

2018 THE OTHER FILM FESTIVAL

Writing on Film on Disability.

22 – 24 November 2018

The Coopers Malthouse, Beckett Theatre



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Contents

<i>Mind's Eye: Re-envisioning Mental Health in the Arts</i>	3
Adolfo Aranjuez	
<i>I know it shouldn't matter, but do you think I'm pretty?</i>	7
Naomi Chainey	
<i>The Other Film Festival - Disability, Comedy & Subverting Expectations</i>	11
Alistair Baldwin	
<i>Filmdis Q & A with Dominick Evans</i>	15
Jax Jacki Brown	

Mind's Eye: Re-envisioning Mental Health in the Arts

Adolfo Aranjuez

At the spoken-word event Queerstories in July, I [bared](#) to an audience of hundreds how borderline personality disorder (BPD) impinged on my romantic relationship at the time. I recounted—in discomfiting detail—the consuming obsessional doubts; the paranoid searching for evidence of abandonment; the complications caused by BPD's comorbidity with obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OCPD), which I'm also afflicted with. Feedback I got following the reading celebrated my bravery; people reassured me it had been an instance of advocacy, an act in which I'd 'taken one for the team' and made myself vulnerable for the greater good. (The paramour in question and I had a falling out soon after. Never mind that—risks, reward, etc.)

The piece also referenced the Netflix series *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, which, notwithstanding moments of caricature, has been rather measured in its portrayal of BPD. A little surprising, really, because—as I [wrote](#) in 2016

for *Right Now*—mainstream media don't have the best track record when it comes to portrayals and reportage of mental health. I've always been a believer in the efficacy of artistic forms, such as films and TV series, as tools for raising awareness about even the heaviest of topics. This may not be their central goal—media products are, after all, often premised on commercial interest in some way—but visibility, as they say, is always good.

Of course, *authentic, nuanced* visibility is better. And works with mainstream appeal, in turn, function as both bolsters and barometers for public understanding: popular culture and the population's comprehension of particular subjects go hand-in-hand. These days, we're fortunate to be witnessing some heartening developments in how mental health is built into storylines and character arcs. Over the last decade, for instance, screen studies researcher Fincina Hopgood has [determined](#) that depictions of mental illness have shifted gears to focus on empathy over exaggeration. And a recent study by advocacy organisation Time to Change has [found](#) that over half of respondents reported an increase in mental-health understanding following an illness's appearance on screen, and almost a third were inspired to kickstart dialogue with loved ones as a result.

This 'transference' from an internal, conceptual appreciation into something outward, interpersonal, actionable is key—particularly for arts workers, who are, ultimately, in the business of transforming the invisible into something visible. We may be making headway in terms of more and better depictions of often-unseen disorders, but is this progress reflective of actual support for the arts-industry professionals who are *behind* their creation?

Around 90 per cent of Australians [deem](#) psychological wellbeing a significant concern in workplaces, yet only half believe their workplace to be 'mentally healthy'. In [the arts](#) particularly, depression is five times more likely to affect us compared to those in other industries; anxiety, ten times more; and suicide, more than double. Creatives are also four times more

likely to experience [bipolar disorder](#) (which I myself have, on top of BPD, OCPD and a motley of others).

These statistics are startling, but they're not inconceivable when analysed with reference to the realities that arts workers contend with daily: the industry is [replete](#) with uncertainty, competition, lack of welfare support, and unfavourable conditions such as low pay and long hours. At the same time, the myth of the 'tortured genius' still holds sway. We're doing what we love and choosing to suffer for it, [we're told](#), and a contentious study even [claims](#) that creatives are 25 per cent more likely to possess genes predetermining bipolar and schizophrenia—illnesses that we've historically associated with enhanced creativity.

Here, it's worth noting that, time and again, the veracity of such studies ostensibly pointing to a causal link between creativity and neurodivergence [has been questioned](#). Moreover, our continued romanticisation of the relationship between mind-based hardship and mind mastery isn't just flawed—it's dangerous. By framing brain demons as essential creative 'tools' for generating work, we forget that, at heart, these are ailments that *require treatment*.

Mental-health issues can impair normal daily functioning, and impact us on individual, interpersonal and systemic ways. I can't tell you how many times I've *compulsively* selected-all, deleted and rewritten emails because it's the only way to rid myself of the *obsessive* fear that my recipient will think I'm a hypocritical editor who can't communicate clearly (hallmark obsessive-compulsive disorder—which is distinct from OCPD, mind you). Or how many writing or choreographing days become absolute write-offs because motivation just proves so elusive (depression). Or how frequently I freeze when a colleague or client inadvertently asks me to repeat myself (OCPD) and I feel talons crush my chest as I try to defuse the situation (anxiety). I'm not suggesting these experiences are representative

of everyone's, but they are indicative of the plight of the mentally ill arts worker.

Much like with psychotherapy, actionable change begins with reframing ideas—so it's vital that we keep talking and learning about this stuff while also working towards taking actual constructive steps. On this front, change is also afoot: these past few years, we've seen the founding of the [Arts Wellbeing Collective](#), [Entertainment Assist](#), the [Bridging Hope Charity Foundation](#), [The Big Feels Club](#), online resource [Real Talk](#) and even Arts Access Victoria's very own [Nexus](#) professional-development program, each of which combining conversation with concrete support. Perhaps, as these initiatives indicate, we're finally seeing concerted, positive efforts—under and behind the spotlight—that bravely turn our vulnerabilities into conduits for a hopeful, healthier future.



Adolfo Aranjuez is editor of film and media periodical *Metro* and editor-in-chief of sexuality and gender magazine *Archer*. He is also a freelance writer, speaker and dancer. Adolfo's nonfiction and poetry have appeared in *Meanjin*, *Overland*, *Right Now*, *Cordite*, *Peril* and elsewhere, and he has worked with and performed for various organisations including the Melbourne Writers Festival, Midsumma, ABC TV and the Melbourne International Film Festival. <http://www.adolfoaranjuez.com>

I know it shouldn't matter, but do you think I'm pretty?

Naomi Chainey

"I know it shouldn't matter, but do you think I'm pretty?"

"I cast you in a film because you're pretty."

My friend Nicole, also the lead actress in my short film "Gaslit", knows full well that this is not the reason I cast her (at least, I hope she does), but she is cute in the film, and my supportive (if shallow) statement is what she needs to hear in this moment of anxiety, so I dutifully deliver.

However, even as I type the words, I understand I'm making myself complicit in a system designed to disempower us both, and that, perhaps, is worth a little unpacking.

Our stories are still, for the most part, being told by straight, white, able-bodied men whose continued domination of our cultural platforms - film, TV, literature, journalism, theatre, etc. - serves to reinforce the feeling that the rest of us exist in relation to them. For women, the lack of equal

representation perpetuates the message that our cultural currency, our worth, lies either in our sexual appeal to the straight male gaze, or as nurturing figures (mothers, carers), while men are presented with countless renderings of themselves embarking on varied heroic journeys.

Disabled women, such as Nicole and myself, are curiously absent from these narratives. We tend to be framed as figures of burden, pity, inspiration or morbid curiosity rather than desire or nurture (except within the context of fetishisation, which may not be every disabled person's cup of tea). We are simultaneously boxed in to our society's idea of 'woman', and excluded from it, with no clear cues on how our worth is 'supposed' to be defined - a state of affairs detrimental both to disabled women's self-esteem, and ultimately their safety. When a society does not perceive you to be of worth, your access to human rights rests on shaky ground.

Should disabled women wish to corrupt the narrative and reframe ourselves as conventionally attractive, we bump up against one of the more insidious rules of patriarchy: a woman's desirability increases in direct correlation to her apparent ignorance of it. In the immortal words of One Direction: "You don't know you're beautiful ... that's what makes you beautiful."

Our collective pastime of reviling the Kardashians when they revel in their own sexuality demonstrates how this form of disempowerment functions. Demand to be assigned value by patriarchal rules, and you have already broken those rules.

"I know it shouldn't matter, but do you think I'm pretty?"

I'm not supposed to know my worth, but do you believe I have it?

"I cast you in a film because you're pretty."

Yes, I believe you have worth.

Sometimes you find yourself complicit in one system of oppression in an effort to ameliorate the impact of another.

One woman whose legacy I admire greatly, partly because she refused to cooperate with any such system, was Lesley Hall. I remember Lesley as an acquaintance I would nod to at disability sector events, and regret that I only became properly aware of her impact in the wake of her passing a few years ago.

Lesley laboured tirelessly toward the deinstitutionalisation of disabled people and was a key player in the fight for the NDIS, living to see the act passed by the Gillard Government in 2013. However, she is perhaps best remembered for her actions at the 1981 Miss Australia Quest, where she stormed the stage bearing a placard reading "Spastic Society Oppresses Women". Not only did the competition exclude from participation the very disabled women it purported to support (through fundraising), Leslie objected to the very notion of pitting women against each other in this fashion. "Attitudes towards disability are not formed accidentally," she wrote. "They are the obvious outcome of a society that values competition between people."

In this culture, where straight, white, able-bodied men still dominate the public discourse, Lesley Hall became a devotee to the arts, working at the Darebin Arts Centre and becoming the Chair of Arts Access Victoria (AAV) to make room for marginalised voices. She understood the importance of demanding the microphone and sharing it, establishing platforms from which we might declare our own worth, by our own rules.

In 2014, I was the recipient of the inaugural Lesley Hall Scholarship offered by AAV in Lesley's memory. With those funds, I produced my first short film, "Gaslit", the intent of which is to hold up a mirror, asking the audience to consider the cumulative effects of assumptions they may be

guilty of perpetrating against disabled women, about our sexuality, our competency, our agency.

In a lead actress, I wanted a woman with lived experience of disability who could portray strength, vulnerability, distress, anger, anxiety, hope, fear, boredom, sensuality, betrayal, amusement and love, all in ten minutes with next to no dialogue. I also needed a collaborator who would both support and challenge me through what was, for me, a daunting creative process.

This was the reason I cast Nicole in my film, and, to me, it was worth a great deal.

I can only hope we've made Lesley proud.



Naomi Chainey is a freelance writer and filmmaker with a focus on feminism and disability rights. She has a degree in media studies.

The Other Film Festival - Disability, Comedy & Subverting Expectations

Alistair Baldwin

Comedy relies on, among other things, subverting expectations. That might be why it seemed such a natural career path to me - every time I meet someone new I register a small ripple of surprise on their face as they spot my leg braces, my odd gait, my not-quite-right posture.

Most abled people expect most people to be abled. And while it's taken many years to get to this place, I've come to enjoy being an unexpected kind of person.

I was sitting on a tram recently, priority seating - no big deal - when a complete stranger came up to me, pointed at my leg braces and asked 'what are those for?'

I replied 'Attention. My doctor will be so glad to hear they're working'.

That's one of the standup jokes I do, and while it may read a little lifeless in text, it usually gets a laugh.

Without dissecting humour to the point of destroying it, the specific bit that gets a laugh is the unexpected, somewhat-absurd idea that my leg braces might have been prescribed for the sole purpose of making people ask what they're prescribed for. For making people give me attention.

Not unfunny, certainly, but that set-up and subversion alone doesn't quite cover just how much of a laugh it gets. No, there's an added dimension.

Most abled audiences, hearing that, recognise themselves in the complete stranger. When they see an unexpected type of human out in the world, a disabled person, they notice. They pay attention, they stare. They might even be so bold as to ask us 'what happened' or 'what's that for'?

The added layer of subverting expectation is that I call them on it. I make fun of them. I reposition myself as neutral, and their fascination and lack of boundaries as the weird thing.

For an abled person, it's unexpected to be the butt of a joke.

Disability is an immutably consistent feature of the human species.

Depending on your specific country's approximation of 'normal' and how many standard deviations away you draw that line into 'not normal', anywhere between a quarter and a sixth of this planet's humans are disabled. Its conspicuous absence from our screens - in our film icons and TV stars and voice actors - is a bizarre choice.

It's akin to a director filming a bush landscape but demanding no eucalyptus gums be in shot, filming the sky but demanding no clouds be in shot. It's a choice.

I guess it makes sense that we're so unexpected in the real world - because in the past we've barely been present in imagined, on-screen worlds. People watch films and TV and internalize what to expect out of a

person and it's rarely ever us.

That's why I like to write scripts where disabled people exist just as much as they do in the real world. It feels like half the battle with disability rights is reminding people that we exist.

So many ramps go un-built because people don't expect a wheelchair user to stop by. So many Auslan interpreters go un-booked because people don't expect d/Deaf people to attend their events.

Half the battle is making people expect us a little more.

If we can put a diverse range of disabled people in short films and web series and TV shows and blockbusters, people's expectation of what a typical person is will broaden.

And indeed, things are shifting. More and more, disabled people are busting their way past gatekeepers to put themselves on screen - or creating their own platforms and DIY content to fill a gap that seems so obvious to us.

These things change the world for disabled people in a very real way.

Bit by bit, business owners and event organisers and universities and festivals and restaurants learn to expect us a little more. Bit by bit, strangers on the tram expect a fellow passenger might be disabled a little more - and are less likely to be shocked into staring.

Bit by bit, I'm becoming a little more expected.

If you know the punchline of a joke, it's not as funny. I'm sure a chicken crossing the road to get to the other side used to kill at open mics. Today? Not so much.

Comedy taught me the plus side of being surprising, and the fun to be

had in flipping the script and subverting what abled people think. It helped me learn to love being unexpected.

But I'm also excited about being expected, for audiences to be completely unphased and unsurprised by my disability, and subsequently for about 50% of my jokes to stop being that funny.

Sure, I won't get as much laughter. But I'm sure I'll find another expectation that's in need of a little subverting.



Alistair Baldwin is a writer, comedian & improviser based in Naarm / Melbourne. He was a staff writer for season 4 of The Weekly with Charlie Pickering, and has both written for, and acted in, the upcoming season of Get Krack!n

#FilmDis Q & A with Dominick Evans

Jax Jacki Brown

Dominick Evans is a filmmaker, trans advocate and the founder of #FilmDis a weekly twitter discussion which explores disability representation in film, television and other media. #FilmDis began over four years ago to provide a platform for people with disabilities to critique media and Dominick says on his website “to educate those who have no understanding of the impact representation can have on those living with disabilities.”

Too often we see disability represented in stereotypical ways where we are depicted as either needing charity, pity or conversely as inspirational for doing nothing remarkable at all. We need to change this and see authentic and nuanced stories by people with disabilities across all kinds of media and #FilmDis is part of driving that change.

For The Other Film Festival which centralises the work and voices of people with disabilities, I spoke to Dominick to find out about his work, life and passions.

Jax: Hi Dominick, I've been meaning to skype with you for a long time but to be honest I have a bit of an activist brain crush on you and so I've always wooed out. Thanks so much for agreeing to talk with me.

Dominick: Well I've been avoiding you too because I admire you as well, so it's good to finally talk!

J: I have been reading about your work and was really interested to learn that you have a BFA in motion picture production and was wondering if you could start by telling us a little about how you found studying for that degree as a crip* and also how it is for you to work in the film industry?

D: It's hard. It's hard. I don't want to say it's impossible but if you don't have money you are going to struggle to get anything made. I haven't shot anything since 2015 because I don't have the funds. If you are a crip, producers aren't reaching out to you, not that they are reaching out to anybody but if you are a crip you are not even a blip on their radar, coz you know, how many people can you name either in Australia or here that are writers, directors, [with disability], you might have a couple that you know personally...the few that I have seen are cisgender white men and I find their work problematic...when you add one writer with disability to a writer's room and all the rest are non-disabled that still a majority who are non-disabled.

My biggest problem in film school was that I wasn't taken seriously. The students didn't want to work with me. We had a guest director who made me assistant director, and everyone thought I did great work in that role, but even with that they [the students] didn't want to work with me.

I went to the head of department and said I'm dropping out and she pleaded with me to stay. Every disabled person before me quit because nobody would help with the gear or work with them on their films. They were going to show our films at an inaccessible theatre but they changed it

because I protested.

When I went into my meeting for my junior film, you have to work with a group and the director is chosen by the professor based on who has written the best script. My script was one of the best, if not the best for my class, but the other students didn't want to work with me...you're not included again, it's just another part of my life where I'm not included. This is supposed to be my life's career and it starts out with not being included - that's been the echo throughout my career. Not included in disability at large, not included in the film community, not included in the trans community. Where do you belong? I don't know...you do your own thing.

So, I went into the meeting and this is telling on some level too and kind of sad. They said "we think you should make this film and we are going to have you work with seniors and super seniors" but I couldn't work with my classmates because they didn't want to work with me. And film its meant to be collaborative.

People can say that you are good, but they don't want to work with you and this says that you are less valued.

Making film is so expensive and disabled people have no money. The disability community really wants film made by us but we don't have any money. How do you pay for good sound etc? You don't want to make a half-ass film because disability in film matters but it's hard to find the funds.

J: You've written that while undertaking your degree you weren't just watching films because you found them enjoyable but you were also looking at the social context of every piece of media you came across. Can you explain what you mean by this?

D: I can't look at a film without examining the social structure of that film- are there women in it? Are there trans people in it? Are there people of

colour? And what roles do they have? What relationships do they have? Are they stereotyped?

J: In Australia there are currently a few initiatives happenings such as Screenability in NSW which ‘creates opportunities in the screen industries for people with disabilities’, and ABC and Screen Australia has just announced Disrupted, an exciting ‘initiative for creatives and content makers with disability’.

Are there many targeted initiatives happening in the American film industry at the moment which provide opportunities for creative and career development for disabled people?

D: Not to my knowledge. There is #FilmDis. #FilmDis is transitioning to become a non-profit, so we can start doing grants and hire more disabled people. I see #FilmDis as a media monitoring program for disabled people. One program that I would like to work on, and I have experience as an actor, which is acting for disabled people.

J: One of the resources that is currently being proposed here by the Screen Diversity Inclusion Network will be a book of actors and casting agents of people with disability, so that the industry can no longer say they don’t know where to find disabled actors. Is there anything like that in the US?

D: There is ‘Actors Access’ which has 4,000 + actors registered and also ‘Trained Actors with Real Disabilities for Film & TV’ which is a Facebook group, but apart from that there is not much!

J: I really want to talk about #FilmDis. I have to confess though that I am not the best on Twitter so I am often late to the party on what is happening, but I’m really interested in how we as disabled people are using social media to critique outdated and damaging representations of disability. How

has #FilmDis been able to challenge and change media representation?

D: When I started #FilmDis I was frustrated and it became this passion project. It allowed disabled people to vent and to critically examine media and for non-disabled people to listen and learn. I would say just as many non-disabled people message me saying they are lurking [in the chat] to learn. We have a lot of disabled people who participate in the #FilmDis chats but also a lot of non-disabled people who just watch and are there to learn. We’ve had a lot of people post about it. We’ve had famous film directors, actors, comic book writers, and other personalities post about it supporting it, saying come to #FilmDis, check it out! That’s what I wanted for #FilmDis.

It’s awareness, and I hate awareness initiatives, I really do, but if they don’t know you exist how are they going to include you? We need to go way beyond awareness, we really do, but I think non-disabled people don’t watch film critically and see how disabled characters are portrayed or notice the harm until its pointed out to them and once you’ve been made aware of that you can’t get away from it. I can’t look at film and not look at it critically.

J: #FilmDis centres the perspectives of people with disabilities. This is a really 101 question I know, but why do you think this is important and how does it tie in with disability activism?

D: I don’t believe you can write disability accurately if you are not disabled. I don’t believe that you can perform disability. I don’t think it’s something you can act if you are non-disabled. Representation matters, firstly because it’s not done right. If you are not disabled, how does one act disabled? If your acting that you have spasticity in your arm muscles, so you just flap your arm around, is that acting or is it just a stereotype?

Portrayals of disability by non-disabled actors are almost always not what disability really is, but what non-disabled people think being disabled is like.

What is your idea of disability? That idea is usually imbedded in fear.

Fear of becoming disabled, fear of losing autonomy, fear of losing bodily autonomy, fear of losing access. So if your coming to disability from a place of fear to begin with you're not going to get it accurately. It's not going to be authentic.

Representation has a more sinister purpose because we look to the media to understand that which we don't experience personally. And media mimics society so if the media portrays disability as pitiful and depressive that's how we see disabled people. The media reflects societies treatment of disabled people.

We need to have an array of narratives because we are so diverse. To limit us to one narrative, often limits us as disabled people to that narrative in our actual lives. Add in the fact that while despite being 20% of the U.S. and world populations we are only about 1%-2% of characters in television and film, and there is not much opportunity to find accurate portrayals of ourselves as disabled people.

J: One thing I get asked all the time when I'm doing panels on disability representation and I'm sure you do too, is the question of whether or not it's ok for non-disabled people to act and/or write disabled characters? I have my own thoughts, but I'd love to hear yours

D: As long as these stories cause harm and we know they do, they shouldn't be written or acted. You can't act disabled without invoking stereotypes. It's like how cis people can't act trans. It's offensive and reinforces stereotypes. It reduces our lives to stereotypes.

We also need to see that disabled people are more than just disabled. You can have a character who is disabled as well as a professional and maybe you have a storyline that shows them on the subway and how hard it is for them to get to work and all that other BS but that's not the focal point of your show.

Disabled characters are so often one sided, they are stereotyped and one-dimensional. Disabled people need to play disabled parts, and disabled parts are all kinds of roles-they are mothers, fathers, or non-gender specific parental roles, doctors, teachers, lawyers.

Why when we get a script and it says the character is a 'woman' does the default continue to be a white cis-gender woman and a non-disabled woman? I think when a part says woman and if directors said ok I'm going to audition all kinds of women, we would see much more diversity.

I challenge directors to cast disabled people at every level. Why are there no disabled people in your background roles? Disabled people are everywhere in daily life. If you want diversity, if you are fighting for diversity for women, for Black and Brown people, for LGBTQIA people and you're not including disabled people...it's not inclusion if you're not including everybody.

J: You've also written that 'I want to see people with disabilities working in all aspects of Hollywood. I want to see characters with disabilities that have authentic experiences in relation to their disabilities. I want to see these characters be more than just plot devices.'

We are fighting similar battles in terms of representation over here in Australia. A 2016 report by Screen Australia found that only 4 percent of main characters in TV dramas had a discernible disability, and it wasn't outlined in the report, but I would bet they weren't played by disabled actors.

Given that people with disabilities make up between 18-22 percent of the population this shows how many more authentic stories we need to see if we are to actually represent the disability community as part of the diversity of the population.

If you had to pick the top 3 ways we can lead change in the representation of disability what would they be?

D: In the US we have 1%-2% of characters on TV who are disabled and 95% of disabled characters are played by non-disabled actors.

Firstly, we need to start auditioning disabled people for all roles. If we fit that role you need to audition us, because if it's a role for a sister for example, disabled people are sisters. Your script doesn't say it needs to be non-disabled.

Secondly, we need to train disabled people. There are thousands and thousands of people competing for similar roles. I want to start training disabled actors, and training disabled people in technical skills, so we are behind the camera too.

Thirdly, us telling our own stories-through acting, writing, directing and being funded to do so.

J: What kind of topics or issues have been discussed in #FilmDis twitter chats and what are your personal highlights?

D: Early in our history of the chat we had an amazing, amazing one on race and disability. I didn't lead it because I didn't feel it was my place, I handed it over to black disabled activists. But it was amazing because they were leading it and telling their own story and educating on race and disability in film. I was able to sit back and listen and to immerse myself in the chat and I and, others were so grateful to learn. It has helped my advocacy, so much.

J: Where can people go to find more of your work?

D: On twitch.tv <https://m.twitch.tv/dominickevans>

Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/dominickmevans>

Twitter @dominickevans

I also do 'Boozy Movies' where I have a few drinks and discuss film

and also do a podcast called 'DISrupt the Media'

<https://www.facebook.com/disruptthedia/>

J: Can you send me a picture of yourself and describe the image for me? That you would be happy for me to use in this article

Jax: Well, I should let you go, but thanks so much for chatting with me its be wonderful!



[Image Description: Dominick a masculine appearing person with green eyes and brown spiked short hair gives a small smile. He is wearing gold wire rim glasses, and has some stubble and hair along his cheek line. This headshot shows from his mid

chest area upward. He is wearing a blue, black, and gray Argyle long-sleeve shirt. He sits in his wheelchair, and his black headrest wraps around the back of his head. The background is blurred, but you can tell there is grass behind him and he is outside.]

*Crip comes from the slur cripple but has been shortened to crip and reclaimed by some disability activists, in a similar way to how queer has been reclaimed by the lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans community and has become a self-chosen label of identity and pride.



Jax Jacki Brown is a disability and LGBTIQ rights activist, writer and educator. Jax holds a BA in Cultural Studies and Communication where she examined the intersections between disability and LGBTIQ identities and their respective rights movements. She is a member of the Victorian Ministerial Council on Women's Equality, the Victorian Government's LGBTI taskforce Health and Human Services Working Group and the Victorian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's Disability Reference Group. Jax is the co-producer of Quippings: Disability Unleashed a disability performance troupe, and she teaches in disability at Victoria University. Through her presentations at conferences and universities Jax provides a powerful insight into the reasons why society needs to change, rather than people with disabilities.