



Candoco Dance Company

Photo by Hugo Glendinning

# Forward Motion Dance Festival Brings Dancers of All Abilities to the Stage

**MINHAE SHIM ROTH** | SEPTEMBER 24, 2018 | 9:00AM

Respect. Equality. Inclusion. These are tenets that should be upheld in all facets of life. Karen Peterson, founder and artistic director of Karen Peterson and Dancers, is working for dancers with disabilities to be respected and included in the contemporary dance world. September 26 through 29, the inaugural Forward Motion International Festival and Conference of Physically Integrated Dance, which Peterson founded and organized with Susan Caraballo and Robert Rosenberg, will explore the inclusive dance form and challenge popular conceptions of disability, beauty, and artistry.

“[Physically integrated dance] is only 30 years old [in the United States], and the third generation of inclusive dancers, teachers, and choreographers have worked very hard to be accepted into the mainstream world of contemporary dance,” Peterson says. “The focus of bringing people together and not dividing one another is needed now more than ever in our society. Our shared common language, not pity or empathy, is the key to the success of integrated dance. ‘How do you move, how do I move, and how can we move together?’ should be practiced by all.”

Funded by grants from the Knight Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, the four-day festival consists of a conference with panel and roundtable discussions on topics such as representation of individuals with disabilities in the arts and media and choreographic approaches for physically integrated dance companies; dance workshops by leading physically integrated dance companies Candoco Dance Company from London and Axis Dance Company from San Francisco; and performances by four physically integrated dance companies, Candoco, Axis, REVolutions Dance, and Karen Peterson and Dancers.

Peterson describes how she became involved with physically integrated dance in the '90s, when the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) civil rights law was being formed. On the West Coast, dancers facilitating contact improvisation classes invited individuals with disabilities to participate. Peterson attended a workshop and became interested in the dance form, which she has now taught, created, and presented for 28 years in Miami.

“There were individuals out of their wheelchairs and walkers [seen] as equal a dancer as anyone else in the room,” she recalls of that first workshop.

“Physically integrated dance is more than physical therapy or a social issue or community building. It is all of above, but the artistry is first now and the advocacy is second,” Peterson says. “There are still lots of audience members that need to be convinced that what they are supposed to do is look at what’s there and not at what’s not there, [to focus on] the ultimate artistic vision of the choreographer versus the physical imperfections that may be there... The artistry is number one in companies like Axis and Candoco, which are the best two companies in the world for this dance form.”





Axis Dance Company

Photo by David DeSilva

Marc Brew, artistic director and choreographer of Axis Dance Company, was a company member of PACT Ballet in South Africa when a drunk driver killed three of his friends and permanently damaged his spinal cord in a 1997 collision.

“The doctor told me I was paralyzed and would never walk again. I thought, *What do I do now?* My whole career was in dance. I had very traditional training, and I was never exposed to anyone with a disability in my dance career,” he says. “I had to change my own perception around dance and disability and what dance meant to me. Dance meant to express myself through movement, and I can still do it, but in a different way, by using restriction and limitation to look for possibility.”

For Brew, who also runs his own dance company, Marc Brew Company, working with Axis and other physically integrated dance companies means helping develop the next generation of dance artists with disabilities. “I hope [integrated dance] will continue to evolve as an art form. I’ve been disabled and worked in the field for over 20 years, and I’ve seen such a growth in companies and disabled artists. At Axis, we think of how we can as an organization support disabled choreographers, composers, and dancers. We want to be supporting the next generation of artists and creating opportunities.”

Brew is excited to return to Miami with Axis for the inaugural Forward Motion festival. He says, “[Forward Motion] is a gathering. It’s a wonderful opportunity to share and learn from each other and share that with Miami community.”

Festival founder Karen Peterson also hopes Forward Motion will create a space for dancers with disabilities to develop and find community. “[At Forward Motion], I want to present the quality of work in its current state and maturity and to present incredible dancers, who are incredibly physical and gifted and not perfect. We as a society all have our own disabilities, and I really feel that if the training and desire are there, dance artists with disabilities should receive the opportunity to perform. I want to show that anything is really possible and to show that there is a place for people with disabilities who want to be dancers.”

**Forward Motion International Festival and Conference of Physically Integrated Dance.** *Wednesday, September 26, through Saturday, September 29, at various locations in Miami; 786-498-6756; [forwardmotionmiami.com](http://forwardmotionmiami.com). Ticket prices range from free to \$95.*

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