

On expectation and transformation



An interview with dancer and choreographer Alice Sheppard

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2844 words.

Tags: [Dance](#), [Choreography](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Beginnings](#), [First attempts](#), [Adversity](#).

You are about to debut a new work that involves, among other things, a ramp that was specially designed and built for this piece. What have been the other challenges of creating work like this?

Most choreographers are always looking for a space to work in, and for us this is even more of a feeling because we can't just get a couple of hours of rehearsal time, particularly with this ramp, because by the time you've got the entire thing set up you can't quickly unbuild it and get out of a studio for somebody else to use. So you can't just come in for a couple of hours, which means you have to rehearse in the kind of really intense way they call "lock out rehearsals." It's difficult. The combination of affordability, wheelchair access, and a space large enough to hold the ramp and the choreography is a challenge. We've been very lucky with *Descent* to be working with dance programs that have not only allowed us to do the basic rehearsal—which heaven knows we need—but have also helped us create and develop the piece in what I hope are provocative ways.



from *Descent*, Andromeda Downhill, image credit MANCC

You didn't start out in dance. You had a different life in academia before you starting working as a dancer and choreographer.

It's true. My academic work and my academic past have definitely informed the way in which I formulate my ideas and the kind of research process I have and how I talk about the work. I would never say my history in academia is not relevant, but in some ways it really isn't because when I decided I wanted to be a dancer I had to start again from the beginning. I had to learn to dance as all dancers do. That's an entirely different set of skills and ideas and experiences. The work I did preparing to be an academic doesn't necessarily carry over to that world.

I think a lot of people harbor the fantasy of ditching their current career path and doing something totally different. It's cool to hear about someone for whom that was a reality.

It really can happen. I took a dance class essentially on a dare and it was ultimately a life-changing thing, but it wasn't until about two years later that I left academia to become a dancer. At the time it felt reckless. It felt wild. It felt impetuous. It felt impulsive. It felt like jumping headlong into a world that I didn't know anything about... and doing so knowing that the door to academia was closed and that if it didn't work for me as a dancer, I didn't have a clue what was going to happen. It was risky, risky, risky.

That process of starting over, starting at the ground level of something new, feels like such a daunting thing. How long was it until you started to feel secure in your skill set or that you sort of knew what you were doing?

I never feel secure in my skill set. And I think... I want to be very real about this. I know that I have skills and I have a skill set, but I think that when you feel secure you stop learning and I don't want to stop learning. I

understand your question. It's a good question. How long was it? I don't know, exactly. I can say that it never felt like it was a mistake even on the hardest days when I felt like I had so much to learn and it was awful. Even on those days when I felt completely under water and out of my depth I still knew that this was something I wanted to do.



from *Descent*, Photo by Jay Newman

It actually seems like this is my third career. I also trained as a classical musician, so I knew what it would be like to start at the bottom and to practice and to learn, to gain skills. I knew what it would feel like to change careers, but I never doubted that this is what I wanted to do because I gained such joy from it, from being in the studio. I gave myself permission not to ask whether I was any good at it because I think it would have been awful to come to this place and then constantly be like, "Am I good at this?" So I gave myself permission to not ask that question. I'm really glad that I did that. That was the most freeing thing I've ever done for myself. Now, of course, I'm always asking myself, "Is this any good? Is this piece going to be okay?" I'm always asking myself these kind of questions. Back in those early years I knew I wanted to be really, really good, but I gave myself some time to experiment with not answering that question. Also, you don't have the answer. It's not available to you. It's not there yet. [laughs]

How did the choreography aspect of your work begin? Or were you choreographing things from the beginning?

I didn't think I would ever be a choreographer. I didn't expect that to happen. I was not the person who was able to come in and immediately start making my own work. Actually, I didn't have anything to say for years. And even if I had something to say, I didn't yet know how to say it in movement. It took me a long time to get my ideas together about what I wanted from the field and what I wanted from myself and what kinds of work I did and didn't want to be in. I came from such a place of zeros that I just tried to vacuum up everything and learn from it and be in it and be the best artist I could be. It took me years to come to a place where I was questioning things

like, "What are the dynamics of the field. What does this look like? Why is this working this way? And do I want it to be that way?" It took forever. Maybe in comparison to some other people I was slow. I suppose you could say that. It just took a while before I had anything anything that was worth saying that could also be expressed in movement.

Do you remember the first piece that you made where it felt like that was really working? Or where you were finally able to articulate something that you'd wanted to say in that way?

No, not really. I think as a person pretty much you're always learning and always doubting and questioning and growing. But I do remember this moment—the first time I rented a studio for my own work. I remember how fabulous that felt. There's a trepidation of going in and closing the door. And what happens once the door is closed? What happens when it's just you and the space? I remember that moment very clearly and I remember the first time that somebody asked me to come and perform something that I had made myself. And I remember the first time people paid money to come and see me. I remember all of these moments very clearly. But mostly I think about that very interesting and truly humbling moment when you're in the space and the light is not on yet and maybe you have an idea and just *maybe* you're ready to start.

How does a new piece usually begin for you? What does the process look like?

Obviously, it's different for everyone. And actually there is a difference for each thing I do. But one way it happens is to just move. *[laughs]* I mean, obviously, you don't just sort of randomly throw yourself around the room. You move with these ideas and sometimes I find that I've already got images in my head that I imagine my body in, or sometimes I have sequences in my head. I think a lot of time I'm listening to what comes next because sometimes the body will tell you that. Often I don't document it too early in the process because sometimes if you forget stuff it's worth knowing that the things that you forget maybe weren't worth keeping. The things that have settled are the things that need to be kept because they seem most urgent. I don't know. I mean, sometimes it's about going to the studio and nothing happens for a long time and you just sit there and you're not feeling it. That's awful. It's like when you're writing and sometimes you go to the coffee shop and you're like, "So, we'll just see what happens." And you end up on Facebook. I think the answer to this is... I really think the answer to this is I don't know. *[laughs]*



from *Descent*, Partnering, image credit Rain Embuscado

There is this quote on your website that says, "dance should engage the critical questions that define us and it should enable us to function as sensitive, committed citizens off the stage." Your work challenges the conventional understanding of disability. Being able to come to your studio and see you rehearse the *Descent* piece, I was so moved and so genuinely surprised.

Here's what I generally want. I want people to leave the studio and to feel as if they have been transformed, even if it's only for a couple of hours. I want them to be in that space of, "My god. I am not sure what just happened, but I feel different now and I have this whirl of emotions to deal with." Because when that's happened to me I know it to be deeply meaningful and totally transformative, even if I don't always understand what the transformation is. And so I want to be able to see that. I want that for my work.

And here's where it gets messy. [My collaborator] Laurel [Lawson] and I do stuff in this piece that most people haven't seen, because many people have a limited understanding of disability. A primary focus becomes their shock, surprise, delight, confusion, and even in some cases anger about ability, about raw ability. I know it happens. I even sometimes play to that expectation. But it's not what I want for my work.

Do you find that sometimes because people are distracted by that aspect of it—by focusing on your physicality or the fact that there is perhaps a wheelchair involved—it keeps them from seeing the larger picture or what the piece is really about?

The common definition of disability or common understanding of disability is what you can't do. And the push back to that is, "Oh, I may not be able to do *this* but I can do *that* and I can do *this*." Disability is mired in this see-saw of can and cannot do. And as an artist I just don't define myself that way. And as a human I hate being put in that place. As an artist I think it's not a productive question because if you come in and say, "In my imagination I think that X diagnosis means that this person can't do Y." And I come in and see a dance and I am

surprised, shocked, and moved by my own ignorance because not only can they do Y they can also do Z and 1, 2, 3—that's not a conversation that I'm trying to have with you. That's about you, the audience member. And I think maybe that's it. And I recognize that many audience members are in that place.

I think it's difficult because dance is about extraordinary physical capacity and sometimes that means hyper athleticism and sometimes that also means a superb ability to communicate in an eyelash or tip of a finger. So the view is that dancers train to do stuff that perhaps most people can't do. It's just that with the added experience of a disabled embodiment this gets mired up in a different kind of thinking about the value of a disabled body on stage and the audience member's own experience of what disability, or using a wheelchair, might mean. It goes beyond aesthetics and culture and race and and sexuality and humanity and veers into troubling larger questions. We are constantly in this fight for self-affirmation and self worth and recognition. Frankly, even if I surprise you with what I'm able to do that doesn't get me there either. I'm an artist. You don't get transported into a different plane by the recognition of someone's physical ability being different. You get transported there by the art.

I'm a political artist. And I don't mean social politics but rather with disability as a politicized thing. With my work the political statement isn't so much about the fight for equity but the assumption of equity and the expiration of culture and aesthetics and lineage and art history. And if you're still wrestling with your notion about what somebody in a wheelchair can or cannot do, I'm just like, "I can't, I can't, I can't." I have lived in that space for 12 or 15 years now and I don't want to be in that space anymore.



from *Descent, Flying*, photo credit Jay Newman

Do you find that the longer that you do this that the conversation around disability has changed?

No and yes. I would say that the people who have worked in the field for all of these years for me and along side

me are still fighting these battles. And we will have to continue to fight these battles. But the conversation is changing for people in the field. People are willing to take the risk. The idea of risk is still due to these old notions around disability. There are still people who might think it may be cringeworthy or they're worried about what they're going to see. Or they question if it can be any good or if it is going to be amateur.

Descent is a piece that was developed over a long period of time and that lots of people, like myself, were allowed to come and see as you worked on it. How beneficial was that to the overall piece? How much did it change it?

What I think you're asking is, "Does it change the movements on stage if you have people come and watch it?" I would say, yes it can, but not always. Not every comment will lead me to go back to the stage and change something... but it can. Often you don't know how stuff is landing, so it can be helpful to get a viewer's perspective. Since I'm in the piece, I'll never be able to see what it looks like from the outside. Having people view the work and talk to us about it not only changes the work, it changes us. Because part of this piece is so vulnerable, we need to learn how to be in that vulnerability beyond the, "Did you make that movement? Did you complete that thing?" Vulnerability is best practiced in front of people. It's hard to be vulnerable when you're on your own, right? So there's that.

The very first rehearsals of this piece took place in an academic building on a mezzanine in the administration building with a café and a library. There were no walls on two sides of us, so it was totally open. It meant a lot to begin that way, versus the closed studio process where it's just me and somebody else in a room with all four walls closed. It meant a lot to me to begin with people around. That mattered to me. This kind of open process is amazing. Look at what it's done for you and me. I've now had the chance to talk with you in some really important ways. I think about creative work as having these tendrils that grow and feed and spread out into the world. Sometimes it happens in more ways that you realize, it can become a vehicle for all of these other things. It has to live. It has to breathe.



from *Descent*, Prelude Chair, Photo by Jay Newman

Alice Sheppard recommends:

Riding horses

Soft and furry things to touch

When stuck, go to someone else's show—in a different discipline

If you are scared, that means it's probably good. Keep going!

Smile at someone in the street

Name

Alice Sheppard

Vocation

Dancer, Choreographer

