

The 'D' Word Season 2 - Episode 2

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 Susie Burpee calling in. Susie traverses dance and leadership. She's a dance artist, creator, teacher and mother of two young children. She is the artistic producer of Balancing Act, an organization dedicated to supporting artist caregivers, by advocating for equality, accessibility, and inclusion in the workforce, which we will talk more about later. Susie! Welcome to The 'D' Word podcast. We're so excited to have you. Thank you for making the time to speak with me.

SUSIE BURPEE: Thank you for inviting me. It's such a pleasure to be here.

ARIA EVANS: One of the things that struck me when we were first talking about this interview, was that you used to shy away from identifying yourself as a mother, in artistic settings specifically. And I'm curious why that was?

SUSIE BURPEE: Yeah. Oh! We're just getting right into it, right off the top!

ARIA EVANS: We're diving right in! [Laughs]

SUSIE BURPEE: I'm so grateful for the question, because it really is top of mind these days. I think that I felt like somehow mothering diminished my professionalism somewhat. Which is such a sad thing to state because I don't believe that. I didn't truly at the time, but I really, like outwardly vocally [laughs] don't. Now, I think I just felt like there was an expectation in dance around being available. And you know, in the body, available in the body, and available time wise, all those economies of time. And, so I sort of kept it out of the picture a little bit in order to kind of keep up this... And I'm sure I didn't need to, you know, and I'm sure we'll get into it, but yeah, you know, it is such a central part of my life, and one that continues to fuel me and fuel my artistic work. So it's definitely at the forefront, now.

ARIA EVANS: And what was the process like to embrace that part of you? Like

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you've talked about the things in the dance industry, you know, the economy, and the availability that we seem to think that we need to have to exist in this field. But how was the process of shedding for you?

SUSIE BURPEE: I think there were a few vectors that kind of motivated the change, I guess, and one was really the advent of the pandemic, and the collapsing of the domestic and professional spaces. It was just undeniable, as you know, for us all, our worlds were kind of open to the world if we were engaging through these online platforms. But also everything was happening in our house, everything. And so it just propelled, you know, a letting go. And I keep using the word collapsing because I feel like the domestic and professional collapsed into each other, and I just collapsed into giving over to it. And also, it somehow sparked a fire. So I was really thinking about what this means, you know, what all this labor means and was in good dialogue with other dance artists Tracey Norman and Kathleen Rea about how we were engaging with the time, and the workload, and being home with the kids, and feeling left behind a bit. And so it really propelled me to find out how other mothers, parents, carers were doing. So there was a process of reaching out to folks and having conversation and writing, and so I think that helped to kind of also just make it a central part of conversations, make the humanity a part of conversation.

ARIA EVANS: Listening to you say that Susie, it's incredible to feel a sense of community being cultivated over what has been a really tumultuous time. And I'm curious, I know one of the things that you do is you are the artistic producer for Balancing Act. And I hear you talk about forefronting our humanity. And for folks who don't know, can you speak a little bit about that organization, and the pilot projects that you're producing?

SUSIE BURPEE: I would love to! I feel very fortunate to be working with an amazing team at Balancing Act. So I'll just name a few of the folks that we're in cahoots with. Lisa Marie DiLiberto, who's the artistic director of Theater Direct. She is the founder of Balancing Act. And Balancing Act is an initiative of Theater Direct. And we also work with Margaret Evans, who is the managing producer. We have an amazing steering committee made up of folks from across the land,

artistic directors, artists, stage managers who have sort of, well they haven't 'sort of', they have really informed our processes and continue to do so moving forward. We also work with Nightwood Theatre as an advisory team. So, just to say, that Balancing Act does really have a sense of community. And it is a project to support parents and all kinds of caregivers who are working in the performing arts. So, looking at the term 'caregiver', you know, in a really broad way, so folks caring for younger kids, older adults, siblings, chosen family, friends, and also engaging with ideas around self care and caring practices in the rehearsal hall. So it's an incredible project that has a few different streams to it. And one of the big initiatives is, under the title Level UP! The Level UP! initiative. And this is a program. It's a three year program, we're in year one, and it engages with organizations and collectives, to pilot care-lead workplace policies and practices. So, companies will come on board and trial, maybe on-site childcare, or a flexible working model in a production run, or integrating compassion fund into a project. So these really interesting nuggets of support that can be in service of parents and caregivers, but also extending to, you know, other folks as well, like a compassion fund could be used towards mental health wellness support, transport for a loved one. You know, there's these different, I guess, lines of inquiry that these companies, and these are companies like Obsidian Theater or Buddies in Bad Times or out on the West Coast, New World Theater up in the Yukon, Open Pit Theater. So a wide range of sizes and scopes of organizations and collectives who are really trying them on and then starting to actually write down policy and templates that then can be shared with the broader sector. And that's really exciting to think of this kind of exponential growth. So year two, there will be a new group, and so on and so forth. And we're really, you know, in an exploratory time with it, discovering what's already going on out there, because there's folks already doing things that are, you know, creating these frameworks of care within their projects or within their companies. So it's also finding out and uplifting those folks.

ARIA EVANS: When we were speaking earlier this week, you were talking about how Balancing Act is very much in a pilot stage. And I'm curious with your steering committee, how has the process been to ideate?

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And to find these sort of systems that you're testing out and wanting to implement into institutions and organizations?

SUSIE BURPEE: Yeah, that's a really great question. In the early years, so, Balancing Act was founded in 2019. So in the First couple years, there were focus groups where folks brought forward their concerns around, you know, barriers to employment, or what they felt they could do and not do in The Arts because they were engaged in care. And so those were brought forward to the steering committee in early 2021. And then through a very slow process, it was sort of looking at what were the repeats, like what's coming up over and over again? And then finding strategy areas that could attend to that. But it's an ongoing process. And so we're finding even deeper ways to reach into communities and really wanting to find out, you know, what particular equity seeking groups are concerned with, interested in doing. For example, this week, we have an Indigenous artist roundtable. So it's an in camera session, where we're meeting with artists who are engaged in care, and through a process of note taking, you know, we'll be able to kind of transmit these ideas, or their ideas, and bring them, you know, into something that perhaps Balancing Act can support. So really trying to find out and discover.

ARIA EVANS: It's really beautiful to hear you talk about the intersections of your own experiences of parenting, all of these roles that you take on, like being the artistic producer of Balancing Act. And I also know you to be a multifaceted theater and dance artist, you're a mentor, you're an outside eye, you're so many things. And I'm curious what parts of all of those identities, maybe specifically related to your dance, theater training, or choreographic process, integrates and informs this work with Balancing Act?

SUSIE BURPEE: Yeah, I mean, I think at the start is just the feeling [laughs], like, I guess I start with feeling. I think that's always been what has led me through dance work is the feelings that run through my body. And I think that moving into this kind of work that sort of swims in advocacy, and, you know, propelling policy, it all comes from a place of feeling. Like I am drawn to it because I care [laughs], because it's about care. And that involves people's feelings and their bodies. And so there's, I guess, a deep connection in that way.

And, you know, it's relational work, and that's the other thing that I love about dance, always, is just being in the room with people and making things with people and Balancing Act is very much that as well. You know, I'm me, I'm Susie Burpee. I'm like, this white, middle aged woman, you know, second generation settler. So I come with that identity. And it's only, you know, in relation with other folks, other identities, that this work can really happen. So yeah, the call and response of it feels very much connected to the inner dancer.

ARIA EVANS: I find the the skills that we've been given as performing artists often get overlooked in positions that are more organizational, that are more structure based, that are about delivering any kind of output to a community who needs it. And I'm constantly reminded of how many gifts we have as creative people to participate in these larger conversations. What is at the core of your choreographic pedagogy that you think relates to how you approach designing meetings?

SUSIE BURPEE: Mmm! Such a juicy question and thank you for the reminder of gift. Yeah, I was saying to someone the other day that I felt the need to lean into the pause at a meeting, and acknowledge that, you know, in the dance spaces I've been, which are generally Eurocentric Western contemporary dance, there's a real embracing of stillness and pause, and comfort in that. And I would kind of extend that thought to some recent learning that I engaged with, and the team at Balancing Act engaged with, which was around, you know, the show doesn't have to go on in these meetings. We were in a panel event, and realized that the need for pause could have been really valuable. You know, that it's always people over product [laughs]. That's what we're working with. And so that filters into every aspect. So even this idea that a meeting doesn't have to get to its endpoint. If pausing and caring for the individuals in the room is the more important piece, it is the more important piece. And I think about that in the studio as well, how we value process and how I think processes have even more value now in these times. Like what is the 'how', of what we're doing, doing? Oh my gosh, that's so complicated. [Laughs]. What are the processes doing? In the world? There's such value in that.

ARIA EVANS: Can I think about that, like, we have those conversations in our

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rehearsal rooms, like 'Put the process before the product', and it's really interesting to hear that also in a different setting, like, how is the process also integrated into how the product happens? It's a worldview shift that I really believe in.

SUSIE BURPEE: Yeah, because it's acknowledging that, you know, the underpinnings of our art system is, you know, colonial, patriarchal, capitalist. And so that's filtered down into, you know, measurements around excellence, and first past the post or ideas of goodness. [Laughs]. And I really feel like there's a shedding of that, these days. And hoping that artists and, you know, the expertise around process can inform other systems.

ARIA EVANS: With Balancing Act, it sounds like a lot of that work is happening interdisciplinarily, but very much in a feeder lens. And I'm curious where you see opportunities for this similar kind of change in the dance sector?

SUSIE BURPEE: Well I will say that Toronto Dance Theatre, and CADA East are both partners this year in the Level UP! project. So that's really exciting. Toronto Dance Theatre as part of a strategy area where they're looking at supporting conversations around needs towards the contracting process. So that's really juicy.

ARIA EVANS: Very juicy!

SUSIE BURPEE: And, yeah! And CADA East is piloting a caregiver subsidy program, not dissimilar to CADA West. That's sort of looking at a few other things in there. So I feel like, you know, there's the possibility for sort of exponential growth. [Laughs]. There's gotta be a better way to say that! But yeah, they're acknowledging that in the studios, there are some really interesting pathways to working that folks are already engaging with. And so, you know, personally, I would love for Balancing Act to connect with those artists, those project based initiatives, those companies, and really uplift what's happening. Because I think, you know, because we work with bodies and negotiating around each other all the time, we know a lot. And, you know, maybe the next piece, just like I'm making this hand motion right now where I'm turning the dial.

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ARIA EVANS: Yeah!

SUSIE BURPEE: But maybe the next piece is finding ways to write that down or just share that with the broader community. You know, spreading the word about these caring practices that we already have in play and seeing if we can continue to grow those ideas.

ARIA EVANS: You just said, 'Write that down'. And it reminded me of a piece of writing that you did during the pandemic, you wrote an article called "Disappearing Act: Dance Artist Mothers in the Gig Economy of the Performing Arts in Canada". And my understanding is that it focused on mothering and COVID-19. And I'm curious if the pandemic has impacted the urgency around this advocacy work?

SUSIE BURPEE: Yes, I think the short answer is yes. And what I would love to say around that is I think that sometimes mothering, caring, parenting, caregiving, caretaking are often invisible. They're invisible. They're, you know, some of it happens in public, but a lot of it happens in private spaces, and in one-on-one kind of relational situations. And a lot of it's like, not glamorous, and messy. So I think the pandemic was an opportunity for visibility. And all of a sudden, some folks, you know, maybe who worked at home, let's say, policymakers, who might have been in the office and not privy to the ongoing care that was happening on a daily basis in their home, they were home. So, you know, that's one example. And others, what we referred to, of like, Zoom kind of opening up interior worlds. So, you know, there's visibility in the reporting and then I think there's also more of an awareness of the care economy, frontline workers, you know, what that actually means. That's kind of another portal to understanding. And so therefore, yes, advocacy comes out of that.

ARIA EVANS: Reflecting on your journey, as an artist who is also a parent, and thinking about what change making you're contributing to right now, is there anything that you hope to see in the future shift for the generations that are coming after you?

SUSIE BURPEE: More voices [laughs] around the table. I want to acknowledge that there are a lot of artists that are not working in The Arts anymore, for various reasons over time, perhaps because they became parents and there wasn't room, perhaps because this pandemic

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has been so hard. Also acknowledging that it disproportionately affected equity seeking groups in the global majority. And so I hope that programs like Balancing Act can bring more folks to the table, keep folks at the table. And I also have a lot of hope.

ARIA EVANS: Yeah.

SUSIE BURPEE: I really have a lot of hope for that. And I have a lot of hope in the ways that artists are working right now and what that's going to do to keep humanity in the room, and the work going.

ARIA EVANS: Mmm. On that dream of carving space and having more voices at the table, I want to thank you for sharing your voice with us today. And the work that you're doing is inspiring and important, and that labor does not go unnoticed. And I'm grateful that you've taken the time to speak with us. And I can't wait to hear more from Balancing Act and you, as an artist!

SUSIE BURPEE: Thanks Aria. Yeah, it's a gift, as you say, to be able to speak about it. And I'm really pleased to be here today. Thanks so much.

ARIA EVANS: That's our show. You can find Susie Burpee online at susieburpee.com and on Instagram at [stillsusieburpee.com](https://www.instagram.com/stillsusieburpee.com). 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.

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