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Axis Dance Company revels in its abilities

The troupe, which features performers with and without physical disabilities, seeks to alter perceptions.

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Rodney Bell, who uses a wheelchair, and Sonsheree Giles, who does not, perform... (Kevin Colton)

Bonnie Lewkowitz has been a professional dancer for more than 20 years. She has worked with Bill T. Jones, Stephen Petronio, Joe Goode and other prominent modern dance choreographers. She's also paralyzed from the chest down. Needless to say,

when she tells people what she does for a living, "it's still a conversation stopper."

"People will say, 'Oh, so you don't need to use your wheelchair all the time?' When someone with a disability says they dance, a pretty narrow image tends to come into people's heads," she says.

Altering perceptions of disability through the medium of dance has been a central tenet for Lewkowitz and her colleagues at Axis Dance Company, one of the best-known practitioners of physically integrated dance, which uses performers with and without disabilities. Founded in 1987, the Oakland-based repertory ensemble has distinguished itself for its collaborations with top contemporary dance choreographers and comprehensive education programs for adults and children of all movement abilities.

The company, which will perform at the Ford Amphitheatre's "Big!World!Fun!" family series on Saturday, has been at the forefront of furthering the national visibility of physically integrated dance. Most recently, two of its dancers were scheduled to perform a duet by choreographer Alex Ketley on "So You Think You Can Dance" June 30.

"We realized early on that rather than being a limitation, disability can radically expand what's possible with choreography," says Judith Smith, Axis' artistic director since 1997. "People that move differently, whether it's in motorized wheelchairs, on crutches or with

prosthetics, create all these partnering and ensemble possibilities that wouldn't exist with dancers who can all move the same way."

The Ketley duet, called "To Color Me Different," features a complex series of athletically rigorous, sensual and interactive movements performed by Rodney Bell, who uses a wheelchair, and Sonsheree Giles, who does not. Each performer has ample opportunity to demonstrate virtuosity and initiative, especially during moments where they wind up manipulating each other's movements. In one sequence, Bell flips Giles over his back, followed by Giles' inverting herself onto the back of his wheelchair. In another, Bell pushes Giles' head with enough force that sets off a chain of shared momentum resulting in the performers spinning independently of each other.

Victoria Marks, a dance professor at UCLA and choreographer who has created several works for stage and film with mixed-ability dancers, believes that Bell's and Giles' appearance on national television signals "a growing awareness that disability is not a medical condition. What dance companies like Axis are challenging is the idea that being in a wheelchair or losing a limb makes you compromised as an individual," says Marks, who created two dances for Axis' repertory and found the experience of working with the dancers to be a "feast of movement possibilities. What they're doing is reframing what it means to be a fully functioning human being."

Since its emergence in the United States some 30 years ago, when Mary Verdi-Fletcher founded her Cleveland-based company Dancing Wheels, physically integrated dance has made significant inroads in its quest to be held to the same professional standards as any other dance form. Axis' website lists more than 40 physically integrated companies worldwide, and schools such as the University of Washington offer intensive courses in the medium. Companies such as Axis or the British Candoco Dance Company have bolstered their reputations by commissioning international choreographers to create works for their dancers, and other well-known dance artists have pursued their own independent projects with performers of mixed abilities.

Heidi Latsky, for example, has spent the last three years working on "The Gimp Project," a series of dances that challenge ideas about disability and virtuosity. To accomplish this, the New York City-based choreographer and former dancer with the Bill T. Jones Company gathered a group of performers, including a legless acrobat, a blind marathon runner and Lawrence Carter-Long, a disability advocate who has cerebral palsy. In the performance trailer for "Gimp," the first dance Latsky premiered in 2008, Carter-Long marches laboriously across the stage, performs a duet that looks as if his burly partner manhandles him and recites a monologue in which he voices what audiences might be thinking. "I thought this was going to be strange. I thought you were going to be weird. But you're not," he says.

"I was interested in different bodies and what they can do," Latsky says. "It wasn't about emphasizing disability or creating any kind of pity piece. It's that I wanted to say, 'These

people are not to be thought of that way.' They're shakers and groovers and brilliant and gorgeous."

Latsky has also battled misconceptions about her work; that it smacks of either therapy or exploitation and therefore outside the realm of critical review. "Some disability organizations wouldn't come to 'Gimp' because how could they support a show with that name? And critics in New York have been afraid to review because how can you criticize someone with a disability? But audiences stay to talk to us. I think we're at a time where people are really interested in this," Latsky says.

Although Douglas Scott, the artistic director of the physically integrated Full Radius Dance company in Atlanta, agrees that the field has "gotten stronger" since the 1990s, he continues to "encounter the mentality of some people who don't hold our work to the same standards as other dance companies. It's that 'Gee, don't I feel sorry for that person in the wheelchair? I've got two legs, and theirs don't work.' This is deeply ingrained in people," he says.

Scott, a nondisabled choreographer who credits his discovery of physically integrated dance in 1993 for revitalizing his career, believes that the future of the form depends on exposure and training. "If we expect dancers without disabilities to be professionally trained, we need to get to the point where dancers with disabilities can get that same professional training," he says.

The lack of trained disabled dancers "continues to be a crisis for the field," says Smith, who has been advocating for a degree program in physically integrated dance at Cal State East Bay. "It's not like we can have an audition and expect 300 dancers to show up."

A former champion equestrian who became a quadriplegic after a car accident at age 17, Smith discovered her passion for dancing through contact improvisation. An "activist at heart," she's ultimately motivated by the belief "that there are broader social and political implications to what we do through our dances. We're opening people's minds and broadening their ideas about what dance is and what disability is," she says. "That's what keeps me going."