

Alice Sheppard: Disability is an art

Meet **Alice Sheppard**, a dancer and choreographer who uses a wheelchair. In this video, she encourages us to rethink our perceptions of disability as a medicalized issue, recognizing it as a politicized identity.

Transcript begins.

[light piano music]

[Alice glides into a large loft space with big industrial windows, performing a dip and turn in her wheelchair before coming to face the camera.]

ALICE SHEPPARD: I'm Alice Sheppard. I am a multiracial woman in a manual wheelchair with red tires. And I'm a dancer and choreographer.

[Text on screen: "Disability is an art—an ingenious way to live." ~ Neil Marcus]

SHEPPARD: That is an incredible quote from Neil Marcus's work. He's an amazing poet, activist, artist, organizer.

[In footage of Alice rehearsing, she performs slow, graceful turns in her wheelchair, bends backward, and arches up.]

SHEPPARD: Most of the external world imagines disability as a medical situation instead of a politicized identity. It is an art to live and be in these bodies and minds and spaces. It's an ingenious way to live.

[gentle, ambient music]

[Two plywood ramps lie in a diagonal line at corners of the room. Alice catches the momentum as she sails down one, flies up the second, catches the edge, and falls sliding down the second ramp on her stomach.]

SHEPPARD: My dance is not about overcoming. Disability is at the heart of the creative force—the line, the aesthetic, the movement.

[Turning quickly, Alice dives into a forward roll and then rolls like a caterpillar round and round.]

SHEPPARD: The chair is the source. And if you're not looking at it and you're not watching what I do and how it completes and fills out the movement, you're not seeing half the dance. It's not adapted from mainstream dance vocabularies. It's not a sort of deficit translation.

[dynamic orchestral string music]

[Onstage at the Fresh Meat Festival in San Francisco, Alice is joined by wheelchair user Laurel Lawson in a performance choreographed by Kinetic Light, a disability dance ensemble of which both are founding members. The two rush toward each other in their wheelchairs, clasp arms, and turn. Each balances on one rear wheel.]

SHEPPARD: This is an approach that is available to all artists in all disciplines and it's about work that is made by disabled artists, featuring disabled artists, supported, created by disabled artists, and has a particular take on the value of impairment in the art.

[Alice lifts Laurel into her chair and onto her lap. They turn.]

SHEPPARD: For the African American civil rights movement, we were successfully able to argue that separate is not equal. And so what does it mean to really assume that a separate entrance for people of color and a separate entrance for white people is socially not acceptable, but we continue to build and structure separate entrances to buildings for disabled people?

[orchestral string music builds]

[Laurel rushes toward Alice and jumps onto Alice's footplate. As Alice rises from her back on the ground, Laurel balances.]

[audience claps and cheers]

SHEPPARD: I hope and want to make art that transforms others. It is cultural, aesthetic, political. Part of the ongoing fight for equality and justice is, yeah, we want to get in the door; yeah, we want a seat at the table—but how we get in the door and how we have our seat at the table matters.

VOICE-OVER: Where are you in your Journey to Inclusion? For more information, go to [DisabilityPhilanthropy.org](https://www.DisabilityPhilanthropy.org), and promote using the hashtag DisabilityInclusion. Brought to you by the Presidents' Council on Disability Inclusion in Philanthropy.

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