

Forging communities

In the midst of difference,
dance artist, choreographer,
writer and director

Krystal S Lowe finds
ways to forge different
communities with countless
cups of coffee and focused
debate. Here, Krystal writes
about finding the best ways
to support each other no
matter how unconventional
that support may look





Krystal S Lowe. Photo: Sleepy Robot Photography.

I consider myself someone who enjoys alone time. I'm a self-producing, freelance artist – I dance, choreograph, teach, create, write and direct. Through all of my work, I engage with others but there's an amount of solitude involved. When I consider community, I don't, at first, realise the value it holds for me. I have been based in Wales since 2012 and over the course of those years I have become a part of a few different communities – some very small and others much larger. Each one as essential as the others.

Perhaps the largest community I am a part of is the Wales arts sector; I teach, perform and create as part of this community and most importantly, we gather. We gather to connect and support one another, to create innovative work that reaches the broadest range of communities, and to move forward – together. This is a community of people I learn from and grow with – because together, we're stronger.

The Our Voice Network | Rhwydwaith Ein Llais (1) aims to provide a regular space for under-represented artists to be platformed; to offer bursaries and mentoring opportunities, and to share artistic process and practice with the entire arts sector in Wales and beyond. Artists are given the opportunity to share what inspires them, the things that excite them and how they push past 'creator's block' to continue to make. Then we ask questions and learn more – together. I am immensely proud to be a part of a collective of innovative and engaging artists. And when we meet, I have a place away from the weight of all of the planning and strategising to focus on the art; the intrigue and the joy of creating.

These communities that I get to be a part of are equally vibrant and fulfilling. However, it's the smallest communities – the connections forged with >>

“These communities that I get to be a part of are equally vibrant and fulfilling. However, it’s the smallest communities – the connections forged with countless cups of coffee, Zoom calls and emails that underpin it all.”

countless cups of coffee, Zoom calls and emails that underpin it all. A community, of any size, is most brilliant when different minds come together – and I have had the privileged of engaging with minds very different from my own. We are beautifully crafted instruments created in different lands, for different purposes, playing different songs in different genres but the exact same chords; and those chords connect us and bring unity to every connection. They ensure that in the midst of difference, there are shared values and objectives at our very cores.

As a neurodivergent woman, there are many ways in which my mind works that deviate from a neurotypical mind. And it took me time, learning about myself and understanding others, in order to realise the ways in which I diverge from the typical. During this journey of discovery and understanding, I have had many connections – some were really harmful and made me recoil into a version of myself that was smaller. But there were other connections that empowered and supported me as a woman, mother and artist. And these connections – the ones that have remained with me, contributing to my development and growth – have become my community.

I moved to Wales in 2012 to dance with Ballet Cymru, a ballet company who like to do things a bit differently. They earnestly seek to find new ways to make what they do exciting, innovative and relevant – and I have been a part of this community as a dancer, practitioner, guest artist, diversity champion, and now as Associate Artist. I danced with Ballet Cymru for roughly eight years and never once identified myself as disabled. However, during my time with this company, they were open and encouraged me to exist in the ways that supported my development as an artist. This wasn’t something that took years, it took months. They never commented when I needed to fidget and look away as they taught exercises at the ballet barre; they supported me when I needed a break from the space even if all other dancers were fine to continue. And as a mother, they welcomed my son

into the rehearsal space when I had no childcare and gave me a quiet space to use my breast pump to express milk during rehearsals. Our community isn’t stagnant, it’s fluid; ever-changing, developing, as we all grow. We continue this learning of one another, over innumerable coffee cups, Zoom calls and emails.

I have by no means completed my journey of self-discovery, but I’m in a place where I not only proudly identify as neurodivergent but where I send companies I work with an Access Rider at the start of our working relationship. For those of you who haven’t yet heard about an Access Rider, I’ll explain mine to you. My Access Rider is a two-page document that shares the things I need in order to access the work. Furthermore, it shares the ways I exist so that I can be free to be myself without need for explanation. My Access Rider isn’t a document for others to use to control my experience but to help others understand what I need to feel at peace while I work. In bullet points under individual headings, my Access Rider shares things like, ‘When speaking with me it would be best to speak literally and tell me directly what you want. I will struggle to understand commands/directions phrased as suggestions or questions’. These offer understanding and help to remove confusion in our working relationships.

The first company I gave an Access Rider to was Theatr Iolo during my time on their show, created by Sarah Argent and Kevin Lewis, ‘Baby, Bird, and Bee’ (a one-person show for babies 6-18 months). Along with my contract and COVID declaration, I sent my Access Rider. I was nervous. I felt I would be seen (really seen) and I wasn’t sure I was ready for that at all or with this company. But all of our interactions, and what I had seen of their work previously, gave me the confidence that they weren’t only a company who publicly did the ‘right’ things but a company that genuinely strives for integrity in all of their work. So, when I came into the rehearsal room, I was impressed to see that Sarah had not only read my Access Rider thoroughly, but that she used it in order to consider >>

Krystal S Lowe. All photos: Sleepy Robot Photography.



Krystal S Lowe. Photo: Sleepy Robot Photography.

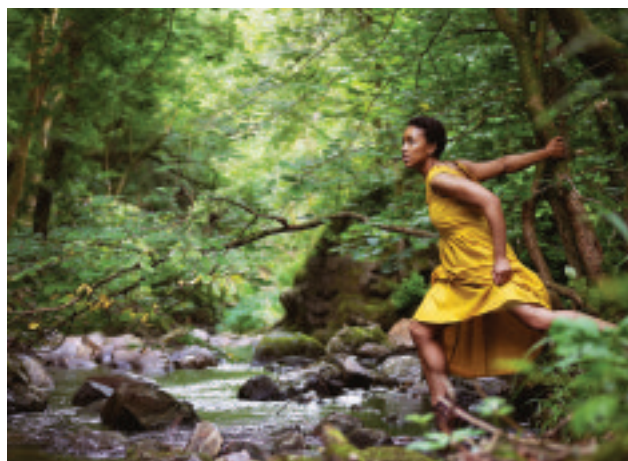


how she engages artists in the spaces she directs. Sarah had an open and honest discussion with me, on day one, about our needs. She didn't only ask me to share with her but she also shared with me. She allowed trust to be built both ways. In the quiet rehearsal rooms of Chapter Arts Centre, Sarah empowered me to be all of who I am.

My most recent experience of sharing an Access Rider was working with Sherman Theatre. I was working as choreographer and movement practitioner so, at first, I didn't feel the need to give them my Access Rider. However, after three days of rehearsals, I realised I was struggling to fully exist. The Access Rider isn't a magic document that allows existence but there is something empowering about sharing yourself honestly and openly with a community of people; and that empowerment changes my experience of the spaces I inhabit. It was 10.08pm when I emailed my Access Rider to Kevin Smith, the company stage manager, explaining that he should feel free to share it with the senior leadership team. By 9am the following day Kevin had shared it with the team and reserved a room for me in the building to allow me alone time to regroup after the sensory stimulation of the work day. Kevin didn't speak to me as if he had just learned there was something wrong, he spoke to me as if he had just understood another facet of my identity and he (and by extension the company) was accepting me fully. Sharing with those I work alongside isn't just functional, it allows me to unmask and fully embody all of who I am instead of feeling that aspects of my identity are shameful. A community is built on trust; trust in sharing and trust in listening.

Sharing of yourself and allowing others to share with you isn't comfortable. You wade through the discomfort to find a place of trust because your desires align. Each of these communities that I choose to be a part of share my desire to see the sector grow more representative and innovative; my desire to see communities engaged and supported by the mental health and wellbeing benefits of the arts. Shared desire; that's the important part. Community isn't about ease or comfort; it's about working together to fulfil shared desires and objectives for our careers, for the sector - for Wales and beyond.

How do you find your community? You seek out people who are playing your same chords - so that no matter how different your songs sound, there's this depth of understanding that transcends the small choices that are made throughout the course of a collaboration. Community is essential to successful development. And no matter the size of your community, you find ways of working that support all; you negotiate, you trust, you build, and learn - together. Because together, we're stronger.



Krystal S Lowe. All photos: Sleepy Robot Photography.

Info

krystalslowe.com

[@krystalslowe](https://www.instagram.com/krystalslowe)

[/Krystalslowe.artist](https://www.facebook.com/Krystalslowe.artist)

[/krystalslowe](https://www.tiktok.com/@krystalslowe)

krystalslowe.com/our-voice-network

This article is an updated version of a blog originally posted on People Dancing's website in July 2021.

References

1. [https://krystalslowe.com/our-voice-network](http://krystalslowe.com/our-voice-network).