

[Season 2 Episode 4]

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

Shelby Richardson: You need to be open to variation, and that's where innovation comes in. You're put up against these different barriers and how you navigate them becomes the work itself.

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. In part two of my conversation with Shelby Richardson, dancer, artist, educator, and founder and artistic director of Method Contemporary Dance Society, we explore dance as an engagement with empathy and hope.

Shelby Richardson: 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 an equal playing field.

Lisa Dickson: That idea of who can contribute to those conversations, I think is really interesting. There's all kinds of barriers to be overcome too, in that context of professionalism or who has the authority, who has the power in that space. And so notions of collaboration, I think, really begin to kind of challenge what we value or how we're placing values on different kinds of experience or different kinds of knowledge, right?

Shelby Richardson: For sure.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. And Parker Palmer, who is sort of my teaching and learning hero, he talks a little bit about working in groups, and he suggests that different kinds of authority don't disappear in collaborative spaces. You know, power never goes away, but... but we can think about the different kinds of roles that we play. And each of those roles is essential to the group. And that's a really different way of thinking about power in those spaces.

And so, this wasn't on my list, but I'm, I'm interested to hear what you think, because you're a choreographer and there's different kinds of choreographers. I've heard choreographers say, you know, I put this dance on the dancers. How do you construe your role in that space? How does that work for you in your mind when you're approaching those things?

Shelby Richardson: Sure. So, I'll talk a little bit about that choreographic process kind of that I work with, that I've been moving more, in terms of direction, towards. For a long time, I've

been teaching, you know, for competitive students that the purpose is to do something that looks good, that they bring to competition and hopefully win. And that trajectory is so troubling to me as an artist because you're not really following a natural process to creating art, for me anyways.

So something I've been moving more towards and that, you know, Method is allowing me to do because it's giving us a platform to express ourselves artistically. And part of that is the idea of not structured improv in a sense, and not structured choreography, but working with the dancers to really create movement, patterns, and structures that are illustrative of particular emotions or feelings. So that's where it becomes a collaboration.

So for example, I'll be working with the dancers and there's a particular point in the piece where, we need to do something that encapsulates kind of a feeling of grief or something like that. We'll kind of work through that by working through what are the emotions associated with grief? How does that idea translate through your body? How does it manifest itself through form? So I'm going to get different responses from all the dancers but the collective nature of those reactions are going to speak volumes in terms of communicating that sense of grief to the audience.

So in a way, just like you were saying earlier in our conversation, you're acting more like a guide than someone who's telling them what to do. And don't get me wrong, there are points in the choreography where I, you know, I want them to do this, this and this because I've thought out those patterns, but there should also be... for me, there always needs to be those opportunities for the dancer to manifest their own reactions to the concept. So there always needs to be an opportunity there, because if I'm just setting something on somebody else, how do they make that their own interpretation so that they can naturally, organically and authentically connect with the audience through their form? And I feel if I give them some of that freedom, it's much easier for them to do that.

So without, you know, structuring barriers or structuring all the form on them, it's much easier for them to translate the concept, the message, the conversation, whatever it is that we're trying to get across to whoever is engaging with the piece.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. And it's interesting because there's an opportunity for surprise there. And I find that as a teacher, as I've evolved, that I've become less and less present... no, more... no, I'm more present, but less in control of what happens. And that's a really tricky thing to balance, right? Because one of the things that I, myself as a teacher, have become quite uncomfortable with is this idea of grading. It's like choreographing for a particular competition or whatever. So which in some ways kind of edits out the possibility of being surprised.

Shelby Richardson: Yeah!

Lisa Dickson: I think. And I love moments when things happen that I could never in a million years have orchestrated. And those moments are so disruptive! They're so disruptive, and can be terrifying, you know, when I have these particular things I have to get to, but they're always the most exciting, deepest learning experiences. When, when the horses just kind of

run off with the, with the stagecoach and I kind of have to see where it goes, you know? And that's, that's where I feel like learning really happens, but it's so hard to quantify or, or even describe, right? So you have to be really present in those moments. Like, you have to have your principles in place, your values really clearly articulated so that whatever scary thing happens, you can recognize it for what it is, as opposed to just, this is wrong.

Shelby Richardson: Yeah. It's wonderful. It's very expanding in terms of dance, but expanding your vocabulary, it's really... especially as a choreographer, to collaborate in that way, it really expands your vocabulary of what people understand form to look like through dance. Just this idea that everyone reacts to situations differently. Everyone has a different reaction. And each reaction, to me, is a new statement or widening of my dance vocabulary because I'm understanding how bodies react, in terms of my understanding how tension and release works in the body in relationship to certain concepts, because there's such a huge variable of reactions. So just as an artist, it's kind of like a research process, working with the dancers. So creation and choreography at the same time is, for me anyways, is a learning experience.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. Yeah. That's one of the things that we've been talking about a lot. Because the pandemic, which threw everybody into new environments, has really made us kind of take everything down right to the studs. What are we doing when we're teaching? And what do we value? And the one thing that I think has really saved me kind of, just in terms of my own mental health, is recognizing that I'm a learner, that we're learners in these situations and that I have a certain... like Liam Neeson, a very specific set of skills that helped me to learn in a particular kind of way that I can share with others to help them structure that experience. But that idea of, you know, if we're coming to this space as learners, it takes a lot of pressure off of us to... you know, it shifts the emphasis from mastery toward process. I think. Because mastery is very closed and process is very open. If that makes sense.

Shelby Richardson: Well, and it allows for a more even playing field between folks.

Lisa Dickson: So here's a question that I've wanted to ask you for ages and ages, and so now that I have you trapped in the little box on the screen, I'm going to ask you this. You've talked about sort of pedestrian motion, bringing ways of moving into a dance space that we wouldn't normally see as, oh, oh, that's dance, like, that's an arabesque, that's a pirouette, so there's a kind of vocabulary, and then there's this other vocabulary that gets introduced when we encounter people as human beings in the, in the moment. And one of the things that you've admonished is, like, stop trying to be pretty, like, stop trying to be... make pretty pictures here. This isn't about making pretty pictures. It's about something else. And so I've wanted to ask you for a long time about the idea of beauty, because you're also coming to this with an art history background.

Shelby Richardson: Yeah.

Lisa Dickson: So, what is beauty then to you as a choreographer or a dancer or an artist in general? Because I feel that your pieces are very beautiful but they're not pretty in a lot of cases. So what's going on there and how are you defining those things?

Shelby Richardson: Oh, I like that question a lot. To me, when I'm watching a piece by anybody, a piece really becomes beautiful to me when I can connect to it. So I can, I can feel it in my belly. It has that kind of guttural reaction to me. That's when a piece becomes beautiful and it's, it's the same for, you know, an art piece, a visual art piece. It's not necessarily about following the aesthetics of beauty. It's more about the ability to have a conversation, because so many emotions and scenarios that we go through as human beings are not pretty, but we still need to be able to share them with one another and that connection and that sharing, that's beautiful. Because it's an acceptance, it's an acknowledgement that those aspects of life are important and valuable. So that's why I'm always saying, you know, this doesn't need to be pretty because that's not the way we experience it. When someone's, like, sobbing uncontrollably, it's not pretty, you know? Nobody wants a photo of themselves in that state but that doesn't mean that that state isn't valuable or valid or important to the world.

So, you know, as artists, we need to be able to translate. We need to be able to translate those experiences and if you're trying to make everything look pretty, then you're kind of doing a disservice to the essence of whatever that ugly concept is. You want to be a translator for the good words and the bad words.

One thing I've, I've really been struggling... up here is this kind of... and it's getting better the more I work with dancers, but kind of this idea of shaking in movement. Because, you know, we grow up in the traditional sense of dance, don't shake! You need to hold that, like, five pirouettes in a row. No shaking. No falling out of it. No, you know, no trembling. And now I try and get dancers to start just from that, like, from inside their core, to start with that type of movement. And it's so difficult. Well, first of all, they don't want to look silly. So there is a barrier there. Plus there's all this indoctrination built into them that, like, that's not allowed. And same with falling. Oh my gosh, teaching dancers to fall is, like, the most difficult thing I've ever had to do!

I had this piece that we did, I guess it was two years go now, An Order in Which to Fall, and that was the most difficult part of the piece, is getting them to learn how to fall. First of all, I don't want anyone to get injured, but I don't want this dramatic, Romeo-and-Juliet collapse onto the floor. How do we do that? So that the audience is like, they're falling. You want them to identify with that movement structure and that's the pedestrian kind of point coming in, so you want them to know that you understand them and you're not separating yourself from them, you're joining them in the conversation.

Lisa Dickson: Do you see that there's a connection between beauty and empathy?

Shelby Richardson: For sure. A hundred percent. Yeah. Yeah. A hundred percent. Yeah. Because it's... again, going back to the idea of a conversation and acceptance, right? So accepting that, somebody might've had a really terrible day and who's sitting in that audience and you do this piece that really connects with them and lets them, maybe they've held it in all day long and it's really difficult for them, and then all of a sudden they just are able to cry and pour themselves out because they've seen that there's somebody else in the room who feels that way too.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah. And being able to think your way into someone else's reality is really an important aspect of... and, and we've been working a lot on the idea of a kind of critical empathy, this notion that you can never fully occupy someone else's position because that's just colonialism, right? So that you can't just, you can't just appropriate someone else's experience, but you can attempt to stand beside them. And there's this great quotation by, I think it's John Caputo, we can never fully know someone else." And so, "all we can do is talk to them. So, one of the ways that we've been thinking about the idea of critical empathy is this notion that you've been talking about, of a conversation, that empathy is not saying, "I know exactly how you feel." Empathy is about listening to someone tell you how they feel and to be able to tell that story, and one of the things that art does for us is it creates a kind of bounded form to have that conversation.

This brings me to another question for you. And we've been thinking about how works of art, particular works of art, for us, for Jessica and Shannon and I, who are sort of the three Wyrdos of the Wyrd House, we're all Renaissance scholars, so we've been talking about, you know, John Milton and *Paradise Lost* and *Hamlet* and, you know, these kinds of texts that give us ways to think through where we are and the wickedness, the intractableness, the messiness of just being a human being and grappling with the world. These people have gone down those roads before, and they have some stories to tell about that, that sort of shines a light down those roads. Do you have someone who kind of shines a light for you or a work of art that you come back to as a kind of a touchstone?

Shelby Richardson: I think there's two areas that have kind of been really inspirational to my practice in that sense. Martha Graham is a huge, huge influence, not necessarily in terms of her form but in her kind of philosophy behind movement, the idea that she would acknowledge the nervousness of her dancers in the room, in her work. So this is, you know, war time, and to not try and create this, just like in the art world, this pristine white cube that we isolate ourselves in from the rest of the world, but to really take the context of what's going on and what's happening to people that are engaged in the project and put that into the work, use that as kind of inspirational or, you know, starting point to explore the conversation. So Martha Graham talks a lot about that in her work.

And I also take a huge amount of inspiration, in terms of my form that I use in my practice, from the abstract expressionist movement. I do this with my students a lot, and I remember I used to put together these little presentations of art history and then ask the students, okay, well, how do you connect, you know, this piece by Roethke with what... with the movement, and how the concepts behind those pieces of work can be used in literature and they can be used in music, they can be used in dance, and connecting those processes. And I love the way the abstract expressionists used form in a very similar way to how I approach it in terms of, it's not an easily recognized structure, an easily recognized form. It's more a meditative methodology on expression,

Lisa Dickson: I just have one last question for you to kind of round us out. Martha Graham, who is, you know, sort of the founding figure, almost, of modern dance, who you've already mentioned, she had the practice of always starting everything on the "and," "eight and," rather than starting on "one, two, three, four," which I just, I love that idea that everything

begins in process. And you've talked about dance being in this kind of transient, ephemeral thing that exists in time. And my collaborators and I have been talking about the idea of hope. It seems so.. seems that dance is such a perfect space to talk about that, because hope is this idea of process, of moving into a future that you don't really know. That's sort of what hope is, right? With the expectation that you're going to be able to effect some kind of change there.

And so I'm really interested in what you think about the idea of hope. Is that something that functions in your practice or that is even on your radar? And if it is, what does that look like? Are you hopeful and how do you find it and then how do you make it?

Shelby Richardson: Hmm.

Lisa Dickson: And the answer could be no, too.

Shelby Richardson: Well yeah, no, I'm just thinking, I'm just thinking. I think hope is so interesting, the idea of hope, because there's no clear answer with hope, so there's no end game. But it is, yeah, a process where you're, you're navigating and you're... And sometimes without any intention as well. So you're navigating in order to create something, to communicate something, but there isn't necessarily a light at the end of the tunnel. That doesn't sound hopeful! But that's kind of why it's interesting because the hope is that at the end of that journey, there will be something there. And that's really exciting. That's really exciting that there's going to be something new at the end of the conversation, at the end of the exploration, the creation, all of that process, the idea that something magically ugly is going to be at the end there. And so that's kind of how I integrate hope, I think, into my work. I try not do have a really solid idea in terms of an end game. I try to be really open in my process.

You know, when you're working with dancers it's difficult. Some days folks are having good days, sometimes somebody is injured, sometimes... there's so many variables to the process that you can't necessarily have this crystal-clear picture of what is going to be your end product. You need to be open to variation and that's where innovation comes in, right? Because you're put up against these different barriers and how you navigate them becomes the work itself.

Lisa Dickson: Yeah, I like that. How we navigate it is the work. This is one of the reasons why I like the English language because... the really joyful mess that it is... because the idea of the work as the product but also as the process, that both of those things are built into it. And that's a genius place for us to wrap up our conversation, which is wonderful. And you've given so much of your time today, thank you!

Shelby Richardson: Very nice! Oh no problem! It was very nice!

Lisa Dickson: For coming to chat and it's... and I hope to see your face in person again someday, which will be nice. I think I'm going to be a very late adopter of human contact. But I will turn up in your community workshops, which are available to everyone. Yes? How long are you running those?

Shelby Richardson: The last one is on May 8th. So they run every week on Saturdays at 3:30. You, you go through our website to register and it's just open to everyone. And when you registered to, you can have access to the previous workshops as well.

Lisa Dickson: Excellent. Excellent. Well, we will be sure to put the link to the website methoddance.ca in our program notes. So people, if you would like to follow along with the exploits of the Method Dance Society and sign up for the workshops, get notifications about upcoming events, which I know will be happening, I know that things have been put on hold a little bit in terms of performances because of our various stages of lockdown. And we'll also... we'll get out of it eventually.

Shelby Richardson: Yeah!

Lisa Dickson: We'll also put that in our episode notes, along with a link to your TED Talk so people can watch it and also see a performance at the end of that, so do check those out. So thank you very, very much for sharing your time and your thoughts and experience with us today. And enjoy the rest of your, of your great week. I hope it continues to be a great week and...

Shelby Richardson: Thank you Lisa! Thank you for having me.

Lisa Dickson: Thank you for coming and I hope to see you on the Zoom very soon. Excellent.

Shelby Richardson: Thank you!

Lisa Dickson: 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.