

The 'D' Word Season 4 - Episode 2

ARIA EVANS: Hi, I'm Aria Evans. Welcome to The 'D' Word Podcast, where we work to demystify dance. Forms of movement have been practiced since time immemorial. I'm here to reveal insights into why physical expression matters, what it does in our bodies when we watch it, and how it lives within our daily lives. This season, our theme is transformation- transforming relationships, identity, our way of thinking, and social hierarchies, all through movement. How does dance do this, you might ask? Let's dive in and find out. Today we'll be chatting with the queen of transformation, Aurora Matrix. A pop princess and dancing diva, Aurora Matrix is the Aries Fire of the Toronto drag queen. This queen stands out amongst the crowd with her bold makeup and electrifying dance numbers. Aurora's Drag is heavily influenced by her Chinese culture and strives to be a role model for queer Asian youth. Serving plenty of turns, drops, and stunts, you can always expect a full theatrical production from Aurora Matrix. And of course, Aurora is also the first runner up of season four of Canada's Drag Race. Hi Aurora, I'm so happy you've joined us today.

AURORA MATRIX: Thank you so much, Aria. I'm excited to be here.

ARIA EVANS: So my first naive question is, did you grow up in the GTA?

AURORA MATRIX: I did. I grew up in Markham.

ARIA EVANS: Wow! Okay.

AURORA MATRIX: So there were a lot of Asian people around. I was seeing Asian culture everywhere. And that's kind of my upbringing, my history before I moved to Toronto.

ARIA EVANS: Amazing. And you've decided to stay in the city? You're still here!

AURORA MATRIX: I have, honestly I really think that it was the best move for me because I'm closer to where everything is, where all the action is. I kind of love the hustle and bustle of the city. It

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gives me purpose and a drive to always be doing something different.

ARIA EVANS: And I feel like with what you do too, there's such a center here to have a platform or a stage for your work.

AURORA MATRIX: 100%.

ARIA EVANS: So you grew up in Markham, you were exposed to the arts as a kid. Musical theater was in your world, but without having formal training, what was your relationship to movement as you were growing up?

AURORA MATRIX: I have always been a very active kid. Not necessarily in sports, but just like, energy wise. So always a mover. Always. Not sitting still. My mom was always calling after me. Being like, 'Hey, get back here, get back here. Stay here for now'. So I don't know, I've always just loved exploring movement. I always thought that hitting shapes with the body was very pretty. And I guess I didn't really understand any of that until it was like, 'Oh, there's a place where I don't have to be just a dancer, but I can just use my body'. And through exploring that, I really learned to love my body even more.

ARIA EVANS: When you say you learned to love your body, was there anything movement-wise you were drawn to do? That you were like, 'This feels really good to like, be and become?'

AURORA MATRIX: Ooh. I mean, definitely being in Drag. [Laughs]. There is an instant transformation that happens once the wig is on, once the padding is on. Everything just comes together and it's just like the persona comes out, the energy. It's like from within. Like, I really do love that.

ARIA EVANS: How old were you when you put your first, like, you're talking about padding, when did that journey begin for you?

AURORA MATRIX: Honestly, it was a little later in life. I started doing Drag in university.

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ARIA EVANS: Oh wow.

AURORA MATRIX: So this was like when I first moved out of home and started living by myself. I was really exploring my own gender expression and how I carry myself and where I sit in the queer community in Toronto. So when I was in university, I really got to explore my own queerness and gender identity. And, you know, I love theater. I've been a theater student my whole life. And I had a fascination with makeup and the artistry of that. So I decided, why not put the two together and create this new person called Aurora Matrix? And I feel like that was really when I started to come into my own body and just enjoy people watching me dance and move. I found that I had that passion and it made me feel very happy. So, here I am. [Laughs].

ARIA EVANS: Yeah, here you are. And those steps that you were taking in university being like, 'I want a place to express myself. What is my community? Where am I at home? '. For somebody who might be feeling those same things, how did you find the Drag community? Like were you on Facebook?

AURORA MATRIX: [Laughs].

ARIA EVANS: Were you like, Googling? Were you looking at like, I don't know, magazines?

AURORA MATRIX: Actually, it's funny you bring up Facebook because when I first started doing Drag about five years ago, Facebook kind of was the place to look for those events. I saw on Facebook that there was an open stage happening, and then from there I went to Instagram and found who was hosting it. And then that's when I messaged and was like, 'Hey, I would love to join the next one that's happening'. So yeah, just kind of searching online and finding what spaces had those opportunities to go on stage and explore whatever type of Drag or movement I wanted to do on stage. It's pretty cool. And I'm very proud that I kind of started from rock bottom of

like, messaging people, to give me a show, to being booked now so that I could be their headliner. It's wild to think of that.

ARIA EVANS: It takes a lot. Like I'm thinking about me as a young dancer and coming into my own identity in that space, and it takes a lot of confidence to find yourself and to just put yourself out there and to send those emails. Where does that sense of self knowledge come from for you?

AURORA MATRIX: When I was younger, I feel like I was kind of like boxed into behaving a certain way. Especially from a religious, traditional Chinese background. My parents had a very specific idea of what they wanted their 'son' to grow up to be. And I feel like I was very boxed in, in the way that I couldn't act a certain way, I couldn't speak a certain way. So now that I kind of have the liberty of being me, I know in my heart that I'm like, 'Oh, this is the true me'. Like when I meet people, when I act, when I dance, when I'm moving on stage, like people get to kind of see another layer of me, like something that's a little more deep and personal.

ARIA EVANS: That's beautiful. And I love that you talk about Drag being able to offer that. I think a lot of our listeners come from the contemporary dance world where we associate a certain value or social connotation to the work that we're making. But to hear you talk about Drag in that way, I'm like, you're doing the same thing in a very different way. And that's really beautiful. My mind is just thinking of all of those preconceived ideas that we might have about the more commercial kinds of performance that exist. Thank you for sharing. This name you have for yourself, Aurora Matrix. And I remember emailing you and being like, 'Why the name?', and you were like 'Aurora like the Princess, Matrix like the movie'.

AURORA MATRIX: [Laughs].

ARIA EVANS: I was like, of course! And I'm curious, like where your civilian identity intersects with this public persona?

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AURORA MATRIX: Wow. I feel like this is something that I've been tackling since I started Drag. When I'm in my full transformation of Aurora, there is a bump in confidence, like a boost in something in me where it's like, 'Oh, I can walk into the room and I know people will part the way for me. I know people will look at me', and there's definitely some power there that I've started to bring into my everyday life more because it's still me. And I've found that I've used Drag almost as a mask for the longest time.

ARIA EVANS: Interesting.

AURORA MATRIX: And now post Drag Race, post whatever fame you may call this, I'm starting to learn that eyes are on me 24/7. You know, I've got to just kind of always be 'on'. And I've learned to bring that confidence into myself and just express myself unapologetically whether I'm in Drag or not, because I only have this one body. And when people see me, it's going to be Aurora regardless of if I'm in Drag or not.

ARIA EVANS: Yeah.

AURORA MATRIX: Yeah. Just learning to be comfortable with like, 'Okay, people will take you as you are and they just got to accept that'.

ARIA EVANS: What a beautiful gift. Also, for those who don't know, Aurora is Sleeping Beauty. [Laughs].

AURORA MATRIX: [Laughs].

ARIA EVANS: When you're performing, are you improvising or is it set?

AURORA MATRIX: For the most part, it is improvised.

ARIA EVANS: Woow!!

AURORA MATRIX: Which a lot of people are very shocked by. Because I know a lot of people who at home will go through the songs and be like, 'Okay, at this moment I'm going to do this. And then for this chorus, I'm going to do this movement'. And that doesn't

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work well with me unless it's a fully choreographed dance, then that's a different idea. But for me, for the most part, when I go on stage, I really do just improvise on the spot. I feed off of the audience a lot of the time. Especially if it's a song that they know and everyone's singing along, maybe I might move less and just focus more on the lip sync and just connecting with the audience. And then knowing that something else is going to come up, and I'll be like, 'Okay, I know I'm going to do something there', but I never plan it out like, 'Here's a split, here's a cartwheel', you know? 'Here's a little backbend'. I like to surprise myself on stage as well. And I think that keeps everyone on their toes. And it's exciting for myself, too. I like to keep myself interested when I'm performing.

ARIA EVANS: Without giving theater school all the credit, how do you feel like that improvisational nature was developed within you?

AURORA MATRIX: I've always been kind of a class clown. And it's like, 'Oh, what's the next idea of things to make myself stand out in this group of students? And in this gathering of family members?'. I always just had that nature of like, wanting to be a performer and wanting to do whatever. So I feel like growing up, I was always put on the spot like, 'Oh, Aurora, why don't you do a little dance for us?' or 'Oh, why don't you sing a song for us?' And it was never something planned, but I was always down to do it because I'm like, 'Oh, this is my five minutes of fame right now, and I'm six years old at my grandma's house'. [Laughs]. But again, in that moment I am a pop star.

ARIA EVANS: Well, speaking now of your, like, five years of fame [laughs].

AURORA MATRIX: [Laughs]. Exactly.

ARIA EVANS: I sometimes joke about and contemplate signing up for reality TV. But honestly, like, the idea of people having access to me somehow feels extremely intimidating. What made you say yes to Canada's Drag Race?

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AURORA MATRIX: I feel like it's been joked about in the Drag community that Drag Race is the Olympics of Drag.

ARIA EVANS: Yeah.

AURORA MATRIX: And I mean, you get tested on sewing, on dancing, on songwriting, on everything. I felt like that was the ultimate test. And when I went into school, I knew that I wanted to finish school completely before even trying to audition for the show. So I graduated. I finished school and everything just kind of lined up perfectly for me. I had finished a theater gig, so I was finally free and I was like, 'You know what? Like, if I get through this audition process and if I get onto the show, I'm going to give it my all. And I'm going to go in there with the mindset that I already won'. You know? And it really pushed me. And I think that was one of the biggest things. And also wanting to share my experiences, not just in the Drag community, but in the queer community in Toronto as an Asian body, as someone who's non-binary. There's just so many things that I wanted to be able to share to the world, because I never had that growing up. And I know that that will be helpful for people, even just to hear an experience that someone could relate to changes the world for me.

ARIA EVANS: Mm. Did you see a transformation throughout your time on Drag Race, like with Aurora or with yourself?

AURORA MATRIX: I wouldn't say that I saw the transformation in myself, but it was pointed out to me.

ARIA EVANS: Ah, interesting.

AURORA MATRIX: When I came back from filming, I was gone for however long, and when I came back, a lot of my close friends were like, 'You've changed'. Not in a bad way, but it's just like you carry yourself differently. Almost knowing that I went through that experience of the toughest type of Drag that I could do at that time, and after weeks and weeks of filming, I feel like I came back a whole new queen. I came back a whole new

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person. Even before Drag Race, I was always a very high energy performer, giving you 110%. And like, that's just the style of performance that I do. But when I came back from Drag Race, that's when a lot of people started really pointing out my performance style. And even my closest friends would say, 'Oh, every lip sync now is a lip sync for your life. You used to give 110% now you're giving 150%, you're giving 200%'. And I think for me, it really challenged me to kind of change up the way that I perform. I was stuck in the same way of performing for four years. For the first four years of my Drag, I did get very comfortable in the way that I was performing. Doing the same songs, the same kind of eight count that comes in at the chorus. And I think when I came back from Drag Race, I was like, 'Oh, there's just so much more for me to explore'.

ARIA EVANS: And what other reason does anyone need to come see you perform?

AURORA MATRIX: Oh, I'm so dumb on the mic. When you come see a show from me, you'll get some witty banter as well, and I will single out the cute people in the crowd, flirt a little. You know, it's not that serious. And a Drag show is always going to be silly and fun.

ARIA EVANS: The Dance Current magazine loves Drag and we love supporting dance communities across the country. We know it's hard to treat yourself right now, but you deserve a little something. So we're offering The 'D' Word listeners 25% off subscriptions until the end of August. Just use the code TDCSUMMER. That's T D C S U M M E R at thedancecurrent.com/subscribe. Don't miss our hot summer issue, on newsstands at the end of the month. Want to contribute to our fall issue? Email submissions at thedancecurrent.com by August 26th.

I love hearing you talk about people seeing themselves represented in you and this exchange of, I went through something and you've expressed that they're going through it, too. How do you hold the representation burden? And I

don't mean burden in necessarily a bad way, but how does that manifest for you, that being able to be an example for other people?

AURORA MATRIX: It's tough. It's tough. Yeah. Maybe burden might not be the word, but there's a lot of weight to that. Knowing that, at least for me when I was on the show, I'm representing all of East Asia. And when I think of that, I'm like, 'That's crazy'. But I know it gave me the opportunity to speak up about things that have been in my mind forever, that I've always wanted to hear. And it almost pushed me to be like, 'No, you have to speak up. You have to speak up about things you're passionate about, about concerns you have about certain topics'. It's just because I know that I would have needed to hear that when I was younger. And this is my opportunity, and I have the chance to share how I feel about things. And I think that now that I'm in the public eye, people do look for my POV. They look for my perspective and how I feel about stuff that's going on in the world and my own personal life.

ARIA EVANS: Yeah, I love how our values and our relationship to politics can be embedded into everything that we do. It's beautiful to hear you talk about that. I'm curious, you've talked about how you often will improvise in your numbers, but when you have an idea for a song or a dance number, what are the steps to getting it from that initial idea to in front of a crowd at Crews and Tangos?

AURORA MATRIX: I love story. I don't just want to go on stage and perform a number for three minutes just because I have to.

ARIA EVANS: Yeah, well, why?

AURORA MATRIX: You know, if I'm given an opportunity, it's like, 'Okay, you have five minutes, you can do a mix, you could mash up songs, whatever you want, but you just have five minutes'. My formula is always a song, a monologue in the middle that's spliced in there.

ARIA EVANS: Ooh!

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AURORA MATRIX: Then it transitions into another number. So for example, for Halloween, once I did Mystique from X-Men. The all blue, the shapeshifting. So I started with a slow song and then clip in a little monologue from one of the movies that transitions into something else. I feel like that, for me, works so well because it's a form of storytelling without it having to be too complicated. And I don't want the audience to have to do work while they're watching me. So it's an easy way to have them follow something without overcomplicating it. And then for me, it also makes it a little different than just a regular club number, you know? And I think that that kind of gives me a little push to change up my numbers a little bit and give story, because I think that's more interesting to watch.

ARIA EVANS: You talked a little bit about Toronto having it all. [Laughs].

AURORA MATRIX: Uhuh [laughs].

ARIA EVANS: I'm curious because, you know, we're in Canada and there are other countries where there's a lot of negativity that's being put out into the world towards drag queens and the queer community. Where do you think we're at in that conversation here in Canada? Or here, even in Toronto?

AURORA MATRIX: Overall, I would say we're doing quite well here in the sense that when you go out in Drag, there's always that scare of like, 'Oh is someone going to say something? Is someone going to be rude?'. But in my personal experience, I haven't experienced that a lot. And I'm very lucky with that. And I think a lot of people in this world are honestly just scared of what they don't know.

ARIA EVANS: Yeah, I think it's coming from fear as well.

AURORA MATRIX: Right? Yeah. And I say, the best way of learning about the Drag scene, about Drag culture is just go to a Drag brunch, go to something that's low stakes, kind of just during the day because you just think like, 'Oh, a person in a wig, and they're standing at six feet tall and they're like, looking down

at you'. Yeah, that's going to be a little scary. But once you see that we don't really take it that seriously, like a Drag brunch, for example, that's like one of the silliest opportunities for drag queens to just kind of do whatever they want. And everyone's drinking their sangria, everyone's drinking their mimosas. Everyone's there to have a good time. I would say to people to just go to a Drag show, learn about it, watch the magic unfold and the stupidity, you know, just blossom.

ARIA EVANS: [Laughs]. I actually teach movement at a theater school.

AURORA MATRIX: Oh, I love that.

ARIA EVANS: So funny. I love the little world connections. But one of the things that I talk to my students about when I'm considering, like, how do we expand audiences, how do we bring new people into our artistic disciplines? And I always say to bring someone who has no relationship to, in this case, it's theatre to a show with you and then have a conversation with them. So I feel like there's also an offer there of like, bring people to Drag! Like, what you're saying, bring in community, experience it, make it something that people have access to and can understand because I agree, I think fear holds us back, but there's nothing to be afraid of.

AURORA MATRIX: Yeah for sure.

ARIA EVANS: I'm curious about, like, reflecting from where you are now and this young kid living in Markham, growing up with religious parents.

AURORA MATRIX: Yeah.

ARIA EVANS: If you could speak directly to that young you, what would you tell them about your life right now?

AURORA MATRIX: Oh, I would say you're a star. I was like, 'You want to perform? You're going to perform'. I was like, 'You want to move around? You're going to move around. You want space

to run around and dance? You're going to have those spaces, and it just takes patience'. I feel like it's very cliché to say it gets better, but, going back to when I was younger, I definitely just needed to hear that more. Just be patient. It does get better, right? And that kind of worked out for me. I came out young, gave my parents time to process that. Now they're my biggest supporters. It's been such a full circle moment and I think when I was little, I was always in a rush to grow up. To be like, 'I want to do this, I want to do this, and I want to be independent on my own'. But now I'm just like, take your time. There's no rush to do that. And you never stop learning. And there's always going to be something that you can improve on, that you can change about yourself, for the better. And I think, if I could go back, I would just relax a little bit. It's really not that serious. I will find my own people. I will find my group. I will find the people that will uplift me in everything that I do.

ARIA EVANS: Did you have role models growing up or are you filling that gap now?

AURORA MATRIX: Definitely filling that gap now. Yeah, just seeing a queer Asian body in media was not very common. Especially, again, growing up with my parents, I was watching Hong Kong dramas and all that, where the masculine and feminine is very separate. You have those characters that are like, 'I'm a man'. And then it's like, 'Oh, I'm a lady and I like this'. And I'm just like, it doesn't have to be that concrete. It's not that solid, you know? There is that gray area where you could just kind of exist in between. I'm learning that, and I'm exploring that every day in my life.

ARIA EVANS: Isn't that what we're here for?

AURORA MATRIX: Isn't that what we're here for! [Laughs].

ARIA EVANS: My final question, to close this fantastic conversation is, what has been a transformational moment for you in your life as a Drag performer?

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AURORA MATRIX: Hate to bring it back to Drag Race but...

ARIA EVANS: Bring it back! [Laughs].

AURORA MATRIX: But, in my package in general, I always try to incorporate my culture into my runway looks and specifically my finale look was this Empress gown with sleeves that hit the ground. It was my most expensive runway. I really splurged on that one just because I knew that I wanted to walk out into that finale with that Asian Empress energy. And every time I look back on that moment, I just am so proud of myself and so happy that I was able to explore that and share that. Because I feel like back in China, the male, the man was always the most dominant one in the family. But kind of reclaiming that and being like, 'I'm a queen. Bow down to me and this is my reign' and it's just feeling that moment of like everything my parents have taught me in my past, whether it's positive or negative, how it affected me, it really did boil down to that moment of like, this is my culture, this is who I am. This is who I was brought up to be. And I'm going to take my teachings from my parents. We work it into my own Drag and express it in a way that I think is aesthetically beautiful and true to myself.

ARIA EVANS: What an answer.

AURORA MATRIX: [Laughs].

ARIA EVANS: Where can people find out more about you?

AURORA MATRIX: Ooh well, we are stepping into the summer. It's Pride season, especially in Canada we have Pride pretty much all the way until the first week of September. So yeah, I'm going to be traveling all of Canada, doing Pride's in all the big cities. And you can always find me on Instagram @auroramatrix. I feel like that's where you can get all the up to date stuff about me, because that's where I live my life. [Laughs].

ARIA EVANS: Awesome. Well, as Aurora said, you can find her on

**This transcript has been edited for clarity.*

Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. And that's our show! The 'D' Word is presented by dance: made in canada/ fait au canada, a biennial contemporary dance festival featuring Canadian dance artists with unique artistic visions from all cultural backgrounds. The 'D' Word airs annually, as well as our dance film screening series available at dancemadeincanada.ca. The 'D' Word is produced by Mayumi Lashbrook with Taylor Young, editor and composer Jamar Powell, sound engineer Chris Dupuis at 1990 Studios, and cover photography by Marlowe Porter. 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. Let dance transform you.