Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 83: Disabled Dancers

Guest: India Harville

Host: Alice Wong

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For more information: DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/podcast

Introduction

[hip-hop beat with radio static]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the *Disability Visibility Podcast* with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Greetings, all you lovely humanoids. Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host, Alice Wong. Today's episode is all about disabled dancers with India Harville, an African-American queer disabled femme teacher, somatic bodyworker, dancer, instructor, activist, and educator. You'll hear India talk about how she became involved in dance and what it means to her, what access-centered movement is and how it's rooted in disability justice, and the connections between bodywork, dance, and healing. Please note, our conversation took place in January of 2020, before the coronavirus pandemic. Are you ready? Away we gooooo! [electronic beeping]

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

ALICE: So, India, thank you so much for being on my podcast today.

INDIA HARVILLE: Yeah. Thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited to chat with you.

ALICE: And India, why don't you go ahead and introduce yourself and just share a little bit about who you are and your background and anything else you'd like to share.

INDIA: Sure. So, my name is India Harville, and I have many loves in the world. Most of my time is spent exploring the world of dance as a dancer and choreographer. I'm also a bodyworker with an interest in all things related embodiment and deepening our connection to ourselves. And I'm also a disability justice activist.

Becoming a dancer

ALICE: Because today's episode is about dance, but I wanna explore all of these things that you do and that you're passionate about, let's first talk a little bit about dance. When did you realize you were meant to become a dancer?

INDIA: I love this question! And it's such a, I think my answer's sorta funny because it wasn't like a aha, yes, I've discovered, I've realized I'm a dancer. It really happened kind of organically and slowly. I dabbled in dance a lot as a young person, but it really didn't start coming alive for me until I was in college. And then I started taking dance classes, and I was like, oh. This is how I understand the world. This is where I go when I have problems, and the solutions just come to me, instead of trying to figure it out. And so, I was really hooked. And dance for me was, in the beginning, was really a practice space and an exploring space for what I needed to be able to

manage my life. And from there, I started doing that with other people I loved, and we started making dances together and being like oh, well, that's kind of pretty! And then we started sharing those, and people wanted to see them more and more. And so, it was sort of like I was revealed to myself as a dancer.

ALICE: Mmhmm. And I think that's probably true for a lotta artists, where it's not this, like in the movies, an aha moment where things kinda sneak up on you. And that's things organically build and evolve. Were there any dancers and choreographers that were particularly influential for you?

INDIA: I think as a young person, like a college-aged person, I didn't really see myself reflected a lot in the world of dance.

ALICE: Mmhmm.

INDIA: And I knew that I wasn't particularly interested in a certain way. I wasn't interested in like ballet. My interest in ballet is sort of, again, about how it makes me feel and what it creates in me, but not in terms of the aesthetic of it. And so, there were looking around at a lot of dancers in my younger years, I didn't have that many role models. I was really interested in the work of Alvin Ailey largely because they told African-American stories, and they utilized African-American dancers. But the genre still wasn't exactly what I was looking for, although their work is stunning. And then, as I got older, I started finding artists that weren't kind of mainstream artists, and particularly as I started doing a lot of mixed-abilities dance and access-centered movement, I started looking and seeking for dancers whose work was more in alignment with my politic and my values and the way I move in the world as a person. I can definitely say Sins Invalid was a big influence on my political identity as well as my identity as an artist. Definitely Antoine Hunter, a major influence for me. And then some of the choreographers that I work with now. I work with someone at Cal State Hayward, and I think Eric has probably been the most influential person in terms of developing how I think about dance and performance in a lot of ways. So, those names come to mind.

The feeling of dancing

ALICE: So, when you do dance, if it is possible to kinda describe it, what is the feeling, and what do you get out of it? 'Cause I think that's, we're talking. We're using words. But so much of dance is not about words. So, for the listeners or readers of this transcript, what goes through your feelings, emotions, sensations as you dance?

INDIA: Well, dance for me feels sort of like a homecoming, like a returning to some core sense of self. I also think, like I think in order to talk about how dance feels for me, I have to say a little bit about how the mainstream conceives dance often and where I differ from that. I think capitalism has made everything a commodity and made it so that we think of sometimes dance and singing and many kind of things as there are people who are good at it, and there are people who are not good at it. And there are people, and only the people who are good at it should do it. And that's not my framework. And for me, I'm far less concerned with how dance looks and much more concerned with how it feels, what it connects me to, what it helps me resolve, and how it helps me live my life.

And I think, I don't think dancing— You know, there's a range of dance. There's the dance that happens in the kitchen when I'm just playing around with my partner and there's dancing at a club and there's dancing on a stage. And so, there's a wide breadth of what and where dance happens. But for me, I think when I'm dancing, I feel the most free, and I feel…like there's

nothing, nothing can be going on in my life that I can't bring to dance and have some sort of alchemical shift occur where I come out with a different understanding of what I came in with. And that happens very in my bones and in my actual physicality.

[bouncy salsa-infused music break]

Identifying as a disabled person and finding access-centered movement

ALICE: You know, you mentioned on your website that you started identifying as a disabled person around 2011. And what has that journey been like for you and what it means to kinda identify as a disabled dancer?

INDIA: Yeah. I think that I was descriptively disabled from very early in my childhood. But I think in a lot of ways, I think the legacy of chattel slavery has really taught, not all of course, but some segments of African diasporic people to try to minimize anything that's going on with our bodies that could be dangerous, that could lead to us having been sold, lead to us being murdered, could lead to us not being able to stay with our families. And so, I think I grew up in a household where the thought was like, don't claim that. Don't lift that up. Minimize that as much as possible. And in 2011, I was at a femmes of color symposium, and Mia Mingus spoke. And as she was sharing about what it was to be descriptively disabled versus politically disabled, I felt like I was kind of being called to task. [laughs] I mean, it was a big, gentle way that she delivered it, but it really landed for me that I wasn't living inside of a truth of my bod in the world in a way that I needed to and wanted to. And I think that that slowly started a process of me claiming the realities of my body and being more open and public about it.

ALICE: Mmhmm.

INDIA: And it certainly has, you know, at times, it's been very challenging, I think, inside of some of the communities that I am a member of. And it's also been an important part of my journey. And I think it kind of, ironically, right around that time, my disabilities intensified, and I started using a manual wheelchair. And that opened up, you know, I started, I was paralyzed on my right side for quite some time, and as I was relearning to use my right side, [laughing] as soon as I could get into a wheelchair, I got myself back to dance class because that was home for me. And I encountered a shocking level of ableism inside of the dance world that, when I wasn't out as disabled, and when I was more able-bodied passing, I wasn't having to reckon with. And so, I think those two things happening so close together was really pivotal in some of the shifts I made and were sort of the beginnings of me recognizing that I needed dance spaces that made room for all different kinds of bodies to be in the experience. And from there, I found more and more access-centered movement experiences and classes and teachers and really found a sense of myself and started to feel more reflected in the dancers around me.

ALICE: And can you also expand a little bit more about what you mean by access-centered movement? Because I think a lot of people may not be familiar with this kind of perspective and framework. So, how would you kinda describe that?

INDIA: I think that there's a lot of challenge in the world of creating dance that is accessible for more kinds of bodies. And you'll hear terms like "mixed-abilities dance," which means people have, some people have disabilities, some people don't. You'll hear terms like "inclusive dance," which is trying to include everyone. And why I really like "access-centered movement" as a framework and as a way of talking about this is because access-centered movement understands, it's based in disability justice, and it understands that what we need in order to show up in a space as a group of people is a complex set of meeting our access needs.

Sometimes we have conflicting needs at the same time, and we have to get creative in how we can make a space work. Sometimes we're unable to meet a specific need at a stage in the process, and we have to be accountable to that. I feel like access-centered movement centers creating spaces that work for more and more bodies and understands that that takes time and is a practice that we haven't perfected yet, and that we continue to work on it.

[bouncy salsa-infused music break]

ALICE: For example, let's say you are instructing a class or designing a performance, how do you kind of really make that real in terms of building access? Or can you give some examples?

INDIA: Oh, so many examples come to mind. I think a lot about who shows up in my classroom and what access looks like for them. But I also think a lot about who's not coming to my class, and what are the barriers that prevent them from coming. And often, what are the emotional challenges and scars that people often have from really traumatic experiences they've had around movement classes or dance or even physical therapy and their relationship to Western medicine. And so, what are some of the kinds of access I can build in that really show folks that the space could be a positive experience for them? So, that's one thing that I think about.

The other thing I think about is…many different kinds of disabled folks show up in my classes, and we're looking for what we can do to be together and create movement. And so, sometimes it means I'm looking for what are the common things that we can do as a group to give us a unifying place to enter our movement from. So, that might mean, you know, I've had classes where some people were having a really hard time with a lot of large movements in their body, and maybe some people didn't have capacity for large movements. And so, we could create a dance that was about just turning our heads and blinking. So, really finding what are our common elements, and then allowing the genius of using those things to come alive in the space. So, that's another kind of example.

And then, on the performance side for myself, and this is still tricky, how to build performances in which I don't know what I'll be able to do on a given day because I have a disability where my capacity varies really vastly. And so, designing very open and spacious kinds of choreography or kinds of scores or just the pattern of what's going to happen so that I could do it if I were standing or if I were in a wheelchair or scooter or if I might even need to lie down. So, thinking, and that's a really different way than choreography is usually created. Another thing I like about that is it means that you can interchange any number of dancers into those spaces. If you've created an idea about what the choreography is going to express, that can be expressed by a variety of different bodies. And so, that feels really exciting to me.

And then, inside of performance space, also thinking about what's accessible for the audience and building in all kinds of accessibility. That ranges from things like having the option for folks to have my program in Braille and maybe having a tactile experience where people can come and touch the set and touch me as I'm moving through aspects of the choreography. So, those are the kinds of, you know, those are just some examples. But I could go on and on and on! [laughs]

ALICE: Yeah. Thank you for that. I really appreciate it because I think a lotta people still don't, they haven't been to those kinds of performances. So, I think that's a really wonderful way to illustrate how performances really can be much more accessible and open to all kinds of people, not just the performers, but clearly, the audience.

Bodywork and tying it to dance

ALICE: So, you mentioned earlier that you're a bodyworker. And for people who don't know what that means, can you tell me about what it means to be a somatic bodyworker?

INDIA: Yeah. "Soma's" just a fancy word for "the body." And I offer a lot of body-based practices and massage and different ways of touching the body when folks are OK with touch that are designed to help people deepen their connection with their own body. And that can be ways of touching someone to help them become more aware of their breath, or it can be touching someone and helping loosen the muscles so that they can feel what it feels like to have less tension in their body.

ALICE: Mmhmm.

INDIA: So, it's a wide range of kinds of tools that just help people feel more comfortable inside of their body. And working with people for whom comfort in the body is a very slippery slope! It's not always that easy.

ALICE: Yeah. And I think this speaks to the medical-industrial complex and like ableism and capitalism that so many of us are completely kind of alienated from our bodies or that we're taught to be, you know, to kind of have a very difficult relationship with our bodies. So, how does your understanding of bodies tie in with performing and dancing? Because clearly, your work as a bodyworker must feed into that, and it goes back and forth as an artist.

INDIA: I think one thing that's really important for me in my work, whether that's making art or doing [unclear] or dance is helping people understand that everything their body does is OK. And every way they show up enriches the space and is acceptable. And I think what I love about dance as a way to help people feel that is that it's not just an intellectual conversation or thinking about it. I remember a very pivotal moment for me in a dance training where I was a student, and I would have moments where I would have seizures and/or paralysis, and I'd be unable to move. And people in the space were learning how to be with me at those times. And I had been in so many dance places where that was considered a problem, and I needed to be ushered away and hidden somewhere. And this was the first time where it was considered just what was, and it was considered beautiful and part of the choreography and something to be with. And that was such a healing moment for me because that wasn't something I was even always able to do for myself. And I still struggle with it sometimes. But to have that experience be something that happened at a cellular level that my body felt was really different than intellectually talking about it. And I think that that's one of the medicines for me of dance.

And I think that's even true to me at the level of social justice. So, there's a lot of times where we have these intellectual frameworks and we have these ideals of what we want to be living into, but we're not as skilled at embodying them and being them with each other. And I think there's something about the practice of dance that is great training ground for living our principles and, in real time, doing the things that we've been thinking about with our bodies, with each other, to kind of let that sink in to a deeper depth. And I think that that's some of the ways I see the tie between healing and dance and the arts.

[bouncy salsa-infused music break]

Ambitions, dreams, and goals

ALICE: And we're talking in January 2020. It's a new year. It's a new decade. As we wrap up, I wanna ask you a final question. It's, what are you looking forward to in the coming years for

yourself, just personally and professionally? What are some of your ambitions, your dreams, your goals that you'd like to share with us?

INDIA: Yeah. I have to just say I'm so grateful that you interviewed me because sometimes I say these things, and then I realize like, oh, I need the reminder. 2019 was a challenging year for me, and I've been grappling a little bit with what does it look like for me to be a dancer in this place of very, very limited capacity right now? And this conversation's making me realize like, oh, there's a lot of things I'm excited about. I'm really interested in choreographing with other folks and choreographing group work, which I think is sort of my growing edge. And I'm working on a show that's called *Secrets in Silence*, and it's developing at the pace it develops. It may not come out in 2020, but I'm really excited to be looking at how to develop choreography at times when I can't dance physically.

ALICE: Mmhmm.

INDIA: So, imagining the choreography: is it having someone else move the choreography on my behalf? So, it's interesting inquiries for myself, and I'm excited to be exploring those things.

ALICE: Mmhmm.

INDIA: And I think personally, I'm also, I have a lot of dancers in my life who are in deep mourning because they can't move the way they used to move. And some of that has come up for me as well, and looking at places where we can generate work from the capacity we have in the moment feels really exciting for me.

ALICE: Yeah. I think there are, as you and I know as disabled people, we're just super innovative just because of the sheer fact that the world was not made for us and that you're kind of developments in choreography and thinking about changes in bodies over time as dancers, I think there's so much to be learned by the broader dance world in terms of just how to really open things up. So, I'm just really thankful for you!

INDIA: Mm, thank you. I think that there's so many dancers who come to me who work in really able-bodied spaces who say to me, "Oh, you know, I really don't hear very well, and there's not a lot of spaces for me to talk about that." Or, "I'm aging, and there's not a lotta conversation about what it is to be an older dancer." And I think oftentimes, disability justice and those of us working at these intersections have real tools and real experience to offer back. And I do hope that that conversation can occur more.

Wrap-up

[hip hop music]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the *Disability Visibility Project*, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find out more about India on my website.

The audio producer for this episode is me, Alice Wong. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Byeee!!