

**My name:** Di Toulson

**My town:** Melbourne

### **My Covid19 story**

If someone wrote a play about my COVID19 experience, you would think it was total fiction. It has been a complete challenge in my personal and professional life.

My sister in law had a massive stroke, is totally paralysed and can't talk. My cousin had pancreatic cancer and passed away. My partner needed surgery for a fractured shoulder. My best friend had anaphylaxis and needed to be resuscitated. One of my friends, who is like a surrogate father for my kids, had a massive heart attack and they said he wouldn't make it – but he did. All this made me feel very mortal. But, I can't complain. I look at what is happening with COVID19 and there is so much suffering and it is out of control.

I had to shut my emotions off – because I had work to do. It wasn't till the Covid19 restrictions started to lift that I began to really feel the grief. The emotions hit all of a sudden. I ate lots of chocolate and slept a lot. I was also going through menopause.

Being at work was a saviour for me. It's a passion. I am the Director of an Independent theatre company in Melbourne called TheatreWorks. I am responsible for 15 staff. When Covid19 hit I had to put eight of them off with no pay. They were devastated and feeling lost and they weren't covered by the Australian Governments Job Keeper subsidy. Some people think art isn't work. It is work. Art is a job. We had to cancel 20 theatre productions, which put 350 artists out of work!! There was so much heart ache. People were so scared. They were scared of the virus and they were scared of not having work. I was dealing with a lot of people who weren't resilient and hadn't been through anything like this before. Every week I had a list of people I had to check in on to make sure they were doing okay.

With all that time off we started to plan – to think even more creatively about what we want Theatreworks to do in the future. We got really innovative and I'm sure we will see this in our programs for a long time to come. We did Zoom events, like a #SheWrites collective to support women writers. It was so good, it fed my soul. We just launched the program for our 2021 season and I think it's the best we've ever done.

### **My act of intersectional kindness**

We want to make sure our theatre is inclusive – we want to welcome everyone. We have just started working with Deaf Artists in a program called Deafferent Theatre. Deafferent Theatre is one of our inaugural Companies in Residence.

Deafferent is made up of Jess and Ilana, two theatre-loves who wanted to share/make theatre. Surrounding them are an amazing community of Deaf and non-Deaf performers, creatives, Auslan users and advocates who come together for art's sake. Have a look at our work: [www.theatreworks.org.au](http://www.theatreworks.org.au)