

Interviewee Name: Michelle Ryan

Interviewer Name: Jung Yoon

Date of Interview: 19th of August 2022

Location: Restless Dance Theatre studio

Length of Interview: 26:22 minutes

Transcript

Jung: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself, including what do you think we should know about where you from? Were you what your experience helped you become the person who you are now?

Michelle: My name is Michelle Ryan. I'm the artistic director of Restless Dance Theatre. I started off as a dancer when I was about five years old, and I had a great career in the arts as a, as a dancer with a major company here called Australian Dance Theatre and I travelled the world and performed in all the major places around Australia. So I was very lucky to have that, that career and then at 30 I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. So I pretty much straight away had to stop dancing because I couldn't feel my feet into the ground. So, I stopped dancing and went very much behind the scenes of another dance company and because I didn't think anyone would want to see me on stage anymore, because I didn't have the perfect body that I used to have kind of thing and then I worked behind the scenes for about ten years. I didn't dance, and then I was asked to dance again for a company that was visiting from Europe and I did dance in front of 300 people when I had a walking stick and it really changed my life because the, the director at the time challenged me by saying, 'Why don't you dance?' And it made me realise that because he said, 'because you are a dancer' and, and it really challenged my perception on, on who an artist can be and it gave me a fire in my belly about not wanting any other artists with disability to feel the way I had for ten years, which was irrelevant and not, not important and so, when the job at Restless became available because I had left the arts for a couple of years, but when the job at Restless came became available, I decided that I would it would be the only company that I would return to the arts for, because I felt like I could make a difference to a well-established company that worked with people with disability.

Jung: Wow... I didn't know that

Michelle: Didn't you know that?

Jung: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So how would you feel when you were asked to dance again and what you said like you said you danced with a stick. How did you feel when, when you were asked to dance?

Michelle: Yeah, I was very nervous when I was asked to dance again. I as I said, because I had been out of the dancing for ten years and I immediately said yes. And then afterwards was like, oh, my goodness, what have I just agreed to? And the strange thing is, I never rehearsed the solo at all because I didn't want to know if I couldn't do it. So, I did it in my head a lot over and over again. And I did one that where I basically had to walk onto stage with my walking stick, pick up a chair into the middle of the room, put it down. The lights were just on me in front of 300 people and and the music would start. And I started to do an arm dance. And I must say, at that moment, I was very, very nervous. And I should say

before I went on stage, the director said to me, 'you look very nervous. What's wrong?' And I said, 'I was worried that I would fall over.' And he just said, 'well, wouldn't you get up again and just keep going?' And it was one of those lightbulb moments where I went, of course, like, that's, that's for my whole life I could've been doing that. So, and when the music started, I could feel myself a little bit nervous in the lights because my balance isn't great but I really did feel like my soul soared again and for that 3 minutes it's like everyone disappeared and it was just me back in my body doing what comes naturally. And so it was a really empowering moment for me. It was very important.

Jung: It's very touching. You know, sometimes, when you think about it. We get so nervous about making a mistake and the answer is a simple one,

Michelle: will just get up again.

Jung: Get up again yeah as it is but we just, that's a really great answer to me personally, too. Yeah, great. Anyway, the next question and certainly.

Jung: Obviously, I can hear you had a lot of people who are encouraging you to be back on the stage. So are there any it was that the only event to bring you back to the art, or is there any other people who kind of motivate you inspire you to go back into your art industry?

Michelle: I did have quite a few people who were really encouraging of me to apply for the Restless job, and one was a very well-known lady, Gaelle Mellis, within the disability sector, and she also was having a show that I'd been invited to be in and so I came and performed in Adelaide for her show, 'Take Up Thy Bed and Walk'. That was the name of the work and so then I have been at Restless as the director and choreographer and, but at the same time, in about 2014 and 15, I worked with a group called Torque Show, which were actually two people that I danced with at Australian Dance Theatre, and we created our own show and it was with two people. It was myself and Vincent Crowley, and it was basically it was a show that showed my adventure through, through dance, but it wasn't about disability. But because I have a physical disability, it automatically changes the lens in which people look at it. And we performed that at the Malthouse, and we actually took it over to London to the Queen Elizabeth stage. It was at Southbank Centre for the Unlimited Festival, which is a very well-known UK festival for artists with, with disability. So I'm lucky enough to have had that re.., reliving my performing days, but my focus now is on, on choreographing and being the director of Restless.

Jung: So we use a little bit of like a change your journey.

Michelle: Absolutely.

Jung: From a dancer to a choreographer now.

Michelle: Yeah. And it's also... I think it was a very good experience to go back to do that to remind myself of what, what it is to perform. So then to have a greater appreciation for the dancers that I work with about how they might feel in that environment.

Jung: So what motivates you to continue to work as a choreographer in Restless? What brings you here, and what? Every morning wake up and you want to come back here to do what motivates you?

Michelle: I love working with the Restless dancers. I find that their responses because we have a creative process which is task based. So I will set a task and they respond physically or verbally or however they would like to, to respond. So the work really comes from the dancers and then I mould what this what they say or do and physically mould the, the dance

and I am so motivated to come to work every day because their responses, as I said, are so honest and so truthful and so left-field, like things that I would never think of. They, they bring as offerings towards the creative process. So, I feel that the work that is being created with artists with disability is unique and it's, it's not drawing on the, the usual dance vocabulary that kind of making their own vocabulary and I think that that's a really exciting thing, especially at a time when a lot of dance, you know, dance can be all about perfection and it's about, you know, technicians and, and the body beautiful and all of those things and I think to see a diverse range of people on stage is incredibly important because it's about representing the broader community on stage so that, you know, a child with a disability or a person with disability can actually be reflected seeing one of our dancers on stage. So that really motivates me to have representation on stage and the other thing that I'm very passionate about is actually employing dancers as professional artists, and so that they are paid the, the rates that any other artists would be paid and that's been a very big shift in the company over the last five years and so now and that was all about artists being recognised for what they offer and what they bring to the dance ecology in Australia. So, I feel very passionate that if we are to perform that they are paid professionals because the quality of the work that they do is absolutely at that standard of the mainstream dance companies.

Jung: So, you have a motivation from, as an art director, but at the same time as the lead of the changes that the structures and the society.

Michelle: Yeah

Jung: Maybe this is the first company being employing the artists?

Michelle: Yeah, in Australia, Restless is the leading dance company employing artists with and without disability that - there is ah in Geelong there is a fabulous - Back-to-Back is a theatre company that works with people with disability and that's the theatre side and we're sort of the dance side. So and the difference even worldwide, there are different companies and different places that are work with people on disability and the lead one in the UK is Candoco, but they and they generally generally work more with physical disability, whereas Restless works with a lot of people with intellectual disabilities. So even within that landscape, Restless is unique.

Jung: Yeah, it is unique. It must be very proud for what you have achieved so far?

Michelle: Absolutely. I'm very proud of what we've achieved. I'm also very proud of all the people who came before me because Restless has been... we are in 31st year and I've yeah, and I've been here ten years, but there was a lot of work done in those earlier years by the founder through to all the different artistic directors and it was it's got such a solid, it had such a solid base governance wise and as a company that it was it was difficult to make some of those changes along the way but we had that solid base from which we could strive to have dancers employed and, and trained properly to be able to perform on national stages.

Jung: Thanks, so the next question is about moving into the more public political side. What do you think the public are saying key milestone or big major happening in the history of disability art in Australia?

Michelle: Well, that's a big question, isn't it?

Jung: Yeah, no, they are big questions.

Michelle: Yeah no they are big questions. I mean, I hate to admit that prior to me coming to Restless, I was always aware of Restless because when I danced with ADT, I actually saw my first Restless show in about 1993 or four. So, I was always aware of, of, of Restless, and I was aware of 'Back to Back' when seeing them in Sydney Festival many years ago with one of their works and so that was kind of my main basis for arts and disability. A few years ago, the Australia Council introduced a sync leadership program and that is for that was for artists with disability in that leadership role and so that really brought me into a place where I met lots of other artists from different genres who were working at the highest level in their field and I had never come across that before. So that was quite fab, it was fabulous because I found a wonderful musician who I ended up using to create a score for one of the works called 'In the Balance' by Liz Martin. So I think the main thing, I think 'Back to Back' was quite a leader in employing artists with disability to be on the stage. I think a lot of people see artists with - they used to, I'm hoping that it's a more of that they used to see artists with disability as more of on a community level and it wasn't in a mainstream professional level and in some ways a lot, you know, some, some I have to keep saying some, some courses or, or programs are actually for that more therapeutic or community-based work.

Michelle: And that's all relevant and valid, but it's shifting that mindset that because something has people with disability is that it's, it's less as in fact it's actually more that it brings to the show. I know that wasn't very articulate, but I think there has been a shift in Australia over the last few years. There's also a bit of a saying in amongst the community that for theatre and acting that you should pay us, not play us. So, you know, gone are the days hopefully when someone with disability is, is, is a character in a performance and instead of getting an able-bodied person to pretend that they're disabled, just get the disabled actor. It just makes far more sense and I feel like that's been a quite a thing over recent years. Also, I think there was a major change in I think it was in 2000 when the Olympics was in London, and they really had an arts festival around that which is called 'Unlimited Festival' and it was for artists with disability and to go alongside, alongside the Olympics and the Paralympics. So, I think the Paralympics has given a great profile for artists, for people with disability. We just need to move out of that area of sport and acknowledgement of of sports people with disability to then have that same respect for artists.

Jung: and a recognition

Michele: recognition of of what artists contribute.

Jung: I think I really like the point of you always expand the boundary of, of course is thought, everything recreational is the same as mainstream. Everyone saw it as a hobby. Yes. Yeah and then going into more recreational and then serious kind of art and then the next level is the professional but I, this is what I found I often have expectations for people with disability ended up where community art.

Michelle: Yes

Jung: and then there's more next level

Michelle: Exactly

Jung: but I think Restless is like pushing to boundary to have another option more to go.

Michelle: In dance a lot of...like say my own pathway is that you went to dance school, you went to university, you studied more training there and then you went into a professional environment and for a lot of people with a disability that tertiary education is, is difficult or not, not really. It's not in their best learning ways. It's not taught in a way that's beneficial to someone with intellectual disability. So at Restless, we actually implemented our own training program with the top, top dance teachers and creators in Australia, like with Larissa McGowan as our lead rehearsal director and associate director and we implemented our own training program for the main performers where they, they, they work from 10 to 4 and it's just dance training and when we implemented that, it started with two days and then moved to three, but their skill levels just soared and that's why I feel like the company has taken a huge step forward because we have been training these very amazing dancers in that way to have a base technique from which they can then interpret their own movement and I think that's been a real, really big game changer in the last few years for Restless.

Jung: Yeah. I really respect that. Really look forward to see the next move because I just did an interview with your new CEO..

Michelle: Yes

Jung: She has lots of plans

Michelle: Well, we're very busy for an unfunded company from Australia Council we're very, very busy.

Jung: To me, I don't know. I was there in 2019, I heard the news about - Nick was still the manager and unfortunately your company were not funded by the Australian Council, but to me that makes, that makes the momentum for you guys to move more stronger and sustainable by yourself and looking for another way. Not hugely relying on government funding

Michelle: Yes, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Jung: That's a big shift.

Michelle: Yes.

Jung: The final question is... is your art political? Or you think art should be political? Is that creating changes in how people think, act and treat each other different way? Or part issue. Yeah, yeah. And the next question I can just say, yeah, yeah, I'll go to the next question.

Michelle: Okay. It's an interesting question asking if if my art is political, I think that a lot of art can be political. I think that it's good to have a balance between those who push really hard. I usually I think that I take a slightly different look at that. I'm more interested in sort of celebrating diversity on stage, so making it a celebration of the artists and just by having the artists that we have on stage, then that hopefully will change people's perceptions of who they think can dance and who can make art. So, I love to do it in a way that is very gentle, in a way that's you present something that's quite beautiful and that gives a very easy access for audiences, but then have something in each work that really hopefully makes people question their own judgements and so, whilst I don't think my work is political

Michelle: because of the gentle nature that we try. And for example, when we did a work called 'Intimate Space', which was in the Hilton Hotel, there were only ten audience

members at a time and we had around 19 to 20 performers at the same time. But in all, our all our collateral and all our marketing, we never use the word disability once in anything and that was a deliberate choice to try and get a different audience to see the work and we had we sold out. It was 600 people saw the work and most of them had never seen Restless before and weren't aware that there was going to be people with disability in the cast and it really was incredibly successful because we had so many people saying that they were so surprised at what these dancers could do and I have a phrase that I like to use, which is that you should expect excellence from our dancers and not be surprised by it and so I live by that and I make sure that all the dancers are presented in the best possible way and that it really shows their personality as well and their passion. So yeah, that's what's important to me with my work.

Jung: I really was interested about you didn't use the disability when you're doing marketing things, was it deliberately you just taking out the word? You know, there is a use, it could be some argument within you must know about this. I because, I also work in this

Michelle: yes yeah.

Jung: Sector there is a big agenda.

Michelle: Absolutely. Yeah.

Jung: Disability as identity versus doesn't matter like we are who we are. So not deliberately hiding, not necessarily. Like not necessarily highlighting. Still, it can be conflicted.

Michelle: Yes

Jung: So this is kind of two different perspectives and then they sometimes conflict.

Michelle: oh absolutely yes its whether you, if, it's whether you consider yourself, if you identify as being a disabled artist, which is that the society and everything around you is, is not enabling you. Whereas I identify as an artist with disability so I see that I'm an artist first and that my disability is second. So, there is a lot of, there is often a clash between which way you identify with and I suppose I think both are very relevant. So. So our work is not about disability. It's, it's about humans working together and presenting work on stage together. So, but, and it's about the individuals on stage. So, it is there is so much within disability, there's, there's a lot of getting the lingo right. It changes a lot, and there's a lot of very passionate advocates out there, which is incredibly important, you know, and I just see my advocacy in a different way that I just do it slightly gentler, I think. But I think it's still I think you need both.

Jung: Totally agree. I just see as different interpretations. People just go with whatever suit them or whatever they feel comfortable with.

Michelle: Yes, yeah, yeah.

Jung: Same my identity as an Australian, but I can just say I'm a Korean too.

Michelle: Yes, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Jung: And the, what would you define the success in terms of the disability art space?

Michelle: The success is to get people out in public to be seen by other people and to be part of the community. I would love to stop having to use the label and just like to say to say disability because I'd just like to say that our dancers are artists and I think the other really

important milestone is finding paid employment, career pathways for artists with disability in the arts. So and to be recognised for the skills that they bring and the yeah, the interpretations that they bring and I just think I feel very passionately that people should be paid as other people would be expected. You wouldn't ask another professional dancer to do something for free. So, I don't think you should be asking any of the Restless dancers to do anything for free. And we often sometimes get phone calls saying, 'Oh, we've got this film that we need somebody.' And then we say, 'okay, so what? What are they being paid?', [then they said] 'Oh, we'll give them coffee and we'll do'. And I just went, 'No, we're not. You know, that's not appropriate.'

Jung: Yeah, it's not a charity.

Michelle: It's not a charity. Yeah, yeah.

Jung: Yeah but yeah this is the still struggle to change the perceptions of any kind of disability related community or in a position seen as charity.

Michelle: Yes. Yeah.

Jung: So, that's the sort of we kind of pursue the agenda and that you are in the very front line.

Michelle: Yes, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Jung: So that was the major questions we finished.

Michelle: ok great.

Jung: Last question, is there anything else we should know about you as an artist, you as a person or experience or disability or anything about disability art?

Michelle: Yeah. I think the only other thing. I'd say is I often get asked to talk at things or to be on panels and things like that and, and sometimes I do feel like it's a bit tokenistic that people are asking me because I do tick the box that I'm a female disabled lady, but I do then choose sometimes to do those things because I think if I can bring thought or if I feel like I can make a difference within that moment, I will do it. So, if there's a group of people who don't really understand anything to do with disability, I'm more than happy to talk to people about it. But as long as it's a genuine engagement or that, I can hopefully make a difference. So, I just hope that in the future that people with disability are just included as people and that it's not a tokenistic gesture. These days with a lot of the arts funding, there are so many criterias that you need to be able to address and diversity is one which is great. Like it's great that it's in there but I just, you know, you can see sometimes is that the way that it's done is it's.

Jung: A very political agenda

Michelle: Yes. Yeah. Yeah. It's their agenda is political and to which I don't think necessarily always benefits the person with disability.

Jung: I totally agree. They just want to show, yes to what they are doing. But you know, there's, just the superficial level

Michelle: Yeah, yeah, yeah....

Jung: All right. Thank you very much.

Michelle: Yeah, that's alright.