

VDC Interview Transcript

Mary Verdi-Fletcher.2

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Dancing Wheels

Sagamore Hills, OH 44067

CF: Candace Feck

MVF: Mary Verdi Fletcher

CF: I was thinking that our interviews with you are providing a pair of book-ends to this phase of our project. You were our first interview in September, and here we are at the end of the interview process, in February, talking with you again due to sound-quality issues in the first recording.

MVF: That's alright!

CF: It's actually perfect! Thank you. Something I'd like to revisit, if you don't mind, is your sense of the dance scene in Cleveland as it was when you were coming up — before Dancing Wheels.

MVF: The primary scene in Cleveland was based on ballet, so Cleveland Ballet — or Cleveland San Jose Ballet¹ — was *the* company in Cleveland, the most focal area of dance that people would attend. There were some smaller groups that were performing, but I don't even recall going to see those groups; I had a strong connection with the Cleveland Ballet.

CF: Now, your mom's own background as a dancer, as well as the way she instilled a certain way of looking at yourself have been extremely influential in your whole trajectory. She gave you a statement regarding your abilities that has served, as you've said, as both a mantra and a metaphor in developing yourself as a dancer and director. Would you care to talk about those influences?

MVF: Sure. My mother always said to me "When people ask about your disability, just tell them 'I'm not handicapped; I'm Mary.'" They used the word handicapped back then; it's no longer used, but at three years old, I thought "What does she *mean* by that — that I'm not handicapped, I'm Mary?" But later, I guess, it stayed within me, and it became my identity for people to see *me*, not my disability. And it gave me strength to stand up for what I believe in, not only on the stage, but also for the rights of people with disabilities, as well. And it allowed me to not be afraid to go onstage and show myself, regardless of what I looked like, because I felt like I was an artist and a dancer. And I loved music. I still do — I love music, and there just wasn't any greater experience for me than being on the stage and performing. So I had *that* from her — her artistry, and my dad's, who was a musician — and I had that independence from the way she helped me believe in who I was.

¹ The Cleveland Ballet was founded in 1972 by Dennis Nahat and Ian Horvath as a dance school, the School of Cleveland Ballet. The company was founded in 1986 as the "San Jose Cleveland Ballet," a co-venture with the ten-year-old [Cleveland Ballet](#) which offered the dancers added performing exposure, and each city a [ballet](#) company for a shared investment. In 2000, the Cleveland Ballet ceased operations, and over half the dancers, the headquarters, and artistic director/choreographer Dennis Nahat moved to San Jose, CA to continue operations there.

CF: You had spoken a little bit, too, about the fact that as dancer herself, she had you dancing early on with your brother.

MVF: My mother was a dancer in the Vaudeville days, and my bedtime stories were those of her traveling across the nation; she actually met my father when he was playing in the orchestra pit while she was dancing. It just had a lot of romance to it, and so I always had that in my life: I had it in my dreams, and then later, when I was about three or four, she created dances for my brother and me to do in our home. She would put music on a record, and I remember one of the songs was the *La Volta*, and she had my brother lifting me in the air — I had braces and crutches at the time — and doing some dips. You know, it just was an everyday occurrence with us, and I think that that helped me when I decided that this is what I want to do in life, because it was already part of my life.

CF: I didn't get to ask you this before, but I wondered whether your mom lived to see what you accomplished?

MVF: My mom did live to see me perform, and my dad did as well. They were in their later years, but they managed to come to some performances. One memory that's kind of funny was that it was the first time that I actually danced out of the chair, and it was a piece that was created by Daniel Job, at the School of Cleveland Ballet. What he had done was to take my movement ability on the floor, and to have the non-disabled dancers, the ballet dancers who were dancing with me, emulate my movement. And then he created lifts and floor work throughout the piece. He wanted it to be very ethereal and have a ballet sensibility; it was created for *Adagio for Strings*,² and it's just an incredible piece! But he had me pull my hair back — you know, very tight in a bun, and so forth — and I always had long, flowy red hair. So after the show, I was just so proud of the piece; it was in an outdoor amphitheater, too, which gave it a heavenly feel for me, in approach. So I asked my mom “How did you like it? And she goes, “Well, I can't stand it that you pulled your hair back like that!” (She laughs, recalling.) “And that's just not you!” And I said “Well, thanks for the advice!” She loved the dance, but you know, she had to remark on my hair, of course!

CF: “Dance Fever” actually played an important role in your origins and your trajectory. Would you mind retelling that story?

MVF: Well, in the late '70s and '80s, there was a [TV] show called “Dance Fever,”³ and what would happen is the producers would travel around the nation and do these competitions. And in these competitions, they would select dancers to be in their national television show called “Dance Fever.” It was much like today's “Dancing with the Stars,” or “So You Think You Can Dance,” when a lot of social dancing was coming of age. There was a lot of social dance going on! And I had just started experimenting in my wheelchair with some friends who were dancers and partners, and we could see that there were a lot of interesting movements that could be done partnering on wheels with a stand-up dancer. So we would go out to the clubs and we would just practice, and at one point, my friends said “Are you going to enter this dance competition?” And I said, “Oh no, we're just experimenting, to see what we can do.” But I was having, really, a lot of fun — and dancing with a lot of partners at that point; they could see that it was possible, so then they all wanted to try it, too. So I thought,

² Samuel Barber composed this work in 1936.

³ The show aired weekly from January 1979 to September 1987.

“Maybe it would be worth signing up for this competition!” and I just signed up, over the phone, and told them that my dance partner and I would like to enter this competition. So we went there, and there were two thousand people in the audience at this club where this was happening. And we showed up, and there I am, in a wheelchair, and they didn’t know what to do. They had never seen anybody in a wheelchair dance, so they weren’t quite sure what to say. We went out on the stage, and we broke into our dance; *It’s Raining Men*⁴ by the Weather Girls was one of the songs that we did. And the producer, who was sitting at a table was, like, leaning forward — and you could just read his mind: he was thinking “What in the world is going to happen here?” And even though there were two thousand people in the audience, there was a hush: you could hear a pin drop. Obviously, they were all stunned, and at the end of the dance routine — I had a thick, old-fashioned wheel chair — it wasn’t old-fashioned at the time, but it had arm-rests and it was a big, old heavy chair; it weighed 55 pounds, and I weigh 70 pounds. But my dance partner was a former gymnast in school, so at the end of this dance, he took a flying leap and landed on the arm-rests, and he jumped over my head. We got a standing audition that night, and by the time I looked over at the producer, he had thrown himself back in his chair, and everyone went crazy over it — they just thought it was awesome! And so we were chosen as alternates to go to California to be on the show. Ironically, though, the producer said — it was before the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act)⁵ — he said, “You know, you guys were great! But if I choose you in the top position, they’re going to say I chose you because you’re disabled; and if I don’t choose you, they’re going to say that I didn’t choose you because you’re disabled.” And I never forgot those words. At the time, I just said, “Well, I am who I am,” you know. But then it created this upsurge of interest in the media, so from there, they did features on Dancing Wheels — I named it “Dancing Wheels” that night, because my wheels were dancing. They did features on us and we were getting calls for bookings all over the country. We did 72 performances in one year, and worked full-time. Then we were called by Disney to do a show called “Up and Coming,” so we immediately got national recognition. And from there, it just grew and grew!

CF: My goodness. It’s amazing that your partner was ready to just give up whatever he had in mind for that year!

MVF: Well, you know, I think it’s a case of “ignorance is bliss.” We didn’t even know where it was going; we weren’t even thinking in terms of “Oh! We’re going to build this whole thing!” And so on. I mean, *it* led *me*; I didn’t really have these grand plans of building this huge company, and such.

CF: So you had that extraordinary year, including Disney. What was your next big step, do you think?

MVF: Well, again it led *me*, so what happened is with the tours that we were doing and the performances, I saw that there was a lot of interest from other people with disabilities — and those without as well — who wanted to be a part of it. So I was beginning to look at bringing other dancers on board with us, as well. And I happened to be performing at a nursing home at one point, and we did our little performance and there was this man who was just stunning — he stood out amongst almost everybody there. And so I said to the person who had set this up, “Who is that person?” (He had left right at the end of the performance.) And she said, “Why, that is the Director

⁴ 1983

⁵ The ADA became law in 1990

of the Cleveland Ballet.”⁶ And I said, Oh!” And she said “He really enjoyed seeing your performance.” And just then I got this feeling — and I’ve only gotten this feeling a few times in my life — but I always know that when I get it, it’s going to happen. So I said to my partner, “I think that we’re going to dance with Cleveland Ballet some day.” And he said “What do you *mean*?” And I said, “I don’t know — I just have this feeling that somehow, some way, we’re going to dance with Cleveland Ballet. And he said, “Oh, you’re crazy! That can’t be.” So, a few days later, I wrote a letter to him [the Director] and said “I’d love to meet with you and maybe we could figure out some way to work together.” I had no idea of what that might *be* at the time, but he wrote back and said “I would love to work with you and I would love for your Dancing Wheels to be a part of Cleveland Ballet.” So, it took about a year or so, maybe even a little bit more, but I ended up making a commitment to doing Dancing Wheels full-time. This was a conversation that I had to have with my husband (she laughs), because in order to do that, I couldn’t be tied to the job I had as the Development Director at the Independent Living Center. So my husband gave me one year to create the Dancing Wheels Company, and to be able to sustain my own salary on it, and so I said “Okay.” So I was looking in the paper and I saw that Cleveland Ballet was looking for a tour manager to do *Swan Lake* in Detroit, for somebody to coordinate the whole thing. I thought that might be a great opportunity to get a consulting job *and* be within range of Cleveland Ballet. So I applied for the job, and I got it. And while I was there, I learned that they were looking for outreach and educational activities and people to go out into the community to represent Cleveland Ballet. As it worked out, I was able to do that; I put together an outreach program and built it with dancers from Cleveland Ballet and disabled dancers together, and we went out and did — I can’t even remember how many — performances every year out in the schools. And that touched my heart because it really was a way for me to take my art and make it a mission-driven artform so that people, starting with our children, could see and understand the abilities of all people, and the artistry that was possible. I had, in the process of all this, created a 501c3 not-for-profit organization, built a board of directors, and staff — so I was already up and running as an organization. And what we did was we built this collaboration with Cleveland Ballet, and we called it Cleveland Ballet/Dancing Wheels. It was licensed and trademarked by me and our attorneys for copyright purposes, and it was the first co-venture of its kind.

CF: One of the things that comes up often when you’re talking is your business experience. I don’t know whether you’d like to say anything about that, but clearly you protected your own interests in a legally binding way...

MVF: Yeah. I actually have a strong business background, and when I was in college, my background was in marketing and business. So I took those skills and my arts background and experience and blended them together. I mean, I feel like it’s a great advantage to have a right and left brain-view of operations, and it has helped and sustained us for 36 years now. It keeps the organization safe, and it keeps us on a level, logistically and logically, that helps the organization forward its mission but keep it safe, too.

CF: A point of clarification: at the time of the nursing home performance, were you still just a duet company, or did you already have other dancers?

MVF: There were about three of us performing together at that time, and then it grew substantially, from there.

⁶ Dennis Nahat

CF: So, was it your joining with Cleveland Ballet that...I'm curious about how that led you, in terms of your forward motion.

MVF: I saw the prototype that was used within Cleveland Ballet, and that became my marker of what a company, at least in its operation — not maybe administrative operations, but in its artistic view — should look like. So, you know, it was a full-time ensemble of dancers who trained every day together, had a space in order to do that — so a home, and the only difference would be that obviously, we were not operating on a six million dollar budget, so it had to be scaled *down* to be able to meet whatever budget we were at. Over the years, I've always said that in order to create our non-profit, my husband and I donated \$3,000.00 to the organization to get all the paper work and get it started, and now I say "It's only a matter of *zeros*, isn't it?" I used to say, "Oh my gosh, how am I going to raise, you know, \$5,000, \$10,000 — now \$100,000, \$200,000? I say, "Well, I guess it's only a matter of zeros."

CF: Mary, I'm jumping way ahead — or not — how *do* you sustain the organization, financially? Do you want to talk about your public/private support at all?

MVF: Well, diversified support is the key for us, in terms of success, because if one falls out, for whatever reason, you look to another to fill in that gap. So, if you can find corporate, foundation, government, individual support — you can then be able to match it with earned income. So, for us, our touring is a big chunk of our earned income: presenters pay us to go perform, tuition and ticket sales — and the merchandise, as well. So if we look at all those ways of balancing our budget, and making sure — the other thing that I do is keep careful tabs on where we are, financially. So there's cash flow, that you have to look at — how do you keep the cash flow flowing, because some government grants give you *approval*, but they don't give you the *money* until the grant is completed; it could virtually be six months before you see a big chunk of funds from that. So, how do you keep it going on those expenses that are reoccurring every month, and stay the same, but the income is not always the same? That's very tricky; it's almost even trickier than some businesses and corporations. I also am able to pull back on certain line items within the budget if I see that we're not making goal, and that is something that I would say I am particularly adept at, for some reason — and it's funny because my husband has a degree in Accounting, and he can't figure out how I can have my finger on the pulse of the finances without even going through the accountant. I can judge within, you know, a few hundred bucks, where we are at the end of the year.

CF: Remarkable! You know, one thing that you spoke about last time related to this budget issue, is that one of your dreams for the company is to get out of the mid-sized company model.

MVF: Yeah, we're operating at a midsize financial range, but in order to really do what we want to do, we need to bump up, you know, several hundred thousand. And that's been a struggle, because in this economy, it's sustaining — we've been operating in the black — however, to really adequately do the programs that we would like to do more fully and pay people commensurate with what they deserve to have, we really need to raise additional funds, over and above the operating funds that we have.

CF: And you mentioned that you get stuck there because the grants are based on your current budget.

MVF: Yeah, a lot of grants are considered as a percentage of what your current budget is — so every year, say you're at \$500,000, and they're giving you a 10% increase on that so every year it's \$50,000, and you really can't grow. It doesn't seem to make sense. And then a lot of grants are driven on projects. So you couple within the project some of the everyday costs (you know, the rent, or a portion of it), but then if that grant only gives you a percentage of what you ask for, then you're facing that you need to do the project over and above anything else. It's kind of a double-edged sword; it's really hard to get out of that. I would say probably a substantial reserve fund that could be used as a percentage off of it, would help us be able to grow to that level. But we just keep being creative, and looking at ways that an angel might possibly come by at some point and help us do that.

CF: It would be interesting to hear what some of those bigger dreams are. When you say “to get where we want, to fully do what we want,” what kinds of things are you dreaming of doing?

Well, certainly our quest for our certification program. We created a manual and a DVD, a training method, from our standards of physically-integrated dance, and I'm requested all the time to go to conferences and to do presenting, but most of those big conferences, even the big international ones, don't have the funds to pay to get you there. If you can *get* there, you can present — so something of that nature. Also, more international performances and teaching; people in other countries with disabilities live very impoverished existences, for the most part, and I think showing them the vision of possibilities would uplift them spiritually and emotionally, and perhaps help those who don't see their value to see a greater value. And my big dream would be that every university, in the United States at least, would have teachers who are equipped to take on people with disabilities in their classes, and be able to do the translation, and be able to offer them the same track of certificate or degree as their non-disabled peers. Obviously, there are a lot of universities in violation of the ADA, and no one seems to be saying or doing anything about that. We were hoping with the announcement of the manual and the opportunity to teach them how to do it, that there would be more open-mindedness in terms of having these kinds of integrated classes — and not as “special” classes, but just the same kinds of classes that everybody else has. Some of the colleges have done what they call “separate integrated classes,” so they *keep* making it separate — and I keep saying “separate is not equal.”

CF: A common refrain in our unevenly evolving democracy...

MVF: There is a lot of close-mindedness that you wouldn't think still existed. But it does, unfortunately.

CF: You've already touched on this, but you and your partner at “Dance Fever” started something that hadn't been seen.

MVF: Right.

CF:...and launched a movement, which is now international...

MVF: Yes.

CF: ... in spite of those difficulties you just mentioned. Would you talk a little bit about the growth of physically-integrated dance?

MVF: There's actually a very strong movement at hand right now. We've been involved in these convenings of physically-integrated dance that are happening around the nation. And AXIS had gotten a big grant to host some of these convenings. What we're seeing is major organizations like Dance/USA are putting their stamp of approval on the credibility of physically-integrated dance, which is great. They're working to help it become more notable, recognizable and supported as any other dance company would be. Again, the equality issue is, I think, what's holding it back, because the general public, let's say, hears the word "disabled" or "disability," and I think they still think it is equated to "less than," or "unable," but it really isn't that at all. Once they experience it, they see that it's a new form of movement possibility. The only other thing is, they think if they saw one integrated company, that we're all the same, and we're not: we operate differently, we have different methodologies in our training, we're infused with different types of choreographic approaches. So they're all very, very different from one another.

CF: Would you care to talk a little bit about some of the discoveries you've made since that first performance with your very gymnastic partner to the present, in terms of the technology, the changes in the chairs themselves...Talk about what you can do in a chair that I can't do on my feet, and the implicit possibilities.

MVF: It's interesting with the evolution of medical technology. Even somebody with the very same disability as myself is much more able to walk and so forth now, with medical technology. People with spinal cord injuries are doing much better in terms of getting up, getting out and getting active in their life styles. And the chairs, the wheelchairs, have a lot to do with that physicality. The chair I mentioned that I danced in in 1980 was 55 pounds and had the attached arm-rests that didn't come out, and they were much longer as well, so the radius was far different, and the wheels were really big in the front. So a quick turn, or a spin, wasn't even attainable at that time. You could *do* a spin, but not in the same way that we do it today. And we have, you know, wheelie-work where the front end comes up and you can succinctly turn. We have a dancer who was a Hip Hop dancer before his injury and he has incredible strength and core. He can just almost *elevate* the chair in these wheelies; it's just incredible. And what I've found physically is that I really love getting out of the chair, as well, and doing floor work; there's a whole other freedom there that people don't realize, because in the chair, we're working with two instruments — our body and the vehicle, the chair. And when you're out of the chair, then you're moving your own *self*, so you have a little bit greater self-awareness in being able to determine what your strengths are, in terms of movement and balance and so forth. And I love the lifts in the air, even though they can be quite tenuous or scary at some points because I can't land on my feet or my legs or plié down and catch myself, so I'm at risk, and therefore the training with the stand-up dancer, who is doing the lift, has to be careful as well.

CF: Do you find that stand-up dancers are wary of that? I assume it is part of the training that they become comfortable with those risks?

MVF: When we first get a dancer, a non-disabled dancer in the company — obviously we all take class together, so they really start melding together in movement. Then we do separate partnering classes, so being able to partner *while* you're in the wheelchair is the next step, because different body types, different strengths, different weights take different control, from both— the stand-up and the sit-down. I think in terms of lifts, they have an initial hesitation, but then they see what it is that is needed — and most of them have been great partners or had experience in partnering non-disabled dancers, so they know how to do the lift, they just need to figure out the placement of the hands or what makes it more comfortable for me and my trust with them, you know? Sometimes (laughing) I

put the fear of God in them before they start, because you can never be too careful. Let's put it that way. And then I've found different strategies, like one time I decided that I really would love to be able to stand at the level of my stand-up partners and be able to partner that way, so we built a device that's on wheels, and it has a corset built into it. I can stand on one leg, so I stand on this device that has a dress that goes over it, and I can actually partner with my stand-up male partner the same as anyone else. So, you know, we keep pushing the possibilities, and whenever we get someone with a particular talent or skill set, that only adds to the diversity of the company, and what we can do. So right now, this male dancer who's in a wheel chair that has the Hip Hop background is lifting the stand-up girls. He's phenomenal, and every day you see him doing more, and being more. So there are endless possibilities!

CF: I was wondering in terms of the diversity of possibilities, if you would discuss how you have sought out choreographers to work with the company, and some of the highlights of that history.

MVF: It's always fascinating to work with all kinds of choreographers. A great many of them, and the majority of them, hadn't had experience of working with an integrated company or dancers with disabilities. So, it's a wonderful exchange, generally, in terms of teaching *them*, helping them learn translations of their own work, of their own vocabulary, and being able to be referred, like if I put out a theme or something that I'm looking for in terms of a creative collaboration, finding choreographers who specialize in certain things, I think is just so exciting. And then there have been choreographers whom I met years and years ago, during the Cleveland Ballet times, when it became the right time to be able to request them, like Donald McKayle, who, in his eighties was thrilled to choreograph a piece⁷ for the Dancing Wheels Company. And we hold one of the few pieces that he's actually created — not restaged — at that late age. You know, it's just a gem. And he was amazing to work with — just so joyful, and he had his own little stories. He said that it taught him something in all of his choreographic years that he had never experienced before. And then, of course, David Rousseve, who is a storyteller and wonderfully creative choreographer and director. Working with him was such a pleasure, so we brought him back twice, for two totally different kinds of pieces. One⁸ was built on the correlation between the African American, Disabled Rights, and Gay and Lesbian movements — how we all came together in terms of our equality. He created a fabulous piece that was a collaboration with an African American dance company, too, where I had a relationship. And then later, our *Daring to be DUMBO!*⁹ piece, which was based on anti-bullying; we took the story of “Dumbo the Elephant,” and we put it in modern-day times, so it was a girl who was bullied for how she looked different. The ideas and the themes came together, and he was just fabulous to work with. And, of course, there is Dianne McIntyre who, again, we have had make several pieces for us. Keith Young, who comes out of ballet — I met him while he was filming the Drew Carey Show here in Cleveland and working with some of the ballet dancers, and came to find out that he had an interest in disability because his sister was deaf. He really connected with me so very strongly, and he's the one that created the piece¹⁰ that we did on the Christopher Reeve Celebration of Hope.¹¹ So, some of them have been referred to me, while others I have known by their reputations and had a desire to work with them, and then contacted and commissioned them.

⁷ McKayle created *Far East of the Blues* in 2010.

⁸ *Walking on Clouds* (2006)

⁹ Rousseve created this piece in 2013

¹⁰ *Fly* (1998)

¹¹ TV special “Christopher Reeve: A Celebration of Hope.” (1998)

CF: Your circumstances have led you to be quite an activist as well as an artist, a director of a company and a business person. You've had to fight for what you've gotten, and you still clearly have that fight in you with regard to the higher education situation, for example. Would you talk a little bit about how that activism has intersected with other issues, such as the women's movement or the disabilities movement, or others?

MVF: I think what it did was led me to research, and during these times of thinking maybe it was only happening to the disabled community, I found out that it was happening — *and in the same way* — to all of these other communities, and that we all were not so different from one another in our quests for equality — in fact, we have a piece called *Quest for Equality*.¹² So there were always these leaders, these activists, these advocates who made it happen — and I think that, for me, it's just this undying need and desire for everyone to be looked upon as equals. So our company in its composition now — beyond just sit-down and stand-up dancers — is really a melting pot of people of color, of age, of ethnicity, of gender — it's just everyone. And in doing that, it's made us even more versatile and able to respond to what the community needs are today — and what is society trying to say and do. I think, too, as a child — even though my mother gave me that vision of being a dancer and she was just a very loving, kind person — she also had a level of protectiveness, too. My grandmother, who was a very strong person and a great business person, and really the matriarch of the family, had really a lot of spunk and strength. So, in some ways, I think I gained that from her, and I gained my love of people from my mother — so that somehow, I'm those two people together.

My grandmother had said when I was born that I was born with a tear in my eye and a smile in my face, and she knew that I was destined to do something in this world. And that was at a time when the doctors told my mother that I would live no more than to be three years old, and that I should be placed in a nursing home because I would be no more than a vegetable. But my grandmother said that “you need to take her home and you need to do the very best that you can for her.” (She is tearing up) And so she did. She said, “If she doesn't survive, you know you did the very best you could for her. And if she does survive, you know you did the best for her!”

CF: Strong women!

MVF: Mm-hmm!

CF: One thing we should probably just get on the record is for you to briefly characterize the current size and shape of the company; you mentioned how inclusive it is, but let's get the status on its size.

MVF: The company is at twelve right now; it depends on the season, we'll go from twelve to fifteen dancers depending on our needs and where we're at in terms of our tours. So right now we have twelve dancers, and we have three — actually, we're getting a fourth one, a wheelchair dancer — of those twelve. We had one girl who was in a wheelchair that trained with us for almost two years and then she got homesick, so she had to go home. But we have another one: she actually is just finishing her degree, so she's coming in June to be with us. Yeah, it's a nice ensemble. We did auditions in January, so we have, I think it's three male apprentices coming in and another female.

¹² A blending of excerpts from two dances for the company's “Lasting Legacy” 35th Anniversary Concert and Tour (2015): Rousseve's *Walking on Clouds* (2006) and McIntyre's *Dancing on a Dream* (2011)

We do auditions a couple times a year, because people — even though they love what they’re doing — sometimes move on, so you always have to have some back-ups, too. The training isn’t like a ballet company, in that people who are ballet dancers can come in, fit in and jump right into doing performances; ours takes a window of time for the training.

CF: What’s exciting that’s coming up for you and the company?

MVF: One of the most exciting things is that we were chosen by a New York City dance project¹³ to present in New York, and it’s only for physically integrated companies. We were one of six companies chosen. We’re doing “The Past, Present and Future of Physically Integrated Dance,” and we just found out that we have a confirmed agreement with David Dorfman to create our “future” work, so I’m excited about that. And we have a choreographer, James Morrow, who has a background in Hip Hop, too, so he’s coming in as well. He’s going to work in our summer intensive, and he’s also going to create a solo work for DeMarco,¹⁴ the hip hop dancer, so we’re very excited about that.

CF: When will that be produced?

MVF: The summer dance workshop is the last week of June, and the performance in New York City is going to be in October, at the Ailey Theater.

CF: Exciting!

MVF: Yeah, we’re really excited about that.

CF: Congratulations. You were talking, actually, when we interviewed you in September about the fact that there was an opportunity, but you couldn’t say anything about it and it had something to do with New York. I guess that was it!

MVF: Yeah, that was one piece of it; there’s another piece that’s still in negotiation that I can’t really speak about. It kind of looked like it was going to happen, and now it’s kind of “*Maybe* it can happen,” so we’ll see. I had gotten that feeling — the one that I only get every few moments in my life — and I feel like it *has* to be, so I’m hoping that I can make it be.

CF: Do you, yourself, choreograph?

MVF: I don’t choreograph, and the reason I don’t is that I hold it on a very high pedestal; I think that choreographers have an amazing skill that has been honed and refined over the years — the good ones, you know, the esteemed ones — and I would want to take the time to study it well in order to have it as a craft that would allow me to be viewed as a choreographer. I do a lot of translation, and I do some “in-between”... like, I’ll make a choreographic choice or suggestion, and it generally is a good one. So I think I have the skill sets to do it, but I just feel like that is something that I would want to have the time and energy to really dedicate and devote to it to be good at it. I don’t like to do anything halfway, and it wouldn’t have its just deserts right now in my career to do that.

¹³ Dance/NYC

¹⁴ DeMarco Sleeper, current dancer with Dancing Wheels

CF: Well, you do wear a number of hats already!

MVF: Yes, I do! I really do. And coordinating a day — “a day in the life of” — you know, you go from manager to dancer to artistic director to events coordinator all in one day, so you have to really be able to flip your brain and keep a very tight schedule.

CF: I know that you often approach a choreographer with a concept in mind. Would you talk a little about how that works?

MVF: *Most* of the time, I do. I approach a choreographer who has the ability to do what I’m looking to have done. But I usually have an idea or concept of where I’m going, either with the piece or an entire program. I don’t think I can ever recall just bringing in a choreographer and saying “Create a dance.” Yeah, I just always have that idea, and usually it’s a great exchange with the choreographer: it’s me setting the goal, and then talking with them about how we can mutually achieve this goal. With David [Rousseve], for instance, he took the concept of the parallels with the African American and disabled and gay and lesbian movement — and knowing that he’s a storyteller, I knew that he would like to do real-life stories of the dancers.¹⁵ And so that’s how we approached it. The music that he used was his own music, and he did the voice-over with it. I went into the studio with him, and he actually made a mistake in what he wanted to do, as far as a repeat in the music — and it turned out you could hear it three times. And he said, “Oh, that’s a mistake — it was just supposed to be twice,” and I said “No, I *love* it. I love it. Keep it.” And it’s just fabulous, you know, like, it *had* to be. Sometimes there are wonderful mistakes that happen that change the whole face of what you’re doing. So, it’s that kind of thing: I love to be involved. And even creatively with costumes or sets, or things of that nature. We had a former dancer of *Dancing Wheels*,¹⁶ and her dream was to create the story of *Labyrinth*, the David Bowie piece.¹⁷ She had come to me four years ago, when she was still a dancer and said “I would love to do this, I love *Labyrinth*,” and I wasn’t even familiar with *Labyrinth*, so I was like, you know, “Hmm, okay, some day, we’ll do it.” And she left the company and came back for a visit, taking classes and things like that, and she goes, “You know I’ve been thinking about this *Labyrinth*...” and so I said, “Yeah, you know, we’re going to do an outdoor amphitheater performance,” and I hadn’t set what the program was going to be yet, and I thought “Well, this will be a great opportunity.” We were already invited to perform there, so I gave her the go-ahead, and it turned out to be a week or two that I had agreed to do this, and David Bowie passed away. So it was kind of meant to be, I guess. But we went to premiere the piece, and it was last summer and storms hit, electricity went out and we were not able to do it. So we’re premiering it for a gala this year in June — still within the same fiscal year, for us — but I decided that we needed to build around it. So we’re doing “The Best of Bowie,” and it turned out that it’s much greater in terms of a program than it originally was. I’m commissioning a choreographer who’s doing forty-and-over dancers, and so I gave her that challenge — she’s going to use Bowie music and we’re going to use dancers who danced with *Dancing Wheels* and who are now forty or over, so it will blend very well. And Catherine’s¹⁸ creating a piece on the company, and in doing so I started researching him, and saw that he’s far more of an artist than many of us ever knew. From his early Berlin days when he didn’t use words with his songs to doing films — I think it’s like forty films, or so, that he did. And he was also a mime, and just had this creative brain that nobody realized, I think.

¹⁵ *Walking on Clouds* (2006)

¹⁶ Dezaré Foster

¹⁷ Bowie’s fantasy film, 1986

¹⁸ Catherine Meredith

And some people say “Oh, I don’t know if I like Bowie,” and some people only like one area of his music, one era. So I learned a whole lot more, and I came to learn that there’s a gentleman¹⁹ who runs “Cool Cleveland,” an online newspaper, and he became an expert at Bowie; he’s doing these films, the early years of Bowie with a narration, and the later years of Bowie and he has a cover band that does all-Bowie music. So I just connected with him and hired him, and he’s going to do video clips from the eras that the dances are drawn from, so it will take the audience on a journey. So it’s that creative force, of taking one kernel of something and developing it into something much bigger, and much more interesting, that I love. That part, I *love*.

CF: Obviously you do, and you’re good at it! For the record, would you talk a bit about the depth of your repertoire? You have some 60+ works...

MVF: Currently, I think we have at least 65 works in our repertoire, and they represent a very large range. Some are based on themes — so I think we have six or seven story ballets: *Pinocchio*,²⁰ *Alice in Wonderland Like Its Never Been Seen Before*,²¹ *Daring to Be Dumbo*,²² *The Snowman*²³ — and that number is unusual for a mid-size modern company, I will say. But they really draw an audience base that maybe a general repertory piece wouldn’t. A lot of times, we’ll pair them together. What I’ve felt is that each piece has to have longevity, so it’s not only shown once, of course — or even on tour. But we’ve built outreach and educational programs around them, so many of them have themes that will be useful educationally. So they fit within the curriculum of the schools, and we excerpt them, and then we write within that how we approach the children, or activities that the children can do with us. So I love that part of it. And every one of them is done in an unusual way: For example, *Pinocchio* was choreographed by an artist who used to be with the Cleveland Ballet. She used very different kinds of music, and we used various approaches — like for the undersea water scenes, we had these hats that were created that light up and sparkle. So they’re all very unusual. And then there are the pieces that tell the other kind of story, such as *Walking on Clouds*, the David Rousseve piece. Diane McIntyre created one that I presented to her when I had gotten a suite of music from the Museum of Art, and it was all women artists, down through history, and I thought it would be great to have a piece created by a female choreographer, with female dancers who were dancing to a theme of these women — powerful women. So she came in and we chose the artists and then she brought in the dancers, too, to find out what their favorite piece was. So, like Janis Joplin — one girl was like “I love Janis Joplin! And I love this song that she does.” So it was a collaborative effort in that sense. It was she [McIntyre], though, who thought “Let’s make this centered around a radio.” So we called it “Sweet Radio Radicals,”²⁴ and it starts in the 1920s and it goes to the 1970s, and for each song, the radio moves across the stage and changes faces to suggest the era in which the piece took place. There’s Mahalia Jackson and Dolly Parton, for example — and it’s one of my favorite pieces, actually. And then there are just beautiful, lyrical pieces or modern, driving pieces. Mark Tomasic created one that’s called *Anomalies*,²⁵ and that is a very popular piece; it has a lot of different balances to it, and strengths and movement styles. We developed that to be a part of a program that was

¹⁹ Thomas Mulready? Rich Line?

²⁰ *Pinocchio* was choreographed by Ginger Thatcher in 2010

²¹ *Alice* was choreographed by Robert Wesner in 2007

²² Rousseve, 2013

²³ *The Snowman* was choreographed by Sabatino Verlezza in 2000

²⁴ McIntyre choreographed the piece in 2008

²⁵ Tomasic choreographed *Anomalies* in 2012.

about the sciences. So, to look at how gravity takes on different aspects, and how do you move together. They're all very interesting, and they're all created for a purpose: they're not arbitrary.

CF: We are at our deadline. It might be good to talk about the development of the school and its relationship to the other activities of the company.

MVF: One of the important factors that I thought needed to be associated with the company was a school, or a means of training. And interestingly enough, it came about, again, from the community requesting something from me. At one juncture early on, a mother came to me from Texas, and she said "Would you spend a week training my daughter?" And I said, "I guess..." and she said "Great!" I only had a few partners at the time, and we spent the whole week involving her in how we train and so on — she was *little!* And then the mother said, "I bet you'd have a lot of little girls in wheelchairs who would want to come. You should create a camp!" So from there, we did a week-long summer camp, and then we decided we would have an adult intensive training session, too. So then we had two weeks of training in the summer, and people came from around the country, different parts of the world, even, to train with us. And then community classes, so making sure that those in our own community who wanted regular training could do so. The school is independently run — actually, I oversee both, but there are different staff members running the school. Some of our dancers are teachers as well, and we do a ton of outreach and educational programs under the guise of the school — and then independent training for kids — with and without disabilities — who all train together in our studios. They have an opportunity to perform on their level as well, and sometimes with the company. So, you know, you just look to foster that "feeder system," and the basics of that are to allow people of whatever age who want to embrace the arts and learn more about the arts or be a part of it, having the right to do that.

CF: Is it okay if I ask one more question? (She nods her approval.) You've spoken a lot throughout our conversations about one of the through lines that is this sense of being *led*: "this happens, and then I'm led."

MVF: Yes.

CF: It's not that I *have* the vision initially, but that I'm *led* and then I follow it. You've also used the phrase "mission-driven."

MVF: Mm-hmm.

CF: I wondered if you could talk a little bit about either or both of those ideas.

MVF: Well, for me, equality was always first and foremost in my mind. But there's equality both ways. The idea of integration would be not necessarily bringing people with disabilities into the non-disabled world, it's a mesh of both so that it's not just one and not just another but it's the combination of the two. So it's integration, education, and employment opportunities within the arts. And to use the arts as a vehicle for community awareness...the mission for it is that it changes lives. Use your art for the good of people and to change lives; it's not just dance for dance's sake. The dancers that we choose and the people who are Board members or our volunteers look at the whole realm of what the company and school do, so it could be that they're interested in disability, they're interested in education, they're interested in art — or all three.

CF: Thank you!