

## **ABDP PODCAST #4 Vanessa Cruz Transcript**

[Opening bright melodic piano]

**[RIANNE ŠVELNIS]** Welcome back, everyone, to the All Bodies Dance Project podcast - our series of discussions about dance, access, performance, the body, and everything between and beyond.

Each episode is co-hosted by me, Rianne, and another member of the All Bodies Dance ensemble. Each new co-host will invite an artist of their choice to be our featured guest - someone we admire, are curious about, want to learn from, and want to be in community with.

Today's co-host is All Bodies Dance Project company member Harmanie Rose, and our special guest is Chicana disabled dance artist and disability activist Vanessa Cruz.

Vanessa tells us about moving through institutional dance education alongside her mobility device Pluto, her rigorous learning in community organizing and solidarity work, and the myriad of forms, aesthetics, and culture that show up in her artistic process.

Before we jump into that conversation, let's hear from Audrey Siegl.

**[Audrey Siegl speaks *hərɪdəmɪnəm*]** I invite each of you: close your eyes, take a slow steady breath in, and let it out. Think about, say out loud if you know their name, the Indigenous people whose lands you're on, the ones whose ancestors are in the earth, the ones whose language is still whispered in the trees and that comes up out of the earth itself. For those of you in the Vancouver area, I say [*speaks hərədəmɪnəm*]. In the language of my ancestors, the downriver *hərədəmɪnəm* dialect, I say welcome to the lands of the *hərədəmɪnəm* speaking people. My name is [*speaks hərədəmɪnəm*] *sɪtəmənɑ:t, St'agid Jaad* [*speaks hərədəmɪnəm*], also Audrey Siegl. I am from Musqueam and am the granddaughter of the late Steven and Celina August.

I want to raise my hands to you all for creating a safe inclusive space, for creating a space where everyone can come and move and dance and be, for us to celebrate not just the differences between us, but the strengths we bring together when we gather, that, where we all meet, and where we're all sacred, and where we are all safe and where we are all included. This is a beautiful place to be, and I implore you: enjoy your movement, enjoy your connection, and again I raise my hands and I say *hay ce:p qá'* [*speaks hərədəmɪnəm*].

[Bright melodic piano/chimes]

**[RIANNE]** Alright, everyone, let's get started. This is Rianne speaking, I'm one of the co-hosts, and I'll introduce myself in a

second, but I'm gonna pass it right over to Harmanie Rose to introduce yourself first. Go for it.

**[HARMANIE ROSE]** Hi, thank you Rianne. I will introduce myself as a blond haired, green eyed, pale skinned cisgender woman who uses a manual wheelchair. I want to introduce my chair a little bit. It is made of silver titanium and has white spokes. It is often wherever I go. There are hints of gold all around the chair. And my seat cushion right now, which you can't see, has black velvet on it - which makes me very excited to have that little touch of class when you don't often think of that when you're thinking of a wheelchair. So it is a part of who I am, it has grown with me, and I get to style it the way that I want to be seen.

**[RIANNE]** Thank you, Harmanie. And I'll pass it over to you, Vanessa.

**[VANESSA CRUZ]** Hello everyone! My name is Vanessa Cruz, pronouns she/ her/ hers. I'm gonna go ahead and provide an image description. I'm a Mexican-American woman. I currently have my hair down, it is a dark brown, kind of looks black right now. I am wearing glasses that have black rims with tiny spikes on the sides. I'm wearing a black dress shirt with a spiderweb undershirt. I'm wearing a bit of jewellery - I have a heart necklace that is shiny; I'm wearing earrings that have the moon phases, it's blue and shiny as well. I'm in front of a white wall with white blinds.

I currently reside on the un-ceded lands of the Tongva and Kizh nations, currently known as Los Angeles, California. I'm very happy to be here.

**[RIANNE]** Thank you so much, Vanessa. And I'm Rianne, and I am a white 37 year old woman with brown hair and freckles; and I'm wearing a red mesh top with orange dayglo earrings; and I also have a white wall behind me with some foliage poking out the side. And I'm super excited to be here, and I will add that Harmanie and I are on the un-ceded, stolen, illegally occupied lands of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh people, colonially known as Vancouver, BC. And I'm really excited about this trio we have here. So Harmanie, I'll pass it over to you to start the first question.

**[HARMANIE]** Thank you. I'm really excited to be here to meet with my friend Vanessa. I want to do a quick introduction on how I know Vanessa, which is when we went to L.A. together, um, to go to the U.C.L.A.'s Dancing Disability Lab. In my previous interview in the first season, I talked with Alice Shepard who was also at the U.C.L.A. Dancing Disability Lab. Some of my favourite connections have come out of that, and Vanessa is, to me, just an inspiration for the drive she has, and how much she's accomplished in such a short amount of time. And I can... I'm just so excited to see where the rest of... what she can do with the rest of her life. Basically, I don't think

there's any stopping her. So I'm excited to talk about all of those things.

So maybe my first question, Vanessa, is: tell us a little bit about your dancing journey - how it began, where it is now?

**[VANESSA]** For sure! Um, thank you for that question and beautiful introduction. I wholeheartedly feel the same way about you. Phenomenal phenomenal artist, and great to have your presence, and to be here. Um, so... where do I begin?  
[Laughs]

It's one of those things, um, that life just kind of throws at you. I fell in love with dance when I was in elementary school. I saw a talent show, and they had some dance pieces, and I immediately felt this inclination to want to be on stage. I didn't know I wanted it to be for dance, but I knew I wanted to be on stage. [Laughs]

Um, and so, throughout my childhood and teen years, I was really trying to discover fun ways to get on a stage and dance, and I was fortunate that in high school I had a really encouraging teacher, Emily Quist who encouraged me to continue to dance throughout my four years in high school. Which is, um, it's hard to come by those kinds of people that really see potential in you. So I'm really thankful that I was in that kind of environment at that time.

Of course, life happens, so I was afraid to go into dance as a career. So I really love science, so I wanted to do... I wanted to be a doctor [laughs], um, and so that was a whole other journey. So I took a lot of science classes in my community college. Then I had family tribulations that happened, and so I couldn't keep up with my academics. So I had to find a job, it was a mess [laughs].

So I found myself during those times of turmoil, um, that I was leaning into dance a lot. I was doing it as extracurricular activity. And so I said ef-it, we're gonna go for it, we're gonna go find a community college that is dance, all dance, everything dance [laughs]. Um, and so I decided to go to Santa Monica College and took dance classes there. And I was the only physically disabled dancer in that space. I graduated from Santa Monica College in 2017. Um, and so, yeah I... decided to transfer to a four-year. That was one of the hardest and most exciting and terrifying moments of my life, because I was entering an environment where you don't see disabled dancers in, especially in audition-based universities' dance programs. But you know, I wasn't expecting to get in anywhere. That was in part my internal ableism, and also, y'know, it's just difficult to meet these standards at a university level. But! I successfully transferred to Cal State Long Beach, and I recently graduated last year and got my Bachelor's in Dance Science there. Yes. That was a little long, but that was [laughing] that's my journey.

**[HARMANIE]** Thank you, Vanessa. My last... like, I was going to go on to a different question, but this makes me really think about, um, how did you have to advocate for yourself in these spaces that were more abled than inclusive?

**[VANESSA]** That's a very interesting question, because... I didn't. [Laughs] Um, a lot of it was having to assimilate my body to these standards. I didn't get the opportunity to voice my access needs all the time, because I felt like it was going to be detrimental to opportunities within the academia. That's both for my community college experience and university experience. Even though I will say my university experience felt a little bit more... it felt like the faculty there were willing to accommodate me, but I was also battling my own internal ableism of like, no, I need to make it through class, I have to push through, I have to do all of this, even though they're like, it's ok, you don't need to do this. But like... I have trust issues [laughing] with non-disabled communities 'cause they're not knowledgeable about disability culture or anything.

So in a way I kind of wish I did advocate for myself, but in a way it's like, it's hard. It's hard. It's just hard [laughs]. I don't know how to explain it, it's um... What ended up happening, I guess... 'cause I know that, like, after my first year at Long Beach, I kind of... I had this urge to see other disabled dancers in this program. And I felt that because I felt that this faculty had potential to learn how to make their environment inclusive because they'd already accepted me, so I'm like let's kind of

push them a little bit [laughing] You know? And so I ended up advocating for others to be in this safe space. Because it's like... It's difficult. I don't really like saying I graduated from school, because I survived it. I survived it. It's more like a survival experience, more than, like, I enjoyed it, you know? I enjoyed certain aspects of it of course. Like, I have wonderful friends and... You know? But behind all that, there's just a lot of ableism in the dance departments in general, so I really wanted to begin dismantling that in my university. Yeah.

**[Harmanie]** How did going to UCLA dancing disability lab change, inspire, affect you?

**[VANESSA]** Yeah, for sure. I love talking about it [laughs], 'cause it's like Ah! Amazing! I have never been in an environment where I'm dancing with other disabled dancers, period, because I've been navigating the non-disabled dance world [laughs], and that's really hard. And so, there aren't others like me in those spaces. And so it was very profound to be able to dance with Harmanie and, you know, other dancers too, and it just struck me, like, everyone is having similar experiences as I am - trying to navigate the dance world, and trying to get opportunities. And I felt this inclination of wanting to change that. I think that's where I started to think about how can I use my privilege... y'know, it is a privilege to be at a university learning dance technique that isn't necessarily offered for non-disabled dancers outside of the university context. So I really wanted to... I was really brainstorming that

summer and, like, trying to figure out, how can I equip myself so I can help build a better bridge for us to get the training we deserve, y'know?

I feel like Dancing Disability was that platform for me to like let me get myself into activism, 'cause, y'know, I think as disabled people, we automatically go into that role of activism. And so, well, let me just kind of accept that role now. 'Cause I'm kind like there's this resistance a little bit, like I really don't want to do this, but I have to... now I'm like, let me just do it, because it could only get better if I equip myself with the tools.

Also, another thing like... I remember being in [laughing] in the lectures, that they were talking, and most of it went out of my head because the terminology was just so new to me. I was like, what are you all talking about? I mean, I get it but I don't get it [laughing]. So I was... a part of me was like... I also want to... y'know... be able to understand my own disability culture, because that's something that I wasn't exposed to... in a non-ableist way, I should say.

So yeah, um, I feel like that was my platform to become an activist and try to create change where I'm at.

**[HARMANIE]** Yeah, I think I found for myself that being in a space where we actually got to study critical disability studies alongside different types of disabled dance, and watching other disabled dance performers, and working with other artists from around the world who had, like, anywhere from

years of experience to very little experience, was just so incredibly profound. Especially since it was one of the first times I was with *just* disabled performers. I work often with mixed-ability. Rianne and I often dance together, and it's been such a joy when I get to work with Rianne who -as far as I know- does not identify as disabled. So it's... but it was still this different type of joy and acceptance when I got to work with folks that have disabilities, and we could recognize that we have the same struggles when it comes to trying to find work or making places for ourselves. So it's really nice to hear how it changed you.

How would you say you will take those experiences moving forward past university?

**[VANESSA]** That's a really great and timely question right now [laughs]. I've been doing a lot of activism work outside of the university. Um, I do want to talk a little bit about some of the activism work I did do at my university that kind of spilled out into the real world. "real world". University is very much real world too. Real experience, human experience. But some of the things that I decided to do, um, as the pandemic hit, and you know, it was, that's a whole other thing [laughs]. But, y'know, everything became virtual, and so, and then, you know, just... trigger warning: I will be talking about police brutality, and the Black Lives Matter movement, and all that stuff, so that might leak into the conversation.

So when in 2020 the killing of George Floyd happened, and everything, y'know, and this is after the fact, I was like I want to be an activist, you know, that was a little bit on hold, it was a little idle because I was trying to figure out other things at school. I realised, like, wait, I cannot just advocate for disabled bodies. I need to advocate for everyone. That includes LGBTQIA2+ community members, our Black community, indigenous, people of colour, and all the intersectionality within that.

And so, I did a lot of workshops, a lot of the workshops became accessible online, so I did a lot of work and learning through [Krip Hop](#). Leroy Moore is a phenomenal human being. I follow them and learn a lot through their organisation like, how Black disabled lived experiences are very much there, just really trying to think about, like, how can I amplify these voices in my work through dance? And so, I was doing all this work [laughs], when all of these workshops were really accessible online, which is amazing.

And so, my university had a whole meeting about racial injustice. And so a group of us decided to create a student organisation called Affinity AIDE. And this is... AIDE stands for Advocates for Inclusion and Dancer Equity. We... I was invited to this group 'cause they saw that I was doing activism work a little bit, outside of that organisation. And so, I became the disability chair there, and kind of helped guide accessibility stuff, and taught a little bit of [Disability Justice](#). And so, through

this organisation, and this amazing cool part of us, we made substantial changes at university. We abolished the dress-code. We... oh I know! [laughs] We abolished the dress code; we included a disability statement that acknowledges that disability is a culture; we listed the different kinds of disability and how those communities want to be named as. And that statement also holds accountable the teachers, that they are consistently learning to be better advocates for the disability community. I helped lead their first accessible dance concert virtually. I built their bridge, um, between the ASL department, and then to come together and make work. We closed caption, audio description, you name it.

I was learning all of this at the same time I was leading it. So it wasn't perfect, but it was a start, and I'm very excited that they're still continuing that. And the last thing before I left last year, I held their first dismantling ableism workshop, just for the faculty. Yeah.

So that was all that. It happened in one year [laughs]. I think about it, I'm just like oh my god. It did leave me burned out. I will... yeah... it did leave me burned out, because it was a lot of work, um and it was not easy even though it sounds like a great list; but behind the scenes it's a whole other thing, right? Holding people accountable is really really difficult. Um... but I couldn't have done it without the amazing cohort from Affinity AIDE. I love them so much.

So yeah, that's what happened. Now, to kind of go back to your [laughing] question of like, how is this all, y'know, outside of university. I'm currently working with DANC. I can officially say that. I'm co-comps-coordinator, something with someone else. And DANC is... Dance Artist National Collective, advocates for dance wage equity among other things.

And so, there is one other disabled person there, and yeah, we're working on creating change that makes it not only equitable for non-disabled dancers, but also for disabled dancers when it comes to auditioning and things like that. We're talking about the real juicy stuff, like making sure the disability community is being taken care of in the audition. And I am also working on building up the dismantling ableism workshop. I'm really interested in facilitating that at other universities, and I also want to expand it to sanism and audism, as part of that work too, because I think that's really important to include that. Yeah.

**[HARMANIE]** Wow. I just have to say wow, that's a lot of work for I think a lot of us, people who have disabilities, feel like they're doing all that work on a micro level, and just the idea of going beyond our ourselves and just advocating for ourselves to fit into spaces, to actually make space for other artists, humans, people, it's exhausting. It's just exhausting. So I applaud all of your efforts, I applaud your generous giving of your energy and your time to these efforts. Like, to me that's just a Herc... I can't even say the word... a Herculean... it's just a

huge effort, and for that you're like one of my biggest inspirations of just how much you give and how much you care about other people. And how much you care about making spaces more accessible, like, especially dance spaces, more accessible, so that maybe others don't have to go through the exact same experience you did. Because we all have to try and make spaces for ourselves, and that endless carving out can be very exhausting.

I know finding space with all bodies Dance Project where we are constantly as a group carving space and deciding who we are and what we want to be as an organisation, what we want to represent. It's great for me because we're holding space together. It's not just one of us making that space but all of us are thinking and all of us are trying to negotiate what are we and how are we going to be the most accessible, be the most accepting, and the most diverse; and how do all of those things count as strengths. And I think, I mean, I don't know if I can say this because I am an All Bodies Dance ensemble member, but I think it really gives credit to our work and has shaped who we are, and I think we're pretty awesome [laughs]. Um, but I'll let some of our listeners be the judge of what they think about the All Bodies Dance organisation.

**[RIANNE]** Um, I have a question. Is it okay if I jump in with a question, just a follow-up question for Vanessa? Is that okay Harmanie?

**[HARMANIE]** Totally!

**[RIANNE]** This is a thing I think about a lot, so I just can't help but ask you if and how you feel that your dance practice, like, the embodied dance practice and the y'know on-the-ground connecting/ organising/ advocating, how those touch one another/ interact with one another, and how the skills are transferable between the two practices. Understanding that they're very interrelated, but more specifically just if you use skills from each of those practices in other fields. If that makes sense?

**[VANESSA]** Mhm. I think so. I think they definitely blend, I think, because even if I wasn't doing this work even if I wasn't doing this at work, because my disability is visible, for our listeners, I use leg braces, extended leg braces, so they don't bend, and I use a rollator, a purple one, her name is Pluto. And so, my disability is very visible [laughs], as soon as I enter any dance space, it's there and can't hide or anything y'know. And so, in a way, even if I decide to do work that isn't necessarily about my disability or disability aesthetics, it's still a form of activism because I am indoctrinating technique that is on a disabled body, you know? Like, my recent piece called "Nycto-Eternity" is a contemporary ballet piece. I purposely call it a contemporary ballet piece because I want to push that boundary of like can't it just be called contemporary ballet piece? Do I want to label this as an integrated ballet piece, and how is that going to be read to the audience versus what this

piece is really about. This piece is really about this moon goddess. A moon goddess that is kind of trapped in a space that is forbidden to their entity and so there's this internal battle that's happening in the piece, but it's not related to my disability, I just happen to be a disabled artist. So that, in a way, is a form of activism. I think, you know, I think it manifests in any way, you know? And vice versa when it comes to my activism. Because dance has -and also our disabilities- has us think about how to adapt things and think outside of things that happens a lot in activism. We have to think outside the box. We have to adjust things, the way we use language is something to be aware of and that's very much with dance too. We have to be aware of how our bodies move, our body language, it intersects beautifully. At times it can be a little -because I have anxiety - it can be a little too much stimulus, but yes it very much, it blends okay. It just blends. I think I answered the question [laughs]

**[RIANNE]** Yes, beautiful, thank you.

**[HARMANIE]** I have to say I'm so happy you mentioned Pluto. Pluto is my favourite oh, well, you're my favourite and then Pluto in extension is my favourite.

I don't have a picture on my computer right now but one of my favourite moments with you was captured in a photograph where we're facing off on a black box stage, and my arms are on Pluto, leaning way forward in my chair, and I think you're

leaning toward me. And it's this beautiful like, to me, beautiful disability empowerment photograph, but also this moment of we had so much fun. I remember that short little dance piece, we had so much fun, your personality and my personality just playing off of each other and trying to surprise and fake out each other. I think it's just one of, I think one of the most, one of the pieces I've had the most joy in dancing. And I don't say that lightly, because I find dance very enjoyable, but there was just so much joy in that short, like, one minute piece that... yeah I just remember that. It was a wonderful moment, and I can't wait to be able to work with you again. And I've always loved your relationship with Pluto, you're piece of equipment.

Do you want to talk more about that, your relationship to Pluto? And why you named your medical device?

**[VANESSA]** Sure. Pluto! Oh my goodness, we have an interesting relationship. I've used walkers since I was a little girl, and it didn't look like the Rollator that I have now. And so, in my dance training with non-disabled folks, a lot of the time I felt like I couldn't incorporate as much, that I could only use it as a support rather than a partner. I did have some instructors tell me to use Pluto as part of my extension, but to me that kind of came across a little funny to me, that a non-disabled person was telling me that. I don't know why, I'm still unpacking that. Because I feel like that should come organically for an artist, like, things like that, because I think I felt like they didn't understand where I wanted to go with my dance career. So

part of me, I was like I understand you want me to do this, but I really need to learn about the technique you're talking about. I don't really have time to explore movement with Pluto in the way that you're asking because there isn't time in class either, y'know? It's kind of like one of those things. It's a very complex thought process when you're trying to be in these spaces.

So a lot of the times I used Pluto just as a support for weight distribution, balance, y'know? But I think at some point when I felt that my body was getting stronger, I felt like I could do a little bit more with Pluto. So I think when I started mastering technique and understanding how my body moves and adapting the technique into my body, I felt like Pluto was becoming my extension. It was like this process. It wasn't just automatically like I'm going to... you know... it didn't feel organic when someone else was telling me to do it, if that makes sense? [laughs]

There's something I want to say, but I don't know how to say it, it's like one of those moments right now.

**[HARMANIE]** Yeah I get that. You need to find that relationship with your mobility device. For me, I had to find the relationship to my chair instead of being told what that relationship is. I know some people say it's an extension of your body, other people say it's part of you. None of those felt organic, or perfectly fit, because I love to do a lot of dancing outside of my chair, but I also feel the most comfortable and at home with

my chair. So I feel like it is a part of who I am but it isn't all of me. So it's like the perfect duet partner. I even choreographed a piece, a solo, this September [sic], where it really was sort of like an ode to my chair and the relationship and all the different roles that it's been to me. I'm in the process of searching for a new chair because it's time to say goodbye or retire this one, which is heartbreaking when you have to do that when it's been so many things.

So that's why I find relationships with mobility devices really a fascinating topic, because they are so many things to a person, and yet every person has a different relationship with their mobility device. And to the point where it's no longer a mobility device, it's a friend, it's a partner, it's... To me, I couldn't dance without my chair. My chair *is* dance, to me, because to me when I first found dance I was moving a chair just to get from point A to point B, like, my legs gave out on me, I couldn't walk, sometimes I used crutches, but everything was so awkward, and through dance I was able to find connection with my chair. And so that relationship has only developed because of dance. And so it is this constant duet with my chair, and this constant relationship. So I think... I think you have to acknowledge just this very special relationship that we can have with our mobility devices. And I felt it was so special when I met you and how strong your relationship was to Pluto, you named Pluto, you acknowledged it in spaces, and that's really important to you because anytime I'm apart from my chair on a dance stage it's now another dancer in space, and you have to recognize that,

you can't just like... and it's just this prop sitting on stage it's always going to be more than that. So thank you for sharing and being vulnerable about that, and all the different layers and levels and conflicting emotions that come with learning about Pluto.

**[VANESSA]** Yeah, I want to try to elaborate a little more and see where my brain goes. I think it was more kind of reiterating a little bit of what I said... I felt resistant when a non-disabled person said it. I think what it was is that they weren't acknowledging the struggles that I was going through as a disabled person going through these dance programs. Not acknowledging that I'm trying to process the techniques in my body before I could expand to include Pluto into my dance work. And what I mean by getting stronger in my body, I feel like what I really mean is working in a safe way with my body, with Pluto. That was very important for me. Because I remember, I'm not going to say names, but a little more early on in my dance journey in my community college, I had a professor who was interested in how I moved, but it felt like it was very much for their own interests as opposed to my... to what I actually needed as a dancer. And I remember, y'know, I asked how can I... because I was so curious... I'm like, well, you're saying that this person has worked with disabled dancers, so I'm curious like, let me ask, like, how can I dance like this, and this person taught me a specific translation that ended up hurting a muscle of mine. And so, from then I'm like

ooo okay, I don't think that was a good idea, let me not do that again with this person [laughs], y'know? So a lot of it for me, I think, for that connection to Pluto, was understanding *my* disabled body and how it works with the technique that I'm being taught and then applying it. It's a whole process.

That feels a little bit more clear to what I was trying to say.

**[HARMANIE]** I appreciate that a lot, and thank you for taking the time to clarify. I know that I often tend to struggle with words or I have brain fog sometimes, and so I can't always be clear.

Throughout this conversation, I've just been thinking about how, with disabilities, we're more than... it's more than what we just see on the surface; and how I appreciate the spaces where we can all hold space for each other, and how we show up, and that it's okay to show up how you show up, and get through it and take the time that you need. So I mention that in a way that is celebratory I think, because... celebratory about differences as opposed to... "oh, it's okay dear", but more like... yeah, I really appreciate when I can take the time to remember... to really think about what I was trying to say and go back and say it again. Thank you!

[Musical interlude]

**[HARMANIE]** One other thing that I remember and think is very unique about you is how much your family was there with you almost every single day. They weren't in the room mostly, but they came to UCLA with you, they picked you up, they were at the performance, they were so excited. And I know that your sister is one of my Facebook friends, and likes everything... whenever I do anything dance-wise she's, like, become my cheerleader too.

So how is it to have... how has it been to have such a great support network at home?

**[VANESSA]** It's been marvellous, honestly. It's not perfect, because we're constantly navigating each other's schedule, but I am just very fortunate to have a mother and sister who are constantly, like, cheering me on and supporting me, and being there if I need anything as a form of access, like, y'know... from an outside perspective it looks more like an access need but it's very much almost, like, it's a cultural thing, right? Cuz I'm a Mexican American woman, so it's very much rooted in familia and having family there and supporting each other. So I'm constantly supporting them, they're constantly supporting me. It's just a beautiful experience, and it makes me feel comfortable being where I need to be knowing that they are out doing their own things, but knowing if I need anything they will come and help me. So it's that beautiful word in Disability Justice of interdependence, right? That's... the root of it is

interdependence, and having that support, it's just so so special. So... I love them so much.

**[RIANNE]** That's so nice.

**[HARMANIE]** I love that. I think we often don't acknowledge the folks that we have in the background giving us the support we need in order to be able to do the things that we want to do, and take on the challenges that we need to face. So I just loved, I love that familia that you had. It inspires me.

**[RIANNE]** Mhm. Yeah, I think about that sometimes too, in terms of performance and art making, how there's a person on the stage or a person in the film, but then there's all these people around them that... in some ways in the arts it becomes like invisible labour or more like... I feel sometimes like there is... there's a hierarchy... of something, of, like, the person performing, but then actually it takes like 20 people to make it happen, including our interdependent care networks. Yeah, it's beautiful to remember that.

**[HARMANIE]** And to recognize it's all part of the beautiful soup that makes art and dance, and that it's so much deeper than what you can see in a film or on stage. That's one of the things I love. And I love community building. I think that's... I think where I want to finish up is... Since I've met you, how have you built a dance community with folks you knew previously in your dance studies in L. A. and, like, more and more disabled dance

artists, and how does that continually impact the work that you're making and where you see your future?

**[VANESSA]** Whoa! It's an interesting question. Um, a lot of it I have to thank my activism work. I think that has been a very strong image when I'm out there. Like, I think that's something that people look at first [laughs] which is great, I love it I love it I love it.

A lot of it is also having open conversations with others y'know? Also, honestly, I feel like I know social media get a lot of hate, but it is incredible what social media can do for you as an artist. I have gotten opportunities through Instagram DMs, y'know? It's quite remarkable how that happens, and sometimes I'm just like is this a legit offer [laughs] y'know? And y'know, being vigilant about that. But I think a lot of it is, like, networking on social media, has been such a blessing . Of course social media isn't always good for you if you're on it too much, but yeah, just... I think it's also just a part of my personality... of wanting to be in spaces... like, let me just apply to this and see what happens. It's very much that. And y'know, another reason I want and am a Disability Justice activist is because I do have that privilege, and yeah that privilege to apply to different programs that aren't necessarily for disabled artists. And bringing in the Disability Justice tools, I can kind of push more people... y'know... welcome more people into certain programs. I think that... yeah... a lot of it is just conversations, y'know? I don't know if I'm answering this question because it's

a very... networking is a very tricky conversation just because it's like complex, but it's a beautiful complex you know? Yeah.

**[HARMANIE]** Do you feel like you have a dance community that supports you now? Like, a bunch of different artists with disabilities and non-disabled artists that can cheer you on in the work that you do?

I ask that because I think that's like pretty special to me, it's one of the things that I find that I love working in the disabled community is because somebody can be like "oh, did you know that artist?", and it was maybe on the other side of the world, and I'm like "oh yeah, I met them at this thing or I met them over here". And sometimes somebody's like how did you meet all of these people? Just going to things where people with disabilities were welcomed in dance spaces. But also I love my All Bodies community here. It's been really supportive, and their support has enabled me to get more and more opportunities and to build my confidence in my dance.

So I was hoping that you could say you have a similar community or you are building one that can support you, because I think these things are really important takeaways in the work that we do.

**[VANESSA]** Absolutely, thank you for clarifying the question, because I wasn't sure if I was answering the question. Yes, I absolutely feel like I'm continuously building that kind of

support system, and community-building through my activism work, and also people who I worked at my previous job as book seller, you know? Like, people are interested in my work, and I've had people donate to my future projects, people who aren't in the arts, and because they just love my work. And it's just been a phenomenal journey meeting disabled and-disabled folks, y'know, across all kinds of walks of life. It's incredibly special. And I feel like it's just going to continue to grow, and I'm excited to meet more people, and you know... and support them as well 'cause you know, got to support!

Yeah, so I really feel like I am in a place right now where I feel like I have a support system, and, yeah, it's very exciting, very exciting.

**[HARMANIE]** Well, thank you for taking the time to talk to us, Vanessa.

**[RIANNE]** Wait! I have more questions! [laughing]

**[HARMANIE]** Those are all of *my* questions. Rianne, do *you* have any?

[Everyone laughing]

**[RIANNE]** I have two. And one of them... okay... the first one is just a burning question... I'm curious about your dance practice. Um, like, in any way that you wish to describe it, but some

things that occur to me are like what are the foundations, what do you go to when you go to your dance practice, yeah?

**[VANESSA]** Yes, I love this question. It's about to get interesting. Okay, so, my dance practice is chaos [laughs]

**[RIANNE]** Yes!

**[VANESSA]** In one word, it's chaos, and here's why. My brain is very curious about all kinds of things and textures and you name it. I love experimenting, so I feel like my work is very experimental, and sometimes it's actually like, y'know, my contemporary piece, it's a contemporary piece, and sometimes it's experimental.

So I have been dabbling currently with mixed media artwork, and how that's being included in my dance work. I do lean hard on dance film. I think that has been my platform to show work, given my experiences at university, where a lot of times my pieces aren't selected. And so I decided to go on this journey of dance films. And so that is my medium on top of dance. Put those together. And then, I do poetry as well, and so I love including poetry into my work. My goal is to write a poetry book at some point, crossing fingers that happens soon.

I have a lot of ideas, yeah. My practice is very chaotic, y'know? And I love that process. I try not to limit myself. I will say I love horror aesthetics, I watch a lot of scary movies. And it's

probably my anxiety, it's fascinating, I used to question why I watch it, but that's okay [laughs]. Yeah, so, it's a little all over the place, but I'm vibing with it.

**[RIANNE]** Cool, I love that description so much. I have been examining my relationship to chaos over the last couple years, and so, I just love the ownership of that, and, like, harnessing chaos is really powerful. Yeah, that's awesome. And we'll invite you back onto the podcast another time just to talk about horror [laughs].

**[VANESSA]** Please do! I could go on forever about it!

**[RIANNE]** Yeah, I feel like that's a whole other topic that we'll get to.

I have a question that we consistently ask all of our guests. Sometimes we have enough forethought to warn them before we ask them, but I didn't remember to give you a heads up, so take your time to think about it if you need to, but it's a question, an opportunity for you to pose a question to the listeners, to the universe, to put a question back out there, maybe something that you're questioning lately, something for us all to reflect on together. And no rush.

**[VANESSA]** I'm going to ramble. That's what's going to happen right now.

**[RIANNE]** Great! Love it!

**[VANESSA]** I know we kind of got into this conversation, Harmanie, about having all dance companies be held accountable to have disabled artists. I know it is a very radical idea, and that it's going to take time. I am continuously thinking about it, and it's almost the root of a little bit of my activism work right now of, like... because who's to say... there are already disabled dancers in dance companies -and well known dance companies- but cannot disclose that for fears of being let go, of other things that, y'know, there's so many reasons why someone doesn't want to disclose that they're disabled. And so, my thought behind this idea is that if we can start holding these companies accountable, that will create a safe space for those dancers who need access needs. That's where my thought is.

Y'know, part of me is like I want to go in this company, but it's really hard. But if you think about it more and more, it's like... it could work, but the thing is we all need to be... we need to work on, um, y'know, teaching these organisations about Disability Justice and what that means for a dance company. It's a lot of work. It's a lot of work, but y'know, also, I just feel like it'll lessen the burden of disabled artists having to constantly create a new group. Because that takes time and energy too, and I don't think that's fair, y'know? Like, non-disabled dancers have the privilege to choose any dance company they could audition to, including integrated dance companies, y'know?

And we don't... and there aren't enough integrated dance companies for the upcoming disabled artists. So, y'know, that's where I'm at. So I guess my probing question is... If you are a disabled artist, identify as a disabled artist, what does freedom look like for you?

**[RIANNE]** Thank you.

**[VANESSA]** Yes.

**[RIANNE]** Great.

**[VANESSA]** I'm still thinking about what I just said.

**[RIANNE]** Totally, me too

[All laughing]

**[RIANNE]** Thank you so much, everyone, for listening to the All Bodies Dance Project podcast. And a special thank you to our behind-the-scenes collaborators. Our soundscapes were created by MJ Coomber, podcast graphic by Kirsten Hatfield, and editing for this episode by Devalin Galloway. Episode transcription by romham pàdraig gallacher from the Radical Access Mapping Project.

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The transcription of the episode is available on our website along with info on upcoming guests and our other projects. Links to artists and organizations mentioned in the episode are in the show notes.

And finally, we would love to hear from you. If you have feedback, questions, ideas, please email us:

[info@allbodiesdance.ca](mailto:info@allbodiesdance.ca)

Until next time.

[Outro music, continuing experimental melodic chimes]

