

Z E B R A C O R N

BMA's Jessica Conway in conversation with writer/actor/inspiration Hanna Cormick on living life and making art with chronic disease

We, as a society, have a problem with ableism.

'Oh no', you all cry! 'Not another -ism!'

Just deal with it, because it's true.

The majority of us are clueless as to what disability or chronic illness actually means in a daily, practical sense. As a result, one of three things tend to happen:

- We simply avoid people with an obvious physical impediment, panicked as to what to do or say or how to say it,

- We talk to adults like they're six-year-olds coupled with the hearing of a 90-year old, or

- We tell people all the ways they can get better if they just *try* hard enough. Mind over matter and all that. 'Just tell yourself you have energy and chronic fatigue will go away!'

This is bullshit. And it needs to change.

Hanna Cormick readily agrees with this sentiment, noting before she became chronically ill that she herself didn't even believe in chronic illness.

"I thought you could push through anything with enough will. My ingrained ableism was shocking, and something I have struggled to unravel and unpick over these years," the young theatremaker told me.

You see, Hanna's life changed radically several years ago. She was an able-bodied actress, dancer, circus artist, cabaret performer and theatremaker in Australia, Europe and Asia for some 20 years.

She was 'normal!'

Until she wasn't.

Today, Hanna largely lives in a sealed room. The world outside literally deadly.

Her allergies are vast and have even included water and mobile phone batteries. She has experienced ceaseless pain, unimaginable fatigue, and unstoppable bleeding.

This myriad conditions are formed by a rare perfect storm of sorts, or what Hanna calls 'the trifecta.'

"The trifecta sees three rare genetic conditions (hypermobile Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, Mast Cell Activation Syndrome, Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome) that, in a certain subset of patients, frequently occur together and make each other worse," she explained.

"I deal with a lot of organ complications caused by these disorders and some other rarer co-morbid autoimmune diseases. It affects every bone, organ and cell in my body, causing physical impairment, debilitating fatigue, and has a profound effect on my immune system, which means that I have to live inside a sealed safe-room and cannot be around most people. I've been living, almost exclusively, in the same room for the last four years".

This tectonic shift in her health is what ultimately gave birth to The Street Theatre's upcoming play, *Zebracorn*.

An odd name yes, but also no.

"Doctors are taught 'when you hear hoofbeats, think horses not zebras', to prevent overdiagnosis of rare conditions when it is statistically more likely to be a common condition," Hanna explained.

The downside is this leads to those with rare disease, like her, being overlooked.

"Those with rare disease refer to themselves as Zebras. But



From left to right: Christopher Samuel Carroll, Lloyd Allison-Young, and Chloe Martin