the crumbs, and I don’t have the answer on how that would work in practice but stop making us fight the crumbs please. Everyone deserves a chance. I’m not saying that you just throw money at everything and it doesn’t matter if it’s actually good or not, but there are so many good things out there and people making good things and interesting things. There needs to be a fairer way to get money that doesn’t make you want to pull your hair out and scream and feel like you’re being pitted against, either people from your own marginalisation, so whether it’s the disability community, or whether we’re pitting marginalisation is against each other and to different intersectional identities against each other, I was in what essentially is a competition between marginalised groups who want to make things. I don’t want to get into specifics because in a lot of ways it’s a great initiative that you go in there and you talk about your project and to hear about everyone else’s project and you’re like, I feel like they’re just pitting different identities against each other, you know, marginalised identities against each other, and that’s so unfair in so many ways and ultimately one or two people get the money even though all the projects are deserving of it.

So to me I guess it’s like doing away – again, I don’t have the practical answer to this – but doing away with competition. We’re not competing for who’s had the worst time of the and sometimes that can be what it feels like and that really gets under my skin in a very unpleasant way. There is an element of that with grant writing. I sort of feel it’s harder to feel that immediately when you’re grant writing because you’re so focused on your own thing but I definitely feel it sometimes. What if there’s someone whose identity they like more than mine rather than what if there is someone who’s project they like more than mine? That is a horrible way to think and a horrible way to feel. I just want to come up with the answer right now but I’m not sure I can.

I: You also don’t want it to be a checkbox exercise where they feel good about themselves because they’ve rewarded every minority either.

P: Yeah. I just think there’s something about the way certain questions are asked in certain funding applications that you’re like, really? Really? Is that really what matters in this situation? It’s such a complicated thing. I mean, to make my life easier personally, just have a funding pool that you just give out to people who ask for it. I don’t know. I don’t know. I’m not the person to fix this particular problem but I just know that even as someone – and I think this comes back to what we were talking about before and my deep, deep level of imposter syndrome, I think some of it still comes from it. I don’t think this is a disability-specific experience at all but an Australian arts sector experience maybe of the constant need to be scrapping for cash and that you’re up against everybody else and that only the best, best things get funded and get made or people that can fund them themselves. But yeah, it’s that, well I feel like I’ve actually, you know, I’ve done quite a bit in my career but still about this place where you’ve got to fight; you’ve got to fight for the money, you’ve got to fight for the right to make things. I do think that ever goes away.

With the arts the way they are now I don’t think that ever goes away. Unless you can fully fund yourself which would be quite rare, yeah, I don’t think that ever goes away. But yeah, I don’t have the answer unfortunately. It seems like such a big, systemic, deeply rooted issue about the way we think about art and its importance to society that would require some massive cultural shifts. But yeah, in the immediate though, stop looking at disabled people and is just writing them off. We can do all sorts of fun things. We are pretty cool. So that judgement barrier that just pops up for so many people still, just listen. Just ask questions and listen. That’s the immediate thing apart from solving the sector wide issues of money. Ask questions, be open, listen to the answers, have real conversations with people, don’t just discount them on sight.

I: Here here. I want to give you a space to plug yourself just before we finish. People who are listening who want to support you, what are some ways they can do that?

P: What are some ways they can do that: well, they can subscribe to Substack which is Olivia – what is my name – oliviamuscat.substack.com and that’s where I mostly talk about what’s coming up, what I’m doing. I do little wrapups about being a person working in the arts and a monthly what have I been doing and how has it been difficult or easy because I always find those things really useful to read. So I’ll write them myself. I’m trying to be a lot better being consistent with those and I put up – because I’m such, as I was saying before, such a consumer of things – I always put up a little roundup of what I’ve read and found interesting in a month. So if you’re into those things and want to know what I’m up to, please swing by. Give us a little subscribe and hopefully they get sick of my voice.

The other cool thing you can do at the moment is pre-order My Name Is Jemima if you have small children in your life who are between the ages of 2 and 8, or just anyone who likes dogs or likes gorgeous, gorgeous, gorgeous pictures because they are beautiful. Talking about how much I love colour and my relationship to colour, the illustrator, Alison Colpoys, she got me. There is neon pink everywhere, it’s amazing. So bookshops. Being added to more and more bookshops every day so pick your preferred local indie bookshop and ask them to get it in. It is up on some of the bigger ones, some that shall not be named, but even if you use GoodReads or StoryGraph you can add My Name Is Jemima to that which is really exciting. What else? Keep an eye out for my show links for tickets when they’re available to come see Is Anyone Even Watching because I promise you it will be a really fun time. You can also follow me on Instagram. I’m sometimes there and make no promises but I’m @wordsbyoliviamuscat on Instagram.

I: And we’ll put links in the show notes as well.

P: Fabulous.

I: Thank you so much for your time, Olivia. This has been amazing.

P: Thanks so much for having me. Oh my gosh, I thought so much.

I: And well done on finally saying you have a career.

P: Yay, well done me.

I: Yay.

P: Took long enough.

I: This podcast solves imposter syndrome. Yay!

P: I’m cured. It’s a beautiful day.

I: Woohoo!

P: No, thank you so much. It’s been great. Yeah, thank you for letting me ramble on about lots of things that are very important to me.

I: Thank you so much.

[outro music]

P: Thank you to Olivia Muscat. (1:06:19.0) assisted by the Australian Government through Creative Australia, it’s principal art investment and advisory body. Thank you for listening. Until next time.