

The
WONDERFUL
World of Dance

FEATURES

Race, Disability & Trans Equity in Dance
Presenting

February 10, 2019 by **JUSTINE BAYOD ESPOZ**



[The Association of Performing Arts Professionals](#) (APAP), a U.S.-based national service, advocacy and membership organization for professionals in the performing arts industry,

holds a national conference every January in New York City. It is attended broadly by both national and international artists, managers, booking agents, producers and presenters and is comprised of hundreds of showcases, networking events and professional development sessions.

The themes discussed at the professional development events are as varied as the kinds of arts performed at the showcases and arise from proposals submitted by APAP members willing to lead presentations and discussions on topics that they consider of special relevance.

One such event that seemed particularly timely, not only because it's something so many in the arts have spent so long working towards, but also because of the climate of homophobia and xenophobia in the United States being perpetuated by the Trump Administration, was a session entitled *Joining Forces: A National Conversation about Race, Disability, and Trans Equity in Dance Presenting*.

Artists and arts administrators, nearly all identifying as people of color, disabled and/or trans, comprised the panel of five, who would end up discussing their own professional experiences, challenges and potential solutions to a small but open audience, which included venue programmers, festival directors, artists and arts funders.



Alice Sheppard, President of Disability Dance Works and founder and artistic lead of Kinetic Light

Panelist Alice Sheppard, President of Disability Dance Works and founder and artistic lead of Kinetic Light, kicked off the discussion by addressing a holistic approach to promoting accessibility and equity in arts presenting.

“The work that I put on stage isn’t meant to be consumed passively. It’s not like you buy a ticket and leave at the end of the show. It’s about the experience from the moment that you hear about the show to buying a ticket to getting to the venue to coming through the door to finding the bathroom to getting seated in the space, to feeling the show and to leaving and engaging with the audience and the artist afterwards as all being part of my artistry,” explains Sheppard, a wheelchair-bound dance artist, who understands firsthand the mobility and inclusion issues faced by disabled artists and theatregoers alike.

For Sheppard, artistic creation and artistic process become one and the same when promoting inclusion and accessibility. “Access that you may think of as ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] compliance, actually drives my creative process. You’ve got a series of things going on that change how the work is felt and perceived,” she says, driving home the point that the perception of inclusion not only hinges on the work performed by the artist, but the larger context and experience within which the work is presented.

Panelist Mark Travis Rivera, Artistic Director of the marked dance project, which he founded at the age of 17, making him the youngest person to artistically direct and found a physically integrated dance company in the United States, extrapolates further on the idea of holism to address the issue of pigeonholing artists by a single characteristic. Rivera proudly identifies as “Latino, gay, disabled and femme,” but sees none of these adjectives on their own as being sufficient to describe a “full human being.”

Rivera believes that artists are often pressured to give priority to specific parts of their identity. “If you’re black or brown, your major concern has to be around racial justice. If you’re disabled, then your issues have to be disability justice. If you’re trans then your performances have to be about trans and identity issues. Why haven’t we joined forces and said we are all of those things at once? Hear me, see me. Come to support my dance work. Come support my storytelling.”