

VDC Interview Transcript
Mary Verdi-Fletcher
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Dancing Wheels
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Cleveland, OH 44115

CF: Candace Feck
MVF: Mary Verdi Fletcher
MDB: Megan Davis Bushway

CF: Before we begin, I would like to say that you're not only an Ohio treasure, but a national one. It's quite an honor to talk with you.

MVF: Thank you.

CF: Thank *you*. I was wondering, Mary, if you could describe the dance scene in Cleveland as it was when you were coming up — before Dancing Wheels was a reality.

MVF: The dance scene in Cleveland was primarily the Cleveland Ballet, at the time where I can first remember what was happening in the dance scene. There was a lot of social dancing happening, however. And it started because of a national television program called "Dance Fever." A lot of people were watching the show and wanting to put their routines together and compete, so I remember those two things. The Cleveland Ballet was the most prominent company in the city, and there weren't as many smaller groups, or mid-size companies as there are today, now that there no longer is the Cleveland Ballet.

CF: "Dance Fever" actually played a pivotal role in your trajectory, right?

MVF: "Dance Fever" was *the* starting point for me, on a public stage. And it happened quite innocently, I will say — but my mother, who was always supportive of me being an individual and being seen for who I am, had always taught me as I was growing up to say: "I'm not handicapped, I'm Mary." And those words, I think — even though I didn't quite understand it at the time she told me — kind of became the mantra for my life. So, when my friends were out publicly practicing different dance routines, I found it quite interesting to try to experiment with them.

My friends were experimenting in the hopes of competing on the show, but I was looking to find a way to participate, because for many years, I just sat back and watched them. Now I just took a little different attitude about who I was and about my disability, and said I wasn't just going to sit back and watch everybody else have all the fun; I was going to try to find a way to do it. But what we saw was that the partnering had such a unique element because there was such a *glide* to the chair. And I had another saying at one point: "It's a lot easier to drag a woman around on wheels than it is on heels" — and (laughing) although that would become a bit antiquated later, it was kind of interesting because of this glide that we saw, and my friends encouraged me to enter the dance competition. So going back to my mother's mantra about seeing *me*, not my disability, I just called up and signed up for it. So they hadn't seen me. I just said "Mary Verdi" (at the time), "...and David Brewster, and

we're going to enter the dance competition." And they said "Okay." So, the night of the show, I show up in a wheelchair, and they were pretty astounded to see that. It was 1980, so people with disabilities weren't *doing* active things — like sports or dancing. So, I went out on stage and there were 2000 people in the audience that night, and the producer from the national show was there — he was the judge. And when I came out, he was leaning forward on the table — like, just astounded, and there was a hush over the audience, and we broke out into our routine, which was *It's Raining Men* by the Weather Girls, and we also had done a song called *Circles*, by Atlantic Star — and by the time we were done, he was practically thrown back in his chair; he just had an open mouth, and he was like "Oh my gosh!" And the whole audience rose to their feet, and that was the beginning of us calling it "Dancing Wheels." And pretty much it was because no one had ever seen it — so, I always think ignorance is bliss. I didn't know I *shouldn't* be doing it, because my mother was a professional dancer — and they didn't know I *could* do it — so it was pretty ground-breaking at the time, but I didn't even know that it was. I just wanted to dance!

We were followed by the media — of course, there was no social media at the time — so it was newspaper or television or radio — and it just spread like wildfire. We got requests for performances all over the country. The first year, we did 72 performances. So it grew and grew from there.

CF: And wasn't that the same year that you actually really founded your company — or did you just start with the title then?

MVF: Well, my partner and I formulated the company right then — and that's how we got bookings, and we brought in a couple of other dancers who learned to do it, and then it expanded from there. But it was a full performing group — even though it was a smaller ensemble, and we were paid for our performances. It really legitimized the artform, and it was just new and groundbreaking at the time.

CF: And so many others have followed! Aren't there now many physically integrated companies?

MVF: There are about fifty-two physically-integrated — as far as we can even document — about fifty-two to fifty-five physically-integrated dance companies throughout the world today. Each of them operates differently, and the Dancing Wheels Company & School is a prototype of your typical small ballet company or mid-sized modern company; we're on fifty-two week contracts, and the dancers have paid vacation time, and we train Monday through Friday as an ensemble, so both the stand-up and the sit-down dancers train together.

CF: I was wondering if you'd talk a little bit about the development of your language around these issues — did the terms "stand-up" and "sit-down" dancers come to you as you developed...?

MVF: Actually, the terminology of stand-up/sit down came about when there was a lot of political — and there still is — a lot of political dialogue about what to call someone with a disability. And one of the dancers and artistic people that worked here at the time said "Well, let's just get rid of *all* of the political ramifications: you're a sit-down dancer because you're sitting, and we're stand-up dancers because we're standing, and it made total sense. And it was a means by which people could visualize it as well — sometimes we still have to preface it — you know, sit-down dancer/wheelchair dancer kind of thing... And the company now is so much more inclusive, even beyond the disability factor — because we have a wide range of age and ethnicity and gender, so it's just really expansive now in terms of being a community.

CF: Well, could you expand a little bit – you say “ignorance is bliss” in a way; you just wanted to dance — you and your partner applied, you didn’t mention to the judges that you happened to be in a wheelchair, and things just took off from there...but what was the next big step? Or, how did you proceed?

MVF: My whole life I wanted to dance, even as young as three years old. And I think, again, that my mother fostered that: she would put on records and she would have my brother and me dance in the family room. And I used braces and crutches at that time, too, so she would have him do lifts with me or dips and things of that nature. So she was slowly bringing that vision, I think, to fruition — but not even knowing, because there weren’t any dance studios to train in. Basically, like I said, it was pretty unheard-of. Once I got that chance to dance, I never wanted to stop dancing: it was the most freeing experience in my entire life, to be on stage and transform into a dancer, when you’ve only known being pedestrian and in a wheelchair. And because of the surfaces of the dance floors, there are no barriers. It allowed for a lot of freedom of movement, and speed and agility –and *that* was my dream, then; the more people saw it, the more they wanted to be a part of it.

Back in 1990, we were doing a performance at a nursing care facility, and there was a young gentleman there, and he was watching it with such enthusiasm, he caught my eye — even while I was performing. After I was finished, he had left — he had to go — so I asked the person who had brought us in, “Who was that gentleman? He just stood out to me.” And she said, “Well, we were visited by a very special person. He’s the Artistic Director of Cleveland Ballet.”¹ At that moment, this feeling just welled up inside of me; every now and then, I get that feeling, and I just know it’s going to come to fruition. I said to my partner “I just know that we’re going to dance someday with Cleveland Ballet.” And he said, “Oh, you’re crazy...how can we dance with Cleveland Ballet?” And I said “I don’t know, I just feel it.” So, I wrote a letter to Dennis Nahat at the time, thanking him for seeing our performance, and saying that I would really love to do something together in the future. And he wrote back, and he said he absolutely loved it, and would like that as well. About a year went by and nothing really happened, and I decided that I wanted to dance full-time. So I said to my husband – I was working at the time at an Independent Living Center as their Development Director — and dancing on week-ends and at night and whenever I could — and I said to my husband, “I really want to do this full-time.” So that was kind of the next level to this lifetime commitment. And he said “I’ll give you one year to make good on that.” I wanted to establish it as a non-profit organization, so that we could better serve the community and reach out to the schools and educate the children in an artful way. Because I had been an advocate for years and years and wanted to continue that — however, I was a dancer first, so I wanted to make sure that I could put the two together. And so I quit my job, and I started to work on the not-for-profit, the 501c3, and in the meantime I had seen that there was an opportunity at Cleveland Ballet for a consultant to help them do *Swan Lake* in Detroit – to get it up there – a coordinator, you know, to be working with two major organizations, Michigan Opera Theatre and Cleveland Ballet to make it happen. I applied for the job and I got it, and as I was there, they knew who I was due to all the publicity, so that started the dialogue about what we could do. And through their Development Department, I had learned that the Ballet was in dire need of an Outreach and Educational program — so I put one together. And I worked with some ballet dancers, including some that were semi-retired ballet dancers but still had great technique, and could dance, and could choreograph, too — and we put the show on the road, and we did many, many performances— canvased all of the city, most of the state, and a lot throughout the nation.

¹ Dennis Nahat

I had Dancing Wheels trademarked and licensed to me as I was developing it, and we entered a licensing agreement with Cleveland Ballet at the time, so we could say we were Cleveland Ballet/Dancing Wheels. They bought the license to use our name. And the establishment of the 501c3 is a not-for-profit organization that's called Professional Flair. Fewer people know about that name – it's kind of like Nestle and Coca-Cola and things of that nature, but we do business as the Dancing Wheels Company & School. We had that relationship with Cleveland Ballet for almost ten years, until they folded. We had kept a watchful eye on the finances, and we were actually taking care of our own finances for this project, for this program. And so when they were going down, we changed the name back to Dancing Wheels Company & School, and you know, by that time, we had far more company members, and since touring is our primary means of business, we were on the road all the time.

We have thirteen dancers right now with and without disabilities; every season it kind of changes a little bit, but it stays between thirteen and fifteen dancers, depending on the season and what kind of dances we're going to mount. And we have over sixty works in our repertory from choreographers throughout the nation. So it grew by leaps and bounds, but a lot of it grew based on others' desires. For example, the school was created because a mom came to me from Texas and asked if I would teach her daughter — if my partner and I at the time would teach this girl for a week in the summer — almost like a summer camp — you know, dance camp — and we agreed. From there, the mother said, “You know, I'm sure there are a lot of young people that would really like to be part of a summer camp...” — and so we started a summer camp, we started classes, and it grew from there. And the whole school now has an outreach segment of its own: we do residencies and classes, and then we have classes here on Saturdays —so, all told, we serve about six to seven thousand kids a year in the Greater Cleveland area.

CF: So, would you say that you started this partnership with Cleveland Ballet around 1991?

MVF: Around 1991.

CF: When did you get this building? Was that the next thing?

MVF: We shared space with Cleveland Ballet during a good portion of the early tenure with them. They were at Playhouse Square, and they probably had five big studios — so we were able to use the studios when they weren't. Then, I had a small office area right there on site by the ballet, as well as a bigger office space that was in a connecting building — so I could go up the elevator and do my office work, and then run down and be in the studios, which is still happening today — I don't go up and down, but I'm going in and out of doing administrative and artistic work. I'm trying to think of the actual date that the Ballet moved over here to the Masonic [Cleveland Masonic Performance Arts Center], and I think it might have been in the late nineties, somewhere around '97, '98 — somewhere around there that they took over several floors here, and then they weren't able to sustain operations of it, so they invited me over here. And we were at the cusp of this further development of our school... we received a rather large grant from my husband's former boss. He had sold his business and decided he would give us \$100,000.00 — with the caveat that we matched it — but the one thing he specified is that to build a school, to have a school, we had to be autonomous from any other organization. So we made this exchange with the Ballet, took over this entire floor. And with that \$200,000.00 that we had, we restored these spaces because they were originally sort of like Masonic places of prayer that they used for service, but they weren't as big as they are now, because we took out all the steps — blasted it all out, put in sub-floors and Marley, and

put in mirrors, so they are actually one of the few studios in the city of Cleveland that are as big as they are — they're 2,500 square feet, and they're totally unobstructed spaces with very high ceilings, so they make a perfect space for dance.

CF: So, getting a space, the connection with Cleveland Ballet, the grant from your husband's former boss... Talk about other major landmarks in your development, if you would. Highlights, lowlights...

MVF: I always said that it was the thing that gave me the most joy and the most sorrow, because as you probably know, running a business is not easy — and a not-for-profit arts organization is also extremely difficult. And as a mid-size group, we are more fragile than a small group, and more fragile than a very large institution, so we're sort of right there in the middle. I was lucky, because I had a background in business, so that helped me in terms of looking at the bottom line as an organization — and I always look at it from the business of the arts— not to make it less artistic but to keep the organization safe in terms of what is achievable, and employing clever ways of possibly getting around the financial issue that always happens.

One highlight was when I met a choreographer from L.A. I actually *purposefully* met him; it wasn't an accident. I had read that he was going to be coming to Cleveland to choreograph the opening of the Drew Carey Show. He mentioned in this article that he had a particular interest in disability, because his sister was deaf. He had somehow seen the Dancing Wheels name, and when he came to film the show, I signed up as an Extra to be on the set, so I was in some of the major scenes of it, but never got close enough to him — I wasn't in the choreographed scenes that he was doing. I actually waited around all day — from morning until 2:00 in the morning, when they had an after-party. Two of my friends who were with the Cleveland Ballet knew what I was doing, so they invited me to the after-party to meet this choreographer — his name was Keith Young. And he was like "I want to choreograph for you. I'm going to choreograph for the three of you — Raymond Rodriguez, Mark Tomasic and yourself — a ballet." And I said "Okay." You know, a lot of people say a lot of things, — so you never know... But no more than a month later, he calls up and says, "Listen, I was given an opportunity to show any dance I want at the Mountain AIDS Benefit in LA — and he said, "Big stars are in it, and this will be an opportunity." So he flew out to Cleveland, he created this piece² to the music *I Believe I Can Fly*, and it was in and out of the chair; there were many lifts — it's just a beautiful, ethereal piece — and I think he choreographed it in four days, then took us off to LA, and we performed it. And again, it got a standing ovation; it was just an incredible evening, and some very big stars were in the audience, and they were weeping because it's a piece that moves you. In the audience was also Christopher Reeve's agent, and he came backstage and he said "You know, we're working on putting together a national television show that would be a benefit for the Christopher Reeve Foundation."³ He said "I don't know if it's going to come together, but if it does, would you be willing to perform on the show?" And we were like, "Okay! Just call if it happens!" And then, probably no more than a month after that, we got the call. And they said, "We'll fly you out, put you on stage, have Bob Mackey's assistant make a costume for you...." It was magical! And so we got there and hadn't realized that it was going to be sung live by James Ingram with a full chorus behind us and an orchestra. And they had — I think we did maybe two rehearsals, and then they went live with a five-camera shoot. So it was probably the scariest thing that I ever did, but the

² *Fly* by Keith Young (1998)

³ TV special "Christopher Reeve: A Celebration of Hope." (1998)

most...it just enveloped you, it was magical as well. Once again, we received a standing ovation, and in the video that we were later able to see, Christopher Reeve was nodding his head with such great pleasure. ...It was an experience of a lifetime. It's hard to describe, you know, what those feelings are like, but it wasn't even so much that we were in Hollywood and all that, but this was another group of people that you would think have seen anything and everything, but they said they had never seen anything like it. We were at a reception and Beau Bridges was there, and he said "I can't even describe it." He said, "It just took flight in my heart." So, you know, it changes people's minds and attitudes — and that's the most important thing about what we do. And it's been my barometer for standing ovations, because it, to me, cements the idea that it moved them to their feet — or it elevated them in their faces to be able to say "This transported me!"

And then low points; I actually had lost a kidney when I was right out of high school, and then as I was dancing, I was experiencing some illnesses...And what I noted was that when I would dance, it would leave me. So even if I had a fever, I was fine when I was dancing, and then I would get off and I was real sick — and it turned out that my second, sole kidney was failing and so I had to have a kidney transplant. So (she begins to weep), my husband donated his kidney. And it's now twenty-two years later, and I'm still here! Knock on wood! They actually didn't think I would survive because the kidney that was in me went septic. And I actually danced while I was on dialysis. I just kept going. And I think that's a sign, besides prayer — a lot of prayer — but it's a sign of survival when somebody can just keep going. (weeping) Excuse me --

CF: You have worked with a lot of choreographers both from Ohio and outside, as you mentioned. Was it just that the first one came and then you got the idea— or were you always seeking outside choreographers?

MVF: As we developed ourselves and the technique that we had, I had hired a choreographer to be an artistic associate with the company.⁴ He came from the May O'Donnell⁵ Company. So, at first we trained more steeped in the May O'Donnell technique, and translated it. It was an easier translation, because the non-disabled dancers started their warm-up on the floor, so we were on an equal ground just to start it off — even being in our chairs: it made sense. He choreographed quite a few pieces during his time here, and then we had a parting of the ways. And as that happened, it sort of opened and bloomed for the company to bring in other choreographers. So, I did a lot of research and had a lot of dialogue with people to look at what choreographers were out there, in order to find work that would make the most sense for our company. It's certainly a wide range...I had entered into a collaboration with an African American dance group whose Head was also a dancer with Dancing Wheels at one time. He and I talked about a choreographer that could create dialogue and tell stories and thread those stories together — and, so he recommended David Rousseve. My question for the choreographer was "What are the parallels between the African American and Disabled Rights communities in their quest for equality? Was there a through-line? Were there similar things that happened in our lives, in our time? And, as we started to uncover and discover that, it was so uncanny because *my* story as an advocate was about capturing busses to make them accessible; back in the 80s, someone in a wheelchair couldn't get on public transportation, anywhere — and he discovered that in 1955, the African American community could not sit in the front of the bus. So, he started this dialogue by saying "In 1955, Rosa Parks took a stand on busses so that they could be equal, and in 1985 people with disabilities captured busses in Downtown Cleveland to make them

⁴ Sabatino Verlezza

⁵ May O'Donnell: May 1, 1906 – February 1, 2004 (former Graham dancer)

accessible. So he threaded it through, and it just made so much sense and, ironically, at the time that Rosa Parks was doing that, it was the year that I was born. So, it was quite interesting. He put together both real-life stories and this amazing, driving music, and both companies did it together, but both companies had the right to do it separately as well, so we could tour it — and so, it's still in our repertory today: it's called *Walking on Clouds*.⁶

CF: You know, I was thinking about those parallels. You brought up the African American community and how you and David Rousseve discovered those intersections, and I wondered...you know, the American Disabilities Act. Wasn't it 1990?

MVF: Yeah, 1990.

CF...and the Women's Movement — would you say that all of these threads have interwoven in your development as a director?

MVF: What I discovered in this work that we were doing is that the African American, Women's Rights, Gay and Lesbian movement and the Disabled Rights community all took the same approach. And what that was, you know, going to the legislature for change — pleading for change, and when change couldn't happen, taking on acts of civil disobedience, which made it very public. So, as a result of that, change started to happen. And that's exactly what happened with the Disability community, too. And, you know, I'm all for equality across the board, but I feel that my strength in terms of being a woman is about being able to take a stand — whether you're a disabled woman or you're a woman without a disability.

CF: Well, it's no accident that you are able to do this in your lifetime — 1955 to the present. I think about Liz Lerman's work, which really featured inclusion — mostly inter-generational at the time, among various examples. In any case, people seemed to be drinking the same water! It dovetails with the growth of the Civil Rights movement. Is that how you see it?

MVF: I think that there was a rise-up, you know, in terms of people with disabilities in society in general; I think there was certainly a rise-up for women, in the African American communities. We are in a place where we *should* have equality for everyone — but it's not always there. The Americans with Disabilities Act mandated equality in various areas: employment, education, public spaces and communication — so, in all of those areas, it's mandated. However, the spirit of the law is very different from adherence to the law. So, we still look at people who are a little closed-minded, and we find it mostly in academia. Because even today, in the majority of universities and colleges in dance departments, somebody in a wheelchair cannot go in and just take a regular class and also strive to get a degree in Dance. So, that's kind of the next step, working to open those doors. We've developed a manual and DVD that was compiled by Mark Tomasic; it was part of his getting his degree, and it came from the whole 36 years of development of this process — how to do partnering, how to be inclusive, how to translate dance from stand-up to sit-down and sit-down to stand-up, how to use the vehicle of the wheelchair as a tool for mobility versus being confined to it.

We always say that you're not confined to a wheelchair; the wheelchair is a vehicle for freedom of motion — and now, technically, the chairs are far advanced from those of years ago — they're so

⁶ Rousseve, 2005

lightweight. My first chair, dancing in it, was fifty-five pounds. And today, some of these are less than twenty, twenty-five pounds.

CF: You've referred to it, but would you like to elaborate on specific ways the technology of the wheelchair allows you to develop a distinctive style, a genre, a vocabulary?

MVF: Using the chair, we actually look at it as having two different partners, because you're partnering the person in the chair but you're also conscious and aware of the chair itself — and each chair can be different — could be a different size, could have a different camber. We experimented with a chair that Invacare had brought out that was called the Twirl — and it has an extension on the back, which would normally have been like an anti-tip bar, but they put a wheel on the back of it, so it could create yet another element of turns. You know, we call it “wheelie work.” The wheels pop off, and mine have brakes on the side so they could flip while I'm dancing, be taken right out of the chair — quickly. So, the chairs have various capacities: the person in the chair may have had an accident, so they might be in the chair because of an injury; they might be in the chair because of a disability from birth, like myself. It takes a lot of calculations and figuring out, and also adapted translations for everybody. So it's always in-process. And we have right now two dancers in chairs who had gotten their injuries from an accident; one was a hip-hop dancer, and he suffered an accident in an automobile. So, he felt like he couldn't do what he did before, and in some respects, he had to learn to do it differently. Until he saw us and heard about this aspect of it, he was pretty forlorn and thinking that his life as a dancer was over. But he's amazing, he has a super-powerful strength — upper-body strength, and has actually been working his lower body, too, so he's recovering somewhat, with some movement ability. And he, like I, likes to be in and out of the chair — although he's far more strong (laughing), has far more strength than I do. He can lift the non-disabled women in the air, and he's just quite a presence on stage. And the other woman was a dancer when she was young. Once she had become injured, she couldn't find anything that would enlighten her, inspire her for anything in her life until she had seen us — and again, she came on board and is just a beautiful dancer and has acquired amazing technique.

CF: I'm thinking back to what sounded like your first really large grant from your husband's business partner. Do you feel well-supported in the state of Ohio? Do you feel that you are connected to the rest of the dance scene in Ohio?

MVF: Well, we're certainly connected with the dance scene, and I would say that in terms of statewide grants, they certainly have appreciated our work, and supported our work. What is a big hurdle nowadays is to try to *grow* the budget, because most grantors give you a percentage of what your budget is now, or a lot of them do — and so they look at you as a midsize organization and continue to support you, but at that level — and in order to jump up, to do more of what we need to do, and allow for compensation for people who deserve to have it and work very hard to have it, like our dancers and our staff, it's been a challenge to try to find a way to make that leap *up* — and, you know, it would take several hundred thousand dollars to do that.

CF: So, I was going to ask, “What's next?” or “What do you dream of as the next thing?” Is it to expand, in size?

MVF: Yeah, to expand a bit, to be able to be more comfortable in what we're doing, and to be able to attract really high-level artists, and staff, of course. We have great staff, and we have great artists but, you know, as the economy grows, we need to grow as well. That's one — that's more the

business side of it. Artistically, I would love to see every university have equality — and be trained, by us preferably — in this method of inclusion. Because it is tried-and-true; our classes, both ballet and modern, and even some other technique classes are all inclusive. So if the teachers are trained, they'll feel comfortable allowing anyone to come in to their classes. And we're challenged by people saying, "Well, why would somebody — a sit-down dancer — take a ballet class since they're not using their legs?" And, for us, in the translation, we work on the strength and agility in the same way the stand-up dancer moves their legs and their hands and their feet and their arms, and we move our wrists and our hands in our *port de bras*. So sometimes it's a match between the *port de bras*, and sometimes it's a translation — a *non-direct* translation — like we're doing a *tendu*. And so it allows for that sort of movement to be cohesive. But also it's the training in the terminology so that any sit-down dancer could go in and teach a ballet class, because it's all steeped in terminology.

CF: I remember reading — going way back to "Dance Fever" days — when you and David were partners: one of the striking things to the audience was that at the end, he did a sort of a somersault or cartwheel onto the handles of your chair...

MVF: Well, he was a gymnast in school, so what he did was jump up on onto my arm-rest and jump over my head. Because these wheelchairs were more of the medical model with fixed arm-rest — and I was not yet dancing out of the chair, initially — didn't even *know* that I could do that. We thought our smash ending would be that he would take a leap onto the armrests of my chair, and then jump over my head. That's what he did, and the crowd went wild! And you know, it was a little scary at that point, too, because he only had that small platform to actually jump on. But it was quite impressive, and then later, when I discovered that I could be out of the wheelchair and do a lot of floor work and lifts — I was really quite fortunate because I'm very small, lightweight — I weigh seventy pounds — but I have great upper body strength, so I was able to do all those lifts with my stand-up dance partners.

CF: I'm curious. It seems that that contribution came as a collaborative idea between the two of you, that he would end the dance that way?

MVF: Yeah.

CF: Have there been other breakthroughs in your vocabulary that have come from working with different choreographers, different people?

MVF: The next breakthrough was being able to get out of the chair and dance. And I was working — studying — in the school of Cleveland Ballet, and the ballet master for the school⁷ wanted to choreograph a work, too. Somehow — and I don't even remember how it came about — he wanted to eliminate the chair, altogether. So, we started on the floor in a position — he asked me to sit on the floor in a way that I could, he made the non-disabled dancers emulate that, and then we moved from the floor work of how I could move on the floor, and then it grows into those lifts. So you never saw the chair in the entire performance, and to this day it's one of my favorite pieces. And again it has this elevating element to it; it's called *Above*,⁸ and the music is Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*. So, it's just moving, and the first time I performed it was in an outdoor amphitheater — and feeling the breeze from the night, it just added to the piece itself, and it was just incredible, and I still

⁷ Daniel Job

⁸ Daniel Job (1991)

do the piece, too. You know, there are pieces, old pieces, that have just been old favorites — and so every few years we might bring it back, and you know, and do it...

CF: Well, I think you have seen a lot happen, both in physically integrated dance and you also mentioned the expansion of dance in the state of Ohio since your days of coming up. Is there anything else that you would like to comment on, as far as that goes? The place of, really, the way Dancing Wheels fits in with dance in Ohio in these other expansive areas...

MVF: Well, one of the things that I'd still like to see more of is that we are on a positive, competitive level with any other dance company, so we're not that "special" dance company: we're a dance company that has a unique method of working together, and an artform that isn't used by non-disabled dancers, so it has its niche, and its place — but it's also alongside non-disabled dance companies. We enter into showcases — we're the only integrated company, oftentimes — we just did a showcase at Playhouse Square, and so to be invited on those same stages, or to be requested by presenters throughout the nation, to book us into a theatre and to perform like any other company is... I just want to see *more* of it, but we have been doing that for years and years, and for me, that's very important. We have to keep a competitive edge, we have to look for new work always, we have to look at what is on the horizon, being presented in dance not only in the United States but throughout the world, and be able to move in that way. We're working right now on creating virtual classes, so that those in other countries — because we have sold our manual to a lot of people who can't come here for daily classes — people outside of the state of Ohio or even outside the country. We felt that we'll start with two classes a month, and build upon them, so they start very rudimentary in terms of movement, and then build upon it so that they can log in through a membership and have classes with us and they could sustain it for a whole month, and then move on to another level.

CF: You have a lot of irons in the fire!

MVF: (laughing) Yeah, we do have a lot of irons in the fire.

CF: You need to have them in the fire to survive...

MVF: Yeah...

CF: Is there anything else that you'd like to talk about in this forum?

MVF: I think I've covered a lot...

CF: You have.

MVF: I'm a big talker, and I find that it's a great pleasure to still be able to dance at my age, and it still is the thing that gives me the most pleasure in my life.

CF: I wish you continued success, and continued inspiration for others.

MVF: Thank you.

CF: (turning to film crew): Any thoughts from any of you — any questions from anyone? Actually, if you don't mind talking about it, something I'm interested in is whether the contact improvisation movement, with its inclusion of differently-abled dancers, has had an impact on your work?

MVF: It's interesting because we've kind of been in two different camps for so long — because my methodology is training — training in the typical methods of dance. That's where I came from, and I feel that it's very important — whether you're disabled or not — that you have technique. And their idea has been to move — to have movement, and just be able to move and take all body types and allow them to experiment through improvisation. So it's less training-based than what we do. However, we integrate the ideas of improvisation as we're working with certain choreographers — or in our summer camp training, we do that. There are times where they're able to work together to improve so that they can create outcomes of worth. So, it's not from where we came, but it's something that we have accepted as a part of what we do. But now it looks like — because I was a part of a national convening of integrated dance companies — that the big dialogue is that training is everything. So, I guess we're a little bit ahead of ourselves, but hopefully we'll be able to use our documentation and record-keeping and knowledge to help bolster that.

CF: Thank you so much.

MVF: Oh, you're welcome.

MDB: I was thinking... the only other question that I had — the piece that you showed at ReelAbilities — I know it was still in its final stages of ...

MVF: I think it was called *Going Up*, right?

MDB: Yeah...

MVF: Was it the elevator one?

MDB: Yeah, I think it was the first time you had shown it, and it was still a little raw, and I was curious about how that was received, and where else did you get to show that work, because I know it had a very strong message about accessibility...

MVF: Well, the piece takes place in an elevator and is indeed called *Going Up*,⁹ it was created by Mark Tomasic, and it was also part of a concept that I put together to bring in five choreographers to represent the five themes of the ADA. So he took a more satirical, kind of in-your-face approach to this, which was a little different than all the rest of the choreographers. He's our Artistic Advisor, so he's been around us a long, long time...and he's a bit irreverent at times, too, so the piece had those elements — but they also were real-life stories of what we encountered in our lives. So, every floor represented a different incident that happened in people's lives. Mine was when I tried to get on a plane and they wouldn't let my wheelchair come on board with me, and the law states that you can have your wheelchair as long as it fits, and so there was this big confrontation, and I finally held up the whole flight — and all the rest of the people wouldn't get on the plane unless I got on the plane with my chair. So, that was one of the ideas. The other was high heels and high-top tables and

⁹ Mark Tomasic (2016)

was about DeMarco¹⁰ going out to a bar and how the girls didn't even see him because he's down low and so they put their coats on him, and all this stuff. So really, a very insightful piece, in a humorous way. And once it premiered, we had a preview in Columbus with the ReelAbilities conference and then we premiered it at Playhouse Square for the 35th anniversary of Dancing Wheels and the 25th anniversary of the ADA. And then it went on tour. So it's been done quite a few times throughout the country and throughout the state. We did it for the Disability Awareness gathering for the mayor of the city of Cleveland — they come together for a luncheon — and it got really great reviews from both disabled and non-disabled audience members. Another favorite.

CF: You said you have a repertory of over sixty works?

MVF: Over sixty works, yes.

CF: Including a recent one by Donald McKayle?

MVF: Donald's was in 2010, and I want to say he was 80 years old — 80 or 81, and he did *Far East of the Blues*.¹¹ It was all Duke Ellington music, and I had hired the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra to play it live when it had its premiere, so that was a glorious evening as well! You know, I would say that I am the concept person, mostly, in terms of the choreography — looking at a choreographer who has those skill sets and then presenting them with the idea — or where I'm going with it. David Rousseve came back to do another piece with us called *Daring to Be Dumbo*¹² — an anti-bullying theme. I had a relationship with another orchestra, and the gentleman said “Do you ever listen to the music from “Dumbo”? And I said “Dumbo?” And he said, “Yeah, the kids' story, ‘Dumbo’ with the big ears, elephant?” And I was like, “Oh!” And so he said “Listen to the music and see what you think,” and I did, and it is really wonderful music, so in talking to David, we decided that it would take place in a real-life time period, like in a junior high, instead of it being an elephant, and we would take it thematically into being a junior high student who was abused because she had big ears — she looked different, and we evolved it into having puppetry. And the conductor obtained the rights from Disney to be able to make a recording of his own with musicians and singers, so it was fabulous — and then I received a huge grant from Cuyahoga Arts and Culture. They had a special granting proposal out that was to think of something big that would enlighten audiences of Cuyahoga County, just people of Cuyahoga County. Any arts organization, any size, could apply for it — and it had to be really expansive in nature. So people were like “Your organization is too small, you know you shouldn't really tackle this — it's just too much.” And I was like, “Well, maybe we can.” So, I wrote this grant that involved the Girl Scouts of Northeastern Ohio, the movement — there's a group that works very much with equality in Cleveland — and I worked with TV3, and I worked with the Cleveland Public Libraries. My idea was to create a documentary, a made-for-television documentary based on anti-bullying, but there would be a twist in it in that it would be about people who were bullied in their lives but took those experiences and conquered the trauma they had created, and became something in their lives — and made it, made themselves something. So those were the stories, and I wrote the script, with a videographer that's a good friend of mine, and we produced it, and then we thought “Well, we need a narrator.” So we decided we would write down on a list of those who could make a great narrator that would be kind of down to earth but everybody would recognize, so we approached Al Roker from national news. We flew into New

¹⁰ DeMarco Sleeper, current dancer with Dancing Wheels

¹¹ Donald McKayle (2010)

¹² David Rousseve (2013)

York and he had a teleprompter, he read it off the script, he did it beautifully — and he had his own real-life story of how he was bullied in his life. And we put it out, and TV3 aired it on television, and then we created an outreach educational program that went into twenty-seven libraries in one summer! We produced all of that programming— *and* the main stage event; the main stage was the springboard for all of the rest happening. You know, you just think “Sky’s the limit,” and you never know what’s going to happen.

CF: It’s been the story of your life.

MVF: Yeah, yeah...it really has...

CF: Well, I can’t help but ask now, what are you excited about at this moment? What’s in the hopper that you’re jazzed about right now?

MVF: Well, we have another opportunity to apply for another grant that is New York-based, and it’s for an integrated dance showcase — they’re going to choose six integrated companies for a performance in New York. I have great ideas for it, and I can’t really say what they are now, but it’s to work both in the past, present and future of choreography — choreographers that were New York-based. And I have a choreographer whose original work I have wanted to restage to be integrated, so we’re trying to see if we can get permission to do that — it’s quite a challenging effort, but, I think we’ll do it! (laughing)

CF: I believe you will! Thank you again. (to Megan) Thank you for your question.

MVF: — And my long-winded answers!