

The Future of Physically Integrated Dance in the USA

A group of seven dancers in various poses, including two in wheelchairs, against a city background. The dancers are in dynamic, expressive poses. One woman is in a wheelchair in the foreground, looking towards the camera. Another man is in a wheelchair on the right, also looking towards the camera. The other dancers are in various poses, some with arms raised, some with legs extended. The background shows a city street with buildings and string lights.

AXIS / *Dance* / *Company*

Conceived by AXIS Founder & Director Judith Smith
Executed by AXIS Staff & Consultants Jennifer Calienes & Debra Cash
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Preface

Now more than three decades into its emergence in the US, the field of physically integrated dance continues to grapple with issues of context, visibility, artistic quality, and professional development for dancers with disabilities.

These challenges parallel many of those facing contemporary dance as a whole, and yet the challenges unique to integrated dance have sparked considerable innovation in how companies train their dancers and invite audiences to consider physical perspectives beyond the usual scope associated with concert dance.

The performing arts in the USA still lag far behind where the field should be regarding equity, access and inclusion, especially in comparison with UK and Australia who are at the forefront of disability equity and inclusion as a mainstay of their cultural platforms. Creating an inclusive culture poses unique challenges to the American dance market.

We believe the challenges that disabled dancers face navigating their careers have far-reaching implications on how we, as a field, train, produce, and market dance in America. Equal access in the studio and dance classroom, as well as on stage, broadens the voices and cultural perspectives in our cultural institutions.

At this point in time, as confirmed by our research, the key challenge facing presenters, audience members, and funders continues to be limits to artistic quality, which can be traced to the lack of professional and artistic development opportunities for disabled dancers and dance makers.

We stand on a precipice in our field—
what does the next 10 years of integrated dance
look like in America?

In preparation of AXIS Dance Company's 30th anniversary, we developed a national platform to explore the Future of Physically Integrated Dance in the USA with key colleagues and "activators" across this country.

We know that physical access in the performing arts for people with disabilities has improved, largely due to passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. But important advances have not been made in the level of artistry or opportunities for disabled dancers. In order to advance the field of physically integrated dance and thus equity for people with disabilities in dance, the artistry has to improve.

The report that follows shares the highlights from our 2+ year journey teasing possibilities for growth within the field of integrated dance, through research, a national convening and subsequent regional town halls, while exploring how integrated dance can continue to inform the broader trajectory of American contemporary dance.

I am grateful to all who contributed their time and passion towards this effort, especially Jennifer Calienes. We share this report in efforts to bring attention to our plight, help focus our collective vision and inform next steps for AXIS and the field.



Judith Smith
Founder and Director of AXIS Dance Company
May, 2017

AXIS Dance Company exists to change the face of dance and disability.

Executive Summary

On May 16–18, 2016, AXIS Dance Company hosted a convening to discuss the Future of Physically Integrated Dance In the USA—a landmark event that brought together three generations of integrated dance practitioners and a range of key stakeholders in the field. AXIS curated a group of more than 50 dancers, choreographers, presenters, funders, educators, activists, service organization leaders, and policy makers who reflected a range of expertise and geographies.

The three-day event was held at the wheelchair-accessible studios of Gibney Dance in New York City. Conceived by Judith Smith, Founder and Artistic Director of AXIS Dance Company in Oakland, California, the event was produced by AXIS with lead funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation Fund for National Projects. Additional support came from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Kenneth Rainin Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Surdna Foundation.

To support the design and production of this convening, AXIS engaged the talents of National Arts Consultant Jennifer Calienes. AXIS also engaged Debra Cash, Executive Director of Boston Dance Alliance, who managed the research and documentation that supported the convening's planning and evaluation. Dance/USA, the national service organization for professional dance, served as a Media Partner by assisting with both outreach and research dissemination.

The convening was designed to assess the current state of the field of physically integrated dance in the United States, articulate shared concerns, and strategize for a future in which the participation of artists with disabilities is recognized as a matter of both aesthetic inquiry and social equity. Participants from Unlimited in the U.K. were invited to share their expertise with far-reaching disability inclusion practices in arts commissioning, presentation, and administration.

ADVANCED RESEARCH DISCOVERIES

Two clear convening priorities emerged, both having to do with enhancing the artistic quality of physically integrated dance.

PRIORITY 1: Improve and expand training opportunities and develop pedagogy for dancers with disabilities.

PRIORITY 2: Improve training and expand opportunities for disabled choreographers and nondisabled choreographers to work with disabled dancers or integrated ensembles.

In wide-ranging conversations, panels, small group working sessions, and over meals and social opportunities, a number of themes emerged. These included:

- The intersection of changing standards in the dance field about the nature of dance participation with the requirements of disability inclusion as a matter of social equity
- The need to aggregate scattered and privately held information about physically integrated dance practice for both dancers and choreographers
- The need to identify barriers to participation and determine creative and replicable solutions
- Identifying non-studio based challenges for dancers and choreographers with disabilities including transportation, lodging, and resources for personal care attendants where appropriate.
- The need to combine formal training opportunities (such as workshops) with ad hoc and individualized engagements (such as informal advice-seeking and mentorship).
- Opportunities for leveraging institutional partnerships, including across schools and university settings
- The importance of “leading with the art, not the disability” and creating opportunities for leadership positions by dancers and arts administrators with disabilities.

In the course of the convening, breakout and brainstorming sessions generated lists of existing resources and known practices. These are described in detail in the body of this report.

Perhaps more significant, however, was the participants' expressions of enthusiasm for working towards an action agenda that would create new structures and conditions for the development of physically integrated dance work.

These conversations were expanded on and refined after the National Convening in a series of six Regional Convenings hosted by activators throughout the country in 2016. These meetings took place in the following regions:

- Midwest, October 1, 2016 (Chicago, IL)
- Mid-Atlantic, November 12, 2016 (New Brunswick, NJ)
- New England, June 15, 2016 (Boston, MA)
- Southern, October 22, 2016 (Tampa, FL)
- Southwest/Mountain States, September 9, 2016 (Albuquerque, NM)
- West Coast, December 10, 2016 (Oakland, CA)

National Convening

What are the opportunities for professional concert dance that includes dancers with physical disabilities across the United States? And what are the barriers to their participation and inclusion?

May 16–18, 2016 AXIS Dance Company hosted a landmark convening to discuss these questions. The event attracted a range of key stakeholders in field, an invited group of over 50 dancers and choreographers, presenters and funders, educators and activists, service organization leaders, and policy makers. Of this group, 27% identified as persons with a disability. The event was held at the wheelchair-accessible studios of Gibney Dance in New York City. In addition, the National Convening welcomed inclusive arts experts from the UK, whose exemplary programming offers innovative models and potential guidance for enhancing the range, quality, and audiences for physically integrated dance in North America.

Participants enjoyed different types of interaction: keynote presentations, panels, movement exercises, group conversations, small facilitated working sessions on selected themes, master classes open to the New York dance community, social media liveblogging, and meals during which the lively conversations continued and new connections were established.

MOVING BEYOND THE THERAPEUTIC MODEL

“I [have] participated in innumerable artist with disabilities conferences, even keynoting a few in FL, TX, CA, and NV where I encouraged those gathered to move beyond the therapeutic model and take ourselves more seriously as artists. Judy Smith and her work with AXIS has been at the forefront of the conversation, not settling for serving up inspirational porn for well-meaning audiences and supporters, but creating an exquisitely wrought dance company performing nuanced layered pieces by top choreographers.”

—JOHN R. KILLACKY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, FLYNN CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

Establishing a Framework for Discussion

The National Convening on the Future of Physically Integrated Dance in the USA opened on May 16, 2016 but, as Judith Smith explained, it was more than a decade in the making. The field of Physically Integrated Dance had not convened as a group of colleagues since 1997, when Dance Umbrella in Boston programmed the first, and until recently only, International Festival of Wheelchair Dance in North America. In 2014, the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation Fund for National Projects awarded AXIS Dance Company support to design and produce a national event that would provide the opportunity for a wide range of stakeholders to assess the current state of the field of physically integrated dance, articulate shared concerns, and strategize for a future in which the participation of artists with disabilities is recognized as a matter of both aesthetic inquiry and social equity.

Eighteen months prior to May, 2016, the National Convening team, under the guidance of National Arts Consultant Jennifer Calienes, began shaping a framework to serve both the National and Regional Convenings on physically integrated dance.

These advance preparations involved four related components:

- Identifying the selection criteria of a national host site and six regional host sites
- Surveying the field and potential participants to confirm agenda priorities
- Establishing a media partnership and agreement with Dance/USA to circulate the survey and information about the convening/s
- Curating a list of attendees for the National Convening

As Jennifer Calienes explains, “It was crucial to populate the national convening with a range of practitioners and activators across the USA, including those who represented different generations of the field. We wanted to give everyone the opportunity to work side by side, to challenge one another, and to push the field forward.” Calienes also determined that stakeholders would lead and facilitate discussions themselves, in order to make this conversation rich and productive.

Early budget projections limited participation in the National Convening to 40 attendees in order to ensure that all voices and perspectives could be heard, and that participants would feel fully engaged throughout the duration of the convening. AXIS, with the support of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, was able to provide financial support to offset the direct expenses of all disabled artists who had to travel from outside New York, and where needed, support the expenses associated with their personal care attendants.

Ultimately, Judith and her team recognized that there were more voices that needed to be included in the conversation. Through the generosity of participants and their own sponsoring organizations, the national convening was able to enlarge its scope to bring together over 50 participants plus volunteers and personal care assistants. A complete list of participants is provided at the end of this report.

Six Regional Convenings took place following the National Convening so that we could report on the convening and bring even more people could be brought into the discussion. The hub locations were chosen through a lengthy vetting process which identified key individual and organizational activators in each region. We were committed to finding partners who not only had an interest in or were already involved in physically integrated dance, but demonstrated a capacity to co-create a regional platform for our findings. We felt it was important to be able to share findings from the national convening at the regionals, and hear from activators in the region how these findings aligned with, or differed from, their own observations and priorities. Each regional gathering would be tasked with producing its own set of reports and action items.

Dance for people with disabilities occurs across a spectrum of activities, from rehabilitative and therapeutic engagement through recreation to professional theatrical work. AXIS made a decision to focus on physical disabilities rather than other disabilities. This was never to ignore the importance of addressing the needs of dancers and potential dancers with autism, developmental disabilities, deafness, blindness, or other disabilities; it was simply that AXIS' decades of work has been on exploring the range of dance with artists with and without physical disabilities and the development of professional artistic opportunities for that specific community of artists.

It was important at the outset that the National Convening on the Future of Physically Integrated Dance in the USA to create a welcoming environment in which people could speak freely. The leadership team knew from experience that language around disability could be contentious and they wanted to insure that participants would not worry that they might inadvertently offend someone else by the way they referred to physically integrated dance, disability, gender, or any other potentially sensitive topic. The field of disability rights and advocacy has developed language and modes of address that vary from community to community, according to individual choice. Calienes explicitly acknowledged these issues in the Ground Rules, which were repeated at the beginning of each of the three-day sessions.

A video overview of the convening with captions can be found at:
vimeo.com/179837936

GROUND RULES

In efforts to establishing a respectful and productive environment, each day began with acknowledging the following statements:

We work in different communities with different resources.

We have different sorts of practice and we have different aesthetics and politics.

We want to learn from our differences, and build a future that includes all of us.

We are all on the same team.

We use different language based on our own communities and situations.

Everyone in this room intends to be respectful.

We need to create an environment where people can speak freely without feeling worried that they will inadvertently offend someone else by the way they speak about physically integrated dance, disability, gender, or any other potentially sensitive topic.

We would rather you speak freely then fear you will use the wrong language.

Advanced Research

In the early 1990s, the Americans with Disabilities Act was new and the public was still arguing that curb cuts were a benefit for parents with strollers as well as people who used wheelchairs. It wasn't easy for nondisabled audiences to shift from the etiquette of not staring at people with disabilities to being asked to look closely and carefully. It was common—as perhaps it still is—for audiences both with and without disabilities to experience the work on stage and find themselves in tears. The terms reviewers used typically included “courageous,” “inspiring”—and in AXIS's 1992 work, *Tellings*, a dancer needed to declare “I am not a tragedy.”

There was no question that physically integrated dance challenged expectations. Companies like Daniel Aschwanden's *Bilderwerfer* made their call to arms *Every body is perfect! Against the perfect body!* The Artistic Directors of CandoCo spoke about how wheelchairs that had previously separated dancers were now being incorporated as previously untapped resources for experimenting with rich ways of moving. People who wrote about this type of work were still learning that, for instance, the word “handicapped” was not a universal synonym for disability. And of course, in the United States, physically integrated dance was—and still is to some degree—considered alternative, a novelty rather than part of the mainstream of contemporary dance.

Nonetheless, dancers with disabilities, the presenters who engaged them, and the critics who chronicled them were beginning to understand that dance and disability offered new opportunities to be explored. Later, at the National Convening, Jo Verrent, Senior Producer of the Unlimited Festival, compared it to discovering a new color in a painter's palette.

In 1997, Dance Umbrella's first International Festival of Wheelchair Dance in Boston lasted two weeks and featured four nights of programs spotlighting 12 companies from throughout the United States, Latin America, Europe and Taiwan. This gathering was a festival with associated talks, master classes, workshops, and a contact improvisation jam.

Today, physically integrated dance activity responds to trends within the dance field and within the arena of disability arts, advocacy and activism. In the pre-convening survey described below, one respondent said that the opportunities for physically integrated dance had advanced in keeping with a broader “expansion of the notion of professional dance; which bodies get to be onstage; what makes excellent art; [and expansion of the] ideas that dancing isn’t only about “other” virtuosic abilities.”

There is no dearth of choreographers who want to work with physically integrated casts. The first time AXIS was at Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography (MANCC) in Tallahassee, Fla., in 2007, Judith Smith notes, 67 emerging choreographers applied to work with the company. Since 1997, AXIS has commissioned work from more than 35 choreographers, many of them major figures in American dance such as Bill T. Jones, Stephen Petronio, Joe Goode, Victoria Marks, Yvonne Rainer, Margaret Jenkins, Ann Carlson, and emerging artists including Alex Ketley and Kate Weare. A dozen more have workshopped with the company.

PRIORITIZING INFRASTRUCTURE AND INNOVATION

“Discussions about the future of disability arts often get stuck. Like, really stuck. A seemingly intractable kind of stuck. We are stuck because we are pulled in two different directions:

1. The need for an infrastructure that brings new artists into the fold. By infrastructure, I’m referring to basic physical access and accommodations, education, and the articulation of a critical language that would communicate to critics and scholars how to understand what we are doing.

2. The need to focus on developing the aesthetic innovations that are quickly emerging in disability arts—physically integrated dance being one of the most innovative.”

—DR. CARRIE SANDAHL, HEAD OF THE PROGRAM ON DISABILITY ART, CULTURE AND HUMANITIES, UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO

Pre-convening Survey

In July through September 2015, AXIS produced and disseminated a qualitative, online multiple choice pre-convening survey. The primary goal was to refine the themes and priorities that would guide the convening agenda.

AXIS also asked for pointers to the change makers and policy makers who should be invited to participate in the conversation at this meeting, in the regions, and over time.

The survey attracted 68 respondents from the USA, England, and Australia. This group included individuals who had demonstrated their interest in physically integrated dance and some who had attended AXIS's 2015 summer intensive and teacher training program August 3-11, 2015.

- 73% of the respondents stated that they were currently involved in integrated dance activities. Interestingly, only 17% indicated that they were involved in adaptive athletic activities, which indicates that at the present time, there is a clear divide between those modalities.
- 34% identified as persons with a disability. Respondents had a choice of self-identifying in overlapping categories, for instance listing themselves as both dancer and administrator.
- Of these, they self-identified as
 - 62% dancer
 - 60% dance teacher
 - 51% choreographer
 - 44% administrator

The research identified two clear convening priorities, both having to do with enhancing the artistic quality of physically integrated dance.

The first priority was improved training and the development of dance pedagogy for dancers with physical disabilities. While some work has been done in this area, one respondent affirmed that the highest barrier faced by physically integrated dance is “[l]ack of training for dancers with physical disabilities and lack of competent, knowledgeable instructors.” Another amplified this concern, seeing a barrier in “recruiting individuals with disabilities to participate in dance and who want to commit to training seriously.”

The second priority that emerged as a priority for the national convening was training and experience for disabled choreographers and choreographers who work with, or want to work with disabled artists. As one respondent explained “choreography does not always take into consideration all abilities. It is difficult and frustrating (and somewhat embarrassing) to have to explain to a choreographer that I may not be able to perform a specific move.”

Other topics ranked in order of popularity were:

- Outreach about physically integrated dance to the disability community and those who work with people with disabilities
- Outreach about physically integrated dance to the dance community and those who work with dancers
- Publicity to build greater public understanding of the value of physically integrated dance
- Funding and/or marketing for existing and proposed physically integrated dance projects
- Professional development for dance leadership positions (artistic and management) for people with disabilities
- Expanded employment opportunities for dance performers with physical disabilities

National Convening Agenda

Day 1: Orientation and Aspirations

Opening Movement Exercise & Introductions

**Overview: 2015 Research and Pre-Convening Survey Results;
Ground Rules**

Keynote by Jo Verrent, Unlimited, UK

**State of the Field Conversation with John Killacky,
Judith Smith & Victoria Marks**

Aspirations for the Future; Break Out Groups

Day 2: Prioritized Working Sessions

**Improving and Expanding Opportunities for the Training
and Development of Dance Pedagogy for Dancers with
Physical Disabilities**

**Improving Training, Experience and Opportunities for
Choreographers with Disabilities and Choreographers
who work with or want to work with Disabled Artists**

**How Do We Find, Train, Engage and Empower the
Next Generation of Administrators and Activators?**

Regional Priorities

Physically Integrated Masterclass with Marc Brew

Day 3: Mapping Action Plans

Network and Strategic Alignments

Activating for a Future: Final Work Sessions

DanceAbility Masterclass

Themes and Findings

On the first day of the National Convening, Cheryl Ikemiya, Senior Program Officer for the Arts at the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation noted the importance of coming together nationally. The field, she said, is eager to learn and to be responsive to the accessibility needs of both artists and audiences.

Amy Fitterer, Executive Director of Dance/USA, shared her admiration that an organization that is first and foremost a dance company rather than a service organization could spearhead such an ambitious project. Lane Harwell, Executive Director of Dance/NYC, welcomed the convening participants to New York, and shared that Dance/NYC has an ongoing initiative on access to arts and culture for dancers with disabilities that includes public forums that have featured many convening participants and resulted in two research reports *Discovering Disability: Data & NYC Dance* (2015) and *Disability. Dance. Artistry.* (2016).

Unlimited: The UK Example

Jo Verrent, Senior Producer of the Unlimited Festival was invited to the National Convening because AXIS was aware that the UK was far ahead of North America in its inclusive practices and championing of artists with disabilities. Verrent and AXIS Dance Company's Guest Artistic Director Marc Brew's keynote presentation about inclusive dance in the UK and the [Unlimited Festival](http://weareunlimited.org.uk) (weareunlimited.org.uk) offered a compelling description of how commissioning and presenting artists with disabilities has helped to shift public perceptions of disabled people and build new audiences. A key aspect of its mission is "to inform the canon of contemporary art with different voices."

A large percentage of the program budget is directed to artists to create work. Unlimited funds several research and development residencies and fully funds three, which are then available for UK touring. Inclusivity is embedded in the [Creative Case for Diversity](http://artscouncil.org.uk/diversity-and-equality/creative-case-diversity) (artscouncil.org.uk/diversity-and-equality/creative-case-diversity) for the UK that in 2015 resulted in an additional £1.8 million investment in Unlimited to continue to celebrate the work of Deaf and disabled artists.

Unlimited, Verrent explained, is aware that the infrastructure of the commissioning and presenting process has to shift in order for producers, artists, and audience members “to meet as equals.” The focus of Unlimited is on high-quality art, not social practice or political expression per se. Investment in the artist includes inviting a short list of artists who have expressed interest in commissions to festivals where they experience the work of other disabled artists. Only after that orientation are potential applicants invited to submit their proposals. Unlimited has made a commitment to train professionals with disabilities on the administrative side as well so that, for instance, a disabled person with aspirations to be a producer can work as an arts administration intern. In this way, it creates a pipeline for new artistic and administrative leadership.

Impairment is always presented as bad news [...], but there is always a new way of doing something, it just may need to be done on a different time scale. We transform perceptions from doom and negative to just another facet of humanity, one that has nuance and textures and subtle impacts on everything you do on the planet.

Each piece of art has to build its own audience, gradually and over time. Each company or artist is matched with a producer and markets its own shows. While the Unlimited logo is part of the presentation package, the artist and festival marketing describes these commissions as “unmissable” artwork rather than work created and/or performed by artists with disabilities.



Pictured: Jo Verrent and Marc Brew discuss the Unlimited Festival and UK models of support at the National Convening.

The Construct of Diversity and Equity

Vermont presenter and disability activist John Killacky argued that after the passing of the ADA, it should be understood that civil rights issues must go beyond requirements to amend architectural barriers and access to insure organizational access and equity. The model that pities disabled artists and offers them recognition only as a form of charity is outmoded, but still persists. Simi Linton, a New York-based disability/arts consultant challenged the convening participants to consider “the whole construct of diversity in philanthropic and artistic endeavors and beef up our argument.” At the same time, she warned against honoring artists with disability with happy talk, responding to Jo Verrent’s points by saying “there is a lot about impairment that is scary, even to those of us who appreciate our disability.”

“In the past, physically integrated dance served as a community building project, but it now presents the possibility of changing the very way we think about bodies,” explained choreographer and UCLA professor Victoria Marks in a prepared statement. “We are taught to aspire to a kind of perfectibility, even if it doesn’t really exist. These socially imposed bodily regimes can create friction with what experience tells us about truly being alive.” She continued:

Our work is about the body, and the body is experienced in part through our sensory filters. Yet equally powerfully, we also come to know our selves through ideas about the body, projected on us from the world as we encounter it. These ideas include understandings about personhood, about identity, about relationships, about good and bad, about ugly and pretty, about desire, about values, and so much more. So, the choreographies we put on a stage are not just about moving. They are as much about who we are, what we care about, what we will fight for and what must change.

PHYSICALLY INTEGRATED DANCE: A NEW SET OF POSSIBILITIES:

“How can physically integrated dance offer, from deep within its own unique medium, strategies for being that rocks the charts of not only economic value, but also human value: new and expansive ideas, beauty and form, and the value of bringing people together?”

I offer my own short list of the ways in which physically integrated dance offers artists a new set of possibilities:

- 1. The possibility of multiple virtuositys.**
- 2. The possibility of attending to personhood through a more nuanced set of frameworks than pure athleticism.**
- 3. Challenging conventional values by providing disability informed concepts of beauty, concepts of community, and values of inter-dependence.**
- 4. New ways of attending to the experience of being embodied.**
- 5. To imagine dance so that its apprehension is not solely reliant on the ability to see.**
- 6. The claiming of pleasure or pain, or any other experience.**
- 7. Visibility. A Voice. A Presence.**
- 8. Challenging the way we see and understand difference. Expanding the way we can be together.”**

—VICTORIA MARKS, CHOREOGRAPHER, PROFESSOR, UCLA

Later during the convening, a panel made up of the rising generation of artists, advocates, and activators turned participants' attention toward intersectionality. They stressed that disability is only one variable in the identity of an artist or of audience member. While these younger artists can rely on the professional foundation laid by the pioneers of this field, many of whom were present at the convening, the political achievement of disability activists, and the institutional and legislative frameworks of the ADA and other commitments to equal access for people with disabilities, they are beginning to articulate the new challenges of acting inclusively as pertains to racial and gender identity and attempts to be part of institutions such as performing arts high schools and universities. Marginality comes in many forms, even for those who were born after the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. As activist choreographer Mark Travis-Rivera noted, "what we can learn from the Paralympics movement is that [adaptive work] doesn't lower the bar of competition but is simply accessible."



Pictured: Panel of Emerging Leaders at the National Convening. Left to right: Laurel Lawson, Breanna Lee, Jerron Herman, Daniela Jacobson, Mark Travis Rivera and moderator Beth Bienvenu.

Training

Most dancers with disabilities cobble together training regimens.

Kitty Lunn, Artistic Director of Infinity Dance, who was a dancer prior to acquiring her disability, says that she was motivated by wanting to continue to dance. “I put myself in a mainstream class scared to death, and the other students looked at me like I had two heads. I didn’t have knowledge about how to do the movements sitting down but I knew if I could transpose it for me I could transpose it for other people.” Judith Smith describes how contact improvisation gave her a glimpse that dance might be an opportunity to experience her body in a new and satisfying way. Kris Lenzo, a double amputee athlete from Chicago, was invited to participate in a dance program by his preschool daughter’s teacher.

One definition offered for “technique” was the ability to work safely and injury free, but others added that for those who use wheelchairs, technique addresses issues such as the difference between the “chair body” and “floor body.” Mary Verdi-Fletcher, Founding Artistic Director of Dancing Wheels Company and School calls this type of dance training “translatable” for her particular body and expressive capacities. Since every dancer with a disability will have different capacities and needs, most have relied on their own sensibilities, training from allied rehabilitation or athletic training, or a combination of mentors, both disabled and nondisabled dancers.

Adequate, appropriate, and profession caliber training is a need felt throughout the community of physically integrated dancers.

Those who are just beginning want safe basic skills; those who are already experienced want opportunities to develop and surpass their current training; and those who perform at the professional level understand that the only way the field can go forward is through the establishment of a training pipeline, and employment opportunities, for dancers with disabilities.



Pictured: National Convening Work Session. Back Row pictured left to right: Zazel-Chavah O'Garra, Laurel Lawson, Kris Lenzo, Victoria Marks, Alice Sheppard, Ana Inés Rubenstein. Front Row left to right: Mark Travis Rivera, Connie Michael, and facilitator Mary Verdi-Fletcher.

In this, the physically integrated dance community shares many commonalities with the rest of the under-resourced American dance field. However, while nondisabled dancers can often choose among a wealth of dance genres and styles, and teaching methods, dancers with disabilities are often left with few options. In addition, some convening participants warned, young dancers with disabilities sometimes find that nondisabled teachers may reinforce ideas of their inherent inadequacy.

Beyond this, as dance artist Alice Sheppard said, the training regimens required for integrated dance—that is, dance that includes dancers with physical disabilities performing with those who do not—has its own learning requirements, training that is currently developed almost entirely in the context of company development. Workshops and specialized training in such integrated forms are few and far between.

Toby McNutt, a Vermont dancer and choreographer with a disability, noted that there is a difference between dancers who were born with a disability and those who acquired the disability through accident or illness

after having exposure to the conventions of traditional dance training. Dancers born with disabilities, and those who acquired disabilities without having had prior dance training, have few ways to become familiar with dance studio practice. Teachers may or may not understand the dancer's constraints or be able to help them expand and deepen their abilities. Exploring and inventing adaptive practice is often left to the dancer.

While under the Americans with Disabilities Act persons with disabilities have a legal right to attend public or university dance classes, their presence is often met with bewilderment, fear of liability, or outright hostility. Mary Verdi-Fletcher noted it takes “a thick-skinned dancer” to venture into such a class. Laurel Lawson, a dancer with a disability who performs with Full Radius Dance in Atlanta noted that while many universities have strong adaptive sports programs, advocates for physically integrated dance need to reach students to let them know that dancing is an option. Those institutions that have established dance classes open to dancers with disabilities have often found—to their surprise—that they serve more than one population. As Merry Lynn Morris from University of South Florida noted, since injury is a constant in dance, integrated dance classes also often up space for injured dancers to continue to train. This awareness may expand the definition of disabled dance activity to encompass a less isolated and numerically small population and by doing so, create opportunities for dancers with more permanent physical impairments.

Kitty Lunn suggested that in urban centers like New York City, it is possible for dance classes to be taught by a team that includes one disabled and one nondisabled teacher, modeling the idea of inclusion and offering specialized awareness of the needs of dancers with specific physical limitations and capacities.

Craig Peterson, who at the time of the convening was Program Director at Gibney Dance, pointed out that while Gibney offers 80 classes a week in a wide range of genres, major dance centers have an opportunity to provide and support across-the-board training for dance instructors to make those settings welcoming places for dancers with disabilities.

In the course of the convening, a number of training resources were identified:

- DanceAbility workshops and certification (danceability.com)
- *Physically Integrated Dance Training: The Dancing Wheels Comprehensive Guide for Teachers, Choreographers and Students of Mixed Abilities*—Manual & DVD by Dancing Wheels Company & School (dancingwheels.org/product/dancing-wheels-manual-dvd)
- AXIS Dance Company Summer Intensive and Dance Teacher Training (axisdance.org/summer-intensive)
- CandoCo Dance Company Co-Founder Adam Benjamin’s integrated dance program at Plymouth University (adambenjamin.co.uk/University.html) and his book *Making an Entrance: Theory and Practice for Disabled and Nondisabled Dancers*

Choreographic Practice and Opportunities

All choreographers create from an individual perspective, aesthetic and their own desires, noted dancer and arts administrator Jerron Hermann the second day of the convening:

But we all aspire to have the same model, a system of work includes diversity and inclusion, placing disabled people in power, and creating choreography expressed to include bodies with disabilities.

While some companies, including AXIS Dance Company, Dancing Wheels Company & School, and Full Radius Dance develop work with an existing ensemble, other choreographers spoke of the difficulty of finding, training, and developing work over time with qualified dancers, both those with disabilities and those who were interested and experienced with working with disabled colleagues. This is also a critical issue for companies. Even demonstrating dance moves, the time-honored way of choreographic communication, must be translated for physically integrated casts. “I don’t get to work with differently bodied dancers who are experienced with taking dance instruction,” said Toby McNutt, adding that one has to be flexible to build new forms of communication.

THE NEED FOR FORWARD MOVEMENT ON MULTIPLE FRONTS

“Two larger structures inform our conversation:

An inward-facing conversation about how we can strengthen already existing relationships and build new ones to support choreographers already working in the field, support the work of disabled choreographers, and create infrastructure and information to invite new choreographers in.

An outward facing conversation about how our field fits into national and international conversation about field development and practice, about our profile with presenters, funders, educators, etc.—so that we can design for ourselves the most effective models and programs for the future.”

—ALICE SHEPPARD, FOUNDER AND ARTISTIC LEAD, KINETIC LIGHT



Pictured: Alice Sheppard speaking during a breakout session at the National Convening.

AXIS and other companies have been inviting nondisabled choreographers into laboratory settings and commissioning work with physically integrated ensembles. This has allowed choreographers to begin the process of expanding ways of sharing information and developing material with bodies and equipment, resulting in radically expanded movement vocabularies. Convening participants stressed that for physically integrated dance it is crucial for choreographers—both disabled and nondisabled—to have sufficient time with a cast to explore new ways of working. They need to see how their ways of working and developing material translate to different physicalities without the pressure of creating and developing a finished product. Additional funding for expenses such as adaptive transportation and support for personal care assistants may be required beyond expenses for conventional choreographic collaborations.

Mentorship emerged as a high priority. Choreographers present also noted that they rarely have adequate, knowledgeable feedback about their work. This includes substantive response to craft and aesthetics and advice about presentation and festival opportunities. While formal arrangements are important, the group coined a term “professionally interruptible” as a way for people in the field to signal that they are available for advice.

They also felt that they wanted to know more about the existing repertory of physically integrated dance from around the world, a project made straightforward through internet access. The extensive bibliography compiled by Jo Verrent and Debra Cash as part of the National Convening’s pre-convening planning includes a large number of video references (see next page). Ana Rubenstein, an educator at NY’s PS 333, noted that there would be significant interest in having access to this, and as appropriate, sharing such resources with K-12 students. Dr. Carrie Sandahl of University of Illinois at Chicago noted that this information could easily be documented and analyzed within the frame of academic performance and disability studies departments. There was broad consensus that this be kept a living, expanding repository.

THE ONLINE BIBLIOGRAPHY OF RESOURCES COMPILED FOR THE CONVENING BY JO VERRENT AND DEBRA CASH INCLUDES:

- **General Resources on Arts/Dance and Disability**
- **Websites for Arts Organizations with Disabled Artists**
- **Disability Arts: Practice, History and Theory**
- **Information on Training Programs and Teachers**
- **Performing Arts and Disability Technical Assistance**
- **Disability and Audiences**
- **Proceedings of Disability Arts Conferences**
- **Funding Sources**

Available at axisdance.org/bibliography



Pictured: Dr. Carrie Sandahl speaking during a panel at the Midwest Regional Convening.

A more ambitious agenda, modeled on the work of Unlimited to provide more holistic support for choreographers, would be to create opportunities for choreographers to make site visits to other physically integrated companies both within and outside the United States.

There was similar interest in creating opportunities to shadow or intern at established physically integrated companies and festivals. Longer-term goals would include dancer exchanges between companies, mentorship and producing support.

Choreographers and company directors also mentioned that they struggle with the managerial and operational issues associated with developing sustainable integrated dance organizations. The prior generation of physically integrated companies learned their skills in a completely ad hoc manner, relying on local nonprofit resources and workshops, national service organizations such as Dance/USA, public and private accessibility resources, and developing their own collegial networks across the cultural sector for mutual support. “The administrators are activators,” Judith Smith said. “The artists can’t do it without having people behind us.” While this process is often exhilarating, and effective, it is also time-consuming.

Artistic Director Heidi Latsky notes that modern dance companies typically use their dancers in multipurpose ways, and she has brought dancers with disabilities into her company’s administrative leadership. Sara Nash from New England Foundation for the Arts’ National Dance Project noted that these issues are not confined to physically integrated companies: most professional dance artists across the United States struggle with finding resources to make and present their work and devote time to professional development. She discussed how we might look at existing models of professional development labs like NEFA’s Regional Dance Development Initiative that could be adapted to support a cohort of disabled choreographers.

Leading with the Art, not the Disability

Physically integrated dance must lead with the art, not the disability. If the participants in the national convening agreed on anything, this was it. Artistic excellence is the only way to avoid what John Killacky referred to as “inspiration porn” and the marginalization of dancers and dance companies with disabilities. Jo Verrent explained that Unlimited makes its case in the UK by arguing for the aesthetic benefits of diversity rather than an equal opportunity approach.

Nevertheless, there is little consensus about the nature of artistic excellence.

On one hand, some participants made the argument that, following the disability rights model of “nothing about us without us,” physically integrated work must be led by people with disabilities. Others spoke of how nondisabled choreographers such as Bill T. Jones and Margaret Jenkins have been transformed by the challenge and opportunities of working with idiosyncratic bodies and created valuable work in the light of that exposure. Still others argue for the value of both physically integrated companies and autonomous groups where every artist on stage has a disability.

“We have to challenge each other to be better artists,” John Killacky argued. “Maybe you need a dramaturg or a director.” Given existence of multiple disabilities, artistic expression may also require new forms of presentation such as the sensory-sensitive presentation models used to accommodate audience members with autism.

The Beginning of an Action Agenda

Acknowledging the historic nature of this convening, the participants expressed a desire to strengthen the physically integrated dance community by raising the artistic quality of the work. At the opening of the convening's final day, Dance/USA's Executive Director Amy Fitterer encouraged participants to envision the defining attributes of a more unified community. All easily agreed on the value of a national and international alliance of integrated practitioners with integrated dance at the center, working to increase visibility, and move the field forward.

An alliance of integrated practitioners with integrated dance at the center could be tasked with:

- Providing regular opportunities to convene in person and virtually
- Conducting research and surveying constituents as needed
- Forming working task groups and convening sub groups as appropriate
- Having strong interactive communication channels internally and externally with writers who can articulate what is happening in the field
- Serving as a clearing house for opportunities; internships, job boards, residencies, workshops, training programs, grants
- Promoting sustainable practice
- Serving as a repository and platform for an ever-evolving bibliography and video archive
- Seeking national and international media attention
- Building strategies for integrated practice that would increase demand across the field

- Addressing obstacles, legislative and regulatory policies that create unforeseen barriers to artists and audiences with disabilities, and challenging practices that while illegal, are still broadly enacted
- Monitoring and publicizing progress in the field.
- Increasing visibility across the disability community

While this vision was compelling, participants felt it was too early to formalize such a group. Instead, participants agreed to begin this work through mutually supportive task forces, balancing internal (private) and external (public) conversations, and providing a context for ongoing discussion and discovery.



Pictured: Betty Siegal, Esq. shares highlights from a breakout group session at the National Convening.

Participants then broke into small working groups to sketch the beginnings of an action agenda. This included:

Enhancing Entry Points into Integrated and Inclusive Dance

- Enhance training in integrated and inclusive dance practices for dancers, independent dance teachers, and studios.
- Develop coursework for integrated and inclusive dance teacher preparation.
- Expand certification programs. Some professional programs that address rehabilitation, expressive therapies and physical therapy have included dance, and other programs are in their early days. All will benefit from direct expertise of dancers with disabilities. Currently, the most visible certification program that touches on dance and mobility impairment is the national Dance for Parkinson's program based at the Mark Morris Dance Group in Brooklyn. (danceforparkinsons.org)
- Seek partnerships with rehabilitation specialists and educators to include dance in their practice areas and research.

Training for Professional and Pre-Professional Disabled Dancers

- Convene educators to share current practices.
- Provide an online presence with sample curricula, videos, books of existing resources for teachers as well as a listing of teachers and their specialties, upcoming programs, workshops and intensives.
- Provide financial subsidy for teacher exchanges between professional physically integrated dance companies and schools.
- Create ways to share curricula, both K-12 and at the college level.

- Link universities through a consortium that could work together to build capacity for training and recruitment.
- Create a funding pool that would allow communities to bring in professional teachers for integrated dance workshops and to offer integrated training for dance teachers.
- Offer travel subsidy for disabled dancers to cover any additional costs (such as personal care attendants) to attend workshops, trainings, auditions, and to participate in apprenticeships.

Expanding Opportunities for Disabled Choreographers and Choreographers who want to work with Disabled Dancers or Integrated Ensembles

- Develop a dance lab prototype for choreographers to work with a critical mass of experienced disabled and nondisabled dancers.
- Provide incentives for existing physically integrated dance companies to work with choreographers “on their wish list” as well as with lesser-known emerging choreographers.
- Explore the regional dance festival model and how to develop a model for integrated dance.
- Prototype a skills-sharing intensive led by a collective of disabled dance artists.
- Embed mentorship and production support into commissioning opportunities.
- Develop presenting partnerships to showcase work.

Mentorship Opportunities

- Create and cultivate mentorship opportunities within the integrated dance field for teachers, dancers, choreographers and administrators by both disabled and nondisabled persons according to their expertise.

Audience Development

- Create, expand and grow the marketplace for professional, physically integrated work.

Moving beyond ADA Accessible Venue Requirements

- In addition to accessible stage requirements, develop and share best practices around accessible transportation and lodging arrangements as a service to companies, presenters and communities that want to invite dancers with disabilities and/or integrated casts to perform.

Connecting Dance and Disability Resources

- Explore ways to share information bilaterally. The dance field needs information about the participation and opportunity for people with disabilities; the disability field needs information about entry points to dance.

Networked, Online Platforms

- Expand the bibliography developed for the Convenings as a living online resource for a wider field of practitioners.
- Consider a repository or platform to showcase existing repertory of physically integrated dance from around the world.

Regional Convenings

At the onset of this initiative, AXIS acknowledged the need to connect the National Convening with regional conversations and activities happening at the local level. In the original grant proposal to the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the scope of the regional meetings was defined as follows:

The regional community conversation phase will begin immediately following the national convening. AXIS' Artistic Director and Leadership team will co-facilitate community discussions in collaboration with convening participants in their home communities. This will be a chance to connect on the conversations taking place at the international and national level with local communities. These meetings will be low-budget, town hall style events that will take place at local accessible performing arts spaces. These community discussions will be an opportunity for community members to engage in the core issues addressed surrounding integrated dance. The meetings will involve moderated group discussions and interaction with some of the media and documentation from the national convening.

Planning for the Regional Convenings took place in tandem with the development of the National Convening and through a selective vetting process, six distinct regional meeting sites were identified across the country representing the Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, New England, Southern, Southwest/Mountain States and West Coast.

By far the most important criteria for the selection of host cities, was the existence of clear leadership and organizational capacity to host and activate regional conversations, participate in the National Convening and assist AXIS in connecting the two in meaningful ways for local and regional participants.

AXIS utilized the knowledge gained from hosting the National Convening to organize a convening toolkit for each regional activator or team of activators with suggestions for pre-convening tasks, sample registration form, marketing materials, travel suggestions, itineraries, volunteer management and useful tips for day of needs. Judith Smith and Jennifer Calienes assisted host organizations as needed with the development of regionally specific agendas and presented findings from the National Convening at each Regional Convening.

Due to the overwhelming success of the social media campaign associated with the National Convening and guided by the work of Rebecca Fortelka, AXIS Social Media Coordinator and Mark Travis Rivera, Artistic Director/ Founder of marked dance project, AXIS also provided a very detailed guide and support for social media activities. The guide encouraged engagement with #Hashtag campaigns, becoming a content curator and brand ambassador and provided content possibilities for sharing. This social media campaign reached 50,000 people across combined social networks during the National Convening. The #FPIDance hashtag campaign had a reach of 88,145 people, with mentions hitting 476,770 timelines.



Pictured: Kris Lenzo leading a movement exercise with Ginger Lane at the Midwest Regional Convening.



Pictured: Elvar Ariza-Silva speaking at the New England Regional Convening.

The Regional Convenings provided the opportunity to gather and connect and there was strong consensus around a shared desire for a more robust network of connective activities. National Convening themes and action items resonated with regional participants across the country and new priorities arose. Participation was expanded to include disabled athletes, medical and sports medicine professionals, and representatives from rehabilitation, expressive therapies and social dance communities.

In each instance, there were clear regional opportunities and priorities. In New England, for example, the geographic proximity and range of inclusive activity happening from the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts in Vermont to the Boston Dance Complex offered a solid foundation for activating a more robust regional network. In the Midwest a consortium began to imagine the potential of an integrated dance festival. In the South, a region with a very active community of inclusive practitioners with connections to the international community, the convening included an international panel on inclusive dance training with; Luca Patuelli/III-Abilities; Hai Cohen and Tali Werthheim/Vertigo Dance; Hanna Harchakova/Dar Dance; Frank Hull and Marcie Ryan/Hands without Shoes; and Sidiki Conde/Tokounou Dance Company.

There were three additional threads running through the Regional Convenings:

- The desire to expand the growing momentum and action items developed through this initiative towards dance that includes people of all ages, body types, and disability (expanding from physical disability to include mental, sensory, and chronic illness).
- The desire to find better language for marketing; and better language to communicate to funders, audiences, policy makers and even one another about the opportunities and challenges of participating in and witnessing this evolving art form.
- The need to acknowledge the unfortunate reality that in many communities, facilities themselves still a barrier to participation for integrated practitioners and work still needs to be done on this front.



Pictured: Participant group photo from the Western States Convening.

Conclusion

The seven convenings produced through this initiative brought together 350 activators in the field, initiating new dialogue, partnerships and momentum for the field of physically integrated dance in the USA.

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Ford Foundation, Dance/USA, Dance/NYC, Boston Dance Alliance, Dancer's Group and regional partners across the country have begun or are supporting new initiatives as a result of this activity. AXIS Dance Company is launching components of a multi-year Artistic Advancement Platform in 2017.

The momentum generated by this initiative will usher in a new beginning for the entire field. As we work to reimagine the constructs of equity and inclusion, our collective efforts over the next decade will be informed by this historic and unprecedented set of activities.



Following the convening, Texas-based choreographer Silva Laukkanen was awarded the inaugural Keshet Fellowship for Contemporary Dance. Pictured is Tanya Winters from Silva's residency. Photo by Pat Berett, courtesy of Keshet Dance and Center for the Arts.

Acknowledgments

So many people contributed their time, brilliance and expertise to this endeavor. They are the power and potential of this work.

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National Convening Participant List

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Judith Smith, Founder and Artistic Director • Eugenia Bowman, Executive Director • Marc Brew, Guest Artistic Director • Jeanie Bunker, Board President • Robin Anderson, Community Engagement Manager • Breanna Lee, Company Administrator

Consultants

Jennifer Calienes, Project Consultant • Debra Cash, Research & Documentation

Participants

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AXIS Dance Company Mission

AXIS Dance Company exists to change the face of dance and disability. We accomplish our mission through three pillars of activity:

1. Artistry: The heart of AXIS is creating and performing contemporary dance developed through the collaboration of dancers with and without disabilities. Judith Smith's artistic vision to commission high profile dance makers of our time has resulted in artistically stunning and significant dance works. Through its commissioning program and choreographic lab, AXIS provides a training ground for disabled and nondisabled choreographers who want to work with integrated casts.

2. Engagement: AXIS maintains an extensive engagement program in the United States or abroad through classes, in-school residencies, teacher training, workshops and intensives. Our program offers 130 events annually for all ages and abilities and is the primary pre-professional training ground for aspiring dancers with disabilities. Our work, modeling collaboration and inclusion has been requested by the Social Security Administration, NASA-Ames, the National Parks Service, SFPD, University of CA SF Office of Diversity, The American Occupational Therapists Conference and Bay Area Rapid Transit to name a few.

3. Advocacy: As a pioneer of integrated dance, AXIS supports the development of integrated dance locally and abroad by championing access, inclusion and equity for people with disabilities in dance and in the wider community. AXIS is respected for its integrity on all levels of its artistic, education and administrative programs and serves as a bridge between contemporary dance and disability culture.

AXIS Dance Company History

Founded in 1987 and based in Oakland, CA, AXIS is the nation's most acclaimed ensemble of dancers with and without disabilities.

Founding Artistic Director Thais Mazur had the creative vision to gather a group of dancers with and without physical disabilities to explore dance. What first started as an integrated group of dancers exploring and creating one performance piece, quickly led to numerous requests for performances and integrated dance classes.

Nearing its 30th year, AXIS is thrilled to announce the appointment of internationally renowned choreographer Marc Brew as its new Artistic Director. Under the Artistic Direction of Judith Smith from 1997-2016, AXIS' list of collaborators included Bill T. Jones, Stephen Petronio, Yvonne Rainer, Ann Carlson, David Dorfman, Marc Brew, Meredith Monk, Joan Jeanrenaud and Fred Frith. AXIS has toured to over 100 cities in US, Europe and Russia. The Company has received seven Isadora Duncan Dance Awards and has appeared twice on FOX TV's *So You Think You Can Dance*, exposing their innovative and relevant physically integrated dance to millions. Through education and outreach programs thousands of children and adults of all ages and abilities are inspired to dance each year.

**“There is no more defiant a land that I can think of than AXIS.
They showed me what dance could be.” –BILL T. JONES**

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