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Dance and Disability: A Case-Study of AXIS Dance Troupe

by

Lee Rachelle Wolfer

B.S. (University of California, Berkeley) 1987

M.S. (University of California, Berkeley) 1996

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

in

Health and Medical Sciences

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GRADUATE DIVISION

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The thesis of Lee Rachelle Wolfer is approved:

John Hurst 5/16/96  
Chair, John Hurst, PhD Date

Henrik L. Blum MD 5-16-96  
Henrik L. Blum, MD Date

Barbara Epstein 5-16-96  
Barbara Epstein, PhD Date

Jenefer Lee Johnson 5/17/96  
Jenefer Lee Johnson, MA Date

University of California, Berkeley

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## Dedications

To Marlon Riggs, for his signifyin' works. To Henrik L. Blum, MD, the "John Wayne" of public health, for teaching me that striving for perfection is for idiot savants.

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# DANCE AND DISABILITY: A CASE-STUDY OF AXIS DANCE TROUPE

## I. INTRODUCTION

One of the first troupes of its kind in the world, AXIS Dance Troupe was founded in 1987. AXIS is a collaboration between four dancers with disabilities and four dancers without disabilities. Respected for their ground-breaking artistry both within the dance world and the disability community, AXIS directly challenges society's conceptions of dance and of disability. Through in-depth interviews with AXIS dancers and leaders in the disability rights movement, I explore the links between the arts and social change in the disability rights movement. At first glance, it is not apparent how the arts might impact social change. My hypothesis was that AXIS' dance positively affects people's attitudes and beliefs about disability, and from that point changes individual's behaviors which consequently impacts social change. The dancers and leaders in the disability rights movement whom I interviewed feel that attitudinal change is at the core of meaningful social change, and, that the negative, stereotypical societal attitudes about disability are the most insidious barriers to the fullest, equitable inclusion of people with disabilities into society.

Scholars are only just beginning to examine the connections between the arts and social change. Activists are exploring the potential of "cultural work" to complement traditional channels of political action. According to one disabled artist the leaders of the disabled movement have almost no concept of the role of art in the movement. Reflecting the premium our society places on productivity, disabled leaders are reluctant to commit resources to the arts. Because the leadership seems ignorant about the value of art or even how to perceive it within the movement, the role of artists and dancers in the disability



movement needs further research. Moreover, to my knowledge, no one has critically examined the arts for social change in the disability community. The arts have a transformative potential which has been overlooked in the disability community. The vision AXIS' dances provide can guide the development of a new disability paradigm which is transformed from the current static model of inclusion to a dynamic modeling of collaboration between people with and without disabilities. More specifically through the medium of dance, getting people to examine their relationship to their bodies and to disability gets to the heart of making positive societal change for people with disabilities.

The links between the arts and social change in the disability rights movement become clearer through the focus on the transformative intersection of AXIS' dance with four main areas: the personal, the disabled and non-disabled communities, and the dance world.

### AXIS Dance Troupe

*The mission of AXIS Dance Troupe is to create and perform dances that demonstrate collaboration between people with and without disabilities. AXIS expands ideas about human potential by challenging attitudes toward art and disability. AXIS is committed to providing and supporting classes, workshops, and presentations that encourage and inspire people of all abilities to move and dance. AXIS works cooperatively with others to promote, advance, and share ideas on local, national and international levels*

*--AXIS Dance Troupe Mission Statement*

AXIS Dance Troupe is one of the pioneers to open up dance to people with disabilities. Currently, there is but a handful of collaborative dance troupes in the world, including CanDoCo in London, England and Mobiaki in Germany. AXIS has performed for national and international audiences, and has been produced by major producers, including Dance Umbrella's Aerial Dance Festival in Boston, CAL Performances / University Art Museum - Pacific Film Archive

in Berkeley, and the The Walker Arts Center Out There Festival in Minneapolis. Among AXIS' most notable awards are a Rockefeller Foundation Multi-Art Production Fund Grant and a Presenting and Commissioning Grant and an International Projects Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

### Methodology

The methodology for the case-study on AXIS Dance Troupe is based on feminist qualitative research methods. I chose a qualitative versus quantitative methodology because of the exploratory nature of the research question and because I wanted to represent the authentic voices of the dancers. Because the dancers were interviewed in their professional capacity the project received an exemption from the human subjects committee. Members of the dance troupe were invited to participate in this project as collaborators instead of as subjects and were engaged in a multi-level process of description and analysis of their experiences. By working with a collaborative model, the author sought to minimize the potential hierarchy between researcher and subject.

Each dancer, for a total of eight dancers, was interviewed for two times for a total of four hours each. All eight dancers in the company agreed to be interviewed for a total of eighteen interviews. The dancers have each been assigned a fictitious name to maintain some degree of anonymity. Because this is such a new topic, written material on this topic is not available therefore additional interviews were conducted with other disabled artists and leaders in the disability community. The interviews were taped and transcribed in their entirety and reviewed for common themes. The main categories of inquiry emerged from the responses of the collaborators themselves.

Numerous potential biases exist in this methodology. The sample size is small, only eight dancers, and may not be representative of other disabled dancers or disabled people in general. AXIS also makes its home in a politically

liberal community, and their perspectives is not necessarily representative of disabled people living in other parts of the United States or the world. The author recognizes that the results of the study may not be widely generalizable and more research needs to be conducted to corroborate the findings. In collecting anecdotes from the dancers, there are numerous potential biases to the data, the results may be skewed in an overly positive direction because the dancer's are sharing their personal opinions and recollections. Moreover, many of the conversations with people are just for moments after a performance. Also, the sample may be skewed because the people who do not like the performance are not likely to come backstage, generally it is the "gushers" who stay after to speak with the dancers.

The author identifies as a person with a disability, and therefore is an insider in the community being researched. Being an insider in the disability community gives the author a personal investment in the work which may affect her ability to be objective. However, feminist methodologist Susan Krieger argues that bias underlies all research and the goal is to be aware of one's biases, recognizing your own subjectivity. In this case, one of the benefits of insider status was access to core community members who would not have otherwise been likely to trust the research motives. As an insider to the disabled community, the author also has a significant personal investment in the research with implicit political goals to help further the aims of the disability rights movement. The author also wanted to employ a maximalist versus minimalist research ethic, attempting to make a contribution to the dance troupe versus simply doing no harm.

### The Independent Living Movement

The disability rights movement is a social movement dedicated to independence for all people with disabilities. The movement is committed to

bringing people with disabilities out of third-class citizenship, a difficult task given prevailing attitudes toward disability. Joseph Stubbins says that "the toughest item on the disability agenda is that modern America has no need for most disabled persons." People with disabilities are advocating for the same basic rights and privileges afforded non-disabled persons such as the right to education, to employment, and to personal choice over reproduction and marriage. Disabled activists are working to improve access to facilities, to Personal Assistive Services, to communication media, to the political process, to appropriate housing and living arrangements, as well as working to improve opportunities for cultural and recreational enrichment. Central to the struggle for civil rights for people with disabilities is the challenge to society's restrictive and destructive stereotypic notions of disabled people as pitiful, childlike, dependent, sexless, and tragic.

People with disabilities have the difficult challenge of facing deeply held stereotypes and prejudices about disability. As with the issues of race and sexuality, disability is an issue loaded deep with fear and stigma. The individual lifetimes of disabled people, as the community history of disabled people, are full of abuses in the name of religion, medicine, and politics. According to author Joseph Shapiro, Eugenicist Alexander Graham Bell held the belief that deaf people should not be allowed to marry or bear children. Leading psychologists in the 1940's proposed involuntary euthanasia to kill "defective" children as the humane alternative to letting them live. Developmentally disabled men and women were routinely sterilized until the early 1970's. As recently as 1985, medical ethicists, in a book entitled Should the Baby Live? The Problem of Handicapped Infants, asserted that it should be legal to kill some severely disabled infants within the first twenty-eight days of life. The following quote

from a literary critic writing about Lady Chatterly's disabled husband speaks to the complicated personal and social meanings of disability throughout history:

The cripple is an object of Christian charity, a socio-medical problem, a stumbling nuisance, and an embarrassment to the girls he falls in love with. He is a vocation for saints, a livelihood for the manufacture of wheelchairs, a target for busybodies, and a means by which prosperous citizens assuage their consciences. He is at the mercy of overworked doctors and nurses and underworked bureaucrats and social investigators. He is pitied and ignored, helped and patronized, understood and stared at. But he is hardly ever taken seriously as a man. (Battye, 1973)

The disability rights movement was born in the early 1970's in Berkeley, California with the founding of the Physically Disabled Student's Program at UC Berkeley and the nation's first community center for independent living. The disability rights movement has come a long way in the last 25 years. Landmark legislation for people with disabilities includes Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973), the Act for the Education of All Handicapped Children (1977), and, most recently, the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990). The ADA extends civil rights protections to individuals with disabilities which are like those provided to individuals on the basis of race, sex, national origin, and religion. The ADA also guarantees equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in employment, public accommodations, transportation, state and local government services, and telecommunications. A person with a disability is defined as one with a "physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such an individual" (ADA, 1990)

According to LaPlante (1992), as of 1990 there are an estimated 36.1 million people or 14.5 percent of the population living with disabilities in the United States. Disability cuts across lines of for people of differing races, gender, age, type of disability, class, sexual orientation, and political affiliation. This figure reflects 33.8 million people living in households and 2.3 million individuals living in institutions (nursing homes, mental hospitals, correctional facilities, and

institutions for mental retardation and developmental delay). Moreover, researchers estimate that by the year 2000, one out of five Americans (20% of the population will have a disability. This figure reflects improvements in trauma care, medical interventions and rehabilitation, prenatal and neonatal care and geriatric medicine for the elderly (Douglass, 1992). Because disability is an equal opportunity employer, people with disabilities constitute an extremely diverse group.

San Francisco Bay Area organizations like the World Institute on Disability, the Disability Rights and Education Defense Fund, and Berkeley's Center for Independent Living continue to lead to nation in the fight for disability rights. While the movement has made great advances in access to education and the workplace, and in protective civil rights legislation, it has remained largely invisible to most of America, lacking the visibility of the civil right's, women's, and gay right's movements. Moreover, the gains of disability rights activists have come about without a significant change in the disability consciousness of America. Only recently, as the first generation of mainstreamed people with disabilities are coming of age, and as the many businesses, governmental agencies, and other public facilities are forced to comply with ADA regulations, is the public taking notice.

According to Joseph Shapiro, the disability rights movement has gone through three important incarnations. The first advocates for the rights of the disabled were the parents of disabled children; the second wave of advocates were the rehabilitation professionals. The most recent and most appropriate advocates for people with disabilities have been the people themselves. Among these recent advocates are disabled artists who are expanding the notions of quality of life, pushing the radical edge of the movement, and providing a novel means for raising the consciousness of non-disabled Americans. The San

Francisco Bay Area is home to many leading disabled artists at the cutting edge of the disability rights movement, including groups like AXIS Dance Troupe, Wry Crips Disabled Women's Readers Theatre, and the Exposed to Gravity Project. The Disability Arts Fair and the National Institute for the Arts and Disability are also located locally. Artists are building a disability culture and a disability pride from which the movement can draw strength and inspiration. Through their innovative work, poets, dancers, painters are challenging some of the most insidious, invisible barriers of prejudice -- the stereotypical attitudes and beliefs. Disabled artists can play a crucial role in advancing the cause of the disability rights movement to the next level. For the last twenty-five years or so the major tools of the disability rights movement for informing the public about disability have been education and legislation. Bruce Curtis believes that artists can take another approach to complement the movement's gains and trailblaze new frontiers for the disability rights movement.

### Art and Social Change

The topic area of the arts and social change is fairly new, with research beginning only over the last fifteen years or so. Looking to the arts in terms of politics or as a force for social change does not immediately appear useful. At first glance, art and politics are completely different, concerned with wholly incompatible sectors of society. Art is seen generally as a luxury, arts funding is quickly slashed before other programs considered essential.

I came to this topic through working with novel methods to educate health professionals about disability. Instead of traditional instruction methods, I wanted to use an innovative technique: education through the medium of the arts. In bringing the arts into a classically scientific field, I felt that the arts could convey a message and a meaning that words from a straight lecture could not convey. The method included live poetry performance and videos of disabled

dance and theatre, instead of focusing on disability pathophysiology, functional assessment and prevention. In using artistic media to teach the medical students, I also hoped to construct a broader definitions for health and well-being. Referring to the department at the University of California, Berkeley, one of the dancers also emphasized the importance of a more holistic perspective on well-being:

This is health and medical sciences? We need to look at what truly maintains health. That might be threatening because it puts many people out of work, but what maintains health is things like dance and spirit and discovering all these things that, as much as they may not want to admit it, exist outside the medical model. (Michelle)

Other important elements that contribute to the health and well-being of people are social changes that improve their quality of life, including civil and political rights, and opportunities for economic, social and cultural enrichment.

Before proceeding, it is important to define my working definitions used in the research project. I will define and briefly discuss three terms: art, dance and social change. By art I mean a form of creative expression. For instance, painting, theatre, sculpture, dance, film, poetry. Webster's dictionary defines art as "the conscious use of skill and creative imagination, especially in the production of aesthetic objects." Art encompasses a broad range of experience: individual experience, shared experience, potential experience, deviant experience, and imaginary experience. The arts are in many places in our lives, the art projects of childhood, the museums, the theatre, folk arts. But for most of our American society the arts are an extra, a luxury, a diversion. As a culture we have also cut ourselves off from artistic expression as an integral part of our lives and everyday community life. This attitude is reflected in the priorities of our government, in that arts funding has never been a priority in this country. The National Endowment for the Arts recently took a forty-percent cut in its budget,



but even before the cut, the government allocated more funds for military marching bands than for national arts support. The American taxpayer was paying a nickel a month to support the arts at this level, hardly a significant investment. In European countries, such as France and Germany, the arts receive much more significant government contributions because of the recognized value of arts and culture to quality of life. The NEA and National Endowment for the Humanities have become political footballs for Democratic and Republican party skirmishes.

Our society has an ambivalent relationship with its artists, on one hand the elite cannot wait to welcome and rub elbows the famous artist, by the same token, choosing to live as an artist can be an isolating, thankless occupation. How many parents can you recall who were overjoyed at the prospect of their child becoming an artist? As Ed Roberts, one of the founders of the Independent Living movement noted, the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation will not train a disabled person to become an artist because being an artist is not seen as gainful employment.

Within society, there are numerous types of art, ranging from the most elite, usually known as high art, to lesser esteemed arts, either popular art or folk art. Disability art has also taken different forms. There is what is called the "very special arts." Very special art was a term coined twenty years ago to describe art by individuals with mental and physical disabilities. Very special art is given a sheltered status, because of the population by which it is created it is not subject to the same standards and critical aesthetic as work by the non-disabled. This is the type of disability art where the audience claps or oohs and aahs simply because the disabled person is on stage. AXIS has fought hard against this kind of mentality towards disabled artists. The dance troupe does not want to have the

audience clap just because there are disabled dancers in the troupe, the troupe wants to be judged and appreciated by the same standards as other artists.

What are some of the definitions of disability art? Artists interviewed on this question are divided. One viewpoint is that any artistic expression by a person with a disability constitutes disability art -- the art does not need a specific disability-related context. The director of the City of Berkeley's Disability Arts Fair says: "If you are a disabled person and you are making it, it's disabled art" The other viewpoint is that disability art is art rooted in the experiences of being a disabled person and reflective of disability culture. Bruce Curtis, a disabled dancer in the Exposed to Gravity Dance Project states:

We were interested in creating dance that was not an approximation of what able-bodied people do in ballet or in ballroom dance, but was rooted in the experience of our own bodies as disabled people. We weren't interested in showing somebody who played the guitar well and also happened to be disabled. We are not assimilationists, all of us are in your face disabled activists.

For describing dance, the following definitions are two of the most widely used. Merce Cunningham defines dance as movement in time and space.

Anthropologist Joann Keali'inohomoku defines dance as the following:

Dance is a transient mode of expression performed in a given form and style by the human body moving in space. Dance occurs through purposefully selected and controlled rhythmic movement. The resulting phenomena is recognized as dance by the performer and the observing members of a given group.

AXIS' dance fits into these definitions, but it is also necessary to define a specific style of dance called contact improvisation, which AXIS depends heavily on to develop its movement vocabulary and in teaching dance classes to mixed groups of people with and without disabilities. The term contact improvisation was first coined by Steve Paxton in 1972 who danced with Merce Cunningham and the

Judson Group. According to the Dance Handbook, Steve Paxton's work on New Dance gelled while leading a dance class of eight men:

Contact improvisation is a style which uses the performer's own weight as the fulcrum for his or her relationship to other dancers. It is based on give and take, on trusting someone to be there if you fall or lean or bounce off them. A mix of martial arts, sports and ideas of freedom and sexual equality. The style stretches the principle of non-display dancing to its natural outcome: improvisational performing where the rules and the risks make dancers as responsible for their partners as they are for themselves.

Definitions of social change, like the terms art and dance, are innumerable. Many other topics fall under the rubric of social change, from the changing demographics of a neighborhood, to the changing of the United States Congress from Democratic to Republican, and so forth. When I link the arts to social change, I define it in a way which works for the betterment of the quality of life for oppressed, dispossessed, or disenfranchised groups. In this research, it is social changes aligned with the goals of the independent living movement.

In understanding how AXIS' dance fits into the disability rights movement, it would be useful to have a theoretical construct based on the role of the dance in other contemporaneous social movements such as the civil rights, anti-war, women's and gay and lesbian movements. However, such a discussion is beyond the scope of this project, therefore, my focus will stay with AXIS' current role in the disability movement.

## II. DANCE AND ART AS NOVEL MEANS OF EXPRESSION

### Introduction

The arts can provide an alternative means of expression and communication versus a lecture, an essay, a movie or advertising. The novelty of the arts as an expressive medium is important with respect to how it affects the audience. The expressive arts -- dance, theatre, poetry, painting -- provide an experience that reaches and teaches individuals differently from traditional educational methods. In my research, I wanted to explore the dancer's understanding of how their dancing affects the audience. How is someone touched by another's movement?

I explored this topic with the dancers to understand how they see dance as another way of learning, speaking, relating the experience of disability. I must say up front however, that I know the dancers intention was not solely to relate a message about disability. The dancers joined AXIS for their love of dance and for the artistic process, not as some soapbox to raise disability awareness. Therefore, the category constructed is somewhat artificial, seen through the filter of a researcher interested in using the arts as another way to teach; and seen through the eyes of a researcher with a broad definition of politics and social change.

My first use of the arts in a non-traditional setting was in the medical school classroom for a class on disability. The traditional medical school curricula is classically myopic, focusing primarily on the pathology rather than the person and the limitations rather than the possibilities. As an educator, I did not want to perpetuate the error so I chose to convey the lessons primarily through performances by artists with disabilities -- by video, slide presentation, poetry reading. I believed that the most important take home lesson for the students was being able to recognize their shared humanity with a person who has a disability, a basic fact that is most often diminished or overlooked

altogether. Seeing humorous, witty theatre about life with paralysis or juvenile onset arthritis is likely to be more helpful for students just learning about disabilities. I hoped that this early exposure would serve as a wholistic framework into which they could add their knowledge about disability, instead of a narrow focus on the pathology and then a hope that the young doctor would integrate psychosocial issues later. Furthermore, I thought this type of presentation would be a refreshing change from the normal way that medical education is presented, medical education typically lacks creativity. Medical education is not typically transmitted with an opportunity for the imagination, for exploration, or for risk-taking. The creative arts can offer a valuable alternative to traditional education methods.

Janis points out, how art is a novel way to influence people's attitudes:

Art is really great because you can change an attitude and you can expand a mind without having to say a lot of rhetoric ... I mean it's one thing to have somebody stand up and preach at people about what they should think about disabled people and how they should act, it's another thing to get up there and entertain them (Janis)

Entertainment is a popular method for raising political awareness in general these days. Take, for example, the Earth Day festival to raise environmental consciousness, these events come complete with bands with names like "Green Day," vegetarian food, and environmental actions organizations. In our media savvy age, political organizers all along the spectrum are becoming skilled cultural workers who can deliver the public a package deal of entertainment and education.

Communicating through dance offers an alternative way of delivering a message. The public has grown tired and mistrustful of people who get up and preach to them such as politicians, pundits, ministers. The public has very few of the trustworthy, paternal Walter Cronkite figures to turn to for the word. The

media today is a sort of multi-headed behemoth and the spin doctors are the busiest guys in the business. This is not to say that art is held to a higher standard that is equal to Truth, Wisdom, Family Values and so forth, art can be manipulative, corruptible and just plain bad as well. This is not to say that dance is just another creative way to package a message, but it offers something different from other modes of expression.

### Novel Expressions of Knowledge: Performance vs. Lecture

The exchange with the audience is not just some new-age thinking, or talking about what we suppose might be happening. There is an actual energy exchange in performance:

Dance is kinesthetic and reciprocal, especially in performance. The audience has a certain energy, they're alive, they're sleeping, they're snoring, they're happy, they're laughing, they're clapping, they're standing up, whatever they're doing. They're moving, they're shifting and as a performer, you can feel that. And the reason the audience is doing it is because they're feeling something from the dancers. It's very immediate, it's very kinesthetic, it's very much in the moment. (Talia)

In one of the most important quotes about dancing versus lecturing, Liane says:

Dance is also putting it into action, putting it into motion ... to have someone actually up there doing what this person is talking about is a lot bigger. And there's the truth, you can't be hiding behind anything when you are performing ... with words you can build in with a lot of 'jibber-jabber.' I think the movement speaks for itself, and is stronger than words in many ways. (Liane)

Liane's point about putting beliefs, feelings, thoughts into action gets back to one of the critical things that AXIS does in making real the collaboration between dancers with and without disabilities. To lean on an old cliché: "It is always easier said than done."

Michelle speaks of the way that dance communicates in a way that the written word may not:

...It gets back to bodies having power and meaning... I think that bodies and different shapes of bodies and different weights of bodies and different heights of bodies symbolize so much more that we may not be conscious of ... bodies and bodies dancing and moving have an implicit power that the word alone does not have. (Michelle)

Performance is experienced differently than say a lecture:

It tends to be in an environment where we can kind of set aside what else is going on in our life and kind of open up to it. It's not something that you, you kind of slot into your day between 2:30 and 3:30, but you kind of go. I think a lot of people whether consciously or not look at art as some kind of ritual way of celebrating something or being entertained. (Naomi)

Michelle expresses an important point regarding alternative expressions of knowledge: "Anytime we express knowledge though the intuitive mode or the emotional realm, the spiritual realm ... people encounter it differently."

Michelle refers to the way in which expressive arts can engage an audience in a more emotional or spiritual way. Audience members usually encounter a performance differently than a lecture. Dance provides a new medium for conveying or living an experience, likely a welcome relief from the verbal stimulus overload of the modern age. Dance is: "... a different medium ... we take in so much information ... words, words, words, what do they mean? In one ear and out the other." (Michelle)

One key theme which was consistently repeated in my interviews was how art has the potential to effect people on multiple levels besides the cognitive, intellectual level. As an member of the audience at an AXIS performance, the audience has more intellectual freedom than when listening to a lecture. Janis thinks that performance gives people a chance to develop their own ideas and to see things through their own eyes and their own experience, more than say a lecture. Talia also talks about how she thinks the performance can affect the audience:

Performance is not rhetoric. It's not a rhetorical thing like somebody standing up on a soapbox and saying 'blah, blah, blah.' It's more open than that, and it takes people a while to sit through a performance and watch it, so they can go through their own natural process of opening up to it. It's very powerful. And then they leave and nobody told them what to think or how to feel. They feel whatever comes up for them. (Talia)

Delivering a "disability message" whether directly or indirectly through dance can give the viewer more freedom:

I think it gives people a chance to develop their own interpretations and to develop their own ideas and to see things through their own eyes and their own experience, because sometimes when you are talking at somebody, you don't have that opportunity. (Janis)

The dance is open to multiple levels of interpretation. In viewing the dance, the audience is allowed "... to be more imaginative and creative. It's kind of like the difference between handing something to someone versus making them go out and get it themselves." (Barbara) Michelle compares art or dance performance to listening to a lecture, attempting to identify what it is that makes the connection to the audience:

Listening to a lecture can certainly jar some new ideas and hopefully inspire people if you have an inspiring lecturer, but it's like, what is it about that lecture that made it inspiring, it's like they connected with some essential truth or, with the audience, they reached the audience. (Michelle)

A word of caution before I continue, however, because talking about topics such as connectedness, heart information, body knowledge can get you into trouble in academia. Such discussions, especially in medicine, are considered soft, difficult to quantify, subjective, and non-scientific. The next point that the dancers make, although often hesitatingly again for fear of sounding too "new-agey," is that art goes through the heart instead of the head, sort of through the "back door of consciousness." (Michelle) Michelle says that knowing heart information is another way of knowing that is just as valuable. Michelle:



I think dance and art forms bypass that cognitive state where we easily plug somebody's words into our preconceived notions. Art can go thru the back door of consciousness. I mean to sound syrupy and this is syrupy -- its going through the heart rather than the head, and heart information is another way of knowing and [it is] just as valuable... Accessing the heart can be a lot more powerful, I mean, I think it's almost like a straighter route in some way ... because we've succeeded or I've succeeded in expressing a part of my human existence, such that someone else, feels the, like... literally, like the arrow and they feel something about their human existence, they may not have words for it at that point, but they've had an experience in viewing and participating as an audience member. (Michelle)

If someone can touch your heart they cease being so much the other, or at least the possibility of learning more about the "other" is expanded. The stereotypes we have about disability will never completely leave our minds, but once we have a heart connection, if you will, we can return to that connection as a touchstone to re-inforce a growing disability awareness. In my mind, this is the key to substantive attitude change.

It is interesting to think about why and how another person is touched by a dancer's movement. Also what is "attitudinal access?" Attitudinal access means that the non-disabled audience has access to the lives of people with disabilities. Accessibility is a reciprocally informed process, it is not just the burden of accommodating the person with the disability. This concept is discussed further in the chapter on "AXIS and the Non-Disabled Community."

Seeing an AXIS performance, Michelle says:

... has the potential to help shape attitudes ... because, it's again, this deep sense of connectedness versus seeing people who are the OTHER. I think anytime we separate ourselves from somebody else that we perceive to be different from ourselves, we build up attitudes around that and often false ones, and fears and myths and stereotypes. (Michelle)

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### The Dance Performance

I asked the dancers about what the audience's experience might be when attending a dance performance. Talia compares going into a dark theatre to view a performance with going into a ritual space such as a "kiva:"

It's almost like a cultural ritual where we go into the theater and it's dark and it begins and the lights come on and the magic happens and suddenly everybody's reacting to everyone else. It's very tribal. (Talia)

The dancers talked about how viewing dance is an sensual experience. Bodies in motion, in relationship, in rhythm are evocative. Furthermore, experiencing the dance with the music, the lights, the smells, the various dancers is a rich sensual experience. The dance is also being created right in front of you, as opposed to viewing a painting or a sculpture that has already been finished.

Dance is very kinetic, I have a different response or a different feeling, not that one's better than the other or more than the other but it's a very different experience for me to go to a museum or go to a gallery or to go to an art show and see art that's been created, and it's kind of 'there' and it's in its final form and...and it's very different when you see people doing the art. I don't know how to make it any clearer...more clear. I think it's because dance is so kinetic and there's ...especially in dance that's more than one person, there's a lot of connection going on between people, and you see relationships and you see communication and you see exchange and you have music and you have lights and you have dancers and so it's a very full experience. (Janis)

The dancers spoke of how people viewing dance have a physical or kinesthetic experience:

I think we know things kinesthetically in our bodies and with dance in particular because the body is the vehicle. I think that when people see dance, or when certainly when people participate in it, I think that even watching dance, that people have a physical experience. That there is a way that we kind of kinesthetically monitor what is happening and it effects us on a... we have a kind of body experience, or body knowledge that we come away from a dance performance with that we wouldn't get if someone just described it verbally standing on a podium. (Naomi)

Naomi talks about the "body experience" of watching dance and the "body knowledge that we come away from a performance with whether on a conscious or unconscious level." "Body knowledge" is something that an audience member would not necessarily come away with if someone simply stood at a podium and verbally described the dance. Simply put, you get it in your body as well as your mind.

I asked the dancers to elaborate on whether there anything distinctive about communicating a message physically, through the dance? Are there things you can say differently through your body movements to the audience?

I think when you see people dance your body reacts, your heart reacts, ... your ears, your eyes, your brain, whereas with poetry, I think that maybe your body responds somewhat, but I don't think as much. I think it's more of a total body experience (laughs). Which doesn't necessarily translate into "better" but you have more resources to draw from.... you're able to respond at a visceral level. (Barbara 1&2)

### Conclusion: Dance and Disability

Dance can also communicate messages that any speaker would want to get across in a disability awareness talk. For instance, when you can see the wheelchairs speeding across the stage, stopping and starting, turning, carrying the weight of other dancers, the adaptive equipment is less likely to be seen as confining and limiting, rather it can be seen as the source of greater mobility and freedom. Also, the audience can plainly see that the dancers are enjoying themselves on stage. Can you imagine a wheelchair as fun? This is probably hard for most people to do. When moving in a wheelchair can be seen as "fun" versus seeing it as constricting and limiting, progress is being made.

We've had so many people come up and say 'you know I never, never imagined that someone in a wheelchair could move that way or I never imagined a wheelchair could be so much fun.' You know most people think of us and our adaptive equipment as being confined to it or wheelchair-bound and they forget that what it does is give us mobility and

freedom and I think that that really comes in what we do. You know this stuff doesn't limit us, it's what gives us freedom. (Janis)

Seeing people with disabilities dancing provides a singular opportunity to really take in disability. Other than watching from the audience in an amphitheatre for medical grand rounds, there are not many such opportunities. Besides, we all know it is not polite to stare. Surely, the non-disabled reader can remember a time when they were strictly admonished by a concerned parent for staring at the strange disabled person. At an AXIS performance, the audience can stare at the persons with disabilities on stage without interruption, without the fear that their mother is going to grab them. With AXIS on stage, the audience gets the opportunity to really watch and perhaps even to *see* the dancers. AXIS' very existence is in direct opposition to the taboo of looking at people with disabilities. Janis describes the process for first time audience members:

We get up on stage and people have ... two hours to stare at us and pretty soon they don't see wheelchairs anymore, they see people in wheelchairs. They get a chance to see that disabled people are human, we are people first. We are not our equipment and we're not just our disability. (Janis)

The taboo is further broken after the performance when audience members meet the dancers. AXIS' performances truly have to be seen to be understood and appreciated, this is because what they are doing does not exist in people's minds, not even in their imaginations. Dance in wheelchairs is something to be seen, not explained.

How might AXIS' dance might affect people's attitudes toward disability, in contrast to a lecture. Michelle responds:

Again, most definitely ... there are many ways of knowing and understanding in our Western world, [yet] we have focused so much on verbal and auditory and rational cognition and I think anytime we express knowledge through the intuitive mode or the emotional realm, the spiritual realm, we're trying to express something of those realities. I mean, people encounter that differently. (Michelle)

On the issue of ableism, when lecturing to group on what you should and should not do with people with disabilities, you only get so far with your words. Especially in the current climate of political correctness, liberal-minded individuals are almost completely paralyzed with fear in respect to saying something inappropriate to a person of color or a disabled person. Viewing the dance or participating in a contact jam appears to be a very effective way to decrease the fear and distance, very literally, there is more 'room to move,' more latitude. Movement and touch can communicate other aspects of intention, of heart and mind. When people are uncomfortable with disability or disabled people, one of the easier ways to deal with that is to keep a distance, especially not touching the person with the disability.

I asked the dancers if there is particular significance to the disabled body dancing. What does the dance component bring to the presentation, as opposed to people who are just coming in and talking about their lives? Is seeing disabled people dance of any particular significance in terms of the issue of disability? As Barbara says:

I think just seeing so-called non-disabled people touching disabled people and seeing that [the disabled person] is not falling over or they're not fragile. (Barbara)

I was interested in this question because a majority of people's stereotypes about disability concern disabled person's physical appearance and limitation. People are not accustomed to seeing people with disabilities moving creatively or being sensual with their bodies. For AXIS, in terms of people with disabilities not being sensual or sexual, one dancer responds: "we just bust that myth all over the place!!" (Naomi) Dance is unique in our culture as a place where expressions of sensuality and sexuality are more acceptable within the form, and so it is that many audience members probably have their first experience of a

disabled person in this light. One of AXIS' most powerful pieces in this way is "Ellipsis." That piece is very powerful in showing intimacy between the two dancers, one using a wheelchair, as Barbara says, "... you couldn't just talk about it, it gives a whole different picture." Sexuality is not something you can just talk about, seeing sensuality or sexuality in action is much more revealing and provocative. Expressing sensuality and intimacy through dance is also a safe middle ground to begin to loosen people's stereotypes.

### III. DANCE AND POLITICS

*Q: What AXIS' dance form and presence as a professional dance company say about culture?*

*A: "It says that there's a movement going on." (Talia)*

#### Introduction

Politics and dance, two seemingly diametrically opposed areas of society. Politics, the work of the world, the daily machinations of the body politic. Politics and dance could not seem to be further apart in terms of our traditional conceptions of each. More specifically, the surprise in the case-study of AXIS Dance Troupe is the intersection of disability politics and dance. The critical intersection is in how dance gets people to question their relationship to their bodies, because, as Naomi points out, "getting people to question their relationship to their bodies is at the heart of almost all political and economic changes." So it happened that I wanted to explore the links between dance and politics. Can a dance company contribute to the disability rights movement? Can a dance company make a meaningful contribution to disability awareness? Or is dance simply a bourgeois luxury, a mindless diversion from the real work of the disability rights movement?

I asked each dancer about what AXIS brings to the disabled community. Interestingly, every dancer strongly emphasized the point that they did not join AXIS as a platform for political change. "It was not our intention -- okay so we're going to make this dance company so we can go out and make a political statement." (Janis) Michelle's reasons for joining the company are representative for all the dancers: "...for me it was a pure love for movement and a belief that what they were doing was artistic." Each dancer emphasizes that:

We are first and foremost professional artists, and at AXIS in particular, we don't seek to make a statement about disability with our art; but I think

by virtue of who we are and how we work collectively, we say a lot about integration of people with disabilities. (Naomi)

AXIS' repertoire of dances attests to this fact. In its eight or more years, AXIS has only done two pieces with explicit disability content, "In This Body," the troupe's very first piece which told the story of a woman who becomes paralyzed and later returns to dance in a wheelchair; and "Navigation" a piece expressly commissioned by the San Francisco Exploratorium. Interestingly, Naomi said that the audience sometimes expects pieces to be more overtly political or disability-related.

In interviewing the dancers, I found that they are somewhat reluctant politicians, they are in AXIS first because they love to dance, then there is this unavoidable issue of what it means to be disabled and visible in our society. The dancers acknowledge the political ramifications to their work -- seeing a dance troupe with disabled people is going to raise the issue of disability awareness. At AXIS' inception few people had seen or let alone imagined someone dancing in a wheelchair, or a disabled person dancing on the floor without their adaptive equipment. As a member of an oppressed group, the simple act of being on a stage and daring to express yourself in your authentic voice becomes a political act. This is true because oppressed populations are not visible, they are not given a voice in the government or the media.

#### AXIS' founding vision

The founder of AXIS says: "I did not start AXIS for the thing about disability and social this and that. I came from an artistic point of view. I came from it because I like the art of it." Talia liked the movement that she saw,

...seeing Janis move and come through was just fascinating to me. I could hardly take my eyes off her. And it wasn't because, 'oh my gosh, she's a disabled woman and she's moving,' (sarcastically), it was because I really liked her movement. (Talia)



Talia appreciated the beauty and potential of the form:

That's how it is for me now. In the choreographic process, as artistic director of this company, I sit back and go, 'man, I love that!!' It's not like, 'I love that and you're disabled and oh, my God people are going to be soooo excited!' It's because I really just like it for the pure sense of the movement. (Talia)

It wasn't until a few years into the process that Talia asked "what are we doing? ... man, we better figure out what it is we're doing here, we better start talking about this stuff." Talia was not politically naive, she always knew the work was socially relevant and that it would have social consequences in the world, but, this was not her main motivation for doing the work:

Now, the fact that it does that, on top of everything else is wonderful. because for me it integrates much of what I want to do in my life, it integrates what I feel is my mission or my passion of life, you know, to change minds and help people grow spiritually (Talia)

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### Dance and social change

An important question to ask if I am interested in exploring and substantiating potential links between the arts and social change within the disability rights movement is whether or not the movement can achieve some of its goals through the arts. Are the arts indeed a vehicle for improving the quality of life for disabled people in a meaningful way? The first response I got was that giving a person a creative outlet and a way to express themselves alone increases one's quality of life.

Art has always been a medium for social change and usually artists are the ones on the forefront of social change. You know there is something about doing art, and being an artist and being involved in art. I'm not going to say always, but often, I think it gives you a very broad perspective. (Janis)

I asked the dancers if they could make a connection between dance and social change. Michelle looked for a historical precedents for AXIS' work for

example historical examples of dance affecting culture and common knowledge or thinking? Because Michelle articulates her point so well, I have her entire answer reprinted here:

I'm trying to think, okay Michelle, how does dance change thinking, and I was trying to think of some examples, and the first thing that came to mind was the minstrel stage in the United States? Black and white performers. Certainly it existed in the 1800s, there was certainly a lot of prejudice, civil war, moving on to Jim Crow laws, and the fact that black dance on stage was often portrayed as somebody shuffling, being kind of lazy in a certain way, or these overdressed "dandies." And I feel like that's how dance on stage was portraying a group of people. I think that that serves to create more prejudices. In that case. Because that's what people saw. That became part of the media culture. Because dance is a part of culture. You have to reflect what's going on in culture, but it does reinforce and ultimately change or encode, or encode and change, culture.

I think about Isadora Duncan. I don't know many things about her life, but I do know that she taught her form of dance in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Her form of dance became encoded in their school curriculum, in the Russian public school curriculum, and there is some thought given that all of the Russian gymnasts who have that certain flair, that some of that really came from 60 years of Isadora Duncan's way of moving being encoded in the public curriculum. I don't think anybody would debate that Olga Korbut changed gymnastics 20 years ago.

Or just thinking about wedding dancers, having been to a wedding recently. What's the encoded way of beginning the dance? First the couple dances together, then they go to their in-law, and then the in-laws dance together, and they go to their same parent. There's a specific order, and I think it reflects what marriage is about, which is literally bringing together two families and encoding bodily their union, and this final thing of, in a lot of weddings, like Barbara's wedding, they do the Horah, or the circle dancing, towards the end after the cotillion of who dances with whom and it's very ordered, then it's open to everyone, and then at some point, everybody is drawn in. You don't have to be a dancer. You need to be in this circle of people dancing. This now is the community, supporting this new union. I just feel like that that, in and of itself, encodes and creates the culture of marriage and what it is supposed to be. The families are supporting this union, the community is supporting this union, and it's like, get it in your bodies, at its most primitive level, this is what needs to happen for this couple. And it's done through dance.  
(Michelle)

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**AXIS' artistic process**

Richard talks about how more in the beginning of AXIS' work there was an awareness of the newness and political ramifications of people with disabilities dancing, however, Richard emphasizes that in the growth process of the company "you cannot let the political content, whatever it is, get in the way of the creative process." AXIS is committed to the form, the medium of dance as expression, this is much more than just standing on stage and delivering a soliloquy on "my life as a disabled person."

Richard said that there came a time when he thought, "yeah, that's okay" to make conscious political statements, but he wanted to work on quality and explore the potential of the dance form and in that way he says, "you cannot really think about political statements too much. "Carrying a heavy, overt political message can interfere with the creative process" (Richard) and, paradoxically, the creative process can carry your message through an unexpected channel with a significant impact on an audience.

#### AXIS and dance and theatre professionals

AXIS has been among the pioneers introducing the disability rights movement agenda of mainstreaming and inclusion of people with disabilities into the arts community. AXIS contributes to the disability rights agenda in working with the arts community and the media.

We do a lot of education about culture because a lot of organizations want to improve diversity with their funds -- so we do a lot of educating about what a disability culture might be, what it means to us, and what it can mean to other people. And getting it recognized as a unique vehicle for expressing personal and political experience that is related to being disabled in a society that discriminates against people. (Naomi)

Previously, the arts for people with disabilities have otherwise consisted of the "special arts" niche. AXIS has received funding from the major arts foundations in the United States, including the NEA, Rockefeller Foundation,

California Arts Council. AXIS is also on the National Performing Artists register, an internationally recognized roster for artists. AXIS advocates for theatre accessibility for themselves and their audiences. (Janis) AXIS also educates art and theatre critics and reporters "on how to talk about disability in a conscious and non-oppressive way." (Naomi) Also AXIS has applied for grants over several years repeatedly seeking recognition as a minority or disadvantaged population group, alongside the African-Americans, Native Americans and so forth. AXIS has been working "to get people to realize that there is a culture of disability, and there are experiences that are common to people with disabilities ... a shared history ... a heritage." (Janis)

#### Flint Center

In 1995, AXIS was booked to perform at Cupertino's Flint Center for the Performing Arts. The Flint Center incident is a good example of how AXIS' existence can become political in a flash. Whereas AXIS may not set out to make a political statement about disability, circumstances sometimes propel disability issues to the spotlight. AXIS was scheduled to do a small scale repertory show of five pieces. AXIS had been involved with a project at De Anza Community College using computer software for choreography. The instructor adapted the program to include dancers using wheelchairs, and with this program the students created a piece which AXIS was to perform.

Upon arrival at the Flint Center, AXIS discovered that the seats had not been pulled to accommodate people in wheelchairs as was previously agreed upon. While it is true that the theatre was accessible, people using wheelchairs were expected to sit on the side of the rows at a steep incline with very poor sightlines. The Flint Center would need to pull a few rows of seating and build a platform to accommodate people using wheelchairs. The night before AXIS' performance the DeAnza instructor was told that the president of the college had

made an executive decision not to remove the chairs because of the expense. Magician Daniel Copperfield was scheduled for the following day, and the workers would have to work overnite on triple-overtime pay to replace the chairs before 5 a.m. Daniel Copperfield had stipulated in his contract that only his employees be allowed into the theatre starting at 5 a.m. that next morning. (Never mind that someone in a wheelchair might want to attend a Daniel Copperfield performance).

AXIS decided not to perform because of the substandard seating for the large number of people with disabilities expected to attend the show. AXIS sent a message to the President's office saying that they would not perform because the theatre was not adequately accessible. The message they got back was "fine, don't perform." (Naomi) Interestingly, the president's husband uses a wheelchair. His wife said he had sat along the side aisles for years. He was incensed at AXIS, saying they "didn't have a right to define for anybody else what was accessible." (Naomi)

In decribing the incident to the press, Talia used the analogy to the Montgomery bus boycott of the civil rights movement to describe why the accommodations were unacceptable:

Having people sit on the sides of the theater with pillars every five feet is like telling people they can sit in the back of the bus. Sure they might be getting their bus ride, but they don't have an option as to where they can sit. They can only sit in the back. And that's basically what we're saying in theatres when you seat people in the back, who are disabled, or way in the front so thy're having to break their neck just to look up at a stage or on the sides where they don't even have good sight-lines and they are not integrated with the rest of the audience. (Talia)

AXIS occasionally makes compromises for their own accessibility for example not having accessible dressing rooms or bathrooms, or being cattle-truck lifted onto stage, but they will not make that choice for their audience (Naomi). Naomi

makes a critical point when she refers to all that is necessary for the artist to make it to the stage and the public to make it to the audience:

Doing art is not just what you see when you're sitting in the audience. There's a lot that leads up to being an audience person. If you can't sit in the theatre, you can't even be in the audience. (Naomi)

AXIS called in press and TV coverage to spotlight their situation.

[The Flint Center incident] was a good example of what AXIS does, which is that we don't just perform, but just in the process of doing what we do and some of us being disabled, it calls things into question. (Naomi)

AXIS was "educating people -- it's not okay to wait until the last minute, it's not okay to have a poor excuse, it's not okay to say it doesn't matter. And, it's against the law." (Naomi)

#### AXIS and the dance world standards

Although AXIS does not explicitly make political statements about disability, Naomi says, "when people see us perform ... it challenges people to ask about what art is, what dance is, in particular about what their own relationship to their bodies is." Naomi believes that getting people to question their relationship to their bodies is "at the heart of almost all political and economic changes."

I asked Naomi why getting people to question the body is so important. Naomi said she takes a sort of Marxist view wherein "your body is what you work with and why you work"

Naomi gave an example to illustrate her point. She had a friend from college who came to a show and related her experience of seeing people with disabilities dancing. She at first felt kind of "grossed out," according to Naomi, by seeing the legs of one of the male dancers "flopping all around." Naomi's friend talked about feeling terrified and horrible for the dancer, but, by the end of the

performance "he just looked beautiful, " and she wasn't noticing the differences about his body. Naomi's friend said that the experience of watching AXIS made her aware of the physical standards she had adopted in terms of who could be a dancer was and what a woman should look like.

On the surface, Naomi noted, that this may seem to be a very personal, superficial experience, like nothing more than a body image issue.

In actuality, it probably has a big impact on her life, in the kinds of work she chooses to do, in the energy and time and money that she puts into presenting herself in a certain way, in terms of what kinds of power she gives to other people and what way she chooses to have power in work situations. (Naomi)

Naomi's point speaks to the significant amount of time and energy, women, in particular, put into their appearances. Traditionally, in our patriarchal society, women's sense of self-worth is largely derived from being seen as beautiful by men. Anything that encourages women to not invest unnecessarily into their self-image and into the power in other people's hands is positive.

Naomi also states that "if you get people to look at the fact that we are mortal," that is also a political thing. Noted dance critic Arlene Croce was angered what she saw as Bill T. Jones exploiting people living with terminal illness on stage his piece "Still/Here" on people living with terminal illnesses. Naomi thinks people are angered by seeing dying dancers on stage "because we live in a world that likes to pretend that we're going to live forever and that the planet is going to live forever. But you know what? It's not going to. We're using it up." And just as we can use up the resources of our natural world, we also can use up our bodily resources.

If you start to see life as something finite and precious and a resource to be cultivated, not something to just bend and get the maximum cost-benefit out of. If you start to change your thinking that way, I think you can't continue to operate in a capitalist mode. (Naomi)

Naomi says that in some ways AXIS' work questions fundamental assumptions on which the Western political system is built. What a radical notion to see "spirit as something equally valuable to physical labor?" What a radical notion to believe that "everybody has a contribution to make that is equally valued."

Returning to the dance world and the anger by some critics at seeing dying people or "victims" performing on stage. Naomi speaks of the paradox of HIV+ dancers performing. She notes the irony of the gay male ballet dancers with AIDS participating in an art form where eternal youth and beauty are held up as the standards:

The person who is doing the dance form is dying, but they are putting all their energy into looking like they're invincible. In ballet you have these eternal masterworks that do not change over time. The dancers are taught the same roles decade after decade. (Naomi)

This is in stark contrast to AXIS -- when a dancer leaves the company, the piece changes to incorporate the individual style of the new dancer. Naomi sees tradition as stasis versus a continually transforming dance style. In classical ballet, Naomi say:

...half the corps of ballet can die of AIDS and you just get another round of people and they do the same roles, and maybe they do them with a little more flash, but its based on somekind of classical technique, and conformity of line, that you just need somebody to replace them. (Naomi)

By the same token, Naomi talks about how you cannot replace a dancer like Bill T. Jones, a dancer who has danced a very personal dance, coming out as a gay man with HIV disease.

No one is ever going to be able to dance his part. His art is not separate from himself. That doesn't make it less art, it makes it his art. It doesn't make it less tanscendent to the universe because he's a human being. We're all human beings. (Naomi)



Naomi says to get up on stage and look "...anything but beautiful with classic lines is threatening to people." The issue of being confronted with one's mortality and fragility and the temporary nature of being is particularly strong for audiences seeing AXIS. There is an aversion or fear towards seeing such displays of disabled bodies. For the uninitiated, for those who have limited or negative experiences with people with disabilities, the response is selfish. It is "there, but for the grace of God, go I." People don't like to be confronted with their own mortality. People need to believe that bad accidents cannot happen to them, that these people who became disabled were somehow to blame for their disability. Like driving drunk or diving into a shallow pool, or being in the wrong place at the wrong time. There is a compelling need to believe that one has enough control over one's life to avoid such misfortune. In our modern society we like to think that we can cheat, beat or treat death with our superior intellect and advanced technology, we invest in a temporary covenant.

Confronting death or illness in this direct way challenges the audience's own sense of mortality in a powerful way. The observer must take a look at her/his shared humanity with the ill, disabled or dying person:

Look at me! I'm dying. Don't just look the other way. This is what a dying person looks like, and , you know what? I don't look that different from you ... we're all dying ... every single human being on the planet is moving towards death. (Naomi)

It is difficult, if not sometimes impossible, for the viewers to separate from the damning stereotypes about disability -- the helplessness, the infirmity, the pitiful tragedy, the naivete, the illness. Sometimes it surprises me how strong the personal response is to seeing people with disabilities. But on a more positive note, Naomi notes that:

Changes are happening in the art world and people are starting to see that the process you use to make and perform the art affects and changes what the art is, and affects and changes what the audience member receives.  
(Naomi)

Naomi gives the example of the ballerina who dances with broken bones in her feet:

You may be suffering while you dance that part, but if you become disabled because you danced on broken bones in your feet for so long, what does that say about all the performing that you did? What was it that you really gave? What about all the ballerinas who have been starving themselves? Are they really these eternal nymphs, or are they dying? You know what I'm talking about, people dying? Let's talk about those women who don't eat. They're also dying. But we call that beautiful. We like to pretend that what we see is not really happening. When I see someone like that on stage, I think that that person is strong, maybe, but look what it costs. That woman may never be able to bear children if she wants to, or her immune system is going to break down at 40. I see the things as being connected. I think that dance is a way of life, not just a product that somebody consumes. I really believe that. But I think that's a relatively new. . . maybe it came in the 60s. It's a relatively new thing for mainstream Western culture to be grappling with. I don't think it's so new for traditional dancers, ethnic dance forms. (Naomi)

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### Dance and Politics

Naomi believes that what AXIS does is political, although not by classic definitions of "political." How does AXIS' work generate the potential for political change?

Though being different and being willing to be on stage in a powerful way. Though modeling a collaboration of abled and disabled people. We get out there and we look different, from each other and different than most dancers who get up there... Difference is not a positively valued thing in business, politics or religious institutions. So if you start modeling a situation where difference is an empowering thing, where it's exciting, where it's interesting, where it holds your attention, where it actually starts to look beautiful. (Naomi)

Such is the climate in which AXIS performs:

So to get up and dance and celebrate life and live with a conscious understanding and representation of what it means to have an illness or to be dying, is a very powerful thing, that I think challenges, it wakes people up, and people don't like to wake up like that. (Naomi)

In my opinion, no matter how you define it, art is socially relevant, and it in some way reflects our cultural values. Art can be a mirror for our culture. But I would argue that the arts, in this case dance, is more than a simple reflection of society. Art does not simply, passively, silently reflect back to culture; art is involved in a reciprocally informed, interactive process with everyday life. I like the definition of art as a verb -- art can witness, incite, disturb, shock, inspire, question, value, and so many other actions

Though AXIS did not intend to make a political statement, seeing able-bodied and disabled dancers together becomes a political statement because we live in a society that is not integrated. AXIS' work especially has political ramifications in a time when the ADA was only passed four years ago. The disability movement is a young movement, hardly 20 years old, and not particularly visible to the public eye until the ADA passed.

There are still disabled people in institutions and family still hiding disabled people away in back rooms... We are kind of the last frontier of freaks in a way and so I think to see disabled people on stage in front of audiences ... is in and of itself a statement. (Janis)

AXIS' work becomes political because it "brings about an awareness of disability and disabled people." (Janis) "It makes a statement about people with differences working together." (Janis) Of course this raising disability-awareness business is not confined to people with disabilities dancing, as Barbara says, "I feel like every time I go out into the world, it's an education. It gets tiring."

### Embodying and manifesting a social movement

*"Bodies moving together have a micropolitics about them." (Michelle)*

Upon joining AXIS Michelle had no disability or political agenda. But she recognized that "bodies in culture have power and have meaning and significance. And bodies in their shape and motivation and intention reflect culture." In particular, Michelle speaks about the meaning of the disabled body in culture:

I think the disabled body in culture, usually means, or evokes fear, disgust, pain, a sense of not being or otherness. And then to show people with disabilities moving in such a way that they are supporting others physically, they are expressing human emotions that are universal, and these universal emotions initiate movement rather than being helpless and passive. (Michelle)

Michelle believes that seeing disabled bodies moving in this way breaks down some of the prejudices. Moreover, seeing disabled bodies and able-bodied bodies moving together takes it a step further "... that's like the mega-message."

In a very literal sense, AXIS' dance "embodies" a social "movement." And this is not too simple a statement. A social movement signifies that things are getting stirred up, the energy is shifting, people want to move to a different place in society -- usually out from under other people's feet. AXIS' work transforms, re-shapes and re-defines the disabled body in society. AXIS' dance embodies the disability movement in a physical, practical yet aesthetic, creative way. The movement holds the vision. In one of the old Native American creation myths, the grandmother created the world by moving and shaking the world into being, and so it is that AXIS makes real a world where people with disabilities can live. Making things real, translating from thoughts of inclusion to actions that take up space in the world is a critical step towards claiming one's civil rights. These acts, though they may appear on the surface to be nothing more than entertainment, become powerful social statements when for an

oppressed community which has otherwise been systematically hidden and silenced.

It can be argued that this makes for a very powerful type of social change or political statement, certainly Berkeley's Center for Independent Living recognized this when they awarded AXIS their prestigious "Spirit of Independence Award." AXIS was honored because they entered the art world wanting to be dancers first, not disabled dancers. They exercised their right to participate fully as members of society, no questions asked. Assuming your rights to full inclusion in and enjoyment of society is radical when your group is afforded a mostly third-class citizenship, and civil rights legislation must be passed to protect your human rights.

#### IV. AXIS AND THE PERSONAL

Being a member of AXIS has affected the lives of the dancers in many ways. The landscape for personal change, growth and transformation is vast. However, I want to state up front that AXIS' mission is not to provide a "sheltered dance workshop" for the "physically-challenged." AXIS' critics are apt to see dancing as a nice enrichment opportunity for the crips -- a sort of equal opportunity for the disabled in a multicultural society. This is not simply dance therapy for the disabled. This is dance pursued for its transformative and creative potential. This is dance pursued for dance.

There are, of course, personal benefits to any endeavour to which one is committed. Dancers in every kind of dance company derive personal benefit from their dancing, whether it is the artistic challenge and growth, notoriety, money, travel or a creative outlet.

I asked the dancers about what they gained on a personal level because of the insights to be discovered. Often subjects' more personal insights and feelings are not considered relevant, but, I was convinced that the dancers personal responses would reveals more levels of insight into the workings of the dance troupe. A personal transformation can coincide with the larger social transformation of one's community and environment. One might argue that the personal transformation process makes one a better agent for social change. Certainly, gaining greater self-awareness and self-confidence aid in purusing one's work.

##### Dancers with disabilities

###### Janis

I asked Janis what AXIS had brought her on a personal level. The first thing about which she spoke was the importance of a physical outlet. Prior to

her accident, which paralyzed Janis from her neck down, Janis' main physical outlet was showing jumping horses. When she became paralyzed, she lost her sense of identity. She had planned to continue jumping horses and perhaps entering veterinary school, after the accident she felt lost, without a clear sense of who she was or what she wanted in her life:

After my accident I had been still for 7 years, being involved in martial arts and AXIS gave me permission to explore my body again and to be in touch with how I moved and that actually opened up a little of doors physically speaking ... It really changed my life, we'd get down on the floor and roll around and move. And I actually learned how to get myself dressed and undressed and how to do transfers in and out of my wheelchair and doing that was something that I didn't come out of rehab being able to do -- this is 7yrs later!!! (Janis)

Through exploring her movement potential with contact improvisation she gained considerable improvement in independent functioning. This represented a significant increase in her abilities; previously, she needed personal attendant care twice daily, now she needs assistance three times weekly. Again, these improvements came seven years after Janis was supposedly completely rehabilitated.

Janis also says that her dance with AXIS has made it easier to be disabled out in the world because, among other benefits, through her dancing with AXIS Janis gained greater self-confidence:

Being on stage is a really good preparation for being disabled in the world because people are staring at you all the time, and they are looking at you and pretending not to. And also being disabled is a really good background for being on stage because you are used to being kind of in front of people you know no matter where you go. So there's kind of a way to use that built in curiosity. I feel like I'm a rolling, well sometimes I say that I'm people's worst nightmare on wheels and you know that everybody wants to look and see what's happening, you know I think it's kind of natural in a way. I know a lot of people who are disabled who are performers and I think it's actually pretty easy because you're so damn used to being visible. (Janis)

Naomi talks about Janis and how dance offered her the chance to have a relationship with her body that was about self-expression and not just the functional approach of rehab. Dance offered a more wholistic integration of mind, body and spirit. Dance also pointed towards a new relationship with one's chair, a way of relating that is creative instead of purely functional.

On a very basic level then, many of the dancers with disabilities spoke about their enjoyment of dance as a physical outlet not previously available to them because of their disabilities. As with many of society's institutions, people with disabilities have largely been denied the opportunity to access the arts. Funding is prioritized for basic services, artistic enrichment is considered a luxury. Moreover, because of the stereotypes about disability, policy makers and educators are slow to think that people with disabilities need opportunities for creative exploration. Arts and recreation opportunities for people with disabilities are not especially abundant. Moreover, most physical outlets are either oriented towards rehabilitation or competitive sports. Giving disabled people a place to express their creative self is the rarer opportunity.

### Richard

Richard also experienced an opening when he began to explore his movement potential. Richard has had polio since childhood and must use leg braces or a wheelchair for mobility. Prior to joining AXIS, Richard was involved in high level competitive athletics including swimming, sit volleyball and track and field in his home country of Germany. In his twenties, he began to lose interest in competing in sports. He found that he did not connect to the "Macho Crips" who were into sports and lacked any awareness of much else. His first contact improv workshop was an epiphany for him. The dance held greater potential for personal transformation than his previous competitive, disabled sports activities.



He attended his first "contact jam" at a Berkeley dance studio and was intrigued. He recalls thinking that this was sort of weird with all these strangers rolling over each other in close physical contact. Richard said, most of all, he enjoyed being able to not wear his braces and just dance on the floor. I asked what the difference was for him and he said that with the braces he is tall and he can walk but he feels very constrained and "armoured." Richard Moreover, the braces are very heavy, without them he is much lighter and has a greater range of motion. Also, being on the floor, he was not the odd man out, in contact improv the floor is just another place to work with. He experienced an equality in the dance form that he had not experienced before in competitive athletics. Often people without disabilities have to go out of their way to sit on the floor when they would rather sit in a chair or dance standing up. Dancing on the floor would not be acceptable at a dance club South of Market in San Francisco, it is not what people do.

The form was new to Richard, as was the idea that he, a disabled man could participate in the form. He came to understand that in contact improv it is the source of the dance that drives the movement, and that one's disability need not restrict the range of possibilities. Certainly, the form would look different when done by a person with a disability, but it would be equivalent to the non-disabled dancers. Interestingly, there was a way in which the form of contact improv had ample room for a people with disabilities. And the possibilities for exploration were just as great for a person with a disability. The barriers in other dance forms with prescribed vocabularies were not so open to a person using a wheelchair, as for example if Richard were to try to take ballet lessons.

Contact improv brought Richard to a greater level of acceptance and comfort with his disability. Previously, he had just managed with his disability, not wanting people to pay much attention to it. Here he had found a place

where he could simply be himself, the self without the adaptive equipment. This was a very important place to find because of his early experiences as a disabled child. As a young child, before he was forced to learn how to walk with braces, Richard spent the majority of his time on the floor, happily scooting around, however, his environment, people and places, soon told him that he was disabled and that this was not the normal thing to do. Previously happy in the body he was born into, his surroundings now told him he was disabled, different. He was sent to an institution for a year and a half to be rehabilitated, when he returned home, he found that he had been replaced by a new brother, born while he was away.

Contact improv opened doors in terms of Richard's desire for physical contact. I think it is true that disabled people in our society likely do not get touched very much, or if they are touched it is for medical, diagnostic purposes or for rehab or by a personal assistant. Fear and misunderstanding often keep people at a distance from people with disabilities. Physical intimacy may not be as easy to have in one's life because of societies stereotypes about disability. Moreover, disability aside, as a western society, we have very strict boundaries and rules around physical contact. There are prescribed ways for contact to occur such as in sports, medicine and in intimate relations. Contact improv provided touch, plain and simple, and a novel way to explore movement with a dance partner.

Contact improv workshops and dancing with AXIS give Richard a more integrated way of being disabled in the world and interacting with people. For many years he said, "I think I wanted people to completely not notice that I was disabled, I think I spent a lot of years totally denying it and trying to look as able-bodied as possible." Richard At the contact improvisation workshops, as part of the introductory circle, participants were supposed to talk about their bodies in

terms of injuries, concerns, body image issues. Richard tells his partners that he has sensitivity to touch, pressure and position.

But even though Richard says that he knows what is happening with his legs and that he can and will take care of himself, he finds that he still has some self-consciousness about his legs when people want to touch them. "I still have this feeling that I want them to ignore it. Ignore my legs, they are not the way I want them." But Richard also says that he has had dances where he has felt an interest and commitment to his whole body. Richard likes what dancing and performing professionally with AXIS has done for him, "... in that this is one of the very few situations that I find myself in where I'm truly living in the moment."

Richard says his dancing has become part of his life practice and life philosophy. Over his five years since beginning dancing, Richard has found the dance to be a great source of information where he has learned a lot about himself, for instance how he engages with a person. Contact improv provides an opportunity to look at: "the way people communicate things, the way you get interested in somebody, how you ask for a dance, how you end a dance, what roles do you use in your dance?" Dancing has given Richard a chance to be introspective. In this very exploratory and organic dance nature, Richard has "... found that there is a great openness for people with different bodies." He contrasts this openness with how difficult it would have been to start ballet class and meet the expectations of the form. "People are not going to let you adapt [the form] to your own needs because they want to protect the form. This is how it is and if you can't do it, you can't do it."

### Michelle

Michelle, one of the dancers with a disability described how dancing brought back her physical body to her. Michelle was diagnosed with a type of

muscular dystrophy around age nineteen. Before she became symptomatic, with weakness of her muscles, Michelle excelled in athletics. Her participation in sports was a significant part of her life. Michelle began noticing changes in her body four years prior to her diagnosis. Her description of her experience of becoming disabled is emblematic for how disability is commonly seen and understood. She spoke of the subtle compensations she made in her body mechanics. She engaged in social avoidance and quit certain activities she could no longer do easily. She recalls that this four year period in her life was:

...A sort of very private, in a certain way, agony. There was a part of my later adolescent life that had this overlay of just angst because my body was changing. I didn't know what it was, I was too afraid to say anything. I thought it was because I was out of shape, maybe because I was gaining weight. I had all these other reasons why I couldn't do some of the same things. (Michelle)

Michelle felt ashamed to say anything about this taboo subject. She explains that:

There was this blanket of shame around the body... It's just the sense that you cannot talk about certain things and I know that probably sounds so simple, but it's a sense that certain things are unspeakable and part of it is because there's a sense of there's something evil attached to it, and almost like a kind of superstition. If you speak it, it will become true. (Michelle)

Furthermore, she says: "I saw it, I knew it, but there was this veil between my observation and my real acknowledgement of it, such that we could not talk about it." At the time, her brother and sister were going through the same experience. but all the family members took refuge in the silence until her brother finally sought medical help at a neuromuscular clinic.

When Michelle finally got her diagnosis she was relieved to have a name for her experience and to know she was not going crazy imagining things. However, looking back over the four years of saying nothing she felt "... such regret and a sense of desolation ... that [she] didn't say anything." Michelle's early experience of disability is representative of how people often feel when they

become disabled. The experience is also representative for how we as a society stigmatize those with disabilities. Michelle's illness was kept private, it was "unspeakable" and a "taboo subject."

Over the next years Michelle's condition caused progressive muscle weakness and wasting and at age 25 she began using a power chair. By her mid-20s, Michelle realized that since she had become disabled she had totally let go of her physical body. Her attitude towards her body started to shift as she began to attend contact improv dance jams. Michelle recounts the experience of her first contact jam:

I remember going to a jam and feeling like OOH...I know this, my body's been here before and really loving the fact that all different bodies were there and this acknowledgment that all bodies move very differently and beautifully... just really appreciating everyone's compensation and it was beauty and function put together for me, to see what these different bodies do...and it was a kick and a joy...I was in ecstasy to be swirling around and moving around with people. (Michelle)

Exploring movement and dancing was a critical piece in helping Michelle to accept her muscular dystrophy. Her attitude towards her disability has changed, and dancing with AXIS has been an important opportunity supporting that change:

Now, I feel like my body is my home, that I do indeed live in my body, and what would spirit or soul be if not somehow embodied so that we make something real in the world. (Michelle)

Michelle knows that her abilities will continue to change as her condition progresses. But now the sadness around her loss of ability has been replaced with acceptance and a sweetness that comes from seeing the movement she still has, as precious. Michelle knows that no matter how her body changes, she can always be a dancer.

### Non-disabled dancers

## Naomi

It is not just the disabled dancers who have grown personally through their work with AXIS. Through dancing with AXIS, one non-disabled dancer has come to a level of self-acceptance and self-celebration that she never had before as a dancer:

My body-type didn't fit the stereotypical ballerina body type. In fact I loved ballet, I was totally in love with it, but when I hit puberty it became very clear that I was not going to be one of those "toothpicks." This is what happens in traditional ballet training -- I went to a school that was geared towards creating professional ballerinas ... so it didn't matter how good a dancer you were, once it became clear that your body wasn't going to fit the stereotype, you got pushed to the back of the room you stopped getting feedback from your instructors and you got ignored that's how dance education worked. I felt really ripped off!! It was heartbreaking to me and so I stopped dancing for a while because it just stopped being fun...it hurt a lot. (Naomi)

Naomi had struggled for a long time with trying to fit with the standard of what a real dancer was, then the opportunity to join AXIS arose and she realized it would be okay to be herself:

I have a dense, strong, compact body and my relationship to gravity is very different from that. So I have been struggling all along with did I fit what a real dancer was? and ...I hadn't really come to a very comfortable place with it at the time. I had kind of quit ... I mean it wasn't like I said that's it I'm not going to dance anymore, but the opportunities that had been presented to me I had been reluctant to take because I wasn't sure that I could really feel good about myself. ... And so I think it was pretty obvious to me when this Axis opportunity came along that nobody was going to expect me to look like anybody else ... and ... that it was going to be okay to be me. And so that I think was the biggest reason why it seemed really appealing. ... I know that over the years through working with Axis I've come to feel much more confident about myself in saying that I'm a dancer or ... putting myself out into the world in that way. And when I go back into those environments where I used to feel really negatively about myself, I don't feel negative in those same ways or I don't feel self-conscious. I'm not self-critical in the ways I used to be even though I still don't look like a lot of people who dance ... (Naomi)

Participation opened up new doors for non-disabled members to learn in dance. Naomi had the whole world of contact improvisation and the use of chairs and trapeze open up for her:

I'd been working within a prescribed vocabulary ... I'd assumed that that vocabulary was the same as dance was and that there wasn't anything else besides what people taught me how to do. (Naomi)

I asked Naomi if she had experienced any surprises while dancing with AXIS:

I think it just surprises me sometimes how I wished I had wheels (laughs). Being able to keep up sometimes, depending on what kind of pieces we're doing. Sometimes I feel awkward having two feet. Of course it gives me other things in terms of mobility and latitude. I can climb up on things and change levels maybe somewhat more easily than someone in a chair, but I have definitely had experiences where I have thought that sometimes I wish I had wheels, or at least I wish would go rollerskating (laughs). But I felt at a disadvantage in not having wheels, and I think that's kind of amusing that I would get to that point. (Naomi)

### Liane

For Liane, who has been dancing since she was four years old, telling new people about AXIS was a coming-out of sorts because of the stereotypes of disabled people and disability art. She is sensitive to their reactions and tells them that it is not something she can explain, that to really understand AXIS you just have to come and see a performance:

I guess I'm pretty sensitive to that, because when I say I work with a dance troupe, people automatically have a vision of what a dance troupe is like. Oh, which one? And I say, no, it's not what you think. It's a little different. Just feeling how some people will go, 'Hmmmm ... interesting,' and you kind of feel their reserve. Then it's really great when those people actually come and they see the show and their jaw drops, and then they're impressed. (Liane)

Liane has found it challenging in AXIS to blend her lifetime of dance technique and her own personal, very physical dance style with AXIS. Dancing with AXIS engages new collaborative techniques that are different from her dance in companies without people with disabilities.

## V. AXIS AND THE DISABLED COMMUNITY

In my interviews with the company, I wanted to understand more about AXIS' place within the disability community. What does a dance troupe bring to this community? Where does AXIS fit in with other disabled groups? The discussion is divided into general responses of people with disabilities (people with disabilities); role modeling; community dance workshops; outreach to kids; disability institutions; creating a disability culture

### Responses of people with disabilities

Audience responses are varied, but overall the feedback has been positive. Many people with disabilities appreciate having the chance now to see something of their lives reflected in performance. "People with disabilities have not had a reason to go to dance...if they hoped to see something of themselves reflected." (Janis) Some of the responses are to the effect of "Thank God there's a place where being disabled is just another feature like having brown hair or green eyes." (Naomi)

Janis says that she thinks "...people were really ready in the disabled community to see disabled people on stage." The community found "...some kind of inspiration or triumph" in seeing AXIS on stage. People with disabilities are gratified by seeing other people with disabilities on stage performing. Barbara talked about how AXIS being on stage brings validation to the disabled community. By validation she meant that "...it's okay to go after...what you envision for yourself even when it's not necessarily what the rest of the world envisions for you (laughs)." Without wanting to sound like a missionary or crusader, Janis talks about the feedback from people with disabilities in the audience who have said that watching AXIS has allowed them to feel better about themselves. After seeing a performance, people feel energized and better able to go out into the world and cope.



People with disabilities in the audience like the sensuality of the pieces. "The stereotype of people with disabilities is that they aren't sensual and that you shouldn't touch them. We kind of bust that myth all over the place!!!" Some people with disabilities have never seen a person with a disability dance and so seeing AXIS on stage can be a thrilling, affirming experience, completely novel to the disabled community. AXIS surprises the disabled community as well as the non-disabled community. I do not see that the disabled community was aware of the possibilities of dance until AXIS and a handful of other troupes started up. AXIS provided a vision, a new attitude toward disability for both communities. People with disabilities have come under the power of social stereotyping, just as non-disabled people have, in a way that limits their vision of what is possible for a disabled person. For Michelle, a disabled person who loves movement, she did not experience any cognitive dissonance, she felt at home with disabled people dancing:

It felt like a aaah this is home." I wasn't experiencing ...a lot of like..."how can this be?" But because it was up on stage and normally it's like oh don't look, can't look at these people! It was this sense of hey, you know, I can look all I want, I love to watch. And I don't have to worry about staring and being odd (Michelle).

I asked Richard about the responses he has heard from audiences members with disabilities. Richard says that:

When disabled people came ...it's mostly around, 'we're glad that you did this.' I mean, 'you're making a very valid statement about being disabled and it's great that you have the potential to be out there and it's usually from a very clear place of recognition of the political importance of it. (Richard)

Richard contrasts these reactions with those of non-disabled audience members:

The reactions from disabled folk and able-bodied folks are quite different. The responses of the non-disabled people were a lot more emotional and

far-reaching. I've seen people with almost tears in their eyes say, 'this was so touching, this was so amazing and it drew me so much in or out to something that I wasn't expecting.'

Daniel speaks of how AXIS' work opens doors for members of the audience with disabilities.

It's a pretty marvelous thing, to just open that door for them, just get a glimpse of it and then maybe they can have enough courage too, that they will come and do something else, whether its a class with AXIS or something else, who care? But it's just the idea that's planted in their mind. And I think in general that's what performing dance should be. It should inspire people to wove. I don't like the idea of dance being...or theater...being something we just go and watch...but rather that it inspires. (Daniel)

This is one of the wonderful thing about AXIS' work, and about art in general, it is one thing to inform an audience, quite another thing to inspire an audience and transform attitudes and beliefs about disability.

Some of AXIS' current members were spectators before joining the company. Michelle also talked about her first responses to seeing AXIS. "I so was so AWED by what I saw on stage." The dance spoke to her as a person with a disability, she said: "I can't remember exactly which of the pieces I first saw; but it was one of their first pieces and I felt like, AAAH, yes, you know, this is the language I know." Michelle took note of "...this mixture of like, strength and fragility, ...particularly Janis and Barbara, both being 'sort of fragile, small-looking women' being the supports of an able-bodied dancer."

Richard recalls his first impressions of the some of the same pieces. Although he was not at first attracted to AXIS' style he found, "... a few things that really moved me and kind of spelled out the power." In particular Richard pins down "one move, one moment; it is the one in "Ellipsis" where Janis in her power chair drags Talia around:

For the first time I saw that a power chair is a power thing and you can make powerful statements with it and it is much more than just this support tool to get around for people who are really severely disabled.

The piece gave Richard, a wheelchair-user himself, a "complete new evaluation of what was out there for me." The piece was able to reach a level of abstraction which Richard looks for in dance performances.

In responding to seeing AXIS for the first time, Michelle described her experience in a way that is representative for many audience members:

The focus and intention of movement kind of like went through the back door of my sense of what are is about. We think that dance has to look a certain way...and seeing fluidity and grace being exercised by people who we don't normally think of having fluidity and grace...just kind of knocked over my other sort of pre-conceptions...of dance on stage, dance as an art on stage (Michelle)

AXIS was "...putting it out there for all to see as something beautiful, something very different, but something that in its own right is beautiful." Everything grandiose aside, very simply "...it was fun to watch people." Michelle

#### Not every response is rosy

Not all the responses from the disabled community are positive however. "I've had disabled people really object to a piece...one that we do called "Red Dress," which started as a solo that Talia did with an empty wheelchair. We've had very strong reactions to that. I've had disabled people say, "that is really offensive to me, because it's a non-disabled person, you know, sexualizing the wheelchair. Where's the person with the disability? It's not the chair that's sexual it's the person.'

By the same token, the same piece elicited equally positive responses: "I've also had people with disabilities look at that piece and go "YEAH!!!" a wheelchair is not an ugly thing, it's totally hot because it's part of how I move and express myself." Here, the point is that as with any community, you cannot

expect all the responses to be homogenous. The disabled community covers a broad spectrum of humanity with all its attendant diverse perspectives and experiences. Not everyone in the disabled community or everyone who has a disability are ready for the "in your face approach" to being out with one's disability. "Sometimes disabled people are kind of uncomfortable to see ourselves up on stage, but, my experience is it's been more non-disabled people have been uncomfortable with it than disabled people." (Janis) Janis says most of the feedback has been positive, and that may be a result of negative reaction, not being verbalized to her. She does note that there is a increasing competitiveness among the different disabled artists in the San Francisco Bay Area, as more and more artists enter the spotlight.

Richard relates an experience that the troupe had Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. After the dance performance there was a question and answer period with the company. The invited audience was mostly local disabled theater people. Apparently, they talked mostly about their work, instead of asking AXIS questions. When the talk shifted to AXIS' work, the company received mixed responses. Two disabled women spoke about their theater project and gave Richard the impression that:

...they think good disabled art or disabled culture should be from disabled people for disabled people. It's something that comes out of the community and goes back to the community, and if its good enough, able-bodied people the other communities will get it anyway.

A deaf man who viewed the show American Sign Language interpreted said that "he really doesn't understand dance, because it must be with the music."..."There's something that's elusive to him, and sometimes when we stopped he didn't know whether something was broken or what...so it must be the music he figured. His closing statement was: 'dance is definitely not deaf culture,; and then he sat down. In actuality, there is a very famous and well-

respected dance company of deaf dancers out of Galladet University in Washington DC.

Audience members also addressed the fact that AXIS, is a mixed company. One question stuck in Richard's mind was "Have you ever tried to put the able-bodied people in chairs?" And I thought well, hmmm, maybe it looks messy somehow to have wheelchairs floating around and people running around. Maybe...from an "aesthetic point of view--you can either do all chairs or all feet." But Richard countered this criticism strongly saying: "But it's not what we want, it's like totally out of the question..." But the question also opened a new channel and Richard thought, "well, maybe the mixed thing that we are pretty convinced about ... is not what people want everywhere." But in spite of reactions such as this from members of the disabled community, AXIS is committed to the collaboration of dancers with and without disability. AXIS is invested in work that will transform both disabled and non-disabled people.

### Role Models

One of the very important things AXIS does for the community is provide role models for people with disabilities. Janis talks about the disabled community being "just really starved for positive role models," instead of stereotypically demeaning portrayals of people with disabilities or no portrayals at all.

As Janis notes:

What we usually get in the media is really stereotypical. You know, we are either the enraged, bitter ax-murderers or we are enlightened and we're saints and we have these perfect story book lives. There is this whole range of emotions and whole range of lifestyles that doesn't get represented ... Up until the last 5 years ... mostly we've been the Hunchbacks of Notre Dame, we've been Frankenstein, we've been psycho killers...there haven't been real images, either that or we've been Jill Kinmont. (Janis) [Jill Kinmont's life was made into a TV movie called "The Other Side of the Mountain. Her story was that of promising young

skier who became paralyzed in a skiing accident, and her "courageous" life.]

There are also essentially no or very few role models for people with disabilities interested in becoming artists or performers. AXIS also gives disabled people "a reason to want to go to a performance or to go out to a theater and see something of ourselves and our own lives." (Janis) Janis also says that:

In the art world and in dance in particular, disabled people have not had a whole lot of reason to go -- if you are going to see something of yourself or your experience -- so I think we offer that, we offer role models, we offer images of disabled people.

The image makers in a community are key players because:

We don't have, as disabled people, very many images of disability in our media. Disabled people are just now for the first time in history being included in advertisements. Now you can see somebody sitting in a chair in a Mervyn's ad, or in L.L.Bean or on a Wheaties boxes. And every now and then you see them on a TV commercial, you know, just doing life the way other people do life, big surprise! (Janis)

But even with realistic portrayals it certainly has not always been easy for disabled people to see themselves reflected up on stage. People with disabilities have internalized much of same stigma and shame about disability and are perhaps hesitant to want to be "in your face" with disability. The San Francisco Bay Area, home to AXIS Dance Company, is certainly unique in its openness to difference.

Even the dancers themselves talk about a time when they were uncomfortable identifying as disabled and associating with other disabled people. Janis talks about how she grew up in a community other than Berkeley, where she says, "I really didn't want to be around other disabled people and I didn't want to see anyone else disabled because it was such a reflection on myself" (Janis). Coming to Berkeley she said, "there were tons of disabled people and all

of the sudden I realized that there was a kind of strength in numbers and there was a lot to be learned from other people who were living with disabilities.”

### Disability Institutions

I asked all of the dancers about how the local San Francisco Bay Area disability organizations view their work. In particular, I inquired about the World Institute on Disability in Oakland and Berkeley’s Center for Independent Living. According to the dancers, WID and CIL are extremely supportive and appreciative of AXIS’ work. Janis said, “they love what we do!” WID has been supportive in many ways, helping AXIS to network for performance opportunities or integrating AXIS into WID’s projects. For instance, WID planned to integrate AXIS into the disability awareness training for AmeriCorps. Janis attributes their support to WID’s recognition of “the value of culture and art to promote the disability movement.” In terms of how the arts are valuable to the disability rights movement, Janis answers:

Our art’s a valuable tool and art’s a really important part of culture, it’s an important part of heritage and it’s a really good vehicle for communication and for reaching people and for changing minds and expanding minds.

Michelle points out how AXIS contributes to disability culture, which is important because “...culture is a really effective way to change people’s attitudes and build community and coalitions.” Also, WID supports inclusion of people with disabilities into all sectors of society and so this naturally includes the arts.

Naomi continues:

Disability is something that cuts across all communities and by including people with disabilities [their] cultural life we help that bigger process of building a world where it’s accessible to all people. There are some things that are in common with the mission statement in AXIS for example and the mission of WID ... on the empowerment level or the level of

integration of people with disabilities into community life, not just comparable services, but community integration and inclusion.

Berkeley's Center for Independent Living awarded one of their 1995 "Spirit of Independence" Awards to AXIS for outstanding contribution to the disabled community. The yearly award is given to "Industry and organizations which represent the spirit of independence." in the tradition of the founder of the Independent Living Movement, Ed Roberts. Lela Davia, CIL Administrator, says that "AXIS expresses a different notion of ability that challenges people's ways of seeing." Also, she points out that AXIS see itself "as full participants in the dance community." Furthermore, "they see themselves as a dance company first, and a disabled dance company second."

I was particularly interested in what AXIS brings to the disabled community or the disability advocacy groups like CIL or WID. In the San Francisco Bay Area, AXIS is an integral part of the disabled community, bringing in different, but necessary things to the community. For instance, CIL is social-service oriented, it's where "you go to get educated or get social security benefits cleared up." Also as Barbara points out, "we're entertainment (laughs), we're fun." People come to AXIS shows with very different expectations than they would come to CIL or WID.

### Disability Culture

In the San Francisco Bay Area there is a vibrant and self-aware disabled community. Berkeley is considered the birthplace of the independent living movement in the late 60's and early 70's. The arts in the disabled community are a sign of the disabled communities health. AXIS is an integral player in creating and sustaining disability culture.



Before I go further, it should be noted that there is a controversy about whether or not there is a culture of disability. According to Webster's dictionary the definition of culture is:

The integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon man's capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations; the customary beliefs, social norms, and material traits of a racial, religious or social group.

The dancers agree that there is a disability culture. Although it may not appear clear and cohesive from the outside, insiders acknowledge its presence.

Michelle makes the important point; however, that this culture is more viable, more visible and more acknowledged in larger, politically liberal communities like the San Francisco Bay Area. The disabled community is especially strong in the Berkeley area, however, all of the United States knows that Berkeley, California is not the "norm." Michelle notes that "more and more there are the grass roots of culture, and as people communicate more I really believe that culture can be sustained."

Disability culture is in the process of defining itself as barriers to economic and educational opportunity are removed and more individuals with disabilities enter the mainstream. Defining a disability culture has been somewhat difficult because of the incredible diversity of the community. Disability cuts across lines of class, race, gender, geography, sexual orientation, and type of disability. But in spite of all these difference there is a shared experience of being disabled in our society. Joanna Manqueros identifies people with disabilities as the most oppressed minority in our society. She bases this conclusion on the fact that two-thirds of people with disabilities live below the poverty level, they are denied equal access to education, employment, reproductive freedom. Currently, however, it seems that the self identified disabled community is primarily white, middle and upper class wheelchair-users. In order to come together as a

powerful coalition much internal work remains to be done concerning racism, sexism and classism.

I thought it would be important to look at AXIS' place in disability culture. I wondered if the dancers acknowledged that they were a part of disability culture, fulfilling a certain role as artists. In their most recent successful grant proposal for "Hidden Histories," AXIS "makes a case for the fact that there is a disability culture and that it's a culture that goes across all lines of race, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation." Janis responds: "Those of us who are disabled know there's a disability culture because we're part of it and we see it, and we have a shared history and we have a shared experience." Michelle says that she has a feeling of commonality of culture with the other disabled members of the troupe:

For all the differences, and there are many, many differences in all of us with disabilities...you know...broad arc of humanity in dealing with its limitations, and knowing that with disability, no matter how defined by the individual, it fits in there and it brings an awareness. You have that understanding an almost shared knowledge (Michelle)

In our discussions about dance and social change, Michelle talked about how dance encodes tradition into a culture. Michelle is talking about AXIS' work transforming individuals into a cultural community. Drawing from examples in other cultures, Michelle reflected on the wedding of another dancer in the company. The wedding was a Jewish wedding with the wedding dance wherein there is a particular order and arrangement for who dances with whom and when.

There's a specific order, and I think it reflects what marriage is about, which is literally bringing together two families and encoding bodily their union, and this final thing of...the circle dancing, towards the end after the cotillion of who dances with whom and it's very ordered; then it's open to everyone ... Everybody is drawn in, you don't have to be a dancer, you need to be in this circle of people dancing. This now is the community,

supporting this new union. I just feel like that, in and of itself, encodes and creates the culture of marriage and what it is supposed to be. The families are supporting this union, the community is supporting this union, and it's like 'get it in your bodies.' At it's most primitive level, this is what needs to happen for the couple, and it's done through dance (Michelle).

I asked Michelle what AXIS brings to disability culture, what is encoded?

I think because in part it is fairly new, that there's an aspect certainly of the rebellion, that we're not going to be. These bodies, these are our bodies, they still move, they still have emotions, they still have the power to emote and to move, and there are no other forces in society now that are going to tell us otherwise. I think that it reinforces that rebellion and encodes it within the new developing culture, and then encodes for very personally.

### Community dance workshops

As a dance company AXIS also stands out from most other communities because of its commitment to education. After AXIS' dance performances, audience members with and without disabilities would come up saying, "I really want to do this, how can I do it, where can I go?" Janis says, "I think there are a lot of disabled people sitting around in their houses thinking, I want to dance, I want to move, so we create a forum to do that."

There was no place for them to go so AXIS met the interest and needs of the community. In keeping with their philosophy of collaboration the classes have always been integrated. AXIS classes provided people with disabilities with an opportunity unavailable elsewhere. "Disabled people don't really have the opportunity to learn about our movement or express ourselves creatively." There aren't many creative outlets for people with disabilities, often sheltered workshops are the most offered; moreover, the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation certainly isn't going to rehabilitate a person with a disability to be an artist or a dancer.

Many of the current dancers were introduced to AXIS through one of the community dance jams. AXIS' dance classes filled a void in the disabled community. On a typical day in the life of a severely disabled person s/he requires personal assistance to accomplish the activities of daily living such as bathing, dressing and eating. Traditionally there has been a large gap between a person with a disability and her attendant. Disability advocacy organizations are lobbying strongly for better standards of care for personal assistants and also for a more enlightened view on how disabled people can lead independent lives by having the appropriate personal assistance. An unequal power dynamic in most daily interactions is common for many people with disabilities with health care providers, attendants, even strangers on the street. AXIS' classes model new ways for people with and without disabilities to work together. There can be more to the interaction than just "doing things for the poor 'crip.'" Janis notes that people with disabilities are in the position of being helped a lot, in contrast:

In dancing and contact improvisation, especially, people find ways of working together. So it's not the abled body person doing something to the disabled person. It's this real collaborative effort. So it gives people a way to feel on more equal footing with each other (Janis).

### Community Outreach

Another activity which sets AXIS apart from other dance troupes is the amount of outreach and education work the dancers do for the community, disabled and non-disabled alike. Interestingly, however, dance troupes as well as other arts organizations are being asked how they are socially relevant and what they can give back to the community. AXIS does presentations for schools, both integrated and disabled only; hospitals; professional groups such as occupational therapists, teacher's assertions, special education departments, police departments; performances for local organizations benefiting disability groups, arts councils, etc. This was a part of the company that was not planned, but as the

company has become better known, the requests come flooding in to do disability awareness training for corporations, movement workshops with disabled children, visits to rehabilitation hospitals etc. AXIS is unique in its approach to community education and empowerment because they offer self-defense training in their dance workshops. When asked why self-defense, a few answers come out. First off, at least half the troupe members took martial arts training before starting the troupe, and so martial arts shapes the dance vocabulary, especially to give a sense of "fire" and "raw-power" into dance, Michelle. Martial arts are also taught to help people with disabilities because less likely targets for assault and abuse. The classes include assertiveness training which involves "learning to speak up for yourself and not just accept the way people treat you and the stereotype of who you are." This is an invaluable skill for people with disabilities given the history of abuse and assault by family, personal assistants, health care professionals in addition to strangers.

On an individual level, for some of the dancers in wheelchairs, exploring martial arts has given them a lot. Naomi shared what she had learned from Janis:

Janis talked about how...as a person in a wheelchair, for so long she was told that she shouldn't move and she shouldn't take up room and she should be very careful not to hurt anybody with her wheelchair. And to have the opportunity to ram into something as hard as she could and make a lot of noise was really freeing...I think she would agree that its contributed to her sense of entitlement...being able to take up more room as a person with a disability in society.

AXIS' dance classes for people with disabilities are one of the most important ways in which AXIS gives back to the community. The founder of the company shared with me some of her most memorable moments in teaching dance to physically and/or developmentally-disabled adults. She tells the poignant story of Merrit, age 62, who had never said a word in his life. He had

always lived with his mother, who spoke for him. After 2 years of working with him Talia gave Merrit an ultimatum of sorts to either stand in the corner for the rest of his life and play with his belt buckle or join the performance. That days class had finished and Talia thought Merrit had already left; he tapped her shoulder, pointed to the song he wanted to hear and began to dance. When he finished he said the first words in his life: "I want to dance." Telling this story still brings tears to Talia's eyes, she speaks of how beautiful and expressive and personal his dance was -- more moving than anything she had seen in her life. Merrit experienced a profound change from the static, isolated silence of his developmental disability to a first moment of mobile speech.

When asked how this could be more moving than all the professional dance she had seen and participated in, she answered:

It moved me differently because he had not been trained in a particular way. His movement was so pure and genuine. It was so much of who he was, without all the...screens and editing that goes on with so many dancers. I mean, it was him...it was his soul talking (Talia)

### Community Outreach to Disabled Youth

AXIS does outreach to disabled youth and many parents bring their disabled children to AXIS' performances. Richard relates a particularly touching story. After a performance that Richard felt had not gone well...he was "totally bummed," a 12 year old girl accompanied by her parents came to talk to him.

She wanted to talk to Richard and she was so excited by the fact that we'd been there dancing. She wanted to be a dancer when she was grown up. There was some role modeling that we'd done for her that put her in a different state. She was so exhilarated about the possibility that you could be a dancer in a chair. And probably she's not going to be a dancer in a wheelchair, but the fact that you show that there are all these things do-able and they're happening. And that there are all these statements that disabled people are making now. This space is available to Richard now, and that's really important to show the parents that life isn't just

something that sucks as a disabled person, that there are all these areas that are available, they're open, they're there (Richard).

AXIS was able to serve as role models for both child and parent. Both child and parents are in need of a positive outlook or vision for life with a disability. Richard said that seeing having seen AXIS perform will give the little girl a lot of positive energy which she can take back to her life and to school. "It's important that kids have these ideas and that they see that the world is available." Richard talked about how parents of disabled children over their children very much but they often think more of what their children cannot be. The parents have had a life time of negative conditioning about disability and have likely closed down to some of the magic and opportunity in the world for a person with a disability. The young girl with a disability, like other children with or without disabilities, could take the dancers as "something very natural, they don't see the novelty in us being on stage."

Another particularly memorable story was that of an 10 year old girl who came to one of Talia's movement and performance classes for people with disabilities. She got around in a puff and sip wheelchair and the only thing she could move was her eyes. (A puff and sip wheelchair is a type of wheelchair that it controlled by breathing into a tube to direct the power chair). Talia directed the class to pair up with a partner for a movement exercise. The young lady was Talia's partner. Talia said to her: "I want you to dance with your eyes. I want you to tell me a story with your eyes." Her eyes then danced, "a micro dance," a very concentrated movement expression of her soul which Talia found to be profoundly moving and evocative.

Janis and Barbara both relate an experience with disabled children which left a very strong impression on them. While performing for Boston's Dance Umbrella productions, AXIS visited a local school for disabled kids with physical

and developmental disabilities. Barbara talks about why the experience stands out for her:

So many of them didn't get the opportunity to put the music on and feel comfortable in just letting go, and seeing them interact with their teachers in a way they don't normally interact. Touching, contact, that's always a heart-wrencher, because some of these kids aren't ever going to lead full active lives, whether it be because of a lack of support within their family structure, lack of awareness of what's possible. And that once we leave, that they are never going to get that experience again, or probably never (Barbara)

The kids responded to AXIS very positively, their faces lit up, they were talkative and wanted to share themselves, they were energized. Barbara speculated on what short-term impact AXIS' visit might have and what kind of messages the kids might take home:

...hopefully that they have the inner spirit that wants to express itself in some way, whatever way that might be, and that it's possible. That difference is okay, being different is okay. There are things out in the world that they can identify with, just use your imagination, and not limit yourself (Barbara).

These are profound messages for disabled children, messages they might not hear often enough and messages that will make a huge difference in their experience of living with a disability. Janis also remembers the visit to the Boston school. Janis spoke of how painful it was for Barbara and herself.

There were a lot of kids who shouldn't have been there, or didn't need to be there. In fact, most of these kids could have functioned really well in a regular school. And Talia asked, isn't there mainstreaming? And the teacher, who was a wonderful man said, 'yes, they go home at night.' (Janis)

But the down side is that "...there's no follow-up. We're really not with the kids for that long a time to see what kind of long term impact is made. We hope that we change something in them."





## VI. AXIS AND THE NON-DISABLED COMMUNITY

Q: *What kind of reactions has AXIS gotten from the general public?*

A: *A funny story about that ... one time we were going to Boston, the first time we toured to Boston. When you are getting on and off the airplane you have to get on first and get off last because of the transferring. We were waiting to get off of the airplane ... and the stewardess came up to us and she said, 'Oh what do you guys do?' We said, 'Oh we're a dance company and we're performing with Dance Umbrella.' And she laughed and said, 'Very funny, no really what do you do?' We said, 'No really, we are a dance company and we are here to perform with Dance Umbrella.' And two or three different times she just kind of brushed it off. She really thought we were joking. And after a while we just realized that the categories people have about who you are and what art is sometimes are so rigid that they can't even hear or see what is right in front of them. It was actually humorous fortunately. (Naomi)*

### Introduction

The opening anecdote is a revealing starting place for understanding how AXIS Dance Company is first received by the general public. AXIS was traveling to perform for Dance Umbrella, one of the countries leading and most esteemed private producers, and en route the flight attendants thought the dancers were trying to pull one over on them. Common reactions to a dance troupe with half its members in wheelchairs include disbelief and plain shock. An abled/disabled dance troupe may seem like a big hoax to many, especially for those with no exposure to people with disabilities living an independent life. For many people who have had little exposure to disabled people, imagination cannot stretch far enough to envision the possibility of disabled people dancing, other than some "precious" performance by "very special dancers."

Seeing dancers in wheelchairs is bewildering for some people. The troupe is always certain to get a reaction, that is assured, people in wheelchairs dancing is not a neutral issue, consequently, people have strong opinions about AXIS, whether they love the movement or are revolted by seeing disabled people

struggling to approximate what they know as dance. As one of the dancers so succinctly summarizes the phenomena: "Sometimes it is just plain confusing to see the 'sick' up on stage performing." (Michelle) Moreover, Michelle continues:

It's up on stage versus the people with disabilities in society normally try to hide themselves or try to be inconspicuous or not to be noticed because they want to be like everybody else. We want to be like everybody else, but, we're not going to go out of our way to show ourselves off. To show off the fact that we've got bodies, you know...that's the first thing that I think jolts people right then and they're either engaged or they're revolted. (Michelle)

Disability is something we typically associate with illness, death, limitation, loss, and unhappiness. Who are these people dancing on stage! Where else would this happen? For the most part it would not happen. Where else do you see this, at the camp for children with cancer, at the hospice variety show, at the center for the mentally retarded, or on the Muscular Dystrophy Annual (MDA) Telethon. One might see kids or young adults with developmental disabilities doing a dance performance to raise money for a special school, or there might be a variety show at a rehabilitation center, or maybe the token person with a disability joins a dance company. At best the choreography would be elementary and rough, hardly a professional production. Such is the social climate and attitudes toward people with disabilities that AXIS often faces when performing or presenting workshops.

In spite of a seemingly inhospitable society with greater prejudice than imagination, AXIS brings its dance to many places and people, with, according to the dancers, audience reactions, dance critics and community organizations, overall good results. AXIS has had a broad influence on multiple communities, from the audience members who come to performances or community workshops, from disability awareness training for health professionals to theatre personnel, and finally the everyday interactions with the world. In the chapter

that follows I discuss the experiences, anecdotes, and impressions of the AXIS dancer's interactions with the non-disabled community. I chose to let the dancers do much of the talking, because I trust their words to tell the stories best. I use the term non-disabled community to cover a broad area, including: general public, audience members, institutional interactions, medical professionals, theatre producers and medical professionals.

### Commonly held stereotypes about disability

Where do we typically see disabled people? Historically, we did not see them at all because they were shut in institutions, group or nursing homes. Unfortunately, approximately 13 million of the estimated 42 million people with disabilities in the United States still spend their lives in these places as opposed to being integrated into the community. Worldwide, conditions for the estimated 450 million disabled people are much worse, infants with physical disabilities or mental illness make not be allowed to live to adulthood. The disabled people who do make it to adulthood usually never leave the back room of the family home or get access to education or employment. Conditions have improved since the 1970's birth of the Independent Living Movement worldwide and the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, but, progress is slow and much work remains.

Before continuing, it is useful to set the stage with a list of beliefs and attitudes currently held about people with disabilities, these commonly include the following: people with disabilities are child-like, helpless, a burden to their families and the social service system, asexual, mentally-deficit. Disability is not something that is showcased, except for exploitive teaching purposes in medical amphitheatres or in demeaning portrayals on Jerry Lewis' Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA) Telethon. At the other end of the spectrum of beliefs, includes the notion of some people with disabilities as "Super-crips" or

superhuman achievers such as Mark Wellman, the paraplegic who climbed El Capitan in Yosemite National Park, six inches at a time; or the man with one leg who walked across the country; or even Stephen Hawking, the brilliant physicist, with cerebral palsy. These people with disabilities are seen as courageous, as saint-like because of the success they achieve in spite of the heavy burdens and great suffering. These images are the extremes, real images of people with disabilities at work or play, with their families, living independent lives are only slowly reaching the mainstream public.

In summarizing a substantial literature on attitudes toward people with disabilities, there is a spectrum of reactions that non-disabled people experience in terms of disability (Fig. 1). There are limits to a model of this nature, and it is understood that people's reactions do not always follow a univariate linear progression. In broad strokes, at one extreme is aversion, fear or disgust, the next step is pity with please give us money for the "poor cripples," next, sympathy which is about the best people think they should do, next perhaps empathy if they have had a similar experience or themselves know a disabled person. The last stages, respect and compassion, are rarely reached in terms of the majority of attitudes towards people with disabilities.

Figure 1: Model for people's responses to people with disabilities

aversion, fear, disgust --> pity --> sympathy --> empathy --> respect & compassion

It is rare that people are moved to respect someone with a disability. Certainly, people respect someone like Mark Wellman, a super-crip paraplegic, who climbed El Capitan in Yosemite six inches at a time. But people expect to gain knowledge or respect for the average disabled person on the street or artist in performance. People think they are doing well if they are sympathetic,

supportive or empathetic, and it surprises them when they respect the performers.

Image makers from within the disabled community recognize that having access to the production and distribution of its own portrayals is critical to the success of the Independent Living Movement. With access to the media, people with disabilities are able to counter the classically demeaning images of life with a disability.

The dancers in AXIS are important image makers within the disabled and non-disabled communities and their work stands in clear contrast to the images of disability put forth by the MDA Telethon:

We tend to equalize people in Axis, where people have disabilities in the company and they are equal members and they are seen as that. One person is not above another person, or we don't have this patronizing image, or the needy kind of image, whatever it is. That's not what we're about. Images of collaboration, people together and really being together, whatever it is. Even in our photographs that you see, that's very true, somebody is seen as able, not unabled. But they're able. It's not like you're seeing somebody all curled up or shut down or something, or help this poor child. (Talia)

Our conditioning around understanding disability is the work of many generations. From the time most children can remember, they have been instructed not to stare at people with disabilities. The curiosity of a young child is hastily cut short and the inquiring gaze best politely averted. As a visibly-disabled person, you are likely to find adults consciously and consistently avoiding contact. A disabled body in our society is mostly a source of shame and embarrassment, it is not something to show off or spotlight. Having a visible physical disability in the world creates a sort of "Red Sea effect," where the people on your path avoid contact, not wanting to get too close, not wanting to make eye contact.

This is the "societal code" where the "AB's" (able-bodied persons) agree not to look, and the "Crips" (persons with disabilities) agree not to be visible. Dancers who became disabled through spinal cord injuries relate the story of the long period after the accident wherein they "... spent a long time just sitting still and trying to hide and not be seen." (Daniel) Many people with disabilities speak about trying to take up as little space as possible to draw the least attention to them -- a difficult task when arriving almost anywhere in a wheelchair makes for the "Red Sea" effect. This way of living with a disability is both expected and conditioned from the moment the doctor delivers the tragic news.

These are powerful and pervasive views about disability and in some form, this is what AXIS faces every time they go on stage. A disabled person is not supposed to display themselves on stage. "Viewing AXIS creates cognitive dissonance because of the power of social stereotyping and expectations that are so ingrained ... How can this be?" (Michelle) Ed Roberts has a wonderful quote about how he chose to live his life after becoming disabled by polio, he said, "Well, I knew people would be staring at me all the time, so I just decided that I would be a star." By the same token, one of the dancers notes that in many ways it was easy to make the transition to the stage because she was so accustomed to being stared at by the public.

#### How the dancers think their work affects the audience

In the research process, I wanted to engage the dancers as my collaborators in both description and analysis of AXIS experience. I inquired about how they thought their work affected the audience, especially people without disabilities. How does AXIS' dance counter the common media portrayals of people with disabilities as the needy child, asexual adult, "Super-crip," enlightened saint, or the bitter enraged victim? Janis talks about the first thing that needs to happen as a humanizing process, where the audience can see people with disabilities

"...in a way that we're allowed to have the same emotions and the same desires and the same wishes for our lives that people who aren't disabled have." Janis is talking about respect and validation, as Richard talks about:

There's also something that has to do with respect. I have heard from my own friends back home in Germany, statements like, 'I think if I had an accident, and I'd be in a chair I'd kill myself.' This is what a lot of people say. A lot of ABs [able-bodied persons] say. So even though they can accept you as a friend and but you know that there is always this underlying issue of that they wouldn't be able to deal with my life and stuff like that. And I think that there a lot of false assumptions about a disabled life in able bodied people's minds. And the more you make statements about who you are and how complete you are and how big and encompassing your life is, the more they get it - and sometimes people think that but they don't feel it. So it's not really available on a all-body level, and I think when you make statements in language like dance, or other artistic expressions, they believe it more, it gets under the skin, as opposed to just in their heads. (Richard)

How does AXIS' dance accomplish this? Janis, talks about how when AXIS is on stage people have a chance to really see:

I think it gives people a chance to stare at us, you know we have this whole taboo against looking at disabled people and talking to disabled people, let alone touching disabled people and climbing all over their wheelchair, so it's just the act of getting up on stage and you know art is wonderful in that you can say a lot and you can change attitudes and you can inspire people and you can leave people with a good feeling without having to shake the finger at them and having to say, 'you should feel this way and you should feel that way.' It's kind of a softer, gentler approach in some senses. And so all of a sudden people get a chance to watch us and the wheelchairs don't become scary, they become a wonderful instruments that do this and more and you know they get you really to watch us and look at us and you know realize that 'Gee maybe we're human, too.'

Janis continues:

We get up on stage and people have an hour and a half or two hours to stare at us and pretty soon they don't see the wheelchairs any more, they see people in wheelchairs. They get a chance to see that people are human, we are people first. We are not our equipment and we're not just



our disability, though I wouldn't say I'm not my disability because it effects every part of my life. They see that it is more than that. (Janis)

Talia furthers the same theme, sarcastically pointing out what a reach and what a novelty it is for people to see disabled people as human beings.

AXIS gives people permission to look and see. And they're actually able to see something, 'Oh, my God,' (sarcastically) and then they're able to look and see something, 'OOH,' they're able to look and see somebody be a human being. Then they're able to look and see somebody be expressive in a human body, which is really what a dancer is, they're using their body to express something. (Talia)

Seeing AXIS means coming to terms with disability in a way that most people have never had to do before. All most people know about disability are the taboos, the stereotypes because most non-disabled people have not had significant contact with disabled people.

One of the most important elements in AXIS' work is the way their humanity comes through for the audience, which is something that does not come through in the reductionist caricature of a stereotype. One part of seeing another person's humanity means seeing that they have the same hopes, fears, and desires that you, the "able-bodied person" possess. Seeing another person's humanity means dissolving the "Other." Part of the connectedness that occurs is interpreted by one member through Buddhist philosophy. "If you begin to not see everybody else as Other, you can begin to treat people nice. And treat people the way you want to be treated, and that all has an effect." (Janis) AXIS' work affects its audiences on an emotional level that allows people to connect their shared humanity with the dancers.

People see not only the movement of chairs but people in chairs, and I think that at their deepest level they feel what that intention is about, what that focus and desire is about, and, so at that level it has nothing to do with disability. It has to do with our humanity, and again, our strengths, our weaknesses, our vulnerability, our foibles; it's like, when

my arabesque doesn't look like somebody else's I think people sense that "Ahh, but you know that's still ... it's still a joyous movement." I think movement takes on truly more that sense of what is the emotion behind this because it doesn't look like any arabesque I've ever seen at the Bolshoi, so ... yet, there's still a communication of human life and expression. And at that level I know that it's art. There's just no question in my mind that it is. It's not fooling around or pretending that we're dancers because when I'm up there I'm not pretending. It's like "I AM" (laughs) and ... and I think people feel that level of honesty. (Michelle)

I asked Michelle what message she thought the audience might get from seeing AXIS perform? Her response will always stay in my mind:

... Again, whether it's conscious or not, or whether they can articulate it or not, I hope and think that they get a message that a body that at first was just a disabled body and sort of carried all the baggage of disability with it, became more human, was mobile, was fluid, was powerful, was supportive, expressed humor, expressed gladness, expressed pain, joy, etc. Again, just that this is not a body, just a body. There is a human being here, and it sounds probably all too obvious, but I think that is what can happen to the audience. (Michelle)

They get a very powerful message about the potential in a body that just looked like a burden and a disappointment. "Like there's far more potential in the body that you thought just had limitations." (Michelle) Michelle's answer gets to the heart of bridging difference and building collaborative coalitions, seeing your shared humanity with the stigmatized "Other."

Naomi has another insightful response to the same question about what message the audience receives. She believes much of the power of AXIS' dance on audiences comes through because of how AXIS puts itself out in the world:

By in large we don't do pieces that make a statement about disability, but I think that just by virtue of being on stage and doing what we do ... I find it has a much more powerful effect on people ... I think if we got up there and said, 'This is what disability is or this is what you should think about it,' that people would really be turned off. But I think because we get up there and we just do art, people go, 'Wow I never realized that this is what I thought about disability,' or 'Wow I never realized this is what I thought about dance.' (Naomi).

Why does AXIS' work touch people? Daniel says that audience members may be thinking about how they themselves are not dancers, are not performers and then:

They see these people go out there who's bodies don't have nearly the functionality as the person in the audience who's sitting there and yet they go out and they put themselves out on stage, put their heart into it, they're really in their movement and they reach at the audience in a way where the audience feels communicated to touch that something and there's something special in that. (Daniel)

I asked Richard about what he hopes his audiences will get about disability? He thinks of people's abilities on a continuum, instead of a hierarchy with a sharp divide between us and them, the able-bodied and the disabled.

If people really thought about disabled and able-bodied as a continuum of what a body can be -- that a body grows from like young to old, from physically very capable or physically not so capable of having all kinds of different forms and shapes and capabilities. But the continuum is the important thing and you're somewhere in this continuum and your place changes, not only is it that you grow older, but you can have diseases and pains and disabilities. I think that more than 60% [of people] will have been, when they're really old, will have been using a wheelchair at some point in their lives. So a wheelchair is something that will be happening to most of us, even though that usually the people out on the street would never think that that would ever happen to them, but it will just be a few days in the hospital or when they get old. It has a lot to do with the values that we have in our society, being old and being physically not capable and not physically well, it's just not cool. (Richard)

AXIS' dance gives non-disabled people a new vision of disability, a new framework to build from for future interactions, instead of drawing only from negative and limiting stereotypes.

So people see us, and see what we're doing and I think that people are able to generalize that out, so the next time they see a disabled person, they might not look at them like they would have them before. You know, I've had people come up to me, you know on feet, and say, 'God I wish I could move like you do.' That is a really interesting thing to have happen. I can't walk, I would love to be able to walk; but here's this

person who can walk, run and move and they come up and say, 'God I wish I could move like you do.' You know, people never consider that. They never consider that maybe a wheelchair could be fun. (Janis)

Janis was quite surprised to hear someone from the audience say that they wish they could move like her, a high-level quadriplegic. In terms of attitudes towards people with disabilities there is an inoculation effect whereby one initially good interaction with a disabled person can help them to meet the next disabled person with a more positive and open outlook. The positive first contact gives the person a reference touchstone for future interactions.

The essential part of the new vision presented to the audience is the collaboration between dancers with and without disabilities. In the dance, the two groups make contact in a real-time, exciting, innovative way. In the collaboration, much of the stigma and shame attached to the physical appearance of a person with a disability falls away, diminishing the fear and the physical distance between groups. Traditionally, people with bodies shaped differently, or with parts that do not function like the rest of society are forced to hide themselves, the dance collaboration on stage reclaims a societal space for people with and without disabilities.

But trying to explain why and how AXIS affects people the way it does is still somewhat mystifying.

To tell you the truth, sometimes I have no idea why our work does what it does. But I just know the feedback that we get. Maybe we don't get bad feedback. Maybe people are afraid to tell us when they don't like our work! We have had people tell us stuff, especially the more people get used to it, the more critical they are able to be. Which is fine. But I just know that we have dozens of people, usually always, we all have people come up to us and say, 'Wow.' I was sitting in a restaurant the other night and this woman was sitting next to us at the table and she said, 'Do you dance with AXIS?' And I said, 'Yeah, I do," and she said, 'Well, I haven't seen you for about three years but I saw you about three years ago and when I was really jaded on performances, but I have to say that I really enjoyed what you did.' I don't know why she enjoyed it. I don't know - is

it because we're courageous or inspirational? Who knows? In some ways, who cares? It's kind of a mystery to us sometimes. We just kind of look at each other and say, what is this about? Why does this do what it does? Why do people even like this? I don't know. (Janis)

Richard talks about the performer-audience connection. His work is on one hand very personal and a result of dedicated introspection, but then it is also a sharing, interactive work with the audience. "What you show, what you do kind of travels away from being your thing to everybody else's. And it's not that you give up responsibility for it, but it definitely takes on a life of its own, and it does a lot of things." As a performer, Richard states his challenge as such:

How can I do things that are really for myself, and on the other hand, how can I use the things that are in myself to come out in performance, that will help other people to have experiences? That's all I ask for. That you provide something that people can have an emotional experience, that could be like a kinesthetic experience or something where they just get in touch with their own stuff, triggered by images or works.

### Tokenism?

Whether or not AXIS felt like the reception from producers and audiences takes the form of token appreciation is an important question to ask. Currently, many arts organizations, institutions, and businesses simply try to superficially comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act requirements and funding mandates for diversity. Moreover, in a time of political correctness, many audience members are paralyzed by the idea of saying or doing something inappropriate with respect to disability. I asked the AXIS dancers if they had ever felt like the company has been treated as the token disabled group? Did they feel genuinely accepted by the audience? Janis said that at first AXIS worried about that people just clapping because they were disabled:

We worried about that. When we did our first piece, we got a standing ovation. We thought, why is that? Is it because there are disabled people on stage and isn't that quite, or isn't that wonderful or great, or oh my

God, I can't believe they are doing that, you know. Or is that we are doing good art? So we kind of, I mean we look back on the first few pieces we did then and we can't really believe that we performed them in public. But people liked what we were doing right away and we got good feedback from critics and audience, disabled and non disabled and from other dancers and other choreographers. So I think there are a lot, I see a lot of disabled artists who maybe aren't doing that great of work but they are getting these huge amounts of applause, and I think that's tokenism. However, I think there are some people who like to include us because we are unique and we are different; and I don't know if that is tokenism or not. We have a good following, and sometimes people like to cash in on that, but I wouldn't say too much that we have been tokenized. There have been a few instances where it kind of borders on that. I am working with a producer now who... she's kind of in the Jerry Lewis mentality (Janis)

Though the situation has improved, AXIS cannot simply go in and dance, a production generally requires that the theatre producers, technical crew, promoters and journalists be educated about disability issues.

Interestingly, one dance troupe member notes that AXIS perhaps has had less financial success because they do not live in an urban area where they are a novelty, and "Oh isn't that wonderful," and here is some pity money. In areas like Cleveland, Ohio and Atlanta, Georgia the dance troupes with disabled dancers have in some ways had more success and more media coverage, in those places it is still a sort of "OHH isn't that wonderful.... Who would've thought? OH MY GAWD, aren't they amazing kind of thing." (Janis)

#### Anecdotes from the Audience

The dancers shared many anecdotes of responses to AXIS' work from performances and other public appearances. Again, in collecting anecdotes from the dancers, there are numerous potential biases to the data. The anecdotes are the dancers' personal recollections, many from quick conversation moments after a performance. The sample may also be skewed because people who do not like a performance are not likely to come backstage.

Regarding the AXIS audience, especially in the San Francisco Bay Area, AXIS draws a diverse crowd, however, the majority of the audience is not disabled, Daniel estimates that maybe ten percent of the audience members have disabilities. AXIS' work has appeal beyond just the disability community. Audience reactions are varied, taking in a full spectrum of emotional responses. According to the artistic director, AXIS does not hope for everyone to love the performance, AXIS has succeeded if they get people to feel, whether that be joy, excitement, sorrow, pity, anger, disgust. AXIS gets the full spectrum of responses from those who do not consider what AXIS does to be dance to those who saying how incredible AXIS is and "you're doing art, that is art!!" (Liane) The dancers grant that there may be some sympathy votes, but overall they do not believe the company is getting awards and grants just for putting wheelchairs on stage:

But that's not the major reason why people walk away feeling good about [AXIS'] work. I don't have this sense of them patronizing us and saying... which happens so much in disability art, you know, 'Oh isn't it wonderful that those folks got up and did this.' (Daniel)

Liane, a dancer since age four, has people ask her about the kind of company she is in and Liane tells them it is a modern company with disabled and non-disabled dancers collaborating, the reactions range anywhere from "Cool!!! to REALLY???" She finds herself sensitive to these judgments and the only way she can convey what the company is all about is to encourage people to see it for themselves.

One of the classic responses to hearing about AXIS "dance troupe" is shock. People are shocked to hear Janis, a high-level quadriplegic, say she dances in a professional company. "It's not something that they see...that most people would even see as a possibility. Let alone a reality." (Janis) The interchange is predictable:

'What do you mean you dance? How do you do that? Can you walk?' 'No,' that is one of the first questions they say, 'Oh, you can get out of your wheelchair?' 'No,' and then there's this blank look, like they can't even imagine, you know, how that might be able to happen with somebody who's in a wheelchair and who's very obviously disabled [who] can dance." (Janis)

People have a high level of curiosity about exactly how people in wheelchairs dance. Audiences are also often surprised at AXIS' level of professionalism, likely because they expected nothing more than a "very special dance performance." Audiences may not necessarily expect to be moved or find the dance beautiful.

There was like there was this expectation that what we would produce wouldn't move them, it wouldn't be beautiful, and it wouldn't be at the professional level that we're at. So I think there's a real surprise to the professionalism that we bring. And that's always kind of interesting, because it's like, 'Well, what did you expect, we would get up on stage and, you know, make fools of ourselves?' (laughs) But, that's a pretty common reaction. (Barbara)

Audiences respond positively to the professionalism of the performances, but more important than putting on a professional show for Daniel is the response that "people walk away feeling full, like they've had an emotional experience that is uplifting, inspiring, (pause) that has touched them in some way."

Richard says that he also thinks the emotional impact of the dances is surprising for the able-bodied (aka AB) audience members, first-time viewers really do not know what to expect they think: Will it be professional? Will I be repulsed by the bodies? Will the dance move me? AXIS consciously tries to engage the audience with their choreography in a way that keeps them from being passive viewers, hopefully "... they are drawn into something that is intense enough to evoke emotional feedback." (Richard) Richard continues:

And this is something I find very important when it comes to quality of art. I'd like to do something where I don't let people do that [stay in their



heads]. I don't want them to have the freedom to do that. I want to drag them to this place where they have to make experiences. (Richard)

Clearly unless the non-disabled person has had previous contact with the disabled community, they are coming in with a definitive preconditioned set of notions and stereotypes about disabilities, and they may not be expecting much. They are not sure quite what they are going get, or they are repulsed at first, and so it is a very different experience than someone who has been living with a disability or in some way associated with that community.

Naomi relates a response from a new employee at the World Institute on Disability, who is himself non-disabled. The new employee was surprised at how accessible, and that does not mean simplistic, AXIS' dance was for him:

A relatively new employee said to me, 'Oh I saw your video at the Berkeley festival. I haven't seen much dance, but what I've seen of it I don't usually appreciate that much, but I really appreciated what you did.' And I said, 'Well what was it that you liked about it?' He said, 'It was very accessible ... you know a lot of what I've seen is very abstract, it's very removed from my experience, it just goes right over my head, but with this, I felt like I could relate to it.' And this is a non-disabled person speaking, and a lot of people give me that feedback. (Naomi)

Accessibility should be a reciprocal process, instead of being seen as a societal burden on the able-bodied, tax-paying population. What is the difference between viewing a dance troupe like AXIS and say Alvin Ailey? Is there a different message indicated by an able-bodied or different body. What happens when you add disability to the mix? Usually, there is a distinct and understood separation between audience and dance professionals. AXIS makes dance accessible for the audience in a new way. When people see AXIS they think:

That could be my next-door neighbor, that could be me, that could be any one of the people I know and it brings it more home and there's not as much of a separation of them and us." (Barbara)

With AXIS the dancers are not at such a great social distance and the audience seems to feel that they share more with the dancers.

Naomi also talked about how friends of hers were surprised at how seeing AXIS perform made them think about their relationships to their bodies and to disability:

Friends of mine who come to see shows, who I'm sure come just because they're my friends and because I asked them to come, they'll come up to me afterwards with this look like "wow" and say, 'this just made me look at how I feel about my body, how I feel about touching people, how I feel about disability,' I mean all sorts of things. (Naomi)

Naomi makes two important points, first that AXIS' performances are "accessible" and second that getting people to examine their assumptions in this way is at the heart of what political change is all about. Michelle, one of the current dancers, talked about how seeing AXIS made her examine her notions of what dance could be and who could be a dancer:

We think that dance has to look a certain way...and then with AXIS you see fluidity and grace being exercised by people whom we don't normally think of as having fluidity and grace... it just kind of knocked over my other sort of pre-conceptions of dance on stage. (Michelle)

Through dance, AXIS makes real new possibilities within disability and a new model collaboration between the disabled and non-disabled. AXIS provides non disabled people with something they want -- real images of disabled people.

Through the choreography the audience finds a shared humanity, that they perhaps would not find in seeing a traditional ballet troupe.

It's not ballet taken to a certain form and dramatic, but it's something that's really real, unpretentious and it's not taking anybody beyond themselves, really, you know, but taking ourselves and where we are and how we're moving and bringing it together and having this ... this vision, this common vision together and ... sharing it with the audience, you know, sharing it with society. (Liane)

AXIS gives the audience a totally new vision of disability and collaboration:

You know people saying God, I didn't know a wheelchair could move that way or was or could be that beautiful or I had no that idea that somebody who's disabled could dance. I actually had somebody come up to me who said "You know, it really surprised me that I felt myself being jealous of how you moved and I never, ever considered that I might envy somebody who was disabled" Because often we're just the objects of pity and scorn and disgust and repulsion and (pause) those are some of the most common ones, it just ....being so surprised that....and also touched that people who are so very different can find a common language together, you know, that...people who aren't disabled and who are these incredible athletic dancers and people who are disabled aren't seen as incredible or athletic or as dancers can work together and find some kind of language.  
(Janis)

Getting people to examine their relationship to their bodies and to disability through the medium of dance gets to the heart of making positive societal change for people with disabilities. The links between the arts and social change in the disability rights movement become clearer with anecdotes of this nature.

#### Dance Therapy for the Audience

One well known San Francisco Bay Area dance critic contends that what AXIS does is not dance, but rather, dance therapy. Interestingly, in the anecdotes shared by the dancers, I got the sense that it was much more "therapeutic" for the audience. Janis talked about how people see AXIS and then are able to feel better about themselves and their movement potential:

People see us moving and, you know we're disabled and, GAWD, if WE can move and be dancers than surely they can do it to. We have people say that all of the time: 'Seeing AXIS really made me feel better about myself.'

Some of the most common responses to AXIS' performances are very personal, coming from the many people who loved to dance but were told that they did not have the right body. Janis talks about a typical response:

Pretty normal Joe or Jane America saying you know I've always wanted to dance and I was told as a young kid that I was too fat or I was too this, or I was too that and I feel really differently now. (Janis)

Clearly, for many, when dance as an avenue of self-expression was cut off, they experienced great pain. The artistic director shared the story non-disabled man who sent one-hundred pages from his diary on how seeing AXIS had changed his life and healed him of some very deep emotional wounds from physical abuse as a child. With AXIS people realize that "there is no right body."

(Michelle) Almost every dancer related a story about different teary-eyed non-disabled women coming backstage after the performance:

This woman came up to me and she was teary eyes...she said to me, 'I love to dance and as a child I loved to dance and they told me that I just did not have the right body, but watching you dance up there I realized that there is no right body.' There was a connection again with this sense of vulnerability...other than your standard ballet body. Where, it's like everyone has this potential in them. (Michelle)

AXIS gives a gift to the able bodied community that they didn't know that they were going to get. "We have a standard in this society of what is beautiful and what is normal and there actually are very few people who fit into that." (Janis) Richard says that the reactions of audience members with disabilities are quite different from those without disabilities. When disabled people come backstage, they talk about how glad they are that AXIS exists and how AXIS is making a definitive statement about being out and being disabled. The disabled audience members speak from a clear place of recognition, valuing the political importance of the dance.

Audience members are touched by the vulnerability and honesty in AXIS' performance, and the dancers willingness to expose themselves seems to allow the audiences to access that same place in themselves:

I think also that ... a lot of our art and a lot of our performance kind of comes from our life experience, and I think people are touched by seeing real portrayals of other people's lives and honesty about that and vulnerability. (Janis)

The responses of the audience to AXIS are different from those responses to traditional dance troupes... why? Again the themes of "honesty" and "vulnerability, "being personable," and willing to show your imperfection come up. Interestingly these traits make AXIS' performance accessible to the audience in a way that is quite different from traditional dance performance.

I think because we are so honest and personable with our performances that we become accessible, that those emotions become accessible to people watching. And questions are asked to. I think it's very provocative that people ask questions as well. A lot of people said they turned a corner at our last performance, that they're not the same person who came in. Something has been changed in them forever. (Talia)

These seem like such selfish responses, but they make an interesting counterpoint for critics of AXIS who say that what AXIS does is dance therapy for themselves, a version of self-indulgent victim art.

The dancers certainly must tire of always being there for people's disability awareness training, at some time it would probably be nice to not have to deal with hearing how special this is, and "Oh I didn't know people in wheelchairs could dance," "I always thought disability was a total tragedy," "My stereotypes about disability have always been, etc." and then audience members coming back stage in tears. Obviously the dances have a big emotional impact on able-bodied people, but at a certain point it probably will be a relief when AXIS is no longer such a novelty and they can simply be appreciated and critiqued for their artistry. Richard relates the story of how able-bodied come back and tell of the tragedies of their lives or people they know who have dealt with disability.

I can listen to somebody's gut wrenching stories about their accident and stuff of course it touches me, but I have lots of friends who've had that,

and I've even had - I'll never forget this - I had this friend in Munich who when she told me - somebody I had met on vacation and we exchanged letters and then two years later I happen to visit her and that was just after she'd had a big accident. And she was shocked about me not being totally impressed and drawn into her big story, and I mean it was hard to describe but I felt like saying to her, 'Well I have lots of friends who've gone through a lot more than you and of course it is horrible and I see how big it is, but get a grip, you'll have a life, and I'm not gonna cry with you.'  
(Richard)

### Negative reactions to AXIS

Assessing individuals negative reactions to AXIS' dance is likely to be biased because I am asking the dancers for their experiences. Again, it is likely that the audience members who do not like the performances do not come up afterwards to share their thoughts with the dancers. Furthermore, what AXIS is doing is such a novelty, people have not figured out what to do with it yet. In fact, reviewers are only in the last couple years offering more critical feedback. AXIS certainly does not want to be sheltered from criticism, because that perpetuates the traditional patronizing attitudes towards people with disabilities. Finally, it is important to remember that there may be negative responses to the dance itself, to the craft, the music, the choreography -- things that have nothing to do disability issues. Naomi shared a story of a non-disabled woman's reactions to her dance with a wheelchair. Naomi is non-disabled herself. In response to the "Red Dress" piece:

I've had non disabled women say they don't like that piece because they thought just the tone of it trivialized women's sexuality. They weren't even reacting to the disability stuff. (Naomi)

With those caveats up front, I will continue. Returning to Michelle, who states one of the key issues: "Sometimes it is just plain confusing to see the "sick" up on stage performing" (Michelle) Michelle speaks of the cognitive dissonance stimulated by seeing the "sick up on stage performing." There are apt to be mixed emotions. AXIS' work does not touch or move everyone in the audience.

Many of the negative reactions likely reflect deeply held negative stereotypes about disability.

I asked each of the dancers about any negative reactions they had received from audience members. Almost every dancer relates the story of the visiting psychiatrist from Russia, a friend of one of the dancers with disabilities, who walked out in the middle of the performance. She was apparently nauseated by the performance and thought that it was disgusting to see disabled people on stage trying to do something that was dance. To some watching the disabled dancers may look like watching a struggle. This psychiatrist comes from a culture where people with disabilities are treated extremely poorly, as Janis says:

In Russia most of the disabled people are still shut up in their homes or locked away. They don't see them out in the streets. And she just thought it was just unbearable to watch disabled people and to look at disabled people. And that's the most extreme response that we've gotten and really haven't gotten bad feedback. (Janis)

People with disabilities are not supposed to be on stage, they belong hidden, or in the back room, a disability is nothing to want to announce to the world. As Richard says:

It's a different story if you go out there as a person who is not supposed to be up on the stage, a disabled body does not belong on the stage, and there's still a lot of people who would never take a look at us, and I've had friends tell me that some of their friends badly wanted to leave after the first half of one of our shows because they couldn't deal with, like, wheelchairs on stage. (Richard)

Richard believes that for a lot of people seeing AXIS they feel "a very strong repulsion" toward seeing disabled people. Where does this repulsion stem from? It is certainly complex and there are many layers to these reactions. Michelle thinks that "... people from more European cultures or cultures that are so into their ballet or whatever, especially, can easily be very, very revolted. This is actually a response that I do yet completely understand, but, one common

theme seems to be that the individuals who are so strongly repelled cannot deal with their own vulnerability. Why did the Russian psychiatrist walk out? Barbara believes she was pained because AXIS brought the issue of disability home, in other words, that could be me up there. Richard says that "... it is very frightening for them that somebody like us actually exists and that there's this slight possibility that they could be in that state too."

### Community Outreach

AXIS does a significant amount of educational outreach, something that is unusual for a dance company. When professional organizations or businesses such as Wells Fargo Bank or Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) want to do disability awareness training they often call on AXIS. The list of AXIS' community contacts is extensive including the Governor's Committee for Employment for people with disabilities, law enforcement agencies, community organizers, and arts institutions. AXIS also runs community classes including a youth program, dance and life story workshops, and martial arts training. Over the last four years, AXIS has been doing much more outreach and is expanding into the AXIS Foundation to serve as the umbrella organization for the company's dance troupe and community outreach. The expansion into education and outreach is a natural progression for the company, over the almost ten years since the founding of the company. There are plans for a book in 1996 or 1997. Moreover, this expansion AXIS' mission will provide an alternative funding stream at a time when arts funding has been dramatically reduced and when arts funders are asking artists to do work that is socially relevant.

### Youth program

In 1995, AXIS set up an Oakland youth program for non disabled and disabled youth to learn dance, movement, performance and martial arts techniques. If opportunities for adults with disabilities are scarce, opportunities



for young people with disabilities to dance are non-existent. Programs such as these are important contributions to the community. This early collaboration through dance with the young people will be critical in shaping how the youth see themselves and how the young people think about disability. In my reading and in hearing the stories of many individuals who were disabled from birth, the early school years were often some of the worst years, a time of isolation, of difference, a time when they were mercilessly teased or excluded from their peers. Healing this time, re-framing disability and building bridges can make a huge difference in the lives of these kids.

In approaching the youth program, Naomi says that the first thing they work with is demystifying disability. Demystifying disability means talking about one's life, what we do in a typical day. Youth are encouraged to talk about what their images of disability. As soon as possible the youth are encouraged to explore their movement potential together and begin learning elementary principles of choreography, with the goal of putting on a performance at the end of the term.

### Arts professionals

AXIS has had various experiences working with dance producers. Janis remembers one producer in San Luis Obispo, during a rehearsal, who said, "Well, we'll put the wheelchairs over here and the normal people over here." Clearly, this producer had not had much experience with disabled artists. Previous to professional groups such as AXIS, the arts world experience of disabled artists had mostly been with what is called "very special arts." This was a type of "sheltered art world" for the physically and developmentally disabled. where, as Janis says, "you dress developmentally disabled kids up in tu-tus and they go up on stage and they spin around a couple times and everybody claps and says, 'isn't it wonderful?'" The arts world has the same conceptions of disability

as the general public: "It is really hard to see a disabled person as somebody who's mature, intelligent, can speak for ourselves, knows what's going on."  
(Janis)

AXIS has also been working for many years on educating funding organizations and foundations about disability culture and improving diversity. AXIS has received grants from the major arts funders in the United States, including the National Endowment for the Arts, the California Arts Council, and the Rockefeller Foundation. AXIS constantly has to deal with access issues and educational issues on top of just doing their art. Any producer that brings AXIS in to perform gets an education in the Americans with Disabilities Act. Producers need to arrange such things as accessible hotels, bathrooms and stage ramps; wheelchair seating for the audience; sign language interpreters and so forth. Hopefully the days of getting cattle-truck lifted onto stages are over.

### Dance Workshops

AXIS offers regular dance classes open to the community, disabled and non-disabled. These classes were started in response to the outpouring of interest expressed by audience members and others seeing AXIS. Attendants and medical professionals often attend the classes. In the classes the paradigm is shifted, the helpers are not just doing things for or to people with disabilities, instead they get a chance to dance with the people who are normally their clients, employers or patients. The dance interaction creates a sort of equalization of power, doing away with much of the traditional hierarchy and dependent-independent, helpee-helper dynamic. The classes show a way of working together in a collaborative fashion. In the dance workshops, for example with contact improvisation, the teachers hope to impart mostly basic dance principles, but along with the dance comes other issues when working people who have different abilities.

### Life Story Workshops

In the life story workshops Talia has participants tell their life stories through movement. She feels that giving people the opportunity to tell their stories gives their lives meaning and allows them to see themselves and their relationships to others more clearly. Talia describes how movement and/or dance is integrated into the workshop:

I like for the life story to be recognized or realized in the body and through the body, which means that somebody is really inhabiting their life, or whatever that story is, they come to terms with it. It's almost like they get to meet their life for the first time. That's what I do at life stories workshops. It's also a way for people to communicate back and forth, and have a platform for bringing up stuff that maybe normally they wouldn't bring up. In social situations, giving them permission to really explore and excavate and look into areas of themselves that they normally wouldn't. It's not a therapy thing, tell me everything you did, and your mother. It's different. Literally life stories. What happened to somebody from the time they were born onward. (Talia)

### Martial arts training

AXIS also offers martial arts workshops. Why is a dance troupe teaching martial arts? First, a bit of history, many of the core members of the dance troupe met while doing martial arts together, consequently, vocabulary from martial arts informs their choreography. The dancers have found that teaching some basic martial arts techniques have been valuable for both youth and adults, disabled and non-disabled people.

Talia talks about why AXIS teaches martial arts:

It offers a sense of empowerment in the body, a feeling of being in their body. This is a lot of what we do. People finally getting their bodies to be expressive, and I've said this, Janis has said this, probably Barbara as well. The fact that she sat still for seven years after she became disabled, and nobody came up to her and worked with her on that is hideous, terrible. A lot of being human is about being expressive, having your own sense of expression. In whatever way that would be. The way we engage with the world. (Talia)

## Conclusion

Through dance performance and community outreach AXIS is making a difference, improving the quality of life for people with disabilities and providing a new model for mutually rewarding collaboration between the disabled and non-disabled communities. Within the disability rights movement, AXIS is providing real images of disabled people:

I mean, we've come a long, long way and there's a long, long way to go around acknowledging individuals with disabilities. And it's acknowledging them in a way with all of ... in their fullest sense, not in some elevated sense, not in some condescending way .. there are foibles and strengths and all of that, too. (Michelle)

AXIS is putting forth a new vision, allowing non-disabled people to see disability differently and thereby allowing disabled people to be different in the world, hopefully to be seen with greater empathy and respect. Barbara explains how this phenomena works and how societal constructs can begin to be re-created, re-  
visioned through seeing an AXIS performance:

In terms of performing I think we're allowing people to look at us, stare at us, giving people the freedom to see us in a different way without them being judged and that in turn allows them to see us in a different way, which in turn allows us to be different in the world. (Barbara)

Social change is an incremental process and it is more than passing legislation, as Liane says: "People can change their buildings but they can still stand at their storefront with an attitude." Changing attitudes and deeply held beliefs will require an open communication. AXIS is one of the places that allows this communication to take place. Talking about the community dance workshops which she leads, Talia talks about the experience of a person with and without a disability moving and dancing together for the first time:

You have issues around touching somebody for the first time who is in a wheelchair, and you have issues of what their body can and can't do and

suddenly you're having to talk to somebody about that. 'What can your body do?' 'Does it hurt when I sit on your lap?' 'No, that's okay.' 'How does your wheelchair work?' 'Ohhhh, okay.' 'How do you feel about being on my wheelchair, is that okay for you?' 'Does that hurt your feet when you stand on my wheelchair?' 'Can I use your cane for a minute?' Suddenly people are talking about this stuff. It's great. I love teaching these workshops, short-term, maybe just a day long, or an hour or two hours long, because I get people in the room, and a lot of times people don't know anything about each other, and within ten minutes they're touching, they're moving around the room, they're laughing, they're creating, their bodies are in whole new places they've never been, new shapes, and rhythms. What a way to communicate, to get people to speak together. Dance is so powerful in that way, a wonderful tool for that.  
(Talía)

## VII. COLLABORATION

*The mission of AXIS Dance Troupe is to create and perform dances that demonstrate collaboration between people with and without disabilities. AXIS expands ideas about human potential by challenging attitudes toward art and disability. AXIS is committed to providing and supporting classes, workshops, and presentations that encourage and inspire people of all abilities to move and dance. AXIS works cooperatively with others to promote, advance, and share ideas on local, national and international levels*

*-AXIS Dance Troupe Mission Statement*

### Introduction

The first sentence of AXIS' mission statement is about modeling a collaboration between people with and without disabilities. Curious as to why this is part of AXIS' mission statement, I explored the elements of collaboration in the development of AXIS' craft. The company's commitment to collaboration gives rise to some of the most interesting aspects and potentials of the troupe. Collaboration is one of the keys to AXIS' success. This newer model for interactions between people with and without disabilities is one of the pearls that the research revealed.

There are very few places where a true collaboration, based on mutual respect, is modeled between the disabled and non-disabled. Some of the prevailing stereotypes of people with disabilities is that they are childlike, helpless and incapable of mature, intimate relationships. In fact this is more than an abstraction, individuals with power over the lives of disabled persons have kept them from having relationships, having sex, marrying and having children. The history of disabled people includes forced sterilization of people who have been institutionalized.

Collaboration is a new model for people with disabilities, historically roles and opportunities for people with disabilities have been minimal and dismal. In

the early part of the century the approach to people with developmental and/or physical disabilities was that of social control of mental and physical defectives. As they were called, the crippled, the lame, the mentally-infirm, the invalids were warehoused in institutions, medicated and effectively isolated from the rest of society. A little known fact is that before Adolph Hitler commenced with his final solution for the Jews, Gypsies and homosexuals, he killed 200,000 mentally and physically disabled people residing in institutions. Sadly, even today we continue a version of Hitler's final solution when we decide that babies with certain chromosomal abnormalities like Down's Syndrome or Huntington's disease should be aborted; or when we deny medical treatment to infants born with "abnormalities." We are also too quick to offer people with disabilities the right-to-die, to supposedly end the long suffering of life with a severe disability.

Institutionalization continues to be a model of choice for people with disabilities, though conditions have improved. People with disabilities are often placed in group homes or nursing homes. Activities for people with disabilities are traditionally in rehabilitation settings or sheltered workshops where "usually it's things that are being done to or for disabled people."

It was not until the late 1960's and early 1970's that the situation began to improve for people with disabilities. This period marked the beginning of the Independent Living Movement, where people with disabilities fought to gain access to schools, the workplace and to society in general. The independent living movement gathered strength in the early 1970s with the founding of the first Center for Independent Living in Berkeley, CA. The theory of mainstreaming was put forth in the Rehabilitation Act of 1974 to integrate disabled children into regular classrooms. In the mid-1980s the new word was integration, for the 1990's the word is inclusion, now the new concept needs to be collaboration.

## Modeling Collaboration

It is rare that non-disabled people, who are not either family members, partners or close friends, become equally invested in accessibility. Non-disabled dancers on AXIS are equally invested in accessibility. With performances, Naomi says:

It's just as important to me that there be an accessible bathroom backstage as it is to Janis, because it's going to take her 20 minutes to get to the bathroom and that screws up my experience. I mean totally separate from the fact that she's my friend and I care about her. We're a company, we have to function as a team and if half of us have to go through the back door and use really poor facilities, that's not going to work for me. ... As a company, we work together, we do this full time, we have a reputation, we can't just come in and do something shoddy, you know, or half our members can't be ill or really pissed off or uncomfortable or have gotten no sleep. (Naomi)

As I was reading through the transcripts, looking for things that surprised me, a lot of things with AXIS I could predict or had thought about. This collaboration between dancers were both disabled and non-disabled members are strongly invested in accessibility was new.

I wanted to explore what was different in AXIS, why is this interaction different? Janis talks about how all the members in AXIS have a common goal "...either to fulfill and enhance the mission of AXIS or a common goal to get through this one section of choreography." The core members of AXIS have been working together for eight years and have developed a deep level of commitment and trust with each other. The company has developed an extremely close working relationship, Michelle says "I really enjoy the people. They are like family." She refers to family in a positive way; for her the elements of this group dynamic which are positive are: "A camaraderie. A common



theme. Feeling like the longer I'm with them, there's a common history and for me that's a lot of what family is about."

I asked why modeling this collaboration might be important and what the audience gets from the performance. Michelle makes the point out that:

The disabled body in culture usually means, or evokes fear, disgust, pain, a sense of not being, and otherness. In the dance collaboration, the audience sees people with disabilities moving in such a way that they are supporting others physically, they are expressing human emotions that are universal and that initiate movement rather than being helpless and passive and all that. To see disabled bodies doing those things I think breaks down some of the prejudices. (Michelle)

Then the collaboration takes things a step further.

As far as the model of collaboration, again it takes a step further so that some of the issues around fear, of defense of others, and that somehow people who look different are not sociable and should not be approached. These are some of the barriers that are torn down. I think that's where the micro politics of bodies interacting then becomes the larger politics of societal change ... Bodies in culture have power and have meaning and significance, and bodies in their shape and motivation and intention reflect culture. (Michelle)

Michelle says that seeing the dance collaboration has the potential to affect future interpersonal exchanges, and from those changes in attitudes, beliefs and behaviors can come societal change, little by little, certainly not overnight.

Janis says that collaboration is the key to the integration of people with disabilities into society. As Janis notes, "our ideas about what disabled people can do and contribute has to do with disabled people .... having opportunities and being able to contribute." These opportunities have to be modeled and made available for any real integration to occur.

In the 1990's this is what multiculturalism is about, for people of different abilities, ethnicity's, sexual orientation, etc. In a world that is becoming increasingly torn apart by differences and fierce nationalism, collaboration offers another choice. Granted it is so much easier said than done. Janis says:

It's about learning...people who are different learning how to work together and how to learn from each other's differences and how to value people, not in spite of their differences, but because of their differences. That's what multiculturalism is about. You know, that difference is a good thing and that everybody has something that they can contribute. (Janis)

### AXIS organizational structure

For the last 9 years in AXIS, the dancers have been responsible for the business and administration of the company as well as the dancing. The collaboration extends, up to a point, to the process the troupe uses to manage the company and produce pieces. AXIS has a so-called "core group" composed of five of the eight dancers in the company. The core group takes care of administrative tasks, public relations, grant writing, travel arrangements, etc.

AXIS has a rotating leadership process, wherein responsibility is shared for directing pieces and running rehearsals, Talia and Naomi have directed the group pieces for the most part. Solo and duet pieces have been directed by others. Various individuals take turns leading warm-ups and rehearsals. According to Naomi: "everybody takes on responsibility for either leading a rehearsal or being the person who gives feedback or directing or coming up with an idea." (Naomi) Naomi points to this an important part of the collaboration process so people do not get pegged into the leadership role.

The company is run in a much less hierarchical way than most dance companies wherein the choreographer has the first and last words. This way of running a company of course makes for a very time consuming process.

### Collaboration in the craft of dance

#### Striking a balance

In the choreographic process, the director and the dancers strive for a balance point so that one person is not overshadowing another. One of the

group's first challenges is to find a place where dancers with and without disabilities are challenged creatively and physically:

We try to find a way so that there's a balance visually and movement-wise so that one person isn't overshadowing another person. We are always trying to find a balance... I think the thing we are most careful about, because of the way people tend to see dance, is to make sure that what the non-disabled people are doing meets the people in chairs on equal terms and that doesn't mean that we hold ourselves back, as non-disabled dancers, but we find a meeting ground. (Daniel)

This point is critical to a successful dance collaboration. There is an effort to create movement for the non-disabled dancers that is not simply supportive of the disabled dancers. Daniel sees this as a subtle challenge. He does adapt his movement to the differences in the bodies of the dancers with disabilities. But he says: "that does not become my overriding statement in the dance ... what I'm trying to do is dance with this person." Clearly, the philosophy of contact improvisation informs his approach to dancing:

So at some points, sometimes at least, I'm just dancing with another person, and it just so happens that person uses a wheelchair for mobility. It is like the place where the mind gets out of there and you're just dancing and creating. As soon as I start to think about it, think about helping this person dance, it's not my dance anymore. If I just have the attitude that we're going to come together and dance and see what happens, then the dance kind of flows out of our interaction. (Daniel)

Daniel contrasts this approach with the classically condescending or patronizing approaches to collaboration wherein the dance quickly degenerates into a sort "dancing-down" for the crips. AXIS does not want to put forth a type of classic disability art where the able-bodied people help the people with disabilities dance and where the thought is not much more than "isn't it wonderful that these people are in the company." The classic disability art model is extremely patronizing: "It doesn't matter whether the art is good or not-it's just wonderful

be they're disabled people." AXIS point is to create good art and to "provide an integrated model where there is balance in the company."

I wondered was if any of the non-disabled dancers felt like they had to hold themselves back to not overshadow the dancers with disabilities. I wondered if the non-disabled dancers feel like they have to hold themselves back physically. I wondered if they feel challenged as dancers and feel like they are growing as professional dancers. Liane felt that she, as the very physically expressive dancer has been held back, she responded to my question as follows:

What am I going to do with all my technique? Physically, it hasn't challenged me in some ways...Like when I take a class, I feel like I use my whole body, and I'm sweating and I have just sculpted things in space.

#### **Democratic approaches to craft**

In keeping with democratic approaches to choreography, everybody creates movements which are then taught to others so "it's not just the non-disabled people adapting their movement for disabled people." As Naomi says, "The people in the wheelchairs create a phrase and then I have to figure out how to move like that."

Furthermore, when there is a guest artist in an existing piece or someone new joins the group, they do not simply adapt to the part:

Rather than mimicking their movements, we will re-choreograph things ... so you don't become a servant to the dance. The dance has to be an expression of you regardless of whether you created that original piece or not. It has to fit your body in order for you to be in it. (Naomi)

"Collaboration is about open communication." (Talia) This makes for a more democratic process, traditionally, the artistic director has the first and last word. The artistic director:

I would say that what is singular every time we work is that we try things. There's a real understanding that if one process or one movement or one

idea is really not working for somebody, they don't feel good about it, then we let go of it. We're not going to ask somebody to do something that just doesn't feel right. (Talía)

This approach to choreography is certainly atypical. One of the regular choreographers, Naomi, says that "...how it feels is probably the heart of it." And all the dancers "are responsible for keeping in touch with that and communicating it clearly." Some might argue that this turns dance into a group therapy session, with all this intellectualizing and processing of feelings, but such is the process for AXIS.

By the same token, members are expected to "...take risks and try things that feel awkward and not just reject them out of hand or think, I can't do that." The choreographer process deepens when the dancer cannot do a movement one particular way and has to create a similar movement, or a contrasting movement or a movement at a different tempo.

Finally, AXIS is no different from any other dance troupe in terms of the negotiations of different personality types and learning methods. There is the dancer who approaches things very methodically, meeting to pull things apart and then there is the dancer that want to move "organically feel her way into things."

### **Ensemble work**

Choreography for a troupe composed of dancers with and without disabilities presents a challenge to the choreographer. Ensemble work, the backbone of most companies, is very difficult for a company composed of dancers with different abilities who do not move alike. People who are in chairs have a different vocabulary from people on their feet. It is not possible for a leap to look the same for a dancer who is paralyzed from the neck down. This dancer can indeed leap, but it looks different from our usual conception of what a leap is. The choreographic process ends up involving a lot of communication and

talking ideas out. Michelle relates some of the tense times in the choreographic process:

Though the years dancing with them, there have been tense times during the choreographing process where the able-bodied dancers are doing some movement that obviously is impossible for us to do, but, the issue is how can we pick up the feeling of the movement. That's what we talk about a lot, is that you may not be able to do this exact movement, but what is the feeling of the movement that you can pick up and make your own, but, there have been some times, and literally they are like, moments, because I think we catch them, where there's a tense of, "well, can't you do this a little bit more," (laughs). You know, on one hand it can be a very helpful suggestion or sort of like, critique, and then on the other hand, it's like well, no I CAN'T JUST do that a little bit more. (laughs). Michelle

Michelle also notes that it is not only the disabled dancers who have limitations:

One thing I've really noticed and appreciated is each of the able-bodied dancers have a specific set of limitations and abilities, just like each of us who happen to use chairs. And I see them go through the frustration at times of teaching choreography to one another and realizing that 'Oh, their body doesn't do this.' Michelle

### "The Way In"

One of the times that a choreographer came in and tried to put a set routine on the company a lot of friction was created. There are tense times when someone puts a movement on the disabled dancers that they cannot do. Almost every dancer mentioned the difficulties with the process of creating "The Way In." "The Way In" was a piece performed at the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum. Liane, the choreographer and one of the non-disabled dancers came in with a piece she had done for herself and AXIS tried to adapt it so that everybody was doing something that blended. (Naomi)

Liane was the choreographer for "The Way In" and she experienced "resistance to trying." She spoke of how "...sometimes at rehearsals, there's not a lot of movement at all... and I think that's what I get impatient with. It's a lot of

intellectualizing.” Liane thinks it might be different for people in chairs because they do not have muscle memory, body memory, like the non-disabled dancers do “...therefore, the choreography needs to be repeated again and again to get it down.” (Liane) Naomi said that the troupe was ultimately comfortable with the end product, but the choreographic process was “pretty frustrating for a lot of people.”

### "Pioneering a new form"

When I asked Talia about what some of the challenges might be in a dance collaboration between a person with a disability and without a disability, I got an answer I did not expect. Talia believes that it is less challenging than working with people who are all the same. She also points out that even in dance companies with all non-disabled dancers, "nobody's ever the same."

The reason I think it is less challenging is because it's so new and different that it's very difficult for the ego to get involved. I think a lot of dancers work for their ego up front. It's like they filter things through their ego, instead of just being genuine with it all. (Talia)

Talia does identify the challenges, however, one of the challenges is that a dance company like AXIS has never been done before. AXIS is “pioneering a new form.” But Talia points out, “it would be a challenge to do something that's familiar because to me that's boring. It would be a challenge just to stick with it (laughs).”

In terms of dance choreography, it is of course so appealing and so very egalitarian and democratic and all such things to speak about collaboration and hold it out as the ideal; however, actually making this a rewarding and aesthetically satisfying process is quite a challenge. A collaborative process almost inevitably takes more time. The process also requires that the individual dancers take greater responsibility and make a greater investment than in the situation where the dancers are simply directed to dance a certain way. In

collaboration, the responsibility falls “right back on you.” Overall, AXIS has been successful with their collaboration, there are problems of course, but the company also makes conflict resolution part of the collaborative process.

### Collaboration in action: the dance experience itself

The dancers were asked to talk about the actual dancing experience of the collaboration. My intention was to get a sense of the collaboration on a physical experiential level. For example, a particularly memorable experience or a sort of epiphany within the dance.

#### Michelle

Michelle appreciates the continuum of ability amongst the dancers, she never felt a sense of having to carve out a space for disabled vs. non-disabled dancers. The process has always felt to her to be very collaborative and that stems from the company’s use of contact improvisation as a framework and a base for the dance.

What happens when two very different bodies with two very different sets of abilities and limitations make contact. I love that and if I had any epiphanies there, it’s been mainly while using my manual chair... and just going through simple exercises of contact improvisation where you’re not trying to create the next move, but you’re feeling a resistance against someone else’s body. (Michelle)

Michelle talks about the one aspect of doing contact improvisation with a non-disabled dancer:

I love the kind of momentum and initiation of movement that I can get from some one who’s standing versus sitting and how that just flows and maybe a whole new movement for me that then initiates another movement for the able bodied person. (Michelle)

#### Dancing with a disabled dancer for the first time

One of the dancers, Liane, talks about what it was like when she danced with disabled dancers for the first time, before she joined AXIS. Liane has shared



these early experiences with members of AXIS but no one else outside the troupe. Liane spoke of concerns and a sense of uncomfortableness that often goes unspoken in this time of political correctness. Having never interacted with a disabled person on any level before, she said she had an initial “..general kind of fear of other people’s disabilities.” (Liane) Liane had the predictable and understandable questions which most outsiders ask about life with a disability, such as:

How do they take care of themselves and how, our bodies being so intimate together and everything, and is her, what do you call, her catheter, her body bag, you know going to spill over me? (laughing)... and , the first time... the feeling...I remember we had the woman get out of their chairs and moving with this woman...feeling her absolute weight spill over me and not knowing am I hurting you? (Liane)

Now Liane feels completely comfortable dancing with people who have disabilities. She says perhaps she has even gotten too comfortable, because now when she sees a person using a wheelchair on the street, she just wants to run up and open them up to the possibilities of dance.

### Safety

Safety is also an important concern in the company. Janis has a power chair weighing over 200 pounds which can be extremely dangerous if encountered improperly. Liane had a few serious injuries from collisions with wheelchairs which have permanently affected her ability to dance. For these reasons and personal reasons she no longer dances with the troupe, except as a guest artist for some of the repertory pieces.

NH talks about how it is necessary to use a measure of caution when dancers with people in chairs:

...there is that element of caution where, you know, I want to be sure I don’t just barrel into somebody, that I might feel differently about it if they weren’t in a wheelchair, not because their physical bodies are more fragile,

but what happens when a wheelchair is off-balanced is unfamiliar to me, I tend to be a little more cautious. (Naomi)

Daniel does note that he is more aware of a dancer's disability when they have to practice moves very specifically with attention to how the chair must be balanced and the dancer supported so she/he doesn't fall over. But in the improved process, "...you're just seeing what happens." The key here he says is the attitude, it is not an attitude of limitation and pity, it is an attitude of hey what can we do with this!

### **Duo collaboration**

The experience of collaboration also varies considerably, of course, depending on the two dancers abilities. Naomi describes the experience of dancing with Janis because of her body size and weight Naomi has not often had the experience of being lifted as a dancer. With Janis and her power chair,, she can have the experience of being lifted:

I can get on Janis' chair and she can take me all over the place, so I get this experience of having my weight supported in ways that I've never had before... I get an experience of momentum and lightness and relaxation that's very different than what I would have if there weren't people in wheel chair in the company. (Naomi)

With Michelle the experience is different, Michelle, because of the type of her disability, doesn't have very much muscular strength. "Michelle has an incredible amount of fluidity...so when I dance with her I tend to tune into that and feel what it's like to blend with that." (Naomi) And furthermore, with Richard the dance experience changes again. Richard has incredible upper body strength but no lower body strength due to polio. With Richard, Naomi can do lifts that would not be possible with Daniel, for example: Naomi does other techniques with Richard also, where:

I'll kind of dive into his lap and we'll spin around and the fact that we're both being supported by a wheelchair allows the momentum to take a different pathway than it would otherwise. (Naomi)

Naomi says: "what's common about my experience is that I had...probably had some general anxieties or unfamiliarity with dancing with someone who was in a chair and maybe was worried a little bit about bumping into it or getting my feet run over." Naomi In contrast to the beginning Naomi says that now she doesn't have any of those anxieties or concerns.

I just don't have that at all, in fact, sometimes I have to remember not to touch people's wheel chairs. I think of them as really accessible to me, like it's okay to just touch somebody and put my hand on their handily, and I've had people remind me that that's really inappropriate. (Naomi)

Overall, Naomi says "my biggest experience by being in AXIS is one of kind of achieving a speed and...a lightness and...kind of a receiving momentum that I don't know that I would have found otherwise."

Talia speaks about dancing with the disabled members of the dance troupe. "When you dance in a situation that is new and different...I think what we cultivate is dancing with perception that is beyond the linear." Without wanting to sound "new-agey" Talia describes the process as being kinesthetic with a "sixth-sense orientation." (Talia) People put out fields of energy:

It's about being in that field of energy and following that momentum. That is not just the momentum of movement, but its momentum of energy. And dancing with somebody who's in a wheelchair, for me, because they're in this piece of machinery, is about me being as connected to that person as to that piece of machinery. (Talia)

Talia recounts an experience of dancing with Janis that was particularly memorable, showing her how much she had become connected to both person and wheelchair. One day, during rehearsal, after dancing with Janis for thirty minutes, she realized Janis was in a different chair than usual. This experience was a revelation for Talia.

I realized, for the first time that I didn't just dance with Janis, but I also danced with her chair. That's very important to me...The two were not separate. I had two dance partners and yet they were one dance partner as well. So everything about her, including this device that gave her mobility created the dance for me. Created that sense of momentum. Suddenly this object...became just is energetically important, you know had the same facilitation as Janis's body did. (Talía)

I especially appreciated Talía's description of what it is like to dance with Janis now that they know each other so well:

She and I have a real connection when we dance, we know where each other's bodies are, we know how to enter into each other's bodies are, we know how to enter into each other's momentum. And when I say that you have to imagine a printing. If you were to imagine colors, somebody moves and there are colors or trails of color being left, and that you enter into that river or that stream of color or momentum and suddenly you become like, almost like, magnets, or gyroscopically, you're like intertwining. (Talía)

In the dance collaboration, "you get a really incredible sense of ... body kinetics and the way bodies work together and you start being able to feel things without having to talk very much about them." (Janis) Janis and Talía have had these incredible dance experiences, that they have been unable to yet replicate in performance.

There have been times where, because our momentum is just right and our movement's right, she can start on the ground or on my feet rest and move, as I'm spinning very quickly, move all the way around my chair, just using the momentum and, you know, go up and down and that's really kind of this amazing feeling. (Janis)

Janis takes note of one particular plus for the dancers with disabilities in the collaborative process. She describes how her own movement possibilities are enhanced and enriched by the "other body parts available" on people.

There are ways that we can get momentum and that we can get support and that we can get movement from working with people who have more

movement than we do. So it opens up different avenues for us and we can do things that we couldn't do on our own. (Janis)

Dance Collaboration with a Wheelchair: "Why would you dance with a wheelchair?"

Richard asks the obvious question: Why would a person would dance with a wheelchair? Speaking of the "ambivalence" of dancing with his chair, he says: "even when I think about it, it's like crazy." So why would you dance with a wheelchair? Because it is there? Dancing with a wheelchair reveals many new things about dance and about disability and dance does this in a way that regular, everyday activity and getting around in a wheelchair cannot. Dance is a wonderful medium for demonstrating, dramatizing the experience of living with a disability unlike other mediums. The dance speaks directly to key issues that audiences struggle to understand.

In doing some contact improvisation for the "Helix" piece, Richard got new information about his wheelchair and his relationship with his chair. In the duet, Richard is on the floor and the piece has a lot to do with his relationship with the chair. Richard said that as the dance evolved it became increasingly emotional and revealing. He experienced the "ambivalence" he felt about his wheelchair. The chair is a piece of adaptive equipment that is simultaneously freeing and limiting, loved and hated:

The ambivalence of that... Because even when I think about it, it's like crazy. Why would you dance with a wheelchair? It is like metal piece that you hate as much as you love it sometimes. But it is very ambivalent, it's the very sign of my disability and the very sign of my weakness even though it has a lot of empowerment. But there are these two aspects that are not deniable, and that some people would never touch a chair, you know make people sit down in your chair, they say, 'No, I would never sit in a chair, the chair is just the next stage to a coffin.' (Richard)

The dance holds the ambivalence, the expressions of hate and love, of confinement and empowerment. The tensions between the undeniable aspects

of what a wheelchair is about are powerful, on one side you have the perspective of people who would never touch a chair, believing the chair to be the next step to the coffin. On the other side, the chair can empower people with disabilities creating greater options and giving them a significant increase in mobility and independence.

Richard's improvisational dance with the chair reflects the emotional intensity of his relationship to the chair. He says his feelings about the chair are "emotionally very deep [inside]." In his improvisation piece he does a lot of "... very risky moves where I was just hurling the chair around and like making it go over me. I was manipulating it very hard." (Richard) It was the contact, the interaction with the wheelchair that inspired the dance and the dance therefore says a lot about "what a wheelchair is ... that it has like all these wheels and certain ways of moving and things that you can do and that you cannot do"

After seeing the piece, Richard says, "... you understand the wheelchair as a thing much differently." Richard illustrates his point with an example:

This one move that we have in the last piece where the wheelchair was basically tipped over on one of the wheels and I'm on top of it on one of the other wheels and the wheelchair is spinning, between the wheels -- the metal part is spinning, and I'm on top and I'm spinning, too. And it's this very ambiguous, emotionally unclear image of somebody resting but also somebody being on a wheel, similar to these things that they did in the Dark Ages in the Middle Ages where they put somebody on a wheel as a form of torture. So I mean there's the picture itself, the image itself has this ambivalence in it of somebody perched on something that is usually just supportive of him... and it is kind of supporting, but not quite... (Richard)

The dance with the wheelchair forces the audience to look at both the dancer and the chair in a different way. In this case the dance with the chair reveals a completely new version of collaboration between human and machine.

If you shake things up that way you break the typical notion of the way we look at things. You gain this ability to look at it again and find out the different levels of it. If you just did like, wheeling around with the chair, people would never really think about the chair that much, but if you start to make the relationship between the person in the chair and the chair more a part of the dance, it opens different levels. (Richard)

The dance provides a kind of visual deconstruction of wheelchair, disabled dancer and the disabled dancer's relationship to the chair. The contact improvisation process deconstructs the relationship between the dancer and the chair, in such a way that you can never see them in the same way again. The elements are not in their "typical" arrangement, to begin disabled person is on stage; next, the chair is not being used for functional purposes to get from point A to point B, in fact the chair is not being used at all like it was built to be used. The elements are thus broken from each other, the person with the disability is no longer just the disabled person in the chair. As the poet Cheryl Marie Wade says: "Metal and flesh do indeed lead separate lives."

The dance helps break stereotyped associations and the audience is forced to consider each element separately, perhaps seeing the disabled dancer as separate from the chair, in a way that the dancer is seen as more fully human. The chair is appreciated more for its interesting possibilities, as a tool, a toy, or a finely crafted metal object with shiny parts and smooth spinning wheels. When dancer and chair are united once again in the more traditional seated, upright position, things are different, they have to be. The audience saw the dancer get out of the chair. The audience saw the dancer as separate from the chair.

Seeing this new relationship between disabled dancer and their wheelchair is critical to re-visioning people with disabilities. The dance breaks the static stereotype. Interestingly, it is the dance that teaches us and un-teaches us about what a wheelchair is. The dance is a dynamic interaction between

dancer and wheelchair, full of much more life and potential than a single image or stereotype of having a wheelchair disability.

**Audience responses to collaboration between disabled and non-disabled dancers**

One of the things which I am particularly interested in is how the audience responds to the collaboration of dancers with and without disabilities. The audience sees the company dancing with and beyond differences. The level of trust between the dancers is something that really comes through to the audience. The dancers all said that the audience members regularly comment on the strong emotional connections between dancers. This visible connection is in part due to the fact that a majority of the members having been dancing together for 8 or 9 years.

Naomi notes that seeing people with disabilities dancing with people with disabilities challenges the prevailing modus operandi to segregate people with disabilities. In our society, people with disabilities have been typically segregated from the rest, only in the last 20 years have school and the work place begun to open up. In the art and theatre world, producers cannot simply patronize the people with disabilities. People with disabilities tend to be segregated usually and so it is a something new for promoters and audiences alike to see a mixed company. The producers might be more apt to patronize the people with disabilities, but when they see the non-disabled dancers interacting as equals with the disabled dancers, they get a new model.

I think there's a way in which being an integrated group gives us a certain kind of....We have an impact that I think an all disabled group might not have and certainly a non-disabled group might not have, because we've got both groups identifying with us and then it challenges both groups to really look for where the common meeting ground is. (Janis)



Producers quickly understand that they will not be able to treat the disabled dancers in AXIS like Jerry Lewis treats his "kids" on the Muscular Dystrophy Telethon. A major part of AXIS' impact is in the integration of dancers with and without disabilities.

Moreover, seeing this collaboration in dance is much richer. The collaboration is more than a work relationship, where you need to make sure your office space is accessible. This collaboration is full of possibilities, this is what makes the vehicle of dance so full. This is the "vision-thing:"

We're providing the ... idea of collaboration, working together, disabled and non-disabled to create something wonderful and beautiful ... that can translate into any area of life. (Michelle)

Unfortunately, at times the media has also tended to focus largely on the people with disabilities, because of the novelty:

People are fascinated by the fact that there are disabled people in the company, so there is a tendency to focus on them. But our whole goal here is not to be condescending or ... patronizing ... towards the disabled community. (Daniel)

In this instance, the dancers with disabilities overshadow the non-disabled dancers. Paradoxically, the people with disabilities often get more of the spotlight than the dancers without disabilities. Liane told me that:

One big reason why I wanted to do this interview was that you actually made an effort to interview me ... all my time with AXIS ... with always being interviewed and questioned, I ... because I'm an able-bodied person, I've never been interviewed. (Liane)

By having this focus, the media misses the importance of the collaboration. The differences are highlighted as unique over the company's efforts at blending and collaborating the differences.

Talia takes a very global perspective in her answer to the question about what images or messages the audience receives by viewing the collaboration. "I

think AXIS role models many things on a larger global scale. It models harmony and balance and human beings with differences coming together in collaboration." And she adds, "It's really as simple as that (laughs). Actually, it's not so simple to do that." Talia feels that:

It is important to bring across the idea that people come together in some sort of collaborative process, where understanding can be garnered, and that in turn leads to balance in relationship or balance in how you see the world.

Talia does not glibly take this perspective, she came to this by growing up with a father who was a émigré from the Ukraine. Her father was very nationalistic and she "had seen his bigotry and his pre-judgements." Let's take the next step. I asked Talia how this perspective informs the dances she creates as artistic director. "The way it informs the dances, is that the dances we create are very human dances. The dances say that we can be ourselves in the dance."

An interesting question to ask is whether the collaborative process has changed the attitudes of the disabled dancers towards the non-disabled dancers. Janis gives a great answer: "depends on the day." she continues however, to say :

I think more and more. I find that people are just people regardless of disability or no disability, color race all of that.... I am just really learning that people are people and we're all basically very the same or motivated by the same factors and we're held back by the same factors.

The audience responds strongly to one piece in particular where the stereotypical powerful and passive roles are reversed. In "Ellipsis," Janis uses her power chair to drag another dancer along the floor. The traditional power dynamic is explicitly turned on its head.

### Conclusion

Through the collaboration of dancers, one of the most powerful things that come through is the vision of disabled and non-disabled working together. The collaboration of dancers with and without disabilities gives a powerful model for bridging differences, allowing non-disabled people to perhaps risk reaching out to disabled persons whom they know. This vision makes a very strong statement, whether the intention was such or not. Although AXIS did not set out to make political statements about disability through its dance, the simple reality of AXIS on stage becomes political. As Janis says, "...because whenever you see really different people working together its a political statement, because we are not a society that is integrated, as much as we'd like to think so." This is especially true in the case of a very young social movement like the disability movement. The ADA is but a few years old. Janis notes:

There are still disabled people in institutions and family still hiding disabled people away in back rooms...We are kind of like the last frontier of freaks in a way and so I think to see disabled people on stage in front of audiences when up until 15 to 20 years ago we were hidden in back rooms and in institutions, I mean that in and of itself is a statement.

But as Janis makes the point, the really big statements "disabled people and non-disabled people working together." Janis has a different experience as a disabled person within AXIS vs. out in the world. Janis makes a point of noting the level of acceptance of disability within the dance troupe, which is not something that is so easy in the everyday world.

I think there's a level of acceptance in the company, you know, when people travel with us they know it's going to be pain and everybody's going to have to pitch in and do things. So I think there's a level of acceptance in the company and a level of ease with the disability aspect that I don't have when I'm just out in the world. (Janis)

From her conversations with non-disabled members of AXIS' audience, Naomi says that the audience can see themselves modeled by the non-disabled

members of the group. This embodied modeling is critical for making this integration real. It is so much easier to talk about how we should interact with people with disabilities, it is a much more meaningful commitment and expression to embody that perspective through dance.

Through its dance, AXIS becomes a keeper of visions:

It is possible that this what an integration looks like, and look, it is full of energy and life and it can be joyous, and full of drama and its just as real as any other connection. (Naomi)

## CONCLUSION

From the preceding discussion of AXIS' effects on the dancers in the company and the disabled and non-disabled communities, the links between the arts and social change within the disability movement become clear. AXIS' dance informs us about culture and politics, and the dynamic intersection of the arts and society. Dance is a transformative medium that drives change on a individual, community and societal level. Although the dancers did not join AXIS to be political, and, although AXIS does not put forth an explicitly political message, their interactions with the public, both disabled and non-disabled, effect people's attitudes and beliefs about disability. Transforming people's conceptions of themselves and others lays the ground work for changing behaviors. All of the dancers and leaders in the disability rights movement whom I interviewed felt that attitudinal change was at the core of meaningful social change, and, that the most insidious barriers to independent living for disabled people were negative, limiting societal stereotypes about disability.

In summarizing the in-depth interviews with the AXIS dancers, it is apparent that dance troupe does make a meaningful contribution to the disability rights movement. AXIS' execution of its mission statement is wholly aligned with the goals set forth for the disability movement. It is one thing to inform and educate people about disability, it is another thing to claim your social space on a stage for all to see. It is one thing to speak of a social movement, it is another thing to embody and encode the rebellion of disabled people through the medium of dance. AXIS' dance provides the new vision needed to guide the disability rights movement into the 21st century. This new vision is stated clearly in AXIS' mission statement wherein the dancers commit themselves to collaboration between people with and without disabilities. Collaboration has

always been a keystone in the production of dance, and now the wisdom of dance craft can be modeled in the disability rights movement. On a theoretical level, collaboration is the logical next step after inclusion. It is one thing to say disabled people should be integrated or included in mainstream society, it is another thing to model that inclusion with a collaborative, dynamic interpersonal process. Inclusion is static; collaboration is inclusion in action. Collaboration is the process by which inclusion can become a reality. The collaboration AXIS models also makes the notion of accessibility a reciprocal process, with both the disabled and non-disabled persons being equally invested in accessibility. This expanded definition of accessibility does not leave the non-disabled persons feeling that accommodating people with disabilities is burdensome.

The collaboration of dancers with and without disabilities gives a powerful model for bridging differences and building coalitions. This year in Atlanta at the 1996 Paralympics Games, in addition to disabled athletes competing from all over the world, the world leaders in the disability rights movement will hold a consensus session to forge a new paradigm for the next phase of the disability rights movement. It is time for disability movement's leaders to broaden their vision and look to the dance for the new model to further social justice for people with disabilities.

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