On the power of agency

Two members of dance troupe Drag Syndrome—Ruby Bond and Otter Baxter—along with their Creative Director, Daniel Vais, discuss the creative evolution of their dance company, the freedom afforded by dance and drag, and the unique challenges faced by entertainers and performers with Down syndrome.

November 12, 2019 -

As told to Katy Diamond Hamer, 1792 words.

Tags: Performance, Inspiration, Beginnings, Independence, Success.

I love doing interviews and I'm so happy to speak with the three of you. How have you all been? I know you've been busy.

Ruby Bond (aka Justin Bond): I love doing interviews, too! Yes we have [been busy]. We had a gig in Italy, in Milan. And after that North Wales, and then we're going to Mexico. I can picture what we are doing in my mind. One part of my brain is about the movie I'm making and the other part is about the gigs we have and how much I love the [other members of Drag Syndrome].

Otto Baxter (aka Horrora Shebang): It's an honor to speak with you.

How was the experience of performing in Grand Rapids, Art-prize/Project 1?

RB: It was one of the most amazing experiences of my whole life. I have a hot girlfriend there now. I liked the gig we did and how much they loved us.

OB: It was grand! I really, really enjoy [working with Drag Syndrome]. We're a dance troupe, baby. We also won an award with Daniel and the others for best choreography in London.

Daniel Vais: Best *Collective*. We recently won Best Collective Drag Company in the UK. And we beat very big names.

OB: Take that Hogwarts!!

I’m so glad that the performance for Project 1 worked out, but how did you feel when people didn’t want you to perform?

RB: I was pissed off and I wanted to be treated well and have good service.

Has this happened in any other locations?

RB: I don’t really know, Daniel?

DV: No, I think the opposite. Everywhere we go, people have been very curious about us and welcoming.

Leave it to America, which I think is oddly behind Europe regarding the acceptance of differently abled people in the arts.

DV: I don’t think it’s America, it can really be anywhere. Stupid people are everywhere, unfortunately. Any negative feedback we’ve received usually comes from people who have never seen them perform.

RB: And we had protesters outside during the show. I was like, “Oh my god, are you fucking serious?” Then I thought, “I don’t give a shit. This was a sold-out show and people love us.”

I had such a great time—I couldn’t stop smiling. There was so much positive energy in the room.

RB: I’m glad you were there.

OB: A great smile.

Have you always had an interest in being on stage?

OB: Apart from Drag Syndrome, yes, I am also a film director. I’m actually directing a horror film at the moment. It’s going to be creepy. I started performing when I was 8. I’ve performed in Shakespeare, made documentaries for the BBC3, and I won an award for best actor in the Cannes film festival. I was also nominated for a BAFTA for a short film called *Samuel 613*. I studied acting and have been in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Waiting for Godot.*

RB: I’ve always been performing on stage. I’ve performed in shows, but drag is easier because I can do whatever I want, but not too sexual.

You can really be anything when you’re in drag.

RB: Yeah, did you realize in that show, that my ass was bigger? I was padded, like really padded. [*laughs*]

OB: I’ve really enjoyed working with Drag Syndrome and especially Daniel as well, with this massive bitch. [*laughs*] Do you have faith in me Daniel? Because I have faith in you.

DV: Awe, that is so sweet! You are an incredible artist. Otto’s CV is like any other superstar, it’s enormous and professional, filled with prestige.

How did you come up with your drag character and look?

RB: I wanted to be a handsome guy, with muscles. I don’t have muscles, but it’s what I wish to be.

OB: It’s thanks to all the make-up people. I choose my own songs and I’m also a songwriter for my horror film. My [drag] name Horrora Shebang is inspired by my love of horror films, and that I go out with a bang!

DV: He has his own people! Otto’s career is enormous, from complete classic to total avant-garde. You name it, he’s done it.

How long have you all been working together?

RB: A year, right Daniel?

DV: A year and a half.

And how did you find each other?

RB: My sister found Daniel online and she signed me up to be in Drag Syndrome and then I became the king I've always wanted to be!

DV: I got an email from this lady who said I like your work and what you are doing, my sister has Down syndrome and she's great, "bring her on!" And then the rest is history. I fell in love with Ruby in seconds. We did *The Rites of Spring* ballet at The Royal Opera House, in March of this year. We had a three-month residency at The Royal Opera House and we did two classical ballets, *The Rite of Spring* by Igor Stravinsky and *The Afternoon of a Faun* by Vaslav Nijinsky, really well known radical ballets. It was with two dancers with Down Syndrome, Ruby and Otto, and six dancers of the Royal Ballet.

RB: I love ballet, and I had the moves, the body.

OB: The Royal Opera House was made famous by the *Phantom of the Opera*.

So how has it been in your life, Ruby—have you had people tell you that you shouldn't dance or perform?

RB: Sometimes, but I say, "I don't care what you think, this is what I do for a living". I put my headphones on, I dance and sing to myself, I practice and warm up before our gigs so that I can be the best that I can be. No one has really said that to me. They say, *you better work girl! You better work!*

DV: Otto is 32 and Ruby is 20 years old. So she is part of a new generation. For example, Otto and Danny (who also performed with the troupe in Grand Rapids but wasn't present for the interview) are different, no one has told Ruby that she can't do something.

Otto, have you had challenges with your acting career?

OB: I was born with challenges. I am conquering them. Any challenge you can throw at me, I can do. This has all been a rollercoaster.

RB: My family is very supportive saying, “You better work baby!” I feel for Danny and Otto because they’ve had a more difficult past. Danny (another Drag Syndrome performer) was picked on. I really feel for those two. I want them to feel safe in their world and be great at what they do. We deserve to be who we are and believe in what we believe in.

Well, I’m so happy that you are living your best life. That’s how it should be.

OB: Always independent, we are.

DV: Yes, they are fulfilling their dreams, fulfilling their talent and showing it all to the world, inspiring others as well as paving the way. Sometimes you have to fight.

Have you had a favorite gig or performance so far?

RB: Oh hell yeah! I have two favorite gigs, at the Arena in Peterborough (UK) and also Berlin.

OB: I like performing [in drag] to a song called “I’m not your toy.” I like performing with Daniel and Patricia [of Bloomin Arts], I like them both. I liked playing Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Is there anything else you want to add?

DV: I am a choreographer and a creative director [with my company Culture Device] and am interested in movement. You see these artists that I am working with and how lucky I am, on a professional and personal level. I just had a chat with a producer recently and I spoke to her about [working with] people with Down syndrome, how they are so surprising, so artistic, so natural, loving and funny—only good things! Society tried to push them away, and other people have tried to suppress them but now you’ve spoken to Ruby and Otto and you see how open-minded they are. There are so many people with Down syndrome, and if only they were given a chance, the world would be a better place. You saw how people judged and censored them before they even know what to think. It’s still easy to say, “No, you have special needs, stay away from society.” It’s too easy.

OB: You can’t judge me.

DV: That’s why they are pioneers and mavericks. They are super independent. We don’t need people to accept us, because we have self acceptance. Don’t try to stop us or mess with us because you will eat shit.

OB: Come on you, out the window you go. I’m Peter Pan and I will fly off to Neverland!

DV: There is an investigation [into Peter Meijer] that is being processed by the ACLU of Michigan. Anyone who tries to stop us, we just move on, we don’t even engage. But other humanitarian organizations who take care of people with disabilities get upset, they will make sure that this doesn’t happen again.

I spoke to Jill [Vyn] and Chris [Smit] of DisArt and the incident in Grand Rapids started a conversation all over the world. Drag Syndrome has entered the USA and there is no going back. The change has already started. [Otto cheering in the background]

People with Down syndrome are a gift. The extra chromosome is like an extra spice. The charm is overwhelming, you can’t buy it at the supermarket.

RB: Daniel, is there anything you want to say about Justin Bond?

DV: Well, I think that Justin Bond is one of the best drag kings around. He is very powerful and is quite a stage monster and he has become quite well-known around the world. He is open minded, open hearted, and inspiring for other people. Ruby is such a leader, always taking care of others.

RB: I sometimes like to be by myself, but if I see Otto or Daniel alone, I will talk to them. You know what they say, “You will never walk alone.” That’s what I say now, you’ll never walk alone, you will always have me.

Recommended by Drag Syndrome:

Drag Syndrome

Bloomin’ Arts

SAMUEL-613 - A film by Billy Lumby

DisArt

Culture Device

Name
Drag Syndrome

Vocation
Dance troupe, Drag entertainers

tEL03AKDQh2SXNFqoyax