

VC: Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: Heidi Latsky Dance is a New York-based company that includes disabled and non-disabled dancers. It is her mission, and I'm quoting from her mission statement here, is to "disrupt space, dismantle normal and redefine beauty". Heidi Latsky joins us today to talk about her work and her company. Heidi, welcome. Thanks so much for joining us.

HL: It's great to be here.

VC: So, let's start with your background. Now you have a very interesting background and a journey how you got into dance. You graduated with a degree in psychology. So how did that lead to your becoming a dancer?

HL: So, I want to go back a little bit, when I was eleven, they found a brain tumor in my mother's brain and she was taken away from us for like three months and it was devastating. I not being there. And then in her case she had brain tumors... her brain kept making tumors. They were not cancerous, that's good, but it took its toll on my mother and she became somewhat isolated, and this was a very vivacious, social person. And when I went to college, I wanted to study psychology I think because of being around her and her illness, and her condition. And while I was there, there was, I went to school in Ottawa, but there was this lovely man from Montreal, and I was from Montreal who was a great dancer. And disco had just become the rage. And we would go to night clubs and dance and I fell in love with it. I fell in love with it, like he would twirl me, dip me and lift me over his head. We had so much fun. And because we had so much fun, we started winning competitions. And I was extremely shy. Extremely shy. The only way I could do that was just look at him which made us even more competitive, because everybody thought we were in love and we were not. I was just terrified. And that's when I, I just loved the feeling. And then I saw Saturday Night Fever, Turning Point, and I remember thinking, I don't want not to do something that I'm going to regret later. And so, I decided to study dance. And I went to Montreal and it was almost impossible to get dance training there because I was too old. And then I went to York University in Toronto. That was fine for a little bit but I didn't really want to be there.

VC: You studied dance there, or other things?

HL: I studied dance. I already had a degree in psychology so I did, I just wanted to dance so I did for a few years and then I left there and was living in Toronto. And Twyla Tharp came to Toronto. I loved her company and I met Sara Rudner who is brilliant and she started dancing very late. So, I went to New York.

KK: Tell us now, you're up to the part I find so interesting because I understand you were too old but you did it anyway.

HL: Well, I was 20 when I started.

KK: Tell us about the dance companies that you worked with once you got into New York and how you auditioned, how did that come about?

HL: I had started doing my own work in Toronto because nobody wanted to hire me and I had friends and nobody wanted to hire them so we did like revue type, like we were doing, it was commercial, it was fun, and then I got more serious and when I got to New York I auditioned a lot, I got extremely injured in my back, had

to take like a year off. Came back and took more care of my body because I just didn't understand my body. You know, when you start dancing very late you have no idea of the intricacies of dance, like turnout, how do you turn out your legs? I was doing it all wrong. I did some of my own work and then I auditioned for Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane, and I got in.

KK: That's amazing. You must have been over the moon!

HL: No, not really. Because, we're missing a piece. Before I auditioned for them, I got into Donald Byrd's company. I loved it, the dancing was fantastic. But they didn't have work, they didn't have a lot of work so I went and I auditioned for Bill and Arnie and I got in which was surprising. I didn't think I'd get in.

KK: How long did you work with the company?

HL: Bill and Arnie? Seven years.

KK: Wow, that's a long time. Let me ask you, what was the catalyst that got you from dancing and deciding to incorporate disabled dancers?

HL: OK, that's way down there, right? First, I had to become a choreographer and I had the desire to choreograph. You know, a lot of dancers don't. I did, I really did and so I started choreographing and then a friend of mine in Boston introduced me to Lisa Bufano who is a visual artist who had just received a grant to make a dance piece. And she had no fingers and no lower legs. And she came to New York, I agreed to do it. And the first thing we did together was have lunch, and I hadn't even thought about her as a disabled woman until I was at the door of the restaurant and I thought, oh, shit, how does she eat? And what do I do? Do I look at her hands, do I not, so I met with Lisa and she was so lovely. She made me completely comfortable. After that it was like six months of just working with her. I called these movement portraits, I wanted to make her a portrait with movement. And you know, it was a 25-minute solo. It was long, and she was gorgeous. And then she went to work with Axis Dance Company which is a company on the West coast. And I moved on, I had met a lot of people from the disability community and I invited them into the process and we started making a piece that I call G.I.M.P, a group piece. And the whole time I was learning about—I knew nothing about the disability community. Nothing. I didn't know the proper terms, I didn't know what they wanted, I knew nothing, so my mentors were my dancers and they were fantastic. And that's how that started, and then the company evolved into this integrated company.

KK: When you choreograph with disabled and able-bodied, is it something that is totally different?

VC: You have a variety of different artists that you work with, all very different in abilities, in training, and it must be a very complicated dynamic.

HL: It became more complicated the more we rehearsed. And that's when you realize that people with disabilities who had never performed, they didn't know anything about the process. And then my dancers who had been dancing all their lives were also getting frustrated with the disabled dancers because they were fighting us. Not all of them. And so, we had to learn how to talk to each other. Really talk to each other, and open things up, say hey, what's going on here, what don't you understand? What don't you think you can do? And so yeah, it was like a culture clash. Culture clash. But on the other hand, there are so many similarities. You know, dancers are berated about their bodies. Your body's not good enough, you're not tall enough, you're not thin enough, you're not this enough, you're not that enough so they learn to disassociate from their bodies sometimes and they hate their bodies, the hate, the hate. I was one of them. And people with disabilities, similar. Different but similar.

VC: They're human beings, so there's bound to be, right, a lot of similarities in that way.

HL: Yeah, but people don't often think of that, you know, you're in a work situation... but those similarities really help bring us together. Because it's not like the dancers are like these incredible, confident dancers. And the disabled dancers are not. A lot of the time it was the opposite, where the disabled dancers were, had more confidence than we did.

VC: Now how do you get your dancers, do you put out a call, have auditions? How do they come to you?

HL: Well in the beginning they came to me because they heard about what I was doing, they saw what I did with Lisa. There weren't a lot of dancers, there were just a few. They were activists and they saw what I was doing as a platform for their activism which was great for me and that's how it started. Now I'm in a very different place. I don't know where to find disabled dancers. The disabled dancers I had were not dancers. They were activists, they were, you know, people that I became interested in and I said Hey, do you want to dance? And they were up for it.

KK: Are you saying it's hard now for you to find disabled dancers?

HL: Yeah, where am I going to find them?

KK: Well, let me ask you, I saw a couple of months ago your company performing on St. Marks Place and I had a friend who is in a wheelchair and he was dancing and he's amazing. But I swear to you I could not figure out who was disabled and who wasn't. It didn't matter, it was all so beautiful. And they certainly looked to me like they were capable dancers, just by their movements and their feeling.

HL: I mean the dancers that I get, we train them so that they are more than capable. It's so much more than just the physical act of rehearsal. So much in your attitude, and that's with every dancer, and me. We've all been learning how to be more open, be more grounded, be more calm,

KK: Sounds like your psychology beginnings really, really helps now.

HL: Yeah, it does. It always has. Or it complicates it, I don't know...

VC: Do you hold auditions ever?

HL: Yeah, I don't like auditions. I've held auditions. The last audition I had, actually the last two, we put an ad out and said anyone who's interested for them to connect with me directly. If I'm interested in them, I'll invite them into a rehearsal to see how they do in my work. And that's a nice way to do it. It's time consuming but I like it.

VC: How about finding performance venues that will accommodate disabled dancers? Is that difficult?

HL: Yeah, it can be difficult. I think more venues are accessible now than they were. I mean it's hard to get a venue now, period, since Covid. I've been having a hard time. And then once you get a venue interested you have to make sure, like the bathroom is completely accessible which most people don't know what that is. They think it's accessible if it has a bar for someone to hold onto. But in actuality there are certain dimensions. It has to be so that a power chair can get in there and maneuver. A lot of times these bathrooms are not big enough. So that's the next thing that we go to, we see if it's rectifiable. Once in a theater in Milwaukee we had to get porta-potties that were big enough. Yeah, but they did it and that was great.

KK: You are also making the average person aware of what is needed.

HL: Right. They have the ramp but the ramp isn't built right. Or they have the ramp but they don't have the accessible bathroom. It's definitely better than it was. It's so much better than it was and people are listening now and people are trying much harder now to do the right thing.

VC: So at least it's evolving, it's in an evolutionary state. So, talk a little bit about your creative process and your creative, I'm going to say philosophy if you will, like you talk in your mission statement about "disrupting space, dismantling normal." So, how you work with the people you're collaborating with.

HL: The mission statement comes from when we started doing a lot of site-specific work. It got to a point, I started working with people with disabilities in 2007 or 2006 and I realized that the people coming to the theater, you know, were on our side. They were the people who got it. And I wanted to affect more people so I started thinking about doing outdoor events that people just saw. They don't have to pay for it, they can stop where they want or they can walk away and so we started doing that work and we realized we were really disrupting the space. We would do it in Times Square, or Chinatown, we just did it everywhere. And we were dismantling normal because of the dancers that we had. But the process of choreographing was a big change for me. I used to go into a studio and my body was the process. I'd walk in, I'd make movement, they'd all learn the movement and then I would build the piece from my movement. And when I started working with people with disabilities, it was like, that's not gonna work. If I'm going to have someone with a really different body, I want to see what they can do. So, I would come in and give some kind of a direction and really watch them and then keep directing them and building them on whatever, and pushing them. I push them hard. And then I'd start bringing in my own movement, but not a lot. So, it became a mixed bag. But mostly with all my dancers I just wanted to bring out their own virtuosity, their individuality, you know? It's fun! Hard, but it's fun to do it that way.

VC: Now how do your audiences react? Especially people who see your work for the first time?

HL: I think some people are ashamed of their response, I think some people don't understand it, I think some people are so moved by it so very moved.

KK: I certainly was. I didn't stop talking about it afterwards and I was dying for Vanessa to see it but I guess it was the last day. It was amazing, It just blew me away.

HL: Some people get it that way. They see the diversity, they see the inclusion, they see the equity and then they see the beauty of putting all those different bodies and personalities and ages, ethnicities, all of it together and what it feels like, what it looks like, what the statement is, they get it. And then there's a lot of people, especially in the dance world, who are like, what are you doing? What are you doing? I don't understand this. And that's OK. It wasn't OK in the beginning; I was very hurt by the way the dance community in New York just didn't come.

KK: I'm surprised.

HL: Now they come. We haven't had much in New York lately but it's a whole different environment now. You know, I was one of the catalysts for change. Now you see people with disabilities in commercials, in films

KK: On Broadway.

HL: On Broadway! And modern dance companies.

VC: Absolutely, absolutely.

VC: Things have really evolved. We've come a long way, right?

HL: We've come a ways but with that and with Black Lives Matter, the disability community also wants to lead. They don't want to just work under a non-disabled person. They want to be the choreographer. They want to have their company. I get it, of course they do. But it's not always communicated in the nicest of ways. You know, in the dance world, there's never enough money, in the modern dance world. There's never enough

money. So, when there's not enough everyone gets a little competitive instead of working together to bring the field up so everybody could benefit. It can get very competitive and it's very hard to stay out of that.

KK: That's even with disabled dancers?

HL: Oh yeah, with everyone. It's competitive. My point was just that that's the reality of our field. We're all trying to get out of that. We're all trying to acknowledge what we do have, not what we don't have. I just think with people with disabilities, if they really want the power. Like to be their own choreographer, to have their own company, it's not easy

VC: It is competitive. Absolutely. So now you, another thing you do is you use technology to bring your work closer to audiences and you've got a project called On Display Global.

HL: Yes, so On Display Global is not really working with tech... like I've made holograms and I make films, but On Display Global is a sculpture court of human beings. And that's On Display. On Display Global started in 2015 when I found out about International Day of Persons with Disabilities at the UN on December 3. So, I had this idea, what if I got people all over the world doing On Display on that day? And my company would do it at the UN. And that's what we started on 2015. And then with the pandemic, and it kept growing. First year I had someone in Hobart, Australia doing On Display and we did it at the UN and we also did it at NYU Tisch's lobby. And the next year we had like 26 sites. It kept growing. And it was the pandemic. We were on lockdown so we did a 24 hour Zoom event. That was incredible.

VC: 24 hours, wow!

HL: I was up the whole time. In 24 hours, we went from midnight December 2 to midnight December 3 and we had to fill every minute of the 24 hours and it's gotten a bit more difficult, but it's so beautiful. Like you see some New Yorkers and all of a sudden, the next half hour there are people from Tehran. A half hour from Israel and the next half hour from Peru. And you know, every time we got more people it was another layer to the work. And it was very quiet because there is no music, there's no sound, it's just very peaceful sculptures and most of them did it from their homes which is pretty vulnerable, so, yeah...

KK: In other words, they're sculptures but do they do slight movements every once in a while?

HL: Yeah, yeah. They can shift but they have to be subtle. On Display is a meditation.

KK: Now that Covid is over, are you thinking of doing it again?

HL: Oh yeah, we're going to do it every year and we're going to do the 24-hour Zoom, because it's so powerful. Before that, when everybody was doing their own thing, wherever they were, they would film it for us and send us the films so we could see what they did but it's not immediate. And when we—for the Zoom event, you're watching them, watching them do it and that's what I always wanted. That it should be live.

VC: That's great, we'll look forward to this year's event. So, you also have, or you're developing, a choreography residency. Isn't that, right?

HL: Yeah, so I mentored a few disabled dancers who want to choreograph. I've been doing that over the years, nothing real formal, and we decided to do like a formal residency because I curated a show downtown at a place called Arts on Site. They were all disabled choreographers, not all disabled dancers but the choreographers were all disabled. And it was great. I didn't mentor them at all. And that's when the idea really settled in, like how great would it be. Maybe not these choreographers but other dancers who really want to choreograph and aren't really sure how to do it. So that's what we're developing.

VC: That sounds very exciting. And are there other upcoming projects that you have in the works right now?

HL: We have an education program, it's called Dancing Ourselves, we're in a couple of schools now. And that's exciting because it's a program that I recently developed that really teaches the students about respect and acceptance. It's not just a dance class so that's exciting and then I'm making a new piece called Tracking Parallel. Yes, very excited about that. Pure dance, I want it to just be dance, and I already am in one section.

KK: When do you think we could see this? And where?

HL: I don't know.

KK: It's too far?

HL: Yeah, we probably won't start rehearsing until March. I don't know when we're going to get to it. It's a little tricky these days to get the dancers to make a commitment, there's no gig in sight, like this is just a process. Money now so we can pay them for this process, creative process, just very exciting.

KK: For a piece like this how many dancers are you looking to have in this corps?

HL: For Tracking Parallel? (KK: Yes). Six. That's all. The last piece I did was 16. And we still do that piece.

VC: Wow! Which piece is that?

HL: "Displayed." I love it, it's, you know, I don't love a lot of my work but I love that one and it's just, there's a lot of people in it.

KK: Both able-bodied and disabled?

HL: Yeah, that's all I do now. I think I'm pretty committed to that integration, and if not disabled, older, different bodies.

VC: Well, it's all very exciting and please keep us posted as your work progresses.

KK: I'm a big fan and so is Vanessa.

VC: Absolutely!

HL: Thank you, and at a time when we don't have much coming up right now, like I'm going to go into a rehearsal process but we don't have any shows for the immediate future and so now I have to sell the company.

VC: Well sure, and hopefully we can help put the word out there when we publish our podcast so more people will know about you. Where can people find out more information about you, about your company?

HL: So, the main website is heidilatskydance.net. And then we have ondisplay.us.

VC: So that's where you can find out more about Heidi and they can contact you through the website, is that correct?

HL: Yeah, yeah, and also like On Display, for instance, that website has On Display Global in it and it has lots of videos, like Harvard does this really big On Display Global and it's just growing every year which is beautiful and you'll see us at the UN, or at Lincoln Center, or the Whitney. There's lots of videos you can watch for two minutes or for an hour.

VC: So, Heidi, this has been terrific. Again, thank you so much for your time. Please go to the websites and learn about Heidi, and when she's got stuff going on. Go see. END