

Mel Fyfe, 39, and Emma J. Hawkins, 31, have spent the past few years developing their double act for Circus Oz – and forging a close friendship. But while Emma is less than half Mel’s size, the pair pack equal punch when it comes to smashing size-related stereotypes.

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Mel Fyfe &  
Emma J. Hawkins



**Mel:** Em and I first met [in Melbourne] in early 2008 through a mutual friend who’d been saying to both of us for years, “You *have* to meet.” When we did, we really hit it off; we danced all night and had a laugh. I am someone who is very choosy about my friends. I don’t let people into my circle too often, but Emma was straight in.

It was a year later that Mike Finch [artistic director of Circus Oz] cast Emma in the show. We were then thrown together – just the two of us – for five weeks, working eight hours a day, five days a week, choreographing and rehearsing our routines. It was challenging for both of us: Emma had never done circus acrobatics before and I’d never worked with a short-statured performer before. That time together really intensified our relationship.

A lot of our routines are dangerous; Emma feels vulnerable during the *adagio* [two-person balancing act] where she stands on my hands and I have to lift her onto my shoulders. If she fell from that height she could really hurt herself. I feel her shaking with fear and have to whisper: “Relax. Trust me.” I’m so pleased she does. The courage she shows is tenfold what I’ve got.

There is one particular act we do where Emma walks on my chest and face and then jumps on my stomach. It *always* makes me fart and then we both get the giggles. We’re also paired up in an act where she tap-dances on top of me while I’m sandwiched between two beds of nails. When she jumps on me, she shows no mercy and

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laughs her head off. I’m not going to lie; it hurts. I get her back because she is at bum height with me on stage and so cops a lot. I don’t see Emma as a short-statured person. She’s just Emma – gutsy and funny and friendly and my mate. What I love about the circus is that it celebrates female performers of all shapes and sizes. I’m an acrobat, aerialist, wheel artist and tap-dancer. I’m also the “strong-woman”, the tallest, strongest, biggest female performer, and Emma is the opposite. I don’t aspire to be stick-thin, nor do I aspire to be a muscle-bound gym junkie; I am both feminine and strong. Conversely, Emma is small and looks fragile, but is physically very strong. It’s empowering for us to have an audience see us on stage, smashing a few stereotypes.

When you tour with the same 20 people for nine months of the year, you gravitate towards certain people. Em and I are tour buddies. But there are also times when we need our own space. She is one of the most cuddly, loving people I know and I am the opposite. When we first met, she would run and jump into my lap and cuddle me and that took a while to get used to. Now? I love it ... but *only* with Emma. There are also times when

she knows I’m not in the mood and keeps clear of me.

Even when we are not on tour, Emma and I still hang out and I often feel very protective of her. If we go to a pub, she is always the centre of attention and drunken men can be quite cruel. The way she stands up to them is amazing and I usually don’t interfere. But as strong as she comes across, she still gets hurt and if something has hit a nerve I go out of my way to make sure she’s okay.

The stuff that Emma and I do on stage has nothing to do with her size. It is about two people working together; in no way is it exploitative. She is my equal – on and offstage – and our friendship is forever. When we are too old for anything else, we will still be tap-dancing together as a duo and having a giggle.

**Emma:** Mel and I met through a mutual friend who described me as a “small version of Mel”. I’m a show-off when I’m drunk and I was tap-dancing on a table at the time. I thought Mel was great; a real hoot.

It was always going to happen that we would be good mates, but my friendship with Mel was definitely fast-tracked by performing on stage together. My background is acting, dancing and singing, and I found it pretty testing to learn acrobatic skills. Mel also found it tough to learn how to work with my body because I’m so much smaller than most other circus performers. After a year of working closely together, it’s now become like second nature; I love that I can stand on her head and balance! My favourite routine is when I tap-dance on top of Mel. It’s fun for me but painful for her. There’s a little, tiny, evil side of me that thinks it’s funny when she comes out with all these red dots from the nails pressing into her skin.

Even though Mel and I are such different personalities, we get along really well. I don’t know why she lets me in and not other people ... maybe it’s because I just run up and launch myself at her and she has no choice.

Trust has always been integral to my relationship with Mel. I confide in her a lot. She is the one I call up if I’m in trouble in the middle of the night and if I share something personal with her, she won’t judge me.

It took Mel a while to work out that although I look fragile, I can look after myself. It’s natural for her to want to protect me from drunken bogans, but she’s finally learnt from experience – like I have – that ignoring them is the best tactic. They all say the same boring things, “Hey, half-pint, can I rest my beer on your head?” or “Why don’t you grow some legs?” If I’m pissed off, I swear at them, but usually I can’t be bothered.

Mel and I see each other 24 hours a day when we are touring so it helps that we get along. It’s very physical and we sweat a lot and have to get very close to each other and grab each other’s bits. We know *everything* about each other. You can’t be prim in this job! She swears like a trouper and is well-known for her farting, but there is nothing about her that annoys me. She does push my boundaries more than anyone else, but it’s because of that I have created my best work for Circus Oz. Even when I am wetting my pants with fear she will keep testing my capabilities. At the moment, she wants me to try to lift her. My legs are strong and I think I can do it and I will keep working at it until it happens.

People do make assumptions about us because of our size. Mel is loud and opinionated. But she also has a soft side. She is a true-blue Aussie chick, minus the bogan mentality. People also assume I’m breakable, which really irritates me. Mel and I play with those perceptions on stage. It’s good for the little people in my community to see me in a high-profile job and it’s good for women with real bodies to see Mel looking so strong and fantastic.

I know what is acceptable and not exploitative and Mel and I have very open discussions about it; we are an equal partnership. Mel doesn’t see me as a small person and it’s because of that she is such a great friend. I admit I sometimes play the cute card if she’s pushing me to learn a new skill, but she just says: “Shut up, Emma, and do it.” **GW**