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Axis Dance Company at the Kennedy Center as part of VSA festival

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By Lisa Traiger

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Choreographer David Dorfman struggled as much with words as with movement in his newest work, "Light Shelter," a collaboration with Axis Dance Company's eight dancers, four of whom use wheelchairs or have prosthetic limbs.

"As familiar as I am working with all kinds of populations," Dorfman says, in his early work with the company, "even the terminology was fraught. How would we refer to each other?"

"I just tiptoed around what to say," admits Dorfman, 54, "but then we talked about it and came up with our own language: peds and treads." Peds referred to dancers moving on two feet, while treads meant those in wheelchairs.

"Light Shelter" is one of the dance performances in the upcoming International VSA Festival, which explores the culture and artistry of disability. The week-long event begins Sunday in venues across the area, with "Light Shelter" having its Washington premiere June 11 and 12 at the Atlas Performing Arts Center.

"We don't consider ourselves a disabled dance company," says Judith Smith, Axis co-founder and artistic director. The California-based company, which has collaborated with some of contemporary dance's most celebrated artists -- Bill T. Jones, Joe Goode, Margaret Jenkins, Stephen Petronio and Meredith Monk among them -- has a repertory of cutting-edge choreography, Smith says.

"We basically refer to ourselves as a contemporary dance company that does physically integrated work, meaning we have dancers with and without disabilities," says Smith, 50, who has been in a wheelchair since a car accident at age 17.

"I spent several years sitting very still because I just really didn't know what to do in my body," says Smith, who excelled at competitive horseback riding before her accident. But then she discovered dance through an improvisation movement experience, and a new world opened up.

For Smith and her other "treads" dancers, their work is not dance therapy. "It's about artistry," she notes. For his part, Dorfman, who directs his own company in New York, has discovered something else while working with the Axis dancers, as well as with disabled community members.

"I see bravery and risk-taking, whether they're throwing themselves along a moving wheel, or allowing themselves to be lifted when they're in a chair, throwing their chair up in the air, or taking a dive to the ground," he says. "It's all quite stamina-oriented."

Traiger is a freelance writer.

Axis Dance Company Atlas Performing Arts Center, 1333 H St. NE. 202-399-7993. <http://www.atlasarts.org>. June 11-12. \$8-\$22.



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