

The 'D' Word Season 3 - Episode 2

- ARIA EVANS: Hi, I'm Aria Evans, the artistic director of Political Movement, a dance theatre company that makes work from a social and political lens. And this is The 'D' Word. I am back for season three and we have some incredible guests lined up to talk about this year's theme: science and the mind. How do ideas like curiosity, embodied physics, and shifting trauma through movement, influence or interact with the work of dance artists? Well, we're going to dive into those conversations right now. This episode, Snjezana Pruginic is calling in. Snjezana is the founder of Circle Point Wellness, she is trained in body based therapy, community justice and building, conflict mediation, and trauma work. Today she's here to talk about shifting trauma through movement. Snjezana, hi! Welcome to the show, we're so happy to have you.
- SNJEZANA PRUGINIC: Snjezana Pruginic Thank you. It's such a pleasure to be here.
- ARIA EVANS: To start off, in our intro, we talked about how Circle Point Wellness is a business dedicated to contributing to social growth by elevating and prioritizing the wellbeing of people and systems. Can you tell me how you do that?
- SNJEZANA PRUGINIC: Yeah, I would love to. It has definitely changed over the years that I've been doing this work, over the last 23 years. But where we kind of currently are now is really focusing on supporting leaders and supporting organizations in building systems that don't continue to perpetuate harm. So that includes everything from employee wellness, to equity, to justice, to the way that we relate together. And it's really about putting in processes and trainings that allow people to kind of function at their optimum level, together.
- ARIA EVANS: Amazing. I wish there was a person like you in every business and every organization [laughs] to do that kind of work. What drew you to that role?
- SNJEZANA PRUGINIC: Well, I've been doing a lot of trauma based work for many years with individuals, a broad range of individuals, individuals experiencing a lot of barriers and a lot of different kinds of intersecting traumas, and then also individuals in the employment and work sectors. And one thing that I've heard back from them, and from the work that I've done with them is that really, there is a cap to how much work they can do on themselves, until they're kind of stopped by the system. They're kind of stopped by the processes and structures and those peoples that are above them,

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who have those leadership positions, the directors, managers, the executives who kind of develop and design these systems, which are not supportive and not healthy, for the kind of work that they're doing, of the work that they might be doing on themselves and their own healing, in their own wellness, in their own community building. So it kind of became really evident that there was a need to speak to, quote unquote, the other side. The people who are holding the power, who are making those decisions, who are designing these processes and policies and systems.

ARIA EVANS: I remember when we were doing our pre-interview, and you spoke about having an "aha moment" when you were working in the jail system. Can you speak a little bit to that and how it relates to what drew you to this position?

SNJEZANA PRUGINIC: Yeah, there's many "aha moments", one we kind of touched on and another one that I want to bring up that connects with it is that, really, I kind of had this "aha moment" of realizing when I walk into the space inside the jail, I move into what I almost noticed as a choreography of how everyone behaves within this environment. You know, how me, as somebody coming from outside, behaves, how somebody who wears blue behaves, how somebody who wears orange behaves. And there's this unspoken kind of system that everyone steps into, you know, whether they want to or not, that's already been predetermined. And so that really kind of showed me this need to look at things from a system level, and this way of really thinking about the way we're relating within the system. So, the way we're relating to one another by the assumed roles that we take on. And with that, there was another kind of "aha moment" from somebody who literally said to me, "I'm doing all the work that I can do on myself. I'm doing all the emotional resiliency, emotional literacy work, I'm doing all the work on my mental health. I'm doing all the work in changing my behaviors, but I can only go so far because the system keeps pressing me down and keeps expecting me to take on a certain role that doesn't allow me to be the best version of myself." So his point was like, "What's the point of me doing this work if I have to consistently fight against this role that the system is placing on me? How it expects me to be and behave." So those two "aha moments" together really brought me to want to explore this idea of how we move within systems.

ARIA EVANS: That's so interesting. I have chills just listening to you talk about

the difference between the personal work that we need to do to arrive at a place to be in good relationship with other people, but there is so much other work that can be done from a systems perspective to really be in better relationships. I thank you for sharing that. I was just like, "Of course!" and it's not something that I would have thought was a practice that somebody has. So today we're talking about shifting trauma through movement. Can you explain what that means?

SNJEZANA PRUGINIC: Well, I think it means many different things to many different people. But I can say, for myself, the definition has changed over the years. You know, I think it started as, I'm a somatic therapist working with the body. So it started as something initially very kind of tangible using your own body to physically move through experiences of trauma that you can't give words to. So whether it's using things like shaking, or movement, or different kinds of body somatic techniques to move that energy. And then, as I continued along that exploration of the body and movement and trauma together, I started to really integrate more techniques coming from dance and theater and using movement there to give voice to trauma that's in our body that we can't really verbalize. So now movement becomes storytelling, in the way we use our movement, and add things to it, whether that's sounds, or no sound, and then it kind of shifted into this movement of how we relate to one another. So this movement within systems, right? So beyond our physical body, but the movement of people in relationship to one another.

ARIA EVANS: Absolutely. I think about all of the times that I walk into a place, and I have a certain expectation of how I'm supposed to navigate through it, and even just the awareness of that will change my relationship to it.

SNJEZANA PRUGINIC: Mhmm! And if you think about it in those spaces, how we move, are we perpetuating systems that cause trauma? Or are we creating relationships between each other that help us heal through trauma, that help us repair trauma, that's been created and prevent further trauma, right?

ARIA EVANS: You talked about shaking off, or using emotions to express where you're at in your body and then shifting to this place where you're looking at the way that we sort of perform in spaces. Can you share some other examples of how the body stores trauma?

SNJEZANA PRUGINIC: Yeah, I mean, there's so many different ways, and it's very individual to different people. So it's important to keep that in mind when you're looking at how the body stores trauma. And to really look at "how does it store for me", right, rather than kind of generalizing how it could. But a lot of ways that trauma can manifest in the body is through our physical symptoms, especially repetitive symptoms, chronic symptoms, chronic illnesses, chronic, quote unquote, complaints that we have. So you know, if you're always getting sick very quickly and easily, and getting colds and flus, for example, that could be a pattern that has been created somewhere. Your immune system might have been compromised due to trauma. Or it could have been due to other things, a combination of other things. And it's important to note that trauma isn't always an emotional experience. There's physical traumas that happen to the body as well throughout your life. You know, sometimes even in the birthing process there's physical trauma that happens to the body. So all of those different kinds of pieces. So, looking at your physical symptoms is one way to start asking the question: are any of these related to traumatic patterns? The other one is behavioral patterns of things that you consistently do, and you feel like you're not really quite sure why you keep doing things that way. Those usually are coming from some kind of pattern that might be related to trauma, or something that at one point you created as a kind of protective mechanism. Same with thoughts that come along that you consistently carry throughout your life, but you can't quite place where those thoughts come from, or why you have those certain thoughts. So those kinds of things can sometimes be, I guess, kind of opportunities to explore. Are there any patterns in here that are connected to trauma, whether that's trauma that you experience in your life, or whether that's trauma that's been passed down through generations.

ARIA EVANS: It's so interesting to hear you talk about all of the different pathways that things can manifest in our body. And I know you are a somatic practitioner, but I know that you have many different ways that you practice movement therapy. And I'm curious, how working through trauma with movement is different to other forms of therapy?

SNJEZANA PRUGINIC: Well, to answer that question, I had a client once tell me, "I can lie to my psychotherapist, but I can't lie to you."

ARIA EVANS: [Laughs].

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SNJEZANA PRUGINIC: Because the body never lies.

ARIA EVANS: Truly.

SNJEZANA PRUGINIC: So it's really about identifying patterns within the body and giving it space to release, to release energy, to release those patterns. And sometimes a movement can be an internal movement, such as breathing techniques that we use to move energy around the body. Different kinds of breathing techniques will activate different parts of the body. And then whatever kind of emotions or things that might be stored in the body will need to be kind of moved and processed. It can be external movements, such as stretching, or, like I mentioned earlier, shaking, or just fluid kind of movement with the body to release some of that energy. But the first part is really kind of understanding what is happening in the body. What is the body trying to speak to you, through its symptoms, sensations, feelings? Especially ones that keep coming back. You know, like, for example, today I did a workshop where we looked at, let's say, you're feeling anxiety, or you have anxiety, where in your body do you feel anxiety? You probably have felt that more than once in that same part of your body. So how do we tap into that part of the body and ask it what it needs? Explore what it needs, maybe it needs some expansion, maybe it needs some nurturance. Your body's always able to kind of tell you what it needs. And that's a way of working with any trauma that might be in there as well, right? Without needing to talk about the trauma, or go back and revisit the incidences that causes trauma, it's just about coming into the present moment and I think that's where the movement becomes really powerful. It gives the voice in the present and gives you this power to move through the present. Because sometimes trauma takes away that power to react in the present, in the time when something has happened. So using movement now, post-trauma or, you know, if it's ongoing trauma, it allows you to kind of have some of that autonomy over your own process.

ARIA EVANS: I love hearing you talk about all of the things that movement can offer, because that is something that has been a part of my life for so many years. And I understand its importance and also the ability it has to free us from so many things. I'm curious, because on your website you talk about also tapping into ancestral work, how does that incorporate into your movement practice?

SNJEZANA PRUGINIC: Hmm. I think again, it's really about understanding patterns. And

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there are patterns that you look at in your life, and you're like, "Oh, I understand where that came from. I remember when I was young, or when this happened I created this pattern". You know, let's say you were really hurt in a relationship, and out of that you created a pattern of "I will never trust anyone again", right? Like you can trace it back to an incident, quote unquote. But when you start seeing patterns that you're like, "I don't quite know where these patterns are coming from, is this just who I am?", or "these are things that have just kind of been passed down", then we can start asking those questions of like, what are the ancestral things here that are moving through your body? And what are some traumas that your ancestors experienced in their bodies, that perhaps is being passed down to you? So, you know, for myself, my ancestors experienced a lot of erasure of who they were and their culture and their different identities back home. So there's this kind of experience of just really playing safe, and protecting, and almost like disappearing, being invisible, blending in. So there's a lot of illnesses I can see in my family that are connected to this trauma that's been passed down in the DNA, in our bodies of like, "I can't take up too much space", you know. So there's different things that can come as a result of that. So it's really just, again, identifying those kinds of patterns, and then finding, what are the movements that you are free to do that your ancestors couldn't, right? Can you give yourself the space to create those movements that they didn't have the space to?

ARIA EVANS: You've talked about your practice being focused on a sort of individual perspective, and expanding to include a more systems based approach. And I'm curious why you think approaching systems in this way works?

SNJEZANA PRUGINIC: Yeah, I think it's because we internally are a system, right? So human beings build based on what we know. What we are is a system of interconnected relationships within our body, our mind, everything from like, the physiology, how everything works, it's interconnected. And I think naturally, and instinctively, human beings designed the world around us, based on that same premise of interconnected relationships. They aren't always healthy relationships [laughs], but they're still kind of copying that from the inside out. So to me, what I've seen over the years is that people will do a lot of things for themselves internally, like they may meditate all the time, they may try and eat healthy, and all these things to make their internal system operate at optimum functioning, right? But then, they always hit ceilings and limits

because who they are is much more than just this internal self. Who they are, exists in relation to others, right? And it's in relation to others where we build the systems that we have in our society. And so it just became super obvious that if we really want to make sustainable changes, we have to involve that part, too. Because that part goes back to it, that's who we are. Like, that's us. It's not us and the system, we are the system.

ARIA EVANS: Yeah, it's so great to hear you also talk about sustainability inside of these practices. And if that is ultimately what we're moving towards, of course, we have to include all of the different perspectives. I'm curious because I know that you, like, adjacent to your work, have worked with dancers. And I'm curious if there's movement forms that you're drawn to.

SNJEZANA PRUGINIC: Yeah, I used to dance as well, myself. And I will still say that my happiest place is on the dance floor. It's where I feel the happiest. And if you ever see me dancing you'd be like "yeah, I I can see why." You know, it's because I feel like that is a place where I can fully express myself. And I don't need to use words, I don't need to worry if it fits within a certain kind of expectation of what I should be or should look like, I can just be myself. And so what I have always been drawn to is dance which tells stories. And you know, I've done dance within West African and Afro Cuban traditions. And in going through those dances, it brought me back to my own culture and kind of wondering, what are the stories of my own cultural stories? What are the stories my ancestors would have danced back then? And you know, how can I kind of connect those stories through movement? And how can I honor them today? And then how can I know that as I'm tapping into those stories, I'm also tapping into the trauma that I experienced. It's interwoven in there with all the joys. So how can I help move through it now as their descendant?

ARIA EVANS: Similarly to the way that you are talking about how the body can store a trauma in many different ways, and it's an individual thing, it makes me think about that too with movement, and asking people to be in body that it's individual, it's like, what is the connection to their ancestors? Or what is the personal connection that they have to movement or their body? And to work from that place, which is really empowering, I think.

SNJEZANA PRUGINIC: Yeah, I think movement is scary. Like, it's scary for a lot of people

because it pushes you into the paradox of seeing trauma and joy at the same time, right? And then asks you how to give voice to both of those without becoming any of it, right? How to kind of keep moving through it all. And I think that's very challenging, and oftentimes, a lot of people don't feel safe to go into those spaces. And it took me a while to feel safe to go into those spaces and explore that, but I think it's the most rewarding thing when we start to tell our story from a full picture rather than just from what our mind wants to say, right? Because what our mind and our thoughts want to say, is just part of the picture that's been filtered and conditioned and influenced very heavily, while our body is kind of speaking from a different space, a different place.

ARIA EVANS: Is there anything else that you would tell somebody who's feeling a little bit nervous or trepidatious about working through trauma in this way?

SNJEZANA PRUGINIC: I would say, don't approach it as like, "oh, I have to work through my trauma through movement", but rather approach it as like, "I want to know what my body has to say to me." And like, approaching from curiosity and this gratitude that your body has wisdom that you haven't tapped into yet, in this deeper way. And I think, if you carry that curiosity with you, and that gratitude with you, it will keep grounding you when things feel a little bit harder, things feel a little bit heavy. And to know that your body has the wisdom to move through it, and it's just your job to listen. Rather than, like, "I need to get to this destination of where I moved through my trauma", because you may never move through your trauma fully. Like it may always keep showing up in different ways. So I think taking that goal away, is a good place to kind of start and just approach it with this curiosity of understanding how your body speaks to you and understanding yourself on a deeper level and kind of loving that journey, right? How can you love that journey more? And so that would be something that I would say, the intentionality behind why you start using movement is more important than, you know, how you use movement.

ARIA EVANS: Those are pretty profound words, I'm gonna let those sit with me. I have one more question for you. And it's amazing to hear that you have a background in dance. And that was where your passion for potentially incorporating movement into your practice came from. But without feeding those words to you, I'm curious, why movement? Like how did you find yourself here?

SNJEZANA PRUGINIC: Well, I found myself, again, through my own personal journey.

Because when I came from former Yugoslavia to Canada, I had a lot of things I couldn't understand and a lot of feelings, a lot of big feelings and a lot of trauma that was happening during the war. And I couldn't verbalize it, I couldn't understand them, I didn't feel safe to verbalize them. And so I found movement is one place to explore and kind of ask those questions and not feel judged and not feel any kind of other external gaze. It just felt like more with myself. So it was a space to kind of explore my own feelings, and find ways to kind of tell those stories of what I was feeling without needing anyone to say anything about the story. It was just for the sake of getting it out and understanding it. And then as I started to work with more people who also had experienced a lot of trauma from wars and different kinds of experiences due to violence, I started to see how movement became this powerful tool to take the inner self reflective work that they were doing out into the world. I ended up going to Columbia and working with former child soldiers, where I specifically partnered with an organization that was using arts, and a lot of performance based arts, to work through a lot of the different things that they were doing. And what I did with them was this project of inner work, we use a lot of meditation, a lot of touch, self touch, through shiatsu therapy, and, you know, partner work and kind of breaking down some of those internal emotions that were kind of getting in the way of the certain things that the people wanted to experience. But then how do we then express them out? Like how to actually make them tangible? That's where I found that the performance piece that they were doing within the organization became really powerful. Because, you know, they might see themselves with greater confidence and greater self love from the internal self reflection work. But what good is that if it's not applied into the outside world, like if you don't actually apply it to your life? So that's where I found the movement became that avenue to kind of explore like, "here I'm going to show you now, what my new self love looks like". Right? And as I show you that, I'm also creating a new pattern with my brain that is now encouraging me to kind of act out of them more, than perhaps not. So that's where I started to see that subtle connection of how movement can take the internal work, out.

ARIA EVANS: 23 years later. [Laughs]. Here you are. Well, thank you so much for being here with us today. And can you tell our listeners where they can find you on the ether, online, in the world?

SNJEZANA PRUGINIC: Yeah, you can definitely find me on my website,

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circlepointwellness.com or on Instagram, or LinkedIn. Depending on what kind of content you want to engage with me, those two are a bit different. But I say check out both and see which one speaks to you.

ARIA EVANS:

That's our show. 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 in person programming featuring artists from across Canada in our mainstage, WYSIWYG, dance on film and video, installation and photography exhibition at the Betty Oliphant Theatre in Toronto from August 16th-August 20th. 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. The 'D' Word is produced by Grace Elliott with Taylor Young. Our editor and composer is Jamar Powell, our sound engineer is Chris Dupuis at 1990 Studios. 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.