

Friday  
**APR 14**  
7:30 pm

# Dancing Wheels Company

A unifying expression of movement for all



This performance is funded, in part, by:



## History and Mission of the Company

Mary Verdi-Fletcher, America's first professional wheelchair dancer, founded the Dancing Wheels Company in 1980 in Cleveland, OH. Having been born with spina bifida, Mary wanted to open the doors of opportunity for people with disabilities who wanted to pursue their goals on an equal ground with their non-disabled peers. Mary always wanted to be a professional dancer and was not going to let her disability stand in her way. The Dancing Wheels Company was formed to employ professionally trained dancers, with and without disabilities. Forty years ago, this concept was uncharted territory in the world of dance, but Mary's passion and perseverance has revolutionized the idea of dance and the notion of who should or could participate.

Now in its 42nd season, the Dancing Wheels Company is America's first and foremost professional physically integrated company, with a composition of professional stand-up and sit-down dancers, and branded as the World Center for Integrated Dance & Arts Access. The company tours globally to more than 50 cities, presenting innovative works from nationally acclaimed choreographers to audiences of 50,000 or more in a typical year. The School of Dancing Wheels, established in 1990, is the only multi-arts school in Ohio focused on inclusive classes. The school offers dance, movement and theatre classes for children and adults with and without disabilities in the greater Cleveland community and throughout America. The School of Dancing Wheels' inclusive arts programming typically reaches over 7,000 children and adults with and without disabilities and economic challenges each year.

### **The Dancing Wheels Company & School presents:** *With and For All People*

#### **Staff**

Mary Verdi-Fletcher, president/founding artistic director  
 Dana A. Kuhn, manager of development and communications  
 Mary Ann Grof-Neiman, administrative/operations manager  
 Sara Lawrence-Sucato, director of education/marketing manager  
 Morgan Walker, rehearsal director/wardrobe manager  
 Marissa Thomas, tour manager  
 KMP Artists, artist representative  
 K. Pakeltis & Company, LLC, accountant

#### **Dancing Wheels Company**

McKenzie Beaverson, Angelina DiFranco\*, Cody Krause, Brian Murphy\*\*,  
 Richard Oaxaca, DeMarco Sleeper, Celina Naima Speck, Trinity Stevens\*,  
 Mary Verdi-Fletcher, Morgan Walker  
*\*apprentice, \*\*guest artist*

#### **Production Staff**

Jaime Benjamin, lighting designer  
 Sara Lawrence-Sucato, stage manager

**There will be no intermission during this performance.**

## PROGRAM

### ***Walking on Clouds (2005)***

Choreography: David Roussève

Music: Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, The Kinks and rap arranged by David Roussève

Costume Design: Janet Bolick

Dancers: McKenzie Beaverson, Angelina DiFranco, Cody Krause, Brian Murphy, DeMarco Sleeper, Celina Naima Speck, Mary Verdi-Fletcher, Morgan Walker

Program Note: *Walking on Clouds* was choreographed in 2005 by David Roussève at the request of Artistic Directors Mary Verdi-Fletcher and Michael Medcalf (of then Cleveland Contemporary Dance Theatre) to bring to the stage a work that would reflect the similarities and challenges encountered throughout history by people with disabilities and people of color.

“Mixing words and movement into a powerful cauldron, this work celebrates a common humanity that survives the boundaries of difference. With equal parts humor and grit, the work blends fact, fiction and possibility to find the connections—both emotional and historical—between people with disabilities and people of color. Commissioned by both Dancing Wheels and Cleveland Contemporary Dance Theatre, this work represents the first time the two companies have culled forces to share, create and comment.” – David Roussève

### **Arts and Access Talk**

### ***Incommunicado (2015)***

Choreography: Catherine Meredith

Music: Global Communication

Costume Design: Janet Bolick

Dancers: McKenzie Beaverson, Angelina DiFranco, Cody Krause, Brian Murphy, DeMarco Sleeper, Celina Naima Speck, Mary Verdi-Fletcher, Morgan Walker

Program Note: *Incommunicado* was created as part of Dancing Wheels’ 35th-anniversary Lasting Legacy Project. The inspiration for this work came from Title IV of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA): Telecommunications, which ensures functionally equivalent services for consumers with disabilities. Using American Sign Language (ASL) as a base for the movement, the piece examines what can happen if that breakdown in communication occurs.

***This Day (2022)***

Choreography: Donald Byrd in collaboration with the original cast of dancers

Music: “On the Nature of Daylight” and “Shadow Journal” by Max Richter

Costume Design: Janet Bolick

Dancers: McKenzie Beaverson, Cody Krause, Brian Murphy, DeMarco Sleeper,  
Celina Naima Speck, Mary Verdi-Fletcher, Morgan Walker

Program Note:

*This Day* is an abstract dance.

*This Day* is also evocative, perhaps recalling memories, impressions or even a dream.

*This Day* imagines, perhaps, the passing of a single day in the life of a group of people—their meetings and encounters, their connections.

*This Day* is a snapshot of a 12-hour period in a particular place, during some unnamed occasion, perhaps.

*This Day*, though not a tragedy nor a drama, is informed by the classical Aristotelian unities that represent a prescriptive theory of dramatic tragedy.

*This Day* represents for me the normalization of the integrated dance company, where, whether a dancer is a ‘sit-down’ or ‘stand-up’ their world IS the world.

Perhaps, *This Day* is just a dance with beautiful dancers dancing.

– Donald Byrd, June 2022

**Audience Talk Back**


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**Company Biographies**

**MARY VERDI-FLETCHER (president/founding artistic director, dancer)** has been a pioneering force in the development and success of physically integrated dance worldwide for over four decades. She founded the Dancing Wheels Company in 1980 and the school in 1990, proudly hailed together as the World Center for Integrated Dance & Arts Access—a highly sought after establishment for training with full and equal access. Mary co-authored and produced a physically integrated dance training manual and DVD with Mark Tomasic in 2021. Her quest to provide equal access for training has continued with the development of the Dancing Wheels Physically Integrated Dance Teacher Certification program. One of America’s first professional wheelchair dancers, she has worked with esteemed artists Donald Byrd, Dianne McIntyre, Donald McKayle, Dennis Nahat, David Roussève, Ben Vereen, Keith Young and Christopher Reeve. In her early career, she helped create the first Independent Living Center in Ohio. She also took a militant stand, capturing buses in Cleveland, to ensure people with disabilities could ride public transportation leading to every public bus in the nation being accessible. In 2014, Mary was awarded the Henry Viscardi Achievement Award, which pays tribute to exemplary leaders in the disability community. In 2016, she was honored with the Cleveland Arts Prize Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2017, she received the Girl Scouts of Northeast Ohio-Woman of Distinction Award and, in 2018, Mary received the YWCA Woman of Achievement Award and the Dance/USA Trustee Award for her contributions to

dance throughout the U.S. In 2019, Mary served on the steering committee to bring the National Dance USA Conference to Cleveland and directed the opening night ceremonies for more than 450 people attending the conference. Mary is featured in *The New York Times* bestseller *In the Company of Women* by author Khushwant Singh, and recently, in the publication *Boss Ladies of CLE: Stories from 20 Leading Women in Their Own Words* by Maggie Sullivan.

**MORGAN WALKER (rehearsal director, wardrobe manager and dancer)** joined the Dancing Wheels Company in 2019 and was named rehearsal director in August 2022. She graduated from Kent State University with a BFA in dance performance and choreography. Post-graduation, she extensively trained and performed on scholarship at The Ailey School in NYC, while concurrently performing on tour with Cardell Dance Theater. Additional training has included lucrative summers at The Ailey School, José Limón Dance Intensive, Jon Lehrer Dance Intensive, Openflr International Dance Exchange, dance labs with Tiffany Mills and Nichole Canuso, and residencies with choreographers such as Ray Mercer, Gregory King, Ronald K. Brown, Silvana Cardell, Catherine Meredith, Stephanie Martinez, Shumpei Nemoto, Mark Tomasic and Jamal White. She has performed throughout the U.S., Italy, Dominican Republic, China and Mexico. Morgan also teaches at dance studios and universities throughout Northeast Ohio and has had choreography performed and commissioned on a national level.

**JEREMY K. BENJAMIN (lighting designer)** has designed numerous pieces for the Dancing Wheels Company in the past 17 years. Jeremy is the director of theatre at Lorain County Community College and a visiting lecturer/lighting designer at Oberlin College. Jeremy has spent the past 32 years designing lighting for all forms of the performing arts. His lighting designs have been seen at the Beck Center for the Arts, Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music, the Cleveland Institute of Music Opera Department, Cleveland Contemporary Dance Theatre, Cleveland Municipal School District, Great Lakes Theater Festival, Ingenuity Festival, Lyric Opera Cleveland, Miami University Summer Theatre, Oberlin Opera Theater, Oberlin Summer Theater Festival, Ohio Dance Theatre, Opera Cleveland, Paramount Productions, Pointe of Departure and Stages Theatre Houston.

**SARA LAWRENCE-SUCATO (stage manager, director of education, marketing manager)**, hails from Columbus, OH. She graduated with honors and a degree in dance teaching and choreography from Mercyhurst University (Erie, PA) and is currently studying for a Master of Science in organizational leadership from the same institution. Sara has worked in various capacities with The Dancing Wheels Company & School since 2006. She danced in the company for sixteen seasons, performing works by noted choreographers Marc Brew, Nai Ni Chen, David Dorfman, Christopher Fleming, Catherine Meredith, Stuart Pimsler, David Roussève, Ginger Thatcher, Mark Tomasic, Michael Uthoff and Robert Wesner as well as by internationally renowned choreographers Donald McKayle and Dianne McIntyre. She served as the company's tour manager for thirteen years and as rehearsal director for three years. In her capacity as The Dancing Wheels Company & School's director of education, Sara combines the roles of director of outreach & community engagement and school

coordinator, oversees the design and implementation of a new company traineeship program, and teaches physically integrated dance technique in residencies, workshops and master classes.

**JANET BOLICK (costume designer)** has been working with the Dancing Wheels Company for more than 20 years starting with *The Snowman*. She works with many of the local dance companies creating a wide assortment of costumes, including ballet, contemporary, competition and ballroom. Some of the companies include Groundworks, Verb Ballets, Neos, Center Stage, Oberlin Dance Department and Viva Ballroom. In her free time, she works with the Cleveland Wardrobe Union as a dresser or seamstress for the Broadway touring shows and concerts that come into town.

**DAVID ROUSSÈVE (choreographer)** is an award-winning choreographer, writer, director, dancer and actor. He is the founder and artistic director of Los Angeles-based dance/theatre company David Roussève/REALITY. A 2004 Guggenheim Fellow, he has created works for the Atlanta Ballet, Houston Ballet and Ballet Hispanico as well as for film and television. Among others, David has served on the faculty of Princeton University, Columbia College summer program and Randolph Macon College. In 1996, he joined UCLA's Department of World Arts and Cultures/ Dance, where he is a distinguished professor of choreography and former department chair. For the UCLA School of the Arts and Architecture, he has served as associate dean (2014–15), acting dean (2015) and interim dean (2015–17).

**CATHERINE MEREDITH (choreographer)** has an extensive career as a performing artist, choreographer and dance educator, and she has garnered critical acclaim both nationally and internationally. Her work has been commissioned by New Dance Partners Project (Kansas City), The Ashley Boudier Project, Santa Monica College, Kent State University, Mercyhurst University, Ohio Northern University, Verb Ballets, Dancing Wheels Company and Störling Dance Theatre, and she has presented at The Kennedy Center, AVAYAVA Festival (India), American Dance Guild (NYC), Women in Dance Leadership Conference (Philadelphia), White Wave DUMBO Dance Festival, TED Talks, Dance St. Louis, HATCH Series at Jennifer Muller/The Works, Playhouse Square, Cain Park, Cleveland Dance Festival, Jacob's Pavilion-Nautica and The American Dance Festival. As a performer, Catherine has worked in television, film, musical theatre and on the concert dance stage, touring nationally and internationally with such companies as Cortez & Co. Contemporary/Ballet, Verb Ballets, Karen Reedy Dance Company and, most recently, The Glue Factory (Corningworks). She has performed in works by Alvin Ailey, George Balanchine, Talley Beatty, Paul Taylor, David Roussève, David Parsons, Shapiro & Smith, Beth Corning and Hernando Cortez, with principal roles in Heinz Poll's *Bolero*, Martha Graham's *Appalachian Spring*, Ulysses Dove's *Vespers* and Dianne McIntyre's *In the Groove and Over the Top*. She has been on faculty at Slippery Rock University, Joffrey Ballet (NYC), Brooklyn Music School, Pineapple Studios (UK), Cuyahoga Community College and is currently an assistant professor of dance at Kent State University. She received her Master of Fine Arts from Hollins University and is a board member of OhioDance. Catherine served as Dancing Wheels' rehearsal director and resident choreographer for ten years.



**DONALD BYRD (choreographer)** has been the artistic director of Spectrum Dance Theater since December 2002. Formerly, he was artistic director of Donald Byrd/The Group, a critically acclaimed contemporary dance company founded in Los Angeles and later based in New York, that toured both nationally and internationally. His career has been long and complex, and his choreographic and theatrical interests are broad. He is a Tony-nominated (*The Color Purple*) and Bessie Award-winning (*The Minstrel Show*) choreographer. Donald has frequently been referred to as a 'citizen artist,' a description that perfectly aligns with an important component of Spectrum Dance Theater's mission and his personal beliefs—"dance as an art form and as a social/civic instrument." Known for themes relating to social justice, Donald creates dance/theatre works that are meant to question, to create awareness, to activate, and to move audiences and citizens into action around the persistent social issues that plague contemporary American society and the world: racism and white supremacy, climate change and the climate gap, gender equality, gender identity biases, xenophobia and police brutality. *The New York Times* describes him as "a choreographer with multiple personalities...an unabashed eclectic."

**McKENZIE BEAVERSON (dancer)** is from Toledo, OH, where she trained in ballet, contemporary, modern and improvisation with the Toledo Ballet. There, she had the opportunity to work with professionals, including Soili Arvola, Tricia Albertson, Olga Pavlova and Renato Penteado. McKenzie is also a graduate of Toledo School for the Arts with a dance major certificate. She has performed in Bolero with Verb Ballets and works by Kora Radella, founder of the Boomerang Dance Company. McKenzie danced with the Dancing Wheels Company in 2016–17, which was her first exposure to physically integrated dance. She then worked with Full Radius Dance, founder of The Modern Atlanta Dance Festival. McKenzie has been an artist with Gotta Dance Contemporary, Dance Canvas and The Big Muddy Dance Company, and she has performed as a back-up dancer for Maya Kodes at Georgia Institute of Technology. McKenzie returned to the Dancing Wheels Company in 2021 to continue her work in the physically integrated dance field.

**ANGELINA DiFRANCO (apprentice dancer)** is currently a senior honors student at Kent State University and double majoring in dance BFA and English, with a concentration in professional writing. Throughout her tenure at Kent State, she has performed works by faculty, students and guest artists, such as Amy Hall Garner, Hope Boykin and Stefanie Batten Bland. Angelina received the May O'Donnell Memorial Dance Award and the dance faculty award for outstanding achievement as an emerging artist and dance scholar. Her piece *Letters From a Monster* and dance film *Unscripted Puppet: The Staged Resurrection* were presented at the Cleveland Dance Festival in 2022. Angelina has attended summer intensives with Deeply Rooted, Koresh, Visceral and the LA Contemporary Dance Company. Alongside her dancing, she took part in See Chicago Dance's 2021 critical-writing fellowship. Her writing has been published in *See Chicago Dance*, *Luna Negra* and *Brainchild*. She joined the company as an apprentice in 2022.

**CODY KRAUSE (dancer)** is a graduate of The Ohio State University, receiving a Bachelor of Fine Arts in dance in 2019, where he focused his degree on composition/choreography, with a minor focus in performance and choreography. During his time as a performer, he's been a part of many concerts and works, including pieces by Donald Byrd, Doug Varone, Marc Brew, Dianne McIntyre and Ohad Naharin, where he was the featured soloist in BalletMet and OSU's Collaboration of *Minus 16*. Cody choreographed a full-company piece, *Bonds of Actions*, for Dancing Wheels' *Memories of Mexico* concert in 2022. Cody is a company class instructor certified in Dancing Wheels level 1 and level 2 teacher training and has had the opportunity to teach physically integrated dance workshops at Point Park University and Mid-Atlantic Dance Initiative. Cody is a freelance teacher to students in the Cleveland area and has taught for the School of Dancing Wheels. He joined the Dancing Wheels Company in 2019.

**DeMARCO SLEEPER (dancer)** was born and raised in Cleveland, OH, where he found a strong connection to making music and dancing. From 2014 to 2017, he worked with the Dancing Wheels Company. In 2017, DeMarco moved to Atlanta, GA and spent two years working with Full Radius Dance. During this time, he was part of many performances in Atlanta, including Dance Canvas, The Atlanta Dance Academy Showcase and Artz in the Park through Southern Arts Dance. He joined AXIS Dance Company in Oakland, CA in the summer of 2019. There he had the opportunity to tour nationally and internationally, including Dubai and Germany. DeMarco has been featured in the *Dance Magazine's* "25 to Watch for 2021" and a CNN/Target short film promoting disability arts and athletic wear. DeMarco is now back in his hometown dancing with Dancing Wheels Company since 2022, and he continues to work on his own music production as singer-songwriter and rapper, as well as recording and playing instruments.

**CELINA NAIMA SPECK (dancer)** joined the Dancing Wheels Company in 2018. Celina earned her degree in contemporary dance at the University of the Arts (Zürich, Switzerland), where she danced in works by Itzik Galili, Barak Marshall, Michael Schumacher, Ihsam Rustem and Adrijana Danchevska. While at Dancing Wheels, she has performed works by Donald Byrd, Marc Brew, Donald McKayle, David Rousève, Catherine Meredith, Laurel Lawson and many more. Celina also commissioned a choreographic work for Dancing Wheels in 2022 named *Home, or Home Home?* She holds a level 2 teacher certificate in the Dancing Wheels method of physically integrated dance and has been a regular teaching artist for the company.

**BRIAN MURPHY (guest dancer)** has been a professional dancer for three decades with acclaimed dance companies throughout the U.S. In his career, he has danced with Ohio Ballet, Cleveland San Jose Ballet, Verb Ballets, GroundWorks DanceTheater, Nashville Ballet, Richmond Ballet, BalletMet and the New Orleans Delta Ensemble. He has danced in works by Paul Taylor, Merce Cunningham, Martha Graham and Lester Horton, and he has performed lead roles in major ballets, including *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*. For more than 25 years of his professional career, he has had the great joy of working with artists from all over the world by producing programs and choreographing works. He is co-owner of Pilates by Murphys.