Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:


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Acknowledgments

This project is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts which believes that a great nation deserves great art.
Birth in Denver, Colorado in 1960—Siblings—Paternal grandparents and the importance of their home—Heritage—Moving to the suburbs—Importance of horses—Catholic upbringing and disillusionment with Catholic Church—Earliest memories: grandparents, wanting horses—Relationship with horses as a young girl, competing and winning state championship, formative influence of working with horses, the physical experience of riding, emotional bond with horses—Parallels between riding horses and dancing in a wheelchair—Learning to read, unspoken familial expectations of high achievement, favorite books—Arts and crafts—High energy level as child—Music, exposure to "culture"—Parents' work, relationship—Mother—Temperament as child—Schooling—Hating dance—Feelings about body and performing as teenager—Car accident and breaking neck, rehab, fear of disability growing up—Moving to Boulder, Colorado, after mother's cancer diagnosis—"Hellish" experience after the accident, family's disintegration, more on rehab—Transitioning from using manual wheelchair to power wheelchair—Learning how to inhabit body again—Independent living center in Boulder—Giving up on God

More on rehab and lack of preparation for the "real world"—More on living in Boulder, exposure to liberals, people of color—Coming to Berkeley, California, in 1983 and first impressions—Improvisational movement and rediscovering body—Visibility of people with disabilities in Berkeley—Involvement with leaders of the disability rights movement—Power of attending camp with other disabled women—Trajectory of life due to disability—Early romantic life—Falling in love with a woman, coming out as a lesbian, father's response—Wry Crips, disabled women's readers theater—Training in martial arts, Zen meditation—Importance of service dog, Miracle—Meeting Thais Mazur and dancing—Being drawn to what's unusual—In this Body, a revolutionary performance and the beginning of more dance opportunities—Mazur and her contributions to AXIS Dance Troupe, Mazur's friendship

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**Interview 2: 1/20/05**

Audiofile 4

Response to George W. Bush's inauguration and the current lack of support for the arts—Difficulties of being an artist, genius of artist colleagues—Business venture with horses, partnership with family friends—Learning to create personal boundaries with colleagues—Trip with AXIS to Novosibirsk, Russia in 1995 and its impact—More on conflict with Thais Mazur—More on importance of International Festival of Wheelchair Dance—Skill level of nondisabled/disabled dancers in company, more on issues related to quality of work—Politics of ability/disability within company—Dancers with a range of abilities learning to move together—Decision-making regarding membership in company

Audiofile 5

Introducing new dancers into company, more on dancers with a range of abilities learning to move together—Division of labor within company—Salaries—Organizational difficulties of having a nondisabled person at the helm—Incorporating as a nonprofit organization in 1990—Board of directors—Involvement of board of directors in dispute with Mazur—Effect of dispute on other members of dance company—Mazur's resignation in 1997 and moving forward with new vision for AXIS—First impression of Bill Shannon, challenges and benefits of collaborating with him

**Interview 3: 1/27/05**

Audiofile 6

Company members remaining in 1997—Process for bringing new members into company—Important contributions of Nicole Richter—Decision that company should be codirected by dancer with a disability and dancer without a disability—Failure of partnership with Nicole Richter—Holding first formal auditions—Lack of administrative structure—More on failed partnership with Richter—Establishing a clear administrative structure, personnel policy—Current strong staff situation at AXIS—Tracing trajectory of company members from 1997 until present—Meeting Sonya Delwaide and commissioning work from her—Delwaide's uncanny ability to choreograph, the joy of working with her on first piece, *Chuchotements*, and subsequent work—Conviction that working with outside choreographers was best for AXIS—Funding the commissioned works—Costumes, lighting, professionalizing the company—Working with Joe Goode on *Jane Eyre*, and the challenges of creative process—Description of
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Audiofile 7

Remaining repertory after 1997—Drive to keep the company afloat, fears—Working with Bill T. Jones in 1999, decision to take financial risk, technical challenge of piece, Fantasy in C Major, premiering it in Boston and the grueling process, receiving acclaim—"Victim art" controversy and its impact on Jones—More on process of working with Jones—Impact on Jones of working with AXIS—More on "victim art" and the issue of professionalism—Choice to have less disability content in work and reactions to that choice—Arts presenters and their relationship to disability—Disabled artists and lack of training, accessibility issues—Working with Sonya Delwaide in 2000 and creating Suite Sans Suite—Working with Stephen Petronio, the concepts he was interested in exploring, creating Secret Ponies, description of piece

Interview 4: 2/03/05

Audiofile 8


Audiofile 9

More on Homer Avila—Difficult beginning of 2003 due to dancers leaving company—Holding auditions—Lack of trained dancers with disabilities—Working with Victoria Marks and creating Dust, in 2003, receiving National Dance Project grant, residency at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts—Marks' creative process, issues that concern her, her experience with dancers with disabilities

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Audiofile 10

Homer Avila and the critical issue of health insurance for dancers—Description of Dust, audience and press response, Victoria Marks' strengths—Remy Charlip and Airmail Dances—June Watanabe—Working with Ann Carlson and creating Flesh, using Meredith Monk's music, Carlson's creative process, funding for the project, initial meeting with Carlson—Performing Flesh in New York in 2004 and Meredith Monk's response—Carlson's previous experience working with nontraditional dancers—Description of Flesh—Keeping a sense of connection with
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Audiofile 11

Alisa Rasera, education director—Teaching with Rasera at Bates Dance Festival in 2004, creating community dance piece—Motivation for establishing education program—Class members—Teaching curriculum—Business aspect of education program—Teaching dance teachers in the community how to work with dance students with disabilities—Sense of ease in AXIS classes—Support network of parents of children with disabilities—Strength of school program—Children's questions, power of educational/advocacy aspect of work—AXIS' growth—Arts presenters award and ongoing access issues—Collaborating with the Sacramento Ballet—Relationship with Iva Walton—Importance of queer identity—Future directions for AXIS Dance Company
Artists with Disabilities Series History

If there was a country called disabled,  
I would be from there.  
I live disabled culture, eat disabled food,  
make disabled love, cry disabled tears,  
climb disabled mountains and tell disabled stories...


Artists with disabilities, propelled by a powerful history rooted in the struggle for civil rights, have been creating a vibrant arts culture which embodies the individual and collective experience of disability and contributes to the artistic landscape of our nation. In June of 2004, the Regional Oral History Office of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, launched the Artists with Disabilities oral history project, with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts. The project grew out of the Disability Rights and Independent Living Movement [DRILM] collection, which explores the social and political history of the disability rights movement from the 1960s to the present and includes two interviews with artists. [http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/collections/drilm]

Our primary goal was to document the lives and work of seminal artists in performance art and dance, providing a rich resource of interviews and documents for scholarly research, education, and general use. We planned to examine issues of relevance to the artistic community, including the ways in which artists with disabilities are expanding themes of identity and the body, central concerns in the performing arts. We also hoped to contribute to an understanding of the impact that the mainstream art scene has on those who, historically, have not been welcomed into it, as well as the role that artists with disabilities have had on artistic trends in the broader arts world.

In developing the project, we consulted with scholars and administrators in the arts, scholars in disability studies, artists, and members of the disability community. Our funding supported interviews with five artists, whom we chose in consultation with our advisors. All of the narrators are professional dancers or performance artists who draw on material from their own lives and whose work has made a significant contribution toward defining disability arts culture.

The interviews were videotaped. They took place in the narrators’ homes, except for the interview with Neil Marcus which was recorded at the Regional Oral History Office and was unique in that it utilized instant messaging technology to accommodate his disability. In addition to the standard oral history format, these interviews also include impromptu moments of the artists sharing their creative work, tours of the spaces where they make that work happen and, in the case of Lynn Manning, a visit to the judo class he teaches for blind and visually-impaired adults.
All of the interviews probe the artists’ formative influences, education/training, career trajectory, and creative process. They address a range of themes, including:

- the intersection of identities, specifically identities rooted in the body, in a particular place and time. What does it mean to be gay and disabled? African-American and blind? And how does being “seen,” living in the public eye as a performer, impact these identities?

- networks of artistic access and achievement. Who helps whom gain entry into the art world and why? How do these informal networks work?

- ideas of normality. What is a “normal” body? What is “normal” art?

- the formation of a disability arts culture. How is the work of professional artists with disabilities creating a disability arts culture? How does their work relate to the more mainstream art world?

Several of the artists in this project are currently making arrangements to have their historically significant materials, including personal papers, writings, photographs, and recordings of performances, archived in the Bancroft Library.

I’d like to thank Ann Lage and the DRILM team for their belief in this project and their tremendous support. I also want to offer my deep appreciation to the artists who so generously shared their stories.

The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to augment through tape-recorded memoirs the Library's materials on the history of California and the West. The office is under the direction of Richard Cándida Smith and the administrative direction of Charles B. Faulhaber, James D. Hart Director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. The catalogues of the Regional Oral History Office and many oral histories on line can be accessed at http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/ROHO/.

Esther Ehrlich, Project Manager/Interviewer
Artists with Disabilities Oral History Project
Regional Oral History Office
University of California, Berkeley
Interview History

After breaking her neck in a car accident and navigating a difficult period of rehabilitation, Judith Smith—a woman compelled to push boundaries and see what’s possible—found herself intrigued by movement and dance, wanting to explore what her newly disabled body could do. In 1987, she co-founded AXIS Dance Company (then AXIS Dance Troupe), which pioneered physically-integrated dance, dance created through the collaboration of dancers with and without disabilities. Under Judith Smith’s creative leadership, AXIS has grown over the years into a dynamic ensemble, known internationally for its artistic excellence. The company has received numerous prestigious dance awards and has worked with some of the nation’s leading choreographers, including Stephen Petronio, Bill T. Jones, Joe Goode, Joanna Haigood, Sonya Delwaide, Victoria Marks, and Ann Carlson. Deeply committed to promoting and supporting physically-integrated dance, AXIS has also created a comprehensive community education/outreach program.

I first interviewed Judy at her home in Oakland in January of 2005. We met for approximately eleven hours over the course of five sessions. Judy and I were familiar with each other from shared art-related experiences in the community. From the first interview, we enjoyed an easy rapport that only deepened over the course of our time together. Despite the fact that Judy was grieving the recent death of her sister and was exhausted from the relentless pace of her life at the helm of AXIS, she approached our interviews with an easy willingness. Aside from an occasional cameo appearance from one of Judy’s many cats, we were able to conduct our interview without interruption, in the relative peace of Judy’s dining room/living room.

I audited the transcript for accuracy and then sent it to Judy for her review. She made just a few clarifications.

Esther Ehrlich
Interviewer
March 2006
Interview 1: January 14, 2005
Begin Audiofile 1

01-00:00:08
Ehrlich: So it is January 14th, and this is our first interview with Judy, except that we started yesterday and had some technical difficulties, so we’re—

01-00:00:20
Smith: Starting over.

Ehrlich: We had just gotten going and we will start there. So, the beginning—

01-00:00:29
Smith: The beginning, I was—

Ehrlich: —where and when were you born?

01-00:00:31
Smith: —born March 13, in 1960, in Denver, Colorado, and I was the fourth of five kids. My oldest sister was eleven years older, so there’s, like, a fifteen year spread with all of us. Grew up in one of the old neighbors in Denver for the first four years of my life.

Ehrlich: Can you go through your siblings?

01-00:01:00
Smith: Yeah. My oldest sister just actually died about two weeks ago. Vicky. She was fifty-five. Then my older brother is Leslie. And another older sister, who is the closest in age to me—we’re about eighteen months apart—is Teri, and then my younger brother is Kenny.

Ehrlich: And you’re number four.

01-00:01:26
Smith: I’m four of five.

Ehrlich: Counting which direction?

01-00:01:30
Smith: Down. So I’m second to the youngest.

Ehrlich: Okay.

01-00:01:33
Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: Are there any stories about your birth?
Smith: Not really. There was nothing that interesting about it. My sister’s was very interesting, {Terry’s?}, she was born, like, three-and-a-half pounds. She was very, very tiny. But nothing very interesting about mine.

Ehrlich: And you were starting to say where you were raised.

Smith: Yeah. Well, the first four years, lived in an older part of Denver, near a park with a lake. It was actually—it’s a really beautiful old section of Denver, and then—

Ehrlich: So it was city, or—?

Smith: It was—yeah, city. City, like, you know, neighborhood, though. And had some wonderful—an older couple living next door to us, Ben and Ada, who watched us a lot and—

Ehrlich: And you remember them.

Smith: Yeah. Yeah. Really wonderful people. And family-wise, I also had two grandparents on my father’s side that I was very close to, and a grandmother on my mother’s side that none of us were as close to. She was a little bit of an ice queen.

Ehrlich: What are your memories of your grandparents on your—

Smith: On my father’s side?

Ehrlich: —father’s side?

Smith: Spent a lot of time with them growing up, until I was really about seven or eight. My grandfather was a gardener and he had a house that he had done all of the brickwork on, and it was a corner lot with a huge yard. I spent most of my summers with him, out in the garden, learning about flowers and bugs and birds and stuff.

Ehrlich: How close to your family did they live?

Smith: Really close, actually. They were in Wheat Ridge. Wheat Ridge.

Ehrlich: Two words?

Smith: Yeah. Colorado. And you know, at the time, there was a little bit more open space between different areas, but of course now it’s just all one
conglomerate. But I spent a lot of time there. And the house, I still dream about, and have—started dreaming about that house, I think, in probably my twenties, after my grandfather moved from it and—. It was a really special place to me.

Ehrlich: What was it that was so special?

Smith: I think it was just safe. You know, my grandparents really adored all of us, but I think I spent the most time over there with them, and it was just a really comfortable, safe place to be and—

Ehrlich: Did it feel different from your home?

Smith: Well, you know, being four of five kids— [laughs] one of five kids, rather, I got a lot of attention there. You know? And I think it was also nice for my mom to have someplace to send me, and my sister went with me too, quite often.

Ehrlich: Vicki?

Smith: Teri. The one that’s closest in age. So you know, I think I got hooked into going there, because I really did love being out in the yard and in the garden and such like that.

Ehrlich: I’m wondering if you could say a little bit about ancestors farther back, a sense of ancestry. Where you came from, where your people came from?

Smith: Well, my grandparents were all first generation. On my father’s side, my great-grandfather was Swedish, and great-grandmother, they were Swedish. I actually have an old tintype photo of them, and they were very austere, kind of frightening looking people. And on my grandmother’s side, English. Her last name was Tebay, and she came from a little village. Her parents came from a little village in England. And then on my mother’s side, my great-grandparents were Irish and German. And my grandmother on my mother’s side actually came to Colorado from Nebraska, in a covered wagon. And that’s really the only story that, you know, I know about, unfortunately.

Ehrlich: So stories weren’t really passed down and—

Smith: Not a lot, no, and a lot of our heritage, you know, wasn’t.

Ehrlich: So any special customs or rituals that you know of?
Smith: No, not really. No, we only celebrated, you know, the Christian holidays, and we grew up very Catholic. Christmas was a big deal, Thanksgiving was a big deal. That was always family. And I had fourteen cousins, from two families. My mother had two sisters, and they were all in the Colorado area, so we spent a lot of time on holidays with them.

Ehrlich: Why don’t you say more about your religious upbringing. “Very Catholic” means what?

Smith: We went to church, you know, every week, and we had to go to catechism and—I think it was probably about in elementary school I started not liking it that much.

Ehrlich: And at this point, you’ve moved, right? Because you were only in the first place until you were four.

Smith: Yeah, yeah, we moved out to the suburbs of Denver, Arvada, which was still—you know, it had, like, pockets of housing developments that were getting built, but there was still a lot of rural-ness about it.

Ehrlich: And what was the name of the town?

Smith: Arvada. It was actually kind of a—in terms of suburbs, it was a good place for us to grow up because there were—we got our first horses—I should probably say I was born absolutely horse crazy, and I always wanted a horse. It seemed like I had waited a hundred years for a horse, when I got my first horse at nine. But we were able to keep the horses, like, within walking distance of the house, on a little farm. We had fields to ride in, and not too far away there were actually dirt roads and—you know, so it was just really getting developed out there.

Ehrlich: We’ll get back to the religion piece, but do you know why your parents chose to move there?

Smith: I think it’s what people were doing in the sixties. Families were moving out of the cities and into the suburbs. It was kind of like the American dream thing, you know?

Ehrlich: So this was suburbs, even though it felt really rural?

Smith: Yeah. It was definitely a suburb.

Ehrlich: Okay.
Smith: You know, shopping malls and—

Ehrlich: But plenty of open space.

Smith: Yeah, some open space still.

Ehrlich: So say more about being raised Catholic, your memories of that.

Smith: Well, I don’t really have much appreciation for the Catholic faith, and I don’t believe in God now. I think it took me a lot of years to get over that. But we always did, like, midnight mass on Christmas and, you know, I—I think I particular resented church in my junior high and senior high years, because I was really into horses at that point, and it was just a pain, you know? And I didn’t really buy it.

Ehrlich: What was the connection between being into horses—was it just a time question, that you didn’t want to have to go—

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: And what was it that you felt like you were supposed to buy that you didn’t?

Smith: Well, there was just something about—but I didn’t really realize this until, you know, in my late teens and twenties. It just all kind of stopped making sense to me. I definitely grew up with Catholic guilt and, you know, issues around body and—you know, women in the Catholic church, yuck. And how women are looked at and—. Ultimately, it was probably not a good religion for my mother, in terms of how she dealt with her life and different things that she went through. So I think I have a lot of resentment against the Catholic Church.

Ehrlich: Was there a point when you were a child when you did embrace it and it gave you something?

Smith: Yeah, I can remember waking up to go to Sunday morning, like, the seven o’clock mass, which our particular congregation was building a new church, so we had mass in the high school gym. And my little friend Bob, who was the same age as me, he and I would walk to the high school and go to seven o’clock mass together. I think at that time, it seemed really special and really important, but that didn’t really stay with me.

Ehrlich: So around high school age, you started to feel disillusioned?
Smith: Junior high. Definitely in high school. And then in college, I managed to get over it. [laughs] Or beyond it or something, I don’t know.

Ehrlich: Going backwards a little bit in time, I’m wondering about some of your earliest memories.

Smith: A lot of my earliest memories are spending time with my grandparents. Animals. We always had a lot of animals, different animals that I grew up with that were important. Mostly I remember really wanting horses. Really, really, really wanting horses.

Ehrlich: So when you go back in time to some of your absolute earliest memories, it’s a memory of desire?

Smith: Yeah. Yeah, and I don’t even remember when—I just always remember wanting a horse. I think it was one of the first things that I understood. I just think some people are born with it, you know? [pause] And so horses were really important to me in my life.

Ehrlich: Well, maybe we should just follow that thread, since we’re there. So tell me about your relationship with horses.

Smith: Yeah. I finally talked my parents into letting us go take riding lessons. My sister went too, because we were kind of close in age, so it was easier if we were doing, you know, somewhat the same thing. Going into a riding stable, and we used to volunteer there. We’d get horses ready for other people’s lessons and stuff, and then we’d get to ride—

Ehrlich: How old were you?

Smith: I think I started doing that probably when I was seven. We did the stable thing for a couple of years, and then I got my first horse for my birthday when I was nine. My sister got one at the same time. From the prompting of a good family friend that—Leo, who—he and his wife, Jean, were very close friends with my parents. At that point, we were spending a lot of time with them. We had property in the mountains and—so my life had kind of drifted away from spending time with my grandparents to spending more time with Leo and the horses and my family and then we moved up to the mountains when I was eleven or twelve. So I really consider that I kind of grew up in Woodland Park, Colorado, which at that point was a pretty small town.

Ehrlich: So you were eleven when you moved there?

Smith: Yeah.
Ehrlich: So what was it about horses?

I couldn’t tell you. I just loved them, was just passionate about them, and that’s, you know, all I ever remember wanting to do was to be involved with horses. I started showing horses when I was twelve. Leo bought a jumping horse. I had been taking English lessons at that point, down in Colorado Springs and—. So I started competing when I was twelve, and I got really involved in that. It truly was my life. Leo and I would travel around to all the horse shows, you know, pretty much the entire summer, living out of a suitcase in a horse trailer, and was fairly successful. I was state champion a few years in a row and—

Ehrlich: What does it take to be a state champion?

Well, I think one of the things that I really got out of having horses at such a young age was a sense of responsibility, and a really strong work ethic, which has definitely helped me in the dance business. You know, you have something that’s relying on you and that you have to take of. You know, when I was nine, I was getting myself up at five-thirty in the morning and, you know, walking up to where we kept our horses in Arvada. And then when we moved to the mountains, I was out there shoveling snow when it was twenty below, and cleaning corrals and, you know, hauling water. It was hard work. But it really taught me a sense of responsibility and self-discipline, a lot of self-discipline.

Ehrlich: And the implication is those have been the qualities that you’ve needed to do the kind of work you’ve done in dance?

Well, I think it definitely has—yes, but I think also, it’s kind of formed who I am as a person. Competing at the level that I was, was stressful. You know, sometimes—I think I started competing against adults when I was, like, thirteen over some of the bigger fences and—it’s stressful. So you have to learn to carry a lot of responsibility, a lot of stress, a lot of emotion. Yeah. But I really did think that what I was going to do with my life was ride horses.

Ehrlich: Can you talk a little bit about the actual physical experience of riding, and what that gave you, or what you loved about it?

Gosh.

Ehrlich: What did it feel like to ride?

Well, it’s just—it’s very freeing, you know, because you’re on this big animal, and you’re going places faster and farther than you would be able to go on
your own. But I think more than that it’s the connection. I mean, definitely, there were, you know, horses I had that I was connected to in a very different way. They all have their own personalities, and some you gel with and some you don’t. So I think it was about that relationship, really, and kind of the emotional bond, a lot.

Ehrlich: What did it take physically?

Smith: Well, you know, when you’re hauling bales of hay and sacks of grain that are as big as you are, and you know, definitely, it put me in good shape, physical shape.

Ehrlich: And to be a good rider?

Smith: A lot of discipline, and a lot of work, and a lot of training.

Ehrlich: I’m wondering, too, about what your body needs to know to be really skilled at riding?

Smith: Well—God. It’s really—you know, it’s funny, because of course, I haven’t—I rode after my accident a few times, but it’s kind of, you know— it’s like a different part of my life. And it’s almost like I was a different person then.

Ehrlich: It was also something you did from such a young—

Smith: Yeah, it was second nature. It really was, it was just second nature, and—but you learn a lot of coordination. How to think on your feet and your horse’s feet. You know? You learn how to read animals and you know when your horse doesn’t feel well, or when something’s off and—

Ehrlich: What about speed?

Smith: Oh, yeah. That was so fun. You know, going fast, galloping, jumping over big fences. There’s definitely an adrenaline thing that goes along with it, as much as sometimes it’s really scary.

Ehrlich: So any parallels to that and dancing in a chair?

Smith: Well, I—you know, I think that there probably are, because I’m used to moving through space on something, whether it’s a piece of equipment or a horse. I think that there are parallels to that. And I love going fast in my chair, and I loved going fast on horses. And you know, definitely, being in a power
chair, I can go places that I wouldn’t be able to go without a chair, or in a manual chair, you know. So there is still kind of that having this other thing.

Ehrlich: Well, I have a feeling that we’re not done with horses; that horses are probably going to—

Smith: They’ll probably pop back.

Ehrlich: —pop back up.

Smith: I have them in my dreams every night. They show up somewhere, even if it’s completely random, you know. I went through a period of time a few years ago where I realized I wasn’t dreaming about horses, and it was fairly disconcerting, actually. It really bothered me. And then they came back.

Ehrlich: Do you have any actual contact with horses in real life now?

Smith: Not a lot, no. You know, it was something that I did until shortly before—well, I rode up until I got hurt, and I taught after I got hurt. And just things in my life and situations and—you know, it was something that I gave up and kind of moved on from and—but it’s always there.

Ehrlich: Well, the likelihood is that horses will still crop up, but I was thinking about other formative influences. Do you remember learning to read?

Smith: Yeah, I started reading when I was really young, pretty young. My sister was about eighteen months ahead of me and we had all those Little Golden Books, you know? I can remember sitting in my grandparents’ yard, learning how to read. It was a Golden Book about kittens and my sister was teaching me.

Ehrlich: How old do you think you were?

Smith: I think I was probably, like, three-and-a-half or four, somewhere right in there, because I was definitely reading by the time I went to kindergarten. I remember counting to a hundred with my grandfather. I probably drove him nuts, because I think I just did it, you know, again and again and again and again. He was very patient. Either that, [laughs] or hard of hearing, who knows? But you know, that was the other thing, that I think in my family, we all got good grades and—you know, nobody ever said that you had to get straight A’s, but that’s just what I grew up knowing we had to do. And I think there was kind of a perfectionistic quality that I have that I grew up with that is a blessing and a curse, both. But you know, even though it was never said, I just always understood, and it was very hard for me, even when I was young,
to do things that I wasn’t good at right away. I think that was one of the allures of horses was that I was pretty good at it right away.

Ehrlich: Well, you had that drive.

01-00:23:01
Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: Books that you loved, that you remember?

01-00:23:08
Smith: Well, I read every single horse book in the public library system, a lot of Patsy Gray books, Marguerite Henry, Wesley Dennis, *The Black Stallion* books, you know, all of those. And I went to an elementary school, before we moved up to Woodland Park, that was, you know, one of the best in the state. So I was reading at, like, a tenth grade level in fifth grade. I think I read the Tolkien, *The Hobbit* and the [Lord of the Rings] trilogy the first time when I was in fifth grade. That was kind of my older brother’s influence.

Ehrlich: He was trying to get you to diversify?

01-00:23:49
Smith: No, I think he just said, “Here, I think you’d like these books,” and I got hooked on them and I read the whole set yearly for about six years, I think. I did lots of book reports on those books.

Ehrlich: Do you remember what you liked about them?

01-00:24:05
Smith: Well, I liked—I think as a kid, I had a lot of interest in things like elves and fairies and kind of the unknown, the magical.

Ehrlich: What about other art? Did you like to—visual art, was that something that—?

01-00:24:32
Smith: I did a lot of art, a lot of crafts. I had little model horses, you know, those little Breyer horses? And I constantly was building things for them, and making bridles and saddles and Arabian horse costumes and—you know, I think I was a kid that was—it was really difficult for me not to be doing something. So I was always either reading a book or, you know, working with the horses, or doing some kind of an art project or a craft project. We’d sit around the TV at night, but my mom would be doing needlework, and I’d be doing something and—you know, we were always kind of—everybody was always pretty busy.

Ehrlich: And what do you attribute that to?

01-00:25:21
Smith: Oh, I don’t know, Protestant work ethic? Who knows? But I just—I had a lot of energy, too, which I think was, at times, really hard for my parents.
[laughs] Especially my mom. You know, my older brother says that they, in some ways, just really didn’t know what to do with me, because they had three kids that were pretty tame, and then I came along and I was a little bit of a piece of work.

Ehrlich: Say more.

01-00:25:51
Smith: Well, I was temperamental, and I was really, really active and pretty demanding. And I was also really critical of myself and my parents and—you know, I always wanted something more, better, different, and—it was kind of a lot to keep up with.

Ehrlich: Are you still that way?

01-00:26:17

Ehrlich: Since music is a part of your life now, because it’s a part of dance, and you’re making decisions about it, but you’re also moving to it and—I’m wondering what early music influences you had?

01-00:26:42
Smith: Well, I knew where all of my favorite pop radio stations were, you know, when I was, like, five years old, I knew how to tune the radio in, and I knew a lot of words to songs. My father was very musical and he played piano and I remember piano being played a lot in our house and him doing duets with different friends. And Teri and I both took guitar and piano lessons. She really stuck with it and got really proficient, and as soon as I got horses, I quit doing everything else, you know, so—but I’ve always loved classical music. My sister had kind of eclectic music taste, so I was listening to, you know, things in junior high and high school that other people weren’t listening to; you know, we were a little bit weird.

Ehrlich: Like what?

01-00:27:39
Smith: Zydeco, Cajun music, different kinds of more obscure artists, Gram Parsons, you know, things that people just—you didn’t really hear on the radio that much. But my sister would kind of, you know, find them and I’d get interested. But I think that my musical horizons really expanded when I started working with AXIS and started dancing.

Ehrlich: So you had some seeds from being a child.

01-00:28:15
Smith: Yeah, but I grew up in a really conservative, white, middleclass upbringing, and, you know, I think the idea of culture was the Boston Pops. Even though we’d go to art museums and natural history museums, we didn’t see a lot of
live performing art. And, you know, the greatest amount of our time was spent outdoors, doing thing in nature and doing things outdoors and camping or hiking or—you know, that’s what we spent a lot of our time doing. It wasn’t based in culture, the way my life is now, so—I kind of feel like most of what I know about art and music and dance, I’ve had to teach myself because I didn’t have parents that, you know, that was a real priority.

Ehrlich: We don’t know yet what kind of work your parents did, if they worked.

Smith: My mom was mostly a housewife and a homemaker. She did bookkeeping on the side. My father worked for Mountain Bell. He started as a lineman and worked his way up to a supervisor position and I think, you know, a lot of his life, that job wasn’t really necessarily that fulfilling, but he had a family to take care of, and—you know, and in that time—they got married in the, you know, late forties—it was kind of the American dream. You know, you got a job, and that was the job you had for your life and you raised a family and—I mean, it was a very, very typical upbringing.

Ehrlich: Do you think your parents were happy together?

Smith: I think that they had their struggles, and—my mother, in particular. I think that she got to a point, when I was in junior high, where she had done everything that she thought a good Catholic woman was supposed to do, and she was not very fulfilled by it. And, you know, my older sister had caused problems, my older brother had caused problems, Teri was causing her problems. My horse life was sometimes not the easiest thing to deal with and—. You know, I do know that they loved each other very deeply but I think when you have five kids and you’re trying to make your family work, you know, that—I think that they didn’t have as much time with each other as they should have. Also, one of the reasons they got married young was because my mom was Catholic and they wanted to have sex, and she wouldn’t do it until they were married. And boom, she was pregnant right away.

Ehrlich: How old was she when they got married?

Smith: She was eighteen, and she had her first kid when she was nineteen and so I think, you know, when she hit her late thirties, early forties, it was like, “Where has my life gone?”

Ehrlich: So did she ever have a career?

Smith: No, no, and she started drinking when I was in junior high, though it didn’t really become obvious until I had my car accident. But she was very, very unhappy. She was incredibly unhappy woman.
Ehrlich: Do you know why?

Smith: I think because she had thought that she had done everything right, and her life was not perfect, and her kids were causing her problems, and money was always a worry, you know. Yeah, it’s just—I think she just felt like she’d done everything and—and I think that that has really affected me, and I had a very difficult relationship with my mom. And it’s—you know, her situation has really had an impact on who I am in my life.

Ehrlich: In what way?

Smith: Well—we fought a lot and I was really, really hard to control for her. And I was very critical. She died when I was twenty-one and, you know, I’ve carried a lot of guilt around about not ever—and sadness that I never really got to have a relationship with her as an adult.

Ehrlich: Hard to control in what way? I mean, you’ve referred to your sibs—

Smith: I was just really headstrong, you know? And I had my idea about what I wanted to do and how I wanted to do it, and—because I had this person, Leo, kind of supporting my horseback riding career, I was a little bit spoiled. And I was—I was a brat.

Ehrlich: Can you give any details, so we have a sense of what that means?

Smith: Well, I just was argumentative. You know, I’d rather argue about something than not, and—I think tension, you know, around my horse riding and such. I don’t know how much to really go into it. I was just a difficult kid. And I think that I picked up on my mom’s unhappiness, and I was unhappy and unsatisfied a lot. I felt a lot of times like—my parents weren’t able to give me, or any of us, quite the amount of attention that we kind of all needed, you know, because there were a lot of us.

Ehrlich: And this is a leading question—answer it how you want to—but it sounds like when you were with the horses, you were satisfied.

Smith: Not—I loved what I was doing but again, there was always kind of this, you know, “I need a better this, or I need to do this more” or—. You know, if I got a red ribbon, I was really disappointed.

Ehrlich: Is that second?
Smith: Yeah, yeah. If I didn’t win, it was very, very hard on me and I would get so impatient, was a very, very impatient kid. I was impatient with myself and impatient with my horses and impatient with other people. [pause]

Ehrlich: Well, let’s sort of switch topics some and talk about school. Can you just give me a sense of elementary school. You know, your education and—?

Smith: Yeah, I really liked elementary school a lot and I went to a good one, so it was very challenging, but I got horses when I was nine, and when we moved up to Woodland Park when I was eleven, we switched schools and they were doing things that I had done two years ago, and I was completely unchallenged. I got really bored with school in junior high and high school. At that point, you know, I wanted to be riding and our school day was really long, like we’d show up at eight and I’d get home at four, you know, and it just—I resented it. I really resented school a lot, even though I did pretty well in it and—I got to miss a fair amount of school for horse stuff, which was always fun for me. But I didn’t like school. It just—it was just getting in the way of what I really wanted to be doing.

Ehrlich: And what about as you grew up? Junior high?

Smith: Well, junior high is when my resentment kind of started with it and by high school I was fairly resentful of it and, you know, I kept my grades up and I did what I had to do, but it always irked me that—. You know, like, I had friends that went to private schools, and they got the whole afternoon off to ride horses and that was—they were getting credit for that, but our school was not quite advanced enough to— [laughs] failed to figure out that there was some good in that, you know? They’d get P.E. credit and a few different other things.

Ehrlich: Did you have any art training in school? Did you—?

Smith: I took art. I always took art.

Ehrlich: Visual art?

Smith: Yeah. Yeah, I always took art classes and took shop, though I wasn’t [laughs] very good at that. And—

Ehrlich: Were there other girls in shop?

Smith: Yeah, a few of us.
Ehrlich: I think that was right on the cusp of when they let girls in.

01-00:38:23
Smith: Yeah, and I think boys started to be able to go to home ec, though none did for a long time. Yeah.

Ehrlich: And what about exposure to dance and dancing?

01-00:38:35
Smith: I hated dancing. I didn’t understand it, I didn’t know what it was about. My older brother signed me up for ballet at a rec center in the summer, when I was probably seven or eight and I think I went two or three times. It just made no sense to me at all.

Ehrlich: What was it you didn’t like?

01-00:38:57
Smith: I have no idea. I can’t even remember. I just remember I didn’t like it. I think also, it was indoors, you know, and who wanted to be indoors in the summer? I can remember getting in a fight with one of my first boyfriends in junior high, because he wanted me to go to a school dance and dance, and I didn’t know how to dance. I didn’t know—like, “What?” I didn’t know how to do that. And I was so self-conscious.

Ehrlich: Do you remember how you felt about your body?

01-00:39:31
Smith: Well, like, you know, I think I touched on it a little bit earlier. Being raised Catholic, you grow up with a lot of shame around your body and—I was really afraid of it, in a sense. And maybe it was easier to inhabit my body on a horse, you know, or working or, you know, doing heavy work, hard work, than it was just to try to inhabit my body as a person on the planet. And dancing was just a foreign object. [pause] But I really didn’t—I really didn’t understand it.

Ehrlich: So there’s been—

01-00:40:14
Smith: Kind of looked fun, I was just too self-conscious to—I mean, I wouldn’t even—I would try to, like, make my mom let me stay home on days that I had to do oral book reports. I mean, getting up in front of people on my—ugh. I could do it on a horse, you know, going around a jumping horse, but I hated having attention drawn to me.

Ehrlich: That’s really interesting, given that you’re a performer now.

01-00:40:51
Smith: Yeah. Pretty weird.
Ehrlich: There’s a lot to fill in here. There isn’t an obvious link from, you know, you hated dance, didn’t like to perform—

01-00:41:05
Smith: Yeah. Well, you know, I think what happened was, partly because of my temperamental self, I ended up getting in a car accident when I was seventeen, driving drunk, without a seatbelt, and that’s when I broke my neck. I kind of felt at that time that my life had kind of come crashing down, and, you know, my family fell apart and—. It was a dreadful time.

Ehrlich: Fell apart, in part, in connection with your accident?

01-00:41:49
Smith: Yeah, I think it was kind of the straw that, you know, broke the camel’s back, in a way. My mom started drinking really heavily. I was, at the time—I was in rehab from December till May and then I lived at home for about a year-and-a-half with my mom being my primary caregiver. And—

Ehrlich: Where were you in rehab?

01-00:42:18
Smith: Craig Hospital in Denver, in Englewood, Colorado. It was a good rehab, but I had a really hard time being there.

Ehrlich: What do you remember of it?

01-00:48:28
Smith: I remember being extremely depressed and feeling like my life was over. You know, I couldn’t ride horses. And I sure as hell didn’t want to be seen in public, as a disabled person in a wheelchair. Disability was something that really terrified me, growing up. My cousin had a disability, and I always thought I’d rather be dead. But the only thing with him was he had a limp, from a spinal tumor that he had to have removed. [laughs] He used a chair for a while, and then he got to where he used crutches, and then a brace and a cane and—but I was sure I would have to kill myself [laughs] if that ever happened to me, you know? And then it did happen and it was really, really hard for me. All of my plans for my life and what I wanted to do, in terms of, you know, being involved with horses, just felt like they’d gone down, down the shit hole. And it was also, you know, I had a lot of my identity tied up in horseback riding and so without that, you know, who was I? What was I doing on the planet? So after I got hurt, I actually taught for about three years and during that time, I moved—about a year-and-a-half into my disability, I moved onto a ranch with a live-in attendant and started trying to make a life. Leo and I went into partnership in a stable and for a lot of reasons, that didn’t work out, and I ended up back up at home, because my attendant took off, and my mom got diagnosed with cancer.

Ehrlich: So how old were you at this point, about nineteen?
I was twenty-one when all—no, twenty-one, when all this started happening. And, you know, so just—I—God. I mean, that—like, from the time I got hurt until that, I just—you know, it’s a little bit of a blur, but I just remember trying to make my life work but really being not happy about it. [pause] And really just, you know—when my mom got sick and—I had to find someplace to live, and my sister Vicki, who just recently died, was living near Boulder, Colorado, and she started doing some research and found an independent living center in Boulder and so off I went to Boulder, you know, at twenty-one. I hadn’t lived away from home, but really, I hadn’t lived in a city for a long time and the noise just drove me nuts, but it was really, you know, the only thing that I could do, because my mom couldn’t take care of me. So—

Can you describe a little bit more what the process was like, being in rehab?

It was—horrible. [laughs] It was awful, you know, because here I am, I’m seventeen years old, trying to figure out who I am as, you know—I mean, going through puberty and becoming a teenager. You know, it was my senior year of high school and I had this idea that what I was going to do with my life was ride horses and, you know, maybe I’d go to vet school, but—. And then just having all of that shattered like that. And I was so embarrassed that I had been driving drunk and my family didn’t talk about it. We never discussed it until, like, God, it must have been ten years later. I talked to my dad about it. And I felt so much guilt that I had done this, and so much shame and then, you know, my mother’s drinking came out of the closet, and she was suicidal, and my father was suicidal and—. At that point, it was just my younger brother and I at home. And it was insane. It was absolutely insane. Then my mom got diagnosed with cancer in February, and I moved to Boulder in April, and she died in July.

So that whole period of time, you know, on top of trying to adjust to a disability, having a family that was just a mess. I had friends, but it was hard for me to stay connected to anyone in high school. So a lot of my friends were people that came through the business that Leo and I had started, but—I mean, it was a pretty scary time.

And the physical experience of breaking your neck and dealing with your body, what was that like?

Well, you know, it’s interesting because when I had my accident, I was in the emergency room and they said, “Well, you’re never going to walk again.” But
what they don’t tell you is that you’re going to have bowel problems, you’re
going to have urinary problems, you’re going to have skin problems, you’re
going to lose your muscle tone, you’re not going to be able to sit up str—I
mean, there’s so many things. You know, so I had this idea that, Okay, I’d be
sitting in a wheelchair, and that was bad enough, but then, you know, you’re
not able to use your hands and, you know, things—oh, it was hell.

Ehrlich: And did all—

Smith: Absolute hell.

Ehrlich: Did those things happen gradually, or was that right away?

Smith: When I left the hospital, I was in a manual chair, because I thought a power
chair made me look too disabled. That lasted about a year, and my mother got
really sick of, you know, she or my brother or somebody having to push me
down to the barn and bring me back up to the house, and she made my little
brother get in a power chair that I’d had and drive it down the driveway, to
make sure it was possible without killing myself. Then she put me in it. I was
so mad at her.

Ehrlich: Is the reason a push chair seemed less disabled, was there somehow the
assumption—

Smith: Yeah, even though I couldn’t move in it!

Ehrlich: —that it won’t be permanent. Is that what is was?

Smith: Well, I don’t know. It just seemed—and I know other disabled people who go,
like, making a transition from a manual chair to a power chair, it’s like they’re
giving up some more physicality or something, you know? But I was so mad
at my mom; but that was one of the best things she ever did for me, was to get
me in that power chair, because then I could go up and down the driveway
alone. And we lived on a mountainside with, you know, a dirt driveway.
There was no way I was going down [laughs] in the manual chair. [laughs]
But—

Ehrlich: But what about accessibility within the house?

Smith: Well luckily, we lived in a one-room ranch. We were one of the lucky ones.
You know, because—

Ehrlich: You mean a one-floor ranch.
Smith: Yeah. Did I say one-room?

Ehrlich: Yeah.

Smith: Oh, God. Yeah. You know, it was one level and so we didn’t have to do a lot of modifying. I mean, we had to change the bathroom and ramp the front. But you know, getting back to being in rehab, I mean, we just saw families falling apart left and right, and people that live in split-level homes were selling their homes and trying to figure out what to do and, you know, just the expense of it. I had good insurance through my dad’s work, and it was still—he had a second mortgage to buy a van and—. It’s just, it’s so earth shattering, you know, because everything changes in a split second and then your life is different and your family’s life is different and—. You know, at that point, there was so little information about disability and disabled people weren’t out in public that much, and nobody knew anything about disability. I mean, this was 1977 and it was terrifying. It was just this unknown territory, figuring out how to deal with all that disability brings you, you know, health issues and body issues and—. It was completely traumatic.

Ehrlich: The list of sort of physical difficulties that you listed, did those come gradually?

Smith: Oh, no, they were there right away.

Ehrlich: Right away.

Smith: Yeah. Yeah, you know. I will say that when I got out of rehab, I was not doing my own transfers. I wasn’t getting myself dressed. I was really pretty dependent. And really, up until I moved to—I mean, I spent three years in Boulder, trying to go to school and trying to figure out how to live a life and met a disabled woman who said, “You really need to go to Berkeley.” So I ended up in Berkeley. But it wasn’t really until I started doing improvisational movement that I really learned how to inhabit my body, and how to use my body again, and how to move in it, and how to transfer, and how to get myself dressed, and how to just maneuver through life.

Ehrlich: So what was the independent living center in Boulder like?

Smith: It was a smaller version of CIL [Center for Independent Living] in Berkeley, but it was really very supportive. I think there were only twelve or thirteen of us that were regular clients and it was really great, because they set up your attendants. There was a nurse that was on call twenty-four hours a day, if you needed help. It was a good way to start, like, a social circle and—some of my attendants are—well, my very first attendant in Boulder is still a very close
friend of mine, even though we live on opposite coasts. So it was kind of a built-in support system and social network and—

Ehrlich: But it sounds like there was still a lot you didn’t learn there about how to live with a disability.

01-00:53:59 Smith: Well, I think a lot of it is just figuring out how I, Judy, live with my disability. So I think it was less on maybe the practical level than it was on an emotional level.

Ehrlich: You mean that it took time.

01-00:54:15 Smith: It took me ten years. To kind of figure, “Well, this is it.”

Ehrlich: So it wasn’t necessarily that in Boulder, the resources weren’t there, it’s that you needed some time to—

01-00:54:30 Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: —integrate it all.

01-00:54:32 Smith: Yeah. [pause] You know, actually, I think they ended up sending me home from rehab a little bit early. I had, like, six months. Now I know they ship people out in halos after six weeks; I think it’s criminal. But they just felt like they’d gotten to a point with me that, you know, I was really resistant and really pissed off a lot and I think they felt like they’d done everything that they could, and it was [laughs] time for me to go out and figure it out for myself.

Ehrlich: Were you in physical pain?

01-00:55:10 Smith: Yeah, early on. I mean, I was lucky, because I didn’t have to have any neck surgery, other than, you know, being in that halo traction for eight weeks. I didn’t have any other serious injuries, so I actually healed pretty quickly. But yeah, it’s really painful. You know, everything that you can feel hurts. Of course, you know, whenever you’re inactive for more than twenty-four hours, you start losing strength and—getting to the point that I could sit upright, even, without passing out, was really hard for me, and—just, you know, getting my strength back. I mean, just, you know, laying there and trying to be able to lift your arm and then just kind of the anxiety of, you know, feeling like I should be able to get out of bed, I should, and not being able to.

Ehrlich: Because you were too weak.
Smith: Because I was paralyzed.

Ehrlich: Oh. [Smith laughs] So the “should” was just—

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: —you should because that’s what you know.

Smith: Yeah, and, you know, I think that that’s really when I gave up on God, and I know it’s when my mom did, was that, you know, I spent, like, probably a week praying, like almost twenty-four hours a day. Then I realized, “No, this isn’t going to get better.” And I was really pissed off at God, you know. It was like, “You’re not worth a damn.” [laughs] I think my mom—I mean, my mom was kind of in the same place.

And I think for her it was harder, because she was much more invested in religion than I was, you know. But yeah, just being pissed off and depressed and—. I mean, we were in a small town. We had boardwalk sidewalks. I was the only disabled person in the whole county, you know, that had a disability like mine. There weren’t resources and so a lot of, you know, early on, what we figured out, we kind of figured out by trial and error.

Ehrlich: Probably a good place to stop.

Begin Audiofile 2

Ehrlich: We took a little break, and we’re back.

Smith: Where were we?

Ehrlich: Well, you had said that there was more to say about rehab. Maybe we should start there?

Smith: Yeah. I will say that I think one of the hard things for me about rehab was, that really hit home after I got home, was that I had a counselor who was a disabled guy and he was telling me what I could do with my life, and you know, that it would all be okay, and that I should go to school. But he was working in a rehab hospital with people surrounding him that knew a lot about disability and, you know, had a lot of disability savvy and he didn’t go away from home to go to school. I had physical therapists and occupational therapists, you know, saying, “Well, you know, this is what you need to live your life and you can do this and you can do that.” And yet I don’t know that
any of them had ever made a trip to a home to see what it was like after you got home. And I got particularly angry about it after I got home, you know, because we didn’t really feel that prepared for what it was going to be like to go from a completely accessible hospital setting with a lot of help, to me and my mom and my little brother and my dad at home. So I had a lot of anger and a lot of—well, I also have authority issues. And especially with men. And so having this guy, you know, who had his life perfectly set up in a perfectly accessible place, telling me that my life was going to be okay really pissed me off.

I think the difference moving to Boulder, and being around—you know, I mentioned that it was kind of a built-in support in system and social network and these were people who were interested in helping disabled people have a life, you know? They had information about what it was like to live in the real world, and the difficulties and—. As much as it was really hard for me to leave Woodland Park, and it was really hard for me to have my mom die, it was a really good thing to kind of get booted out of the house and end up in Boulder where I couldn’t just sit on my twenty-acre ranch all day and have life come to me. I really did have to go out and be in life. You know, I started going to school, even though I didn’t know what I wanted to do with it and—

Ehrlich: Where were you at school?

Smith: At UC Boulder. And I actually moved out to Berkeley under the guise of going to Cal, but I went one semester and had some health problems in the middle and had to take time off, and then never went back, but—

Ehrlich: So you transferred to Cal—

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: —from UC Boulder.

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: Not UC Boulder—

Smith: It is. Well, CU Boulder, but—University of Colorado, Boulder.

Ehrlich: Okay.

Smith: Yeah, yeah. But I think that one of the things that also really happened for me in Boulder was that I met some really great people. And my friend Tyler was—she showed up the first night I was there alone and, you know, I hadn’t
had very many people helping me with my attendant care; it had been my mom and then a live-in attendant, Cathy. She was just so cool and we just instantly connected. She lived, like, half a block away. She really influenced my life a lot, because she had ridden her bike out with her boyfriend from Boston. She’d ridden her bike across the country, and she was political and smart and—you know, I’d never thought about women’s issues. It’s like “How do you vote?” Well, Republican; that’s what your parents do. And she really opened up my eyes to life. She took dance classes and, you know, she was just this really kind of odd, eccentric person that—. She was living in a macrobiotic household and, you know, it was just so different than what I was used to. [laughs] I met lots of people like that, especially in Boulder, because it’s kind of the Mecca for liberals in Colorado, you know, and alternative lifestyles and such. And there was a little bit more color, not much, but it wasn’t totally all white, and I actually had a few friends that were people of color and—

Ehrlich: Was that your first time?

02-00:05:10
Smith: — who were also disabled. Oh God, yeah. Yeah. I mean, in Arvada, where we grew up, an African-American family moved in, and I think that they were probably the only ones for, you know, fifteen square miles, and it was a big issue. Then in Woodland Park, my best friend’s father was a developer, and had several different housing developments, and had an African-American family that wanted to buy a house and, you know, he said that he didn’t have anything available, even though he probably had twenty-five or thirty houses and—. You know, so I definitely grew up really white.

So Boulder was good for me in a lot of ways. I had to go out the door. I had to go out the front door and I had to figure out my life, and how I was going to live it and, you know, deal with Social Security and deal with healthcare. And my mom wasn’t there to kind of fall back on, and my dad was two hours away. So I really had to develop a different kind of system. And I will say the one thing about—. You know, being a person that dealt with horses—there’s a reason, of course, people are into horses, and it’s usually because they can’t deal with people. [laughs] You know? And I really—I was clueless about how to deal with people, especially, you know, given that I was really dependent on people. You know, and I learned a lot from Tyler and a lot from other people. But it was really moving out to Berkeley. My friend Susan, who is disabled, had lived in Napa and Sonoma. She was disabled. She’s about twenty-five years older than me, and she actually ended up back in Marin about ten, fifteen years after I moved out here. But she said, “You really need to go to Berkeley.”

Ehrlich: That was in Boulder that she said that to you?
Smith: Yeah. Yeah, and I had this idea that I’d move to Berkeley and, you know, CIL would be the way the Center for People with Disabilities was in Boulder, and they’d set up my attendants, and they’d help me find a place to live, and they’d—. Man. Rude awakening. I show up with my friend Mary. We drove across from Colorado with my van, and all my stuff in a U-Haul trailer and you know, I moved—I found a place, just by calling CIL, and kind of took a place sight unseen and—you know, but they didn’t really set up your attendants for you. You got a list and you had to call people. Some of the people I called were really weird. Especially for me back then.

Ehrlich: Weird in what way?

Smith: Oh, you know, I had one person show up to interview who was a transsexual, and completely freaked me out. Completely freaked me out. You know, he was like this—she—was, like, this six-foot-three African-American, huge person, with a shadow of a beard and a lot of makeup over it, and a bad wig, you know, and—Oh, man! I was just—I was not sure I’d made the right decision. And the place I moved into, I was living with a woman who had muscular dystrophy, and a couple of her attendants and she was a Percodan addict, and they were all speed freaks, and the place was flea-ridden and—Oh! You know?

Ehrlich: What year are we at now?

Smith: We’re in 1983, so it was, like, five-and-a-half years after my accident.

Ehrlich: What are your impressions of Berkeley, when you first came? What do you remember seeing, and—?

Smith: I really remember going to the Ashby Flea Market with my friend Mary and thinking, “There must be a convention of disabled people,” because I had never seen so many disabled people in once place since I’d gotten out of rehab. I was completely flabbergasted by how disabled people were and yet they were out. They were on ventilators and, you know, high quads and people with spastic CP and, you know, the whole thing kind of scared me a little bit. But again, I got really lucky. My first attendant was Avril Harris, who is at UC Berkeley [University of California, Berkeley] and the Disabled Students Office now, and she lived around the corner. And, you know, I started meeting people right away and I had some really scary attendants, but I had some really good ones, too. Tyler had opened my eyes to—I’d taken a women studies class in Boulder and, you know, I was getting more interested in politics, and I was no longer voting Republican and—. One of the things that I really loved about Berkeley was the architecture. I lived over by the Ashby BART. It’s a pretty little neighborhood. But I was very naive, I would
say. Things I didn’t like, it was so friggin’ cold, because I was used to eighty-five, ninety degree days in the summer and it was foggy and sixty-five. And the trash, the amount of trash on the streets. I really didn’t think I was going to be able to stand it. It just completely upset me. And I took six months to just kind of get myself together, and I started meeting people up at Cal in the Disabled Students program right away and—

Ehrlich: Did you attend the school, or you’re—?

02-00:11:18

Smith: I did. I went to a half a semester. Then I ended up with kind of this weird—it was probably a blood clot in my leg, but I had to be in bed a lot, and I took incompletes. I didn’t go to school because I wanted to go to school, in Boulder; I went to school because I had to. You know, it was the only way that I could get some services that I needed, and it was the only thing—I didn’t feel like I could just move to Boulder and live there, because it wasn’t okay for me not to be doing something, you know, so I was trying to do—I mean, my mom had died and I was trying to do things that I thought were what I was supposed to do, which is a lot of what my mom did with her life, I think. She did things that she thought she was supposed to do. But after two-and-a-half years in Boulder and a semester here, I had, like, a year-and-a-half to go, and I had no clue as to what to even declare as a major. And I was so depressed and so disgusted with school, in a way, because I didn’t have a passion for it, that I wasn’t getting straight A’s, and I couldn’t tolerate it. Just couldn’t tolerate it. So I thought, “Well, I’ll just take a year off,” you know. And then I started getting involved in other things.

But you know, I really did move from Colorado to kind of get away from ghosts, and I really felt like five years in a wheelchair in the winter in Colorado was enough, because I knew there was no way I was going to, you know, be able to have a life in that kind of weather, and I just really needed to go out on my own and figure out who the hell I was and if I could figure out how to live my life. [pause] It was pretty scary. Now I think of it and, God, you know, moving across the country in a van, with a U-Haul trailer, and just showing up in Berkeley and [laughs] assuming that everything would work out. [laughs] It was crazy. My dad was a little bit worried, but I think he felt kind of safe because his older brother, who’s an uncle that I’m very close to, is out in Livermore. So they kind of took care of me. And they were, like, rolling their eyes at where I was living and the people that were coming in and out. My uncle was talking to me about it not too long ago. He said, “Yeah, I was really concerned about you.” [laughs] But—you know, again, I met people that really, really changed my life. Met a woman named Pacifica, who did attendant work for me, and I started doing improvisational movement with her on the floor, which is something I—you know, I felt like I had spent about five years sitting like this [gestures a rigid pose] because I was afraid to move, because I didn’t know, you know—this body that I was stuck in was really unfamiliar, and really unpleasant, and really unacceptable.
Ehrlich: So tell me about that class.

02-00:14:49  
Smith: Wasn’t a class, we just started doing it on her living room floor.

Ehrlich: Wow.

02-00:14:53  
Smith: On mats. And it was really through just moving that I learned how to get myself in and out of my chair, and got to the point that I could get myself dressed, and you know, I went from needing attendants twice a day to needing attendants only at night and—or only in the morning and then I went to only needing attendants three mornings a week. It was, I think, really through doing movement with her that I got interested in being physical again, because when I was riding horses and growing up, my identity was so tied up in being really able and to lose that was just crushing, and, you know, here I was, and I was learning how to move again. We developed this system that I could actually get out of my chair onto the floor and back into my chair, with a little bit of help, or no help sometimes. So I was getting out of my chair and—. Also, I think just being in Berkeley, you know, there’s such a different attitude about disability in the Bay Area, and the accessibility, you know?

Ehrlich: Can you say more about that? When you first came, what you noticed?

02-00:16:13  
Smith: Well, you know, I think now, it’s kind of safety in numbers, in a way. I mean, there’s so many disabled people here and as we all know, the disability right movement started here and it’s politically really advanced. You know, we just spent six-and-a-half-weeks in New England, and I don’t think the ADA’s [Americans with Disabilities Act] been there. You know, so just—. And seeing people that were more disabled than I, or as disabled, who were having lives. They were having relationships, they were going to school, they were having jobs. Or maybe they weren’t. Maybe they were just living on Disability and going to the coffee shop every day. But they were getting their butts out of bed and out of the house, and they were on the street, and in public, and I think that there’s kind of an inspiration that came from that.

Ehrlich: Did you get hooked in politically early on with the disability rights—?

02-00:17:14  
Smith: Not a lot. I did a little bit of work at CIL. Of course, a lot of the people that I knew that I became friends with were, like, early leaders. I—

Ehrlich: Like who?

02-00:17:26  
Smith: Judy Heumann. I was one of her volunteers when WID [World Institute on Disability] was in her living room and she taught me so much.
Ehrlich: What do you remember of Judy?

Smith: I remember her being really funny and really sarcastic and really smart. And just, you know, really just, “This is who I am and take it or leave it,” kind of, “no excuses.” Well, one thing that happened, Esther, that I almost forgot about was, that summer that I moved out here, you know, Avril was one of my attendants, and she was involved in this thing that Corbett, and I think Judy, and all of these women—it was a camp up at Cazadero for disabled women.

Ehrlich: Corbett O’Toole.

Smith: Yeah. And so you know, like, within a month-and-a-half, two months of moving here I’m out at this camp with thirty other disabled women and assistants, talking about being disabled. A lot of the other women were also fairly newly injured and it was one of those empowering things, you know. But it really was. It really started to help me change my idea that there was just no way I was ever going to have a life. I didn’t know what the hell I was going to do with my life. I mean, that was a whole other thing was that, you know, I mean, my passion—I was so single minded towards horses that I just—it was hard for me to imagine anything outside of that. So I dabbled in this and I dabbled in that and—I did a little bit of work with Judy, you know, starting in the very early stages of WID and did a little work at CIL and—

Ehrlich: Do you remember any other leaders that you met? Or people who went on to be leaders?

Smith: Ed Roberts, I met. And I thought he was pretty scary.

Ehrlich: Why?

Smith: Just, you know, his disability and a trach and—I was a little bit scared of people like that, because I was still—you know, I still had kind of an embarrassment about being disabled, and a self-consciousness. I still didn’t like the aspects of my disability life that I had to deal with every day, you know, catheter and leg bag and bowel programs and spasticity and all of that kind of stuff. So you know, people that were just so out—CeCe Weeks, she terrified me. Absolutely terrified me. [laughs] You know?

Ehrlich: What do you remember?

Smith: I just—she just scared me. I mean, she’s just—you know, she had those piercing eyes, and she was so intense in some ways, and so laid back in other ways, but there was just something about her that was really intimidating to me. I think maybe I saw some of myself in her, because we had long blonde
hair and we were close in age. I think she was a little bit older than me. [pause] But it was a good place for me to end up. And I don’t know that, you know, had my mom not died when [she] did and—I mean, definitely, I think that if I hadn’t broken my neck, I never would be where I am, doing what I’m doing, you know, even a version, a nondisabled version of it. It never would have happened.

Ehrlich: Because?

Smith: Well, because I would have stayed in Woodland Park or, you know, in some part of Colorado. And I was not a happy person when I got hurt. I was really, really not happy before I got hurt. Then after I got hurt, I was really not happy. You know, I was just—I was confused before I got hurt, about life, and I think having a mom who was a closet alcoholic probably added to that, because I think we all knew something was amiss, but you know, it wasn’t really—you couldn’t put your finger on it.

Ehrlich: Right.

Smith: You know? So I wasn’t happy. And I don’t know that I would have—you know, as much as I loved doing the horses and—there was always a kind of a dissatisfaction that I felt with my life and myself and my situation that I don’t know if I ever would have—. I mean, who knows, you know? But I could see myself going down the wrong path and ending up an alcoholic unmarried mother [laughs] in a trailer in Woodland Park, Colorado.

Ehrlich: I want to sort of move us towards the sort of first steps of you discovering a creative life in Berkeley, but before that, I realize there’s something we haven’t talked about at all, which is romantic life when you were young. Did you have one? Crushes, dates?

Smith: Yeah. I think I started kissing boys when I was, like, five years old and I always had lots of little boyfriends and—but I could never really stick to anything, any one of them. You know, I’d kind of get them and then it was like, “Ewwwww,” after a week or two.

Ehrlich: Oh.

Smith: But I got involved with somebody when I was seventeen who was really bad news, and I think I kind of did that because I knew there was disapproval. You know, he was a lot older than me, and he was—I wouldn’t touch him with a ten foot pole now. I mean, he was just—[makes a gagging noise]. Yuck. But I had started being sexual right before I got hurt, and it was his car that I
wrecked. And about a week—no, it was New Years, so about two-and-a-half, three weeks after I got hurt, he dumped me. And I was sure—

Ehrlich: How long had you two been going out?

02-00:24:34
Smith: Oh, like, five months, but I’d had a thing for him for about a year. But when he dumped me, I was really sure that that was it, my romantic life was over. And it’s interesting, because I had never been a kid—I was never a little girl who dreamt about her wedding. I knew right away, from about the time I was in second or third grade on, that I didn’t want kids, that I was not going to burden myself with a kid. I never imagined myself married, and I never planned for that or thought that far ahead. But when he dumped me, I was pretty sure that, Well, nobody’s going to want me, You know? And that was the other thing about moving out to Berkeley, I actually got involved with a guy who was disabled and—I’d had some crushes through—well, when I had my ranch in Woodland Park and, you know, I was living there with friends and with an attendant, I had a couple of crushes during that time. I had some in college, but I just was terrified of the whole aspect of being sexual, or even, you know, thinking about that. Also, I mean I grew up Catholic. Sex is such a dirty word. My parents never talked to us about it, and anything I learned, I learned on my own, except for those stupid sex education films that you get to see in junior high and high school.

So when I got dumped, I was sure that my life was over that way and that I’d spend the rest of my life alone. When I moved out to Berkeley, I got involved with a guy who was disabled and, it was a really good thing, because I didn’t have to talk about my disability. You know, he was a para, he knew what was involved. We didn’t have to go there. That kind of opened up my life a little bit. And then I fell in love with a woman and that completely changed my life.

Ehrlich: What was the timing with this? How long were you—?

02-00:27:00
Smith: It was about a year after I moved here, so I was twenty-four.

Ehrlich: That you fell in love with a woman.

02-00:27:07
Smith: Yeah, and it was when I was seeing the guy, and it was kind of hard for him. I think it was probably really painful for him, because he’s probably kind of thinking the same thing, you know. And then he gets dumped for a nondisabled woman. It was sad. And that wasn’t without its trauma. I mean, she ended up getting involved with my best friend, who was also not disabled, and, you know, I didn’t think lesbians did that kind of stuff to each other, so it was a little disillusioning.

Ehrlich: Did you define yourself as a lesbian?
Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: Right away.

Smith: But—yeah. I mean half of the people, or ninety percent of the women around me were lesbians and so it—. I’d gotten exposed to lesbians in college. I had an attendant that was one and it was, you know, kind of creepy to me at first but then I realized that I had fallen in love with one of my college friends and, you know, she used to say, “Oh, I wish one of us was a man.” She was Catholic, too. She ended up married with, like, six kids.

Ehrlich: So falling in love with a woman and deciding that you were lesbian, what did it mean to you?

Smith: Well, it helped things make sense to me, especially, like, in my growing up years, when I just couldn’t figure out how to really be with a guy. Then it just—it felt really natural and this is an easy place to come out. It is. It just was never an issue for me. I didn’t feel shame around it; I didn’t feel guilt around it. At that point, I was really moving out of my belief in Catholicism and belief in God. I mean, that had gone, you know, so I didn’t have that context within which to look at being queer. It just—it wasn’t an issue and I told my siblings right away. My sister Teri completely freaked out. My sister Vicky said, “Well, I can understand, you know, being disabled, that you’d feel more comfortable being with a woman.” My older brother Leslie—we’re kind of the two oddballs of the family, the liberals—he thought it was great. [laughs] And my little brother just was like—we just didn’t talk about it, you know.

Ehrlich: And your father?

Smith: I told my father when—I didn’t tell my father until—let’s see, this was ’84. Took me a long time to tell my dad. I think it must have been ten years. No, no, that’s not right. I told him when I was thirty, because I ended up, actually, in treatment for anorexia problems and I had not talked to my dad for a long time, at that point. We had started—no, maybe I was thirty-two, somewhere in there—we had started to communicate again and he made some comment about gays. I sat down and I wrote him a letter and I said, you know, “This is who I am. All these people that you’ve met, that have really changed my life and made my life good are—these are who they are, and when you make cracks like that and comments like that, you’re talking about me. and I want you to know that.” And so I stuck it in the mail and then went, “Oh, my God, what have I done?” because I was really pretty invested in how my dad felt about me. And even though, you know, he was in Colorado and I was here, and we didn’t have a lot of contact, I felt really attached. And I got—my
brother called. I called my brother right after that and he was just laughing, you know? He said, “Good for you. I can’t believe you did it but good for you.” And then I didn’t hear from my dad.

Ehrlich: Really?

Smith: And so my brother called my dad and said, “Did you get a letter from Judy?” He said, “Yeah, I did,” and my brother said, “And?” and he said, “Well, it’s given me a lot to think about.” Shortly after that, I got a card from my dad. It was kittens in a basket, and it said something inside like—I think I still have the card; I hope I do—you know, something, “I don’t agree with it, and I don’t understand it, but I love you.” But oddly enough, a few years after that, he was having a discussion with my cousin and my cousin’s husband. They’re also very liberal and live on the Western Slope in Colorado. They were fighting about some racial thing or something. He said, “Well, my daughter is a lesbian; I can deal with that,” you know. So I think ultimately, it was a really good thing to do, because it did make him really think about the people that he was talking about, and what he was saying. [pause] I don’t think it was easy for him, but he did pretty well with it.

Ehrlich: So did you get involved politically, in terms of the women’s movement and lesbian politics?

Smith: Yeah, you know. Yeah, a little bit. I was more involved in disability issues, and I think in this community when you’re involved in one issue, you’re kind of involved in a lot, just because that’s the way it is. But I really started thinking a lot. And you know, at that time, I had gone through a couple different living situations and was living with Pacifica. She was much more of a separatist at that point, you know, and—

Ehrlich: Was she your lover?

Smith: No. No, she was just a friend and she did attendant work for me. One of the things I did was volunteer at the AIDS hotline, kind of right when they started figuring out what AIDS was and, you know, organizing around it. I did about a year of volunteering on the AIDS hotline, so I got involved that way. But a lot of my more political stuff was around disability and finding out that there were a lot of disabled queers in this community.

Ehrlich: So can you sort of make the transition towards the very beginnings of AXIS?

Smith: Yeah.
Ehrlich: Actually, I think a question before that is what your involvement with Wry Crips was?

02-00:34:44 
Smith: Oh, God, I completely forgot about that! I was actually one of the founding people. And Patty Overland and Laura Rifkin and myself—was Cheryl [Marie] Wade in on that meeting?

Ehrlich: I can say that what I know is that she doesn’t consider herself a founding member, because she’s not a lesbian.

02-00:35:05 
Smith: Yeah, I think it was—. Oh.

Ehrlich: And it was a lesbian—

02-00:35:08 
Smith: Yeah. I think it was Laura and Patty and I got together to meet about forming this reader’s theater, Wry Crips, disabled women’s readers theater. I did help get it going. But I didn’t perform with them ever. And you know, I wasn’t—didn’t really want to, at that point. Do you remember what year that was, Esther?

Ehrlich: No, I don’t, but—

02-00:35:38 
Smith: I’m thinking it was—

Ehrlich: We’d have it in Cheryl’s oral history.

02-00:35:43 
Smith: Yeah. So I kind of pulled out of that right away. Also, because I had, you know, gotten involved in some other stuff. I can’t—I wish I remembered the timeline a little better. But I did help get it going, and I thought it was a great idea. I was really interested in it. But I think that the performing aspect and the writing aspect kind of kept me at bay a little bit. I think I was also still trying to figure out kind of what I wanted to do with my life, and at that point, I was collecting people. [laughs] You know, I’d spent most of my life not being somebody who had a lot of friends and had a big social life, and then I moved out here, and all of a sudden it was possible to have a social life, you know? So I just—and the really weird thing is, is it got to the point where if I wasn’t doing something, you know, about eighteen hours a day, I’d go crazy. I couldn’t stand being alone. I couldn’t stand being idle, you know? I would just, like, make appointments with people, if I wasn’t in a project or something like that.

Ehrlich: Well, it sounds like carry-over from childhood, too. You had talked about how you were always doing things and busy.
Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: And that your mother was the same way.

Smith: Yeah. So I ended up doing people-collecting for a number of years. Some of them were just really not good people to collect [laughter]. They were a lot of trouble. But you know, I started doing improvisational movement with Pacifica, and that got me to going swimming at Berkeley High. It got me to start doing—I think there was a conditioning class through CalStar that I started taking. And at the time, I bunch of my friends were training at Hand to Hand.

Ehrlich: Can you say what that is?

Smith: It’s a Kajukenbo school started by lesbians, mostly lesbians, and women that went there. I’d go and watch their belt tests, you know, and watch them train and I’d think, “There’s a way you can do this in a wheelchair.” And I really wanted to do it. I was really excited by it and—you know, not enough to say, “Hey, I’d like to do this,” because it just didn’t seem like—I mean, “Somebody in a wheelchair doing that?” But Hand to Hand started a self-defense program for women who use wheelchairs, and I was one of the first people in that. I got really involved in training and trained, like, three or four times a week, sometimes more, and trained up to blue belt level and did a lot of teaching.

Ehrlich: Do you remember who some of the other women who were involved were?

Smith: Well, Colleen Gragen. She really was one of the people that completely changed my life, and I owe her so much. She was a very complex, complicated woman and definitely not perfect in her interpersonal relationships. [laughs] But she was incredible with me, and she was kind of my first teacher, and I think really took me under her wing, in a way. You know, when we were talking about martial arts and how I could make those accessible, she said, “You really need to meditate and you should go to the Berkeley Zen Center.” She kind of got me started meditating, even though sitting still, God, it was so painful. But I showed up. I called the Berkeley Zen Center, and a very nice man named Ran Hall, who committed suicide about ten or twelve years ago, answered the phone. They had had, unbeknownst to me, a lot of discussion about becoming accessible there. He said, “Well, you should come over and meet with our abbot. So I came over and met with the abbot and said, you know, “I really want to meditate here.” He said, “Well, we’re not accessible,” and I said, “Well, I have a portable ramp.” It really wasn’t portable; it weighed, like, a hundred-and-fifty pounds or something, you know. But he agreed to let that be brought down and every time I showed
up, like, four or five people would have to put that ramp up, you know, and I’d go into the zendo and—.

So I was really involved at Hand to Hand, and I got really involved at the zendo. And I mean, that wasn’t without its difficulties, because they had a lot of issues that they needed to work out around their feelings about becoming accessible and making that a priority and I think I got caught up in, you know, some of that. But between that and martial arts, my life, I felt like, was really starting to take on some shape. And Zen completely made sense to me in a way that, you know, other religion didn’t. It can be a religion if that’s what you want it to be, but it doesn’t need to be. But there was something about the philosophy that was like, “This is what I’ve been looking for.” It just made so much sense, and it rang so true with me. And it was actually through Zen that I met Thais Mazur and got involved in founding AXIS. So a lot of really exciting things were happening to me all in that time. That was in 1987, like, ’86 and ’87. [pause]

The other thing that happened was I got my dog, Miracle, a service dog from Canine Companions. She was kind of my disabled service dog. She had a lot of health issues. But I had decided that I wanted a dog, one, because I was rolling to the zendo in the morning at, like, five-thirty—I wasn’t driving yet—and, you know, it was a little bit scary to do that alone, through North Oakland and South Berkeley. I also felt like I really needed something in my life to get me to settle down and to feel okay about staying in one place and, you know, Miracle really did that. She was such great company. I had to change the priorities of my life, because I had this other being that was attached to me, that I had to take care of.

Ehrlich: So it slowed you down, in some ways?

02-00:42:39

Smith: In some ways, yeah. It made me a lot freer in other ways, but it definitely kind of brought a focus into my life and a priority into my life, that came at a really good time. So, you know, Miracle and Hand to Hand and doing movement and—I mean, I was training and swimming and weight lifting and going to the zendo, and I really made that my life. I mean, I’d go twice a day, and then I’d do all my other stuff in between. You know, it also helped me start culling things out of my life and people out of my life that weren’t really working very well. And I met Thais, of course, in martial arts, and trained with her for a little while. Then she called me up and said, you know, “We’re going to do this dance piece, and do you want to get involved?” and I was so naïve, Esther. Oh, my God! I knew nothing about dance. Nothing. But I was so intrigued by it. And I will say that another part of having Miracle was that I started doing presentations for Canine Companions. You know, going out to different, like, Rotary Clubs or Lions Clubs or things like that and so I developed a way of being in front of people. And it was really easy for me to talk about Miracle, you know? So it wasn’t like I had to make anything up,
and I was so passionate about that program and about her. I had also started teaching self defense and kind of assisting Colleen, and then also Stacy {Jollis?} and some of the other black belts. But I think, you know, what I also realized was that being disabled, you’re so visible all the time that I had kind of lost my fear of being in front of people and being visible.

Ehrlich: Because people are always watching you?

02-00:44:49
Smith: You’re always making a scene, even in Berkeley, no matter where you go, what you do. You know, you’re moving around in three-hundred pounds of machinery and—

Ehrlich: That’s probably a—

02-00:45:00
Smith: —you’re visible.

Ehrlich: —cue for us to back up and show that you’re—ah, it didn’t work [referring to attempt to get shot of wheelchair]. Okay.

02-00:45:09
Smith: So, you know, Thais calls me. I had actually heard through the grapevine that this thing was starting, and I was a little annoyed that it had started, and I hadn’t been asked.

Ehrlich: At that point, what was it? Was it a class, or a—?

02-00:45:24
Smith: Thais had been doing a class for women who use wheelchairs, a movement class. Out of that class—because someone had brought in a piece of poetry, and the class decided it would be really interesting to put together a dance around this piece of poetry. I don’t remember what the transition was around that. Bonnie might. But ultimately, it ended up to be not everyone from that particular movement class that Thais was talking about. But it ended up being Cheryl Wade and Corbett. I came in because Cheryl’s arthritis, it just was too painful for her to move, so they decided that she would narrate. But they needed another person in a power chair, and Thais knew me, you know, from martial arts. But it was Cheryl and Corbett; Thais and her husband David—I don’t think they were married at the time; Leigh Lightfoot, who was another dancer, choreographer; and Bonnie.

Ehrlich: Lewkowicz.

02-00:46.41
Smith: Lewkowicz.

Ehrlich: And David’s last name is Mitchell?
Yeah. So we all got together with this idea of putting a dance piece together and it was really weird because I really knew nothing. I mean, talk about having two left feet; I had four left wheels, you know? And Bonnie at least had danced before her injury, so she could at least retain information. I’m still a slow learner, but I got so hooked on it, on just, you know, the creativity and working with other people. We were kind of a tight group and it was great. We were doing a lot of improvisation and contact improvisation, and I loved that part. You know, I just loved the physicality of it, and the creativity. I also, at that point, felt like I wanted to be seen more, and that it was important. I felt like the work we were doing was important, even though that’s not really what we set out to do or the reason why we did it, it did feel like there was an importance to it.

Ehrlich: Say more about that.

Well, I just, you know, I’d been involved in disability politics, and women’s politics, and queer politics and this is the late eighties, and socially responsible or socially meaningful art was a big thing. And it seemed important to do. That, you know, it was really time for disabled people to be onstage. I don’t think I realized that, really, though, until after the performance. But I just really got hooked on—one thing, it was a discipline. You know, we had to show up at rehearsal and I loved that aspect of it, having—in the same way that I had with horses, the extreme amount of self discipline.

I think that I realized a while back that there’s something about doing things that are a little less usual, for me, that is intriguing to me, not only as a person, but as a disabled person, you know. When I was a kid, I rode jumping horses and that was something that not every kid did. In fact, I think in Woodland Park I was really, at the time, the only person I knew that was riding English and everybody else was riding Western or bareback, so it was a little bit unusual. And, you know, maybe it has to do with being one of five kids and kind of getting lost in the mix, but, you know, having something that I was good at, that was a little bit different than, you know, something that anyone else in the family or any of my friends did. And then doing martial arts, it was the same thing. There weren’t a lot of disabled people doing it. And then dance, it was, like, a new frontier. I really liked that aspect, that it was slightly unusual. Or really unusual. You know, for somebody who was disabled to be doing that.

The first piece we did was called In this Body, and it was supposed to be one woman’s story, and it ended up being Bonnie’s story about being a dancer,
and then becoming disabled, and then starting to dance again. Bonnie and I look at the piece now and just are like, “Oh, my God,” you know, it looks so hokey to us and so contrived. But it was really revolutionary at time. We performed it in the Dance Brigade’s Furious Feet Festival for Social Change. Terry Sendgraff was on the bill; Joe Goode; Rhodessa Jones; the Dance Brigade; Terry Rhodes, who was a wonderful dancer who died of AIDS pretty early on in the epidemic. And you know, so here we are, this little group of people, on this bill with all of these major dance companies. And we got a standing ovation. You know? And—

Ehrlich: Do you remember where the actually performance was?

Smith: It was at Calvin Simmons, yeah, and the Dance Brigade was really hot then, so there was a pretty good audience there. I think we did three performances, I want to say, and people really liked what we were doing. You know, a few years later, I started wondering, “Well, did we get that standing ovation because it was really good? Or because some of us were disabled?” And I think it was probably more for the second reason. I mean, it was a good starting piece, but—. We just kept getting offers to perform, and Terry asked if we wanted to come into her studio and play with aerial stuff.

Then Bruce Curtis asked if we wanted to create a piece for something he was doing, and the Dance Brigade asked us to create a piece—the second piece we did was for the [Revolutionary] Nutcracker Sweetie, and it was pretty funny. Cheryl was in that, and Corbett, and Bonnie and I. And then David {Leigh?} and Thais and—the four of us in chairs kind of looked like Christmas balls. [laughs] It was this really wild, silly piece. Then the next year, they asked us to do another piece, and we created Wheels, which was a really beautiful piece and definitely a piece that I think we all still feel good about, whereas some of the other work, we’re kind of like, “God, we really did that in public?” So that was kind of our humble beginnings.

But we really didn’t—I mean, maybe Thais did—and I want to give Thais a lot of credit. You know, the company split apart, and I’ll probably talk about that down the way, but it really was her brainchild, and her impetus, and her hard work that brought it together. She really deserves a ton of credit for that, because it was, you know, it’s a lot of work. And she had a passion. She was very passionate about it, and about the work and—and she is another person in my life who really changed the course of my life. We were very, very, very close for, you know, the first seven or eight years of AXIS. But she just really taught me a lot about being on the planet, and being an artist, and being a person who really cared about things.

Ehrlich: A good place to take a break?
Ehrlich: So we just took a break, and now we’re back again. I was wondering if you could say more about how you all worked together at the very, very beginning, what that looked like? The one thing that I know—not from you, I may have read it—but was the word “intimacy,” that it was an intimate group. But tell us more about how you actually worked together.

Smith: Well, Thais directed the piece. I’ll talk about the very first piece.

Ehrlich: Okay.

Smith: And I think, you know, by necessity, it was—by necessity, and also by choice—and that’s the way Thais likes to work, is very collaboratively. But we were all really, really involved and invested in the process, and some of us had never danced. Some of us had never danced in chairs. Most of us that were not disabled had never danced with people in chairs, so there was a whole lot of territory to be explored. And, you know, I think that the only way that that could happen was for us all to be involved. We were a really intimate group, and a very close group, and—

Ehrlich: The only two who were able bodied were Thais and David?

Smith: And Leigh.

Ehrlich: And Leigh Lightfoot.

Smith: Yeah. She was in the first two pieces that we did, so like, the first little over a year, she was with the company. And then she left and Nina Haft came in. You know, we had some changes. I think that that’s been something that has been fairly true about the company, is that a lot of people do think that we kind of invite—it’s like we invite people into our living room or something and our group has tended to be kind of a close group. I think that that’s changed a little bit in the last years, because we’ve gone through more of a turnover. But early on—. You know, Bonnie and I have been with the company for seventeen years, and the first ten years, there was a core group of us that had been with the company for the entire time, or almost the entire time. So there was kind of a lot of knowledge of each other and a lot of involvement in each other’s lives and—
Ehrlich: So describe, at the very beginning, what it looked like.

Smith: Well, at the very beginning, it was really fun and really exciting and just kind of full of growth because we were just discovering and discovering and discovering. Then we performed and that went well, and we performed again, and that went well. Then people started saying, “Well, where do I go to learn how to do this?” And we had nowhere to send them, so we started a monthly dance jam, and that was a lot of fun, you know? But yeah, early on it was just a lot of exploring and a lot of fun and—

Ehrlich: How did decisions get made?

Smith: It was a very collective group and I think that in a lot of ways, Thais really, especially early on, allowed for that, you know? And, you know, we were—I mean, shoot, look at the group of people. Cheryl Wade, Corbett O’Toole, Thais, myself in some ways, even though I didn’t really know a lot about dance. Kind of strong personalities, you know?

Ehrlich: Powerful women.

Smith: Yeah and, you know, with a lot of ideas about how things should go. And [cat meows]—

Ehrlich: Do you need to deal with—

Smith: No.

Ehrlich: —that crying cat?

Smith: No that would be, probably, Charles growling at the next door neighbor’s cat.

But you know, for me, it was—I had such a huge learning curve, in a way that some other people didn’t.

Ehrlich: In terms of what?

Smith: Learning about dance. I knew nothing. And one of the ways that I started educating myself was to go see every single thing I could. I will say that I knew about the Dance Brigade, through Hand to Hand. And then also in ’85 through ’87, I’d gotten involved with a singer who was kind of on the women’s music network tour and so I had started booking her, and then started booking other musicians. And I worked for Linda Tillery for a little while, and Rhiannon some, and Mimi Fox was a good friend, and so I had kind of this “in” to the performing arts world through that.
Ehrlich: Who was the musician?

Smith: Hunter Davis, the woman I got involved with. Yeah. It also ended painfully, but that’s okay. So I knew—I had started to get an interest in performing arts and what was involved and, you know, kind of self-taught myself. I taught myself how to be a booking agent and I did a little bit of publicity work for the Bay Area Women’s Philharmonic really early on and so I kind of had developed an interest in the performing arts through that. That was, you know, prior to getting involved in AXIS, which is also kind of a blessing and a curse, because I came with some knowledge about the performing arts industry and how it worked and, you know, things that you needed, like a press kit and quotes and stuff like that, so—. But you know, I would say that the first—we started—I started with the company—I think that they started really rehearsing in the fall, and then I got involved very early. I think it was in ’88, but it might have been in ’87. Then our first performance was in ’88 and then the next year, we did one performance and the following year we did, I think two performances. The following year, it was, like, four or five, so it was kind of a gradual build-up.

Ehrlich: If one was to come to, say, one of the really early rehearsals, like for In this Body, what would it look like?

Smith: I don’t think it would look that unlike what we do now, depending on who we’re working with. It was really collaborative, and we did—and we still do, with some pieces—did a lot of exploring with each other. The third piece that we did was called Wheel and Thais was on roller skates. We tried to put Nina on skates, but it was not pretty. Didn’t work. We experimented with having a skateboard in that, and David was on wheels, on roller skates. Laura Rifkin had joined the company that year and was involved in that piece. Corbett had left, and Cheryl had pretty much left. So it was, you know, a new configuration, but definitely, still a pretty interesting group of people.

Ehrlich: So exploring movements and people saying what they do and don’t feel comfortable with and—

Smith: Yeah, or things that they really liked and, you know, early on, Thais was not one to use a video camera. We lost so much material, because we didn’t tape rehearsals. We’d kind of do something, and then we’d try to revive it and I know that Nina and I lost an entire section of a piece, or maybe it was the whole piece, because the videotape—we had it taped for a performance, and it didn’t work. The video came out really bad and so when we went, like nine months later, to recreate the piece, we’d lost most of it. You know, so it was a lot of that. “Well, I really like this.” “Oh, do that again,” or “Try that again,” you know. It was not—it didn’t feel very structured, in some ways.
Ehrlich: And if someone wasn’t comfortable with a movement, they just wouldn’t do it.

Smith: Right.

Ehrlich: Even if other people thought it was a great idea.

Smith: Yeah, and I think early on, also—you know, for myself, it wasn’t without its frustration because I’d see—especially, like, when we did the *Nutcracker*, with fifty or sixty really good dancers, often it wasn’t without its frustration, because I couldn’t dance that way. So it was the whole thing of, you know, kind of getting back into my ideas of perfection and “more, better, different” and wishing I could do this or I could do that and being resentful that other people could do this and that, that I couldn’t do. I think early on, there was more of a concern about comfort level, emotional comfort level in our work. And—

Ehrlich: For the dancers or for the audience? Or both?

Smith: Mostly for those of us dancing. I think also that—and this, you know, nondisabled dancers have said this to me, that they felt like they weren’t really allowed to dance full out in the company, because it would look too different from what maybe Bonnie and Laura and I were doing. So there was kind of this desire to keep people, I think, happy on that level, you know? But also, in a lot of ways, the amount of training that our nondisabled dancers have that join the company now is significantly more than the amount of training that some of our nondisabled dancers had early on because the work was not technically demanding in that way. I think it was—we did a lot more issue based work. Several of the pieces were really about disability or about relationship. You know, it was just a whole different level of technicality, really.

Ehrlich: What about that? Not about technicality but about the sort of advocacy element of the performance. I mean, did you feel like you were committed to teaching, through the act of dancing?

Smith: Well, the interesting thing is, is that several of us in the company really didn’t start teaching until ’97.

Ehrlich: But I mean—

Smith: Oh, as a company. Yes, we felt very committed.

Ehrlich: I mean—
Smith: As a company.

Ehrlich: I mean simply having people with disabilities dancing onstage is teaching.

03-00:12:30

Smith: Right.

Ehrlich: You can’t get away from that. But beyond that, did you feel like, through the dance, you were trying to educate people about disability?

03-00:12:45

Smith: I think we realized after the first performance, that that was an aspect. You know, our first name was AXIS Dis-slash-Abled, with a capital A, Dance Troupe.

Ehrlich: Right.

03-00:13:00

Smith: You know, so I think there was a way in which we were being kind of political right off the bat and thinking about disability as ability instead of disability. Thais had had the experience of working with a theater company in San Jose that—I don’t think it was integrated. I think it was all people with disabilities—that she directed, so you know, she had a little bit of a—she came with information, with her slant, you know, on the politics of art. And, you know, I think early on, we really did get that there was a political and a social implication to what we were doing and I think it is something that we really embraced. Early on, we were a lot more concerned with being politically correct. You know, we didn’t have people pushing a wheelchair. We didn’t have nondisabled people in wheelchairs. We were a lot more concerned with that early on.

Ehrlich: One of the really interesting things, I thought, that Jeremy Alliger said when I spoke with him was that he felt that some of the international companies who didn’t have a disability rights movement. and therefore, a much more limited sense of disability and disability rights, in a certain way, were freed up—

03-00:14:32

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: —from the political correctness.

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: That they weren’t—

03-00:14:37

Smith: And we weren’t—
—held in by some of the same constraints and were able to just go for it, in a way that wasn’t instinctive for AXIS, because AXIS grew up in a—

Well, and I think also, it had to do with the mix of people in the company and, in particular, I think, you know, Thais shaped a lot of that, in how she looked at disability and disabled people and her political concerns and such. But, you know, I mean, we were all concerned with how we presented ourselves to our audience, and what we did. And I think Jeremy was probably right about that.

I kind of started—as I said, one of the ways that I educated myself was I went and saw everything I could possibly see. We didn’t really know anybody else setting choreography. We knew Bruce Curtis and Allen Patashek. We knew that they were doing contact improvisation and through them, we learned about Alito Alessi, you know, up in Eugene, who was also doing improvisation and kind of setting some choreography. But we didn’t know other companies that were really setting choreography and there really wasn’t anybody that we could go to and say, “How do you do this?” There weren’t models for how to develop a company or, you know, for a company like this. And—I can’t remember exactly where I was going with this—but we felt like we were doing something that was a little bit unique and I think we felt a lot of ownership around that, early on. I know that there was some feeling of threat, you know, when other people showed up that were doing the same kind of work, or that wanted to do the same work and, you know, we found about other companies, like Dancing Wheels in Cleveland. They came to the Bay Area and we went to one of their performance and, you know, I felt competitive. It’s my competitive edge, what can I say? You know, wanting to be the first, and the blue ribbon, and the best and all of that. And I think it was after I saw Dancing Wheels and started to learn—. Oh, then we went over to Germany, after Uli joined us. And—

Uli Schmitz.

Schmitz, yeah, and the reason that he got involved with us was that he was doing contact improv, and somebody said, “Oh, you should come to this performance.” He came to a performance, and we were doing aerial work, and that was something that he was very interested in. I think the piece was called *On the Rim of the Well of Darkness*—I think that’s what it was—and we performed it in Terry’s studio.

Since you just brought it up, say more about what the aerial work was about.

Well, at the time, it was mostly trapeze and we tried putting a wheelchair up on a trapeze. Charlene Curtiss, who started Light Motion, danced in that piece. She was down here in the Bay Area for a while, and she danced with us for about a year, and then went off and did her thing and—. You know, but I
always felt really competitive, and I think Thais did, too. You know, “Nobody else can do this as well as we can,” and you know, I think in some ways, there was this idea that there was some God-given grace that made you able to do this work.

I started realizing, around—I think it was in ’92, we got invited by Jeremy to go perform in an aerial dance festival in Boston and we did a piece there called—I think that was when we did Helix. We had a couple of different versions of Helix. But that was a really interesting experience, because you know, once again, we were, like, the only company there with people in wheelchairs, and it was really novel, and we got a really great reception. The theater wasn’t accessible, so Jeremy had to have a stair lift put in when we got there. But he’d gotten hooked into our work right away. But I got to start seeing other people’s work. I was already going out and seeing a lot of different work. And that’s when I started kind of thinking that, “Wow, there’s some good work going on out there, and some interesting stuff,” and I started being a little bit less satisfied with what we were doing.

Not so much in ’92, but definitely, like, over the next few years, I really— you know, I went and saw Joe Goode and I thought, “Oh, my God, he could do something really interesting with this!” Bill T. Jones. I would see these people whose work I could imagine on us. And that’s kind of when friction started happening, you know, because I was getting educated and educated through just going to dance performances and seeing what was good, and seeing where—like, seeing this potential for this company, and realizing that, you know, some of us did not have the same viewpoint. I started to realize that I didn’t really feel like it was a God-given grace; you know, that it didn’t take some person with special endowment to do this kind of work; and that—

Ehrlich: And you’re talking about the dancing itself, too.

03-00:20:24
Smith: Yeah. The dancing of it, the teaching of it, the choreographing of it, the directing of it. At that point, Nina was directing a fair amount of pieces. Our process was still really collaborative, though. We’d argue about, you know, what to do here and what to do there.

Ehrlich: That’s what I’m interested in. You know, “collaborative” sounds great, but what did it really look like when someone had an artistic vision that they really wanted, and other people didn’t, or—?

03-00:20:52
Smith: It got hard.

Ehrlich: You’d just argue it out?
Smith: Yeah, you know, and I think in some ways, we did remarkably well, but in other ways, there was kind of this, you know, for some of us, and I’ll say for me, there was kind of a growing dissatisfaction with what we were doing. I just really felt like we could be more, better, different. So, you know, that little aspect of my personality and my criticalness was really coming into play in sometimes not very flattering and positive ways.

Ehrlich: Before we get deep into that, which I know is a big chunk of the story, is your dissatisfaction and then where AXIS ended up moving, but I have a question. I think either I read or someone mentioned—maybe it was Cheryl, when I did an interview with her—the role of the “creative eye.” Can you say how you used that in rehearsals, and what that meant? Who that person was?

Smith: Well, I think it was hard early on, because the creative eye was—you know, often we were all in a piece, and we weren’t using video, and we weren’t using mirrors. Occasionally, somebody would step out and look at something and—but I think we went a lot off of, “How does it feel!” Truthfully, Esther, looking back on it, I don’t know how the heck we were able to come up with, you know, some of the quality of work that we did, given that we didn’t use video. You know? Nina usually—no, it was about half. Sometimes she was in a piece that she was working on, directing, and sometimes she wasn’t. But a lot of times, there wasn’t an outside eye. Or sometimes Leigh Lightfoot would come in and look at things, but I’m not sure that she was the strongest person for that position. So, you know, I think that that’s when things would sometimes get hard, is that we had no sense of what things looked like, until we saw a performance video, usually. And, you know, Wheels, I still love that piece, it’s a beautiful piece, and how we were able to get that together that way, with Thais being in the piece—. I think sometimes people would step out of their role and look at the piece without them in it, but you can’t do that if you’re involved in a partnering part or something. I think we had to go a lot off of how it felt, you know, and if it seemed like it made sense structurally.

Ehrlich: And at some point, Thais got training as an occupational therapist, right? Was that in this—?

Smith: Yeah. Yeah, she went and got her masters in occupational therapy and her impetus, a lot, was because she really wanted to infiltrate the medical system. After hearing my story with rehab and other people’s, you know, it really—and after seeing—I mean, for me, dance changed my life, and improvisational movement did, because it’s really how I learned to inhabit my body and how I developed the strength and also kind of the will to become a physical person again, you know. I tried driving way early on, and, of course, I was terrified of wrapping myself—you know, sending myself over a guardrail or something, so I had a lot of fear of driving, but I also just didn’t have the physical orientation in my body to be able to handle it. It was after, you know, dancing
and moving—. One day I said, “This is crazy.” I had this dog; I wanted to be able to take her for walks. I got in my van, and I drove down to the Marina, and I thought, “Well, why didn’t I do this ten years ago?” but I couldn’t have done it ten years ago, because I had a whole different body of knowledge about my body and my physicality. I think Thais really saw that and really felt like—and we still, we try to work with medical professionals as much as we can, because I think there’s a lot of information in dance and movement and allowing people to explore movement, that opens up pathways that might not have existed.

Ehrlich: Can you say any more specifically what was it that you learned that enabled you to drive, in a way that you hadn’t been able to before?

Smith: Well, for one thing, I got a lot more strength. For another thing, I could transfer myself. For another thing, I had a whole different sense of balance. A lot of times we’re pretty aware of our limitations but we’re not—as disabled people—but I wasn’t aware of what my potential or my possibilities were, or how far I could push things, or how far I could test things. And, you know, especially dancing with people that—after five or six years of dancing together, we knew each other so well kinesthetically. I mean, Thais and I could fly across the floor, you know, with me not in my chair, or with me in my chair. I mean, we just had so much knowledge about how to move together and that really translated for me into being able to do things in my everyday life that I never would have thought possible. Even after, you know, six months in a really state of the art rehab facility.

So I think Thais really saw that, and wanted to, you know, take that information. But I think also, some of us were beginning to wonder if maybe the way we were looking at our art was maybe not just a little bit outmoded. I think, you know, our trip to Siberia was a big undertaking. We went there in ’95 and at that point, I was starting to feel pretty dissatisfied with what we were doing artistically and that was a very difficult trip for Thais and I, because I didn’t really want to be talking about the work or approaching it from, you know, a medical model or an “aren’t we special people model,” you know?

Ehrlich: So that did feel like that was her vantage point?

Smith: Yeah, and I think that’s, you know, when we started really having friction and butting heads was when I realized that we needed stronger directorship. And I wanted to use video, I wanted to see what we were doing, and to talk about it, and to look at it, and to analyze it. I really thought it was important because Bonnie and I still, to this day—you know, unlike some of our less disabled disabled dancers—it’s hard for us to show up in a dance class and have that work, you know? After seven, eight years of working together, really feeling a
need for new ideas and new input and—. And I think, as I said, my issues with authority and my criticalness probably didn’t come out in a good way, in my attitude towards Thais, but I just really felt like we needed more.

Ehrlich: Can you say more about how her view, that was a sort of medical model view, how that affected how she thought you should all be dancing? Or what that meant?

Smith: Well, I just think it held us back a little bit and it kept us doing work that was—I don’t want to say patronizing, but—it wasn’t patronizing, but—

Ehrlich: Was it focused too much on the disability? I mean, is that the point, when you—?

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: So, “These are disabled people who are dancing and isn’t this good?”

Smith: Yeah. Instead of, “These are dancers who are disabled and isn’t it interesting?”

Ehrlich: “And what can they do as dancers?” Okay.

Smith: Yeah, and I was just really dying for outside criticism of our work, because we weren’t getting it from reviewers.

Ehrlich: Because they were scared to say anything critical?

Smith: Yeah and we got a very difficult review, a non-flattering review in Minneapolis, and I really wanted to talk about it. I understand that a lot of people don’t read reviews and don’t give a hunk about what critics say about their work, but for me, it was important to hear what other people have to say. And I think because I wasn’t feeling like it was as good as it could be, and I wasn’t satisfied with it, and I was beginning to feel like, “Maybe we’re not the best at doing what we do?” You know? “And maybe there are places we need to go and things we need to do to get better?”

Ehrlich: You’d started the Siberia thread.

Smith: Yeah. Well, we went to Siberia, and Thais and I just really, really butted heads. At that point, because I had experience booking, I was doing some. I think I was called Program Director or something; I had some title. And I had certain ideas about things, you know? I was starting to feel like we had
outgrown Thais’ ability to direct the company and to create challenging work. It felt to me like we were kind of going sideways.

Ehrlich: What was her title at that point? Was it Artistic Director?

Smith: I think that at that point, it was, yeah. My regret during this period is that I didn’t give Thais the amount of credit that she was due, and in a lot of ways, I didn’t understand the amount of work that it had taken. But the other thing that was happening for me, and I think for some other people in the company, is that we felt like we’d been doing this work, you know, seven, eight years, almost nine, and we didn’t known how to teach it, because really, Thais, and sometimes, David, were doing the teaching of it.

Ehrlich: To you.

Smith: Well, and to our classes. Thais had—

Ehrlich: So the classes had started?

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: When did the classes start?

Smith: Thais got an artist in residency grant, I think, in 1990. But, you know, as we were starting to tour and to go to these places where they were wanting us to do master classes and presentations and workshops, we really didn’t know how to teach and that wasn’t acceptable. [pause] Given the fact that I really felt like, you know, as disabled dancers, it would be good for us to be visible as also teaching.

Ehrlich: Right, and she’s able bodied, and she was teaching.

Smith: Mm-hm. I also felt like, you know, as a dancer, I wanted more technical information. I wanted—instead of just, “Oh, you know, do what feels right, or do what feels good,” you know, I didn’t want that anymore.

Ehrlich: What did you want?

Smith: I wanted somebody to say, “Judy, that looks really good.” “Judy, that looks like shit.” You know? “Make this change.” “Make that change.” I think that that wasn’t Thais’ forte and that in some ways, as we’d all kind of grown up together doing this, Thais had, you know, some background in dance; and David had done a lot of improvisation; and Nina had some background, but—
you know, there were no really—oh, boy, not to sound harsh. There are people that are really good at choreographing and those were the people that I wanted to work with and that was the kind of work that I wanted to be doing. I was upset that I didn’t know how to teach this work, really. I could kind of assist, but left to my own, I couldn’t. And I was upset that it didn’t feel like we were creating new movement; it felt like we were recycling. And I felt like we needed a costume designer. I was just really dissatisfied and really started pushing to bring other people in to teach us and to choreograph. When that really came to a head for me was when we did the International Festival with Jeremy, in Boston, and I got to see what other people were doing—

Ehrlich: —and that was the—?

03-00:34:55

Smith: —in other companies.

Ehrlich: And the full title was International—

03-00:35:00

Smith: —Festival of Wheelchair Dance, which was a whole other *megillah*. You know, Jeremy sent emails out to all of us that were involved, and called us, and said, “What are we going to call this thing?” We all went blank. It’s like, “What do you call it? First International Festival of Dance with People, Some of Whom Use Wheelchairs and Some of Whom Don’t, and a Few of ’Em Have Other Disabilities?” He needed something to market it and it was a great topic of conversation. But ultimately, that festival really kind of led to the, you know, the implosion, the AXIS implosion. Uli got hurt. He fell on stage and completely tore his rotator cuff and that, in and of itself, kind of put the company in a standstill. So all of a sudden, we had time to talk about, you know, all of the dissatisfaction. And I saw CandoCo, and I saw what another outside choreographer had done, and I talked to Celeste Dandeker, the artistic director, at length about their transition from going to company choreographed works to, you know, bringing choreographers in. And I saw that all their dancers were teaching. You know, and I just was—I was pissed. We were doing a piece there that was *Hidden Histories/Visible Differences*, and it was really about disability. And I really didn’t want to do that piece there. I felt like we should be doing repertory works, you know? I was sick of doing things about disability and really felt like it was time to move on from that, and just was really—

Ehrlich: So things really cracked open there?

03-00:36:45

Smith: Yeah. Yeah, they really did, even though it had kind of started broiling up around Minneapolis and that bad review that we never talked about.

Ehrlich: Can you—I’ve read the review, but for this [oral history], will you say a sentence about what the gist of it was?
Smith: Well, basically, he said that the work we were doing was not as good as what Chris Aiken was doing in Minneapolis, and that—I think he said our nondisabled dancers were heavy-footed and clumsy or something, and that the work was not sophisticated.

Ehrlich: Which is partly what you were feeling?

Smith: Which was really what I was feeling. Yeah. And it’s hard to tell somebody that you know has put so much into it. You know, it was hard for me to tell Thais that “I don’t think that this is as good as what we should be doing at this point.”

Ehrlich: And though everything was collaborative, she really was in charge, right?

Smith: Yeah, I think so, and I think I didn’t give her credit for that for a few years before we split up and a few years after. I was so angry that it was hard for me to give her the amount of credit that she was due, because it really was a labor of love and a butt load of work to get this company going and to keep it going. And it wasn’t well paid, you know. And—

Ehrlich: And you were partly so angry because you knew what you wanted, and you didn’t have it.

Smith: Yeah, and I really—I’d go see Bill T. Jones, and I could just imagine, I just had this vision—especially after the festival, and seeing CandoCo, and Bilderwefer, and having seen Mobiaki in Germany, that our work could be a lot better, and that we could be better. I felt like my interest in doing the work that we were doing was not there. I didn’t want to be doing it, and continue doing it at that level, but I also didn’t really feel like I wanted to go out and start my own thing.

Ehrlich: A question that—

Smith: And I felt an investment in AXIS and in the other people in the company.

Ehrlich: A question I have is what was Thais’ response when you said, “Hey, let’s open this up. Let’s bring in someone from the outside?”

Smith: She was furious.

Ehrlich: Why?
Smith: She didn’t think anyone else would work with us. She didn’t think anybody would want to, would know what to do with us. She really felt like we were the only ones that could do this work. And, you know, I think it was very hard for her that I was doubting her, and doubting her abilities, and feeling like there were people out there that could do it better and, you know—

Ehrlich: So it didn’t feel, to her, like expanding possibilities, it felt like taking something away?

Smith: It might have. I think she was very intimidated at the thought of having other people come in, because I—I mean, maybe she was afraid that, yeah, they would do it better. I don’t know, really.

Ehrlich: But meanwhile, there’s all of this dissatisfaction and tension, but you’re still an active, performing, rehearsing, traveling dance company.

Smith: Yeah, and that last year of rehearsals was not always very much fun. I was very vocal; but then at one point, Uli said that he didn’t want to be anybody’s performing monkey. I think he was starting to feel dissatisfied with what he was doing and the way he was being put onstage and—

Ehrlich: Before we move too far ahead, is there anything you want to say about the actual pieces you were working on and performing during these times?

Smith: Well, I think—. [pause] Early on, we did In this Body, and we did a reworked version of that and we did Wheels. Nina did Ellipsis and Corazon, which were nice pieces. Then we did Vida Sintonia, which was another kind of epic aerial piece with low flying trapeze, and, well, Helix before that. And—

Ehrlich: And Helix was an aerial piece, too.

Smith: An aerial work, yeah, and that was kind of Uli’s introduction into the company. We did an evening length work at the art museum, which—UC Art Museum—which was a really fun space to perform in. We had live music and it was a huge undertaking, and it was supposed to be—. That was in ’94, and I was starting to have, you know, kind of difficulties with what we were doing with that, because it ended up to be kind of about—I felt like all of our pieces were taking the same trajectory. They’d start, they’d get really crazy and insane and frantic, and then they’d end, you know? And I was sick of doing screaming mad woman in pieces. It just felt like we were doing the same thing again and again and again. Yeah, it just felt like we were doing the same thing. It was a little bit different, you know, if Nina did a piece. But the last piece that we did as a company was Hidden Histories, and I had actually kind of come up with the title and developed a concept for the work, kind of before
I got completely, like, “Why are we doing things about disability?” and that piece was a little bit of an embarrassment to me.

Ehrlich: Why?

03-00:42:59

Smith: I just didn’t—you know, I felt like it was hokey. Interesting enough, though, Esther, I think that there are people, especially in the disability community, who kind of don’t like the route that we’ve taken. They really liked us doing things specifically about disability, kind of being the cheerleaders for disability pride and, you know, all of that stuff, and, yeah, sometimes bringing out the heartbreaking of being disabled but doing it in a way that we all ended up heroic at the end. I think I was a little bit tired of being heroic. And like I say, when Uli got hurt, we had stuff that we were supposed to do that we had to cancel, and—

Ehrlich: What happened?

03-00:43:51

Smith: He fell during a performance and tore his rotator cuff.

Ehrlich: Right.

03-00:43:56

Smith: And it just kind of—I think it was like we all got kind of punched in the something and went [makes gasping sound], you know, because we hadn’t had anybody that seriously injured, and we hadn’t been having—I mean, we were having a lot of friction in the company at that point, so that just felt like salt on a wound that was starting to grow bigger.

Ehrlich: Did people line up sort of behind you and behind Thais? Did it feel like people were divided and taking sides?

03-00:44:32

Smith: Yeah, and it was really hard. We went through mediation, which was kind of a joke, to talk about the artistic vision and all. It was a joke because Thais had several meetings with the mediator before the mediations, and so they were already set to go in a direction, and then I was there, and some other people were there saying, “We’re not happy with this work. We want to be working with other people.” And, you know, Thais and I, there was so much tension between us, and it was just—it was coming into rehearsals and—

Ehrlich: What did that look like, and how were you at the rehearsals?

03-00:44:32

Smith: It looked like bitching at each other. You know, we just were, like, snotty and snippy to each other. I was completely—I was uncooperative a lot, and I think she was frustrated and I was frustrated, and everybody else was kind of caught in the middle. And I’d been doing a lot of the work. Not as much as her,
administratively, but you know, I’d kind of been the one that was maybe out in the community a little bit more, talking to people and being more visible and trying to figure out how to make AXIS succeed and grow. I know she felt like she was being the workhorse; that she was, you know, the one that was doing all the work and putting in long hours and, you know, that it wasn’t being appreciated.

Ehrlich: I must have made it difficult in rehearsals—

03-00:46:17
Smith: It did.

Ehrlich: —to move forward with creative energy, when there’s so much discord.

03-00:46:22
Smith: Yeah, it was. I think *Hidden Histories* was a particularly difficult process, and probably, I should have taken myself out of the piece. We’d gotten a grant to do a piece about the Women in Black, it was called *Women in Black*. Thais, at one point, actually asked me not to be in the piece, when we were still trying to move forward as a company. But you know, through the mediations, we did, at one point, finally get to the place where I said, “I really want to commission other people to work with us.”

What had happened right before this was that we had had a meeting with Jeremy Alliger, and it was either during the planning of the wheelchair festival or—it must have been during it. Jeremy wanted to commission us to do a work, and I think it might have been for the festival. We were meeting at Yerba Buena. It would have been in ’96, because that’s right when John Killacky came there. We all met over there. Jeremy was talking to Thais about commissioning a work from us. She was getting all excited and, you know, having her ideas and she left the room, and I said, “Jeremy.” I’d already started talking to him about my dissatisfaction. I said, “Can’t we please work with somebody else?” and he said, “Well, who do you want to work with?” and I said, “Bill T. Jones.” So when Thais came back in from the bathroom, and Jeremy said, “Well, you know, I was thinking, maybe we should get somebody else to work with you.” He said, “Well, who would you like?” and I said, “Bill T. Jones,” and Thais was just, like, raging. Very stoic, but she was so angry and really resistant to the idea and, “Well, I don’t—” She really didn’t think that he could work with us, but, you know, she kind of was like—. And Jeremy said that he would talk to Bill about it. In the meantime, Bill was here doing something with some organization in Marin, and she ended up going to a workshop that he did, and Laura Rifkin was there in a chair and—

Ehrlich: “She” meaning Thais.

03-00:48:50
Smith: Yeah. I had wanted to go, and I can’t remember why I didn’t go, but she really felt like, you know, Bill had discounted Laura and wasn’t paying attention to
her, and there was no way he would be able to work with us and all of this stuff. But Jeremy and I just kind of stuck to our guns on it, and I know that she was really angry. I know that she felt like she had put all of this work and time into it, and she felt like it was her company. I felt like it wasn’t her company, that it was all of us. After seven years or eight years of being the person mostly in charge, I can really understand how she felt, and why she felt that way, in a whole different way and, you know, ultimately, that was what led to the parting of ways, was that I really wanted to commission, and she really didn’t, and the board and the company kind of got behind me, and—

Ehrlich: When did you get a board?

03-00:50:00

Smith: Oh, we had a board all the way.

Ehrlich: From the very beginning?

03-00:50:02

Smith: From when we incorporated—

Ehrlich: You had incorporated in—?

03-00:50:05

Smith: 1990. So we had a board that was mostly those of us in the company. Like, the board was the company for a number of years, and then we started asking some other people in. Then we realized that, legally, we needed to have a certain number of other people, and we had started getting other people on. You know, mostly, also to help with the work some.

Ehrlich: Is becoming a nonprofit different from being incorporated?

03-00:50:34

Smith: I don’t think so.

Ehrlich: I thought it was in ‘87.

03-00:50:37

Smith: No, we were founded in ’87.

Ehrlich: Oh, okay. And you became a nonprofit—

03-00:50:41

Smith: Became our own nonprofit ’90.

Ehrlich: Okay.

03-00:50:44

Smith: You know, primarily so that we could write grants and get funding, and such like that.
Ehrlich: And just to quick catch us up, in terms of the name changes, can you just talk us through that?

03-00:50:54
Smith: Oh, yeah, in—we got rid of the Dis-slash-Abled, probably in ’90 or ’91, and went to AXIS Dance Troupe.

Ehrlich: And do you remember any of the discussions about either of the names? I mean, the first one, Dis/Abled, how you chose that?

03-00:51:18
Smith: Well, I think we chose it because we wanted to make that distinction, and then I think we got rid of it because we felt like it wasn’t really necessary to make that distinction.

Ehrlich: And what about AXIS? Where did that come from?

03-00:51:31
Smith: Well, we needed a name for the company. We were all sitting around, when we were getting ready to do the piece with Furious Feet, and they needed a name to call it. We started thinking about, “Well, what is it about us that sets us apart from other dance companies?” We realized it was the equipment, the wheels. At that point, it was, you know, people in wheelchairs and people not in wheelchairs. There weren’t any disabilities that were kind of in between. And you know, thinking about a wheel and, you know, the axis being a center point around which these other—all things—you know, the spokes. The people came together to create something that moved. So it was—but what we didn’t realize is that it sounds like access. So that’s been a nemesis for us. I just always spell the name. “I’m calling from AXIS, A-X-I-S,” you know. But we still get things for Access Dance Company. So that was kind of the origin of the name.

The transition with the name was, I think, as we grew and professionalized a little bit and then there was a point at which one of our board members wanted us to become a foundation. I don’t know why. It was a—it was silly. So for a while, we were AXIS Foundation, with AXIS Dance Company underneath, because we decided that troupe was not—troupe sounded like a band of us that got together, you know, every now and then to dance. It didn’t sound very professional. So we changed it to “Company.” Then, after Thais left at the end of ’97, then we—took us a while, but we got rid of “Foundation” and just became AXIS Dance Company, and I hope that’s what we stick with. [laughs] Think that we probably will.

Ehrlich: So will you go back now then to—you were sort of tracing the Thais—

03-00:53:37
Smith: Yeah.
Ehrlich: —that transition. So what happened?

Smith: Well, we went through several mediations, and it was somewhat decided—it was decided that if I wanted to commission work, I could write the grants, get the project together, hire the people, deal with the funding. We had this thing that was kind of cooking with Bill T. Jones already, but I had in the meantime seen Sonya Delwaide perform. It was in ’96, at the Bay Area Dance Festival. I fell in love with her work, and I had told Thais about her. I said, “I really want to work with this woman.”

Ehrlich: What was it about Sonya’s work that you loved?

Smith: Oh, her work is just stellar. It’s theatrical, and gestural, and well crafted, and physical, and emotional and—I just—it was stunning. Her work was just stunning.

Ehrlich: And was that your first exposure to it? [pause] And what year was that?

Smith: That was in ’96. Iva [Walton] and I had actually just gotten together. We saw it together, and we were both just in tears because it was a duet with her and Jadson Caldeira, who’s a Brazilian guy who lives in Canada, that she’s danced a lot with. It was so stunning and so moving and so edgy, you know? We just looked at each other. I said, “We have to—I have to work with her.” You know? So I had told Thais about her, and, you know, we still were not getting along well at all. Even though we had made this decision that, you know, she’d do the Women in Black project, and had asked me not to do that, to be in that, because she didn’t want to deal with me, and I don’t blame her, because I was being a total bitch. I was awful. And it was agreed that I could start writing grants and fundraising and, you know, organizing projects. I told her that I wanted to work with Sonya Delwaide. She wasn’t happy about it. And she wasn’t really happy about that decision. We were, like, being ugly with each other, like, emails going back and forth and fights on the phone and—. I found out through one of the dancers that Sonya Delwaide had been invited in to choreograph a section of Women in Black.

Ehrlich: Invited in by Thais?

Smith: And I hit the ceiling. I was so pissed, because I thought that we’d had this agreement and even though things weren’t good between us, I thought, “Well, maybe we’ll be able to work our way through this, you know. I’ll do my thing, I won’t be involved in her projects.” And—

Ehrlich: I’m having trouble understanding the impetus—
Smith: I had trouble understanding, too.
Ehrlich: Okay, so I’m not missing something.

Smith: No, you’re not. It was completely against everything that she had said that she wanted and didn’t want to do. She had no interest in working with outside choreographers, so she brings in the one person that I was dead set to work with. I hit the roof. I was furious. Furious. And that ended up, you know, being a really bad exchange with us. And Thais fired me. I said, “Well, you can’t fire me. The board has to.” So at the time, Jan Garrett, poor thing, was our board president, and I called her and I said, “I’ve just been fired,” [laughs] and she said, “Whoa.”

Ehrlich: What was her name?

Smith: Jan Garrett, she’s Executive Director at CIL. She said, “Oh, this isn’t good, and we really need to see what’s going on with this.” So we started meeting with the board and doing kind of this crisis management, you know? And it was not altogether a clean process. We had one board member, whose name I won’t mention, who really played Thais and I against each other, in a not good way. It ended up being very painful for me, because I had told her some things in confidence, that she then turned around and told Thais. And I, you know, said some things that weren’t flattering, and said how I felt and—yeah, so the whole process was not very clean and not very pleasant. But what—

Ehrlich: I don’t know who the board member is, but is that person still involved with AXIS?

Smith: No. No, but they are in the community and around us. And I just couldn’t understand, you know, how that would happen.

Ehrlich: You know, we should probably stop here. The tape’s just about to run out.

Smith: Okay.

[end of session 1]
Ehrlich: Well, it is January 20th, and this is our second interview with Judy Smith. We were talking before we were on the camera about the fact that today is George W. Bush’s inauguration. I’d like to know how you feel about that, and specifically as an artist, how you feel about that?

Smith: I think it’s a black day in history. Yeah, I think it’s really embarrassing, it’s demoralizing. I was recently at the Arts Presenters International Conference in New York, and Jesse Jackson was staying in the same hotel. The conference organizers talked him into coming in and giving a bit of a speech during lunch. One of the things he said was that, you know, “They can steal our elections, but they can’t steal our spirit,” and then he went on to say how much artists are kind of conveyors of that spirit, and that, you know, artists are always on the forefront of, and always have been, of every political movement, from anti-imperialism to anti-slavery to the civil rights movement to, you know, protesting against the war. He was really very supportive of artists and our cause and the need for art, both just on a human level, on an education level. So, it was somewhat hopeful that, you know, there are people out there who value true democracy and really value the arts. And it was fun, you know, it was kind of a nice “up,” because I’ll have to say, going to, you know, conferences and talking to people all over the country, everyone is very depressed about the political situation and the situation for funding in the arts. And, you know, I think we, a lot of us, had this idea in the eighties and nineties that it would get easier or better, and it hasn’t. You know, it’s—I mean, if you’re an artist—being an artist is not for the meek.

Ehrlich: Say more.

Smith: Well, it’s—you know, being a contemporary dance artist, in particular, is not for the meek. You know, a lot of people have jobs they go to at nine o’clock, and they leave at five o’clock, and they leave that job there. And our hours sometimes might start at, you know, three in the morning to catch a flight, and end at eleven o’clock at night when we finally get to our hotel; and then start again the next morning at nine a.m., when you’re, you know, on a time zone that’s three hours earlier. You know, there’s just—I call it “no rest for the wicked,” because there really isn’t. There’s always more to do, and always something to do, and always something that you can be doing more of. Or better of. And the arts business—and I think in particular, dance—is really difficult. I can’t think of very many people that I know that would say it’s not. I tend to be a bit more of a cynic and a pessimist than a lot of people, but even the optimists will, jokingly and laughingly, say that, you know, it’s hard.

Ehrlich: And so then, when you put it in this political climate—?
It’s doubly. It’s doubly and, you know, I think it’s so easy to become despondent, when one feels like there’s no room for kind of our collective voice, you know, in this particular administration and in this time. It’s very easy to just be completely despondent and disillusioned and demoralized, and so I think the best thing to do is get up in the morning and go make art happen, you know, in whatever form that is. And I think also, I mean, the great thing about being in this business is there are some incredibly brilliant people in it. I often say that, you know, as much as the dance itself and what we do artistically and socially and politically is important, a lot of what keeps me in this business are the other people. Because there are some really, really genius folks, really wonderful, deep thinking, deeply caring people in this business.

Ehrlich: Well, and we’ll get to chronicle as many of them as you have energy for throughout the interview.

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: So last time, we ended up with sort of moving into the conflict with Thais.

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: And I think before we move forward with that story, there’s other background that I think we should explore first and then we’ll come back to that. Or however we end up wending this conversation.

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: But one thing that I did want to ask about, in the context of you having a business partnership, was you had mentioned that you had a business with Leo after you broke your back, working with horses, but you said very little about what it was. I’m wondering if you could say a little bit about what the actual business was. What did you guys do?

Smith: Well, I taught riding. I had kids and adults, and I did some buying and selling of horses, and we boarded horses. And, you know, a lot of the business was getting people ready for competition. One of the things that I particularly liked was finding the right horse for a person. That was quite fun, you know, when you really found that match.

Ehrlich: And can you say something about what working with him was like and how that relationship developed?
Well, without getting into a lot of detail, because I mean, in some ways, I feel like my life is so segmented, you know, just by virtue of major changes in my life, and, you know, that was a part of my life that was incredibly wonderful, and painful, and difficult, and nourishing. I mean, it was kind of the best and worst of everything combined. Leo was a mentor. He was a good friend of my family, and we had a very difficult relationship.

Did it become more difficult when you two became business—

It became—

Were you partners?

Yeah. Well, kind of, yeah. It became more difficult as I started to get independent, both as a teenager, and then after my accident. Kind of went through the whole, you know, scenario again and then finally decided that the situation for me was untenable. I was making plans to move forward in the horse industry but in a different way. And then my mom got sick, and that’s when I ended up kind of dropping all plans and starting over in Boulder, you know, with the idea of going to school and trying to have a somewhat normal— [background noise] That’s my cell phone.

I was just making sure that—

Yeah. It sounds like a music box. It’ll go away in a minute; I should have turned it off.

That’s okay.

Yeah, so it was, you know, it was a very, very difficult and painful time and leaving that particular partnership and leaving the horses that were involved in my life was really, really painful, kind of gut wrenching, in a way. But I also knew that it was something that I needed to do. I was also leaving the comfort of something that I knew, you know, that was familiar to me.

It seems significant in talking about future business relationships, to have some sense of what your earlier experience had been.

Yeah, I think that kind of colored how I looked at business relationships and personal relationships, and personal boundaries, and you know, that issue of being too involved with somebody that you’re in business with, in whatever
way, has come up again and again. And it came up in my martial arts situation, with a teacher that I was very close friends with, and you know, then with Thais in the context of AXIS. You know, in some ways, I really value that, the ability to make really deep relationships, but what I’ve learned—and then it came up again in, you know, a situation after Thais, with some co-directing of the company that didn’t work, that you know, I’ve necessarily had to keep a little bit more distance between myself and people that I work with. It hasn’t been an easy thing for me to learn, and it’s not really a comfortable place for me to be. You know, it’s—but I think it’s better, on a personal and a professional level, for myself and, you know, for the company and other people involved in the company.

Ehrlich: Well, we’ll get back to the rest of the Thais story, but I think it’s helpful to just have that little bit of history in place. Something else I realized that we didn’t talk about really at all was the trip to Russia. How did that come about?

04-00:10:21
Smith: Well, we went to Russia in 1995. I have a friend who I’ve known since I moved out here in 1983, Mark Krizak, who was working with Ralph Hotchkiss’ program. Ralph is a MacArthur Fellow and had gotten his fellowship for work that he was doing in developing countries, building wheelchairs and establishing wheelchair manufacturing plants, and organizing disability community in those areas. They happened to be starting a project in Novosibirsk, Siberia, and Mark called me up and said, “Do you want to go to Siberia?” and I was like, “Oh, sure, why not?” I mean, we were young back then. Would I make that trip again? Maybe not. But—

04-00:11:10
Ehrlich: So that was ten years ago.

04-00:11:10
Smith: That was ten years ago. We put in an NEA grant, when they had an international projects program, which they no longer have, and we got it. It was kind of like, “Oh, God! Oh, shit!” you know, because then it meant that we really had to go to Siberia. But it was an incredible experience. It was a very grueling trip. I think it took us probably thirty-six hours to get there. We were staying outside of Novosibirsk, which is a city of about a million, which was actually really a good thing, because they do not have an EPA, an Environmental Protection Agency there, and it was extremely polluted. The air was really bad and so we were staying outside of the city limits at the only place that was wheelchair accessible, which was the eye micro surgery clinic, oddly enough. Everybody knew who we were, because we were the only ones running around without eye patches, at dinners and such. But just, you know, on a health level, one of our dancers, David, got a really bad lung infection there, which took him months to get rid of. We all had eye problems and, you know, coughing and—

Ehrlich: From the pollution?
Smith: Yeah, from the pollution, and it made me really appreciate the fact that we do have some environmental protection here, which, under this administration, is getting to be less. But outside of the difficulty of, you know, accessibility and—we didn’t have wheelchair accessible vans. They picked us up in your wheelchairs, and stuck us in the back of, like, 1950s, early sixties army vans. Then they threw some of us in Fiats, and you know, off we went. Driving there was incredibly frightening.

Ehrlich: Who was on the trip?

Smith: Myself, Bonnie Lewkowicz, Nina Haft, Thais, David, her husband. We had a photographer, Almudena Ortiz, and we had an assistant, Leslie Smuckler. I think that was it, that was us.

Ehrlich: So what did you do?

Smith: Well, originally, when I was talking to Mark, I wanted to do what we do in most residencies, which is we go in and we work with dancers. We go in and work with people with disabilities. We work with educators, medical professionals. I was particularly interested—and Thais was too, at the time—we were really interested in kind of infiltrating the medical system, so working with rehab professionals, physical therapists, occupational therapists, recreational therapists. Mark informed me that they didn’t have those in Novosibirsk, and, in fact, the hospital is not even wheelchair accessible, and then went on to find out that whereas the number of people that survive spinal cord injuries here in the States at the time, you know, it’s in the ninety percent; and the people that didn’t survive spinal cord injuries in Russia at the time was about ninety percent. So the ratio was about reversed. That was kind of our first real eye opener.

But we got to Novosibirsk after about thirty-six hours. We were there in July, which is an incredibly beautiful time, and we missed quite a bit of rain. Ralph had started a wheelchair manufacturing plant, and around that, had developed Finist, which was a disability sports program. It was really the women in the program that were taking—the disabled women—that were kind of taking the leadership and organizing, socially and politically. But we had people—one woman who was probably in her late forties, who had polio, she walked with crutches, and she had, like, a mile-and-a-half walk to a bus, and then about a two-hour bus ride in every day, to come work with us. We had one woman working with us who literally had hardly been out of her, you know, five-story walk-up in thirty years. We left a power chair there for her to use. The stories were just phenomenal. Larissa, who was one of the women that was definitely a leader, unfortunately, a few years after we were there, she was murdered in her apartment. But she had the only wheelchair accessible apartment in Novosibirsk. Her husband worked for the government on the railroad and
became disabled, so they were able to work with the government to get a wheelchair accessible apartment, and then she had worked with the city to get them to put some cement in to make curb cuts. But you know, mostly, it was not accessible. And at the time, you would ask Russian people about, you know, their disabled folks, and they would say they didn’t have any, because they really didn’t see them. So this community was up against a lot. And plus, there’s a huge pride issue, you know, and disability was something that you definitely kept in the back room of your house.

It was a really, really inspiring trip. It was very difficult personally, because Thais and I weren’t getting along, which made it also hard on, you know, other people in the company. But we made some wonderful friends. I think that the most exciting thing that came out of that, we went and we taught dance, and, you know, Bonnie taught some recreation stuff, because that’s her background. We had this one woman who used a wheelchair, who made these really elaborate dresses, and she was out there playing quad rugby in these pouffy dresses. We talked a lot about disability and independent living and community organizing. You know, we got to spend about seven or eight days with them. Then we did our performance. We also did a performance out in the square, under statues of Lenin and Stalin—not—Lenin, I think it was. And then workers, you know. Men and women workers. These huge, like, fifty-foot iron statues. And people would kind of walk by, but they wouldn’t really stop and look right away, they’d kind of—because we were just doing these improvisations out in the square. But oddly enough, we were on, I think, every television station in that region of Russia. We were in a lot of the newspapers. We got an extreme amount of coverage.

Ehrlich: Because they’d never seen anything—?
04-00:18:11
Smith: They’d never see anything like it and, you know, the looks. I mean, we were like this caravan of people in wheelchairs. When we had the Russian group with us too, it was just—I mean, people would just, like, stop and—I think we were somewhat terrifying to them, in a way. But I think that the great thing that came out of that was that the women formed a dance company that was all disabled women, that they called Firebird, and it’s still going, as far as I know. They started performing in local community events, and it really gave them a way to integrate into the community, because dance and folk dance, art is really important in Russia, and really valued. So it gave them an “in” that they might not have had, just if they went and showed up at a meeting to talk about the need to put in an accessible sidewalk, you know? And that, I think for us, was really incredibly rewarding.

Ehrlich: And I heard that you also met the Minister of Health?
Smith: Yeah, the Minister of Health was at a conference that they put on. A big press conference, a news conference.

Ehrlich: And how significant was meeting him?

Smith: Well, I don’t know. I think it was a little bit difficult or sad to go there and tell them how things could be, and how we had it, because they were so far from being able to achieve that. You know, I mean, just the climate there, it’s dark and cold and snowed-in nine months of the year. It’s harsh. It’s a really, really harsh place to live. And so, you know, we’re coming from this country—and this was right after Perestroika, too. So you know, people who had been doctors, lawyers, dentists, engineers were selling cigarettes, because they could make more money doing that. There was kind of this whole falling apart, you know, of their social systems and—it was a really, really interesting time to be there. But it was painful to go there and, you know, tell them about how our life was and that Bonnie and I had vans that we drove and, you know, that we could get into most buildings and that we live in an area where people weren’t angry that we were out on the streets, or embarrassed, or sickened, you know, by that. So, you know, it was—we had a lot to talk about.

Ehrlich: How did you handle the language barrier?

Smith: We had translators, and they worked their butts off. We had two or three of them and it was very difficult. Like, a lot of people in the company—I think Megan [Schirle] and Bonnie in particular—would have their little dictionaries out, you know. I just gave up. I’m so not—I just— that part of my brain no longer works; I think I hit my head really hard or something, in my accident. But it was difficult, you know? And it takes so much work to—you have to teach in a whole different way. When you’re teaching dance, you have to talk in a whole different way so that the translators can kind of absorb it and—. But the stories were just—I mean, the stories of what people had gone through, and their spirit, and their pride, and their strength was just amazing. Completely amazing.

Ehrlich: Are there any stories that stick with you?

Smith: Well, the one I told you, in particular, about the woman who—you know, it was like a four-and-a-half hour ordeal for her to get into town and back.

Ehrlich: Which gives you some hint of what it meant to her.

Smith: Yeah. They really—it was really important to them that we were there. Nina and I taught self-defense. Taught a self-defense class, which got interrupted by about three or four drunk soldiers with machine guns. We learned a really
difficult lesson, that you don’t teach self-defense outside in public, you know, because they wanted to beat up the *Americans*.

**Ehrlich:** How did that resolve?

**Smith:** Well, we left, with them following us and jeering us and, you know, getting kind of sticky. It was in the middle of the day, and here are these twenty-something testosterone ridden thugs, drunk, with machine guns.

**Ehrlich:** What about access issues for you guys there?

**Smith:** Well, the transformer that I brought to deal with my power wheelchair, which is—you know, one of the reasons we don’t travel internationally a lot is because we use power wheelchairs in this company. It wouldn’t work, so in order to charge the batteries, we take a set out of the car, and then we put mine in, and they drive it around all day. It was a little bit of a nightmare. Then the army vans were transporting us. Oddly enough, some of the places that we did work, we taught our workshops and performed, were fairly accessible. The stage that we performed on, it was in the railroad theater and the upkeep had not happened on it. It was literally like dancing on railroad ties. I mean, it was just so bumpy that Bonnie and I were just like this [gestures], and completely spastic. We had to change a bunch of our choreography, and there were things that we couldn’t do. Luckily, at the last minute, like a half-hour before we were supposed to go on, somebody showed up in a Fiat with a bunch of old gray Marleys that they had found somewhere, which is—Marley is a dance floor—and we put it down with masking tape, like in a half-hour. The lighting guy was a little bit drunk, not to, you know, perpetuate a stereotype, but he definitely had been into the vodka, and the lighting system was the old one, where you had to run and, like, pull the levers down. It was not a computerized board, where you just sit there. I mean, the whole thing was such a scene, you know.. It was amazing.

**Ehrlich:** So what’s your sense of what it did for the company?

**Smith:** Well, I think it put more of a wedge between Thais and I.

**Ehrlich:** Why?

**Smith:** Well, I felt like there was a lot of competition between us, going on to get our points across. I think at that point, some of us in the company were realizing that, you know, what we were doing was not really a God-given grace. It was just something we happened to be doing, that other people could do, too. And I think Thais had an idea that there was something really, really special about the kind of people we were to do this kind of work or something, and—there
was just a lot of competition and a lot of animosity, and a lot of not crediting each other, and not supporting each other. And she could be pretty vile, and so can I.

Ehrlich: Vile or violent?

04-00:26:06
Smith: Vile.

Ehrlich: So things heated up.

04-00:26:12
Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: What about for the company as a whole, in terms of, you know—if you can think of it in terms of sort of lessons learned or new directions taken from that trip. Is there anything?

04-00:26:23
Smith: Well, I think for those of us who are disabled, it was an incredibly difficult trip. We’re used to a certain level of ease of life around here, and it was physically and mentally and emotionally really grueling. It was light, you know, twenty-some hours a day, so you know—and it was, like, a fourteen hour time change, and so just, you know, dealing on that level of kind of the physical difficulty and—. But I think for those of us—for Megan and Bonnie and I, it really gave us a sense of the importance of this work, and the ability of work to, you know, transcend language, to transcend culture. It was really a life changing experience, I think, in a lot of ways, and it really gave us an incredible appreciation of what we do have here.

Ehrlich: Did any of those relationships last?

04-00:27:36
Smith: We were in touch with Larissa on and off, and actually, a few years ago, there was a Russian exchange program between CIL and the independent living center in—I think it was in Novosibirsk. We got to see some of the folks that we had worked with, which was really fun.

Ehrlich: When was that?

04-00:28:01
Smith: That was three years ago, I want to say. My years are all running together at this point. Yeah.

Ehrlich: So anything else about Russia, or that trip?

04-00:28:24
Smith: No, not really. You know, one funny story was that we got back to JFK Airport, and we were trying to get to the vans that were picking us up, because
we actually performed in New York, in Central Park Summer Stages, on our way home. I don’t even remember being in New York, because I was so jetlagged, for the most part. But what I do remember a little bit of was Megan complaining, “I can’t get off the sidewalk. There’s no curb cut,” and Bonnie and I had both looked at her and we said, “Megan, we just survived a trip to Siberia. I thin we can deal with the curb cut.” [laughs] But it was really funny how quickly we got right back into, you know, “There should be a curb cut there.” And there should have been, but it was just one of those kind of comical moments of, you know, “Here we are back in our life of ease and expectation.”

Ehrlich: So another thing I thought would be good to talk a little bit more about, though we did talk about it some, was the International Wheelchair Festival.

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: Part of the impetus for wanting to talk about it more was that Jeremy Alliger was really clear that he— his perspective was that it was really pivotal, in terms of AXIS’ direction—

Smith: Absolutely.

Ehrlich: —because it exposed the company to the international scene and to ways of dancing that hadn’t come up before.

Smith: In our company.

Ehrlich: Right. So I’m just wondering if you could say more about memories from that festival, and what seemed significant to you?

Smith: Well, first of all, that festival was an incredible undertaking, and I think Jeremy ended up going on high blood pressure medication during the course of it, because we’re in Boston, which is not, you know, the most accessible place in the world, and—

Ehrlich: We should just say for the record, this is 1997.

Smith: Yeah, 1997. We had all sorts of weird things happen. Like, they were doing street construction from twelve midnight until six in the morning, so getting sleep was really interesting. We’re staying at Emerson University, in the dorms.

Ehrlich: College.
Smith: Emerson College, yeah. In the dorms. We had a lot of people in wheelchairs there, from around the world. You know, huge, huge undertaking. And the construction broke a water main, which flooded the basement, and made the elevators in our building not work. The accessibility coordinator was a disabled woman. She fell and split her head open. One of the vans, you know, was in an a—I mean, it was just—you know, just the logistics of it. It was both, you know, really difficult and at some point, looking back on it, we’re able to laugh a little bit. But to get that many—we had twelve different companies and some individuals come in, you know, from the United States, from South America, Central America, Europe. I think we had one young man from Taiwan and it was just an incredible gathering of people doing this work.

Ehrlich: Judy, you were part of the planning of it, right?

Smith: Yeah, yeah, we helped Jeremy plan it. We were kind of the co-curators and, you know, we planned out the schedule and the workshops and et cetera, et cetera. It was a three week long event, too, so there was lots of workshops that went on, and a really heated discussion about the name of the festival. Some of the Europeans, in particular, were really pissed off that we called it the Wheelchair Dance Festival. But you know, Jeremy needed to market it, and none of us could give him a better idea, but it really—

Ehrlich: What would they have liked it to be?

Smith: They didn’t have any ideas, really, but they really were resentful that, you know, it said wheelchair, because not everybody was in wheelchairs, and not all the disabled people were in wheelchairs. There were two European groups in particular—CandoCo was one of them, and I can’t remember which of the others—that were just livid about being marketed that way. You know, they wanted to be marketed as a dance company.

Ehrlich: He had mentioned there was one group that wasn’t going to come.

Smith: I think it might have been CandoCo that actually wasn’t going to come because of that. But I think it was also really interesting to see the range in quality of the work, and to see the different forms. Because you know, we’re calling it one thing, but within, like, what we call now physically integrated dance, there are people that are using more of a jazz vocabulary; there are people that are doing strictly improvisation; there are people who are really working off, you know, a ballet vocabulary, or a specific technique. So it was really interesting to see—oh, there were groups there that were adapting traditional folk dance. So you know, for me, and for a few other people in the company, it was really eye opening, because we were doing a piece—Hidden Histories/Visible Differences, is what Thais decided we should do there—with
a lot of argument from some of us. You know, we really felt like we should be showing repertory that was more representative of who we were. And it was a little weird to be going to a festival that was so strong on the disability component and doing a piece about disability. It felt unnecessary. It felt like we were up on a soapbox, and it also felt a little outdated. But what happened for me was that I got to meet folks from CandoCo and folks from Bilderwefer and Din A-13. And then all of the American companies were in the same place at the same time and there was a lot of competition. And a lot of feelings of ownership.

Ehrlich: On everybody’s part?

04-00:35:34
Smith: Well, on a lot of our parts and that, you know, “They’re not doing this as good as we are,” and just all that kind of stuff.

Ehrlich: But I’m not sure if you’re talking within AXIS, or you think all of the groups were struggling with that?

04-00:35:47
Smith: Oh, I think there’s been that competition. And I think it’s been—because it’s still such a novel thing, it was still hard for us to find ways to work together, you know, because we were all competing for the same dollars and the same notoriety and everything else. It was really interesting to have us all in the same place, because we got to see, you know, what people were doing and whose work we liked and whose work we didn’t like, and who was doing work that we thought was much stronger than ours, who was doing work that we were just like, “Oy”.

I know for Jeremy, it was an incredible challenge to curate as, you know, one of the leading contemporary dance presenters, because some of the quality was not up to being on one of the main stages in the contemporary dance world at the time. So, you know, it was an undertaking and definitely kind of a labor of love and passion on Jeremy’s part and Dance Umbrella’s, to pull that together. But what it did for me was that I got to see CandoCo’s work. I got to see Bilderwefer’s. I got to see—there was some Brazilian work that was really strong. And I realized that our work—and I’d been feeling this way, but now I really had proof—I had proof, [Ehrlich laughs] you know, that there were people that were doing things differently and better than we were. Stronger work. A lot of them were commissioning work from outside their company, or they had people running their company who were really strong choreographers and directors. And I felt like that was lacking. Thais had done such a brilliant job of bringing the company together and, you know, her commitment and her passion and her intention, but I think that we had outgrown her, and I think that that was really proved to me, that we had, and that we needed to move forward. Some of our vocabulary felt really
elementary, compared to what some of the other people were doing. Our topic felt, you know, outdated and unnecessary.

Ehrlich: Can you say more, specifically when you say the “limits of the vocabulary,” what you mean?

Smith: It was not at a technical level that was up to some of the other companies, both in our disabled dancers and our nondisabled dancers. Some of the companies had non-disabled dancers, who were really highly trained dancers, and they were dancing full out, in a way that I think, early on, our nondisabled dancers had been held back some. I think just, you know, the quality of the work and the way the pieces were structured and—

Ehrlich: Can you say more about why the nondisabled dancers didn’t dance full out?

Smith: Well—

Ehrlich: Was it partly sort of—?

Smith: I think it was partly direction. It was—

Ehrlich: —but part of that sort of political belief, in a way—

Smith: Mm-hm.

Ehrlich: —to sort of showcase the dancers with disabilities?

Smith: Yeah, or not to show us up. Something like that. I think, you know, several of the dancers in the company were not utilized to their full potential; and others’ full potential was not very strong. And definitely, you know, early on, our disabled dancers were credited a lot in reviews as being the stronger performers in the company and the more interesting to watch. And I think that’s still an issue, you know, because—well, for instance, we’ve had four artists with disabilities nominated for Isadora Duncan Dance Awards, and we have had no nondisabled dancers nominated.

Ehrlich: So what sense do you make of that?

Smith: I think disabled dancers are more visible, more prominent, more watched, in a way, because our nondisabled dancers now are very strong, and I think the company technically is stronger now than it’s ever been. But this is an issue also because when some of us would show up after a performance, you know, people would recognize those of us in chairs or with a disability, and we’d be
standing right next to one of our nondisabled dancers, and people wouldn’t even realize that they’d been in the piece. So I think that there’s—you know, that’s an issue that I think companies like ours are kind of grappling with. But that was pretty apparent to me at this festival, was that we really needed to up the quality of our work.

Nicole Richter, who had done an internship with CandoCo, had been in the company for a little bit under a year, and she and I both shared a strong belief that things needed to change. There were other people in the company that were also onboard with that. But I got to talk to Celeste Dandeker from CandoCo about their transition from doing company choreographed works solely to commissioning work, and that it was actually at the advise of a reviewer who said, you know, “This work is fine and it’s interesting, but they really need to commission work from outside the company.” I think ultimately, that let to a split in CandoCo too, where Adam Benjamin, who was one of the co-founders, left, and, you know, among other things. But that whole issue of—.

I feel like what happened was that we were doing more community art than really strong dance performance, and I wanted, and other people in the company, wanted us to be doing really strong dance performance. And I think Thais and some of the other people felt like we were doing that, and I don’t think they were right. Then Uli got hurt, right in the middle of our performance. The stage was built in and there was a soft spot, and he was on his crutches and his braces, and he fell and tore his rotator cuff. We weren’t able to perform some of the stuff that we were going to in a mixed show. Like, we had our own night where we did just Hidden Histories, and I think CandoCo had their own night where they did a work. Or maybe we shared it, I don’t remember. Like we each had half or, whatever. But we were definitely the two groups that were the most seen and the most prominent there, and I was really blown away by their work. I didn’t think that the way they integrated their nondisabled and disabled dancers was as strong as ours, in terms of partnering and in terms of the material that their disabled dancers had, but I felt like the piece on the whole was so much stronger, and the dancing on the whole was so much stronger, and the production values were stronger. And it was edgier. I got to really, you know, spend time and talk to Celeste and tell her about how I felt and my dissatisfaction with what we were doing and the direction we were going. And, of course, Thais and I were really at odds there.

Ehrlich: So the steam is just, you know, is all building.

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: Maybe now is a good time to talk a little more deeply about some of the politics issues, in terms of dancers with disabilities, dancers without
disabilities, in these earlier years, because it’s all there. But maybe more specifically. One question I have is, how directly were concerns talked about? And sort of the politics of—

Well, I think early on, we were very strong about our stance. You know, people in manual chairs were not pushed from behind, because it was institutional and somehow degrading. Nondisabled dancers did not get in wheelchairs, because they might be able to move them faster, you know, differently than what we could, and that it was somehow disrespectful to people who had to be in chairs all the time, that somebody got to just hop in one and play. And that’s still a little bit of an issue that we grapple with. You know, we take wheelchairs to workshops and classes, because we want to teach in an integrated way, but we don’t always have, everywhere we go, people in wheelchairs show up. So how do you teach partnering, you know, in the way that we like to teach partnering, when there’s no one disabled there? But it’s very different for somebody to get in a wheelchair and have this really pleasant experience and this really kind of mind expanding and inspiring time, and then they get to get up and walk away from it, and then Bonnie and I get to live in the friggin’ things, you know? So there are some issues like that that we still kind of grapple with, but in terms of how people push each other in chairs or who gets in a chair, that we have not understudied disabled roles with nondisabled dancers; we’ve understudied disabled roles with dancers with different disabilities. You know, it’s an issue that we grapple with. You know, how do you draw a line between what’s okay and what’s not? And you know, artistically, some choreographers want nondisabled dancers in the wheelchairs now and then.

And in the earlier years, where did Thais fit in as someone without a disability, in terms of these sort of politics?

Well, I think early on—and I think Bonnie might say this, too—is that we really looked to her as, you know, the leader, and the person with the answers, and the person with the knowledge, and the person with the experience. And as we started our own knowledge and our experience and getting our own ideas about things, we began to see that she wasn’t the one that held all the answers.

She certainly didn’t know what it was like to live with a disability.

No. She had experience—

I mean, from the inside out.
Right. Right. But to her credit, she had a lot of experience working with people with disabilities. And, you know, there was a point where I really felt like the company needed to have leadership from someone disabled and someone nondisabled, and Thais and I were kind of doing that. I think I probably thought my leadership role was stronger than she thought, you know? And there was, again, the whole competition thing and kind of jockeying for power and position, and I think that, you know, the disability/nondisability component played into that.

Ehrlich: In terms of “jockeying for power,” say more.

Well, I think, in some ways, I was more visible in the community, because I’m in a wheelchair and I also made a point to get out there and—. You know, you can’t, as a nondisabled person, know what it’s like to be disabled. You can have an idea about it, and you can work in the field, and you can work with people with disabilities, but, you know, it’s the same that I don’t know what it’s like, really, to be a quad on a respirator, or to be somebody with CP with a speech impediment. So I don’t know what more to say about that. But I do think that the disability thing, nondisability issue, you know, was there with Thais and I, and I know that at one time, Uli brought up that he didn’t want to be anybody’s performing monkey, and that’s what he was starting to feel like in some of the work.

Ehrlich: It’s a really important part of the history, and in part because it’s still evolving and will continue to.

Yeah.

What about the just sort of nitty-gritty of dealing with people’s physical limitations, other people’s expectations, in the actual rehearsal space, and dancers without disabilities learning what was and wasn’t okay? It’s about three questions at once, but I’m wondering about the actual internal learnings of each other, what that looked like?

Well, I think in the company, that has been relatively easy. As we bring in dancers who haven’t had any experience with disability, or maybe limited or—you know, I think those of us with the disabilities are really patient and tolerant and direct. I think Bonnie and I kind of sometimes laugh because we have, at different times, felt like our nondisabled dancers were kind of wimpy, in a way, just in the things that they complain about or the issues that come up, you know?

Ehrlich: Like what?
Smith: Well, just different inconveniences. As a disabled person, you spend your whole life being inconvenienced, and nondisabled people are just, you know, so quick to complain about the littlest things. But I think we’ve developed a good process for learning about each other and learning how to move with each other and learning about equipment. I think that that is a necessary and important and exciting component, so I think by necessity, we have to be really open minded and open with each other.

Ehrlich: And do you see that as a sort of smooth trajectory that’s just been increasing from the beginning?

Smith: I think it goes up and down. You know, as we bring new people in, there might be somebody who’s more comfortable, less comfortable; there might be somebody who’s, you know, really adept, somebody who’s less adept, but I don’t ever think it’s been incredibly bumpy for us.

Ehrlich: And people tend to talk openly about—

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: —what their concerns are?

Ehrlich: I think early on, we tried to bring a woman who was blind into the work, and it didn’t work for her at all. She felt incredibly patronized and not understood. I think we realized that it’s kind of hard to sometimes mix, in a choreographic way, people with visual impairments and people in wheelchairs, because so much of how, you know, in a wheelchair, you have to relate to other people, is through the visual. Also our choreography doesn’t lend itself easily to being adaptable for somebody who doesn’t have vision, just because of the way we work and, you know, what our particular specialties and interests are. So I think that was the one thing that really didn’t work and really ended up being, like, a political—a disability politics issues. She did not feel accommodated, and I can see how she didn’t, and I don’t think we were able to accommodate her in the way that she needed to be, doing the work that we were doing. I know that Corbett at one point left, because she really preferred to work only with disabled folks. And it really—I think she realized, if I remember right, and I might not, that, you know, her interest was not working with nondisabled people.

Ehrlich: I’m just intrigued by what you said about how you felt that the way that AXIS works specifically wouldn’t work well, or didn’t work well, with someone who can’t see. Can you be a little more specific? What do you mean in terms of the style?
Smith: Well, it’s just, you know, our choreography is really dependent on visual.

Ehrlich: Okay.

Smith: On seeing each other and knowing where people are in space. And we didn’t take the time that maybe was needed to really incorporate her. I don’t think it was really a direction that we wanted to go with our work.

Ehrlich: Because there would be other ways—

Smith: Absolutely! You know, and definitely—

Ehrlich: More tactile.

Smith: Right. And definitely, we taught people with visual impairment, but it’s not something that, you know, we’ve choreographed into our work.

Ehrlich: How were decisions made about who was let into the company, in terms of sort of percentage of dancers with disability, percentage without? Did that matter? Did you say, “Okay—” I know there was a while where it was three and three. Was that a conscious choice? Was that just who was available?

Smith: Well, we’d always love to maintain kind of an even mix, but that’s not the reality. I mean, there’s been sometimes when there’s been more of us who were disabled than nondisabled, and then, you know, other times when it’s been equal, and other times when it’s been the other way, there have been more nondisabled dancers. We never said, “Okay, we’re going to always be fifty percent disabled, fifty percent nondisabled.” It’s been more just who shows up, who has the talent, who has the interest, who can make the commitment. And a lot of the ways that we brought people on, early on, were more of we’d all say, “Yeah, you know, this is going to work,” and bring people in for a trial basis. We still do that. We kind of do, like, a six month trial thing, and then check in, but—. You know, I think now it’s gotten to be more, in some ways, more my decision, with a lot of input from people that I think—you know, especially Alisa Rasera, our education director, who’s been with the company since ’99; Bonnie. You know, when Megan and Uli were in the company and dancing all the time, I really valued their—you know, there’s different people whose opinions I really seek out. Then after Thais left, after about nine months or so, I kind of established a co-directorship with Nicole Richter, and she and I really shared the responsibility of; you know, kind of deciding who was appropriate for the company.
Ehrlich: And what about decisions about what kinds of disabilities work? I mean, is that the same as what you said with the blind woman, that it’s just what works? You try it?

04-00:56:52
Smith: Yeah. I mean, we’ve had, you know, some people show up with a disability that, you know, we’re looking for a specific thing—and at this point, our repertory kind of requires a certain thing—and they haven’t been appropriate. In the same way that we’ve had nondisabled dancers show up and, you know, whatever they have to bring to it doesn’t really work.

Ehrlich: It’s probably a good—

04-00:57:16
Smith: It’s tricky. [background noise] That would be Muffin [Smith’s cat]. [Ehrlich laughs] Are you going to get in on the oral history here?

Ehrlich: Muffin’s saying the tape is almost over, that we should—

04-00:57:27
Smith: Time for a break.

Ehrlich: —take that as a time for a break.

04-00:57:29
Smith: Hi, Muffin.

Begin Audiofile 5

05-00:00:02
Ehrlich: So we’re back after a break. This is tape five. So we were just talking about the unfamiliar terrain of disability for those who aren’t—

Smith: Right.

Ehrlich: —people who are nondisabled, and again, trying to get at how that worked within the company, what kinds of issues came up.

05-00:00:24
Smith: Well, I think, early on, of course, we’re talking, you know, 1987, Bonnie and I were a lot younger and maybe more willing and able to take different physical risks. I know that we always, whenever we bring somebody new into the company, you know, as a company, we do a lot of exploration. You know, “How do you climb around on a chair?” “Where can I put weight?” Working with contact improv and working with improvisation. “How much weight can you take?” “What hurts?” “What doesn’t hurt?” “What do we need to be careful of?” And, of course, as some of us in the company have grown older,
that’s changed a lot, like I don’t like working out of my chair, and I used to love to be on the floor and working out of my chair, but it’s not something I do anymore, because I’m much more worried about injury. But you know, I think in classes and in workshops, when new dancers come in, they’re really concerned about getting their feet run over, which is kind of funny in a way, because it doesn’t happen that often, and it’s not usually all that painful. But also, people in wheelchairs spend so much time watching out for nondisabled people, you know, and especially, like, in crowds, making sure we don’t run over feet and this and that and the other thing. And, you know, those of us in the company that use chairs are pretty good at. But it’s kind of interesting when we put somebody with a disability in a chair that has used them a little bit; you know, maybe when they were in rehab or—I’m speaking specifically about, you know, people like Stephanie and Jacque [Poulin-Denis], who have amputation, or Nadia [Adame], who uses a cane. Some people are much more adept at learning how to drive, especially a power wheelchair, than other people. Some nondisabled dancers are much better at it that other ones, you know?

Ehrlich: Just like some people are better drivers than others.

I mean, of course, Stephanie, just getting her, in Joe Goode’s piece, to drive a straight line, like twenty feet across the stage was, like, “Whew!” you know? And yet Renee [Waters] can get in the chair—and she’s actually going to learn a piece that Alisa and Megan choreographed together and she’ll be the first nondisabled person we put in a power chair, because it’s a great piece for kids. She’s so good at it. Stephanie, when she understudied Megan’s role, and Bill—I mean, really hours of just practice, and it is funny, because Stephanie’s a scary driver in a car, actually. [laughs] But, you know, just little things like that and getting used to where to put weight.

I know that after Thais left the company and choreographers started coming in, they started asking us to do things that we didn’t think were possible. Joe has this whole section that, you know, he kind of visualized this section of partnering, and we’re like, [whispers] “Oh, God, that’s never going to work,” but it works, and it’s beautiful. And when we worked with Bill Shannon, Nicole and I did a trio with him, and he had her run as fast as she could and jump in my lap, and that was something that we’d never really tried, you know? I think that there are concerns sometimes with nondisabled dancers, that they’re going to hurt us and there have been different ones of us who are more fragile. Or you know, I have a shoulder issue sometimes, or Bonnie has an elbow issue, or you know, after Uli got hurt, when we were going kind of through his rehab, we were all really, like, scared of hurting him, and really like, “Uli, be careful!” But I think on the whole, we have less injuries in our company than most dance companies do, because we are pretty careful. On the other side of that, some people are just so—nondisabled folks, are so kinesthetically tuned in that you know, their ability to partner with me in my
power chair doing just fast, intricate—and I’ve had it happen with total
strangers, too. But some people just have a knack for moving around the chair,
and over the chair, and in the chair, and around me, and with me.

Ehrlich: When you say a total stranger, so it’s some kind of dance jam?

Smith: Yeah. I had the experience, Alisa and I taught at Bates Dance Festival in
2003, and there was a dancer, Patrick Widrig, who has been dancing all his
life. I had never moved with him, and we were doing this improv section in
the faculty concert. I didn’t take my usual chair that I dance in, because I
knew that—it’s harder to travel with than my everyday chair, and I knew that
I wasn’t going to be performing. But I decided that I would go ahead and do
the faculty concert, we have to, and Patrick and I did this wild improvisation. I
mean, he was just—it was scary, it was a little bit scary, and just on the edge
of being totally dangerous for both of us, but we had so much fun. And people
were talking about it for days. I mean, it was just one of those—and he was,
and I was. It was just one of those, like, once in a lifetime clicks, that maybe if
I tried to do it again with him, it wouldn’t work in that way. But it was just
phenomenal. I mean, we just got this language together, and we were just
flying, and he was jumping and leaping, and I was stopping and, you know—.
It was an amazing duet.

I think in the company now, Katie [Faulkner] and I have that kind of a
communication, and she just came in with it. She was just so able to read my
chair and to read me, and me to read her. We really—our brains kind of get
synched up, and that’s such an exciting thing, when it happens, you know. It
doesn’t happen with everybody. Some dancers are more afraid, or more timid
or, you know, some people don’t fit on the chairs as easily as other people do.
Stephanie McGlynn came in with a background in gymnastics, and she came
to us through a class, and she showed up at class; and the first class, she was
dong all of this stuff with me moving, and she was walking up my chair, and
over the back, and down the chair, because she had this experience on
apparatus. It just wasn’t that much for her to translate it, you know, to my
apparatus and to me. It’s really fun when those kind of things click. But there
is an amount of trial and error and a lot of practice. We really do try to spend
time with new dancers, just improvising and just moving and making up
scores for each other or, you know, doing different exercises, just to kind of
get to know each other. There’s a pretty big learning curve for a lot of people.
[pause] Does that answer the question a little bit?

Ehrlich: It gives more of a sense of things. I’m also interested still in understanding
more about Thais’ role as someone without a disability, informing sort of the
philosophy of what AXIS is.
Bonnie and I have talked about that especially, because we’ve been in the company together going on eighteen years now. I think early on, we were kind of amazed and mesmerized by Thais, and really looked up to her, as I think I’ve said, as the leader and kind of the possessor of knowledge. I think it was hard for both of us when we did realize that maybe she didn’t know everything, and maybe she wasn’t going to be able to, you know, take us as far as we wanted to go as dancers or as a company, and I think Thais might have had a little bit of a Great White Hope syndrome. You know, she’s somebody who’s—and I don’t say this in a negative way—somebody who’s deeply committed to social change and social responsibility and—where am I going with this? I think that she really felt, and does have, something to offer in that vein. But I think at times, it can be a little bit—it can become a little bit on the patronizing level, even though she would never intentionally be patronizing, I think sometimes it came across that way.

Well, that is part of the history of you wanting a bigger vision. Is that accurate?

Yeah. But I think also, you know, she chose to go into a medical profession and I think in some ways she may have been responsible for looking at disability from a model that she didn’t necessarily want to look at it from. I don’t know what to say more than that, but—

You mean that there was conflict within her own vision?

Well, or that she didn’t recognize that she was acting towards or, you know, conveying the same kind of thing that she was hoping to argue against.

And if you could say what that is, in a sentence or two, can you do that? What that—

Well, this is a little bit hard, but, “Look at the wonderful work I’m doing for those people.”

[pause] Yeah. Well, maybe before we continue the story of what ended up happening with leadership, we could talk a little bit more about the organization, how it was set up.

How were tasks divvied up? Who decided who did what? I know now we’re talking about a chunk of time from when it was first founded up until the break, so that’s ten years—
Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: —from—

Smith: Well, I think early on, Thais did the majority of it and then when things got to the point where she couldn’t handle it all, because I had some experience booking musicians, and a little bit of experience in publicity in the performing arts world, and I’d also really been educating myself about dance, I took on some of the booking, and the grant writing, and the research and those kind of things. David always dealt a lot with the financial aspects of the company.

Ehrlich: So were those three paid positions or—?

Smith: Not early on, no. One thing that’s still hard for me is that I don’t get paid what I should get paid, because I can’t, because I’m still on State Disability. So there’s a cap on my salary, and it’s been very difficult for me, and for other disabled artists, disabled people in general, to figure out how to earn money, because of the way our whole Social Security and state health insurance system is set up. It’s a complete disincentive to work. I don’t even want to go there, but—it’s almost more trouble to make money than it’s worth, and, you know, I go into Social Security three or four times a year and deal with these morons who don’t understand that yes, I’m making money but, no, I can’t afford to live without some health insurance [laughs]. You know, because AXIS would literally have to pay me about two-and-a-half times what they pay me, for me to feel like I could meet my health needs and my attendant care needs. So early on, it was more trouble for me to make money. I started out at, like, two-hundred dollars a month, and Thais started out—I think when she was first paid was when she got an artist-in-residency, and that was about nine-hundred a month and then it was four-hundred a month.

Then Thais was making a little bit more than that, and David was getting paid something and, you know, then dancers started getting paid for performances. We actually started getting paid a little bit, and that’s gradually improved over the years, and I’m happy to say at this point, you know, we have people in the company that are making forty-seven-thousand dollars a year. Whoopee. You know, but in the Bay Area, that’s not much, but it’s more than I’m making. The dancers are getting paid for all of our rehearsal time this year. Not a lot, but something. We’ve got all but two dancers insured, you know, with health insurance, and we pay for some health insurance every month. We’re paying for mileage, so gradually, we’ve been able to—there’s three of us on full-time salary. And—

Ehrlich: And we should say who they are.
Smith: That would be Mollie McFarland, our company manager; Alisa Rasera, our education director; and myself, and at this point, Alisa and Mollie are both making more than me, with the idea that as time goes by, I’ve lessened the amount of hours that I’m doing. Sometimes that happens, and sometimes it doesn’t, but for me, it’s easier to cap my salary and not have to deal with Social Security any more than I do, than to really make a wage that I deserve, because then it’s just going to wreak havoc on all my other little systems that I have set up to take care of my life.

Ehrlich: So it was a very, sounds like, cooperative figuring out of who would do what, and what needed to be done. Is that—?

Smith: Yes. Yeah, and at different times, other people have pitched in to do things. Bonnie, for a while, was doing all of the kids’ programming. At one point when Nicole and I were co-directing, we split our duties so that she was dealing more with education, with dancer issues, and I was dealing with the grants and the fundraising and the financial aspects of the company and, you know, kind of making the artistic decisions together. But that co-directorship really didn’t work out. I felt really strongly after Thais left, that I wanted it to be a co-directed company, one person with a disability and one person without.

Ehrlich: We can get into those—

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: —the details of that.

Smith: So you know, because I did feel like having Thais at the helm, as a nondisabled person, wasn’t really that great for us organizationally, both internally and externally.

Ehrlich: Can you say more about what you mean?

Smith: Well, I just felt like we were saying, you know, trying to bring disability to the forefront, and trying to make a statement about disabled people, and trying to role model collaboration between people without disabilities as equals, and then we had a nondisabled person at the helm. I’m not so sure now that that would matter as much to me, as long as I knew they were doing a good job and, you know, with the right intention and the right attitude, and that the company was moving forward in a good direction, but at the time, it bothered a lot of us. So—
Ehrlich: Was there anything expected in terms of work, of the dancers, besides dancing? Was it sort of assumed that they’d pitch in, or—?

Smith: Not really. I mean, you know, this company has been demanding of people, and early on, almost everybody, and still, almost everybody has other jobs. We expect people to make room in their life for this company, and that’s not unlike any other dance company, really. It’s just that we work a lot. You know, we have an education program and an artistic program, and our dancers are our teaching artists. So there’s a lot of juggling. That always has happened, but it’s happening even more as we’ve gotten busier as a company.

Ehrlich: I think we should also—not now, but at some point during this interview—really focus on the educational piece—

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: —because that’s really important. And—

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: —maybe even trace it from inception on into the future.

Smith: I think it would be actually pretty interesting, because it really has transformed.

Ehrlich: Right. And rather than do it short shrift, really focus on it. So what about the board?

Smith: Well, organizationally, we’ve always—as soon as you incorporate as a nonprofit, you have to have a board.

Ehrlich: Also, just to get clear—sorry to interrupt—in literature that AXIS puts out, it says that AXIS was founded in ’87, and became a nonprofit in—

Smith: 1990, yeah.

Ehrlich: —’90. What did that entail?

Smith: Oh, you have to go through all the rigmarole of filing your papers with the state and the federal government, you know, and getting approved as a nonprofit.
Ehrlich: So it was just an issue of making sure, at first, that you were really going to be a viable group, before you got—

05-00:19:40
Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: —to the point where it seemed like a smart thing to do.

05-00:19:42
Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: Okay.

05-00:19:44
Smith: And the reason that we decided to incorporate as a nonprofit is that that’s what dance companies do. But we wanted to write grant—we wanted to be able to get money, you know, grant money and foundation money, and it’s just a step in professionalizing. I think if there’s a way to do it without being a nonprofit, that would be lovely because I mean, the whole nonprofit thing is, you know, a whole management nightmare in and of itself, but it was a good move for us.

Ehrlich: So, the board?

05-00:20:14
Smith: So when you incorporate, you have to have a board of directors, and early on, almost everybody in the company was on the board. Gradually, you know, as we started learning more about ethical business practice and transparency of nonprofits, et cetera, and realizing that we wanted other people to do some of the work, and that we wanted to have the community support, we started bringing other people on, that were outside. Then when we started dealing with Workers Comp, we realized that we couldn’t afford to have a lot of us on the board, because your rate is based on how much some directors or people on the board are paid from the company. So financially, it didn’t work for us to have five of us on the board and have our rate be based on a sixty-thousand dollar salary for each of—I mean, it was insane. Then also, just the ethical issue of having a board that was all people who were very invested in the company. So board development is another area that’s pretty much a nightmare for most nonprofits, but I think especially for dance companies. We’ve had different times where our board has been really strong; I’ve had different times where our board—like, maybe one person has been a particular pain in the butt. And boards can be dangerous.

Ehrlich: What power does your board—what does the board actually do?

05-00:21:53
Smith: Well, the board is responsible for governance and fundraising and, you know, with that being said, different boards in our time have been better at different things and—but board development is something that we’re kind of constantly struggling with, you know, finding the right people, the right makeup. But I
have had—. And I think for Thais, inevitably, or ultimately, the board proved to be really dangerous to her, because they did feel like they wanted to see the company grow and change, and she felt really betrayed by me and by the board and ultimately resigned.

Ehrlich: Okay, so let’s take up from where the story ended before, which was that we’d gotten as far as you communicated how much you loved Sonya Delwaide’s work, and you bowed out of being part of *Women in Black*; and then you found out that Thais had basically commissioned—

Smith: She had invited Sonya in to do some—

Ehrlich: —to choreograph a piece.

Smith: Yeah, or to do a workshop, with the idea of, you know, creating some movement material for the piece.

Ehrlich: And you hit the roof, and vice versa.

Smith: Mm-hm.

Ehrlich: And we know one sentence about—she tried to fire you, and that’s about as far as we got.

Smith: Yeah, and then the board got involved. I called our president at the time and said, you know, “This has just happened,” and she said, “Oh, this is not okay,” because—and actually Thais—well, the way we were—we didn’t have job descriptions, we didn’t have personnel policy, we didn’t have personnel reviews. All of that was not inline. So the board got involved and they stepped in and, you know, started trying to mediate the issue between us. They weren’t supportive of her. Well, and Thais really felt like our board president, who was disabled, was really pulling the disability/nondisability card. And so that’s one place where, you know, the whole—

Ehrlich: Who was the board president?

Smith: Jan Garrett. I can see how Thais felt that. I don’t think that she was pulling that. I think she was really looking at it from, you know, a place of, “This is process, how you do process.” The whole board—there were several disabled people, several nondisabled people on the board—but the whole board was really trying to figure out what we needed to do to have the company survive, and thrive, and to grow.
Ehrlich: It must have been a little bit confusing from the board’s perspective, because the central issue, as I see it, was that you wanted to bring in guest choreographers and open the vision, and Thais didn’t, except she’d just invited a choreographer to come join you.

05-00:25:13
Smith: Mm-hm. Join her.

Ehrlich: Join her.

05-00:25:16
Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: How was that explained?

05-00:25:18
Smith: Well, I don’t know that that was as much talked about as just what was going on between her and I, and other people in the company and the positions that they took around that. Most of the people in the company kind of took my side and said, “Yeah, we want to grow. We want to move on. We want to change,” and, you know, it was just one of those ugly, bitter divorces.

Ehrlich: So it was sort of seen as an issue of that Thais was comfortable keeping things the way they were, and you were advocating for a bigger vision or a new vision?

05-00:26:01
Smith: Mm-hm.

Ehrlich: So it wasn’t so focused on choreographers or not? Is that—?

05-00:26:06
Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: Okay.

05-00:26:07
Smith: I think it was. But also educationally, you know, we felt like there was a lot more that we needed to be doing and could be doing, and we needed disabled people in the company who were teaching and showing leadership in that area.

Ehrlich: And what had been happening up until that point?

05-00:26:25
Smith: Thais was the primary teacher and Bonnie and I realized, you know, about seven or eight years into it, “God, we’ve been doing this a long time.” And at the international festival, we saw disabled people who were teaching and leading things. And we’re kind of like, you know, “We haven’t had the opportunity to develop that skill.” We also felt like we wanted our classes to
be more reflective of where we wanted to go artistically, so we didn’t want to just be doing fluffy, feel-good movement classes, you know. We wanted to start thinking about technique and, “How do you translate that?” And we can get into that more when we really talk about education. But you know, getting back to the situation, I know that Thais felt incredibly betrayed and that for her, the board had really—. I know that this has happened to other people who are friends of mine, that the board’s taken over and gotten rid of a director, and it’s not pleasant.

Ehrlich: Is that what happened here?

Smith: Well, the board kind of took over and, you know, they were definitely wanting to make room for me and saying they didn’t want me leaving the company, and, you know, Thais’ position was that—and I think it was true—there was not room for both of us.

Ehrlich: Okay. So that’s what it came down to, it was one of you or the other.

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: And you—

Smith: I think, you know, as I’m remembering it now—like I say, I don’t have a good clear memory of details of events. But I think that ultimately, that’s what it was. She wanted me out, and they didn’t. I think, you know, at some point, she realized that here she had this board of directors that she didn’t like, and didn’t want to work with and she can’t fire the board of directors. She could fire me, kind of. But she couldn’t fire the board of directors. I mean, ultimately, a board of directors has control of an organization.

Ehrlich: Do you remember what you fundamentally wanted at that point?

Smith: I wanted the company to grow, and I didn’t feel like it could with her. I felt like we had outgrown her artistically and philosophically, and it was really, really hard for me to say that. She was a very hard person to stand up to. Very powerful person. Very passionate person. And it was really hard for me, at the time, to be really direct and to say those kind of things. I think ultimately, I did end up saying that, you know, that I felt like we had outgrown her. And that, you know, it was holding us back from being all that we could be on every level.

Ehrlich: And where did the other dancers fit into all this? In fact, if you could back up a little bit, how did all of this tension between the two of you, which lasted for years, what’s your sense of how it affected the other dancers?
Made it really hard. It made rehearsals unpleasant. Thank God there were a lot of committed people in there, you know, who were somehow able and willing to put up with our crap, our bitch fighting back and forth, and our snide remarks and, you know, me saying stuff behind her back, and her saying stuff behind—I mean, it was just ugly. But you know, there wasn’t anywhere for *me* to go, there wasn’t anyplace else for *me* to go. You know, the same way that there wasn’t anyplace for them to go either, and I think that they didn’t want to give up the ship either.

Ehrlich: You mean there was no other company for you to go to.

Smith: Exactly. You know, some of our nondisabled dancers did end up leaving, either right before this or at this time. And we had several guest dancers, because we were doing that big *Hidden Histories* project. So they were kind of, you know, indirectly, a little bit involved in this whole thing. But it was really, really, really painful.

Ehrlich: Do you have a sense of the loss artistically during that time? Was it hard to concentrate and be creative and inhabit your body?

Smith: Oh, yeah. And I think it was—. At the time, I also felt like we weren’t doing anything new. With *Hidden Histories*, I didn’t feel like we did anything really new or different. We were kind of—and with a few repertory pieces before that. Several of us felt like we were just recreating and reusing the same movement and the same theme and the same trajectory of a piece. It would start this way, it would get this way in the middle, and it would end this way. You know, that there was just nothing happening that was moving us into different places, really.

Ehrlich: Did the tension affect you physically? You, personally. Did it make it hard to dance?

Smith: Yes. It did. It made it unpleasant. I was really resistant, and I also didn’t sleep well. I was angry a lot. Thais and I were so mad at each other. Also, because we’d been such close friends, not only were we losing a business relationship, we were losing a friendship, and we really relied on each other a lot. I think in some ways, I didn’t know if I could pull it off without her. I look back and I think it’s really, in some ways, a shame that we couldn’t work it out, because we’re both fucking work horses. We work our heads off when we’re committed to something, and we have a really similar ethic, so it was kind of a shame, you know, that we couldn’t figure out how to—. But I think, ultimately, we had pretty much outgrown Thais, and I think that that’s become evident in the places that the company’s been able to go.
Ehrlich: So she resigned. Is there more in between her resigning and what we’ve already talked about?

05-00:33:09
Smith: Oh, nothing worth, you know—. At the time, I had said, you know, “I’m taking a leave. When you guys all figure it out,” meaning the board, “who was left, let me know.” But I stayed in contact, you know. It wasn’t altogether a clean process. From Thais’ side or from my side, or from the board’s side, or from the dancers’ side. You know, there was a lot of jockeying. She was a very hard person to deal with and to stand up to and to communicate with at times.

Ehrlich: Because?

05-00:33:46
Smith: She just was very strong in her opinion and her belief, and she’s just personally a very powerful person that can be really intimidating.

Ehrlich: So what happened?

05-00:34:04
Smith: She left, and the board hired me back, and we moved forward. At that time, it was myself, Bonnie, Uli, Megan.

Ehrlich: Megan’s last name is Schirle?

05-00:34:16
Smith: Schirle. Stephanie McGlynn, and Nicole Richter. So there were six of us, and we just decided we were going to move forward; and Uli was recovering from his shoulder injury; and we started creating work, and I started thinking about how we were going to commission work.

Ehrlich: And is this around when Bill Shannon came on the scene?

05-00:34:40
Smith: Mm-hm. The Bill Shannon project was one of the very first things that we did after Thais left. It was actually a project that Thais and I had started to talk to John Killacky about at Yerba Buena. We were their first Wattis Artist-in-Residency, even though the program wasn’t really formally structured yet. John was really interested in our work, and he was very interested in Bill’s work, Bill Shannon’s work. He said, “Why don’t you guys come over here for—you know, work for six weeks, and then we’ll do an informal showing.”

Ehrlich: Had you first met Bill at the International Wheelchair Festival?

05-00:35:10
Smith: No, we had first met Bill at the Paralympics Festival in Atlanta, in 1996, where he crashed a performance. [laughs] He kind of came in on his skateboard and crutches and took over the stage for a little while, and then I
think maybe during a tech rehearsal, and then we managed to find some room for him to perform. I was, like, I was amazed by him.

Ehrlich: Was it your performance that he crashed?

05-00:35:46
Smith: It was a group performance. It was a shared bill.

Ehrlich: So what was your first impression of Bill?

05-00:35:51
Smith: Oh, “Who is this guy?” and I was really interested in what he was doing movement-wise. He was a little bit—and still is; he’s mellowed some, but he was pretty arrogant. We’re like, “Who is this person?” but he’s so intriguing to watch, you know, and his movement was like—I immediately wanted him in the company. Of course, you know, he’s a solo artist. He does his thing you know, with his collaborators, but he’s usually in charge of it. So anyway, that was—Thais and I had gone over to meet with John about the residency, and she had all these ideas that she wanted to put Bill on trapezes, and he was like, not very interested in that, so I think he was a little relieved when it ended up being Nicole and I working with him.

Ehrlich: Did you also have contact with him at the International Wheelchair Festival?

05-00:36:48
Smith: Yeah, he was there. He was one of the artists that we brought in and presented, yeah. And he and I got to be friends and did a lot of talking, you know, about this form of art and about disability, and disability in art and—. We hung out a fair amount. Bill’s a great guy. Complex character. But really a wonderful artist and, you know, truly unique. [pause]

Ehrlich: So you ended up working with him.

05-00:37:22
Smith: Yeah, we did a trio, a work-in-progress, that was—you know, he was—we kind of turned it over to him to direct, but we kind of collaborated all on it. Then we did a shared show that was part of a series that Intersection for the Arts was doing and it was a fairly interesting work-in-progress, actually. He really challenged us to do some things that we hadn’t done, like having, you know, Nicole jump in my lap from a full run and just different things.

Ehrlich: He talked, in his interview, about wanting to see how slow you could go in your wheelchairs.

05-00:38:01
Smith: Drove me nuts! And I used my other wheelchair, which can really go slow, slow, slow. Yeah. My Zen meditation practice came in really handy. But I really did feel like I was going to go out of my mind, going that slow. It was so monotonous.
Ehrlich: So what was the experience of working with Bill like?

Smith: Inspiring, exhilarating, frustrating. You know, Bill’s on his own schedule, and he really is used to being a solo performer. At the time, he hadn’t had very much experience working with other people and working in an indoor environment. I know he had a lot of people in Yerba Buena mad, like, after one day there. You know? And getting him to show up on time or, maybe he would have partied a lot the night before and wasn’t feeling too good, so he couldn’t accomplish a lot and—. But when we did start moving, we had a blast. One time, he accidentally walked over my chair, and we realized that that was a really cool move, so we found a lot of things, we discovered a lot of things, and—. We fought. We got mad at each other, you know, some, and—

Ehrlich: Do you remember what you fought about?

Smith: Mostly his scheduling issues. I know he decided he needed new tennis shoes, and left in the middle of a tech rehearsal. Everybody’s like, “Okay, where’s Shannon?,” you know, and he’s nowhere. [laughs] You know, he would just do things like that, you know? It was fairly innocent, in a way. You know, he’s just doing what he does.

Ehrlich: What about what it was like to actually work with him? The differences in style, if there were?

Smith: Challenging, you know.

Ehrlich: Can you say more about that?

Smith: Well, it just—you know, when you work with somebody who has a really different aesthetic and a different way of moving, and is trying to impart ideas, and at the time, you know, he hadn’t done a lot of directing and he was kind of new at it, and kind of learning, I think, as he went, too, so, you know, it was all of it, but every artistic process almost is. They all have their challenging moments. I won’t say every one, because we’ve had some that have been incredibly easy. But it was, you know, it was very—I think for us, it was a really good thing to do, because we started that in February, and that was just, like, two months after the split. I call it the implosion. “The grand implosion.” It was nice to have something that was supported, that was fairly high visibility, that was somewhat prestigious. You know, we were already working with somebody outside the company, so it kind of just sent us on our path. John really helped with that. You know, John Killacky’s been an incredible friend and support to our company since he brought us to Minneapolis in January, in 1994, you know, so he really—it was a good opportunity for us.
Ehrlich: Are there specific things that you feel like you learned from Bill about dance that you hadn’t known before?

05-00:41:46
Smith: No, but I think he challenged us to do things that we hadn’t done, like moving really slow or different things that were risky. You know, whenever you work with somebody, the hope is that you learn a lot, and usually we’re lucky enough that we do. I can’t really think of anybody that we haven’t learned quite a bit from.

Ehrlich: How did you feel about the performance?

05-00:42:11
Smith: We actually really liked the piece, and Bill liked the piece, I think.

Ehrlich: It was The Aesthetics of Awkwardness, right?

05-00:42:17
Smith: Yes, and our hope was always that we could find some time and some money to recreate it and do it again, and we never have been able to totally finish it or rework it or anything and—. It might be fun at some point to try to work with Bill again, but, you know, I think for a couple years after, we were really trying to figure out ways to make that happen and it didn’t. But it was a good piece and John Killacky loved it. He thought it was, like, the first post-modern integrated piece that he’d seen.

Ehrlich: I loved it.

05-00:42:52
Smith: Yeah. Oh, you saw it, Esther?

Ehrlich: I’ve seen it, yeah.

05-00:42:54
Smith: Yeah, it was a good piece, you know, for the amount of time that we had.

Ehrlich: Do you have any sense—you know, you said that you’d love to be able to—there’s sort of been a fantasy that maybe you would rework it or move it forward. Do you have any sense of how it would be different?

05-00:43:09
Smith: Oh, I don’t know, at this point, I think we’d probably redo the whole damn thing, almost, you know?

Ehrlich: Because you’ve both changed so?

05-00:43:14
Smith: Yeah, and I mean, that was, you know, seven years ago. A lot has happened for him, a lot has happened for us, and—
Ehrlich: This sounds like it also just has meaning to you simply as—and also to the company—as almost a symbol. It was sort of a symbol of the new direction. Is that—?

05-00:43:36
Smith: Yeah. “We’re moving on. We’re going to keep going. We’re going to create work. We’re going to be visible.” And to have support from Yerba Buena and from Intersection, I think was really good for us, right off the bat, because our original idea—. I will say that our original idea was to take a year and rebuild the company, you know, let Uli get better, do some training within the company, do a lot of organizational work, but ultimately, what ended up happening was we did the Shannon piece, we did a piece with Sonya in the summer, we started with Joe Goode and Joanna Haigood in the fall. I mean, it was just—we started our studio program. I mean, it was just like, bam, bam, bam. We didn’t really even have time to catch our breath.

Ehrlich: Well, so can we start talking in some detail about all of those different things that came your way, and how that worked?

05-00:44:35
Smith: Yeah, how are we doing with time?

Ehrlich: We’ve got eighteen minutes left [on the video tape.] Oh, in terms of—nah, you’ve got to—

05-00:44:44
Smith: I’d like to start there next, because I think that’s kind of like the next era.

Ehrlich: And it’s almost one, which is when you wanted to stop.

05-00:44:50
Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: Okay.

Smith: Cool.

[end of session 2]
Interview 3: January 27, 2005
Begin Audiofile 6

Ehrlich: It is January 27th, and this is our third interview with Judy Smith. Last time we were sort of at a crucial turning point, 1997, where it sounds like a lot was happening in AXIS, but I was thinking, before we get into a lot of that, you could tell us some more about who Nicole Richter is, and her role, and maybe then tell us some about everyone who was in the company at that point?

Smith: Yeah. Yeah, I think it’s important to say kind of who was left. At that point, it was myself and Bonnie Lewkowicz, who’s also disabled. Bonnie and I were at that point the two remaining co-founding members, so we’d been with the company for ten years. And then Uli Schmitz, who’s also disabled. I talked about him a little bit. He’s originally from Germany, and he had been with the company since about 1989. Megan Schirle, also disabled, and Megan had joined the company shortly after Uli, I think in around ’90—I want to say ’90. I think it was ’90. And then Stephanie McGlynn, nondisabled, also from Germany, and she had joined the company in ’94, ’95, right around there. And Nicole Richter, who was kind of the newest member of the company. She joined the company in ’96, so she’d only been with the company about a year, but she came from having done a year long internship with CandoCo, kind of an administrative and teaching internship, and she had known about their transition going from, you know, being a company that choreographed all their work to commissioning work and seeing how that kind of helped them explode into the dance scene in Britain.

Ehrlich: So did she come to AXIS sort of with that mission? Is that part of what drew her to AXIS?

Smith: Well, I think the work that we were doing, you know, the fact that we were an integrated company definitely drew her. I think that she had concerns, too, about kind of the quality and the subject matter that we were working with. It was nice to have somebody else come into the company who really felt like there was further that the company could go. She also came in with a really extensive knowledge of how CandoCo ran their education program, and she came in with some strong teaching skills, which I think I mentioned at the time was a concern of Bonnie’s and mine, because we felt like, you know, a lot of us had been doing this work for ten years, eight years, you know, seven years, whatever, and that we didn’t have a good grasp on how to teach it. So Nicole was a really important person during this time, because she really, you know, came in with some knowledge and came in with some firsthand experience.

Ehrlich: Judy, just so we understand, how did the nitty-gritty of bringing a new member in work? I mean, did you hold auditions? Did people approach you?
Well, at that point, we didn’t hold auditions. Usually people came primarily through our education program. Or they’d be somebody who saw what we did and, you know, said, “I’m really interested in doing this. How do I get involved?” But you know, at that point, Megan, Uli, Stephanie had all come through our education program, and Nicole came, actually, first, when she was working on her thesis. She was working on her thesis that kind of looked at physically integrated dance in the context of, like, social and cultural history, and why it was that these companies were all popping up at the same time around the world. So you know, she had a definite interest, and that’s how we first met her, and then she moved to the Bay Area and joined the company. So it was pretty exciting to have someone who had a different experience and a different model.

Ehrlich: And what was Stephanie’s history?

Smith: Stephanie had been a gymnast and a dancer, and she had studied dance in Germany. She came to us through a class.

Ehrlich: And were there members who left? Was there fallout from the Thais conflict?

Smith: Well, Thais and her husband left, David, and then we had a few artists that were—Tim Dreher, who’s a nondisabled dancer, who was also through our classes, left, mostly because he didn’t really feel like it was what he wanted to do; nor did he feel like he had the skill level, I think. And we had several—because we were doing this big project in ’96, started in ’95 and then—well, ’96, and then the last time we performed it was in Boston at the international festival. Hidden Histories, I’ve mentioned that a lot.

Ehrlich: Yes.

Smith: We had probably—one, two, three, four—we had, like, five guest artists in that piece, and one of them, Tom Metz, was actually also on our board of directors, so he was pretty involved in the whole transition thing. But it was kind of a core group of the six of us. I took over the company and, boy, I just had to kind of sink into it, you know. I’d been doing some budgeting and I’d been pretty involved in the planning and stuff, so it wasn’t completely foreign; but it was a lot to end up with in my lap. And my feeling at the time that the company split was that the company should be co-directed by one person with a disability and one person without.

Ehrlich: Can you say more about how that decision evolved?

Smith: I felt like because of who we were as a company, and that we were trying to model collaboration and, you know, equal importance of disabled and
nondisabled dancers, and having come out of a directorship that in the last few years, some of us felt didn’t represent disability quite the way we wanted it to be, I just—I felt like it was important, and it was something that I was really committed to. So after about nine months of running the company pretty much by myself, and you know, it was a lot to take on—. At that time, our budget was, like, ninety-eight-thousand dollars, maybe. I mean, it was tiny, you know, and we were trying to do all of this growth, and so—

Ehrlich: It seemed like a lot of opportunities were suddenly coming your way.

Smith: Oh, my God! We just—you know, we had—I mean, it was instant opportunity.

Ehrlich: Maybe you can go through all of those.

Smith: Yeah, and I think we’ve talked a little bit about some of them, but about nine months into it, eight months into it, something like that, I really decided that I needed somebody to co-direct, and I asked Nicole if she would do that with me.

Ehrlich: Can you give us just a sense of what your days were like without her, when you were working on your own?

Smith: Well, you know, the first—’98 through when we hired Mollie, really, I mean, I was doing, you know, fifty, sixty hour weeks, mostly. You know, I was doing a lot of admin work, and then rehearsing at night, and I think at that point, we were still rehearsing on Sundays. [laughs] We did weekend rehearsals up until, really, just a couple of years ago, when Uli stopped dancing, because we kind of had the weekend rehearsal schedule so that he could be involved, and we were really glad to give that up. [laughs]

Ehrlich: And that was because he worked full-time.

Smith: Yeah, I mean, we had a lot of dancers that were working other jobs. Megan was working pretty much full-time. Stephanie was working and going to school. Uli had a full-time job. Bonnie had other things she was doing. Nicole was working a part-time job, I think, at the time. We started off, like, paying ourselves, you know, four-hundred dollars a month. I mean, it was—and then we got some artist-in-residency grants from the California Arts Council, so we were able to, you know, augment our salary with our teaching money. But unfortunately, the co-directorship thing didn’t work well, because Nicole and I have a very different work ethic, and I think it was just a little bit more for her to take on than what she realized. And after a few years of, you know, trying to figure it out, and going from co-directors to co-artistic directors to co-
artistic director-slash-executive director for me, co-artistic director-slash-
education director for her, and then going to artistic director and education
director, we finally realized that it just wasn’t really a workable situation. But
I think what Nicole really did bring to the company was really helped us “up”
our level of professionalism within the company, especially around our
education program. She came up with the name for it, Dance Access, just kind
of off the top of her head one day and, you know, really helped us establish
that and get that going. And then in— I guess it was—Louise is bouncing.
[referring to tremor in leg]

In ’98, we actually held kind of our first formal audition, and it was an
interesting process for us. We probably had about seven or eight disabled
people, and maybe about twelve nondisabled people and we pulled in a couple
that kind of didn’t work out. So we went back to kind of our second round of
choices, and Alisa Rasera joined us at that point, in ’98. She got involved and
invested really quickly, taking over some of the kids’ programming
responsibilities from Bonnie, who had been doing it and, you know, helping
Nicole out and—

Ehrlich: So to back up just a little bit, you becoming the director was the board’s
decision really?

Smith: It was the board and staff. And the dancers in this company have always,
especially back then, been—and less so now, because we actually—. I also
need to say that at the time, we didn’t have job descriptions written down.
You know, we kind of had them in our head. We didn’t have a personnel
policy, and there were all these things that we didn’t have. Laurie Posner, who
was our board president for a few years, really helped us get those in place.
That was around—I think that she joined the board around maybe 2000, and
was with us until mid-way through 2003. So, you know, we had a lot to do,
just in terms of getting our administrative act together.

Ehrlich: And what that means is, in these years that we’re talking about, you didn’t
have—this stuff was all pretty open-ended?

Smith: Yes.

Ehrlich: Because the second question I had was, the decision to make Nicole co-
director, was that primarily your decision?

Smith: That was pretty much my decision, and the dancers were kind of, you know,
“Whatever you need, and it sounds like a good idea.” The board, at that point,
was kind of in the same place. Then, you know, the decision to change that
relationship and ultimately for Nicole to move out of a directorship was really
done between she and I and the board.
Ehrlich: Can you say a little bit more about why it didn’t work? I don’t have a clear sense.

06-00:13:06
Smith: I would rather not, because I think Nicole and I have very, very different views of why it didn’t work, and I don’t think it’s as important to know that as it just—. I mean, at that point, I was working sixty, seventy hours a week, still, and you know, we were really growing tremendously artistically and through our education program. I just felt like I needed somebody to carry half the ball, and that wasn’t happening.

Ehrlich: Okay. So, in part, the impetus for doing it didn’t end up panning out.

06-00:13:44
Smith: Not at all, because I ended up feeling like I had even more weight on me, because I had a situation that wasn’t working on the personnel front, which led to more work, you know, so—but Nicole’s a wonderful person. She’s incredibly talented, very committed to this kind of work, and it just didn’t work out for us. You know, it just was not the right combination, or, you know, the right set of expectations, maybe. So—.

But I think what it did lead us to was a very, very clear structure. I took over as artistic director, that was now my title, as of 2002, and Alisa stepped into the education director position. I think, originally, we called her program director, and then she did such a fabulous job. She and I work really well together and have a really similar ethic: “You show up, you do the work, you get the work done,” and so we gave her, you know, a more official title pretty—I think within the year. Everybody’s always pitched in with this company. Bonnie’s come through and, you know, done some grant writing or handled the kids’ aspect or, you know, just—different people have taken on different roles over the years. But now I have a really clear structure: artistic director, education director, and company manager. Then we have our dancer and our teaching artists. We have our personnel policy; we do an annual review. We get raises every year, you know? Dancers are finally—the ones that we can get insured, we’re helping with health insurance. This year is the first year we’re being paid for all of our rehearsal time. So, you know, over the last—I think particularly the last four years, we’ve really moved the company forward. And in spring of 2002, we hired Mollie {Mungen?}, now McFarland, as our company manager and she’s done a fabulous job.

Ehrlich: So maybe we should back up in time now. Actually, can we take a two-minute break?

06-00:16:11
Smith: Sure.

Ehrlich: Okay, we took a little break, and now we’re back.
Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: And Judy wanted to say—

Smith: Just a little bit more about the staff situation, because I think, you know, AXIS is at its strongest place right now. Mollie does an incredible job. She comes to us with a lot of experience booking and—. She comes from the Western—we stole her from the Western Arts Alliance, which is a presenter service organization and so she knew all the presenters in our region; she worked in New York with Stephen Petronio; she worked with a booking agent in San Francisco. So we were really lucky to get her. She’s made, you know, just a tremendous difference in the amount of our earned income and the amount of out of state booking. But also, Alisa’s doing a fabulous job with education director. And we have such a strong group of dancers right now.

Since ’97, you know, we’ve gone through different phases of dancers, and, you know, from ’97 to ’99, it was kind of the six of us. Then we had a young woman, Nadia Adame join us from Spain, who is a disabled dancer. Well, she was disabled when she was fourteen. Then we had Jacque Poulin-Denis from Canada join us, also disabled, and had danced, you know, prior to becoming disabled. Christine Chen, who is now dancing with Elizabeth Streb in New York. Uli had kind of pulled out a little bit at that point, because of family, work, health stuff. And Megan was dancing less. But we had some really exciting things happen during that period. Jacque and Nadia were in a trio with Baryshnikov that was performed at the Kennedy Center. We performed at the Olympic Arts Festival and we put up a lot of work and—. When those two left and Christine left, all at the same time, it was kind of a shock. I think Alisa and I and Bonnie were particularly freaked out.

Ehrlich: And when was that?

Smith: That was in spring of 2003. So we did an audition. We held an audition, a pretty formal audition. We did a call for nondisabled dancers and a call for disabled dancers and we ended up with Sean McMahon from San Francisco; Katie Faulkner, who was living here and had just graduated from Mills; Renee Waters, who was born in Sacramento, but had been at school in Arizona, and kind of wanted to move back to the area so she could be near her grandparents, who were very elderly; and Stephanie Bastos, who was disabled in a car accident, and also a dancer. The really exciting thing for us is, at this point, all of our nondisabled dancers have degrees in dance. You know, they all—this is what they want to do with their life. So it’s a little bit less juggling of outside work, and their outside work is in the dance world, for the most part. Then there’s—Bonnie and I are still with the company and dancing, and Alisa. So we have just, I think right now, the strongest group we’ve ever had. Definitely administratively, we have, you know, just—the staff is really
cohesive, and we all have a lot of knowledge. So it feels really good. It’s nice to have ended 2004 not feeling completely burned out and, you know, scared to death of 2005, so—

Ehrlich: Well, that’s great.

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: So back us up now and take us on that sort of trajectory, starting in—

Smith: In ’97.

Ehrlich: ’97.

Smith: So kind of from the artistic point of view?

Ehrlich: Yeah, from the work that you were doing. Actually, I know that—did the *Women in Black* piece with Sonya Delwaide, did that end up happening?

Smith: No, it never did. Thais actually never called Sonya back, after she made the initial connection, and I’ll talk a little bit about that, because it was kind of a funny thing. But the first thing that we did right off the bat was our—Nicole and I did a collaboration with Bill Shannon.

Ehrlich: We talked about that last time.

Smith: And we already talked about that. And then—

Ehrlich: Unless you have anything more to say about it?

Smith: No, I think we talked about that pretty much in depth. The first choreographer that we actually really commissioned was Sonya, and it was kind of an interesting story because my partner, Iva, is friends with her husband, Alex Nichols, who’s our lighting designer.

Ehrlich: Ah.

Smith: We kind of keep it all in the family. Iva and I had seen Sonya together, the summer of ’96, and just fell in love with her work. I mean, it was so stunning and remarkable, and I think I’d mentioned that I just said, “We’ve got to work with this woman.”

Ehrlich: Right.
Smith: So after I found out that, you know, Thais had invited her, I was just kind of actually heart broken, because I felt like that would preclude us from ever working with her. We happened to run into Alex at a performance, and Iva introduced me to Alex—this was in early '98—and Alex introduced me to Sonya. I said, “I’m really glad to meet you. I feel, you know, I really wanted to work with you, and—” We got to talking, she said, “Well, I never got involved in that project, because Thais never called me back,” and I said, “Well, gee, would you like to come in and do a piece for us?” and she was, “Yes,” immediately. So—

Ehrlich: Had she had any experience related to disability?

Smith: No, not really. No, she hadn’t, but she was really intrigued. Sonya is actually a really dear friend. We’ve gotten to be friends over the years. She’s just phenomenal. What happened was we decided we were going to do a trio, and it was going to be myself in a power chair, Bonnie in a manual chair, and Nicole, not disabled. It was such an interesting process, because we got together and started working, and Sonya was—well, it was kind of phenomenal, actually, and a little bit weird, but she had just an absolute uncanny ability to see the movement of the different wheelchairs, see Nicole’s movement, and just choreograph it. We were used to collaborating and, you know, putting in our two cents worth and saying, “Well, I think this’ll work, but this doesn’t work,” and probably right away—Bonnie and I worked with her first on a duet section—we figured out that all we had to do was shut up and dance. It was such a relief. I loved it. And I still love that.

You know, but it was just uncanny how Sonya was able to choreograph that work. She works very fast, and we hadn’t had that experience, so it was very challenging. The first piece that she did for us was called *Chuchotements*, which means whispering. I totally massacre the French. I can’t speak French at all and Sonya would be mortified if she heard me say that. But called *Whisperings*, and it was a lot—she was very interested in kind of social mores and social etiquette. So we used Telemann, classical music, and kind of set it in this French provincial costume. But she had Nicole kind of tethered by this costume, with a very, very long tail that went up and—you’ve seen it on video?

Ehrlich: Yes.

Smith: And her whole thing was to look at, well, who’s really limited or constricted, and who’s not? And then just kind of the social politics that happen between people with and without disabilities. So Sonya’s very interested in the human condition. She’s very theatrical, very gestural. We just *loved* working with her, right away. What she was able to come up with and visualize and see—well, she never really ceases to amaze us. She’s doing her fourth work for us
right now, and she works so fast [laughs] that she terrifies all of us, but—. She’s just like a stream of consciousness choreographer, but she’s got such a strong vision and a strong way of directing. We’ve also had her come in and teach company class for us, and she’s really been, I think, the one person that we’ve worked with who really gets us as a company. She would come in with a class, and she would have an adaptation for Megan, an adaptation for Bonnie and I, and an adaptation for Nadia. You know, I mean, it was just—

Ehrlich:  Like what? Can you—?

Smith:  Well, if we were doing a certain phrase, for example, that moved across the floor, that turned, that was gestural, she would have, you know, the version for the nondisabled dancers, which would be the way she would do it; and then she would take it and she would figure out what an equivalent would be for us. She did that even with, like, you know, warm-up exercises that dancers do all the time. So she’s been really brilliant that way for us, and really inspiring, and has really brought a lot to the company in that way. But that first piece was, in some ways, such a triumph because, you know, I think there are some ways in which I knew, from looking at people’s work, that there was a way they could work with us, and I really didn’t feel like we had to have, or they had to have, some kind of God-given grace and talent to do this kind of work. But at the same time, we hadn’t done it, and so there was a little bit of, “Well, what if it doesn’t work?” you know, so it was really great to get through Sonya’s—that first piece.

Ehrlich:  So it was really affirming of something you had sort of known inside for a long time, but hadn’t had a chance to really test out?

Smith:  Yeah.

Ehrlich:  Since when? I mean, since—

Smith:  I started looking at other people’s work in, like, ’93, ’94—’95, especially, when I saw Bill T. Jones’ piece, Still Here. I was absolutely convinced that we had to start working with other people, and that there was a way that they could do it, and it wasn’t—it was a science, and anybody who had a good grasp of choreography and movement could do it, if they had the interest, and if they wanted to expand, you know, whatever their choreographic vision and style is to include people who move really differently.

Ehrlich:  Were there any dancers who didn’t like letting go of the more collaborative style?
No, at that point, we were all—I think we were all onboard for it. Yeah. The next piece that we did was with Joe Goode.

Quickly, where did the money come from to work with—?

Where did the money come from? Well, the interesting thing was—

And then Sonya, how did that—?

Well, we started out working, you know, with really small budgets, and I started doing a lot of grant writing right away, but it really gave us a different “in” to funding, because these people were known. The projects were interesting, we were doing something different, and funders got interested in it really quickly. So we were able to fund—. And again, you know, Sonya and Joe and Joanna really kind of came through for us and, you know, did these works. I think they were a lot of labor of love. They didn’t get paid as well as we would have wanted to pay them, but all of the funding for those first three projects came mostly through local funders: Zellerbach, Fleishhacker, Lef Foundation. You know, they were all people who were very interested in local work. So we were really lucky to also have a little bit of money. We weren’t paying ourselves, so everything that came in, you know, we were able to put towards these. But we were finally working with a costume designer; you know, we were finally working with a lighting designer, who—. We had worked a lot with Elaine Buckholtz. She did really great work for us, but the designer was actually designing the lights with the choreographer. You know, so it was a step, definitely, in the right direction for us.

How had you dealt with costumes in the past?

Mostly Thais or whoever was directing the piece would figure out what the costume was going to be, which is not that much different, but we didn’t really have a budget for it. We’d, you know, kind of bring stuff from home or do things really low budget, and a lot of us really didn’t like our costumes at all, you know, and felt like we could benefit—. We had one piece, The Way In, that we did at the art museum, that we had a costume designer do for us. But most of them were done from within the company on really low budget which, you know, was kind of a sign of the times, in a way, too.

So having your costume designer, lighting designer—

Well, I think it really increased our production value, and the company looked more professional.

Which, in turn, made it easier to get grants?
So how did you hook up with Joe Goode?

Well, you know, Joe is somebody whose work I had seen a lot and really liked. I was a little bit intimidated by him, and John Killacky, lovely John, made a phone call and—I think he actually called Joe first and said, you know, “This company would like to do a workshop with you. What do you think?” We did a workshop with Joe over at Yerba Buena and really enjoyed working with him, and I think we were really interesting for him to work with. Joe’s another person that really kind of delves into the whole human condition and he’s, you know, very interested in relationship and humans and, mostly, how we muck it up and, you know, manage to find our way out of the muck. So he was pretty intrigued by the company.

Had he heard of AXIS?

Yeah. Yeah, he had heard of us and—you know, because we were pretty involved, even, you know—throughout our career, we’ve been pretty involved in the dance community. So Joe came in and did a piece called *Jane Eyre*. And it was—seven of us? Is that true? Maybe it’s only six of us.

Why don’t you list the dancers?

Uli, Bonnie, Megan, myself, Stephanie and Nicole. Yeah, so it was six of us. But the interesting thing was, was that Joe decided that he wanted, at one point, for Stephanie to drive a power chair across the stage, and we’re kind of like, “You know, we don’t usually—we’ve never done that.” We hadn’t put nondisabled dancers in the wheelchairs before. And there were a lot of challenges working with Joe, because we had to count; and counting was something that every dancer does, but we hadn’t done much, because most of our stuff was, you know, more improvised, it was—we did a lot less unison work. So that was a real challenge, I think particularly for Uli and I, who had never had any formal dance training. It was very challenging. And I think that the process was really challenging for Joe, because he was used to coming in and setting a work; and we were working, like, two times a week or three times a week, and then he had to go out of town or—. We were also working with Joanna Haigood at the same time, so we were trying to, you know, do Joanna’s these couple weeks and Joe’s these couple weeks, and it was really a hard process.

And their styles are very different.
Yeah, and you know— I mean, we were learning a lot about how professional companies even deal with their rehearsal process, you know? Most companies don’t rehearse a piece twice a week and spend a year on it, because we don’t have that luxury of time and money. So what we do now and—what we usually do is you come in and you do a chunk. Or you do the whole piece, in a chunk of time. So it was kind of frustrating for Joe, and I think it was also hard for him because we were pretty slow, learning. And then, you know, when you would learn something and then you drop it for two weeks, you know—

Ehrlich: Can you describe the piece?

Yeah, it was based on *Jane Eyre*. Joe was really interested in the whole disability thing, and we weren’t really that keen to do works about disability, but at the same time, we were inviting people in to create work for us, and we were basically turning ourselves over to them. We were a little bit at their whim about what they wanted to do. I knew that because of the way we were creating the material and developing the material and presenting the material, that there were people in the disability community who were probably not going to be very happy. Joe doesn’t know about disability politics; and he probably doesn’t give a damn about them, in that artistic way, you know, because he’s not looking at the piece to please everybody.

Ehrlich: He’s exploring ideas and—?

Absolutely. Yeah, and while we don’t do things that are downright blasphemous or insulting, we were also willing and ready to push our own political boundaries a little bit and our own artistic boundaries. *Jane Eyre* has a whole subtext about disability, and if it had been a company of nondisabled people doing this work, I think it would have been different. But because we’re in wheelchairs, and we already come with—you know, we get onstage, and people have their whole baggage and their whole idea about disability and who we are as disabled people, and what disability is, and how disability should be looked at or presented, you know, we come in with a whole bunch of luggage, baggage, and, you know, Joe didn’t know about that. I did warn him. I said, “You know, we’re probably going to get some flak for this.” Because there’s—what Joe was really interested in was codependency, interdependence, and how we manage to work that out in a relationship. And Jane and—is it Edward?

Ehrlich: Yes.

—manage to work that out in a relationship, after he becomes blind in a tragic accident, you know. The whole piece is very dramatic and very theatrical and
I’m, you know, sitting up on cushions in this huge hoopskirt that is just an absolute nightmare, but very hilarious. Originally, Joe wanted us all in hoopskirts, and [laughs] one of the things he said was that he wanted us all to look like short, fat dwarves. And we’re like—but the problem with the skirts is that we couldn’t get near each other in them. So, ultimately, I was the only one that had to be in one, because everybody else needed to do some partnering, because Joe does beautiful partnering work. And his movement vocabulary is really lovely, you know. So we were really excited about that. But, you know, there is the subtext about Edward and Jane and how she ends up falling in love with him and leaves because it’s not requited; and he’s got this crazy wife locked up in a tower, which, you know—I mean, there’s the whole mental disability community that—. You know, it was just kind of an intense piece, but it was also really funny. We were trying to poke fun at it. But we previewed the piece at ODC Theater and we had a woman—

Ehrlich: What does ODC stand for?

Smith: Well, it’s Oberlin Dance Collective, SF; but nobody knows it by that anymore, it’s ODC/SF. Brenda Way’s company, and they have their space in San Francisco, and they have a presenting program there. So we showed some of the company work that we were working on at the time, Ta Kala, which Nicole and Stephanie choreographed, and we showed Joe’s piece. I can’t remember what else we showed. But anyway, it was really to preview Joe’s work. We had a question and answer afterwards. The first question out was really kind of a five minute reaming by a disabled woman who had never been so insulted by a piece of artwork in her life. She felt that we, as disabled people, how dare we present this negative image of disabled relationship? And she went on and on and on, and then she walked out. So Joe’s kind of like [makes facial expression] and we’re kind of like [makes facial expression].

Tom Metz was in the audience that day. I think Megan actually really saved the day on it. We have the whole thing on tape, but Megan and Tom kind of, as disabled people, brought it back around. Megan talked about her experience of creating the work, and Tom said, “Well, as an audience member, I think it’s right on,” because the thing is, is we don’t often like to look at the negative aspects of disability, but the truth is that the negative aspects of disability in a relationship are not that different from the negative aspects of nondisabled people in relationship. That’s what I think we were really trying to get through in the piece, that it’s a universal human condition, and disability is an added element to that, but it doesn’t necessarily really change it that much.

Ehrlich: But it also seemed like one of the dynamics in the piece—it isn’t like the person with the disability is the only one who’s troubled.

Smith: Oh, no. We were all crazy!
Ehrlich: Yeah.

06-00:40:59

Smith: It was also very ambiguous by gender. Sometimes Uli was doing Jane roles, and sometimes the Janes were doing, you know, the Edward roles and you couldn’t—. You know, Megan and Bonnie and Uli were all dressed up as Edward, and Stephanie and Nicole were in nightgowns, and I was in this giant hoopskirt and—. That’s another thing that Joe really likes to play with, is gender and gender issues. So, I mean, the whole piece is pretty hilarious, really. There were several disabled people who said, you know, “This is funny, and it’s good to see, you know, these kind of issues kind of brought out, because a lot of times, we don’t want to look at the negative aspects of disability.” And, you know, disability isn’t easy. And it’s not always pretty. And we’re not always heroic, angelic, enlightened individuals, any more so than anyone else is. We have a full range of emotions and we have a full range of the ways we deal with them. I think, so often, people with disabilities get put in—you know, you’re either bitter and enraged because of your disability, or you’re enlightened and you should be sainted because of your disability. The truth is, if I’m pissed off and bitchy one day, it might be because the bank really screwed up my checking account, but if somebody sees me being pissed off and bitchy, they’re probably going to naturally assume it’s because I’m disabled. You know, so we’re really treading a fine line in this piece with that, you know? Just how do you look at people just as people, with a full range of emotion, and a full range of how we deal with it? And some people really hated it.

Ehrlich: Well, it seems clear that you felt really captivated by the ideas and by exploring them.

06-00:43:01

Smith: Oh, yeah, and the movement was really interesting for us.

Ehrlich: In what way?

06-00:43:05

Smith: Well, Joe’s vocabulary is beautiful, and Marit Brook-Kothlow—I think is her last name—she assists Joe a lot. She was very involved in the process, and she’s just this music hound. She brought in all of this really interesting music that we hadn’t heard. We loved the way Joe was structuring the piece. It was very collaborative. He did a lot of writing.

Ehrlich: I was going to say, there’s also spoken word.

06-00:43:35

Smith: Yeah, and we used a lot of the text right out of Jane Eyre. Megan narrated a lot of it, did a beautiful job. So you know, there were a lot of components that—I mean, we’d done some dance theater work, you know, in AXIS.
*Hidden Histories* was definitely a dance theater piece, but we kind of felt like Joe took us to a different level with that.

Ehrlich: And what was the actual relationship with him like?

06-00:44:03

Smith: Fun. You know, it was—and it was hard, because the process was hard. As I said, it was really broken up, and that wasn’t his ideal way of working, and we were a little bit slow. But I think that in terms of the piece, there were things that would have benefited from a different way of working together. Like, you know, more condensed, concentrated. But I think all in all, we kind of recognized that there were difficulties. I’m kind of remembering back now that I know that he and Megan had a long conversation about the process and—I mean, it was also a real learning thing for us, because we hadn’t, you know, worked in ways that he worked and—just really pushing us as a company. But there’s some great movement that—we still do some of the movement out of that piece in our assembly program, because the partnering is so interesting. And he really—there’s this whole partnering thing that happens with Megan and Bonnie in manual wheelchairs, and Stephanie and Nicole. We were sure that it was impossible to do it, but, you know, we tried it and it worked, and it was beautiful.

Ehrlich: Can you describe it?

06-00:45:27

Smith: It’s really hard to describe, but basically what happens is that—I think Nicole was working with Bonnie. Nicole went backwards up to Bonnie’s chair; Bonnie leaned forward; and Nicole went with her, so that Nicole is kind of laying on Bonnie; and that made momentum, so that the chair was moving forward; and then Nicole comes over Bonnie, sideways, and ends up on her feet. It’s this beautiful thing. It’s very hard for us to describe our work, but—. We were like, “Oh, my God, that’s never going to work,” and everybody was like, “Ah! He’s going to kill us!” but it was beautiful, and it really made us look at different ways of partnering. We tipped Bonnie over on her back, in the piece. He had Uli, Stephanie, Nicole, and Megan doing this whole counterbalance thing, with the manual chairs tipped sideways, and then this whole momentum thing, with Nicole and Stephanie up on their laps, leaning out, and then coming down, which sent them into a spin. There were a lot of really interesting partnering things that happened in that piece. [pause] We’d love to work with him again at some point. I don’t know when, but—

Ehrlich: And is there—?

06-00:47:01

Smith: Or rework this piece, I don’t know.

Ehrlich: Is there the possibility, do you think, of another collaboration with him?
Oh, probably but, you know—we’ve chatted about it at different times, and we’ve talked about maybe just reworking Jane a little bit, but the cast of characters is so different, and the way we move is so different, because Megan and Uli—Uli’s balance is really precarious, but he’s incredibly strong. So we still, you know, have yet to replace our Uli. So I don’t know. I think we’d have to do a lot of reworking, so it might be easier just to do something new.

Ehrlich: So do you have a sense of the choreographers—I might be jumping the gun with this question—but the choreographers who you’ve worked with, having learned something from the other choreographers you’ve worked with? Have they watched—?

Smith: A lot of them don’t want to see what we’ve done before. Joanna had done one workshop with us, and she’d seen a lot of our aerial work, so she kind of had a good sense of us. Joe and I got together, we watched videotapes. Sonya had seen videotapes that Thais had given her. I don’t think that there’s been—I, I don’t think Joe called up Sonya and said—

Ehrlich: “What did you do with them?”

Smith: Yeah, “How do you do this?” I don’t think that there’s been that, but I do have a sense that every choreographer that’s worked with us has gone away feeling like they also got something out of the process. I think that, for me, almost the most rewarding, is that instead of, you know, those people coming in and doing that thing for us, you know, this group of dancers with disabilities and without, that it’s some kind of—that it’s really a mutual exchange. And I think some choreographers have gotten more out of it than others.

Ehrlich: So anything more to say about the experience of Jane Eyre?

Smith: I don’t think so.

Ehrlich: Where did you perform it and for how long?

Smith: We premiered it in Boston in 2000, and then in our home season. Unfortunately, at that point, we weren’t touring very much. It’s a very costume intensive and kind of intensive piece to put together. Then, as Uli had to step out of it, we weren’t able to do the piece nearly as much as we had hoped to.

Ehrlich: Where did you perform in Boston?

Smith: At the Emerson Majestic Theater.
Ehrlich: And—

That was a good program. We premiered Sonya’s work, our Bill T. piece, Joe’s, and then we did a company piece, and that was kind of our first official home season in our new, you know, as the new AXIS, so—. And it took us a while to get our work up. So what we did in between time was we did showings and performed in other people’s stuff and—you know, just to kind of keep ourselves out there. But it took us a while to develop, to build up our repertory.

Ehrlich: To have a full show.

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: So should we move on to—?

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: Is Joanna Haigood next?

Yeah, Joanna we did at the same time. We started working with her at the same time as Joe. But I think that we actually—gads. One would think I would be able to keep this all clear in my head. No. What we did was, we did—we didn’t do Joanna’s piece in Boston, because we couldn’t figure out how to get the ladder from Boston back here in time. That’s why we did Ta Kala, which is a company piece. But in our home season, we did Joanna’s piece, Descending Chords, Joe’s piece, Sonya’s piece, and Bill. So that was our first home season. Joanna’s piece mostly takes place on a ladder, and it’s raked from a single point, so it swings. Mostly in a circle. We affectionately started calling it the vomit piece. The other component to it was that Joanna wanted Bonnie and I in these sculptures. They were kind of like really high twirling chairs, and there was this whole duet that happened. But it was originally going to be Megan and I. But then Megan, at that point, was getting fairly weak in her upper body, and she just couldn’t do the movement the way I think Joanna needed it done. Then I broke my wrist, so I was completely out of the piece. So it ended up being Bonnie, who hates to spin, and Stephanie in the sculptures.

Ehrlich: How did you break your wrist?

Oh, I went off my back ramp, my front caster stuck, and I drove off the ramp, and tried to—you know, tipped over and stupidly, put out—you know, instant reflex—put out myself to catch all the weight of me and my two-hundred-and-fifty pound chair, from about two-and-a-half feet up, and I just crashed my
wrist. But Joanna’s piece, we were actually able to premiere in 1999, at Dance Umbrella’s International Festival for Aerial Dance. So we did it out of town a year before we were able to do it here.

Ehrlich: Can you just back up and say how did the connection with Joanna happen?

Smith: Joanna’s somebody that we knew from around, and we had—she had performed in Boston in ’92, when we went for the first Aerial Dance Festival, so she was somebody we just knew from around, and because we had, especially with Uli, real interest in working with aerial apparatus, she was somebody that we thought of right away, that we wanted to work with. But she choreographed a really beautiful duet for Nicole and Uli. They had done a lot of contact improvisation work together on the floor, and had a really good sense of each other, and I think they just took that relationship and that kinesthetic knowledge of each other from the floor and put it in the air. Joanna taught them a lot about how to use the ladder, and momentum and, you know, different things that she did on the ladder, especially with Nicole. That was a very collaborative process with them. But it was interesting, because Uli had torn his rotator cuff, and we weren’t really sure that he was ever going to be able to get back in the air, and the aerial work is really kind of his passion. He prefers to be on the ground or in the air. The in the chair thing is not his favorite way to move. So she choreographed this really lovely duet, and it’s stunning. Uli climbs up the ladder, in the dark, and the piece starts out with he and Nicole kind of in this flag, as the ladder’s spinning circularly, and it’s physically really exertive.

Ehrlich: What is it that you think Joanna is working with? You know, you were able to articulate really clearly what you thought—

Smith: Oh, Joanna was working with movement. The music is haunting. It’s by Lauren Wenger, New York composer who Joanna had been working with, but she was really just working with the movement. I think it’s an emotional piece, because it’s so beautiful and haunting, but it doesn’t have a story line. Most of it focuses on the ladders, on the ladder duet; and then about two-thirds of the way through the piece, the lights come up on the sculpture chairs, and they’re supposed to somewhat mirror—and we never really— and I think Joanna was never completely satisfied with the sculptural chair duet. They kind of seemed like two different pieces, in a way. But the ladder duet was just stunning. The funny thing is, is you know, Uli is built really oddly. Very, very, very strong upper body, and because he had polio and a lot of atrophy in his muscles, his lower legs are very spider-like and slight. But when we performed the piece in Boston, I didn’t get to go because I had my broken wrist, but Alisa was sitting in the audience, and when Uli bowed in his wheelchair, there were people around her that were just, like, shocked. They didn’t realize he was disabled, which was really funny for us, because—
Ehrlich: Wow!

06-00:56:29

Smith: —how could you look at Uli and not realize he’s disabled. But it just never occurred to them that somebody disabled would be hanging on a ladder, twenty feet up in the air, you know—

Ehrlich: Spinning around—

06-00:56:40

Smith: [laughs] —spinning around doing this work. So I think even though he’s built really oddly, they just couldn’t connect his odd shape with the fact that he was a disabled dancer. So that was pretty fun, that was fairly shocking to people.

Ehrlich: Well, and it’s interesting too, because we talked about just the fact of dancers with disabilities being on stage—

06-00:57:01

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: —it’s educational. It’s advocacy. This is an example of that.

06-00:57:05

Smith: Yeah. Yeah. because when he bowed in his chair, I mean, people were just, all around Alisa, were just [gasp], you know, couldn’t believe it.

Ehrlich: That’s probably a good place to stop.

Begin Audiofile 7

07-00:00:02

Ehrlich: Okay, so we’re back after a little break. This is tape seven.

07-00:00:07

Smith: Good Lord! So anyway, one thing that I want to also say is that, you know, throughout this time, the company has always had people choreograph. We let go of most of our repertory in ’97, but pieces that we held onto were Prayer, which is a really lovely duet that was originated by Stephanie and Megan, and it takes all place on her chair. Most of it spins, too. Megan and I are the spinners of the company, and Stephanie likes to spin. So we had that piece, and then we had an aerial duet that Stephanie and Uli did, called of Air, and the first company piece that we did, which was actually Uli’s rehab piece, was Ta Kala, which is the piece with poles. It’s a series of duets and solos, and a quartet at the end.

Ehrlich: Who choreographed of Air?
Stephanie. Well, originally, Lynell Sjoberg, who was one of our dancers when we did *The Way In* at the museum, she and Uli originally did it for that piece, and then Stephanie and Uli reworked it kind of as its own thing, you know, as a repertory piece. So we still had company works happening, too. And *Ta Kala* actually got nominated for an Izzie for choreography, which was exciting, because that was kind of our first company piece out. I have to say that it was really scary for me to think about moving on without Thais and without her direction, and I think had Nicole and Bonnie not been there, I probably wouldn’t have taken it on, because I didn’t feel like I had enough knowledge or enough expertise just by myself.

Ehrlich: So what would have happened? It would have just—

I think it would have dissolved. Or you know—I don’t know. Maybe the board would have negotiated to, you know, let Thais take it or whatever. But it was really having kind of their support and the support of the board and everybody that really helped. But once we started commissioning works and I started—you know, and I had a good relationship with Jeremy Alliger and John Killacky, so there were people that were out there that I could go to in a panic and say, “Help.” But it *was* scary, and it was— I felt kind of a—you know, because of the way the company split up, and because of the amount of anger and hurt, and the amount of drive that I have, I really felt like, “This has got to succeed.” At the same time, I was really afraid of failure, you know?

So the fact that our company work was coming out stronger, and that we were coming up with these good commissions and—. One of the things also that was happening was that reviewers were figuring out a way into our work. Some of them thought that *Jane Eyre* was one of the strongest pieces Joe had done in a long time, or in an amount of time. I feel like, you know, the way choreographers are able to work with us, it kind of brings out the best in them, and brings out the best in us, and it brings out new things in them, and new things in us. So that has been thrilling, I think. But it was scary, and it did feel like we were taking a risk. There was this little part of me that would wake up in the middle of the night and go— [laughs] You know? Mostly about the budget and what we were doing, but—.

The next thing that we took on was the Bill [T. Jones] piece, and this was Alisa Rasera’s first piece with us. Uli was between jobs, so he took his break time, and Stephanie had to take time off work. Stephanie was really the only one that got paid for rehearsal, because she was actually losing income to do the piece. But we thought we were going to have six weeks with Bill, and we ended up having three weeks. Bill had looked at videotape, and he had seen—. He was in a gala event that Stephanie and Uli performed in. They did their aerial piece of *Air* in Boston, in ’96, I think, so he had seen just a tiny bit of us. But what he saw on video was that we were doing a lot of more poignant
human relationship duets and work, because he hadn’t seen our other commissioned work at that point. He really wanted to do something completely different for us. He wanted to give us something that we didn’t have in our repertory. He also was kind of looking—he was kind of going back to formalism in the structure of his choreography. He’s passionate about Schubert, had a piece of music that he had had the desire to use for his company, but hadn’t, *Fantasy in C Major*, which I hear from Garrick Ohlsson, who’s a world class pianist, his words are, “It’s a diabolically difficult piece of music.”

Ehrlich: It’s extremely fast.

Smith: *Oh* yeah! So Bill and I had some conversations on the phone.

Ehrlich: Can we just quick back up?

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: I mean, the last we knew, Jeremy had said, “Who is it you’d love to work with?” You said, “Bill T. Jones.” How did you get from there to actually working with him?

Smith: When Bill was performing in Boston, he and Jeremy had dinner, and Jeremy said, you know, “This company is someone I’m really interested in, and they’d love to work with you, and I’d like to commission a piece. What do you think?” and Bill was like, “Sure.”

Ehrlich: Okay. Yeah.

Smith: So you know—

Ehrlich: And then did you have to—oh, to commission a piece, okay.

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: So in terms of money—?

Smith: So Jeremy raised some money, we raised a little bit of money, but we didn’t raise enough money for the project. We had about fifty percent of the amount that we needed, and this was kind of a high end commission for us. I got to a point where I was—I’m very conservative, fiscally, with the budget. I don’t like being in debt myself, and I’m really conservative with the company. And back then, really so, because we didn’t have a great deal of cushion. But after, you know, going back and forth, “Should we do it? Should we not do it?
Should we do it? Should we not do it? We don’t really have the money, but we have money.” I finally just decided, “To hell with it. We can’t pass this opportunity up.” Probably one of the best decisions I’ve made. You know, it felt like a risk, because we didn’t have all the money for it, and I didn’t want to take money out of the company budget. But we had the money there. So that’s kind of how, you know, we finally decided, “Okay, we’re just going to do this.”

Bill was also very generous with his time and, you know, he worked from the lower end of his fee for us. He and Janet Wong, who’s his incredibly brilliant rehearsal director—she’s like a walking choreography computer. She’s phenomenal. Beautiful dancer. They both came in September of ’99, is what it was. We met with Bill the first time, and the first thing he said was, “I’m really intimidated about working with you,” and we’re like, “You’re intimidated? What about us?” You know, we’re sitting in the room with Bill T. Jones and we’re all like—because he was kind of an icon and a hero for all of us. We loved his work. And, you know, he talked about what he wanted to do for the company, that he wanted to give us a really classical piece, which he called “our ballet.” Unbeknownst to him, his partner Bjorn had forgotten to send us the music, so we hadn’t heard the music.

So the first thing that we did was sit down with Bill and talk a little bit about it, and introduce ourselves, and kind of get over the willy-jillies a little bit, and Janet was there and—. He played the music for us, and it starts out very slow and kind of somber, and we’re like, “Oh, yeah, we can do this.” Then it gets faster and faster, and by the time he turned the music off, he looked at us and he said, “Oh, you haven’t heard the music.” It’s like, “No,” and I think we were all ashen, [laughs] totally ashen, because we’re thinking, “How in the hell are we going to dance to this?” So we kind of all took a deep breath, and—we started right in that day, and Bill started choreographing right away. There was an amount of, you know, “Can you do this? Can you do that? What happens if—? What happens?” and we realized, after the fact, that it would have been really great to let Bill get in a manual chair and play with it, but—

Ehrlich: You mean, so he was trying to get a sense of what your abilities and—

Smith: Of what we could do, yeah.

Ehrlich: —limitations were.

Smith: Yeah, but we started choreographing right away, because we didn’t have a lot of time. He was choreographing his solo show, The Breathing Show, in the morning, and then working with us in the afternoon, so he was also doing two things. Bill was kind of in an interesting place, because one of the things that he told us was that, “I’m not happy with what I’m seeing in dance. I’m not
happy with what I’m doing in dance. You know, I have an amount of fame; I’m not rich; but I’m just—I’m not sure what I’m doing here.” He meant in dance. So he was kind of in this odd place. And he was trying to choreograph his solo show. So there was a lot going on.

And we had, you know, all taken off; we’d blocked out three weeks of our time. So I was doing admin work in the morning and at night, and we were rehearsing during the day, and it was very fast. He came in with an amount of material for the three ladies, Alisa, Nicole and Stephanie on feet. Technically, much more demanding than anything that they had done, and a very different vocabulary. Then with us, those of us in chairs, because he didn’t know what we could do, he had us develop our own material and he would help us tweak it or change it, or he would have Janet change it. At one point, he took a whole arm sequence that I had done and he said, “Well, okay, retrograde it and invert it.” And I kind of went, “What?” I mean, I didn’t even know those terms. So with a little help, we got it inverted, and we got it retrograded, and then he said, “Okay, Janet, teach it to the three ladies and put legs on it,” because he wanted it to move through space. So that’s one example.

He had Bonnie and I and Uli and Megan learning each other’s material and doing each other’s material, and he, you know, had Uli working on some solo material. He had all of us working on some solo material. But it was just one of these, like, tornado processes, you know, because we weren’t used to working every day. And he choreographs—had to choreograph pretty quickly and some of us don’t learn quickly, me being one of them, Uli being another. And we hadn’t had to count a piece, and this piece is counted all the way through, you know. It’s very, very much reliant on the count to the music. So it was an incredible challenge for us, just technically and musically, but somehow, we managed to pull it all together in three weeks. And it’s a piece that we still love doing.

We’re on our third cast with it. I can remember when we went to Boston to premiere the piece, Bill joined us there. One of the things—I want to back up a little, because one of the things that Bill really pushed, particularly me, on is, “Where do you want your company to be? You know, you’ve got this piece from me, you’re doing these commissions. You need to start acting like a professional company. You need to hire a rehearsal director—which we still don’t have full-time. But he really—he wanted. We knew that we needed help with this piece, so Sonya came in to a couple rehearsals, and it was weird for Bill, because he had never really had somebody else kind of take over his work and rehearsal direct it.

Ehrlich: Sonya came in to do that.

Smith: Yes, because we needed help, and I called her and I said, “Sonya, help!” I knew that she would understand his vocabulary and understand, you know—
But it was a little bit of pressure for her, and it was a little bit of pressure for him. So in January, after working for a number of months with Sonya, they were back in town, and we got together and rehearsed with Janet, and she helped us out with some stuff, and Sonya came to that, and we kept rehearsing through the spring. We needed a lot of rehearsal for this piece, because it was really hard for us to learn.

Ehrlich: And part of what the difficulty is, along with the speed, is the sense of precision. Is that accurate?

07-00:14:29

Smith: And the technique, you know, for Nicole and Alisa and Stephanie. It was a technique and movement that they weren’t familiar with. So we had—you know, Sonya came in and did company class for us and rehearsed us. She was so awesome. And we show up in Boston, you know, we’re all excited, because we feel like we’ve got the piece in a really good place. We’re going to premiere it there, and Bill’s lighting designer’s coming in, Robert Rosenwasser, to do the lighting, because he really wanted to have his own designer. Robert’s great, does beautiful work. He looked at the piece the first day we got together and he said, “This looks too easy.” We all just went—And Bill does this to his own dancers. He will change a piece in intermission. He will give people changes. With his own work, it’s easy to do that, because his dancers are used to it and, you know, they just—you know, sometimes it works out great, sometimes it doesn’t and—but they’re used to that kind of process, where you never know when Bill’s going to change something.

So we spent the next— we spent, like, six hours that day and five hours the next day, making changes. I think Stephanie about had a nervous breakdown. Her leg was all bruised up, because they were, you know, going on and off the floor a lot. Nicole and I ended up meeting with Bill the morning of the second day and just saying, “We can’t really handle very much more. We have to premiere this piece, and the dancers are freaking out.” And Bill was like, “Okay, okay, okay,” and then we went back into the studio, and he made more changes. [laughs]

Ehrlich: What was the time period between when these changes were happening and when you were supposed to be premiering it?

07-00:16:22

Smith: Two days. But the thing is, is that, I mean, it was a little bit of a brutal process, and I think the nondisabled dancers in particular felt a little bit beat up. Bonnie’s chair broke in the middle of rehearsal and he said, “Well, can’t you just use your power chair?” and we’re like, “It doesn’t work that way.” So Iva—thank God she was with us—took the chair in a taxicab, ran all over Boston, getting it welded. Somehow we managed to get it put back together. But I mean, there were a lot of little things like that that happened.
But the changes that Bill made were really, really good and really important. But the really funny thing was, on the way out the door of the theater, after we had set the lights and everything, he said, “Judy, turn your solo around and do it facing the back.” I mean, he was literally out the door, on his way to the airport, making—“Uli. Fly out of your chair and roll,” you know, “as the lights go black.” I mean, it was so hilarious. He just—you know, that’s how he works. During the process, Janet was really a saint, and she kind of keeps the whole thing together, you know. During the first process, she was, like, really, really awesome, because Bill starts choreographing. He’s like, “You, you, you, you,” but none of us knew what “you” he was talking about, you know? [Ehrlich laughs] So Janet would kind of reinterpret things and get us all on the right track and—.

But the piece is gorgeous. It’s our favorite piece, still. Everybody that has danced the piece has loved it. Presenters want it all over the place, which is difficult for us right now because we’re minus one of the people that we need for it. But it got Bill an Izzie for choreography, and I think it really helped us. It helped Uli get an Izzie for individual performance for our entire home season that year, and it helped us get an Izzie for company performance for our entire home season. The other pieces that we did were Joanna’s and Sonya’s and Joe’s, and it was a really, really strong program. I think it really made us realize, “Okay, we can do this, and we’re on our way.”

But I want to go back, also, because Bill felt a tremendous amount of pressure doing this piece, and one of the things that he said to us right off the bat is, “Because of who you are, and because of who I am, this piece has got to be good. We have no choice.” What he meant by that was that in ’94, I believe it was, or ’95, when he premiered Still Here, which was his piece—it was based on movement material that he had gotten from doing workshops with people who were terminally ill. There was a review that came out in the New Yorker, by Arlene Croce. She reviewed the piece without going to see it, and she basically said, “This is victim art. It’s a piece of crap. I don’t want to see dying people onstage.” There were no dying people onstage. There were his incredibly beautiful, super-trained dancers doing movement material that had been generated through workshops with people who were dying. But she was so off the mark on it. She also, in the article, said, you know, “There’s basically no place in dance for fat people, old people, disabled people. I don’t want to see any of that. It’s victim art,” and kind of coined this phrase. What happened with that review is that it opened up this international dialogue and discussion, and sometimes intense argument, about, “What is art? What is dance? Who gets to do dance? Who gets to say what dance is?”

For us, it had kind of—I mean, that whole thing had an impact, because she had specifically said, you know, “There’s no place in dance for people with disabilities.” Bill was so angry about that that he never—he didn’t start commenting on it—he couldn’t really even talk about it until just a few years ago. He was furious. Furious, furious. He lost his partner Arnie to AIDS, so he
had a very direct emotional, personal interest in the whole issue of death and
dying and—you know, it was just this huge ordeal for him. It ended up being
huge in the dance community, and in the art world too. But because of that, he
felt like there was no room for him to fail in this piece, and there was no room
for us to fail, so he felt a lot of pressure.

Ehrlich: Did you know that going in? Or do you only know that in retrospect?

07-00:21:47
Smith: We knew it going in, because he talked about it in our first rehearsal. You
know? And he mentioned, you know, the review and the whole thing. We
talked about victim art. You know, what that was and what that meant to us,
and what it meant to be put in that label, you know.

Ehrlich: How much talking did you do with him throughout? Was it just initially at the
beginning, or was?—

07-00:22:13
Smith: There was discussion throughout the process, yeah, especially for those of us
in chairs. The piece at first was a little bit—I think we were kind of like,
“Hmm. This is interesting,” because we didn’t expect him to do a really
formal, classical piece for us, you know, something that was structured that
way. The other thing that was very challenging for Bill is he loves unison, so
figuring out what unison was for our company—you know, Megan could only
raise her hand to here; Bonnie and I can’t open our hands; Uli falls off balance
at a certain point. What is unison for this company? And it really made him
rethink unison.

I think it was an incredible experience for him. It really—you know, he was in
this kind of not great place, in some ways. He was creating such good work,
and his company was really successful artistically. I think at that point, he,
like a lot of other companies, was struggling financially, and he was in this
whole—and I think he left in a much better mood than he came in. I think that,
you know, from what he’s told me and what he’s said at different times, is that
the process was really inspiring for him and really helped him broaden the
way he looked at dance, and the way he looked at unison, and the way he
looked at a company. So we were all pretty friggin’ thrilled, you know? It was
a hard piece for us. It was challenging, and we really felt like—. Well, and the
funny thing is, is that I at one point said to him, I said, “Bill, I have to tell you
that, you know, there were nights when I’d wake up and I’d just go, ‘What if
it doesn’t work?’” and he said, “Judy, I did the same thing,” you know, so we
were both having this, like, “What if it doesn’t work?” But it worked so
beautifully, and it’s such an incredible piece. Janet played a big part of that,
Janet Wong. She was just great in, you know, helping us learn the material
and retain the material, and learn the changes and retain those.

Ehrlich: So in some ways, what he came in needing to prove, it sounds like—?
We fell like it was really successful. Whether Arlene Croce would look at it or not, who knows?

Do you know anything about where she’s ended up?

I don’t. I think that—I think she might still write for the *New Yorker*. But there were a lot of critics that jumped on the bandwagon with her, and, you know, one of them is in San Francisco. He swore, back in, like, ’93, that he would never come see our work, because he didn’t consider it to be dance.

And had he seen it?

He came to see our work in 2003 at Yerba Buena, when we did our home season with Victor Marks, and he actually gave us a pretty positive review. So minds can be changed, but he was adamant that he would not come see our work.

Can you say who he is?

I would rather not.

Okay.

I don’t know that I can, because I have never had a direct conversation with him. This is, you know, information that was given to me by presenters and—but he was a prominent writer.

The argument about victim art, how has it shifted?

Well—boy. From my point of view?

Yeah.

I think that there are still people out there that are in that camp, but I think that over the years, there has been more of an openness towards different kinds of people dancing, different kinds of people moving, different subject matter. I guess for me, it’s not so much a question of victim art, it’s how do you put art, whatever you’re doing, in the right venue, because I really think early on, you know, AXIS got to perform, and got asked to perform, in some pretty major events, and major presenters. I think it some ways, it might have been a little premature for us and for the level that we were at artistically and professionally, but because there weren’t a lot of people doing this work, but
there were presenters that were very interested in it—Jeremy Alliger; Jeremy told John Killacky about us; he brought us to Minnesota—

Ehrlich: To the Walker?

Smith: —to the Walker Art Center. We actually performed at the Southern Theater in a festival called the Out There Festival. So there were definitely presenters. John told someone else about us, who told somebody else about us, you know. So there were definitely presenters who were really interested in what we were doing, and are interested in dance that expresses different things, you know. But there are a lot of people out there that, I think, still wouldn’t consider what we do to be dance.

Ehrlich: I guess it’s a murky line, too. I mean, I know there’s an issue about professionalism within with the disabled artist community—

Smith: That’s where I was going with this, is that I think, you know, a lot of the work that gets done, because companies are still learning and growing themselves—and I think also, you know, a lot of the dance companies, integrated dance companies start without really a choreographer at the helm. You know, there’s somebody who has an interest in this kind of movement, and so I think we need to be careful about where work gets presented. I think all work is valid and really important, and I’m so glad that there’re so many people doing it. But maybe some companies’ work doesn’t yet belong on the same stage that would present Bill T. Jones or Joe Goode or—

Ehrlich: And there is work—I think, through the years, there’s been a whole issue, specifically linked to disability, of art as rehabilitation, art as—

Smith: Art as therapy.

Ehrlich: —therapy, as healing.

Smith: And we have struggled with that. I mean, I had a consultant that we brought in to work with us say, “Early on, I didn’t know what you were doing,” you know. And she was on a panel, and they were discussing whether we were doing art or whether we were doing therapy.

Ehrlich: And when was this?

Smith: This was—we brought her in in ’98 or ’99, maybe it was actually 2000, because she said, after she saw our home season with our commissioned works and—she said, “Now I can see that what you’re really doing is art.” That’s one of the reasons I wanted to start commissioning, is I felt like, you
know, until we got people involved in this art form who had already made it, and until we started creating work that was at a higher level, we weren’t going to be taken seriously, and the art form and AXIS weren’t going to move forward.

Ehrlich: I have heard the question raised that there’s been something lost, in terms of a fear that AXIS—a sort of a fear of assimilation. You know, is the goal now to dance like everybody else, versus sort of the dance vocabulary that says, “These are different bodies doing different things.” What’s your sense of that?

07-00:30:54
Smith: Well, I think that there were a lot of people in the disability community who liked what we did earlier on better, and some of them are good friends of mine. They feel, you know, like—I think for them, the disability content was really important, and I think that maybe they felt like we moved more as individuals, but the truth is, Bonnie and I can only move the way we can move. We’re never going to be able to move like a ballet dancer or a modern dancer. Choreographers that come in—you know, I choose choreographers that I know can handle that, and are interested in that, you know? And I think for some people, yeah, I think that we’ve probably lost some audience, and I think we’ve lost some interest from some people, because what we’re doing is—you know, we really decided that we were going to concentrate on the art aspect, and that we didn’t need to do pieces about disability, because what we were doing said enough, and that it was more powerful just to get up there and dance than it was to get up there and preach about disability through our dance.

Ehrlich: And it sounds very clear that you don’t think there’s anything in your actual sort of movement vocabulary that’s less now than it was before.

07-00:32:32
Smith: No, I think it’s so much more. I think it’s so much more. But you know, that’s a route that we chose to go. We chose to move out of more of a community arts into more of the mainstream, and I think that we’ve made a tremendous impact by doing that, because we introduced a lot of choreographers to our work, a lot of presenters to our work, a lot of audience to our work, who wouldn’t have seen it otherwise, you know, if we hadn’t made kind of this leap. And personally, I got really disinterested in seeing disabled people writhing around on the floor of a stage. Doing improvisation. It was no longer interesting to me. And for me personally, it was a little bit embarrassing and degrading. You know, I wanted to see more. And I think it’s really valid work, I think it’s—like I say, I think it’s important for all of us to have a voice to do whatever we are, but our particular company was not interested in going or staying in that direction.
Ehrlich: The phrase that, I think this is accurate, Bill Shannon used—he had talked about—it was either honey-dipped dancers or honey-dipped choreography—I think honey dipped choreography, where everything was “nice,” gets old.

07-00:34:05
Smith: Yeah, and you know, like I say, I was just so tired of people putting things on stages, you know, and this was a tremendous issue when we were curating the festival with Jeremy in Boston, because Jeremy—

Ehrlich: Which one?

07-00:34:26
Smith: The international festival in ’97, because Jeremy’s a mainstream dance presenter, and he’s known for presenting a certain level of work and a certain quality of work. There were some people in the integrated dance community who were really pissed off, because they weren’t getting their full evening to do what it was that they do, because Jeremy didn’t, and we didn’t feel like in that context, it was appropriate. It was really tough, because it’s hard to find a way to tell people that, you know, the work that they’re doing is maybe not quite right for this particular venue or this situation. It’s painful. One of the things I wanted to do at the international festival was to get together and critique each other’s work, because I wanted to hear what people had to say. Jeremy’s like, “Not goin’ there.” He did that with Boston Moves, I think, a festival that he produced of Boston artists and choreographers, dance artists, and it was disastrous.

Ehrlich: In what way?

07-00:35:45
Smith: Well, people don’t have a good way of giving feedback sometimes, critical feedback, and people are really sensitive. It ended up just being ugly and awful, and he said, “We’re not goin’ there.” [pause]

Ehrlich: He actually did mention when I talked to him to ask you specifically about the sort of dog and pony shows the two of you did together.

07-00:36:11
Smith: The dog and pony shows, yeah. Well, we did one at Arts Presenters last year, we’ve done several over the years, basically, just presenting this dance form, and, hopefully, demystifying it a little bit for presenters and clarifying it a little bit for presenters.

Ehrlich: So specifically for presenters.

07-00:36:33
Smith: The ones that we’ve done have been, mostly. But you know, it’s—John Killacky and I have done things together and it’s really hard to get presenters at these conferences to come to something about disability, accessibility, ADA, disabled arts. You know, the presenting world is still way far behind.
Ehrlich: Jeremy actually talked about that, and felt like it’s been a sort of major commitment on his part, and that it’s been like pulling teeth—

07-00:37:03
Smith: Absolutely.

Ehrlich: —to get presenters interested.

07-00:37:05
Smith: Absolutely. Arnie Malina from the Flynn Center [for the Performing Arts] and I and—. Well, MetLife and Arts Presenters gave an award this year. They were awards in excellence in access to presenters around the country who are doing good work, or superb work, in outreaching to the disabled community, in specific. I was on the panel that reviewed those proposals. We got thirty-two proposals. I think about six of them, we took out right away because they just didn’t really fit the guidelines. But we’re talking about a country that has thousands of presenting organizations. We had thirty-two proposals from presenters that felt like they were doing exceptional work and reaching audiences with disabilities.

Ehrlich: Well, that says a lot.

07-00:38:11
Smith: One of my pet peeves, and I bring it up a lot, is that, you know, for any organization that’s getting federal money, state money, city money, county money, there are ADA compliance clauses. And if they really went out and enforced that, they’d pull—I bet you it used to be ninety percent of the grants or more; I think they’d still pull seventy, eighty percent of the grants, because there are a lot of organizations that are not looking at this and don’t want to look at it. You know, because the whole idea of ADA compliance scares the shit out of business.

Ehrlich: Right, it just translates, in their minds, as money.

07-00:38:49
Smith: As money.

Ehrlich: As loss.

07-00:38:50
Smith: And they don’t see the opportunity in it. Well, the really great thing is that the Flynn Center this year was one—I didn’t get to review that proposal, because of conflict of interest. But they were one of the organizations that got—and it’s a ten-thousand dollar award, you know? Ten-thousand dollars, people just don’t give away. So one would have thought that a lot of presenters would have wanted to go for that. But the Flynn Center got one of them for the work that they did with us in our residency there, and—. How do I say this? Arnie was really committed to bringing us, and he was really committed, and his organization is really committed to looking at access, and they did a great job.
We had to pull out sixty—more than that; I think a-hundred-and-twenty seats, or sixty seats or something, out of the theater to make room for people in wheelchairs and, you know, whoever they were coming with. For the first time ever, we had our performance audio described. We had sign language interpretation at our performance and the school performance. We did a lot of work in the community. What was really cool is that their whole organization has bought into this now, but they’re one of how many, you know? Arnie and I did a session at Arts Presenters with The Kentucky Center, who won the other award, and we had one person show up, and it was after the luncheon when The Kentucky Center and Flynn Center had received this award. John Killacky and I did a session at Western Arts Alliance, three years ago? In San Jose. We had five people show up. So it’s still, you know—I mean, sometimes we still feel like we’re beating our head against the wall.

The thing for Mollie, the challenge with her in booking us is that people don’t believe it until they see it, and then they get it. But it’s really, you know—we’re not one of twenty-thousand ballet companies. You say “ballet,” and you can get a sense. You say “contemporary ballet,” you say “modern dance,” but you say “integrated dance” or, you know, “dance that has disabled people in it,” and the screen goes blank. That was another reason that I felt really committed to bringing this company to a level where they were creating work that really did belong on the same stage as these other contemporary choreographers’ work.

Ehrlich: Well, so maybe there’s just sort of a lag—there’ll be a lag between this new thrust of professionalism and presenters catching up?

07-00:42:18

Smith: Yeah, but I think in general, it’s so hard for disabled artists to get training. I’ve heard artists who are disabled in all disciplines talking about this. It’s hard to—you know, people want to get cast in theater roles. They want disabled people playing disabled roles in movies and in theater, but the people that show up for the audition aren’t trained. Yes, they’re in a wheelchair and yes, you know, they are disabled, and it’s important, really, really, important that we get disabled artists trained to the place that they show up at an audition for a disabled part and they’re better than the nondisabled person sitting in the wheelchair.

Ehrlich: Actually, can you talk a little bit about— I know you’ve been involved in the—I can’t remember now the name of the conference that we were both at, specifically looking at what is it—?

07-00:43:27

Smith: Was it the NEA conference?

Ehrlich: Yeah, that was at the Oakland Museum.
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07-00:43:31
Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: It started off with a meeting at the San Francisco Foundation.

07-00:43:35
Smith: Mm-hm.

Ehrlich: With the focus specifically—

07-00:43:37
Smith: Oh, the last one, yeah. I ended up not being able to go because I got really, really sick, and Bonnie went and did my thing for me. But what did you want to talk about it?

Ehrlich: Well, I mean, I think just that there—

07-00:43:54
Smith: That was the California Arts Council.

Ehrlich: Yes, and that there are people working to specifically—and you have been one of them—specifically to address this issue of lack of training, lack of opportunity—

07-00:44:08
Smith: Lack of professionalism.

Ehrlich: —lack of profe—what is it that artists across all genres with disabilities need, in order to get training and live lives as professional artists?

07-00:44:21
Smith: Accessibility. You know, how many dance studios in San Francisco have a flight of stairs? How many dance studios can Bonnie and I go to that have a teacher that won’t freak out? You know, we’re in the Bay Area. [laughs] Training is really hard, and it’s been hard for us to figure out how to train ourselves and to train our own dancers sometimes. This year, 2005, we’re doing our first summer school. I’ve been talking to people around the world about trying to set up an international training institute where disabled dancers can go any time of the year, or people who are disabled, who have an interest in dance, to get trained up. But training is so crucial.

We have an audition and—you know, most auditions for dancers in the Bay Area, like, if there was just a call for a female modern dancer, couple-hundred, easy, dancers will show up. We have an audition and we have twelve—I think we had twelve people with disabilities show up, and really, there were only two of those that would have fit what we needed and had the training we needed. One of them was in London—in the UK somewhere, not London—and we couldn’t afford to bring him, and luckily, Stephanie joined us, Stephanie Bastos, in our last audition. But, you know, we don’t have
hundreds of people showing up; we don’t have the luxury of having twenty different really superb trained dancers to draw from. And this is—it’s a crisis. It’s a crisis for all of us working in this field. And it comes down to, you know—I mean the ADA, here in the States, has been in effect for almost fifteen years, or fifteen years, and I could go to San Francisco and sue ten places right off the bat, you know. But you don’t sue your friends.

Ehrlich: Right. Or the issue of, you know, being able to get into the theater, but not onto the stage.

07-00:46:48
Smith: Yeah. You know, the funny thing was, at that CAC [California Arts Council] conference that you’re talking about, John Killacky got stuck in the lift.

Ehrlich: Right.

07-00:46:57
Smith: And he was stuck in the lift for, I don’t know, fifteen, twenty minutes, something like that. [laughs]

Ehrlich: There is now this new network—

07-00:47:07
Smith: That’s forming, yeah.

Ehrlich: —with the NADC.

07-00:47:12
Smith: Yeah, through the National Arts and Disability Center, in UCLA.

Ehrlich: The point being to link together people who are concerned about these issues—

07-00:47:20
Smith: Yes.

Ehrlich: —to try to make changes.

07-00:47:22
Smith: Yeah. Yeah.

Ehrlich: What were you going to say?

07-00:47:26
Smith: Oh, I can’t remember, but just, you know—I think being on that awards panel this year was just so eye-opening to me and also really discouraging, because I would have assumed—you know, I’m thinking, “Oh, my God, why did I say I was going to be on a panel? I’m going to have, like, a hundred-and-fifty proposals to read in a week!” I got three. It took me a day, you know? And it’s just discouraging how little interest and action there is being taken out there
to—you know, and there are millions of disabled people in this country and they will go see work. They spend money. We spend money.

Ehrlich: So it sounds like there’s just this huge divide now, that you’ve gotten to experience personally—

Smith: Oh, yeah.

Ehrlich: —between watching the company and the work you do shoot through the roof, in terms of quality, and the sort of pleasure in that; but a divide between that and how it’s perceived by the presenters?

Smith: Well, and by—you know, I mean, what’s happening in our company is not happening for disabled artists in the community. It’s not like all of a sudden everybody can go take a dance class. And, you know, there are so few of us around the country. We get inquiries from all over the world, all over the country, “Where can I go learn to do this?” Well, you know, the nearest thing is three-hundred-and-fifty miles away or, you know, two-thousand miles away, or—. We’re still really young. As a field, we’re still really young, and we have a lot of things in the way. Lot of barriers in the way, because we’re still dealing with attitudes, we’re still dealing with accessibility.

Ehrlich: So it’s sort of a mixed story now, in terms of—

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: —when you look at AXIS, what you guys have managed to do.

Smith: Yeah, because the struggles are not going to go away. I mean, we’ve created a great company, you know, we have a great product, we’re stronger than we’ve ever been; but there’s still the theater that we can’t get into, and there’s still the dancers that we can’t find, and there’s still how do you pay people? And, you know, it’s intense.

Ehrlich: Well, I’m sure we’ll probably say more about it, but I’m wondering, should we move on? Is the next choreographer Stephen Petronio?

Smith: The next one that we worked with—mm-hm.


Smith: Sonya did another piece for us.
Ehrlich: Which was?

Smith: At about the same time. *Suite Sans Suite.*

Ehrlich: Right. Do you want to talk about that experience?

Smith: Yeah, that was our second time working with Sonya. She’d done one piece for us and rehearsal directed us through Bill’s piece, and she’d done company classes, so she had a great amount of information. It started out as a duet for Nicole and I, because we needed something that we could do, that we could just do the two of us, something that we had to perform, so if we had to go to a conference or go to something—and we needed a little bit more material for our home season, in 2001. And so Sonya agreed to build around a duet, this series of pieces. She used it for her season, too, which was good, so she got a little bit of double mileage out of it. But it’s a series of duets and solos, and a trio and a quintet, set to Tin Hat music. It’s really quirky, really odd, very gestural, very theatrical. Oddly enough, we use red folding chairs in it, and then oddly enough, the same year, Stephen wanted chairs in his piece. Same thing happened to Sonya. She wanted me in a big skirt for the first piece she did in the home season with Joe’s piece, and Joe got a *bigger* skirt. You know, it’s just so funny. This year, what’s the theme this year? Ah, I can’t remember, but it’s like that. It’s like chairs end up in once piece, then all of a sudden a completely unconnected choreographer wants chairs in his piece, so—. But *Suite Sans Suite,* we’ve gotten a tremendous amount of mileage out of it. People love the piece. We do it for kids. It was one of the pieces that we toured all last year, which was nice for Sonya, because she’s so talented, but she hasn’t gotten nearly the exposure in the States that she really deserves. So it was nice to get her work out there, around and about.

Ehrlich: Can you say a little more about the piece?

Smith: Well, it’s set to Tin Hat Trio music. It’s kind of a French *musette,* you know, and a lot of it kind of reflects the café scene, and it’s a lot about weird relationships and, you know, those of us in it, some of us have more of a weird character than others. The costumes are vintage. Mario Alonzo did costumes, and they’re kind of a 1940s type look, and it’s just a fun, weird piece.

Ehrlich: Funny, too.

Smith: It’s hilarious. It’s really funny. Yeah. It starts out with a duet between—it was originally Stephanie McGlynn and Nadia Adame, and now Stephanie Bastos and Renee Waters do it. But a nondisabled person starts out driving the power chair, and there’s this kind of funny duet between them, and then Jacque, or
Sean now, comes out for a solo, pulling his pants up and getting his clothes on, minus a shoe. That goes into a duet, and then there’s another duet, and I come out with a shoe, with Jacque’s other shoe and, you know, throw it offstage. It’s just—it’s very funny. It’s just hilarious. And it’s very gestural and really, really nice partnering and timing work in it. Sonya’s partnering work is really incredible. Yeah. it’s a good piece. [pause]

So we started working with Stephen. Stephen was a little bit more reluctant to work with us, I think. I’d heard his name a lot. I actually hadn’t seen his work. And he was in San Francisco, and I was at Yerba Buena for a performance, and he was there, and John said, “Oh, Stephen, you should meet Judy, and you need to do a work for them. And Judy, this is Stephen, and he needs to do a work for you,” and we kind of looked at each other. [Ehrlich laughs] “Hi, how are you?” So we started out by doing a workshop with Stephen, during one of his residencies at San Francisco Performances, and we had a really good time. It was a really, really fun workshop. But I think he was a little bit freaked out. He’s known for really, really fast articulate footwork, and I kind of didn’t know this about him. He just looked like a really interesting person, and I liked him and, you know, his process was interesting and—but he had to be a little bit talked into it. He wasn’t quite so sure.

Ehrlich: So what is it, do you think, that had him intimidated?

Smith: Well, what’s he going to do on these people, you know? But what happened was, I finally talked him into it, and we got quite a bit of funding. We got MAP Fund grant, and from Rockefeller, we got an NEA grant.

Ehrlich: What was the first one?

Smith: MAP. Multi Arts Production Fund. And we got a Rockefeller. We were runner up for National Dance Project. But we got a fair amount of attention for the piece, and in between deciding we were going to do the piece and doing the piece, Stephen was in Hawaii on vacation. He broke his ankle, and he ended up not knowing really whether he was going to be able to dance again. It was a pretty severe break. But what happened was he ended up choreographing a bunch of stuff sitting down in a chair. So he came in to us, really, with the idea of—he wanted to do—. What happened early on was we’d kind of say, “Well, who’s available to do this project?” and that would be the dancers that we would kind of turn over to them. Joanna had kind of picked her cast from a workshop that she did with us. But what happened was that Megan was really happy to cut back her activity, and Uli wasn’t interested or available. So it ended up being a quintet with five girls—Bonnie and me, and Nadia, Nicole, and Alisa.
And so Stephen had spent a lot of time choreographing. He often likes to start pieces with kind of a little prelude to a pop song, and he decided he wanted to use Janis Joplin. So he came with all this material, and we had a week to work with him the first time. We just played, and we laughed and laughed and laughed, and had a great time. Stephen has this reputation as being kind of arrogant and difficult. We’d tell people we were going to work with him, and they were like, “Oh, you’re kidding.” He’s just a teddy bear. He’s the greatest guy, and he’s really such an incredible artist. I, you know, luckily got to see quite a bit of his work between when I thought it would be a good idea to work with him and when we actually did, and I love his work. It’s really, really great. He’s getting so much attention in Europe right now, which is wonderful, because he had a few really lean years.

But his idea in his piece with us was that he really wanted to find a way to equalize us as dancers, which was very different for him, because it meant that he was probably not going to be doing a fast piece. But he had also wanted to explore some things with his company that he didn’t really feel like he had the room to, because he has this reputation for a certain kind of work. So what happened with us was he came in and he created *Secret Ponies*. Music’s by David Linton. Mario did the costumes. Alex did the lights. And he was really able to try some things out with us. When he came back after doing our piece, with his next work, we saw definitely that he had taken some of the concepts that he’d worked on with us and put it in his own work.

**Ehrlich:** Well, that’s exciting.

**Smith:** Yes, it was really, really good experience for him, because he got to try some things out and incorporate some different stuff, and it was great for us. Really hard piece. We ended up with, like—I think we had the first week or ten days, and then we had another, like, thirty days. We ended up with, like, forty minutes of material, and we just had to start chopping, you know, and—. Some of the material, he actually kept and used for a section that his company’s doing. But it was a really great process. We had so much fun. We laughed our heads off.

Shelley Senter, who’s [an] incredible dancer here in the Bay Area now, danced with Tricia Brown for years, and is still one of the only people that Tricia lets go out and teach her work, Shelley came in to be a rehearsal director, because we knew we’d need some help. The piece uses a lot of different techniques. The first piece, we all start out sitting, to Janis Joplin, and then it moves into this solo for Nadia that Stephen actually choreographed—he took Nadia’s cane and really started playing with it and using it, and using it as a point of balance or, you know, how to get momentum, and really worked with Nadia. She ended up falling on her butt a few times because he could do things, of course, that she couldn’t push it quite that far. But came out with this really sexy piece. That’s the thing about the
piece is, it’s totally sexy. We’re in these corset dresses and we usually had to put a lot of glitter on. He kind of made the quintessential girls piece for us.

Ehrlich: We should stop there.

[end of session 3]
This is our fourth interview with Judy Smith. So one thing I wanted to follow up on from last time was you had said that in the work that you saw Stephen Petronio do right after he worked with AXIS, that you could see the influence of the work that he’d done with AXIS. I was wondering if you could say more? What was it that you felt like he sort of got to try out with you, that then you saw in the next work?

Well, there’s a part in his piece, which is broken up into five different sections, and we call it the sultry part, and it’s very slow. It’s a lot about being seen, showing oneself, but I think the quintessential thing about it is that it’s slow. When we saw that in Stephen’s work, it was like, “Oh, my God! That’s the sultry section.” It wasn’t the exact movement, but the quality was very similar.

And was that different from things you’d seen him do before?

Yeah, so it was really nice to see that.

And one other thing I was wanting to hear more about was, when we ended last time, you had just said something about sexy, that he created something that was sexy. I was wondering if you could say both more about what that looked like, but also what that meant to you to have a sexy piece? Especially as disabled performers.

Mm-hm. Well, I think that was one of the fun things about working with Stephen, you know, is that he’s really into his body and into himself and into sexuality and everyone else’s sexuality and, you know, he’s so out there about it. He and our costume designer, Mario Alonzo, just really clicked right away, and they made these, you know, tight corset dresses and—I think it was just nice to be seen that way, you know, because so often disabled people are unsexed. And I know that for me, being a lesbian, a lot of people are like, “Well, you don’t have sex. Why would you be queer?” You know? It’s really kind of shocking to people, I think, when they find out that disabled individuals actually have different sexual orientations.

You mean, they can’t make the leap—since you’re not having sex anyway—

Yeah. It’s a hard leap to make. So. So that was fun about Stephen and about his piece, you know.

So did it feel radical to have it be a sexual piece? Or—
Smith: Not really.

Ehrlich: — it’s not sexual, it’s more sexy.

Smith: No, it’s just sexy. Yeah. No, it wasn’t radical and I’ve seen, you know, other disabled artists who have done things to a much more extreme, around sexuality and being disabled.

Ehrlich: Like who?

Smith: Um—God, I don’t know, Esther, right off the top of my head, but I know, you know, that I have seen a lot of work in that area. More from people who are doing theater or experimental.

Ehrlich: And the other dancers, did they sort of enjoy that piece, do you think, like you did?

Smith: We all liked it a lot, yeah.

Ehrlich: Yeah.

Smith: Yeah, we’re on our second cast for it, which is always interesting for people to understudy other folks’ roles.

Ehrlich: Meaning?

Smith: Well, Stephanie Bastos is understudying Nadia’s, you know, taking over Nadia’s role, that was created for her and the way she uses her crutch; so then Stephanie has to learn how to do that, you know, too. But also embody it in her way, you know.

Ehrlich: Does she use a crutch naturally?

Smith: Absolutely, because it’s—oh, no, no, she doesn’t naturally, but it’s very integral to this piece.

Ehrlich: Right.

Smith: So—

Ehrlich: So you had asked me to remind you to tell the skullcap story.
Oh, God, we had so much fun with Stephen, and we played jokes on him a lot. One of the things is he came for ten days, and we set some material, and then he left for a month-and-a-half and came back and we decided that we would joke around with him in rehearsal and so we each took a section of the piece. This part that we had created; it has, like, four different verses, movement verses. We each took one and did it over and over and over, when they’re supposed to be sequential, you know. He’s looking at it—we see him, you know, and he’s all smiling, and he wanted to see the material and make sure that we worked on it. We just are watching him as his face goes—and then at the end, you know, we’re all trying not to bust up; he says, “Did I make that?” We were like, “Yeah, Stephen.” He said, “Wow, that’s kind of interesting.” [Ehrlich laughs] But then we had to fess up.

But what we did in dress rehearsal is that, you know, we’re in these corset dresses and sparkly—we wanted glitter, so we had a lot of glitter on our arms and our faces and everything, and we put skullcaps on. So he was there to set the lights. When the lights come up, we hear this, “What the—” and all we could see out in the audience was Stephen’s glasses, because the house was dark. So we did the whole piece in skullcaps, just trying—and we had—everybody in the theater was busting up, because Stephen’s bald, like, totally bald. So it was very funny. It’s nice to have a relationship with choreographers like that, that you can really just kind of joke with them and tease them.

Ehrlich: Can you say more about sort of the style of how he worked with you?

Smith: Yeah, it was rigorous. The first part is a section that’s all—like, we’re sitting down, and it’s a lot of gestural, which he set pretty much before he came. Then he took a few things from us and tweaked it and everything. But we got to the point where we were afraid to move, especially Bonnie and I, because every time—you know, we do a lot of things, you know, with disabled people stretching and stuff, and he’d say, “Oh, I love that. Keep that.” You know? And so—

Ehrlich: You mean it was just a natural movement.

Smith: Yeah, and the other thing is that we created this whole arm quintet section, where he sat, for instance, where you are, and he would do a movement, and we’d repeat it back in whatever our interpretation was, but we had to remember it exactly as we had created it the first time, because he’s looking at us all together and seeing this. That was really difficult, because you’re doing something, like, really quick, just based on—. He’d do something, and then we’d repeat it and interpret it, and then have to remember that really exactly. And I think that that’s the hardest part about teaching this piece to other
dancers is that, you know, it was created so much in the moment, on the spot, and with such individual movement.

Ehrlich: So he would hold you to the exact movement.

Smith: Absolutely.

Ehrlich: And he’d remember it.

Smith: He’d say, “That’s not what you did,” and he wouldn’t remember it exactly, so it really became incumbent for us to remember it exactly.

Ehrlich: So he wouldn’t necessarily know what it was, he’d just know what it wasn’t.

Smith: But he would know it wasn’t what he had seen. So that was pretty interesting. And then just, you know, we spent one whole afternoon walking in the studio, moving in the studio, like we were in—and this was a little hard, because it was April, and the studio was pretty cold—that we were in the South in a ninety degree night, and ninety-eight percent humidity, you know? And so just, you know, trying to interpret and really stick with his direction. The two hours of walking slowly was—it gets tedious. Then we created—I mean, we had, like, forty-five minutes of material. We had to chop it practically in half. So there were a lot of things that we created using text or—.

One of the things that he had us—and we had done this with Stephen in our original workshop with him—he had us bring in an object, and then we had to quantify it, qualify it. You know, like, so it’s got six sides, it’s five inches long, it’s smooth, it’s—. Then you had to put emotional content to it and create movement out of that. That was a really, really great process. And we ended up [laughs] having to cut that whole section, you know? I think Nicole brought in a rubber duck, and I bought in my dad’s box of ashes and—I mean, there were some just really weird stuff. Another thing that was fun about it was that he asked us all to bring in a piece of music that we really liked, that was music with lyrics. I think I brought in something from Billie Holiday, and Nicole brought in some Gilberto family, which we ended up—“Girl From Ipanema,” which we ended up using a lot in the piece. So it was funny. I mean, we had—you know, he really involved us in the process.

Ehrlich: So it sounds like it was highly collaborative, but he also had a really clear sense of what he wanted—

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: —and also, what he’d asked for.
Smith: Oh, yeah. He’s a great director. Really great director.

Ehrlich: So if you had to sort of put in words what you feel like the company took away from the experience of working with him, can you articulate that?

Smith: Rigor. [pause] You know, the movement is, in some ways, not as difficult as some of our other pieces, and in some ways, it’s the hardest piece we have.

Ehrlich: Can you say more? Why?

Smith: Well, it’s a lot about being really, really, really present and being really connected with each other.

Ehrlich: It’s very theatrical.

Smith: Oh, it’s incredibly theatrical. The lighting is stunning. There’s a lot of different light shooting down. We do use fog, a hazer. So we have fog when we start and, you know, the sequined crutch comes down from ceiling and—. Yeah, it’s very theatrical.

Ehrlich: And I was thinking also, just in terms of the sense of characters.

Smith: Yes, but characters, but being ourselves, you know? It’s a really, really fine balance. It was a hard piece. A very, very difficult piece for us to learn. And I think I’ve already mentioned that Shelley Senter, who danced with Tricia Brown, and still teaches her repertory and sets her work and works with her, came in and rehearsed—you know, to learn the piece so she could rehearsal direct us in it.

Ehrlich: And what about response of the audience?

Smith: Mixed. It’s a long piece. So I think it loses some people. I think a lot of people who are really into dance and choreography really like it. And if you don’t like Stephen and don’t like his work, you’re not going to like the piece, you know? Lot of people think it’s self-indulgent.

Ehrlich: In what way?

Smith: On his part. Well, because it’s a little bit long, and it’s very showy, you know, in the way that Stephen is. But a lot of people love it. And I really love doing the piece.

Ehrlich: It’s still part of your repertory, isn’t it?
Smith: Yeah, we’ll be doing it some this spring. In fact, we’re rehearsing it right now. Taking it down to UC Riverside [University of California, Riverside] in February, and then CSU Monterey [California State University, Monterey Bay]. Then I think we’ll probably do it a few other places this spring.

Ehrlich: So when you’re working on it now, you don’t have him and you don’t have Shelley; who is it who—

Smith: Shelley comes in.

Ehrlich: Oh, she still comes in.

Smith: So she’ll probably come in next week and take a look at it and give us a little feedback. We use a mirror, we use a videotape, we use each other.

Ehrlich: And are you now—I mean, I know you’re the artistic director. Are you sort of the ultimate, at this stage, before Shelley comes in, for example, are you running the—?

Smith: Well, that’s a really tricky thing that we’re working on in this company, because right now, pieces that we’re all in, that no one else knows, the whole rehearsal directing issue is really tough for us at the moment. Alisa really kind of took the lead on a lot of the parts that are for her and the other nondisabled dancer, because she was there and learned the movement and knows it. And then you know, we just kind of—we do a lot of, “God, is this how it was? What was this count?”

Ehrlich: And then you use a video and play it back.

Smith: Yeah, but the rehearsal directing thing is an issue that I’m still losing sleep over, because we’ve got to figure out how to have somebody more consistent. I’m actually hoping that maybe Mario Alonzo will, because he’s been ballet rehearsal director for the Oakland Ballet for a number of years.

Ehrlich: And you’re talking about across all the different pieces?

Smith: No, just ones that we need it for, you know, but it would be great. I mean, it’d be wonderful to have a full-time person in that position, and that that’s what they did, but we don’t really have the budget for that. So you know, I learn as much as I can, and other dancers pitch in where they can, and—. With Sonya’s work, it’s convenient because she’s here. It’s harder with people who live thousands of miles away.
Ehrlich: So in an ideal world, if money was no object, what would that look like?

Smith: It would look like we’d have a person in that position, and that was their job, was to learn the pieces and communicate with the choreographers and make sure that we were always right up to snuff. It’s also harder, though, I think, for a repertory company, because you’re working with so many different choreographers who have so many different ways of—you know, their movement vocabularies are different, what they want to emphasize is different. So it would really mean having that person—like Shelley was with Stephen’s—be in on the rehearsal process and really learn the nuance of the work.

Ehrlich: So is that a goal?

Smith: Yes, definitely. Definitely.

Ehrlich: Anything else to say about working with Stephen or Secret Ponies?

Smith: I don’t think so.

Ehrlich: So maybe we should just keep moving forward in time. I’m wondering about—and I think this is sequential—Nadia’s role in the company. Another dancer who—I spoke with Megan Schirle, and she felt like Nadia’s place in AXIS was really significant in having such a skilled dancer and skilled choreographer as part of the—

Smith: Well, the interesting thing about that is that Nadia Adame, who’s, you know, now back in Spain, she was definitely very important in the company, but she didn’t really dance between ages fourteen and when she joined us, because there weren’t opportunities for her.

Ehrlich: Because?

Smith: She was disabled.

Ehrlich: And can you say what her disability was?

Smith: Nadia trained in Spain, at the Royal Conservatory, studying flamenco, modern and ballet, and I think her dream was really to do flamenco. She was injured in a car accident when she was fourteen. She had a spinal injury, mid-back, and she ended up being able to walk with a crutch. But she wasn’t able to dance after that. She came to the United States—I think I talked a little bit about her—to study English and finish high school and ended up wanting to
go to college here. She applied to about thirty dance departments and was
turned down by every one of them and so she went to University of Colorado
in Boulder, in theater. She got into the theater department. She did a major in
Spanish literature, I think, and theater. They had told her that she’d be able to
take some dance classes, but it really didn’t work out for her very well. There
was only one professor who really kind of embraced her being there and was
willing to help her out in the movement department. A lot of the other dance
instructors, she’d be in the class kind of in the back, you know, trying to
figure out her own adaptations. They didn’t know what to do with her, and
they didn’t want to really take the time and—you know, so for her, it was a
rather frustrating experience. But between the time that she got hurt at age
fourteen and when she went to college, she did, at age nineteen, choreograph
an entire evening of work, that she showed in Spain. So she just kind of had,
you know, a natural talent. But she came with seven years of training as a
child and a teenager, and then, basically, ten years of not being able to really
train.

Ehrlich: And did she walk—she uses a cane?

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: And does she have a prosthetic?

Smith: No. No, she has a spinal cord injury, so—

Ehrlich: Oh, right.

Smith: You know, she understudied Megan’s role and took over Megan’s role in
Bill’s piece, and she choreographed a work for us called El Ultimo Adios.

Ehrlich: Right.

Smith: Which is a really lovely piece. It’s a quintet with a duet in the middle, so
there’s three sections; and kind of loosely based on her aunt and uncle’s
relationship. They were killed in the car accident that she was hurt in and, you
know, kind of a tribute to them.

Ehrlich: What is the significance to you of her role within the company?

Smith: She was just so talented and just a natural performer, really quick learner.
Beautiful person. She’s just a really beautiful person and, you know, a delight
to have around.
Ehrlich: And was having someone within the company choreographing at her level, did it feel like coming—?

08-00:19:44
Smith: Well, we’ve always had people in the company choreograph. And—

Ehrlich: I was thinking specifically with her skill level.

08-00:19:50
Smith: With her?

Ehrlich: Or did it not seem—

08-00:19:53
Smith: It wasn’t that—no, it wasn’t any different than what we’ve had. You know, Alisa’s created some really wonderful work in the company. She and Megan created together a duet, *Up Syncline*, which you’ve probably seen on video.

Ehrlich: Yeah.

08-00:20:08
Smith: It’s a really, really good, strong piece. Stephanie and Uli reworked the rope duet of *Air*. You know, that’s one thing that we really are trying to also keep going in this company, is opportunities for company members who want to choreograph, to do that.

Ehrlich: I had the sense, from Megan, that she thought that the quality level somehow was significantly different, but maybe that’s not your perception.

08-00:20:39
Smith: No, that’s not my perspective. I think that’s Megan’s perspective.

Ehrlich: And so we’re at, I think, about 2001 in time. Does that sound—? You worked with Stephen—

08-00:20:56

Ehrlich: So can you just catch us up, in terms of where does Mollie McFarland fit in? Is she—?

08-00:21:03
Smith: Mollie came in in May, 2002.

Ehrlich: Okay.

08-00:21:07
Smith: Yeah. This is Muffin. [Smith’s cat]

Ehrlich: Muffin, you’re on camera. [Smith laughs] And what year did Nicole leave?
Nicole left at the end of 2002.

Okay, so the—

Yeah, her position kind of transitioned gradually. When she resigned as education director in December of 2001, the idea was that she would, you know, continue dancing with the company and being a teaching artist. She got pregnant right away, which was wonderful for her, so she kind of had to pull out of her dancer role sooner than we had expected. And Christine Chen stepped into her roles, which was—Christine was great. Really fast learner, really got the movement. And then Nicole taught for us through that summer. And Mollie came in that spring.

Do you want to say more about Mollie’s role?

Well, we had tried having a company manager type position I think in 2000, 2001. We hired somebody at kind of a part-time rate, who had a lot of talent and a lot of enthusiasm but not the level of experience that Mollie had. Bringing her in, with all of her contacts in booking—because booking was one of the things that I was supposed to do, but I could never get to it. The thing about booking is that you have to develop relationships with people, and it takes time. I mean, you know, from an initial contact, it can take three or four or five years to actually get the company to that presenter’s venue, even when they’re really interested, because schedules are booked out and, you know, blah-blah. So the great thing about Mollie was that she came in with all these contacts and with an incredible amount of experience. There were things, systems that we needed to set up that she brought that knowledge right away. Also, the thing is, is that it was a full-time position, with somebody who was, you know, very, very knowledgeable and talented and smart.

Which also tells us something about the financial place that AXIS was in, if you could afford—

Yeah, we got to a place where we could do that, and we also got to a place where there was no way I could handle it. You know, after doing, what?—you know, four, almost five years of mostly fifty, sixty, seventy hour weeks. I just—I was burning out really quickly, you know. Plus having gone through a really traumatic departure with Thais and David and trying to build the company back up, and then having this incredibly fast growth and visibility, and then going through Nicole and I trying to figure out how to make that work and having that not work. I mean, it was a bunch of really stressful, hard years. Then waking up in the middle of the night and worrying about the budget and—. But, you know, I just decided that we really did need somebody to take over some of this, and that it was going to mean an amount of expense,
and it was going to mean having to support another salary. And Mollie wanted more than what we were offering her, and what I wanted the position to start at, which was the same salary as I was receiving. And she wanted more. I just said, “Fine,” you know, “We’ll just make it work out.”

Ehrlich: And how did you come up with that money?

08-00:25:27
Smith: Well, AXIS has operated pretty much in the black all the way along, so we’d gradually been building up a reserve. But what really helped us out was that we got a three-year operating support grant from Hewlett Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett. It was a sixty-thousand dollar grant, so twenty-thousand dollars a year for three years. And that, just coupled with, you know, other money that we had, gave me kind of the security to feel like I could make that leap.

Ehrlich: And in terms of the fundraising, did you just figure it out as you went along? I mean, it seems that—

08-00:26:13
Smith: Well, I’d been doing grant writing, you know—

Ehrlich: But it was on your back.

08-00:26:15
Smith: Oh my God, yeah. Yeah, I’d been doing a lot of the grant writing for the company from, like, early on, you know, right away, ’92, ’93. So it wasn’t unusual or something that was new, but what was new was, you know, having to have, like, total oversight of the budget and learning how to develop a budget, because I had done it for projects, but I hadn’t done it for the entire organization. And I’m really fiscally conservative, which I think has served us well, because we have been able to—but what it’s meant, in being fiscally conservative, is that, you know, dancers haven’t got paid what they need to get paid. I haven’t gotten paid what I need to get paid. Alisa hasn’t. You know, the places that we’ve cut corners has been in, you know—and this always happens to dancers. Dancers are always the lowest paid, which is so wrong, but it’s just—. I mean, we talk about this a lot in the field, because there’s such a culture of it. You know, that if you need to cut money, you cut dancers’ pay, or, you know, dancers are the last to get paid.

Ehrlich: Well, in some ways, it reflects our nation’s attitudes towards the arts, that the artists themselves—

08-00:27:27:36
Smith: And artists, yeah.

Ehrlich: —are the ones who suffer.
Smith: Yeah. Definitely.

Ehrlich: I guess I’m sort of curious, knowing that you have been the force behind keeping AXIS financially afloat, the sort of learning curve for you. I mean, it sounds like you’ve been—

Smith: It was steep and fast.

Ehrlich: —self-taught.

Smith: Yeah, pretty much. I went to a few workshops and learned a little bit about budgeting, and then we got invited to be in this thing that was a really good idea, that ultimately failed. It was called The Catalogue for Giving. It was a nonprofit that was set up to develop this catalogue of organizations that served kids. The idea was that these would be handed out to people who were known to be philanthropists in the area. We got invited to be in that catalogue, and they wanted quarterly financial statements, and they wanted to know this and that, and this and that, drove me nuts! I hated it. But what it did was it really pushed us to get our act together. Ultimately, we ended up hiring a bookkeeper and getting our bookkeeping system, you know, out of the checkbook and the ledger and onto the computer and—so it was—ultimately, it was a really good thing. But it was a pain in the butt at first, [laughs] because I already had so much to do. It was like, “Oh, God, I don’t have time to generate a financial statement. How do you do that?” you know.

Ehrlich: So I don’t want to get too far ahead, but it does seem like a good time to talk a little bit about how it’s worked out with Mollie and what her primary responsibilities have been.

Smith: Well, I mean, it’s worked out great, and it’s worked out—Mollie, Alisa and I are a really, really strong staff. We get along really well, which is nice. We all have a similar work ethic, which is basically, you work your butt off and you get done what needs to get done. The nice thing about Mollie is she’s really good at leaving at five o’clock. You know, and Alisa and I aren’t good at that. In fact, we both call our partners the computer police, you know, because they want the computer off at night. When you work at home, that’s hard because the office, there’s always something to do and, you know, the computer’s back there and—. But Mollie’s really good at just saying, “Okay, I’m off now. Bye.” But she gets things done.

Her primary responsibilities are booking and logistics around that, so I don’t have to deal with making plane reservations and hotel reservations and figuring out how people are getting to the airport and from the airport to the hotel, you know. She helps me out a lot with board management stuff. She’s
doing a lot of our PR in-house and doing a lot better job at it than I was able to do, because of time. Our website is much more together and much more up to date. I have quite a bit of work I need to do in some of the areas. But just in terms of that, kind of our visibility, she really keeps us out there, you know? Sending out regular emails and dealing with more of the—. Well, also, just having somebody in the office everyday to answer the phone, you know, and to be there when inquiries come in. So, she’s kind of like me and Alisa; she wears a lot of—she wears antlers and, you know, puts her different hats on them and [Ehrlich laughs] one minute she’s doing PR, and the next minute she’s dealing with a hotel problem, and the next minute she’s booking, and the next minute she’s writing a grant.

Ehrlich: The next minute, she’s helping an oral history interviewer with all of the research.

08-00:31:51
Smith: Yes. But I think the really great thing is, I think she really loves the job. One of the things that’s really important to me is to make AXIS a really great place to work, on every level, so that you’re growing on a personal level, on a professional level, and that you’re supported. And I think that most people in the company feel that now.

Ehrlich: That’s terrific.

08-00:32:25
Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: So should we move along, following the path of the different choreographers?

08-00:32:34
Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: So?

08-00:32:35
Smith: So we’re doing Stephen. The year that we premiered Stephen’s piece, what else were we doing? We brought Bill’s back for a second year, which was fun. And then I mentioned Up Syncline by Megan and Alisa. That was kind of a long process; I think it took them over a year [laughs] to do that duet. But it’s really, really great. Then we also had Stephanie and Uli’s, the rope duet, Of Air, which they reworked a little bit together. So that was kind of our second home season, you know, in our new configuration. Oh, no, and what—the other thing that we had, was Sonya Delwaide did Suite Sans Suite for us.

Ehrlich: Right.

08-00:33:30
Smith: Which is just such a great piece.
Ehrlich: Can you describe it?

08-00:33:34
Smith: I think we’ve talked about it, actually, a little bit.

Ehrlich: Did we?

08-00:33:36
Smith: Yeah, we’ve talked about that one.

Ehrlich: Oh, yeah, we did. That’s right.

08-00:33:39
Smith: Yeah. Yeah, because we talked about that before Stephen, I think.

Ehrlich: Right.

08-00:33:43
Smith: The funny—

Ehrlich: You talked about Sonya all at once.

08-00:33:46
Smith: Yes. Yeah, we talked about her all at once, yeah. Yeah, so that was kind of 2001. And then 2002 was actually, for us, kind of an interesting year. Sonya was creating a new work, Sans Instruments, and we had eight dancers. So we brought in a guest dancer, Kate Weare. Wonderful dancer, now in New York. She’s actually fairly phenomenal. She had done a lot of work of Sonya’s, and Stephanie was pregnant, and we needed somebody to come in and—now, was Stephanie pregnant? I can’t remember why she couldn’t be—no, she wasn’t pregnant, but she was working on getting pregnant and didn’t want to commit herself to a piece that she didn’t know she could finish. So Sonya did this major work. We got a really great grant from the City of Oakland; it was a commissioning grant that they did one year. I think that was all that they were able to—next year, the program didn’t get funded. But SoVoSo, who’s an Oakland based ensemble group—David Worm primarily wrote the music. He wrote the music, and then they performed it life.

Ehrlich: What was his name?

08-00:35:09
Smith: David Worm. But SoVoSo is a wonderful group, a great, really, really great group of people. So we brought him in. He was somebody that Sonya was interested in working with. We had hoped that Homer Avila would join us in that piece. Homer was a professional dancer who lost his leg to cancer. He came to visit us in spring 2002 and to kind of start working with Sonya. I met him through Bill T. and Jeremy Alliger. They both, you know, called me right after they found out about Homer’s amputation and said, “You need to get ahold of this guy,” and so Homer and I connected pretty quickly. But Vic
Marks actually really kind of got us connected. Or no, that’s not true. Homer got us connected with Vic. That’s what happened. But I had talked to Homer, you know, many, many times, and had talked to Sonya about him and, you know, we’d watched some video and—

Ehrlich:

He was in New York.

08-00:36:24

Smith:

Yeah, he was in New York and we thought it would be really interesting to have him join us for this piece, so he came out and rehearsed with us for about ten days, and Sonya—of course, it was supposed to be an exploration, but Sonya always ends up starting to set material. That was in March, and Homer was supposed to come back in May, but right before that, he found out that he was having a recurrence of cancer, and that it was in his lungs. So ultimately, he wasn’t able to join us in that piece. But we invited him to perform a duet that Alonzo King had created, PAS, which basically means duet. Or dance. I’m so bad on my French. It was a really, really gorgeous duet that Andrea—I’m going to have to get her name. Why don’t I remember these things? His partner, Andrea, and he performed in our home season. That was really wonderful to be able to present his work, because part of our mission is, you know, to support this work locally, nationally, and internationally. It was a way that we could bring somebody who—I knew that Alonzo’s piece wouldn’t get seen otherwise, and Alonzo is a really important Bay Area choreographer. This piece is stunning. Absolutely stunning.

Ehrlich:

I’ve seen it.

08-00:38:02

Smith:

You’ve seen it on video.

Ehrlich:

It’s breathtaking.

08-00:38:03

Smith:

Oh, my God! You know, and Homer is just a quintessential performer. The piece just brought down the house. So it was nice to have him there, even though he wasn’t able to be in Sans Instruments.

Ehrlich:

Can you say what about the piece was so powerful?

08-00:38:21

Smith:

Him. And the way he moves. I mean, he had one leg. And his balance and his athleticism and his commitment to his dance. He was just an incredibly powerful performer. But oddly enough, he thought, and a lot of people thought, that he really came into himself after his leg was amputated. He really used dance, you know, as his rehabilitation.

Ehrlich:

I feel like this is—we had originally—the plan had been for Homer to be part of this—
Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: —interview series, and he was very excited about being part of it, and he died before he was able to be interviewed. So this is our chance, really, for you to say as much as you can about him, because this becomes part of his legacy.

Smith: Yeah. Well, Homer was pretty incredible, because after he found out that the cancer had gone, you know, from his hip into his lungs, he called me and said, “Well, I’m not sure if I can make it out,” and “I’m having a little bit of a problem and—” I’m like, “Homer, there’s ten people depending on you out here. What is going on?” and I made him tell me. I was one of the first people that he told and he didn’t want anybody to know. I was so crushed when I found out that he had cancer again and—. My mother died of lung cancer and I know that the treatment for lung cancer is not very successful. He, you know, was trying to gather information and find out from doctors what his chances are, what he should do. So he really did need to stay in New York. It was also, for me, difficult to think about bringing him into a piece and setting this, you know, twenty, twenty-five minute work on him, when we didn’t know whether or not he would be able to do it, so I was just in this quandary. And he didn’t want me telling anybody.

I got off the phone and, of course, told my partner Iva about it right away. And I really felt like I wanted to honor, you know, Homer’s wishes, but we were starting rehearsal, like, in two days. [laughs] I had to tell Sonya and everybody what was going on. We made an agreement. I didn’t tell them he had cancer. I said—you know, I told Sonya. But I told everyone else that he was having some health issues and he wasn’t going to be able to be involved and—. So we went on and created Sans Instruments without him, which ended up to be a really great piece, and Jacque and Nadia got an Isadora Duncan Dance Award for a duet that they did in that piece.

But Homer was a very complex fellow. You know, everybody loved him. He knew everybody. He was out all the time. He was social. I mean, he’d make friends on BART or at a bus station. He had a community here on the West Coast. He had his New York community. He developed a European community. He went over to work with William Forsythe and his wife, whose name I’m also not remembering right now.

Ehrlich: It’s okay, we can always fill these in later.

Smith: Oh, God, I’m such a ding-dong. I mean, any other time, these names would just pop right into my head.

Ehrlich: Don’t worry about it, Judy.
Smith: So he had, really, communities all over the world of people that were really involved and invested in him, and he was very, very private. He didn’t want people to know he had cancer again, because he didn’t want to be seen as, you know, walking dead, and didn’t want people to feel sorry for him. You know, and so for those of us that did know, it was kind of a big burden. I just felt like, “Homer, you know, you’ve got to tell people, because you’re going to need support.” But ultimately, what happened in his research was he decided he wasn’t going to do any treatment, and I was so relieved, because I knew that if he started chemotherapy and started radiation, he would be too sick to do anything. You know, the treatment is so debilitating.

So he ultimately came out and performed Alonzo King’s piece in our home season. And Vic Marks created a solo for him. He created some of his own work. He performed all over the place. I think that the thing that was really lovely about Homer is that, you know, he’d been a professional dancer all his life and he had been in that world, and yet when he became disabled, he was really willing to embrace the disabled community, and to embrace his disability, and to realize that there were people out there, and disabled artists out there, disabled people who could help him and inspire him. He was just really willing to just kind of involve himself with a community that, you know, a lot of people who become disabled—and me, myself included—don’t want to associate, but he wasn’t that way.

Ehrlich: The thing that struck me about him, in the brief time that I met him, was how it seemed like everything was about community and connection, that he talked about that a lot.

Smith: But the interesting thing was, was that there weren’t very many people that were really close to him and really knew what was going on with him. He was so intensely private, you know? And it was very hard for him to ask for help. I think there were probably only five or six of us that knew he had cancer, with all of these hundreds of people that knew him. I’d tell him, I’d say, “Homer, you know, you’ve got to let people know at least that—. Don’t tell them that you have cancer, if you don’t want; but let them know that you don’t know what your health situation is going to be, because you’re planning all these projects, and these people are depending on you,” you know.

Ehrlich: And how did he respond?

Smith: He didn’t want to. Vic Marks created a solo for him called Solo, and there’s a lot of him running in the piece. Laying on the ground on his side, running, and, you know, balancing on one leg, running, and leaping on one leg and—. Vic was one of the people that knew, and I just feel like she completely captured—because that’s what he was doing, he was running for his life.
Ehrlich: Yeah.

08-00:45:35

Smith: You know? And everyday, he was running for his life and dancing for his life. I feel like Vic captured him in a way that other people didn’t. I think her statement at the memorial service that we had in San Francisco was perhaps the most honest. Because she wasn’t afraid—I mean, Homer was a nightmare to schedule. You couldn’t get ahold of him, he wouldn’t return calls, he wouldn’t return emails. He showed up, you know—for our first performance, opening night, our call was six-o’clock, he was the second piece on. He showed up at ten after eight. Andrea was a mess, you know, and—I mean, he would just do these things that you just wanted to kill him. Or at least scream at him. But ultimately, you really couldn’t, especially if you knew what was going on with him. But Vic really talked about that part of him that was so kind of self-involved and self-indulgent and distant. I know at one point, after he’d been doing the piece for a while and came back—because he did it in our home season in 2003. He did Vic’s piece, Solo, and Vic had been rehearsing him a little bit and she said, “You know, I really need you to be more generous,” and he said, “I don’t feel generous,” you know. She was able to say those things about him.

The rest of us were—I think, you know, everybody was kind of in awe of him. He was so charming and so charmingly manipulative that, you know, “Oh, sure, Homer, go ahead, fly to Washington, D.C. on our dress rehearsal night and take the red eye back, and we’ll hope that you get there for the performance the next night,” you know? I mean, he was just always doing these things. And his life was such chaos. I mean, you know? But that’s what he needed to do. So we all put up with it in whatever ways we could, and Vic and I would get on the phone—especially because when he performed her Solo in our home season, we were sharing that season with Vic. So I had my logistics I was dealing with him with, and she had hers, and we at least had each other to bitch and moan about Homer with.

But he was—you know, he was just one of a kind. I think that he is probably the most talented disabled dancer yet, because he was so highly trained, and he was so able to translate that training into a one-legged body. And he was fearless. He was just fearless, and fierce, in his commitment. He ended up—he performed in our home season in 2003, and he looked exhausted. He was very tired, you know. He just said, “Oh, God, I need a rest.” I tried to keep in touch with him, you know, and we’d talk every few months, and I’d check in with him. You know, “How you doin’? What’s going on?”

He actually found out, I think it was in December, so a month after our home season, that the cancer had spread to his heart. Again, he didn’t really tell anybody. And he died on April 25th of 2004. You know, it was interesting. He had his amputation in April, on April twelfth. He found out that he’d had a recurrence of cancer almost to the day of his amputation, and then he died in
April, you know? But interesting enough, he’d been in Europe for a few weeks. He had a lover over there, a partner, who he was very in love with, and she was very in love with him. He came home, went to dance class on a Friday, went to a performance at DTW in New York, Dance Theater Workshop, on Saturday night, called a friend and said he was taking a cab to the hospital, that he wasn’t feeling well, and he died Sunday afternoon, which is exactly what he wanted to do, you know? He wanted to just go out dancing, and he didn’t want to be sick a lot, and he didn’t want to have a long, drawn out thing. I mean, it was really kind of magical and mysterious and beautiful that he really lived his life and died pretty much the way he wanted to. It wasn’t enough time. And I think, you know, we all just still feel a really tremendous loss. [pause] And I’m sorry that he didn’t get to do his interview, because he’s really dynamic, and articulate, and charming, and funny, and honest.

Ehrlich: He liked the idea of—

Smith: Being immortalized? [laughter] Yeah. He loved performing. He loved being in front of people. You know, that’s who he was, and that’s what he did.

Ehrlich: Maybe we should stop there.

Smith: Okay.

Begin Audiofile 9

Ehrlich: Okay, so we’re back. It is tape nine. You had just been talking about Homer Avila, and you wanted to say a little bit more.

Smith: And I can’t really remember what it was. You know, people, if they want to read more about Homer, can go to danceinsider.org or .com. I think it’s .com. [danceinsider.com] There’s a whole tribute that people—Dana Caspersen, that’s William Forsythe’s wife, and she choreographed a really dark, interesting solo for Homer. But people from all over the world sent, you know, comments about Homer and how he had affected them. The impact that he had had on so many people was so evident, and it’s a really wonderful way to get more of a sense of Homer and—

Ehrlich: What you had been saying when we were off the camera was more about people’s own sense of being close to him, but your sense of him being distant.
Yeah, Homer, as I said, he was very, very complex. Community was really important to him, in a way and, you know, he had so many people that adored him, and he was kind of a hero to a lot of people. At the same time, he was very—you know, he kept a distance from folks and you know, he had some unpleasant sides. Luckily, not a lot of people got to see those, [laughs] because when he was unpleasant, he was really unpleasant, apparently. But you know, he was difficult, and he did drive us nuts, you know, just trying to deal with the logistics of his life and him and—you know, there was this way in which he was also very self-involved, and, I think, necessarily so.

But he was one in a million. Well, one in billions. I mean, he was definitely unique, and there will never be another Homer. I don’t think there’ll ever be anybody on one leg that can dance like he does. Did. It’s a horrible loss. And what was really weird was that so many of us, so many of us—you know, the half-dozen of us that knew he had cancer again, we were so blindsided by his death. I probably shouldn’t use that word, but it just really hit us and surprised us, because he seemed so—endless, you know, and so strong, and so immortal, in a way, that when he really died, it was such a shock. Even though we knew that it was inevitable. And sooner than most of us would have wanted it to be. It was such a shock. I found out the morning of the Isadora Duncan Dance Awards, and his duet with Andrea, that Alonzo had set, was actually nominated also for an award. I think Alonzo got nominated for choreography on that one and it didn’t win, and it truly should have. It’s very sad for us that it didn’t, especially given that, you know, we just found out that morning that he was gone.

Alonzo ended up not being able to make it to the Izzies, and he asked me, he said, “If I actually win this award, will you please go accept it [laughs] for me?” because he was so shaken up and devastated about Homer’s death that he just—he couldn’t even go out that day. I believe that he did end up showing up, and then he couldn’t take it, so he left. But it really did, it devastated a lot of us. Mollie and Alisa were in the office the other day watching one of our videos, because we were dubbing something, and there was Homer, and there was us sitting there crying, you know? [laughs] He really had that affect on people. He had a way of making—the one thing about Home that was really beautiful, he had a way of making everybody feel really important. [pause] So, I think I’m done.

And if anything else occurs to you, you can always—Yeah.

So where are we now?—
Ehrlich: Are we up to 2003?

Smith: Well, we’re up to the end of 2002. After our home season, the beginning of 2003 was really difficult for me, because Jacque and Nadia and Christine all decided that they were going to leave the company. Jacque wanted to go back to school in Canada, and Nadia really had been so homesick. She’d been homesick for years, and had spent ten years in the States, and her grandfather was very ill, and she felt like she needed to go home. And Christine wanted to go to New York and try her luck her, and she actually has done incredibly well. She’s dancing with Elizabeth Streb, which is no easy feat, for anyone that knows Streb’s work. It’s really, really hard work. But that was, for me, a very, very, very frightening time, because I had this company of dancers, you know, and we had this repertory and—. Whenever a disabled dancer, especially, leaves, it’s so frightening. It was so scary to have them both go at once, you know, and to feel like we were losing our repertory, and what were we going to do to replace them? Luckily, Jacque is at least on the same continent, so we’re able to bring him back for things occasionally, but it was—. Losing Nadia was really, really difficult, and also because she and I were very close, and it was emotionally really painful to think about her not being here. So we did an audition, and we got Stephanie Bastos, which has been great.

Ehrlich: Will you just tell us a little bit about what the audition looked like?

Smith: Well, we decided to do a weekend workshop. We had gotten videos and resumes from nondisabled dancers. We screened those and picked a few that we wanted to see more of. So we had them come into a rehearsal. But our disabled dancer audition, we had, you know, people as far away as Australia want to come. Ultimately, some of them ended up not being able to. But we had people from the UK and from all over the United States come. I think we had about twelve disabled folks, and there were really only two that we thought would work well with our needs. One of them was this wonderful man, Michael, from the UK and just, you know, the expense of living in the Bay Area, and the difficulty of getting visas for people now, and his schedule—I had wanted him to come out right away and work on Vic’s piece, and he couldn’t, so that didn’t work out. But we ended up hiring Stephanie Bastos, and she was willing to relocate. She’s been great, because she’s been able to take over a lot of Nadia’s roles and then roles that Nadia had taken over from Megan and—she’s very, very talented, also.

Ehrlich: How did you make the decision about who to let in? Was it ultimately your decision?

Smith: I talked a lot with Alisa and Bonnie. The three of us kind of—ultimately, it was my decision, but I always get a lot of feedback from people. And we had
chosen already two nondisabled dancers, Katie Faulkner and Sean McMahon, and we had a few nondisabled dancers come to our disabled dancer audition, because they were from out of state, and it was a way for us to see them. One of them was Renee Waters, who we ended up hiring. So it was one of those things, it was a really good experience for us. But it was also really scary to know how few trained disabled performers there were out there. And I already knew it, you know, and those of us in the field have been dealing with this issue now pretty seriously for about ten years. But I think that that’s the biggest issue of AXIS and for the field is, you know, how are we going to train these people, and where are we going to find them? For us, being in the Bay Area, it’s so expensive to live here, how are we going to support them? But we ended up making it through, and through that [laughs] period of time. Nadia left in May, actually just right before our audition, and Jacque left in June, just right after our audition, and Christine left also, I think, in May or June. So we brought on a whole new crop of people and spent the summer kind of getting to know each other. What we did right away was we had planned to do a piece with Vic Marks. She came in July, and that was kind of a way for us to really get a week with her.

Ehrlich: How did that decision to work with her come to be?

Smith: Well, I had known that I wanted to work with Vic since I’d seen a dance film that she had done with CandoCo—I think that they shot that in ’94 or ’95. It was excellent! Really excellent. And I had known of her. I knew that she was in California. Homer and she were friends from way back. So when Homer told me that he was going to be working with her, I said, “Oh, God, I’ve always to meet her,” but I was also a little bit reticent to hire somebody that another integrated company had already worked with. Oddly enough, CandoCo’s director, Celeste, had seen our Petronio piece in Florida, and at the same time that we were working with Vic, they were working with Stephen. So we kind of did this—we both did this, you know—. But I decided, “Nuts!” to it. You know, Vic’s work is really—and I’d seen the piece that she had done for Homer, and I loved it, and I met her and really liked her and—. So we knew we wanted to work together, and we needed a project. I think it was a good project, because it kind of gave us a format to really get to know each other, you know, because there was Bonnie, Alisa and I, and then four new dancers. [laughs]

Ehrlich: Will you list the new dancers again?

Smith: Stephanie Bastos, she’s disabled, has a prosthetic foot; Sean McMahon, Katie Faulkner, and Renee Waters; and they’re all nondisabled. The really great thing about the Vic Marks project is that Loris Bradley, who was at Yerba Buena at the time, was very familiar with Vic’s work, and we managed to work in a—we got accepted for a Wattis Artist-in-Residency, which meant
that we got to use Yerba Buena’s forum for a month—actually, five weeks in October, November 2003, to create the work. Then, because I didn’t really have enough work, repertory that was ready to go, because we had all these new dancers, but I wanted to do a home season—I felt like it was really important—Vic agreed to share the home season with us. So we did our residency at Yerba Buena, which was really well supported; and we were able—they presented us. So basically, our home season was wonderful, and really inexpensive for a change. They paid for a lot of the production costs. The other thing that happened was that Vic and I had started fundraising earlier that year for this piece, and we got a National Dance Project Grant, which is one of the most prestigious and most supportive grants to get. It’s kind of a two process grant. You get money for creation, and then presenters get money to bring you to their venue, so it really launched us.

Eve Beglarian did the music. New York composer that I think Vic had done a little bit of work with, but she did a beautiful score, and got to perform it live with us. But we had a week in July with Vic to kind of get to know her and get to know each other, and for her to get to know us. Then we started at Yerba Buena, and we worked there for five weeks, like Monday through Thursday, pretty much, you know, six-hour days. Then Vic went back to L.A. to be with her family on Friday through Sunday. It was really nice to just be able to really immerse ourselves in a process.

Ehrlich: So what was working with Vic like?

09-00:14:47
Smith: Well, it was really difficult for some people. Some people had a lot of problems with her process. I think there were some dancers that she had a harder time connecting to. I loved it. I loved working with her. I love her. We’re going to be doing some more short works with her this year and early next year. She gave us a really, really strong piece. She likes to think of her works as—like the solos and duets that she does are mostly choreo-portraits. That’s what she calls them. For us, she wanted to do kind of a portrait of the company, but dealing with issues of longing and desire and not getting. Vic also really likes to contemplate the issue of being a performer and being seen, and how are you seen? What do you give the audience? The piece has been really, really well received. People love the piece. They love the music.

Ehrlich: Dust.

09-00:15:56
Smith: Dust. Thank you for mentioning that. By the way—

Ehrlich: For history’s sake.

09-00:16:02
Ehrlich: We could say, we’re surrounded by cats.

09-00:16:14

Smith: We’re surrounded by cats here. They are all socially awkward semi-ferals, [laughs] who just kind of found us and moved in. So—

Ehrlich: So say more about the process of working with Vic Marks.

09-00:16:30

Smith: Well, it was very collaborative. She relied on us to create a lot of work, and then she put everything together. She’s a really good director. I like the way she directs. She gave us some wonderful movement exercises to do that we used to build material.

Ehrlich: Can you describe them?

09-00:16:49

Smith: Well one of them, she calls graphics, where you basically go out and make a snapshot with each other, and you know, there’s this whole building process of going out and replacing somebody or connecting to somebody. She’s, you know, a dance professor at UCLA, and she’s a wonderful teacher. We just got a lot of really interesting information, working with her, and, you know, different things that we’ve ended up using in our classes to teach, because they’re such good tools for building material.

Ehrlich: So what was it like to actually work with her? How did she choreograph?

09-00:17:35

Smith: Well, we developed material, and then she started putting it together. I think she had a really clear sense about where she wanted the piece to go. I don’t know what to say, more than that.

Ehrlich: What was it about her style that you loved, and that other people, it sounds like, didn’t necessarily love?

09-00:17:59

Smith: Well, I think the fact that she relied on us a lot for material is kind of hard for people. I think what was hard for her is that some dancers had a harder time holding onto the original material without kind of letting it mutate into what—you know, we all have our movement habits, and that’s the hard thing about doing repertory, is making sure that you’re doing Sonya’s movement, or Vic’s movement, or Ann’s movement, or Stephen’s movement, and not your own movement, not just your own. I think some people’s movement, she was able to connect to more than others, you know, the way that they moved or the style. And for some of the new dancers—. Also, because we hadn’t been in a process together. I was in the process, and also still doing—. You know, Mollie had been with the company for about a year, but there was still—I had a lot of burden, you know, in terms of trying to figure out how to make it all work together. Financially, that was a terrifying year. In August, we were
looking at a huge deficit, something that we’d never [cat meows] had to look at before. Hello, Hugo. Like, forty-thousand dollars. I had never been in that position.

This was after 9/11, and the funding had just fallen out of the arts, just, you know, every single source—individuals, foundations, corporate, government—it all went. So it was really scary for me, I feel like, because I had so much on my mind, and I was also dealing with some really weird health things that had just started. I was having a lot of spasticity, uncontrollable, in my legs, and not sleeping at night. That was a hard, really hard time. 2003 was not a fun year for me. I probably wasn’t as aware that people were having a difficult time as I could have been. But they were also, because they were new, they didn’t feel like they could say that they were having a difficult time. A couple of them are pretty young, and hadn’t worked with other choreographers, so they didn’t really know, you know, how to say, “This isn’t working for me,” or “I don’t understand this,” or “This is difficult,” so I had a lot of bitching and moaning after the fact, and I was like, “Well, thanks for telling me now,” you know?

Ehrlich: Right.

09-00:20:39
Smith: But I think that was kind of part of getting to know each other and how we work as a group. And it also made me more aware that—you know, the company up ‘til then had been really a group of people that were pretty outspoken and pretty used to taking responsibility for themselves and for saying what was working and what wasn’t, and, you know, I had a group of people that I kind of needed to pay more attention to that.

Ehrlich: What kind of experience with disability had Vic Marks had before she came to AXIS?

09-00:21:17
Smith: Well, she had worked with CandoCo.

Ehrlich: Oh, that’s right.

09-00:21:19
Smith: And she’d done a video for two people who are blind. It was part of a video that she calls Touch, and she had done the solo for Homer. Vic’s always been really interested in—while she loves really highly trained dancers, she also has an interest in nontraditional dancers, so it wasn’t a stretch for her at all. It was great working with somebody who already had a body of knowledge about what a wheelchair was and how a wheelchair worked and—. She worked with David Toole in CandoCo, and David, you know, has basically no legs, that are visible; I know that he’s got, you know, stumps. But he’s like, you know, this tall [gestures], and incredible dynamo. But so she was used to people who had different bodies and excited by that.
Ehrlich: So it was a natural fit.

09-00:22:19
Smith: Absolutely.

Ehrlich: I think we should stop there.

09-00:22:22
Smith: Great.

[end of session 4]
So it is February 24th, and this is our fifth interview with Judy Smith, who has let me know she’s tired and just come back from—

UC Riverside and CSU Monterey Bay.

And what were you doing there?

Oh, we did repertory shows, and in Riverside, we taught a master class, which was actually really fun. We had a bunch of grad students and dance theorists. So we did our repertory show in both places, and yesterday we did kids’ performances in one of the local schools. But I’m a little bit tired. Too many late nights and early mornings.

So maybe we can just leave that there and get into where we were in time. Actually, a few follow-up questions from last time. You had mentioned when we weren’t recording, about Homer, that he didn’t have health insurance.

Right.

And then we never followed that up, and I’m wondering if there’s more to say?

Well, I think it’s just, you know, the dilemma of dancers in the U.S. Most dancers average about seventy-five hundred dollars a year income from dance, which means they’re working, you know, a lot of other jobs. Most dancers—well, it’s not even dancers in this country anymore, it’s most people don’t have health insurance. A lot of people don’t. But with dancers, you know, that’s a really, really critical thing, because you’re using your body all the time and there’s a lot of opportunity for things to go haywire. But Homer didn’t have insurance and like a lot of dancers, he lived in poverty.

So how did he manage?

He ended up in the emergency room, and you know, I think probably all of his healthcare was taken care of through general assistance, whatever they have in New York. They probably have an equivalent to, you know, our Highland Hospital or Fairmont.
Ehrlich: So last time, we ended talking about Vic Marks and Dust, and we talked about the process of working with her. I’m wondering if you could just describe the piece?

Smith: Oh, God, Esther, it’s so hard for me to describe our work.

Ehrlich: It’s great having the—

Smith: I don’t know if it’s because I’m inarticulate about it or—. I think in general, dance is somewhat hard to describe.

Ehrlich: But it’s really interesting just hearing—. We’ve done that in the past for each of the pieces, and it’s helpful to have—

Smith: Have I done that?

Ehrlich: Mm-hm.

Smith: Oy.

Ehrlich: It’s been helpful to hear your perception of what the dance is.

Smith: Yeah. Well, Dust starts out with a series of duets in spotlights. In the first one, I am kind of helping Alisa get up off the ground, in a rather mechanical or puppet-like way. Then in the second part of that, Katie is collapsing to the ground, kind of in a similar, very articulated—kind of like a puppet would collapse. Then Stephanie, in the third one, is reaching for things. That’s a lot about, I think, what Dust is about, is like, grasping, you know, reaching, trying to get the unattainable. It’s a lot about human relationship. Somebody said in Riverside that it was a very beautiful piece, but it’s sad, in a way. Vic likes to work with—especially when she’s working with, like, solos and duets, she does what she calls choreo-portraits of people, which I think she really did such a beautiful job with Homer’s. This was kind of a choreo-portrait of our company, looking at it as a community.

There’s some really funny things in it. Like, we have these whole—we call them the tango and the fractured tango sections, you know, that are really comical about trying to get someone and trying to attain that unattainable thing, and then losing it. And there’s a lot of reaching in the piece, you know, reaching for whatever. Different things that we all want in our life. I think one of the most poignant moments in the piece is when Stephanie takes her leg off, and then she moves away from it and looks at it, and looks at the audience, and then she knocks her foot over, which kind of changes the tone
of the piece. We really love doing that piece. And Eve Beglarian did such a lovely sound-score to it. It’s very haunting, very rich, very layered.

Ehrlich: What other kind of audience response have you gotten?

Smith: People love that piece. Right now, in the repertory that we’re doing, it seems like the favorites are Ann’s Piece, *Flesh*, and Vic’s piece, *Dust*. But I think *Dust* is a really accessible piece for people, and it’s a very beautiful piece, and I think it tends to be an audience favorite.

Ehrlich: And what kind of press has it gotten?

Smith: It’s gotten really good press. In fact, I think I talked earlier about a critic in San Francisco who said he would never review us.

Ehrlich: Yeah.

Smith: And he showed up at the show that we were doing with Vic, when we shared our home season in 2003, and he actually gave *Dust*, I think, the most positive review of the whole thing.

Ehrlich: Do you remember—you don’t need to—

Smith: I can’t remember exactly what he said about it, but it was just the fact that he liked the piece, I thought was, you know, it’s kind of like—

Ehrlich: Yeah. Well, the fact that he showed up.

Smith: Yeah. I was glad I didn’t know he was there until after he had left, until after the show, because I would have been disgruntled.

Ehrlich: So is there anything else that we haven’t said about working with Vic, or the piece, or—?

Smith: I don’t think so. We’re going to be doing a little bit more work with her this year. She’s going to do some solos and some duets. I’m really looking forward to that. Vic is such an incredible person, and actually, every choreographer that we have worked with. That’s why I’m in this business, you know, that’s what kind of keeps me here, is that the people in the business are really fantastic people and really brilliant people, each in their own way. Vic is somebody that I consider to be a really dear friend, and she’s such a deep thinker, and like Ann, I think she really brings her politics into the work, and
the way that she views the world and the human condition. It’s really refreshing to work with her.

Ehrlich: So I know that June Watanabe and Remy Charlip were both part of that season.

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: You’ve said very little about either of them or those pieces.

Smith: Yeah. Well, I think it’s because they were kind of pieces that were one time pieces. Remy Charlip, I think—did I talk a little bit about—we talked about his “Airmail Dances.”

Ehrlich: Just a little bit. I mean, we were—

Smith: Yeah, he draws choreography. His original idea when he started these—oh, God, I think it was probably twenty years ago, maybe—was that he would mail them to people and they would get this sheet of drawings. Then what you do with that is you interpret them and you can put them to music or text or silence. You can do them on a stage. You can do them in a bathroom. You know, they’re really very, very versatile. The reason that I came up with wanting to do them is that, one, I’ve really enjoyed Remy a lot over the years; he’s an icon. I love the idea of the “Airmail Dances,” and I really—it was our fifteenth season, and because we had lost dancers—I had wanted to do a retrospective, but that wasn’t really possible. I also wanted to find a way to bring people in who had been involved with the company but, you know, who because of whatever situation, their life had changed, they weren’t as involved. So I was hoping that Megan would do something, and Stephanie, and Nicole, and Uli.

What ended up happening was I had originally seen Remy’s face dance, and I thought that that would be a really interesting piece for Megan to do. Then I saw the wing chair dance, Dance in a Wing Chair, is what it’s called. I thought, “Well, it would be really interesting for her to do that in her wheelchair.” But then she realized that because, you know, her disability’s gotten so advanced that she really didn’t feel she could move enough. So we got David McCauley involved, who was an Ailey dancer and runs the Ailey Camp in Berkeley now. We actually—Mario Alonzo and his boyfriend, Daniel Gibson, built a wing chair around David, basically, and David is the chair, and he helps manipulate Megan. So they got nominated for an Isadora Duncan Dance Award, which we’ll find out if they won in April. But the other part of that was that Shelley Senter, who is a Tricia Brown dancer, based here in the Bay Area now, she had done an “Airmail Dance,” and Shelley has been involved with the company; she rehearsal directed us in Stephen’s piece, so I
was just trying to figure out a way to bring all these different elements in. Shelley took the “Airmail Dance” components, which ended up being David and Megan doing the wingchair dance; Alisa ended up doing the face dance; Stephanie and Stephanie ended up doing a dance on a staircase together. They made a duet out of it. Shelley did her dance to one of Remy’s books, with her daughter Isabel. Am I missing anything? No, that’s it. So it was a nice way to bring all of these different components into the company. Uli ended up feeling like he couldn’t really—he didn’t want to do a solo and didn’t really have time, and Nicole wasn’t involved. But it ended up being a really nice piece.

I’m hoping that there’s sections that we’ll be able to do. We’ve done some—Oh, Katie Wreede, a viola player who was originally with Turtle Island String Quartet, we’ve done a lot of work with her. She came in and did the music. Just solo viola, which is really beautiful. She does such great music when she works with us. And on her own. She’s done—we did a Berkeley Public Access TV project with her, her Wind Chime project. She has these huge, huge chimes. So there were a lot of different people involved in that—you know, either new to the company or people who have been with the company for a long time. And Remy, I think, was particularly moved by Megan and David’s duet. He felt like that was one of the best interpretations that he had seen.

Ehrlich: So that dance had been done by different people in different ways, over and over.

10-00:13:44 Smith: Oh, yeah, it’s been all over the world. You know—

Ehrlich: And everybody does their own spin.

10-00:13:50 Smith: Yep. Yeah, Joanna Haigood actually just did a few evenings at the Exploratorium that were just Remy’s “Airmail Dances.” And she did them up high, on this set that was built, you know, like a storey up. So they’ve been on all over the place. And—

Ehrlich: So his response to your work was—?

10-00:14:21 Smith: Well, I think he really liked the whole thing. Shelley did a beautiful job of weaving them together. She really directed the whole schmiel, and kind of pulled all the components in and reined people in a little bit, you know. “No fuzzy slippers” and you know, things like this. She really kind of kept the aesthetic very pure and clean.

Ehrlich: They’re a very animated series of pieces.
Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, they are. I was actually really, really happy with the way it turned out. The two Stephanies on the stairs, I think, are really fun. You know, it’s the same dance, but their interpretation of them is so different, and they built them separately, and then we brought them together; and it was kind of amazing to see the different places that your eye could rest, because they were both doing a similar thing. It was really, really lovely. And Alisa had a lot of fun with the face solo.

Then June’s piece—June had been wanting to do something for me for a while, and she’s also just an incredible artist and an icon around here. She did a duet for Katie and I, which the process was a little bit difficult for us. June is such a thinker and she would see things, and then it was hard for us to, I think, do them the way she wanted them done, because the piece is very much—it’s really kind of an internal energy that’s expressed externally. But we had some beautiful partnering. The way June did it was that we came in and just Katie and I improvised together, and I think that we have a really good rapport improvising. June just filmed us for a few hours, and then took different—and this was a hard process, and something that we had never really done before in this way, was to take an improvisation and then set it, but try to keep the improvisational quality to it, you know? And the spontaneity. It was a difficult process, but I learned a lot, and I think Katie did, too. Unfortunately, it’s a piece that’s really, really hard on my chair.

Ehrlich: Because?

Smith: There’s just a lot of turning and a lot of spinning and a lot of fastness to it, and a lot of dragging. So my motors get really, really hot, and my electronics slow down. It’s also a piece that, because of what I’ve been going through with my body, is really hard on my body. So—

Ehrlich: What have you been going through with your body?

Smith: Oh, just a lot of spasticity from God knows what, since she’s not telling me, or he or whoever. So we haven’t been really able to get diagnosed, but I deal with a lot of spasticity in my legs and my back, and the piece is very difficult for me because of that, so we’re hoping at some point that we’ll get to go back with June and rework it a little bit, so that we can do it more. But it was a very intense process, and I was really glad because we needed some more work, and I’d been really interested in working with June. It was really nice that she was able to pull that out of her hat for us and hopefully, we’ll get to see it again sometime.

Ehrlich: So I think, unless there’s anything left to say, we should move on to Ann Carlson. Unless there’s—
Oh, we haven’t talked about Ann yet? Geez! Yeah, Ann’s piece is—we love it. We had a great time working with Ann.

Flesh. Yeah, and, you know, we started working with her just around the anniversary of the first year that we’d been in Iraq, and so we talked a lot about the war and about politics and about the world situation, in the rehearsal process. Ann’s a very political person and also, you know, one of these really deep thinkers, and we had a wonderful time working with her. I think for her—she’s been doing a lot of site specific work on the streets, and she did this project on a train in Montana—so for her, it was fun to think about a work for the stage again, that was really a stage piece. But the nice thing is, is that I think that there are elements—there’s four sections of Flesh that we have right now, and it’s pretty easy to take those sections and do them off a stage, you know?

She used text from E.M. Forster’s short story, The Machine Stops, which was actually written back in, I think, 1906, and it’s about our future now. But everybody lives underground, because we’ve destroyed the surface of the earth. It’s a machine that kind of supports everybody and keeps their life together. Alex Nichols did a really nice job with the lighting and set design. We have these rows of light bulbs that come down and are kind of reminiscent of stars. Mario and Ann costumed us in kind of distressed flight suits. We had goggles and gasmasks and things, so it really is kind of a very futuristic piece, but there’s a lot of humanness in it, too. And we had the absolute delight of using Meredith Monk’s music. It’s Meredith’s fortieth anniversary year, and there’s this whole year-long program of her work happening around the country, and I think some of it is happening outside of the country, too. Just really celebrating her. She had asked Ann to be one of six choreographers to do a piece for a performance last November called Dances to Monk at Dance Space in New York. Ann said to Meredith, “Well, I’m doing this project with AXIS; could I combine them?” So we ended up with Meredith Monk music, which is really cool, because she’s not always fond of letting people use her music, and she just gave all the choreographers just free rein to use whatever music they wanted. So we got to play with a lot of different music and came up with about five different selections that we used for this piece.

So you guys got to have input into the actual music?

No, it was really Ann’s choice. Yeah. Yeah. Ann works really collaboratively, so we did have a lot of say, and Ann is one of these people where if the movement doesn’t feel comfortable, don’t do it. Find something else. If you really hate it—and she talked a lot about personal agency, you know, and encouraged us to dress up in rabbit suits for rehearsal, if we wanted. We did
really bizarre things in rehearsal. She’d done a piece on auctioneers and auctioneering, and so she’d gone to auctioneer school and learned all these tongue twisters. So she’d bring these tongue twisters in, which I can’t do worth diddly, and so we did lots of tongue twisters. Then she brought in a bunch of exercises that she had done with Meredith Monk over the years. Different vocal things and movement things, and we really had a wonderful time working with her. I think it—especially for some of the dancers—really changed their ideas about choreography and, you know, how they work.

Ehrlich: In what way do you—?

10-00:22:52

Smith: Well, I don’t know, you’d have to talk to them. But I know Sean just basically said, “Ann Carlson just rocked my world,” and she really did; she’s just so brilliant. She’s kind of an unflappable dynamo. I mean, she just doesn’t—nothing fazes her, you know? Her schedule was really chaotic because she was trying to get some other projects finished and she has three kids, and a partner and, you know, life in New York, and a home on Martha’s Vineyard and just—.

One of the elements that Ann wanted to bring into these pieces was robots, because when she started working with us, she really had this idea about robots, and she saw these robotic things that—these little machines; I think that they were {Billtop?} little Bobcat tractors or something, I don’t know, that they had at carnivals, and you could get in them and box. She kind of had this Terminator idea, you know? She found these robots in Montana, and so her idea was to drive from New York to Montana, pick up these robots and bring them out to us. I’m like, “Oh, God, I do not want to tour with a bunch of robots.” I mean, she was—and I felt really bad that it didn’t come through, but also really relieved. She had a contact, she talked to these people, she was ready to go buy the robots and—You know, they’re carnival people, and they kind of disappeared off the face of the earth, with the robots.

Ehrlich: And you were relieved because you know—?

10-00:24:38

Smith: Oh, my God! We have enough trouble traveling with power wheelchairs and props that we had, let alone dragging these, like—it just seemed like it was just going to be logistical hell for me, and for everyone else, but—. So she let go of the robots.

But we had a lot of support for this project. Arnie Malina at the Flynn Center in Burlington kind of came on as a co-commissioner, and we got a few other co-commissioners—UC Riverside was one, UC Santa Barbara; the National Performance Network gave us some creation money; we got NEA money, Rockefeller money. You know, everybody was really, really jazzed about this project.
Ehrlich: How did the initial contact with—?

Smith: John Killacky. I’d been following Ann’s work a little bit. I found out about her in the mid-nineties. She and Vic were the first and second CalArts Alpert Award winners in dance, and I can’t remember who was first and who was second but through that award, I found out about both of them, and had been interested in them. Ann was doing a big project at Yerba Buena, and John called me one day—and I had mentioned that I was really interested in meeting Ann and I thought that, you know, it would be really great to work with her. John called me up one day and said, “Ann’s here. Why don’t you come on over?” and so we met and chatted, and liked each other right away. You know, for me, it’s always fun to be able to work with other lesbian artists, We did a workshop with her a couple summers ago. Only a few of us, because it was a summertime thing and most of the company was out of town, and we just really had a good time with her. So we started developing this project, and then the Meredith Monk element came in. We got to perform the piece in New York for Meredith in November, and she loved the piece.

Ehrlich: November of this year.

Smith: Yeah, this—well, 2004; we’re in 2005 now.

Ehrlich: Right. That’s true.

Smith: So, but just a few months ago—it seems like a really long time ago. But Meredith loved the piece, and the audiences really liked it, and it was really fun to get to do that in New York.

Ehrlich: What did Meredith say?

Smith: Well, it was a little bit intimidating. She got on the floor and started bowing at Bonnie and I, going, “I worship you. I worship you.” We’re like, “Oh, my God, Meredith, get off the floor. We worship you.” [Ehrlich laughs] She loved the piece, and she really felt like—there’s this whole element—there’s a section called Scared that we do to her song Scared, and it’s kind of a reflection—it’s Bonnie and I dropping off bodies. She really felt like we should tour the United States and go to high schools and show them that piece, because—

Ehrlich: When you say “dropping off bodies,” just for those who haven’t seen the piece, you mean, they’re on your laps and—?

Smith: Yeah. Our other dancers, the nondisabled dancers are on our laps, and then we dump them upstage right in the corner, and Alex did this really weird, eerie
green light behind it. We created this piece when we were really thinking and
talking and living with the Iraq war and what a freaking disaster that is, you
know, and so it really has kind of that element of tragedy and war and death.
Meredith just felt like we should go to high schools all over the country and
show them that piece so that kids stopped going into the armed services.
[laughs] But she loved the piece, and I think the whole evening was really
moving. My other favorite work was a film that Janet Wong did with Bill T.
Jones. Acchh. It’s just so stunning. So it was a complete honor to be on that
program with, you know, Dana Casperson, and Sean Curran, Melissa Finley,
Bill T. Jones—

Ehrlich: Was this at the St. Marks—?

Smith: Yeah, it was at St. Marks Church in the Bowery. [cat meows] Oh, Muffin’s
back. She’s come for her cameo. Yeah, so that’s, you know, I mean, it’s hard
to go wrong when you have Ann Carlson and Meredith Monk.

Ehrlich: Had Ann Carlson had any— There’s Muffin.[in Smith’s lap]

Smith: Here’s Muffin. Muffin, smile at the camera.

Ehrlich: [laughs] Had she had any experience—or what was her experience with
disability?

Smith: Ann?

Ehrlich: Yeah.

Smith: Ann has worked with a variety of nontraditional dancer types. In fact, when I
was first interested in working with her, I was telling people about her and I
said, “Well,” I said, “She did a piece with animals; she can probably work
with us.” [Ehrlich laughs] And I’ve never lived that down. But she did, she
did a piece with farm animals; she did a piece with a quarter horse. She’s done
lots of different pieces with nondancers. And you know, most of her work
lately has been solo work and, you know, site specific work with large
numbers of people. What was your question, Esther?

Ehrlich: Oh, just whether she’d had experience with dancers with disability?

Smith: Yeah, she hadn’t—no, she hadn’t, really, but you know—

Ehrlich: She casts her net wide.
Smith: Well, and in some ways, it’s just not that different.

Ehrlich: Right.

Smith: And I think that’s one of the things that we found out through commissioning, was that it’s not that different. You know, we’re not that different.

Ehrlich: But you had talked about some of the other choreographers, you know, being scared, or coming in with—

Smith: Intimidated. Oh, no, Ann’s unflappable. She was completely un-intimidated and really curious, and generous, and we did a lot of exploration, you know, with her. We have this whole section where we create these two moving statues. I have three other people climbing around my chair—Alisa, Renee, and Stephanie—and then Sean and Bonnie and Katie are another statue. So we kind of do these towering inferno things. We have a really fun section we call Wallpaper and it’s to Meredith’s song “Tale.” It’s just—it’s a delightful piece, but it’s also really, I think, poignant and deep.

Ehrlich: It’s serious.

Smith: Yeah, it’s a serious piece, but there are some hilarious—I mean, Wallpaper is such a funny section. Bonnie and I do this little bumper car thing and, you know, crash our chairs into each other. It’s funny, and weird, you know, and Ann keeps changing the order, so—

Ehrlich: I was just about to——

Smith: ——ask you how it’s evolved over time?

Ehrlich: Yeah.

Smith: Yeah, well, we have, you know, like, four sections, and we got rid of some sections that were a little bit extraneous. Ann likes to change the order, so we’re kind of dealing now with, “How are we going to deal with the lighting that she wants, with the order change?” But you know, it keeps the piece alive, too. I mean, it’s kind of fun to have that, because we kind of finished the piece before we showed it here in September. Then Ann came to Dartmouth, and we did some changes there, and changed the sound a little bit, and added some stuff, and then she was supposed to come to Riverside, because she changed the order in New York. We didn’t do the entire piece in New York, we did three sections. But she decided she wanted to change the order, so now
we’re working with a different order this spring, and we’ll probably bring Ann back, and she might change the order again.

But I love that piece. I really love it a lot. And I just find Meredith’s music so inspiring, and Meredith is a really inspiring person. I think one of the best performances I’ve ever seen was a year ago. She was at Mills [College] in residency, and she did a kind of a retrospective of her work, with students and faculty, and then different musicians from the community. Oh, it was just a fabulous, fabulous show. So it’s really great to be able to work with these people that are just so—I mean, you’re just inspired by them, you know? What’s really great is when they end up liking what you’ve done. Really, really rewarding.

Ehrlich: So are you in ongoing touch with Meredith Monk, or is—?

Smith: When I went to the Arts Presenters conference in New York, I got off SuperShuttle, and she happened to be standing right outside, soo we got to chit-chat a little bit. And no, you know, we’re all really busy. I mean, people are really busy with their lives, but, you know, I do feel like everybody that we’ve worked with, in whatever capacity, if I needed to call them for advice or something—Stephen and I, you know, try to stay in touch occasionally, and Bill and I are in touch every now and then. So it’s nice. It’s nice to kind of try to keep a thread of connection. I’d like to work with Bill and Stephen again sometime in the near future.

Ehrlich: And do they know that?

Smith: Oh, yeah, we’ve talked about it. It’s just, you know, logistics. Bill’s going to be here in May, so I’m hoping to chat with him a little bit and see if we can actually pin something down. But our next projects, we’re going to either rework Jane Eyre or do a new piece with Joe Goode for ’06, and then we’ll be working with Margaret Jenkins in ’06.

Ehrlich: So let’s save the future direction for the end, because I do want to hear all of that.

Smith: Alright.

Ehrlich: Anything more about Ann Carlson or—?

Smith: Oh, I could go on and on [Ehrlich laughs] and on and on and on, you know, and also, it’s the newest piece so—

Ehrlich: Right. And you’re living it now.
Yeah. Yeah, we’re doing it now, but it’s fun. It’s really a great piece.

What about press? What has to be said about it, that’s been meaningful to you?

You know, [sighs] it’s hard to get reviews, but—. What ends up happening with that piece, photos of it end up happening a lot, because it’s a very visual piece. We ended up being the photo in the New York Times and Village Voice kind of review report about the Meredith Monk events, and then Keith Hennessey just did a big benefit for his new space at Yerba Buena, and we ended up being the photo for that in the [San Francisco] Chronicle. I can’t remember what the press has said, exactly, but it’s been favorable.

Yeah, it’s interesting to—I guess interesting to know what ends up sticking with you, from what’s written about you.

I think—yeah. I think that the statues really impress people.

They’re tall.

Yes, they’re tall. Yeah, because Stephanie and Renee are, you know, standing all the way up here. [gestures] They’re very tall. I think Scared really moves people. It’s disturbing. People talk a lot about the press has mentioned Alex’s design in a lot—yeah. And the Wallpaper section is really whimsical. I mean, there’s just so many different elements of it.

How long a piece is it?

It’s about seventeen minutes.

Where does that fall, in terms of length of time, in terms of what you normally do?

Kind of average. Yeah. Yeah, we try to stay between, like, twelve and twenty minutes for rep pieces. Ponies, Stephen’s piece, is a little bit longer.

And is that because of what it seems like the audience can pay attention to? Or because of the dancers? Or both?

It’s mostly—well, part of it’s choreography, you know, and a choreographic choice, but I kind of feel like you can say about everything you need to say in twelve to twenty minutes. I think a big problem in contemporary dance is
editing, because you get so many good ideas generated, and it’s hard to let go of those good ideas. But my feeling is always that it’s better to leave the audience wishing they could see a little bit more than saying, “Oh, my God, I’m so glad that’s over.” You know? I think it’s just not great to saturate people.

Ehrlich:  
So this is something—?

Smith:  
We’re not like the Europeans. We don’t go to four-hour performances in this country. I think we’re much more of an impatient culture.

Ehrlich:  
I wonder if that’s shifted even more so over time.

Smith:  
Absolutely.

Ehrlich:  
Have you noticed a difference?

Smith:  
I’ve noticed it in myself. And, I mean, drive on the roads. We’ve kind of turned into an aggressive, impatient culture. You know, we have kids playing video games, murdering each other. Yeah.

Ehrlich:  
Have you recognized a shift in audience? I mean, the—

Smith:  
Well, audiences all over the country have been going down. Audience numbers have been going down. We’ve all been talking about it in the field for years, you know, and I think that in contemporary dance, especially, that’s true. But even for ballet and everything else. You know, people are—we’re a couch potato society. Stay home and watch videos. Performing arts and live art and—it’s just not as appreciated or supported in this country, which is one of the reasons we like to go into schools and perform, you know, so the—. We like to brings schools to the theater to see us perform, because a lot of kids never have the opportunity to see live performing art.

Ehrlich:  
Why don’t we move on to the East Coast tour, and then spend some real time after that, talking about the whole educational outreach piece? So tell us about—

Smith:  
Well, this past fall, from September 15th to October 30th, we did our longest tour ever. Six-and-a-half weeks in New England. We went to the Flynn Center in Burlington; to the Hopkins Center at Dartmouth College; UMass Amherst [University of Massachusetts, Amherst]; Keene State University—

Ehrlich:  
In New Hampshire.
—in New Hampshire; the Music Hall in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. We did some work at a residential school for kids with disabilities, also near Keene, called Crotchet Mountain. Did I miss any? Oh, UMaine, up in Bangor, University of Maine. So we got to drive all over the place in—well, I call it ten people, two vans, a car, and way too much luggage. But the great thing is, is that, you know, we were there for the entire fall season, and we had an unseasonably nice fall. So we didn’t have a lot of rain, didn’t have a lot of cold weather, had beautiful leaves. We got to see the whole thing change. And we worked our butts off. We really, really worked hard.

Ehrlich: In terms of?

Smith: We did a lot of performing and a lot of teaching and a lot of presenting. Alisa and I went the year before to Burlington and had a meeting with presenters that were interested in bringing us, and Arnie Malina at the Flynn Center kind of instigated the whole thing. We got an entire tour booked in one afternoon, basically, which will probably never, ever happen again. They originally wanted us in February, and I said, “No, we’re not going to New England in February,” so we ended up there in the fall. It just happened that people had this space and this time, and this time, and—. We ended up going back and forth to Burlington three times, which was kind of nice, because it was kind of a home base for us. We just traveled and worked really hard. I think we learned a lot about pacing and scheduling. because we had some days that were, like, thirteen hour days, you know, and then early the next morning, and—because people really wanted us to be doing a lot while [they] were there. We did work in the schools. Alisa and I did a keynote speech at the Vermont Arts Education conference; we worked with business people, we worked with people in the health field, the education field, did a lot of work with kids in schools. In addition to mainstage performances, we did several performances, matinee performances for kids. So we were busy.

Ehrlich: Was it fun?

Smith: Yeah, it actually was, and I was really, really worried about it. It’s a long time to be on the road, and we’d never done it before. Bonnie and I were worried about keeping the equipment going and—. But it was really weird. We were in lift equipped vans, and there’s always things that can go wrong with those, but we really had no chair problems, no vehicle problems. A few little emotional meltdowns but nothings huge. A couple little physical things. Alisa ended up going to the dentist, and Sean had to do some physical therapy on his neck, and I think Katie got a bad cold, but it was remarkably easy. It was really a great experience.
Ehrlich: You had said, I think, near the beginning of the interview or one of the earlier sessions, something, a little offhand comment about how the ADA hadn’t reached the East Coast yet. Can you say more?

Smith: Well, Bonnie and I, in Dartmouth, felt like we had turned green and grown antennas. I mean, people just would stop and stare at us, you know? Just little towns that we were in, there were so many places that had, like, one step up. They just don’t enforce the ADA there. Disabled communities, I think, are not as politically organized and vocal as, you know, maybe they are in some bigger cities, like in this area. It was just the lack of access and the lack of awareness was really astounding.

Ehrlich: And specific—?

Smith: Ongoing. You know, we went to teach at the University of New Hampshire, and they didn’t have an accessible bathroom in the entire athletic building.

Ehrlich: Oh.

Smith: You know, a lot of the theaters took huge steps, you know, to do work around accessibility that needed to be done, but you know—

Ehrlich: You mean specifically to accommodate you guys.

Smith: Yeah, but in the Music Hall in Portsmouth, it’s a building that was built in the late 1800s, and, you know, there’s only so much that they could do. When we were at the University of Maine, there were, like, four seats, you know, wheelchair seating areas, in the entire theater, and it’s like a thirteen-hundred seat, something like that. That part was really hard for Bonnie and I. Everybody else would kind of go off and do all this stuff and, you know, it was hard for Bonnie and I to get around and there were little towns that, you know, eighty percent of the things, we couldn’t get into. New York was that way, too. New York was incredibly frustrating for Bonnie and I. But you know, we’re just kind of, after spending over twenty-five years, both of us, being disabled, we’re kind of used to it, and we just have to roll with it, because if you spend your whole life getting upset, that’s all you’ll have time to do. But I think one of the great things that we did was, in Burlington, we took people from City Hall onto the marketplace. They have this pedestrian—you know, they’ve blocked off the streets, and they have this pedestrian mall, and we put a bunch of them in wheelchairs and took up the mall so they could really experience what it was like.

Ehrlich: And who were the people?
Smith: They were people from City Hall that worked in different departments, planning and such. I think that was one of the funnest things that we did. It was very eye opening for them.

Ehrlich: So that was a planned presentation or—?

Smith: Yeah. That was something that the Flynn Center organized, because they are right off the mall, you know. So being able to do things like that, where you really are, hopefully, able to affect change for a lot of people in the future, you know, and hopefully, the not too distant future—

Ehrlich: Maybe that’s a good sort of segue into talking about the whole education piece of AXIS, which, you know, obviously, it’s been woven into this whole interview, but we haven’t really focused on it. If there’s more to say about the tour, just as it comes up—

Smith: No, I don’t think that there is.

Ehrlich: So I don’t what the easiest way for you to talk about the role of education and outreach in that whole program is?

Smith: Well, I’ll just start from the top, you know. Shortly after we started performing, we starting having people come up to us and say, “Where can I go to do this?” and we didn’t have anywhere to send them. So we started, like, way back in ’88, we started doing a monthly community dance jam, up at UC Berkeley, and then I think it was in 1990, Thais got a California Arts Council Artist in Residency grant, and we started doing some classes for adults.

Ehrlich: Can you say just a sentence or two—I’ve had other people mention the dance jam. What was it like?

Smith: Well, it was just a place where, you know, people of all different kinds of abilities and movement styles and movement experience could get together and come jam. It was based on a contact improvisation model. We’d do a little bit of teaching beforehand, and then mostly, it was a jam. Sometimes it was more structured than other times. It was, you know—it would be a fun thing to do again at some point. We’re just so darn busy.

Ehrlich: So it was a place where people got a chance to explore what their bodies could do—

Smith: Yeah.
And what they could do together, you know. For us, it was also really great, because we were still exploring all of that, so for us, it was kind of like a lab. Early on, lots of different people got involved with the company through that program. As I was saying, Thais got an Artist in Residency grant in 1990, and started teaching adult classes, and shortly after that, we started going in and doing some presentations in the school, but I don’t think that they were that successful, you know. What happened also around, you know, the time that the company—Oh, God, it’s so hard to trace all of this back. So we did the community dance jam. Thais started teaching some ongoing adult classes. Nina Haft and I taught a kids’ class also, up at UC Berkeley; and then we taught another one at the Alice [Arts Center], when Nina got an Artist-in-Residency grant. And then in ’97, when we did the international festival, we did a lot of teaching there. But what happened was that Bonnie and I especially realized that, you know, we’d been doing this work for about ten years, and we didn’t really know how to teach.

Thais was doing—

—was the one who was doing it.

—the majority of the teaching, yeah. We didn’t feel like we were really teaching what we were doing, because we were teaching mostly creative dance, and kind of improvisational stuff. Some of it was a little bit fluffy, but that wasn’t what we were performing or what we were doing. So when the company imploded, one of the things, right alongside changing what we did artistically, was to really revamp our education program. Nicole Richter had a lot to do with that, because she had come from doing an internship with CandoCo and seen their education model, and really, she came up with the name Dance Access.

So before that, had it had a name?

No, no, it hadn’t. So she came up with the name, and she and I applied for Artist in Residency grants through CAC, and both got one. So I started teaching with Nicole, and then shortly after that, we added a kids’ program.

And what did you and Nicole teach? What were you doing?

We taught a performance lab, and we taught a scores and jams class that was kind of more creative dance based. But also, you know, all through our
history, we’ve done video presentations, lecture demonstrations, trainings. People have brought us in to do trainings about diversity, about accessibility, about collaboration, so, you know, truthfully, education is fifty percent of what we do in this company now.

Ehrlich: And some of the presentations were driven by what other people requested of you?

10-00:54:18

Smith: Yeah, we have so many different ways we can approach a subject with our work. If we go into a rehab setting, we approach it more from a disability standpoint. If we go into, you know, a masters program in dance to do a master class, then we really approach it from the repertory standpoint and technique. This summer we’re doing our first ever summer intensive. We’re going to be teaching with Jurg Koch from—he’s now at the University of Washington, and he was with CandoCo for several years. Then Olive Bierenga is going to be teaching the contact improv component. We’ll be teaching choreography. So, you know, we’re really trying to keep developing our education program so it’s really a reflection of what we do in the company. We have the kids’ program that we started about four years ago; and then we had to start a teens program, because our kids were growing up.

Ehrlich: So take us back to—

10-00:55:24

Smith: And those are studio programs.

Ehrlich: So Nicole named Dance Access.

10-00:55:28

Smith: Yeah, she came up with the name Dance Access. So the components of it are our ongoing studio program, so we have classes for adults, for kids, and for teens. We’re adding a mentorship program for young disabled women this year. We’re doing the summer school this year. Our assembly program, we’re on the performing roster for Young Audiences. I think it’s now called Northern California—they’ve just changed their name, but Young Audiences is a national organization with different affiliates throughout the States, and what they do is they bring performing arts into the schools. We usually do fifteen to twenty schools a year, where we go in and do assemblies. We have a program we call Dance Access Day, where we invite schools to come into a theater and see us perform in a theater, so they get to see it with lights and costumes and all of that. Then we have our master classes, and we have a presentation that we do with video, and lecture demos. We do teacher training, teaching arts educators how to use creative movement in classrooms. We have a really extensive guide that, you know, has curriculum tie-ins. God, what else do we do? We do a lot. [laughs] We do a lot of education.

Ehrlich: Maybe we should stop there, because the tape’s almost out.
Smith: Cool.

Begin Audiofile 11

Ehrlich: So we’re back. In trying to sort of get a handle on the whole education piece, maybe it would be helpful to talk about bringing in Alisa Rasera, and what her role has been?

Smith: Well, what happened was that when Nicole and I were trying to figure out our whole directorship, we ended up splitting the co-directors into artistic director and education director, because it was obvious, for one thing, that the education component was growing and needed its own thing, you know? So when Nicole resigned from the company, Alisa stepped into the education director position.

Ehrlich: And up until that point, Alisa’s primary role had been as a dancer?

Smith: She had also—and she’d been organizing the kids’ stuff. Like, Bonnie organized the kids’ programs for a while, and then Alisa took that over from Bonnie when Bonnie got busy. Alisa’s taught dance for many, many, many years, so she already had kind of a handle on education and stuff. It’s been something that’s been really thrilling for her to do, because she has such a passion for it. Yeah, so she’s the education director, and her role is to keep the education program going, which is no easy feat, because we do so much of it.

Ehrlich: What year was it that Alisa started?

Smith: 2002. Yeah, so she’s got lots of experience at this point now, and—. She and I got to teach at Bates Dance Festival together. We taught a class on physically integrated dance, and then also put a community piece together, which was really fun.

Ehrlich: What did that look like?

Smith: It was called Connections, and we had five disabled members from the community, aged twelve to fifty-some. Then we had eleven or twelve students from the Bates Dance Festival, so it was very fun. It was kind of structured. A little bit of improvisation, but structured. Then we had several duets in it and—. The really fun thing was that we got to work with all of the Bates Dance Festival musicians. Shamou, who’s a wonderful composer, kind of
took the head lead on it, and he wrote all the music, and I think we ended up with, like, five vocalists and, like, fifteen musicians or something. It was just—it was a scream. The really fun thing was that it was really one of the highlights of the festival. People really loved the piece a lot. It was a great way for the festival to kind of integrate into the community even more, and to bring, you know, the disability component in. They’d had Bill Shannon there, and I think Homer had been there. So that was pretty fun.

Ehrlich: So if you had to sort of say—I mean, I know there’s sort of a written mission of what the education is about, but if you had to say, for you, sort of what the point of it is—?

11-00:03:27
Smith: Well, the point of it is that, one, we’re the only ones doing this around here. People see it, they want to do it. We have—our kids’ program kind of started because we had one parent who would just call us several times a year and say, “Have you started a kids’ program yet?” She had a disabled daughter who wanted to dance. Some little girls are born and it doesn’t matter what kind of body they’re in, they want to be a dancer. You know, I happened to grow up with horses in my blood. I mean, it’s just something that—you’re born with these things, you know? And the other aspect for us is that it’s really important for us to have a venue, and for this field to have a venue to train dancers, because disabled dancers are still, for the most part, not invited or made welcome in, like, university dance programs. That’s something that we’d like to do is to help develop a university and community college dance curriculum that would be specific, you know, for people with disabilities; teaching universities how to expand their program to include people who move differently. But for us, it’s an opportunity to find dancers, to train a next generation. I’ve been in touch with some other companies around the world who are really interested in trying to establish some kind of an international training program that’s ongoing, so that we can—because there’s a crisis—I already talked about this—there’s a crisis in this field around—

Ehrlich: Right.

11-00:05:11
Smith: —finding and training disabled dancers and kind of replacing the ranks. So you know, for us, it was a dual motive. One, to educate other people; and two, to, you know, keep filling our ranks.

Ehrlich: And what about the mix of who takes your classes?

11-00:05:33
Smith: Well, ideally, we love them to be, you know, fifty percent people with disabilities and fifty percent without. That doesn’t always happen. Our kids’ classes tend to be more, right now, kids with, like, multiple disabilities, developmental disability. It’s hard—you know, around here, we compete with BORP for the physically disabled—
Ehrlich: Could you say what BORP is?

Smith: Bay Area Outreach Recreation Program. They’re a recreation program for people with disabilities, and especially kids. Their wheelchair basketball team is internationally ranked and—so we kind of are competing with them to get the physically disabled kids. But in our education program, I think that we teach—well, I don’t think, we teach a much wider range of disability than is represented in our company, because our company is really just people with and without physical disabilities at this point. That’s not to say that that might not change someday but, you know, that’s kind of our specialty and our niche. In our education program, we teach people with developmental disabilities, and sight disabilities, and terminal illness and, you know—as well as people without disabilities that are interested in this branch of dance.

Ehrlich: And what about in the adult classes? Who is drawn to taking your classes? Is there a—?

Smith: People with disabilities and people without.

Ehrlich: And is there any kind of—?

Smith: Dancers, nondancers. You know, it’s a really wide gamut.

Ehrlich: I was going to ask, have you noticed any sort of common threads between the people who are drawn to AXIS?

Smith: Well, I think people that love movement and want to look at movement in a more expansive way. Those are the nondisabled dancers that we end up with. You know, they’re not interested in a ballet vocabulary, that’s not what they want to be doing with their dance. A lot of times, we get people in without disabilities, who have been told that they were too fat to dance, or they didn’t have natural ability, or you know, come to dance later in life and just decide that they really love movement.

Ehrlich: So what about curriculum and how that’s determined and—how has what you teach evolved? I’m thinking specifically in terms of teaching kids.

Smith: Yeah. I hear power tools. Doesn’t sound like a chainsaw, though.

Ehrlich: Good. During the break, Judy was saying she was worried about trees being cut down.
Smith: We have horti-terrorists around here.

Ehrlich: So the question really is sort of what gets taught, and how is that determined, what’s going to be taught?

Smith: Well, it—yeah, I mean, it depends on the setting. You know, in our studio program we have, as I said, a scores and jams class. It is much looser, more creative dance-based plan, class plan. We usually have a performance lab going that is really—gets a group of people together with the intention of putting together a work-in-progress that can be shown at the end of the class session. We usually do eight-week sessions. So in that, you know, different performance techniques, movement styles. It also depends on who’s teaching. I mean, we have really talented teachers in the company now. So—

Ehrlich: So how many people are teaching now?

Smith: Altogether, we have seven people in this company that teach, and a lot of our dancers, their other dance jobs or their other ways of making money are teaching dance. And that’s changed a lot for us. That’s really, I think, just added so much to our education program to have, you know, dancers come in and that’s what they do; they teach dance. It’s been really great.

Ehrlich: And you said something about there’s actually some kind of written guide, or—

Smith: We have a teacher’s guide. I know that Jurg and some folks from CandoCo have developed a curriculum that they’re test driving in a community college in the UK. I’m hoping to get to see that and see what they’ve done with that.

Ehrlich: Who wrote the guide that you guys have?

Smith: Several of us in the company have put it together, together. Together, together.

Ehrlich: And I assume in all the teaching that the sort of spirit of collaboration is one of the things that—

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: —you convey.
Yeah. Yeah, we used to only co-teach in teams of someone with a disability and someone without. But more through just necessity, that’s kind of changed. Like, Megan and Bonnie right now are co-teaching one of the kids’ classes; Sean is teaching the other kids’ class alone, and he’s not disabled. Stephanie and Sean are teaching the performance lab. Stephanie has a disability; Sean doesn’t. Katie’s teaching the scores and jams class, she does it. So you know, I think we’re just—we’re not as rigid about those things as we started out being.

Ehrlich: How much teaching do you do?

I do less. In fact, I had to stop doing the assembly program, because I had so much administrative work to do, but I always teach when we’re on tour. Alisa and I taught at Bates for three weeks, which was really nice. So I’m tending not to teach our studio program, mostly because it’s a way for other dancers to make money. That’s the other thing about our education program is it supports our dancers.

Ehrlich: I was just about to ask if you could talk about the business end of it?

Yeah, because it’s a source of earned income, which ends up being a source of, you know, salary money for them. So we try to get people teaching in the studio program who have less opportunity to do other work.

Ehrlich: And is the whole teaching component, has it been lucrative? That’s probably too—

No.

Ehrlich: Lucrative, I’m sure is not the word.

No, our studio program, we lose money on. For a lot of years, when we had the California Arts Council grant, we taught the classes for free, because that’s a stipulation in the grant. When you have support, you can do that. Now we do charge for the classes, which was really kind of a hard transition for our constituents, you know, to actually pay for class, because they were used to not. But we also have a scholarship program, and if people really can’t pay, they don’t. But, you know, we spend probably a hundred-and-fifty per class, with studio time and admin time, paying people, and Workers Comp, and insurance and all that; hundred to a-hundred-and-fifty a class. And our kids’ classes are limited to six kids. So we maybe make forty to fifty dollars on a class. Our adult programs, our classes are usually around ten to twelve. So we don’t make money on it, but that’s not why we do it.
Ehrlich: Right.

11-00:13:49

Smith: And the summer school, we’ll end up subsidizing a lot of that because, you know, we can only handle probably thirty people, and some of those will be scholarships. But it’s probably going to cost us forty- or fifty-thousand dollars to put on that summer school.

Ehrlich: How have you seen—or have you seen—the sort of advocacy message change over the years of teaching? I mean, does it—?

11-00:14:20

Smith: Not enough. Not enough. In general, you mean?

Ehrlich: Well, I was thinking specifically in terms of teaching, but however—

11-00:14:28

Smith: Well, one of the things that we did was we started a master class program, where we brought teachers in—you know, dance teachers that are teaching in the Bay Area, in the community—to teach a master class, so that they could come into an environment where they were working with people with and without disabilities. They knew that’s what they were getting into. It was kind of a safe container. We were there to help them problem solve or brainstorm. Our intention in that was so that if somebody with a disability shows up at their class, they’re not going to completely freak out about it, because there are a lot of studios in San Francisco that aren’t accessible. There are a lot of teachers that would just see somebody walk in with a crutch or roll in with a wheelchair, and they’d go, “Oh, my God, what am I going to do with this person?” and that’s what we really want to change, you know, so that it’s not uncommon.

It’s changing slowly. I mean, we’re in the Bay Area. You know, we’re in a bubble here. But one of the things that we did up in Sacramento a couple years ago was we did a teacher training for dance teachers. We had tango teachers, ballroom dance teachers, and we had them come to the class, and then we helped them develop ways of teaching what they taught and adapting them.

Ehrlich: And do you have any sense of what they’ve gone on to do?

11-00:15:58

Smith: I don’t. No. I mean, the hope is, again, that if somebody shows up, they’ll be welcoming and say, “Well, of course, we can figure this out,” instead of, “Oh, my God. I really—hmmm—you know, I just don’t think I can handle this.” Or, you know, “You can go in the back of the room and kind of follow along.”

Ehrlich: Any changes in the sort of basic message you feel like AXIS is conveying in the classes, between now and when you first started? Or has it stayed consistent?
Smith: Well, I think that we have a more formal and structured way of teaching. I think that there’s less fluff in it, you know, but other than that, I think what happens for people when they come to our classes and our workshops is—and we get told this over and over and over again, whether it’s our studio program, whether it’s going in and doing a one time master class—people feel really comfortable right away, the way that we teach, and the way that we present the work. And I think that they feel not intimidated by it, really welcomed, and really just valued and respected. For whatever they can bring, and do bring.

Ehrlich: And that’s consistent along the lines.

Smith: I think it is, yeah, very consistent. One of the things that happened with our kids’ program, though, was that parents would come and drop their kids off, and they’d end up sitting out in the hall talking and chatting, and they’ve developed this whole parent network. [pause] You know?

Ehrlich: Meaning of supporting AXIS and each other—

Smith: No, supporting each other. You know, “I’ve got this going on at the school, and—” “Oh, well, I had that problem once, and—” So it’s ended up to be this kind of whole support network for them.

Ehrlich: So these are the parents of the kids with disabilities?

Smith: Yes.

Ehrlich: Okay.

Smith: Which was something that we hadn’t anticipated, you know?

Ehrlich: Mm-hm. And have any of the kids who started out in classes continued on?

Smith: Well, we’re not at that age yet, you know, we don’t—we have people who have started out in our classes who have gone on to do their own work or—. We’ve had kids perform. We’ve put together pieces, mostly duets, with some kids, that they’ve then performed in the community. Yeah. So we’re hoping to continue doing that, to give kids the opportunity to get out there and perform.

Ehrlich: Any memories of presenting in schools and getting particular kinds of responses? Or could you give us a sense of what kinds of—?
Well, in general, I think what happens when we go into schools is that, one, kids get to stare at us; two, they get to ask questions; three, they see disabled people being strong, being leaders, working well with nondisabled people. And they get to see nondisabled people interacting with us like we’re “normal,” quote/unquote. We get called some really funny things. We’ve been called the—we get introduced by principals a lot, and we’ve been called the regular and irregular dancers, the normal and abnormal. Recently, one principal said, “And this just goes to show, you don’t have to have all your parts together to dance,” or some—“You don’t have to be—” I don’t know. So we get a lot of that kind of stuff.

But I think what happens is that kids get to go away with a different view of disability than they usually get from their peers, from the media. And when we go into a school that has a lot of disabled kids, our hope is that the nondisabled kids will look at them a little bit differently, and maybe see a potential in them that they didn’t see before. One of the models that we’ve used with Nancy Henderson, who’s an adaptive P.E. teacher in Albany, she has a peer pal system where she brings nondisabled kids in to work with the disabled kids as peers and it integrates—and in dance, this works really beautifully, because in dance, everybody can do something that’s beautiful, or that’s valued. So what happens is that it ends up integrating the school community outside, because they make friends with each other in the class. You know, and they get to know each other, and I think it breaks down kind of the fear or the unknown. We let the kids ask any questions they want, and we’ve had kids say, “Were you born in that wheelchair?” and, you know, we explain to them, no, that we get in and out of it and explain how we drive and—. One kid asked Jacque if he had his foot at home in a jar. But they get the opportunity to just be really candid.

Ehrlich: What about adults?

Smith: Adults are strange creatures. Kind of the same thing. I think when we go in and work with a group of people—as I said, I think we have a way of making folks feel comfortable right away. We just did a master class for PhD, master, and undergrad students at Riverside, and, you know, we had a few of them come up—and these are people who’ve been dancing all their lives—and say, “You know, this has really changed how I look at dance,” and that’s in an hour-and-a-half of working with somebody, you know? I think that’s the beautiful thing about what we do is that we don’t have to get up on a soapbox and try to tell somebody how they should feel or what they should think. People get to watch us, or move with us, or experience it, and then they get to go away with their own conclusion, formulate their own ideas. I think that’s part of what keeps a lot of us in this work, is that, you know, we do feel like we get to dance, we get to do what we love, and—I’m all for art for art’s sake, but I feel like our art goes beyond that, and that’s really great. [pause]
You know, it’s nice to do something that—because it’s hard—I mean, I, even for myself, as much as I believe in art and I believe in dance, sometimes it’s hard for me to justify doing dance and doing art, when there are so many problems in the world. There are so many hungry people, and so much abuse and, you know, just all of it, that it’s even sometimes hard for me justify being a dancer and being an artist, and feeling like I’m doing enough in the world. But I really do know that after people see us perform or come to a class, that we are able to affect a lot of people, and that’s really important. I don’t think I would do this work if it wasn’t. There are too many other important things to do, too.

Ehrlich: Well, and it seems like you’ve gotten to see the effect of AXIS grow tremendously.

11-00:24:32
Smith: Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I think what’s really bizarre is realizing that, you know, we’re one of the companies that people call first for benefits or for shared shows. We really are—we’re really established. And we’re becoming more and more name known in the dance world, too, nationally, and it’s kind of weird.

Ehrlich: Weird in what way?

11-00:25:16
Smith: Oh, who would have thought? Bonnie and I look at each other all the time and just, you know, “Who would have thought that we would have been able to take this idea and develop it into this?”

Ehrlich: So can you say something about the Arts Presenters conference and the award?

11-00:25:57
Smith: What I can say is that it’s really great that Arts Presenters and MetLife are recognizing that AXIS is an important component to the arts, because, mostly, the arts are way behind in terms of ADA compliance, in terms of even, you know, thinking about outreach to disabled communities. I sat on the panel and read the grants, and I was floored that we got less than thirty proposals. There were less than thirty presenters in the country that felt like they were doing exemplary work around access for people with disabilities. There are thousands of presenters in this country, and I was really pissed. It really made me angry. John Killacky and I, and Jeremy Alliger and I, have done so many sessions at different conferences and events, where nobody shows up. Or a few people show up, you know, that are al—it’s like preaching to the choir; they’re already people that are doing the work. So you know, I just feel like there’s so much room for growth. Facilities. You know, it’s an ongoing nightmare for us when we tour, or when we even try to figure out how to do a season here or a show here, because facilities aren’t used to having thirty people show up in wheelchairs. They’re not equipped to handle that, even here
in the Bay Area, so we have a long way to go. I think that was one of the things that being on tour in New England really opened up Bonnie’s and my eyes that, man, yes, we have it so much better as disabled people here in this country; and we have so far to go. It’s unbelievable. [pause] So we just get up in the morning and do the work.

Ehrlich: I want to hear some about your relationship with Iva. But before that, collaborating with the Sacramento Ballet, something you just did, what was that?

11-00:28:33
Smith: Well, we’ve been doing that since 1995.

Ehrlich: Oh, you have?

11-00:28:36
Smith: Yeah. We go up there once or twice a year. And—

Ehrlich: I guess I know there just was a performance, right?

11-00:28:42
Smith: Yeah. Yeah, we’ve done that a few times with them, where we’ve actually done, in their studios, shared a performance where we’ve done some work and they’ve done some work. But generally, what happens is that—they have a pretty strong education program that goes out and does work in the schools, and we go out and we do these little lecture demonstrations together. They do their thing and we do our thing, and then we do some things together. Like I say, we’ve been doing it now for almost ten years.

Ehrlich: But this was—

11-00:29:18
Smith: This was pretty much the same, it’s just that we did an informal studio performance—

Ehrlich: Oh, okay.

11-00:29:22
Smith: —on Sunday, and then the next day they went into schools and did work in schools.

Ehrlich: Okay, so this is all—

11-00:29:27
Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: —sort of under the umbrella of the education—

11-00:29:29
Smith: Oh, yeah.
Ehrlich: —piece.

11-00:29:30
Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: Okay. I got an announcement about it and wasn’t clear what it was.

11-00:29:35
Smith: Yeah, that’s what is.

Ehrlich: So you share this home with Iva.

11-00:29:52
Smith: Mm-hm.

Ehrlich: And do you want to— it seems important that—?

11-00:29:54
Smith: Well, Iva’s been—I have to say that Iva and I met backstage at the Cal in 1996, when we were doing Hidden Histories, as part of the Bay Area Dance series, and we just connected instantly.

Ehrlich: What was she doing backstage?

11-00:30:11
Smith: She was stage manager. She saw me and I saw her, and we started talking, and realized that we were really drawn to each other. Truthfully, I think without Iva’s support, I wouldn’t probably have made it through the whole AXIS implosion, you know? I would just have thrown up my hands and said, “The hell with it all,” but she really encouraged me, you know, to not let it go, because it was important. She knew it was important to me, and she also feels like it’s important work in the world. I think what a lot of people don’t know is that Iva tours with us. She helps me out, she helps the company out, and she takes a financial loss, because she’s a tile contractor, so when she tours with us, she makes a lot less money, which is actually why she got out of the arts. She was doing set design and stage and production managing. But it’s just such a hard way to make a living, and it’s such unappreciated work that when she started doing tile and got really good at that, she kind of went off in that direction. But it would be really hard for me to keep this company going without her, both, you know, emotionally and just the physical support that she gives to the company. [pause] And I love her dearly, and I hope that we’re always together. So—I feel really, really lucky; I have a great life.

Ehrlich: I remember earlier in the interview, you said something about people being sort of surprised when you would say that you were a lesbian, because, well, you’re not supposed to even have a sexual identity, since you’re disabled.

11-00:32:09
Smith: Yeah.
Ehrlich: And I’m wondering if you can say more about that. I’m now thinking specifically, you are so now in the public eye. People know you and—?

11-00:32:20 Smith: Yeah. Well, you know, I think maybe it’s less true around this area. There are a lot of disabled queers around here, because there are a lot of queers around here. I think maybe it’s a little bit more surprising when, you know, we go out of town. But, you know, I’m very out and I don’t really care who knows. I think the more people that know, the better. It’s just—it’s who I am, and Iva’s my partner, and it’s my relationship. You know, luckily, I work in a business that, for the most part, has a bunch of left-leaning, open-minded, queer friendly [laughs] people, you know?

Ehrlich: Yeah.

11-00:35:15 Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: Have you had any sense of your identity as a lesbian making a difference in people’s lives or, you know, touching people who would not have known, either positively or negatively?

11-00:33:33 Smith: Well, I think when I came out to my dad, it really made him rethink things for himself, because he was very homophobic. I finally wrote him a letter and said, “Dad, you know—”

Ehrlich: Yeah.

11-00:33:45 Smith: “—this is who I am,” and it really did, it shook him up, because then he had to start thinking about the people he was talking about. And—other than that, I don’t know, Esther, you know?

Ehrlich: I guess how would you assess it? I was wondering in a more public way, as a sort of public person, whether you’ve had a sense of an impact you may or may not have had.

11-00:34:15 Smith: I don’t think so, really. You know, it’s not—I don’t go around with a note on my forehead that says I’m a lesbian, but if it comes up, then it comes up, you know. I mean, I’m really proud of being part of the queer community. I think it’s an incredible community. We’ve seen such a backlash over the last eight years, it’s—well, the last five years, in particular, but it’s just been stunning, you know, to see us, like, just spiral backwards and—it’s not something I’m ever going to hide.

Ehrlich: So anything else to say about Iva or your life with her?
Smith: No, she’s just—she’s a really great person, and she’s, you know, so talented in her own way. I know that there are a lot of times when she misses being in theater, but it just ended up not being a viable [laughs] way of making any kind of a living for her. But she wouldn’t do this kind of work for anybody but us. You know, she’s said that. But we’re really lucky to have her. It was kind of funny when we were all trying to figure out what kind of a title to give her, and we finally gave her the title Tour Assistant, but we all came up with these really funny things to call her. I can’t remember what any of them were at this point, but we had a good time with that.

Ehrlich: So she is close with the other dancers?

Smith: Yeah. Yeah.

Ehrlich: So maybe now—

Smith: In fact, she and Wally our production manager, are both beer connoisseurs, so—

Ehrlich: What’s Wally’s last name?

Smith: Holden, and he’s married to Alisa.

Ehrlich: Oh.

Smith: Which is kind of nice.

Ehrlich: So this is probably a good time to talk about future directions, where—?

Smith: Well, I think we’re going to keep doing what we’re doing. There are things artistically, I think, that—we’re still kind of trying to perfect our company class and a company training system. I really, really strongly feel that a big focus for us is going to be outreach into the disability community over the next bunch of years.

Ehrlich: You mean for dancers, or—?

Smith: Just to let disabled folks know that this is here. So many people still don’t know it, you know. And then creating training opportunities. Artistically, we’ll continue commissioning, and our company choreography just keeps getting better and better and—I don’t really think we’re going to be doing anything that radically different. You know, I dread but imagine that we’re
going to have a dancer turnover in the next year or so, because people want to move on and go do their own thing. I guess my big hope would be that at some point, we can find a crew of people that is really as committed to this work as Alisa, Bonnie and I are, because we really have made it—you know, AXIS is kind of our life. I would like to find some other people who could be that committed and passionate, because I think there’s something really powerful in having people be invested at that level, and to share that kind of history together, and knowledge, you know? Because this work is hard to talk about and—I think especially for people that are new to it and not disabled, and kind of, you know, really new to the whole idea of it. I would really hope that we could come up with people that will just keep carrying it on, you know, but have really deep roots in it.

Ehrlich: You’d started to talk earlier about some of the specific choreographers you’d like to work with.

11-00:38:59
Smith: Well, we’ll be working with Margaret Jenkins and hopefully, Joe Goode again, either redoing *Jane Eyre* or a new piece. There’s—

Ehrlich: Redoing it why?

11-00:39:09
Smith: Because we’re a whole different cast of people.

Ehrlich: Oh, okay.

11-00:39:14
Smith: We don’t have Megan, Uli, Stephanie—

Ehrlich: Right.

11-00:39:16
Smith: —and Nicole. It’s going to look very different and feel very different. Now we have—for Joe’s piece, we actually have people who can sing, which we didn’t before. He loves using song. There’s a guy, Stephen Koplowitz in New York, who does these really outrageous, huge production, site specific works. He’s done work in Grand Central Station and a coal factory that was converted into an arts center in Germany, and he uses, like, you know, twenty to seventy dancers. We’re very interested in trying to develop a project with him sometime in the next few years. I’m always looking for people. I want to work with Bill [T. Jones] and Stephen again, because I think it’s really interesting to bring people in for a second time, which we’ve had the opportunity to do with Sonya. There’s something really wonderful that happens when they get to know the equipment and the dancers really well, you know.

Ehrlich: And what’s the plan with Jenkins?
Smith: A repertory work. That’s all we know at this point.

Ehrlich: So you’re just in the—

Smith: Yeah.

Ehrlich: —sort of talking phase?

Smith: Yeah. There’s some European choreographers that I’m kind of interested in, and I’m also kind of trying to start looking at young, upcoming U.S. choreographers and see who’s out there, and what they’re doing. So we’re just going to keep, you know, doing what we’re doing, but hopefully doing a little bit more in really furthering the field, in terms of training and visibility and outreach.

Ehrlich: So anything else that we haven’t talked about that seems significant to you?

Smith: I don’t think so. Nope.

Ehrlich: Thank you very much.

Smith: Thank you.

[end of interview]