

[Season 2 Episode 3]

“The World Answered Me”: Conversation with Shelby Richardson, Part One

Shelby Richardson: There's no reason why some folks should be entitled to certain aspects of the arts and others should not be. So, a part of that is bringing that conversation into the broader arts and culture vernacular.

Lisa Dickson: You're listening to W.Y.R.D. the Wyrd House radio, I'm Lisa Dickson and this is Wyrd Words, conversations about literature and learning in higher education.

My guest today is an award-winning choreographer, performer, artist, designer, and educator, Shelby Richardson, founder, and artistic director of Method Contemporary Dance Society, brings an exciting mix of formal training in dance, art history, and museum and curatorial practice to her ongoing quest to provide opportunities for professional dance and dancer training in the British Columbia North and beyond. The Method Dance Society aims to create provocative and collaborative performances, workshops, and connections for artists and community members alike.

Shelby Richardson: Hi! Thank you for having me!

Lisa Dickson: Excellent. So Shelby, it's lovely to see you and see your face. I want to start by just asking you, how are you doing right now? As a human being, but also as an artistic director of a dance company, which I know you founded just as we were going into lockdown, which I think is an amazing kind of confluence of circumstances. How's it going?

Shelby Richardson: Well, it's going really good now. Yeah, it was kind of crazy that we started the dance company and literally two months later went into lockdown. So it's definitely brought a different approach to how we do things, but yeah, no, we're doing really, really great right now. I'm doing great. It has been challenging so far trying to, you know, we can't be in a room together as, as dancers or collaborators, artists, et cetera. Or at least, you know, in physical proximity to each other.

So that, has definitely been a challenge but right now we're actually doing our virtual workshops online, the Method Community Workshops, and these are a series of sessions run by different practitioners within contemporary dance across Canada. And they are on Saturdays in the afternoon, and basically anybody... They're for anybody, they're for someone with extensive experience in dance to someone who's never encountered a contemporary dance piece of work or anything, they're just brand new to the field.

So it's really interesting to watch folks collaborate that way, even if it is virtually. And one thing I found in the workshop we did last week with Giselle Liu is that even though we were all in our separate little digital boxes, there was still a shared energy between all the folks interacting, and that's really neat to see, because you would think that, you know, throwing us all into the interweb would detach us that way, but watching the video, you can see still an exchange of energy between the participants in the workshop.

So that was really exciting. I think it was a turning point in fighting through this COVID world. And just bringing something that was really successful in allowing us to share the process with one another. So this last week has been really great.

Lisa Dickson: Good, good. So it set a new precedent for you or a new way of looking at it. And I want to talk a little bit about sort of your philosophy of founding Method in Prince George in Northern British Columbia, which is, you know, 900 kilometers from everywhere, so I know there's a really interesting story behind that. It's interesting too, because I was re-watching your TED talk that you gave on communication and the body, I was re-watching that last night, and one of the themes that runs through that is the danger that, as we move into digital spaces, we're kind of moving away from each other. That's one of the things that you say in that talk. And so, that was in October. So that was like six months before we went into lockdown. So, has your thinking then started to shift, about how you're seeing that idea of separation?

Shelby Richardson: Yeah. Yeah, for sure. I thought that was, it was so interesting because, you know, we did that TED talk and I was kind of making a statement there in terms of supporting our performing artists and that field of work, and how we can't just throw things online. And then we had to throw everything online, all of us! So it was actually great. It was like, you know, I was putting a question out into the world and the world answered me in a way. Yeah.

And so, yeah, I have always been, you know, wary of that, the digitization of a transitory genre and kind of like an ephemeral genre that is about the experience of the piece in real time. So I've always been wary of putting that into a digital archive form because of how it transforms the nature of your work. And so, this whole situation has really allowed me to think about that, and also strategize ways that we can deal with that.

So if... I'm finding strategies to create probably new types of connections that are different than the ones you would have sitting in an audience, but still using the art form to connect one another. So yeah, that's been really the focus of the work over the last year, which, you know, wasn't the intention initially for the project, but it became a really interesting way to position the work. So...

Lisa Dickson: Hmm. Yeah.

Shelby Richardson: Yeah. I don't know if I answered the question, but...

Lisa Dickson: I love that idea of putting the question to the world and the world answering you in, like, the most emphatic possible way!

Shelby Richardson: Like, totally shutting me down. Yeah.

Lisa Dickson: Yes, it's like, okay, well, let's really test this hypothesis of yours and see how that works. But I love that idea though, of how a thoughtful artistic practice is always in a state of evolution. It's always responding to what's going on around it. Nothing exists in isolation.

And that, I think, gives me a good segue to the question of storytelling. So we, here at the Wyrd House, are particularly interested in these concepts of critical hope and empathy, and

how we can use artistic forms. We're literary scholars, but we're also interested in theater and performance and visual art and all of these kinds of things. So, how does an artistic practice, or an interaction with art in the world, help us to grapple with what we're calling "wicked problems," those really messy multifaceted issues that we're grappling with in the world today? And your precis of what happened between your October TED talk and March, I think, is such a beautiful little jewel of an example of how that conversation goes on.

I was giving a TED talk that day as well and we went back into the green room after your talk and that performance, and the speakers were all sitting around a table and they were trying to figure out like, what was this about? And it was just like... I don't understand what just happened! Which on the one hand you might think, oh no, that's... what? You know? But on the other hand, I found it... it was just so beautiful, because here were people who never thought about dance before, some of them, and they were just so deeply in conversation about what they had just experienced. And one of the things that you say in that talk is that the purpose of dance or choreography isn't necessarily to tell a story or to create an image, but rather to use the body to have conversations about the world.

Can you talk a little bit about the distinction between the idea of a dance piece as telling a story and the idea of a dance piece as having a conversation?

Shelby Richardson: Sure, sure. So the key, kind of, distinction I make between the traditional telling of the story, which some dance does of course, and a conversation is the idea of exchange. So, exchange between the viewer and the artist or the dancer, et cetera, and kind of the idea of a transitory narrative. So the idea that through the exchange of the piece, the conversation of it changes the narrative. So it's not this idea that we're just sitting in the audience and we just, you know, are absorbing all this of which of course we are, but we are also giving back to that dancer and that dancer is feeding off of that energy.

And so that creates a really interesting dynamic, I think, that can be used, especially in the genre of contemporary dance where we're not held to certain structures or ideologies that, like a traditional classical ballet piece or something where you're telling the story of Giselle, that's different. In contemporary practice we can change the story. We can change the conversation throughout and we can also interact and actively engage audience members. And I think that's what's so exciting to me.

And, you know, it's kind of... that comes off that idea of the Happenings in the sixties and that kind of group action, party dance thing. I'm not saying that all my pieces are... have the audience partying with the dancers, but the idea that they're not separate entities so that we can feed back and there's, you know, we talk about this in the TED talk but the idea that when you're dancing a piece, the audience. Members can actually identify with particular movement patterns. They can actually feel those. And that's what's so interesting because there's actually an exchange of information going on between the dancers and the audience members. And that's how I differentiate it.

And not to say that that can't be done in a traditional narrative sense. You could do that as well. But just the idea that it doesn't have to be a linear trajectory of, you know, beginning, middle, end.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. And that's interesting even from the perspective of teaching. For us, university teachers, professors, for example, you're the Sage on the Stage or you're the Guide

on the Side, is sort of the kind of phrases that we use, but that difference between presenting and being in a space with someone which, you know, our current online circumstances have been a really interesting challenge.

I've seen a number of your pieces, been in a few of them, and one of the things that I always find so interesting, at least in two of the ones that I've been in with you, where the dance, for example, continues after the music ends and what that does to an audience is so fascinating to me because the audience doesn't know... because it suspends the conventions of just being an observer, right? Because we have rules, right? That you sit quietly while it's happening and then you clap your hands when it's over. But when the music stops and the dance is still going on—and the piece that we did in our class was just, only the sound of our breathing—you could feel the room just kind of get weird. You know?

Shelby Richardson: Yeah, I love that feeling!

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. And as a Shakespearian, that really speaks to me because Shakespeare's theater is also very similar to that, that idea that people are, you know, they're leaning on the stage and they're talking to the actors and there's noise. And those conventions of sitting quietly in the dark and consuming the art are also suspended in those spaces. And so there's that ethos, I think, of conversation versus presentation, really gets to some deep questions about what are we doing when we are engaging with art. Yeah. So this is... sorry, I'm...

Shelby Richardson: No it's great! It's great, no.

Lisa Dickson: But yeah. Yeah. I love being in your pieces for that reason because they're always just, they always just push audiences into a slightly strange place.

That kind of leads me in two directions, so I have two questions that go down different paths. So the first one is, to go back to your philosophy about Method Dance, which is a professional contemporary dance company in the North, which is a very rural space, and there's lots of misconceptions about what goes on in the North. And I know when I moved here as a Shakespeare scholar, people said, well, why would you want to teach Shakespeare in a logging camp? And my response was, well, why wouldn't you? Like, are there some people who are capable of, or value... are worth having Shakespeare and there's some people who aren't? And I remember being enraged by that comment.

Shelby Richardson: Of course!

Lisa Dickson: And so you're bringing contemporary dance, which is something that is... it's kind of, you know, there's not a huge culture of that. There's a great culture of dance and competitive dance in the North, but can you talk a little bit about how you're seeing Method... how you're positioning the Method Society in the broader cultural and artistic environment? Like, how are you having a conversation with your space right now, and your vision for that?

Shelby Richardson: Sure. So I think there's a few levels to that, I think. First, I totally agree with you. There's no reason why some people should, or some folks should be entitled to certain aspects of the arts and others should not be, because, you know, art is a universal thing, it's for everyone. So... or at least it should be. So a part of that is bringing that conversation into the broader arts and culture vernacular.

So in the North, we have a wonderful local arts organization, Studio 2880, for painting. We have a great musical theater, production company that does stuff in the summertime, but we don't have something kind of in the middle, and I don't know if putting it in the middle is the right way to kind of describe that, but there's so much more. There isn't just *The Nutcracker* and there isn't just *Les* or something. Those are beautiful works and they're interesting and they're fun and they're entertaining, but there's so much more in the dance world that brings us into, you know, transdisciplinary practice that I think is so interesting and just could give so much to our community in terms of inspiration and engagement. And so, that's part of it. Just bringing that conversation of contemporary dance into the lives of folks in the North. So that's one facet of Method.

Another facet is the idea of really promoting professionalism in the arts in the North. So the idea that we can have professional practitioners here just like anywhere else is really, really important to me. Artists work really hard. They have a lot of value to bring the world and we should... My belief is that we should support them that way and that we should create a culture of professionalism in the arts for our community, so that we can grow the arts and culture sector. So that's, that's a really important stem I think, of the program. The hope is that it will create conversations on supporting artists in our community, not just dancers, but visual artists, musicians, all those folks because artists volunteer all the time! Especially in the North, that's just expected. It's just expected that you volunteer your time. However, if an artist is working a full-time job and then having to volunteer their artistic practice, how much are they able to focus on that and pour into that when it is a really valuable service that they're doing for the community. So that's kind of the economic development side of the project, is to really support that.

And then thirdly is to... I guess it ties into that, like, keeping artists in our community. So most dancers, you know, they come of age, they graduate high school and then they have to make a big choice about going to university and staying here, or college, or going to work, or leaving the community and going to dance. So that's a huge disservice to our community because we're losing all this talent in some shape or form. So, to create a program where we're fostering that development, we're going to grow that culture of arts appreciation and support.

Lisa Dickson: And I think it's... that really becomes clear when you look at the artist profiles. You've got some beautiful videos of each of your dancers that are available on YouTube and we will link to those as well in the show notes, but one of the things that I think is so interesting in the stories that they tell about themselves is how painful that divide is to have to choose between, quote unquote, "real jobs" or having no job, or having to leave, and that. Because, you know, home is a really important idea. And so, to think about how you can be divided from what you love or what you see as something that defines you, to have to sort of export your resources. So that idea of having a dance company that in some way kind of heals that divide or attempts to heal that divide, I think, is really valuable in, among all of the other, you know, ideas of building a culture of patronage and a culture of professionalism, all of these things take time to create, but somebody's got to start it, right?

Shelby Richardson: Yeah. Well, it has to start somewhere. And the other point too that, you know, is that the perspectives of these artists in the North are really important. When you look at across the nation, we're talking about diversity and inclusion all the time, but if we're having constantly, or if we are constantly losing our practitioners to urban centers, those identities are being appropriated into other venues.

And it's really important to me that identities and perspectives should be able to kind of organically evolve. There's some, some, you know, medium, and if we're able to do that in the communities, we're going to get a way more diverse and inclusive kind of exploration of those perspectives. Do you know what I mean? And giving the opportunity, a voice to folks who wouldn't necessarily have had that avenue previously.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. Yeah. And so that brings me to the second path of that question. So there were two paths. So the second path then is to come back to this idea of wicked questions or wicked problems, right? Like complexities of what we're dealing with in the world. So this is another way of thinking about that conversation that we can have in dance. So, are there wicked questions or problems that you sort of feel that dance, and dance in the North or dance in general, can engage with? And is there something particular or unique about the way that dance has that conversation that gives us a particular grasp on, or handle, or start into dealing with those kinds of complex or wicked issues?

Shelby Richardson: Well, there's a few things. One thing that I'm really grappling with right now, especially in terms of the workshop we're doing, is when you're, when you're on a virtual platform, the globalization of that platform is really interesting. So a lot of folks ask me, well, is this just for people in the North or is it for everyone? Are you marketing this to just folks in the North, just Prince George, just those types of, like, boundary questions around, you would've never thought of doing a dance workshop, you know, last year, even. You wouldn't have thought of that because you would have been, like, well, it's only folks who can come, right? But now we've opened the doors to, you know, folks from all over the world.

And so the question I have is, I guess it's not a question, but it's more of an answer to those questions, is that if it is for everyone, if it is to benefit the North, we should be able to have those conversations globally, because for so long, especially, you know, contemporary dancers that are growing up here, going to the studio, et cetera, they don't get a lot of that collaboration and that input from practitioners or other dancers in other places. And all of a sudden this kind of big, I don't know, bomb went off where it's like, all the doors are open. Everyone can engage, everyone can collaborate. And so. You know, to not take advantage of that, I think would be silly. But it's still a hard question because it's walking a line of we still want those folks in the North to feel included. And we don't want to make them feel as if they aren't as equally important to the conversations we're having in those workshops.

So that's kind of a different, difficult question that I am trying to grapple with. How do we make this both local and global at the same time and putting those two things on an equal playing field. And it's kind of the same question as, you know, putting a professional and a novice in the same world. How do we... because there's things to gain from both sides.

I really encourage a lot of the method dancers to really pay attention in these workshops, to the folks who have never taken a dance class, because there are, I don't want to say purities, but there are aspects of the movement of those folks that haven't gone through the same conditioning that professional dancers have gone through, that are really valuable because they're fresh and they're different. And I think that's really interesting, especially if you're talking about conversation and communication and getting down to very, like, pedestrian movements that get integrated, and paying attention to those.

How do we do the local and the global? How do we have the professional and novice all in the same room together and put everyone on a equal playing field.

Lisa Dickson: This brings us to the end of part one of my conversation with Shelby Richardson. please join us for part two, in which we explore dance has a medium that opens up spaces for empathy and hope.

Wyrd Words is made possible by the generous support of the Stephen A. Jarislowsky Foundation and the Stephen A. Jarislowsky Chair in Undergraduate Teaching Excellence. Our technical producer and Wyrd apprentice is Cecilia Alain. Our theme song "Doubt" is by William Shakespeare, set to music and performed by Kevin Hutchings. Our outro music is "Spirit World" by Josh Woodward and this piece and the other incidental music in this episode are used under the creative commons license at freemusicarchive.org. You can find the details in our show notes.