

Episode 3.4 – Dance As Described with Stephanie Miracle and the University of Iowa Dance Company

(Recorded April 8, 2024)

Judy Warth: Welcome to Disability Exchange. We are a podcast that comes from Iowa's University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities. Our purpose is to elevate the voices of people with disabilities.

Our co-host and actually, the master of ceremonies, is Mr. Michael Hoenig. Mike, you want to introduce yourself?

Mike Hoenig: My name is Mike Hoenig. I am a program coordinator at the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities.

We are in our 3rd season of producing Disability Exchange. We're grateful for the continued support. For those of you who may have just tuned in for the 1st time I have been blind since birth.

Any activity that is promoting access for people with disabilities really is awesome. And I'm glad that we have gotten so many people that are playing a major role, in Dances Described, to be here today to talk with us.

Why don't the rest of you just introduce yourselves, just so I don't have to guess.

Stephanie Miracle: Stephanie Miracle. I'm the artistic director of, the UI Dance Company this year, and I teach on faculty in the dance department.

The dance company is called the University of Iowa Dance Company. The program was called Dances Described.

Sophia McLaughlin: Hi, I'm Sophia McLaughlin, and I'm the assistant director and an MFA student in the dance department.

Cami Rezabek: Hi, I'm Cami Rezabek. I am the research assistant and audio describer this season of UIDC. I'm also a dance major in the Department of Dance here, but my role in this, show was audio describer.

Enza Handzel: I'm Enza Handzel. I'm a current company member in the UI Dance Company this season.

Sam Claassen: my name is Sam Claussen. I am a blind entrepreneur advocate and I sat in some rehearsals for Dances Described.

Judy Warth: For listeners who maybe haven't even looked at what Dances Described is, can you give us kind of an overview of what is Dances Described?

Stephanie Miracle: This is Stephanie speaking. Dances Described was the UIDC season performance. Every year we have a big performance. In the past these are just performances. They're open to the public, but they don't, typically have any accommodations.

Last year Kayla Hamilton, an admired artist based in New York City; an educator, dance maker, and is visually impaired; led a really profoundly impactful workshop on how to decenter sight in the dance studio and also how to use description as a tool for access. We committed this whole season to describing the entire dance show.

Another person's work who's really informed this process is Krishna Washburn. Her program is called Darkroom Ballet, and through movement research, she offered a series of workshops for describing dance for audio describers, and also for choreographers who were looking to describe dances. The whole company attended one of those workshops and just was really inspired by that work.

Mike Hoenig: I picked up on something that you said, and I may not get the term exactly correct. The term "decenter sight."

Stephanie Miracle: Yeah, that's right. And I'm really borrowing that directly from Kayla. Part of that is maybe prioritizing other aspects of how we encounter art and performance. Which dance is really about the body and how can dance be shared and be about the body or other ways of perception instead of it being just a visual form?

Cami Rezabek: This is Cami speaking. To me, I think the idea that dance is a visual art form is a bit of a misconception. Certainly, there are visual aspects to dance, but I think it really is a bodily sensation and the experience of the body.

When people are watching dance, there's this thing that happens in your brain and I don't know the full scientific terms for it, but your brain is picking up on what the dancers are doing firing nerves in the similar way as if you were doing

it yourself. So, when I describe dance, I'm focusing on telling someone what these bodies are doing so that they can imagine what that might feel like themselves.

Judy Warth: Sophia, you were going to say something?

Sophia McLaughlin: I think something within the audio description that we talked about was including the emotion or what's being evoked in the dance as a core part of the descriptions.

Judy Warth: That's interesting. That makes this a very intimate and personal experience.

Mike Hoenig: This is so fascinating to me because, as someone who's been blind since birth, I have always appreciated all different kinds of art. One of the things that people find strange is that I have gone to and enjoyed several performances, either of Cirque de Soleil or performances like it. I have never been fortunate to have it described. Cami, when you were talking about something happening in the brain, I get fired up just when I go in and know that these things are happening. I've often wondered how much more that would kick in if I actually had descriptions.

Sam, can you give some, some context on how that, how you experienced it differently?

Sam Claassen: I got so much more out of the performance just in the audio description. I do have some vision and the lack of vision the audio description came in handy.

Stephanie Miracle: This is Stephanie. I'd love to describe a little bit more about how the performance worked. We have 4 different choreographies on the show, and it started with a piece called Winning. For this piece, it was open description with both Cami and Sophia describing on microphones for everyone to hear. Also at that Friday performance, we had ASL interpretation that was a very playful piece.

Dancers were talking. Dancers at some point started self-describing their actions. It was very experimental, not traditional description.

The other 3 pieces on the program were closed description and many people chose to listen, even if they didn't have any specific visual impairment.

And then the other works in the concert, we had dancers talking about their experience learning a Martha Graham repertory piece. There was video of the original 1935 choreography, so that was also described.

There was a very technical complicated piece that also had set design of a laundry baskets and a clothesline that was by Christopher McMillan and that was described.

So, each of these were being described in different ways, depending on the atmosphere or the style of choreography. And the final piece was by Aaron Samuel Davis and had a totally different tone.

Mike Hoenig: People sometimes say, sighted people, but sometimes even blind folks say that they find audio description very intrusive. It's interesting to me that you have so many people in your space that actually wanted to continue to listen to the open description. Did members of the audience come up afterward and talk to you about it?

Enza Handzel: I'm Enza, I can speak on that as being a performer in this space. Something about the open audio description helps encapsulate the energy that us dancers are really trying to put forth especially in a piece like *Winning*. My family who had never experienced audio description before said that the audio description really helps them understand and contextualize the piece, and it made it really exciting to watch. They felt like they got more of an immersive experience with the work which they, loved.

Sophia McLaughlin: I had similar feedback in terms of how the description can focus an attention or let an audience member see something that they might not have seen or might not have been thinking about. Sometimes dance can be hard to interpret for people that don't often watch dance.

Judy Warth: Cami, how did you learn to do this?

Cami Rezabek: The majority of my learning happened doing the online workshops with Krishna Washburn That was, I believe, a six-part workshop.

The one I remember most was one where she was talking about different ways to describe bodily sensations, like what the skin feels like, what the muscles feel like, what the bones feel like. So, for me, it was a lot about learning different

ways to speak about what's happening in a dance besides just saying what dance looks like. Again, the decentering site.

Stephanie Miracle: I think the open description, what was nice about that was that everybody was experiencing the same thing. The closed, I don't know. I think it was still unfamiliar, so I don't know if people would always want to go see dance like this with description added on, but it was the opportunity to have a shared experience that was really special.

Judy Warth: You can't do the description without opening your heart, you suck us all into dance. And it makes it far more universal, not just for people who don't see, but for people who don't speak the language of dance, you give us a new vocabulary. You guys are really heading down some new pathways, which is exciting to me. Not just for people with disabilities, but for everyone, making dance accessible.

Michael Hoenig: Are you looking to continue this journey reaching out to multiple populations?

Stephanie Miracle: This is Stephanie speaking. Yes, I can speak for myself saying that I'm really curious about where dance can belong and who can have access to it. I'm excited to learn more and work with others on figuring out how to do that.

Enza Handzel: This is Enza speaking, it's definitely shifted the way I think about dance and how I can bring what I've learned to others. How to be more descriptive and think of ways that I can cater teaching or movement to other types of learners and different types of audiences.

Sophia McLaughlin: I think dance should be for everyone. I think dance can only get better when we bring more people into it.

Judy Warth: This one's for you, Sam. you're an entrepreneur. What do you do?

Sam Claassen: I have a business Blind Soul Productions, a live audio and DJ production business. I've been doing it for 15 years now.

Mike Hoenig: You're in a unique position, Sam, because you're creating music and entertainment for others. I imagine it's fun for you to sit back and be entertained.

Sam Claassen: It is.

Mike Hoenig: Especially when it's accessible.

Sam Claassen: Yep.

Judy Warth: One last question, how do you guys envision making this common practice, not just in dance, but at the theaters or other places, How do you see it expanding?

Sam Claassen: Personally, I feel that it won't happen unless somebody is speaking up and saying, we, we need accessibility. Be the voice. Be the change and keep going to our congresspeople and going even to our communities and going to theaters and telling them your next show. Can we have these dates be audioscribed?

Mike Hoenig: I also would be interested to hear from our UIDC Friends. How what you think you could do as performers and professionals to promote audio description and other kinds of accessibility?

Stephanie Miracle: Yeah, I have a few thoughts about that. This is Stephanie speaking. One thing artists can do is, think about those questions from the conception of the project, like really the outset. Okay, who is my "audience"? And who doesn't get to be a part of that audience unless certain considerations are made?

Mike Hoenig: Any of our students?

Enza Handzel: This is Enza speaking, We really should be thinking about how we're making what we're producing and showing accessible to as many audiences as possible. Because I feel like as dancers we want our work to reach as many audiences as possible. And sometimes to do that, we have to think beyond what we already know and not being afraid to introduce those into spaces where they might be unfamiliar.

Sophia McLaughlin: I think it's also about making accessibility a part of the production element that's equal. So like we put a lot of money and time into costumes or set or finding the right musician and hiring an audio description, prioritizing accessibility within our budgets as well. I think it's really important.

Judy Warth: That is such a good point, Sophia, that sometimes we have to invest in what we want to have happen and a budget makes that commitment. It's a given instead of the exception.

Mike Hoenig: These are just fantastic answers because you have an amazing commitment to not only to providing audio description, but really thinking about some sustainable ways to keep this kind of access. We're focusing on audio description today, but we want our listeners to realize that this is about multiple types of accessibility. It warms my heart to know that we're talking to so many young people today who really, who get it and want to make it continue to happen.

Judy Warth: As I listen to you your love of dance oozes from your pores. And I think when we love something that much, we should share it with everyone. You guys certainly have shared that with us today. I want to come to the next performance and I want to hear Cami in action.

Stephanie Miracle: We would love to do it for you. Mike, I thought I heard on one of your podcasts that you do a little dance thing yourself. Is that true?

Mike Hoenig: Oh, just for fun.

Stephanie Miracle: Next time you and Sam may be more involved in the production.

Mike Hoenig: Hey, I'm up for that.

Stephanie Miracle: Yeah, let's keep talking about that.

Sam Claassen: I'm up for that too,

Judy Warth: Words can't adequately express our appreciation for one, what you're doing, and two for you spending time with us here today. I am as I attested, I'm got a rhythm impairment, but now I'm really desiring to come to your show and see because I think as you open the doors for people who we think are different you open the doors for all of us. Check out the University of Iowa Dance Company, and make sure you reach out to Sam as well, because if you need music, he's your man.

At Disability Exchange, our purpose is to center and elevate the voices of people with disabilities through meaningful conversation and connection.

Thank you all for joining us. Our show is produced by none other than the infamous Joanna Sabha. Thank you all for your time today and we'll see you next episode.

Narrator: Thank you for joining us today on Disability Exchange. Disability Exchange is produced by the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, which is housed at the Center for Disabilities and Development at the University of Iowa. Special thanks to Kyle Delvau for the music contribution.