

It Is Complicated Episode 23 transcript

(intro music play)

Josephine: Hello and welcome once again to It Is Complicated the podcast where we answer every single question with It Is Complicated including the name of the podcast which is It /s Complicated. Hello Dr J.

Dr J: Hey Josephine, how are you this week?

Josephine: Hmmm, good question. Hmmm, how to answer? Err.... Let's go with (strange wibbly wobbly sound). That noise.

Dr J: I was going to say it's been a week.

Josephine: However, having said that we were both engaged in a wonderful event over the weekend which I really want to talk about because I think that will form some of the basis of some of our conversation today but before we do that, Dr J, it is my eternal mission to find out why you exist.

Dr J: Apart from dreaming of being a timelord, I am somebody who got to define myself in my job as Harbinger of Change because Thoughtworks, where I work, allowed me to write my own job title and New Zealand where I was born allowed me to define my own gender, so, I am transgressive nonbinary genderqueer, and that in fact is my official gender. I am in fact a troublemaker and a #queernuisance because... branding. And Josephine, why are you?

Josephine: Why am I? There was a queer without portfolio hole in the universe and I materialised as a result. My name is Josephine Baird, I am an independent scholar, activist, and artist. I occasionally put my things upon the Internet, which is probably where you're listening to this right now. And I happen to be a queer without portfolio because...

Dr J: Because unemployment?

Josephine: (Josephine laughing) because unemployment. (Dr J laughing) One of these days I'm going to get a portfolio and I can't say that anymore. And if you like this bollocks, and would like to hear more, then support us on Patreon so that we can make more great things happen, patreon.com/itiscomplicated.

Dr J: Well, we were chatting about what we did on the weekend, what we did on Friday night, and we got talking about how making stuff is complicated. How there are - as a producer, as somebody who puts things on, as somebody who creates things - there are complications in how we do that. There are complications and the way that we act, in the way we build it together and promote it. And the philosophy behind things that appear simple from the outside, like how we pay people.

Josephine: Yeah, for sure. There is an ethical process that goes into, for want of a better word, queer events production – that I don't see as often, or at all, in any other production.

Dr J: And as somebody who produces events for work, I know that a lot of the skills that I bring – or a lot of their perspective I bring from my queer production life – people just kind of look at and go, “why would you even think about that and in such an odd way?” To me now what's simple, basic things like accessibility, like equity, like fairness – the way that you think about these things – is incredibly important. The way you prioritise them is incredibly important.

Josephine: It's our history, our experience of creating events or trying to create events, and how those complications have taught us – I know for me, it's been a learning experience over about 20 years or so. To figure out the better ways to do this and especially the most accessible ways to do this. I started creating events from the age of about 18 to 21-ish. I was a dancer and a dance teacher briefly at my university and we used to put on a dance production every year. And from there I became something of a - I don't know I guess a cabaret performer in queer environments. Which then became a semi-professional career in performance and then became a professional career in performance. Which then became a film acting, film producing, film writing – for a little while – and generally making a spectacle of myself on stage whenever and wherever I could. That also led me to become something of an event producer because one of the things that became very obvious, throughout my career as a queer performer, was that there were very few spaces for us. And we often ended up having to make our own. So that, weirdly enough, as an independent queer performer and producer, you basically had six jobs of an evening – you would be promoter, you would be selling tickets, you would be hosting your own attend and then performing at it, and occasionally DJing at the same time and saying goodnight as people left. And clearing up the glasses. So, you ended up doing everything and I became a producer for a little while. And that's where I was, at the point when I had to stop because I became ill. And I couldn't work for a couple years. And at that stage I had learned a great deal. And now that I am sort of coming out of that particular period of my life, having to adjust to my new access needs, I am finding that I have to use that information in new and interesting ways. I worked for many years with a wonderful organisation called Attitude is Everything, who promote disabled people's access to live music specifically. So, large music festivals to smaller events – as long as it is live they want to create more access for disabled audiences but also disabled artists – and that taught me a tremendous amount, all of which I have been trying to amalgamate into some sort of ethical belief of how events should be produced and how they should be accessible. And I have not always got it right. Far from it. And sometimes I have made mistakes. Some of which I have had to learn the hard way. But I do try to learn them. And J has been a huge influence on that.

Dr J: Well, you have been a massive influence on me, so, I mean, I never did any events back in New Zealand. And when it came to the UK, I started doing a bit of performance but I was much better used as a performance photographer. I'm a good performance photographer, if I say so myself. I can take photos of performances. And that meant I got to go and work kind of front of house and backstage at a lot of events. And then Josephine and I worked for the same, I was going to call them troupe, company, production house, I'm not quite sure what you would call it – for about six or seven years – and then from about 2008 and 2009, I became a co-producer or a

backup producer, doing the backstage, organising people, programming people, and learning how to do everything because of one of the things I learned through that is to be a successful producer you have to be able to do every single job because at some point there will be somebody who drops out, something that fails, or where there is something that happens that means that the DJ is not able to DJ because they're off dealing with something and you have to step up and be able to run the decks with their CDs, and be able to start throwing music on that works. After all that kind of learning, I decided to start to run the festival based on my philosophy of wanting to show all the different sides of queer and burlesque and music performance spaces that I was involved in. Because I realised chatting to people that I was seeing so many different sides of the London performance scene that no one else was – and I wanted to give other people that same sort of view that I had of this performance scene. So, I created the festival Queerest of the Queer with Maria, the team from Wotever, and also, they're now Me, the drag queen, and their partner Joe Paslow. And then we built a really, really talented crew around us, a really inclusive crew – it was successful and everything bar financially and we've talked about that. And we tried to keep Queerest of the Queer running as a brand over the next six months after the festival – and we just couldn't quite get the toe-hold it needed to take off because that idea of mixing goes crowds was just a little too avant-garde, even though now it's actually happening. And it's really interesting watching that idea of mixing life music and drag performances has started to take off in a few spaces. And people are starting to do those same ideas. So, I stepped away from producing for about two or three years just because of work, mental health, those things. And since COVID, since lockdown, I was producing events for work and figuring out how to build them, how to put them together, how to build audiences and slowly building very niche audiences – because I was very, very targeted in who I wanted to come along to these things. And we've in fact managed to build some nice little niches there. And then I used some of the skills and some of the technology that I had from there to work with Queer House Party, by providing them with the tech basis to do it. And really learning from them a whole lot of accessibility. And being told "I need this thing to happen" and me going "how do I make this happen inside the tech." And that's been really interesting as well.

Josephine: I'm just trying to think of how to approach the subject because it really is a complicated subject that has many, many facets. And I imagine it is one of these that we're probably going to come back to a lot. But I think of... because we're talking about Queer House Party, just because it happened literally this past weekend, and Dr J and I were talking about it before we pressed record – for me, being part of that event, was like seeing a combination of ideas all come together in one place. And it was really, really lovely. Don't get me wrong, it was a chaotic night but that's something I'm really used to. I mean, I've been in productions big and small, with budgets and no budgets, they're always chaotic like that. And it's always about *how* you approach it, how you deal with the problems – how you deal with complications that demonstrates the quality of the people involved. And every occasion when there was something to be dealt with, it was dealt with the well. And it was dealt with in a version of practice that I consider better or best practice. And that comes from 20 years of experience. I started performing in small queer clubs that invariably would be completely inaccessible to anyone with a myriad of disabilities. The spaces were never lit very well, there was no access to the bars let

alone into the venue in the first place. And if you could get into the venue as a disabled person, you most certainly could not get onto the stage as a disabled person.

Dr J: So, one of the things with Queerest of the Queer, was we did a little video about it and we said, “what is queer enough?” Because people were saying “am I queer enough to come along to Queerest of the Queer?” And effectively I kept saying, “if you think of coming along to Queerest of The Queer, you’re queer enough. Because it’s attracted to you in some way and it has said to you this is a place that might find something interesting. And you’re queer enough to walk in the door because you are open minded enough to come along and think there may be something here for me.”

Josephine: And the questions I have seen come up, time and again, especially where communities who are producing large events seem to ignore or forget entire sections of the culture that they would hope to be accessible to. So, whether that be community members that are just made to not feel welcome because they’re just not included in any way – I’ve been to several clubs where it will be like “well, we’re sort of for women and non-cis people.” And even then, the trans people are going, “yeah, but do you really mean me? Or do you mean the sort of trans people you normally associate with?” The cultural access is a real question, and the weird thing was that some of these things were way too normalised. So, for example, there would always be a really good excuse for the lack of physical access. “Well, you know, we have to run a club in this tiny venue because there are no other venues and this venue happens to be inaccessible and if we didn’t run it, it wouldn’t happen at all.” And to my shame, for a long time, I would accept that as an excuse. And say, “OK, yeah, especially working in London where venues are really inaccessible.” And don’t get me wrong, Stockholm is pretty much just as bad. And we would constantly have this conversation to the point where we came to the conclusion, no, actually it’s not OK. It really isn’t. And I’m really glad we finally learned our lesson. I had to learn that lesson, and I learned it in part from working with Attitude is Everything, and working with Dr J. Because every time we’ve done an event together, you and I, you have been really, really clear about access. In all levels. So not just, as you said, about disability access but in terms of cultural access – about welcoming and making very, very clear, and I mean literally clear, you have to say it, being very welcoming and trying to invite in those communities that are often left out. For one reason or another.

Dr J: One of the things we did with Queerest of the Queer, we focused on ensuring there was any good mix of people for we put on stage. And it wasn’t tokenism, it wasn’t “okay so we’ve got 10 performers and they’re all white, okay, maybe we need one Black act on there.” Which is what you often see people saying when they’re not thinking about it in the right way, or in the way that I would think about it. Because it’s not saying that my way is right, it’s just saying that’s my way of approaching it – is to go, “what space can I give to somebody? How can I give somebody the room to bring stuff on?” We set up partnerships with parts of the Black community and connected with LGBT Underground and Kaisa Rose from Black Lives Matter. And I gave them a room and a budget and said, “go for it, curate, put on a space because this is your to run.” And that, to me, was really important of saying, “here is a space and go for it” rather than, “okay, well, tell me you’re three top performers and I’ll put them on the main stage.” But it was also about ensuring that people felt safe within those spaces. Safe to be themselves.

If there wasn't that... (sigh) because I've sometimes had it that, "you're our queer speaker." And I'm like, "da fuk, I'm the only one? I'm not a good voice for all of the queers. I'm not the only voice from all the queers, and all the transes, and all the others."

Josephine: What you were trying to do was to provide an answer to a significant problem. Maybe not *the* answer, because maybe there isn't *an* answer, maybe there is the *answers*. And your answer was this, in this case. And I can tell you certainly from experiencing it at the other end when it went spectacularly wrong (Josephine laughing) because I have experienced that very many occasions. And what you were describing reminded me of a very large event that had many stages and I was brought on as a producer for a particular event during that festival – which ran for several days – and part of my discussion with the production team was discussing their main stage. They had several stages, and they had a very, very large main stage. And I said, "well my event is sort of off to one end" and they said, "yeah, you know, we are constantly being criticised because we don't put enough different acts on the main stage, listen, Josephine's you have access to different people..." By the way that just meant, people who aren't white, cis, (Josephine laughing) normative and I was like, "oh great, I'm *that* person in the room." And they said, "can you recommend some artists?" And I said, "actually yes, I can. I'm going to go away and I'm going to get you a list of people who are very, very good, who have different access needs, who come from different parts of our varied communities and who might represent an actual sense of the real diversity of our community." And I gave them a long list of names, as many names as I could think of and I said, "here's their phone number, here's their email, here's their website, here is video of their acts... I've done all the work for you, here's a giant list, pick several, I don't care who." And they picked exactly zero. And I did my event, and nothing changed on the main stage. And I was like, "wow, now I know what literal tokenism is." Like, and they didn't give a shit about us. And they barely supported our event, they barely gave us the tech we needed. And it was just painful. But of course, because we effectively became the "different event," I then started to feel absolutely awful. Trying to promote artists who really deserve to have that spotlight, to be centre-stage in these environments that are often spectacularly homogenous. And I realised my mistake (Josephine laughing).

Dr J: I was helping to put together the programming for a stage, for another large festival. I was helping programme what was nominally called the Cabaret Stage, also known as the cabaret-back-of-a-truck-in-the-middle-of-a-street. When I raised the nonbinary representation and the trans representation, because they had a women's stage – and I said, "well, there's issues with the women's stage in that I know there are nonbinary people who are allowed to perform on that stage, and there are nonbinary people who are not allowed to perform on that stage, because of who they're being read by other people. So, why don't we be explicit and open that stage to nonbinary people and be explicit about what we have on that stage so we're not asking people to effectively not be their nonbinary selves to perform on this stage. And to allow all nonbinary genders to perform on this stage." And I was told, "no, that was a women's stage, and that was what the women wanted, and if I wanted a nonbinary stage, they would open another nonbinary stage for me." And I was like, "but that's not what I am asking for." Because I don't want us on the back of a truck, down a side alley, that fifty people will come and see. I want us to be on the stage that we're already on, just being able to be our nonbinary selves and not be assumed to be cis-normative. See, now, here's a question: would you rather

be listened to or would you rather be paid? Because I know we'd like both. But if you have to choose one over the other?

Josephine: I had to make another decision about pay, and Dr J actually taught me this, and I want to go into this next is that I decided that I would no longer run events where I couldn't pay the artists. And I would no longer do events that were unable to pay me, unless that event gave me something else was valuable or more specifically if they were a charity or an event that really needed it. Because there were so many times when I was being asked to speak, or perform, or do things, and not get paid, and it wasn't just because our community doesn't have a lot of money, it was also because um, our work is just not valued. And so, I was doing a lot of this talking, performing, speaking, activism, you name it and I was doing – and never getting paid. And it wasn't because, "I'm desperate to be wealthy." Because believe me, we don't do this for the money, there ain't any. But I do like to eat food and drink water and survive. So, there came a point where I was just like, "okay, I can't live doing this." And also, it's really, really fucked up not valuing people's work. So, in that sense, people should get paid. And the answer to your question is, I'd rather be heard. (Josephine laughing) Which is a complete contradiction.

Dr J: I do completely understand. And I know that it's hard. And I know that it's really hard to do as a freelancer. But we need to not only value ourselves, we need to value the people who work for us as producers and one of the things that I have always kicked against – they have an expectation that people can work for free, can do this as a volunteer. And I'm like, "that's great if you've got a good paying job." But if you are working on a zero-hour contract, that my chance of volunteering competes with my chance of going out and earning – so I may want to volunteer, but that's a day of earning that I have to give up. So, we should be paying our volunteers at least minimum wage. Because then, we can open volunteering to more people and it's not just people who have good stable incomes or can somehow manage to find a day outside of their jobs.

Josephine: Which means the only volunteers you get are from a very specific set of the community. Which means, they are the only voices that will be heard. And therefore, you won't hear the voices of those people who couldn't afford to come. And I know that because I've experienced it here as well. Stockholm Pride is *the* largest festival in all of Stockholm, every single year. In terms of money, in terms of cash-flow, they are by far *the* biggest festival every year. When I first started going in 2004, they paid every performer a salary, entry to the entire festival, and if you were coming from another country, flight and hotel. It was one of the first, it was *the* first international gig I did as a professional artist. And it was amazing. I was so thrilled and we were treated exceptionally well. After that, I would say for many years, that Stockholm Pride was by far – I thought – the best version of pride that I'd ever been to. It still had issues, but I was really pleased with how it went. For years afterwards, the deal would just slowly get worse and worse and worse – until one year, when Stockholm Pride went spectacularly and publicly bust. Because the management team managed to lose millions of Kronor – completely vanished and they couldn't track it. And so, pride went bust. So, that year they tried to recoup their money by not paying anyone. Not paying any performers at all. Which... oh, except for of course, the very big acts that they would bring and would have. You know, we kind of accepted that one year because, "we're like, okay, it's broke, okay we'll feed back into it." Even though it

was broke because, who knows. Because they couldn't find out. But the year after, but what did they do? Not pay any performers. Ever again. Because they realised, "oh, these people will do it for free. We can just use that. And from now on..." And if you can believe it, the deal has even gotten worse. To the point that the last time I performed for Stockholm Pride, I went to the venue – I almost wasn't allowed into the room where I was performing because I didn't have a ticket to my own event.

Dr J: Wow.

Josephine: And that was when I said, "holy shit, what are we doing to ourselves?" And yet, as Dr J quite rightly asked me, in a really interesting question, would I rather be heard than paid? I'd rather be heard. But I'm not going to put myself in that situation anymore, and I'm *not* going to put anyone else into that situation. Now, we may have to create things for ourselves – which is what this podcast is. Something that we created for ourselves. Now, we can set the rules. And I'm really happy with what we're doing. And I was really happy with Queer House Party. Because that was the same idea. A group of people who came together with the best ideas and have put them into practice. And I love that. Because access is a huge priority. And everybody gets paid from a pool of money that is gathered together, and equally.

Dr J: No, equitably.

Josephine: Sorry, equitably.

Dr J: Those of us who are on furlough, who have day jobs or have salaries – we can decide not to take money out of the pot. And of course, I don't. Because there are people who need money, who've lost all of their income streams – who are zero-hours contract workers, or who worked in bars, or worked as DJ's and performers. They're the ones that the money should go to. Paying us equally is not going to be fair, paying us equitably is going to be fair. That's it. And it's a philosophy, it's a way of looking at it, it's a way of looking at the distribution of income.

Josephine: Yeah, well then also by extension, look into whose voices you would like to highlight. Those voices that aren't necessarily most commonly raised. So, when I came in and saw an event that not only emphasised access – and I think eventually, if we don't talk about it today, I definitely want to talk about how Queer House Party especially does access. Because I think it's a very complicated topic that you've managed to create a model of practice that I think is incredibly advanced and useful. And I've been doing this for many years, and I haven't seen it done as well. And I think other people should learn from this. It's seeing these things, all these ideas that I have been experiencing over twenty years and experiencing with you J, developing over time and being put into practice in one place. And it makes me so happy. It makes me so hopeful. Because of all the horrible experiences that Dr J and I may or may not include in this episode – I don't know which ones I'm going to keep in or not – they can be really depressing, working like this as an actor or an artist. Because you just aren't valued. But to come on Friday, I got to enjoy and work with an event that put into practice some of the most complicated notions of access and emphasis, and being communal amongst different people with different needs.

Voices that aren't raised very often. And there is a notion of equity, I just... oh, fuck, I needed this.

Dr J: It's a very activist space. So, there's a lot of activist voices. Not just the talking activism, the doing activism.

Josephine: I think what's really difficult about this episode, and I'm not sure we've achieved it – I guess I'll find out in the edit, really – is that what we've been trying to cover is a myriad of issues with the production of events. Trying to create events. And what J's wonderfully sort of summarised with that, is that there is of course, a practical element that one has to get certain things going and keep it going. But it's about the process of what we've been doing. The philosophical angle, the ethical approach to it, that infused everything that we did on that evening – that made me so happy. And watching a machine that I was very late to that particular party – literally, five minutes before it went live. And I just really enjoy seeing that process, because one of the things that it highlighted, for me, was that often we think of performers or performances as maybe, political. Or raising an important issue or speaking out to our community and saying the things we want it to say. And that is true. And highlighting those performances is really important. But the actual process of getting that performance on the stage, can just as equally be a statement of intent. A statement of philosophy, of care, of doing that political work. The massive amounts of organisation that has to happen before anyone gets onto that stage or in front of that camera, or joins that particular party to enjoy the space – to have that public moment of support or to share their story – that process, from beginning to end has to have the same values that you would like to see on the stage. It has to have the same process. And to discuss that process with J, as we often do, has been something that we've been doing for many, many years. And I'm really enjoying getting to be able to record some of that now. To say, this is our history. We haven't always done it the ways we'd like to now do it. But because we've gone through that process for as long as we have, seen it done the wrong way, we've come to a point where I think we've learned that the whole process as a gestalt, has to have the same philosophy. And that philosophy has to do with raising voices that aren't heard, structurally changing things, so that people can be accessing it in every single way that means – whether that's physical access, sensory access, mental health, other forms of identity, whatever it is, all forms of access. And I really like talking about that, and I think it's probably something we're going to keep talking about.

Dr J: There's so many things that if you've not got the right mindset about it, if you're not centring yourself on that inclusion, if you're not centring yourself on ensuring you're making space with your privilege. Your privilege has given you access to technology or platforms or something and you are able to use that to make space, to include more voices. And that's that core mindset.

Josephine: That's why the organisation that I used to work with was called Attitude is Everything. Suzanne Bull, who started that organisation, would explain it very similarly to the way that you just did. Because she would go into venues that were, in England would be called a "listed building," which means a building that cannot be changed because of its historical context – and they would say, "we can't remove the stairs, we can't do this, we can't do that,

how can we make it accessible?” And she would say, “you can put yellow strips on the staircase, so that someone who has a visual impairment will see it more readily. You can provide menus in accessible formats. You can provide an auditory loop; you can provide people who’ve been trained to be aware of access.” Even if it’s just that. Because *Attitude* is Everything. You can approach this with an open and conceptual mind that is ready to learn. Now, these models didn’t exist before people actually started doing something about it. And that’s why I’m still learning, and J’s still learning, and we’re all still learning. Because those models, our culture did not make available for us before we started doing these things. And we will continue to put that into our work here on the podcast, or anything else that you would support through our Patreon – and that was a *really* good segue into self-promotion because branding. But we will put this into all of our work, I have no doubt. And I’m sure as Queer House Party, as it carries on, will continue to do so as well.

Dr J: It is just taking that attitude, that mindset, and centre it on, “how do I make this inclusive? Who do I talk to, to find out how to make this inclusive? Do I have a blind-spot on inclusion? Have I spoken to people who I wish to include? And ask them, what their needs are? Or have I just gone, oh, I’ve read a page and I think I do it *this* way?”

Josephine: Well, yeah. And it’s often that excuse that you hear that’s like, “oh, well, you know, so-and-so community doesn’t attend these events. Or listen to this music. Or is interested in being a performer in this way.” It’s like, “now that’s not true.” It’s just the environment hasn’t ever been accessible to them, and they know that and so they don’t fucking bother. There’s a reason I don’t attend open auditions, because I know they’re not open to me. So, I’m not going to go. So, if you want someone to come into that community, you have to seek them out. You have to do the work. You can’t expect someone else to do it for you. You can’t expect them to tell you... or, they probably are. Because as communities, we tend to need these things and ask for them vociferously. We just don’t get listened to. In many, many ways. That’s definitely being shown right now in the political movements that are prevalent right now. So, yeah, a complicated topic that we’ll very likely need more episodes of *It Is Complicated* – and you can find out about *It Is Complicated* in a number of different virtual arenas. One of which is Twitter.

Dr J: We’re now in the trash-fire that is Twitter. You can find us on twitter.com/itiscomplicated – because you have to skip off the last “e” because *It Is Complicated* was too long for a Twitter ID. So, we had to drop the last “e.”

Josephine: For now, it is my absolute delight to always ask Dr J at the end of the episode, err, what would you like to talk about next week?

Dr J: We could talk about the removal of transphobia hate-speech from, from Twitter and the removal of some people who support JK Rowling from Twitter?

Josephine: I’d rather... yeah, okay.

Dr J: Yeah, that sounds really good.

(Both laughing)

(outro music)

Josephine: I subvert comedy. I subvert it I tells ya!

Dr J: #queernuisance, you knew it was coming.