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WORK AND MONEY

Falling In Love With Dance & Disability Arts

by [Julia Travers](#) March 15, 2022


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Photo Credit: Kinetic Light

“I took a dance class on a dare.”

With this one decision, disabled dancer and choreographer Alice Sheppard embarked on a new, invigorating journey of self-expression, eventually leaving behind academia to pursue dance full time. Her career as a disability arts performer, writer, and speaker has blossomed in the last two decades as she has danced in diverse companies and spaces around the globe.

As a queer, multiracial Black woman who uses a wheelchair, Sheppard's work is inherently intersectional, and she views disability as "an aesthetic, a series of intersecting cultures, and a creative force," as she writes in her [manifesto](#).



Wired: A close-up of Alice Sheppard and Laurel Lawson suspended in the air, arms outstretched and clasping each other's hands. Alice is a multiracial Black woman with coffee-colored skin and short curly hair; she wears a shimmering deep red costume. Laurel is a white woman with very short cropped hair; she wears a shimmering gold costume with thick black shoulder straps. The dancers are somehow upside down and horizontal at the same time, their wheels shining and facing out; if they let go, they will swing like pendulums. Photo Credit: Robbie Sweeny/Kinetic Light.

During a disability studies conference in 2004, Sheppard says she "saw disabled artist Homer Avila perform, and we chatted after his show." He challenged her to try out a dance class. Sheppard, then a professor in medieval studies at Pennsylvania State University, made good on the dare. Her first class was taught by ballet dancer and disability activist Kitty Lunn. Sheppard "fell in love" with dancing, and, two years after meeting Avila, she left her professorship to pursue a career in dance.

“It felt reckless and wild. I had to start all over ... in the traditional dance world, it’s incredibly rare to become a dancer in adulthood,” she says. Sheppard has danced with Infinity Dance Theater (which Lunn founded), AXIS Dance Company, Full Radius Dance, and Marc Brew Dance Company, among others.

In 2016, Sheppard co-founded the disability arts ensemble Kinetic Light with disabled artists Laurel Lawson and Michael Maag. Jerron Herman has since come on board as well, along with other project-based creative partners. Kinetic Light works “at the nexus of access, disability, dance, and race,” according to its [site](#).

Sheppard’s performances incorporate wheelchairs, crutches, ramps, aerial cables, and other materials. Kinetic Light has produced multiple ramp-based performances that have toured widely, including DESCENT, the collective’s first full-length work. DESCENT tells the story of Andromeda and Venus, reframed as interracial lovers. “DESCENT was a dream come true, and Kinetic Light’s introduction to the world,” she says.



Wired: Three dancers face each other onstage. Jerron, a dark-skinned Black man with blond hair, stands boldly facing the others, his body tense with energy. His tight pants and leather top shimmer. His fist flies overhead as silver barbed wire cascades from head to feet. Alice and Laurel are stacked and lean in toward Jerron with concentrated expressions. Alice, a multiracial Black woman with coffee-colored skin and short curly hair, hovers in the air. Laurel, a white woman with cropped hair, balances beneath her; she grips Alice's wheels while tilting on one wheel. Photo Credit: Robbie Sweeny/Kinetic Light.

“Sheppard's work models a truth that is rarely understood among dance audiences: Disability does not signify incompleteness. In fact, it offers novel pathways to several movement styles, each of them whole and generative of unique choreographic forms,” Kevin Gotkin of Dance

Magazine [wrote](#) of DESCENT. The show was voted Dance Magazine Reader's Choice "Most Moving Performance" in 2018, the year Sheppard appeared on the cover of the publication.

Check out a 2019 performance of DESCENT at the Ferst Center for the Arts in Georgia:

An audio-described video of a DESCENT performance is available on [Kinetic Light's Facebook Page](#).

We asked Sheppard if the recent years of the ongoing racial justice movement have affected her work. She says the disability justice and racial justice movements "are inextricably linked," and that she and the artists she works with "live, work, and dream at a multiplicity of intersections." She thinks the world is "reawakening" to the effects of racism and ableism. "The ground we perform on is different now, and that can bring new people to our work," she says. "It is not enough, but it is a beginning."

For other disabled dancers entering the field of [disability](#) arts, Sheppard advises them to "just go for it! Try a class. You might not be great at first, and that's okay. If you like it, if you love it, keep trying. There is an entire community and world of brilliant disabled artists, and we will welcome you."

In May 2022, Kinetic Light is scheduled to premiere [Wired](#), an aerial performance, at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, through both in-person performances and a livestream.

Headline Image: *Where Good Souls Fear: Alice Sheppard lays on her belly, chin lifted, body arched, arms lifted. She is a multiracial Black woman with coffee-colored skin and short curly hair. She wears a gold bodysuit; her legs bend around her wheels as light reflects off her costume, chair, and crutches. Photo Credit: by Mengwen Cao.*

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