

Maiya Leeke - Interview

Season Butler

I'm really pleased to be here talking to Maiya Leeke, who's a totally interesting dance artist. And we're here talking under the umbrella of Radical Structures, which is a project looking at Counter Cultures, Circular economies, and strategies for creating an arts sector where artists can really thrive as people. And so, Maiya, thank you for agreeing to talk with me and letting us all hear a bit about your journey, your career and your practice.

Maiya Leeke

My pleasure, thank you.

Season Butler

Maybe you can give us a bit of an overview of your creative practice and what you do?

Maiya Leeke

I am a contemporary dancer, and I am also a teacher. I perform and teach. Both are huge loves of mine. I am a neuro-disabled artist, so I'm a wheelchair user and I'm also semi-verbal, so at times might speak or [types into device] I may also use my speaking device. Yeah, so that's the semi-verbal bit.

But back to the interesting things. I'm an Associate Artist at Mind the Gap theatre company in Bradford which is a learning-disabled theatre company, and I dance on the full time performance academy course, which I adore. They are exceptional human beings. I perform in a freelance capacity for Josh Arnett Dance. I also teach for him, too. I perform for Frontline Dance Company, an integrated dance company, and also CoDa Dance Company who work with a lot of technology to explore the impact of neurological conditions on the body and how we can show that through technology.

Season Butler

Your practice sounds so exciting. And you sound really, really busy. So, I appreciate you taking the time to talk with me. Could you tell us a bit about how you started out in your career?

Maiya Leeke

Yeah, so I started first as a jazz musician. I played alto saxophone and I played the flute. Yeah, music was my life growing up. I was always in jazz orchestras, dotting around doing gigs and then I kinda came across dance and, contemporary dance in particular, and I... fell in love...

Yes. So I grew up as a jazz musician, and when I was 14 I found contemporary dance and the two started to merge together, which I really loved. For me dance felt like a new way to work with music and suddenly I found how I could start showing the music through my body, which was just *my thing*. My musical background as a grade-A jazz musician really helped inform my practice. And from there I began training in contemporary dance companies, studying ballet as well. But at this point I was non-disabled, so my practice looked very, very different. And so did my professional world, really.

Season Butler

When I look at your work, I really see something that is so rich with resources and meaning, that it feels that without your disability, clearly, your practice would be very different but it also seems like it would be somehow more austere. Like there would be less there.

But the next question on my list of questions: So you started in temporary dance, when you were 14, and I think dance is interesting because it's professionalised quite early on. Like, if you're committed to dance, then you're really dancing like a professional even while you're a child often much of the time. And so that is an interesting kind of career trajectory, but I'm wondering how your practice was received and how your practice was supported in the early stages?

Maiya Leeke

I mean, I was non-disabled and I was good for my age, so it was received very well. The people around me know how to take me, how to deal with me because I looked like everyone else, I fit in just like everyone else. I was in quite an exclusive environment, which I know now because, quite ignorantly, I'd say, my world wasn't diverse at all. And that's not something I'm overly proud of at all, but it was an environment I grew up in. And until you know any different, you kind of stay there, don't you? I was in an exclusive practice where I fit in because I was non-disabled, basically.

Season Butler

Did you grow up in Bradford?

Maiya Leeke

No, I grew up in Preston. I danced in Preston and the Lancaster area and the North West, and they have some fantastic contemporary dance youth companies around there, and I was in one of the best ones. I had some phenomenal experiences.

I remember we worked with a choreographer called Gary Clarke. Goodness, he's wonderful. We made this amazing 25-minute piece, and we took it to the Edinburgh Fringe. And I played my saxophone in the piece as well. And we got into a national festival, that was around us, which was really the best thing we could get into at the time. Which was exciting, and we had some really successful times with them. Which was great.

Season Butler

That sounds killer. That sounds really amazing.

Maiya Leeke

It was.

Season Butler

Do you have any other role models or mentors that were important to you when you were in those early days?

Maiya Leeke

I had a lot of fantastic teachers that were passionate and great at what they did, and they really influenced me and informed the way that I worked, and thought about things...I have

a lot, a lot of gratitude. They instilled discipline, and they were just generally inspiring which is what you need at that age, which is great.

Season Butler

Dance to me is an interesting place to think about discipline because at times there's nothing I admire more than a dancer's discipline and commitment, and then I also think about the discipline in the other sense, that's often paired with punishment, where there can be a very strict and narrow idea of what's allowed and what's good to do. And, I can sometimes think about the choreographer at the bar with the cane kind of, you know, sort of disciplining your turnout...

Maiya Leeke

Oh, we didn't have that.

Season Butler

Okay, cool.

Maiya Leeke

Traditionally in contemporary dance that's not how it works. Don't get me wrong, I'm sure there still are places that exist like that, but in youth dance, in contemporary dance, it's very much nurturing excellence and a driven, loving environment where they want the best for you. As a non-disabled young person, it was wonderful. But if I was how I am now, I wouldn't have fit in, which is my only kind of gap with this. But my experience of dance as I was at the time was fantastic. No canes. Just beautiful, beautiful people.

Season Butler

And so can you tell us, and I want to just ask a very open question here, about how your life and your practice changed?

Maiya Leeke

I'd grown up training in both music and dance at the same time, and looking back it was really beautiful and has really helped me now. And then I made the choice to focus on dance, but at that point I became ill. And my practice diminished a bit because I could no longer perform. So I was kind of moving into teaching in community dance and I was going around schools and teaching, and I enjoyed that but it wasn't as dear to my heart. It wasn't what my purpose was.

And then I became a little bit more unwell and I became a wheelchair user, where I actually had to take eight months out of my practice in rehabilitation. And then it's very, very interesting because the [medical model of disability](#) means: *You're in a wheelchair, that's the end.* [Laughs] And I was like, 'I'm just beginning!' And they were like, *Oh no, no, no, no. You're in a wheelchair now.* Even though that was one of the hardest times in my life, it was just the very, very beginning. And I had a few 'universally' beautiful moments, like where I actually became a wheelchair user in a session of an integrated dance company, one of the leading integrated dance companies I worked in. I have a neurological condition and I had a relapse in a session, and that was that: wheelchair user. But I happened to be in a session taught by a wheelchair user, who's exceptional, and she was like, *we're doing this in a few weeks' time, do you want to come down?* And I got myself a wheelchair, went to that, saw

people flipping their wheelchairs around. I'd some beautiful friends who'd just opened a studio in Manchester, so I started dancing there with them.

It all grew from there, really. I started trying to find my way. I was travelling the country working with some incredible people. A huge influence was Adam Benjamin who's the co-founder of CandoCo Dance Company, the world's leading integrated dance company. And then I remember we went to Ipswich for three days. It was a co-delivered workshop between him and Russell Maliphant. We spent three days in silence improvising, and I just came back a transformed person. I had all this permission to be in my chair and to move in my chair and to uncover things.

And then I got a wonderful job with **Darrell Beatham** Productions, an amazing acrobat. And I totally blame him for the fact that I do all this upside-down, balanced on my head ... I'm a bit of a part time acrobat because no one ... I'm incredibly blessed that no one in this world had the medical model of disability at the heart of their practice. They were like, *okay, we've got wheels – what can we do?* That was so exciting and even though one of the founder members used to be stood in my wheelchair with me like, *Is it gonna break? Well it's still standing, let's keep going.* That sort of thing. It was just growth beyond my comprehending. It was a beautiful alignment.

And then we hit lockdown and I suddenly found myself on my own. And I was like, *oh man, I've only been in a wheelchair for five months.* And I couldn't dance in my wheelchair at home. I didn't have a studio. I was living in inaccessible housing, I didn't have suitable flooring – all these things that happen when you suddenly become disabled. You don't plan to be in a wheelchair, so you live in a house that has stairs and that has carpet, and then suddenly that's not helpful.

So, we're in lockdown, I didn't have a dance studio, so I was like, *right, I have a bit of a choice to make.* And because I had been dancing with my beautiful, beautiful friends Josh Hawkins and Josh Wild in Manchester in a studio called Wild Hawk. Josh Hawkins opened his own dance company, Hawk Dance Theatre, and Justin Wilde is actually a lead dancer with Christine and the Queens, previously Balletboyz. So they come from places of exceptional talent and excellence and drive. Basically, there was no deliberation about whether we were gonna be great. We were. We were gonna find a way to do it. And they were like, *yeah, come on down.*

So I got to a stage where I was really frustrated because I kept falling out of my wheelchair in class and I couldn't get myself back in. Josh had to keep lifting me back in. Because I was relearning to move, basically. 'This one day I was like, Just leave me on the floor!' And he's like, 'Alright...What are you gonna do now?' And I'm like, 'I don't know what I'm gonna do!' And I ended up finding ways that it was possible to move from my knees and actually ... I have a neurological condition that causes paralysis from the neck down temporarily, and so I had to relearn to move from that place in a ... rehab was basically me going to dance, because they used to hold me up, so I could start to feel how it felt to be able to hold myself up again. And we started finding that actually I could dance from my knees which was really exciting. And I had some control. And the more I did it, the more control I had. So we hit lockdown and I really started dancing from my knees, well, *I can't use my wheelchair, so, here we go, let's see what I can do from my knees.*

I had a beautiful bit of garden with grass, and I found that in the rain, because it was always raining, in lockdown, I could do knee spins on the grass. So I started learning my tendus and pirouettes from knee-spins on the grass, and my practice just suddenly took flight. Then I started working with **Josh Arnett** during lockdown and performed in his piece which connected people from around the world, which was brilliant.

And then last year in August during lockdown, I became non-verbal – another situation which was, like ... *Boom, hit again.*

Josh and Josh were like, *Well we did it once, let's do it again.* I spent half a year in hospital, but I left with a deeper understanding of what my practice can be now. And I'm going, *Okay. I can't walk. I can't talk. What can I do now?*

I thought the medical model of disability was bad when I was just in a wheelchair, but at least I was verbal. Oh, my days... Now they were like, *right, look, you need to get in your place. You can't walk, you can't talk, you can't, you can't write: you can't be a dancer.*

And I was like: *Okay, here we go...*

So I left hospital with a place in National Youth Dance Company, a company based at Sadler's Wells and – fun fact – I perform at Sadler's Wells next with them, and it's two years to the day that I first started using a wheelchair back in that class, two years ago when I had my last relapse and needed to use a wheelchair that I'll be on the main stage at Sadler's Wells, which feels very, very huge. A big achievement. I wish I could have all my doctors there if I'm totally honest.

Season Butler

You should invite them! You should invite each and every single one of them. I would love that. I'm grinning. You can't see me, but I'm absolutely grinning.

Maiya Leeke

Yeah, it's been a journey and because the choreographer I'm working with at the moment, Alesandra Seutin, in National Youth Dance Company. She's an exceptional human being and whose style is African contemporary, and it's heavily based on footwork and verbal words.

Season Butler

[giggles] Okey-doke...

Maiya Leeke

Now, and I'm a wheelchair user and I'm not verbal at times. And I was like, *Oh dear, here we go...* And I had the doctor's going, *Hahaha. You clearly can't do that.*

But I had all these people saying, *Come on. What can we do?* So, this is what I mean. I've been so blessed with beautiful people along the way going, *Yeah but, we can absolutely find a way to do that.*

And I happened to be mentored by Charlotte Darbyshire who's the artistic director of Candoco Dance Company and Joe Brand who's a company dancer in Candoco Dance Company, also a wheelchair user himself, so it was really useful to unpack the footwork and what that can mean.

The way I now approach movement, my understanding, the way I can communicate when I'm teaching and performing, it's the biggest gift my disability's given me.

Season Butler

I completely love that; I could listen to you absolutely all day. I'm guessing that you have a pretty unique perspective on some of the political differences of being in the world before and after a disability. And I love your mentioning of the medical model and really what a kind of violent and, pretty soon, politically obsolete thing I think it's going to become. I love seeing more and more that people are taking on the [social model](#). And so I guess, in terms of being a working performer and a working creative and also a disabled person who's now needing to encounter certain parts of the system that you may not have had to deal with before and that many non-disabled people just don't have to deal with – I was wondering: is there anything in terms of those encounters with the establishment that you want to share or talk about?

Maiya Leeke

This may not be quite where you want me to go but what feels comfortable to share now is actually from a dancer's perspective, my biggest thing is the perceptions of other people on myself – what I'm allowed to do ...

I think one of my first initial experiences was actually with performing outdoors Leicester Square in London, and I was really quite ignorant to the world where I never saw people with disabilities as *they can't do that or it can't be that bad 'cause they're going shopping*. None of these things I thought, *I never had that, so people won't have that about me*.

Oh dear, that was my first mistake. So I was performing in Leicester Square. It was a street performance. And I then moved into the square and an audience member decided to go, 'Ha! She clearly can't dance!' to try to get everyone to laugh at me before I started performing.

And I have two responses: the one that I really wanted to do is basically to burst out crying and being like, *Oh, I can't deal with this anymore*. These things come in waves, you kind of get through a few days where you're like, 'Look at me, I'm managing in a non-disabled world whilst being disabled' and then they go HAHAAHA and they all crawl out of the woodwork and go Boom and this was one of them.

And I thought, 'Naw, I can dance better than you and I'm gonna tell you I can dance better than you.' So I thought, 'Okay, I'm just gonna let him have his moment.' And people were really awkward moment like, are we meant to laugh? She's not laughing, he's laughing.' They were all just stood there. And not one person, not *one* person told him to shut up, or something stronger, or said, 'Um, she clearly can.' No one kind of ... which for me was worse than the laughing.

You really are kind of isolated and it's draining because it has to come from you constantly. And if I didn't do great – I knew I was gonna be great, and I knew what I was doing. I was like, *yeah, I'm sure I'm about to blow your minds because I'm about to flip my chair over and do all these things*. To me I'm just a dancer, this is just what I do. And I want you to be inspired by my art and not because I'm disabled and I got out of bed in the morning. That's not inspiring; my dog gets up and barks in my face – I *have* to get up.

So, but, yeah and it was interesting because I performed and it was great the audience received it well. And at the end someone else came up to me and just went, thank you. Because I didn't say anything. I responded with my art. And I thought, I'm not going to give you my energy, I'm going to put my energy into my performance. But really just reflecting, that's the biggest thing I wished people would do more and I have some exceptional colleagues and friends now, and if they had been there, they would have been the ones to stand up.

What I would really love is a world where you don't need to be best friends with someone who's disabled to be an ally in a situation where you find yourself like that, where there was hundreds of people in the audience and not one of them stood up and said anything.

I bring an extreme level of resilience, like I really, really do, and I just know that not everyone is as strong as what I was in the situation, because I wasn't that strong once, and I know that and I'm like, for some people, that don't have the support around them and the amazing friends and colleagues that I did, they wouldn't bounce back from that. They wouldn't perform anymore, they wouldn't put themselves in those situations. For me to perform I have to put myself in situations where I know I'm gonna face backlash, I know I'm gonna challenge people's perceptions by being on stage. I'm gonna make people feel uncomfortable because they haven't been warned that they're going to get a wheelchair on stage. And then I think, oh bloody hell, *what if I open my mouth as well and I sound like I do, or I'm using a speaking device. And then we'll have a real problem, won't we?*

It's quite sheltered in the contemporary dance world, because we're beautiful people, and I can honestly say that everyone I work with is a blessing. And I'm welcomed. But it's always the same.

Season Butler

I mean, I think that what your work provides as well is, or something that I wonder if people feel confronted by with your work, is the actual diversity within the group, the constituency, that we think of as wheelchair users. Because I think some people think that all wheelchair users are wheelchair users because they're paraplegic or quadriplegic. And there's no other reason why people use a wheelchair. But also some people with Tourette's use wheelchairs, you know, there are all sorts of reasons. And so I was wondering if you ever get challenged with that because your wheelchair user but it's clear that you're not paraplegic and so do you kind of get shit for that? Do you have to, like, kind of educate people or correct people?

Maiya Leeke

Yes, is the short answer. But I must say, for me, kind of a whole area of safety for me has been surrounding myself with people I know have my back. If anything was ever said, they

would jump in. And it was putting myself in situations where I'm not exposed to those sorts of people who are gonna come out with that, basically.

But my problem is, I apparently make disability look too fun. I make it look cool. I actually had someone one time go, 'Can I have a go?'

Season Butler

Oh no!

Maiya Leeke

I'm like, 'You what?'

And he went, 'Can I have a go?'

'A go with what?'

'You know, I can go in your wheelchair.'

And I was like, 'Nnnnoo.'

And he was like, 'Yeah, but, it looks *really* fun.'

And I was like, 'No part of my life is fun!' I was having a really bad day; he caught me at a really bad moment.

And he was like, 'I'm not saying your life is fun. I'm saying it would be fun for *me* right now if I could have a go. I wouldn't like push you out or anything; you could sit on the floor. But then I could, yeah, you know, just have a go.'

And I was like, 'No. It's still a no. And I'm gonna have to roll over you if you don't get out of my way.'

And that's my biggest thing. People almost don't see my disability because I'm the person who leaves hospital with a job with prestigious theatre companies, a dance company based at Sadler's Wells. I do these things and push myself to achieve these things, such that people don't see the challenges of my disability, they just see what I'm doing, which looks great, and they 'want a go.' And I'm like, 'You don't want "a go" at having a neurological condition. Think about what you're saying.' That's the biggest one.

Season Butler

I have to wipe the tears of hilarious from my eyes. I was weeping. So, I'm wondering about society in general and it sounds like you've really managed to continuously place yourself in these spaces and contexts where you can move through these quite profound changes that you've experienced, and thrive. And I think this is one of the most beautiful things about the social model of disability, that it encourages us to think about our bodies as something that's always changing. It's not necessarily this, like, *are you ill or are you well?*, like a light switch that's on or off, but rather: *okay, and now there will be this and now there will be this and now this combination of things...*

And you seem to live that really beautifully and of course, it's, I think, and maybe I've got this wrong, but I've really seen the popularising of the social rather than medical model of ability, disability and bodies really being pioneered through the arts in the UK and specifically dance. And in particular the dance companies that you've mentioned by name, that you've been involved with. And so, it just feels like you're a real part of a shift in our collective cultural mindset, that's going to benefit all of us, no matter what our bodies are doing or being on a particular day. And so I'm just feeling really moved and I wanted to say that.

Maiya Leeke

Thank you. Thank you for saying that. I aspire to be part of the change and there's some exceptional beings in our dance world. They are really, really exceptional dancers, exceptional humans. And they are really paving the way for us to be able to move forward. And as a younger person, to be able to be part of that is really exciting.

Season Butler

Yeah. Yeah, cool. Like, so in terms of this sector – because my task here with Radical Structures is to – I don't know – try to gather some intelligence about how the UK Arts sector needs to change to better help artists to thrive. And of course the Marxist in me wants to say, *total revolution. Let's, you know, burn it all down.* And you know, that too, of course. But this is all political and I think that when we experience states that are classed as illness or profound changes in our ability, we really do bump up against the political and ways that we didn't necessarily see it before. And so, I was wondering, do you consider yourself political? I'm doing scare quotes around 'political.'

Maiya Leeke

I don't. Not right now, no.

Season Butler

Cool. And do you have a sense of, like when you look at the sector, what do you think works well in the UK art sector and what do you think works not so well, for artists, for institutions, for audiences, whatever?

Maiya Leeke

What works well is the ever-growing openness to evolution and to *seeing people*, and challenging what we've always known. And these are the people I want to be involved with. Because the places that are going, 'This is how we've always done it – but actually, we have these people that we're not even including or reaching, how can we evolve, what can come from our practice to make us get to where we want to be?'

And it's this different level of hunger and drive in these people and organisations. The energy is really infectious to be around, and when you get a group of them together, you really feel like, *Whoa, the world is changing.* To me, that's what works really beautifully well. And the more that these people are working together, it's very exciting.

Season Butler

And anything that you think could work better?

Maiya Leeke

To me – and I don't know if I'm gonna see this in my lifetime – but this is what I'm working towards every single day...

It's to get away from the idea that the world is exclusive unless stated 'inclusive'. And how can we reach the point where we are all being inclusive, not to tick a disabled box, not to tick a box for any body, person, anything. To really make access at the heart of creation. To layer it up on top as if it's a problem, I think for me that's still a challenge – it's when you see people complaining about adding in extras and the length of time that takes. But actually it's not that it takes longer, it's that you weren't doing all the work [from the start].

And I think for me especially as a disabled person, the burden I feel existing in the world, is that that would just be a huge weight towards me just being able to function as an artist. And I know that is just my view, that it is a very widely adopted view. So, allowing artists to just be artists, whether disabled or non-disabled, and having the support and accessibility in place to enable that to happen.

Season Butler

Okay. I've got a little bit of an imagination question: What would a world in which artists are truly empowered look like?

Maiya Leeke

Okay, I feel like there's two sides to this. Because there's the responsibility of the artist and the responsibility of the organisation, the world, the people the artist is working with. And for the artist to be empowered, you've got to function from a place of passion and purpose. If you do not love what you're doing, quit making the decisions you don't love. If you don't want to do something, and you're not going to function from a place of love, don't do it. 'Cause that's a drain. *You're* going to be drained. You're not going to be empowered. You're going to have this bitter resentment in you. You're going to function with a different level of energy and drive, and you bring a little bit of something out that makes people go, *Whoa, what's going on?* when you truly love what you do. And you are empowered to just turn up, be alive, create, be an artist.

And that's a responsibility to continuously make those choices to function from a place of passion and purpose.

But also to be able to do that, it's incredibly hard to turn up full of life, full of passion and purpose and empowerment, and you're like *Phwarr, I'm ready to go* – and you get to a building that's been specially said is wheelchair accessible...and you can't get in.

And it's like, are you joking? Or you have to be pushed in. I'm an independent, self-propelling manual wheelchair user. I do not need pushing in. I can wheelie, I can do an acrobatic roll in my wheelchair. If I need help getting up a ramp, chances are your ramp isn't accessible.

When these two things match ... and I can say that they do match and it can happen, because I'm in the place where I am today, I'm working at Mind The Gap in Bradford which I truly, truly love, and they meet my passion, my purpose, my energy, my drive for my work

with the accessibility, for one, with the seeing me as an artist (they never, ever, ever have seen me as anything less than an artist. It wasn't *a thing* that I was disabled. It was just, *who are you? What do you need? What can we do? And here's what we do as well, as an organisation, with artistry.*) And when these things match up – oh my goodness – magic happens. But it's a shared responsibility.

Season Butler

I love that. Yeah, you've got me choked up for the second or third time in an hour. Okay. So finally, I know that you mentioned that you're going to be on the stage at Sadler's Wells, coming up. That sounds really exciting. Can you tell us just a little bit more about like what you're working on now, what you're into, what's on the horizon, and where we can see you soon?

Maiya Leeke

Oh, there's so much happening that's so exciting. Yes – I am currently working with National Youth Dance Company and we will be opening at Dance East in Ipswich on the 20th of July, and then moving to Sadler's Wells on the 24th of July, and then going on a tour in August.

I am just beginning some work with Adam Benjamin, who's an incredible human being who's the co-founder of Candoco Dance Company. And I've got an artist residency at Sadler's Wells as well myself, and I'm going to be going there with Adam, and looking at how we can evolve my practice as accessible, universal, and most importantly, I can evolve alongside as well, so I can reach more people, I can understand more things. Unlock new things, open up new things and find the light in new challenges because there's so much to discover.

And I am incredibly blessed to say that I am joining Candoco Dance Company from September as an apprentice dancer, and I'll be studying for my master's in contemporary dance performance at Northern School of Contemporary Dance. So, I'm incredibly excited and I feel a big world of Candoco coming up, which I'm here for every day. They are absolutely wonderful.

Season Butler

Amazing. Okay. I'll definitely be including links to all of these projects so our listeners will be able to find you. And I think that we should wrap it up here. I've absolutely loved hearing from you, and I so, so appreciate you taking the time out to speak with me today.

Maiya Leeke

It's been a pleasure. Thank you for speaking with me, too. I've really enjoyed it.

Season Butler

All right, so I'll sign off here. Thanks, Maiya and thanks everyone.

Maiya Leeke

Thank you.
