

The 'D' Word Season 2 - Episode 1

ARIA EVANS: Hi, I'm Aria Evans and this is The 'D' Word. This season the theme is activism. We are jumping into the work of three dance artists who through performance, choreography and production, are driving social justice. Through conversations about representation, caregiving and reclamation, we spotlight the issues that these artists care about to answer the question: How is our sector leading social change? This episode we have Ravyn Wngz calling in. Ravyn Wngz is a Tanzanian, Bermudian, Mohawk, 2 spirit, and queer storyteller. She is a co-founder of ILL NANA/DiverseCity Dance Company, a co-founder of Black Lives Matter Canada, a co-founder of The Wildseed Center for Arts and Activism, a Canadian best selling author, and a 2021 top 25 Women of influence in Canada recipient. Welcome Raven, I'm so happy to have you here joining us. Thanks for carving out the time.

RAVYN WNGZ: I'm excited to be in conversation with you. Thanks for having me.

ARIA EVANS: I wanted to start by asking you about Black Lives Matter TO and how you first got involved with that movement.

RAVYN WNGZ: Yeah, absolutely. Black Lives Matter Toronto chapter began around 2014/15. And I was very, very heavily involved with the LGBTQ community in terms of organizing community space, as well as dance programming. Anything that was related to harm reduction and better health with our bodies and relationship to our bodies I was doing, and I got connected with the Black Lives Matter chapter. And they asked me to choreograph a flash mob with a bunch of other choreographers, it was really fun. We came together and it was the first time that I had used my choreography for a movement. And so it was really exciting to think about it that way to articulate my choreography that way. And it was for this event called Take Back the Night, which is a night for survivors of gender, race, and sexual violence, to take back the streets and own our possibilities, and to make people aware of what's happening. It was a collaboration with Black Lives Matter Toronto, and so it was really beautiful. We marched and we stopped to perform at Spadina and Queen. That's an interesting area for me, because multiple things have happened in that space for me. I've had lots of transphobia, lots of homophobia in that area and so I didn't really feel safe in that area regularly. But here we were in the middle of the street, dancing

**This transcript has been edited for clarity.*

to Michael Jackson "They Don't Really Care About Us" and doing step dance, which I had learned from Atlanta, Georgia in high school days, and it was just really beautiful. All these things coming together. And it reminded me of my five year old dream of becoming Michael Jackson, and wanting to be a star and wanting to have influence and change the world. And it all sort of compacted in that moment.

ARIA EVANS: It's a pretty incredible dream for a five year old.

RAVYN WNGZ: It was. Yeah, I think, I don't know, maybe it was a different five year old, but I was really looking for safety. I was bullied so much at four that I was just like, 'Oh, how do I get safe?' And I don't think I was using that kind of language. But I saw Michael Jackson, and he had a soft voice. And he was a feminist. And people celebrated him. And I was like, 'Oh, that's who I have to become in order to be safe.' Of course as a five year old I didn't know all the things that he was going through. [Laughs] And, you know, all his stuff. But that was sort of, I think, why I leaned into dance and performance and all that. It was really about trying to carve safety out for myself. So it was a really interesting moment. And so then I started showing up at the rallies and actions and trying to support in the ways that I could, by teaching dance and stretch. Because I was just like, they're doing really intense work, it's really traumatic on the body, and a lot of them don't have a body practice. And so I was just like, 'Well, that's what I can offer', because I don't have organizing strategy, I didn't want to be a part of this chapter, that wasn't anywhere near my intention. I just wanted to be useful. And so I went and I taught stretching, particularly at the tent city action in 2015. It was very, very cold outside. And so we did singing circles and drum circles, and there were indigenous elders there, and land protectors. It was just so full of life and beautiful. And it gave us an idea of what solidarity could really, really look like if we came together. It was a really intense, but beautiful experience. And there was one night in particular, where the police came out and bum-rushed everyone and knocked us down to the street. And it was really intense because I grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, and so I've seen a lot, but I had never seen that image. Other than on, like, an old video of the civil rights movement, you know? Like that they were in this formation and like, this is Toronto, what's happening?

So all of my illusions kind of broke about what was safer in Canada and all that kind of stuff. And so they came down and they pushed elders down and kids down. And it was just so horrifying. And what got me was that they looked terrified. And so I understood something in that moment. I was like, 'Wow, there's so much at play here, it's a deeper system.' But I was protected. People surrounded me and got me out of the area. And then I came back the next morning and I was like, 'Okay, we're gonna stretch it out. We're gonna work it out.' And then I help them organize a night of performances and storytellers and all that kind of stuff. And I was just trying to be helpful. [Laughs]. And then they asked me to join and I did, so naively, but I'm grateful for the experience.

ARIA EVANS: I want to take you back to something you were saying about how when you were invited to choreograph in collaboration with other choreographers for that flash mob, you said that your choreography took on a new form. How did you approach your choreography differently after that?

RAVYN WNGZ: The truth is, because I grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, I was surrounded by conversations of the civil rights movement. I was surrounded by these monuments to Martin Luther King and Coretta Scott King. And so for me, I always wanted to be a part of revolution. I always wanted to be one of those people, but I didn't think I could be. Because my voice was too soft. I didn't look like what I thought I was supposed to look like in order to do it. And so I had sort of just let go. And in that moment, when I was chosen to help choreograph, and I got to show up as myself, I was like, 'Wow, I get to be me in this movement, and impact something. And so I don't have to change it. Wow, that's incredible.' So how can I be more intentional about the stories that I'm telling? Where I'm telling them and who I'm telling them to? Up until that point, I was intentional, but it was a different kind of intention. I wanted to show queer and trans and non-binary folks as powerful. As super powerful. As I wanted to feel that way, because I didn't feel that way. So I was projecting an image that I wanted to grow into. And that's what ILL NANA/DiverseCity Dance Company was, initially. So this was a change for me. I was like, 'Oh, okay, I can be part of a movement. Okay, what does that look like?' And so I thought about Nina Simone and James Baldwin, and I sat down and I like, studied

their work and the work of Lucille Clifton, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, and I really, really thought about how what would it mean for me to identify as a renaissance artists in this time period? What would that look like? And then I started doing that within my burlesque, within everything.

ARIA EVANS: As someone coming to Black Lives Matter Toronto chapter with a dance background, how did this training inform your approach to community organizing?

RAVYN WNGZ: I sat down and had a conversation with Syrus Marcus Ware. We have known each other for some time, actually, Syrus gave us our first real gig. And so we had this history and he talks about being an abolitionist. And I didn't really understand what that meant. And so I sat down, I was like, 'Can I have an honest conversation with you? Can I just like, ask you questions that might seem ridiculous or annoying. I just want to understand,' you know, and he sat down with me and I asked about, like, 'What does it mean to be an abolitionist? What does that look like?' And he said, 'It looks like all the things that we do. It looks like dance. It looks like storytelling. Art. It looks like community building. It looks like disability justice.' And I was like, 'What's that?' It's like accessibility. It's like really fighting for a different understanding of wellness, and how we relate to it. And I was like, 'Oh, okay, I do that.' I just didn't know that I was doing an aspect of it. And so now I can be more intentional in how I do it, and what it means for me to take up certain spaces and to work in solidarity with other spaces. And so it really just got me to think about my relationships, to the work that I was doing, and the people who I was doing it with. I've always said, I think, since those conversations with Syrus, [laughs] that activism is just relationships. It's just like passing our relationships around, and you're just learning how to work with each other, and understand each other, and the land, and all the things. And so it just changed how I wanted to be with people. I just wanted to be better around folks and understand my impact. And so I had to look at where first, I was not moving in principled ways. I was like, 'Okay, this is what the movement stands for, am I doing that? In my interpersonal relationships, in my work that's going out there?' And I started to shift and change things that I wanted to move. Like, one of my friends describes it as flying an airplane while learning how to fly an

airplane. So you're in the movement, trying to learn how to navigate it, and change it and impact it. And so it was beautiful. And it really helped me to articulate my talents, that I didn't actually think that I had. Or had buried through shame and bullying and all the things that I experienced. And so BLM really helps me to get a voice, vocally to what I had given a voice to in my body. You know, I had silenced, I've been silenced, and then I took everything into my body. So I could speak, movement-wise, but not so much through my voice, through what I was saying anymore. So they really helped me, putting me in situations where I had to articulate my ideas and how I related to things. And I was a different kind of speaker, because I didn't come from academic backgrounds. And so I didn't use that to relate to people. I'd be like 'So I'm new to this. And this is really difficult to understand. But here's how I got to it.' I felt like people were really starting to take to my way of relating to them. And I just developed that more over time.

ARIA EVANS: It's incredible to hear you talk about that reciprocity. How, like, your movement practice supported the work that you were doing, and vice versa, how being surrounded by a group of people that were more vocal in a different way, also gave back to you. You spoke just now about collaboration and I know this is something that is very alive in you and your history. You are the co-founder of ILL NANA/DiverseCity Dance Company, which is described as a queer multiracial dance company. How has that role integrated into your trajectory as an activist?

RAVYN WNGZ: It is wild because I was having a conversation with Sze-Yang Ade-Lam yesterday. And I was so grateful. I was just feeling so full and so grateful. And I was crying a little bit because I was just like, 'ILL NANA/DiverseCity Dance Company started in our living room. Us and our best friend. And we were dancing all the time, we would just come home from school or from whatever we were doing, work, and we would just dance, for whatever reason. And I was like, 'I want to change something. I want to take this into the school, I want to do drag in school and just like, change everything.' Because I think that if they knew that drag existed, if they knew that this kind of storytelling related to people, in these really beautiful, magnificent ways, it could change how people are coming to the theater and are experiencing them. But I never expected ILL NANA to be what it

was. That was just what we were doing when we were going for other jobs and it ended up connecting with community. And we understood. But in 2010 there was the disaster in Haiti. The earthquake. And we were asked to perform, and up until then we had just been doing hip hop. We had just been doing street styles and different things like that, that we weren't allowed to do at Toronto Dance Theatre. It was such a special moment, because we did contemporary. It was like this return to this training that we had done and had abandoned because it was so painful, and brought it back for this reason, and it was so beautiful. And then we added 'DiverseCity Dance Company' to our name because we started as ILL NANA. You know, the era of Foxy Brown and Lil' Kim. We added 'DiverseCity' because we wanted our dance company and our work to reflect the city that we lived in. The stories that were hidden, the people who we had learned from, who we wanted to offer to. And it became like a mission, like our name is the mission of the dance company. And so it has given me everything. Everything that I'm experiencing right now, this activist thing, Black Lives Matter, conversations with people who I looked up to my entire life, in rooms, where my influence is impacting how trans and non-binary people can be hired. ILL NANA gave me all of those particular strategies. And I'm so so so so so grateful for that journey.

ARIA EVANS: Your five year old self I think would be really delighted to hear you say that.

RAVYN WNGZ: Yeah.

ARIA EVANS: In many of the articles talking about your your activist fame [laughs], in many of the articles that have been written about you, and when I listened to the speeches that you've made, when you speak publicly, one of the things that really hits me at my core, is how your art is driven by wanting to have conversations that open people's minds and open people's hearts by encouraging self reflection and empathy. And I see this as such a beautiful way to operate in the world and to engage with folks, how did you come to that place?

RAVYN WNGZ: Wow! Ooh, I'm gonna get emotional. My mother was a teacher. And I got to watch her relate to students who had very different backgrounds and very different brilliances that she acknowledged

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and talked to us about, me and my twin brother. And I think it was like just watching her shift. Like she would change how she spoke to this one, and change how she spoke to that one. And they would feel seen and their behaviors would change. These are usually children who have been called, like, problem children, or had behavioral issues. And sometimes they would stay at our house and we became friends. And it was this really interesting thing. So definitely my mother, who pushed me and put me into a speaking program called Toastmasters that I hated. I hated it. But she did that I think because as a kid I didn't speak. And so at like seven years old, she was like, 'You're going to have to learn how to articulate yourself. I know you know how you feel. But when I ask you how you're doing, I need you to give me like five words to answer it.' Like she had to teach me how to have conversations with people and relate to people, because I was so nervous of being wrong or sounding whatever way. And I was afraid of my voice and all those kinds of things. So I think when I'm teaching, when I'm sharing in any space, I think about that. It's like how am I going to relate to people in a way that doesn't make people feel like crap? Because they don't know. You know, I want to be helpful. And I fully fully believe that shame and punishment are things that don't help people to grow. Guilt is not something that's useful. But it's often what is used sometimes, even by activists on the left, to get people to stand up and do something. But it doesn't work. For some people it might initiate something, but I don't feel like it's a holistic way of engaging with the work. It's a lifetime kind of thing. And if you're going to do it for a lifetime, you have to have self reflection. How do you feel? And that comes from dance. Body practice. And I mean, like, how am I feeling? What's happening with me? When I came into the team.

ARIA EVANS: Yeah.

RAVYN WNGZ: I was like, 'So what's the safety plan?' And they were like, 'Sorry, what?' It's like yeah, I know we have a safety plan for everyone who's coming, but like, what about us on the team? It was like, 'Oh, we don't. Oh, we just have to go.' I was like, 'No, no, no.' If this movement is about us saying that this is about the elevation of black lives, the protection and support of black lives, acknowledgement of black trans women and queer folks, which we

all are, then we actually have to center that within what we're doing. It has to be on the inside and the outside, otherwise, like, why are we doing it? You know, everyone has to come up together. It's not like, one group is pulling another group, that doesn't work. We've seen those strategies not work. So for me, it's just constant learning. Just learning from people, from history, from kids, from everyone, just people who are speaking. And so I like to have conversations with people, like my mom had conversations with me. And I started BLM speeches in high schools, talking to 15 year olds and 14 year olds, and I was like, 'How am I gonna relate to them?' Because it's not like they don't understand certain experiences, I don't want to make it feel like they don't know. [Laughs]. So I just related it to situations that they might understand, like bullying, for example. And it really did help people to understand the movement more. That was my goal to be like, 'I want people to understand what abolition is. I want people to understand why Black Lives Matter exists. What we're doing here.' And now I'm interested in joy, and wellness.

ARIA EVANS: Mmm.

RAVYN WNGZ: And not wellness in this way that I feel like right now, there's this conversation a lot about mental health, and we're talking about that more as COVID is happening. And I get a little frustrated. [Laughs]. Because people talk about mental health, like the goal, ultimately, is just to get back to productivity. And I feel like wellness is wherever you're at. So how can we make the conversations about mad, disabled people as desirable states of being? As opposed to 'You need to get better, you need to do this, you need to do this, you need to go on a diet', all that kind of stuff. I feel like it's not wellness to me.

ARIA EVANS: One of the words that you used was 'holistic.' And I think thinking about your practice in that way, thinking about the way you want to engage with politics in that way is such a beautiful way to encompass all of those things, and to move forward from that place. I have one last question for you.

RAVYN WNGZ: Okay.

ARIA EVANS: You mentioned Syrus Marcus Ware earlier. And I understand that he created your Patreon account, which is where I am asking this question from, because you talk about creating a revolutionary arts practice. And you spoke about your return to contemporary dance in one of the activisms that you did. In what ways do you desire to challenge mainstream Arts and Dance spaces through your work?

RAVYN WNGZ: Oh, gosh. I mean, I think it has changed so much over time. There were times when I wanted to go into institutions to be like, 'I'm going to change you! I'm going to go in and I'm going to fix it. And I'm going to create band aids' and, you know, that's an approach but I think it exhausted me. You know, over 2020/21 I'd been having lots of conversations with lots of organizations and in places about inclusion and diversity and activism and the movement. And with dance, I feel like there's a way that certain art forms distance themselves from human-ness. And I feel like dance is one of those. When dancers, institutionalized dancers, I should say, remove themselves from society a little bit, like we talk about certain choreographies for example, as 'pedestrian', for example. [Laughs]. And so the ways that we look at regular human life prevents us from understanding our role in changing it and in offering to it. And this is from James Baldwin, I'm thinking about how you use art as a hammer sometimes. Sometimes art reflects the world we live in, and sometimes it needs to be the thing that changes it or shows a different possibility. And so, you know, I hope that mainstream institutionalized dance programs, companies who are doing work Indigenize their practices. Respectfully. [Laughs]. You know, respectfully, not for buzzwords or for merit badges, but for real relationships. And for real understanding of ceremony. Art is ceremony, it's bringing people together, it's learning from each other, through all of our Indigenous histories there are, well not all, but many of them, there's song, and there's dance, and there's teachings through those things. You know, and how do we bring those together to talk about the environment? To talk about, over-incarceration? And to talk about grief? You know, or joy, or happiness, or sexuality, or biracial experiences, whatever it is, you know, I think dance could actually play a much bigger role. And I think in the past it did. Which is an interesting thing, in the past, singers and artists and dancers were talking about real stuff that was happening in the world, like Chaka Khan and Eartha Kitt. And,

you know, they're really talking about their communities, who they are, it's why we like hip hop, some of hip hop, [laughs] you know. We identify what is happening where we are. And so I think, dance could stand to do that. Identify where it is, how it's situated. Thinking about the School of Toronto Dance Theatre, because that's where I went to school, and thinking about the fact that it's in Regent Park, but most of the people who live in Regent Park, don't go to that school. Why does that happen? To ask those questions about who isn't in the room? And how we change our programs so that people come into those spaces. Not just be like, 'You can come here', but how do you change the inside to be open for more folks to believe that it's possible for them to walk through those doors and to experience those things if they want to. I always describe dance as my love language.

ARIA EVANS: Mmm.

RAVYN WNGZ: Because it's how I learned how to love myself, truly. It's how I understood the energies that I was, it's how I understood how to, as a burlesque dancer, have control over a situation. [Laughs]. In really particular ways, you know. The major speech that people know me from was burlesque. I took pauses, I brought people in, I wasn't doing a performance, necessarily, but I spoke in a way that, I feel like, got people to slow down for a second. Like, 'Okay, we're just gonna listen.' You know, I felt like when I was getting erratic as a kid and my mom would be like, 'One second, let's just take a moment. How do you feel? Cry. And then tell me how you feel.' And so that's kind of how I approach all of it.

ARIA EVANS: Your presence inside of what you're doing your work for and the voice that you found coming from an embodied place is so delicious to witness and to see starting to be recognized in a way that I think it deserves. And I just want to thank you, for the work that you're doing, the human that you are, the conversations that you're starting. This conversation has been a true delight, and I can't wait for the next one. Thank you.

RAVYN WNGZ: Thank you for having me. I appreciate being asked to share my story. I've done it many times, but I don't take it for granted. You know, every time I get to share little bits about myself, or hear it

reflected back to me, it's allowing me to exist [laughs] outside of myself, and I really appreciate that.

ARIA EVANS: That's our show. You can find Ravyn Wngz on Twitter and Instagram at Ravyn Wngz. The 'D' word is presented by dance: made in canada, a contemporary dance festival featuring Canadian dance artists who possess unique artistic visions and come from all cultural backgrounds. This year dance: made in Canada presents dance on film + video, a curated selection of films screening at the Paradise Theatre in Toronto on August 13, and available on demand at dance:madeincanada.ca for a limited time. The 'D' word is produced by Grace Wells-Smith and Sam Hale. Our editor and composer is Jamar Powell. Dance: made in canada's co-festival directors are Janelle Rainville and Jeff Morris. Yvonne Ng is the artistic director and also co-festival director. And I'm your host, Aria Evans. Thank you to Canadian Heritage, the Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council and Toronto Arts Council for making The 'D' Word possible. Find us wherever you get your podcasts and don't forget to rate and review. Talk to you soon. Bye.