

CASE STUDY

JULIA HALES

ARTISTIC AMBITION, LEADING TO SUCCEED

*In 2018 Perth Festival premiered a new Australian work **You Know We Belong Together**. Its star and creator Julia Hales collaborated with an extraordinary team to spark ideas about love, sexuality, relationships, starting a family, and how people with disability are portrayed in popular culture. A co-production between WA arts and disability organisation DADAA, Perth Festival and Black Swan State Theatre Company, the story focused on Julia's desire for love, and to portray a character in her favorite show **Home and Away**. These themes galvanized her creative collaborators and moved audiences at sellout performances. Julia also has Down syndrome.*



Julia Hales, Joshua Bott
and Lauren Marchbank
in *You Know We Belong
Together*, Perth Festival/
BSSTC/DADAA.
Credit: Toni Wilkinson/
Perth Festival.

Early opportunities to participate in the arts are important to spark curiosity and engagement.

Informal support from family, friends and carers plays a vital role.

At age 16, Julia Hales watched her older sister on stage and was inspired to perform. Julia described how family support, particularly her mother, gave her confidence to pursue a career in performance, saying: "She always wanted me to follow my dreams."

To support her ambition, Julia's mother connected her with arts and disability organisation DADAA where she met mentor Simone Flavelle and other artists, commencing a collaboration that has lasted for more than 20 years. Simone recalled: "Julia came to meet us in 1996, she was about to leave school and we were about to do a little mini festival - it was very early days for DADAA. She was quite clear she wanted to be a performer."

DADAA's programs are built around the aspirations of artists and communities to empower expression.



Julia Hales performing in *You Know We Belong Together*, Perth Festival/BSSTC/DADAA. Credit: Toni Wilkinson/Perth Festival.

Ethical frameworks ensure artists with disability can lead their own work.

The approach is disability-led, artist-led, and informed by an ethical framework. Mentorship and learning are embedded into the creation of work. Artistic outcomes are high quality, seeking to engage audiences, change perceptions, and support pathways to professional practice.

Julia's work with DADAA has evolved since the late 1990s through collaborations across theatre, dance and digital media. In 2001 Julia starred in *Exile*, a major DADAA theatre production at Fremantle Arts Centre. In 2005, she performed in the radio play *The Proper Shoes*, a co-production with ABC Perth broadcast on ABC Radio National. In 2008 Julia travelled to Ireland to perform *The Proper Shoes* with a local arts group KCAT.

As Julia developed, she took on artistic and project leadership and is now a facilitator and role model for other artists.

Julia pursued formal arts training, including at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA). She has also gained recognition in new fields, including as a public speaker.

In 2015, Julia participated in the Australia Council's Sync Leadership program, encouraging her to set clear goals and a plan for her career. Julia's evolution as an artist and her experience at Sync fuelled her ambition to create her own work.

In 2016 through DADAA's *Digital Dialogues* project Julia produced the short documentary *Finding Love*, drawing out candid insights from her peers with Down syndrome about their experiences and desires. Julia's recent collaborators identified *Finding Love* as pivotal to the momentum that grew around her artistic vision.

Champions for disability and inclusion across the whole arts ecology play an important role in creating change.

At the time Julia was creating *Finding Love*, Wendy Martin commenced as Artistic Director of Perth Festival. Wendy had curated the lauded *Unlimited* arts and disability festival in the UK for the 2012 Paralympics. *Unlimited* is now an annual international event commissioning and presenting work by artists with disability. Wendy recalls arriving in Perth in 2015: "I started talking about disability arts. Everybody said, *you've got to discover DADAA.*" They quickly formed a partnership to support Wendy's goal to place arts and disability at the centre of her vision for the festival.

Funding and support comes together from many different partners.

In 2017, Julia received an Australia Council grant to work with mentor Finn O'Branagáin, an independent writer and theatre maker, and they began collaborating on a script for a longer theatre piece based on *Finding Love*. They subsequently received creative development support from the Blue Room Theatre's LOFT program. It was at this time that Clare Watson and Black Swan became involved.

Clare commenced as the Artistic Director of Black Swan State Theatre Company in 2017. She recalled Wendy's introduction to Julia and DADAA: "She said, I wonder if there's something here... I'd love to see Julia make a show and for it to be in the festival." Clare said she immediately recognised the spark at the heart of Julia's vision, and the rich potential in the story.

With all the production partners on board, Julia's *Finding Love* project evolved into *You Know We Belong Together*.

Finn O'Branagáin described the impact of Perth Festival and Black Swan's involvement:

"It suddenly meant that we were looking at a much bigger stage ... Being able to afford to spend more time together, and knowing there was a director attached that would take it to a really exciting place."

As the project moved into production there were learnings and adjustments for all. The cast were performers with disability, some performing professionally for the first time. The partners all recognised the importance of a disability-led artistic process and ensuring access needs were accommodated.

Great art happens when artists with disability have creative control and lead their practice opportunities and leadership.

Critical for all involved was the integrity of Julia's vision and voice. The process was driven by Julia's and her peers' stories and experiences. Dramaturgy emphasised conversation and storytelling. Design, staging and assistive technologies were adapted to enrich the production, giving it freshness and spontaneity. Simone Flavelle: "I think that Clare [Watson]'s genius or artistry was in really supporting the artists to be comfortable on stage, and confident to be themselves."



Julia Hales and cast members of *You Know We Belong Together*, Perth Festival/BSSTC/DADAA. Credit: Toni Wilkinson/Perth Festival.

Visible success stories, role models and mentors are key to building opportunities and leadership.

You Know We Belong Together premiered at Perth Festival in 2018. Performance mentor Laura Boynes described its impact, echoing the sellout crowd and critical response:

“People told me it was the best thing they’d seen in the Perth Festival. People laughed and cried ... because I was on stage with [Julia and the other performers] every night, I could really feel the audience, and they were just on a wild ride with them every night.”

Artists report positive impacts on communities and audiences.

Julia agrees: “the audience when they left... they went ‘Wow, I can’t believe this woman put all of this into a show’ and they loved it and I just feel like everything that I worked for as part of this show. It makes me happy to show that out to the real world.”

Julia has ambition to develop further as a performer and theatre maker. She is also aware of her role as a leader, and the impact of her visibility and platform to advocate for and encourage her peers:

“I wanted to keep going with my leadership and I wanted to work and I wanted to give back to my community [and run] goal setting workshops with all sorts of people with disabilities, and I have started with that. The goal-setting is mostly about dreaming big, what they want in their dream so I show them the way I learnt ... like stepping stones around their map.”

In August 2018, Black Swan announced the return of *You Know We Belong Together* for their 2019 season. Back by popular demand.



Australian Government

