



So...podcast – Episode # Disability, it's a joke, for some

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John: Greetings, John McKenna, So...podcast. We're talking comedy today and I'm going to introduce Mr Tim Ferguson. Before we get into it, one of those things with comedy, whether you like it or not, sometimes there are language which may not be appropriate or may offend others so at this point please accept this disclaimer that there is going to be language which may be offensive. Coarse language will come out of this conversation, not deliberately but in the spirit of talking comedy and disability, it's going to come up. G'day Tim, thanks for coming on board.

Tim: John, great to see you, hello everybody.

John: How could you see me, brother? We're doing a podcast.

Tim: Oh that's true. I see you in my mind at all times, John.

John: That's good.

Tim: Like a Jiminy Cricket telling me to always use my conscience to be my guide.

John: Really happy, Tim, that you're a part of this conversation. For those people that don't know, yes, should know if you're looking at my website, I'm in a wheelchair, have been since birth. What's your story Tim?

Tim: I've got MS, so I've acquired a wheelchair as I've gone along. MS since I was a teenager. I've still got my hair so you know, it's not all bad.

John: So mate, we're talking comedy slash disability, how it's intertwined, how it works, why we use it. I've got my own take on that, you've got yours. You're a professional, let's make that very clear. You're a professional comedian.





Tim: Yeah. I mean I don't act professional because I'm never there on time but yeah, at the end of the night they slip me a couple of bucks.

John: Beautiful. So what's your take when we talk about ways that we use comedy? Let's look at this two ways, Tim. Comedy in general as a comedian, you might want to touch on that. And then let's move into okay, now you're a cripple, now you're in a wheelchair, how do you use comedy now? So first bit first, comedians as a general.

Tim: As a comedian in a wheelchair I got to say if you need a gimmick a wheelchair is the thing because not only does it make touring easy because somebody just pushes you around, it also means when I wheel on stage, people, even though they know I'm in a wheelchair and all that, they're immediately a little bit on tenterhooks. They're a bit on eggshells. And so they're not quite sure the first minute or so what they should laugh at. But once I make it clear that I find multiple sclerosis really quite hilarious because what else am I going to do, they all relax and they have a good old laugh at me, and then hopefully by the end of the night with me.

John: And of course they've paid tickets to listen to you.

Tim: That's right, they bought a ticket to laugh and so at the end of the day it's up to them if they're going to get their money's worth or if they're going to sit there squirming.

John: Before we started our chat when we were offline we were talking about timing of comedy and humour and you mentioned walking on eggshells. Is it a skill, how to use it, how do you stop people being offended, what are your thoughts around that?

Tim: I've never made any effort in fact, John, to avoid people being offended. Because really it's not that I want to set out to offend them it's just that it's a waste of time trying not to offend them. Even if I said hey everybody, you should drink more glasses of water, what if Australia is in a drought, as we





were. What if there are people in the bush who have an empty water tank. Being told they should drink more water is offensive. So if I tell them you should breathe more air, there'll be oxygen-arians out there who say well that's all very well for you but you know, we're running out here up in the, you know, someone sitting out Mount Everest doesn't want to be told to take deep breaths. So I've never made any effort to avoid those things. Even if you're talking about hard topics, the way I've always looked at it is so long as I know what I'm trying to say and what I'm trying to say is a positive kind of thing or it's a new perspective, or is justifiable in some way, then if someone gets upset that's on them.

John: I agree with all of that by the way. I do agree with you.

Tim: Oh thank god. I didn't want to offend you, John.

John: Yeah, I'll stop the recording right now.

Tim: It's like offending the mafia, you don't want to step on John's toes.

John: That's never happened. Being in a wheelchair, I'd be set on that, no one has ever stood on my toe. Hate that.

Tim: That's true. It's very hard for them to get there and really stab with conviction.

John: Thank you, I do break easy by the way so we don't need to talk about my bones. I've got fragile bones.

Tim: Right, yeah. We don't want to encourage people. The thing about offending people is, I think Steven Fry talked about it, where he just said if you're offended by what I say you've got a couple of options. One is not to listen, and the other is to complain to somebody else because I've said it, therefore I own it, you're not going to change my mind by saying oh my god, how dare you say that? You with your fancy glass of water, waving it in our faces.





John: So true.

Tim: I've got a glass of water right here and I'm not afraid to use it.

John: Please, there's a lot of electronics around you mate, do not do that. Tim you've got, of course we all have third party witnesses that watch our behaviour even if we're not talking to them, and from an observer. And if we talk about other sectors or topics, not just humour but sexual harassment and racism and watching from a distance that looks like that person is being racist or that person is being sexist, that must happen in comedy when people try to be funny but the person watching what's going on is really concerned and in a HR environment or a disability support environment may feel empowered to go off and tell the manager what they've been watching. So it's a tough one isn't it?

Tim: Not really because I don't care. The main thing is that... In fact one really good example is a show called Aisha the Geisha which performed in the 2014 Melbourne Fringe Festival and did really well, was really well reviewed, everybody had a good time. I saw the show twice, I thought it was hilarious and funny and smart, about a young girl in the country who has a boyfriend who runs away to Japan so she decides in her own limited perspective to become an Australian Geisha which meant putting on all the Geisha white makeup and the dress and the hair and all that stuff. When they came to perform the show again at the Melbourne Comedy Festival only last year there was an uproar from nowhere.

These people wrote a very serious letter saying this was yellow face, despite the fact Geisha's paint their face white, and that it was racist. One person used the magic word which is "This show makes me feel uncomfortable." As if you and I don't spend our entire lives in various states of physical discomfort. In fact it was the Fringe Festival in Melbourne, took the show away, having had a successful season four years ago the show was not put on. I found this to be completely outrageous, and why? Because according to the two writers and producers of the show, both university educated who live in the inner city, and vote for the greens for god's sake, did not write the show with any racist





intent. The joke was on Aisha. But they said that none of the signatories on the letter had seen the show which is a bit like being like, who was it, Fred Nile, the extreme religious zealot in New South Wales politics who condemns everybody without having any knowledge. The American, I think it was Pat Buchanan said I don't have to go to a brothel to know it's bad. Well, maybe you should go to a brothel before you start trying to close them all.

John: That's right, exactly. And I think from that, Tim, I take away that people sit back and watch without knowing the nuts and bolts.

Tim: Yeah, and so they take something out of context and go what? A white woman pretending to be a Geisha? That makes me feel uncomfortable, and away they go. Whereas really the first people they should contact are the creators of that comedy work. If they're upset, confused, or outraged, they should talk to the comedian. Talk to the woman on stage before they take the concerns elsewhere so that they can get all the information. It's very backward.

John: It is.

Tim: These days because of social media, when people want to complain it's there, it's on their phone, it's at their fingertips, and so they can all pile on. The trouble is if you really felt seriously about something would a tweet do it? Does one tweet of 140 characters get your fury, outrage and pain out of your system? If it does then I would suggest you weren't really hurt or offended. You were just a bit mildly miffed and so you scribbled something on the cyber wall.

John: Yes and I think a little nip of whiskey might replace a tweet if you're feeling stressed.

Tim: Oh yeah, if people are stressed, but otherwise, I mean it is true. I have said and done things where I've misjudged my ability to not offend people, where I have said things that at the end of the day were just in poor taste. Looking at a comedians career over 35 years, I think it would be impossible to find or to





not find sometimes where they'd gone too far. And so I'm perfectly happy to accept that occasionally, yes, I've gone too far and done things in poor taste. But so what? Who hasn't, dear listener? Have you, dear listener, never done anything ever, ever, in poor taste? Including that thing at band camp?

John: Hilarious.

Tim: So comedians aren't perfect.

John: Sure.

Tim: Occasionally we screw up but at the end of the day part of a comedians job is to not so much ruffle the feathers but to question the things that everybody is taking for granted. No matter if those things are political correctness. No matter if they are woke. The woke people, which hopefully is everybody by trying to be non racist, non sexist, non ageist, non this, non that. Hopefully everybody is on the same page. But if you look at the ancient art of drag, drag queens, which goes as far back as people started wearing clothes, there is currently a debate between woke people on one side who see drag as a vulgar mockery of femininity and womanhood, and on the other side you got woke people who like drag, which is men dressing up as women, telling jokes and miming to pop songs. These two groups are completely opposed. So by saying I'm woke, it's worth checking all the contradictions that may be involved there. If you're woke where do you stand on drag? Have a think about that.

John: Okay. Now from drag, I want to move into MS, I want to move into the medical journey that you've had talking with OTs, physios, doctors. Are you able to share with us your own... So what a bummer getting MS. Now, by the way, you've got MS, so here's the medical system, go for it, open that door and deal with it. So your bag of tricks, your bag of tools, whatever you want to call it, how has humour played out when interacting with health professionals?

Tim: Well John, talking to doctors has always helped if you've got a sense of humour, that way it just makes the conversation more real between you.





Quite often people make the mistake of thinking doctors can have godlike powers where really they're just body mechanics. They go, you know, ask a mechanic for a clear question about anything about your car and you'll know exactly what I'm talking about. So neurology is even trickier because it's the brain. So when a neurologist says we're not quite sure, what they mean is we have no idea. So if you've made a joke with them they're usually a bit more frank.

John: That's good.

Tim: So it does help if you can tweak their sense of humour, then they drop all the evasion or trying to make you feel good.

John: What about that health professional that's just really dry and will not smile? How do you work on them?

Tim: They're best avoided. You just get out of that office as fast as you can. Because at the end of the day they won't really help you because any medical professional has two jobs, or three jobs, one is work out what you've got and two, work out what to do about it. But the third job is hugely important which is reassurance. They have to give you reassurance that for the next period as much is being done as can be about your condition. Reassurance is hugely important. And so if you've got someone who is incapable of being able to be on a human level reassuring then you might as well leave the office because a bad bedside manner is not going to help you psychologically or emotionally and they should really go outside, put their head in a bucket of hot water until they change their personalities. Or they should just become a mechanic.

John: That's right, very good. You are known as someone who runs courses or different types of mentoring for other comedians, people that want to learn to be funny. And I always struggle with those words, do you learn to be funny or does it happen? But for those listening to us right now I wouldn't mind just to be able to break the ice with a little bit of humour. What tips would you share?





Tim: There are two ways to look at comedy. One is, say it's a natural skill. There are people who are just naturally funny. John, you're always funny. You can always tell where you are in a room because there will be people cackling at something you've said which is part of the thing that makes it great fun talking to you.

John: Thank you.

Tim: But like you say, there are some people who aren't naturally funny, who aren't naturally cheeky or outgoing enough to be able to stop a conversation and put in their five cents worth. For those people there's a different way of looking at comedy which is what I teach. I can't really teach people how to do stand up because there are better people, Brad Oaks, Glen Nicholas, Jack Levy, these people can explain how to be a stand up much better than I can and they do it. They've done a podcast, no a documentary recently which is called, I don't know, it's called something made by the School of Hard Knock Knocks.

John: Okay.

Tim: And it's great. Tells people how to be funny, but I tell them how to write funny. How to write a joke, how to write a sitcom, how to create a comic character. And to do that you can use ancient time honoured principals of how to make an audience laugh, how to surprise the audience on a regular basis through a show by the way your characters are acting, what they're saying, and the way the story is moving. I do courses which take a couple of days where I teach very serious screenwriters how to write actual drama as opposed to the very serious dark drama that nobody wants to watch because it's just too bloody dark. And it's great fun because I'm the only one, certainly in Sydney in Australia who explains how this works. In Melbourne there are two people. One is Kate [Dollarghy] who teaches at RMIT University. And also Andrea Powell who also is a teacher of how to perform and write narrative comedy as it's called. So it's a different kind of way of going about it, because there are plenty of people who are not socially funny, you aren't socially interesting, who can write great comedy.





John: They're just bloody boring, aren't they?

Tim: Oh they're just terrible people. Talk to an animator and you will just talk to a lonely, lonely person who lives in the dark. So there are ways to create a comic character. First thing you got to do is pick their most identifiable and active characteristic and exaggerate it.

John: We do see that in cartoons of course don't we?

Tim: Oh yeah, all the time. Look at Tweety Bird and Sylvester. Sylvester's most active characteristic really is that he's hungry. He's hungry and he wants to eat that bird. And little Tweety Bird is happy and chirpy and cheeky and a little bit smug. So you just exaggerate between these two and you start to get comedy. So as you can imagine it doesn't take me long to explain comedy to people because that's one of the big principles right there, John.

John: I've got it brother, I've got it. Who is your hero when it comes to comedians?

Tim: To go Australian style I think Flacco, Paul Livingstone's character Flacco is quite extraordinary. If you haven't seen Flacco. If you haven't seen Flacco, he's a strange little bald man with a little curl. No hair but a little curl of hair. He's great with language. He had one thing, a headline which was Paradox Caused when Blind Man Shown the Door. And he just writes these things and says these things seemingly off the top of his head so it was great having him as guitarist in the Doug Anthony All Stars as well as doing that work.

John: I remember that. And for my audience who do not Doug Anthony All Stars do you want to just reflect a bit on that please?

Tim: They were, still are, still touring a bit. We were a couple of years ago. I'm sure we still will now. They were kind of like, we were described as the Sex Pistols of Australian comedy. So three guys with a guitar who were very much in your face, saying and doing things on television that you couldn't do today and you couldn't do then. In fact, there has never been a time where you would have let the Doug Anthony All Stars do their stuff except for on live TV in the UK and





in Australia. When it's live, all promises that you make before the broadcast can vanish. So quite cheekily, we didn't tell producers exactly what we were going to do during rehearsals where we just kind of go blah blah blah, there's a song, la de dah de dah and then something happens here and then we'd walk off. If you want to know more about the Doug Anthony All Stars, don't. Don't Google the Doug Anthony All Stars. It doesn't work out well.

John: I'm loving how this conversation's going all over the place. I want to jump back into disability mode for a second. You're a funny bastard, people know that. The first stage of MS was "Shit, what's happened" and then you progress. You're now in a wheelchair of course. Has your comedy style changed with your disability?

Tim: It depends. With the All Stars, I tend to play a character who's basically off their face on meds and that's always funny and great fun to play. With my stand up show, Fast Life on Wheels which we were about to take to America but I have to wait a few months, then I'm basically myself or like any stand up distilled version of myself. Because I know the script. There's no point in saying it's just me out there because it's not. If it was, I'd just sit there talking. Those two kind of characters are always fun.

Bearing in mind that a couple of comedy festivals ago, Doug Anthony All Stars were interested in playing at the Malthouse Theatre which is one of Melbourne's very deluxe kind of theatres, and before we did the season, we were sent a letter asking us to justify some of the humour that the show contains. This is a letter to three comedians who, between us, have over 100 years of live, on stage performance behind us, to be asked by a venue to somehow justify our use of language and our actions regarding disability. It was about me being in a wheelchair and being off my face on meds and being picked on by the other two. It does seem really quite ludicrous and subsequently we didn't do that season.

I figured it's a bad start if the venue is saying "Can you explain how making fun of a man in a wheelchair, even though he's actually in a wheelchair is amusing and justifiable?" Venues like that really deserve to lose their





government funding as far as I'm concerned because they're not allowing people to speak.

John: It sounds like another case Tim, where that person needs to put their head in a bucket of water.

Tim: Yeah. Put your head in a bucket of water and scream as loud as possible. We weren't offended. We were quite titillated because it made us feel current and on edge. Like wow, we're still edgy, we've still got it. Even the venue is getting ready to be offended.

John: Yes, it makes you think doesn't it? Tim, it's been a lovely conversation. I can't believe how bloody academic you are. I thought you were just a funny prick but you've got academic which is lovely.

Tim: Am I?

John: Could you work on that?

Tim: Well I'm academically funny.

John: Mate, it's been a great chat and thank you so much. Thank you listeners. You've been listening to John McKenna from So...Podcast with Tim Ferguson, all about disability and comedy. Don't forget, all these podcast episodes are available on my website johnmckenna.com.au and also transcribed and on YouTube. Tim what's your plug? You've got your own website have you?

Tim: Oh yeah. It's cheekymonkeycomedy.com. Cheekymonkeycomedy.com will help you with all of your literary and artistic needs.

John: Great talking to you Tim. Thanks very much.

Tim: Thanks heaps John, great to talk to you.





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