



AXIS DANCE COMPANY

For more than 20 years, Judy Smith, one of the founding members of Axis Dance Company (Axis), has been committed to providing educational programs and performing arts opportunities for disabled and nondisabled adults and children.

The longevity of her work is fueled by the notion that Axis is an evolving nonprofit organization. The success of the Oakland-based organization came on the cusp of the independent living movement of the 1970s and converged with the emergence of post-modern dance.

“There was a social and political relevance to our art that allowed nondisabled and disabled people to collaborate in a way that wasn’t medical or that didn’t call for those without disabilities to do something for those with disabilities,” Judy explains.

For the first 10 years, Axis had to develop a movement vocabulary

that was different from traditional dance forms. Both nondisabled and disabled dancers learn to partner with wheelchairs and prosthetics and explore movement possibilities.

The quality of Axis’ work transformed significantly when the company began commissioning work with well-known choreographers and composers. Judy recalls, “It was a stamp of approval, and fresh ideas came our way that didn’t always directly address the disability aspect of our organization.”

Consisting of both performers and teaching artists, Axis provides afterschool programs and eight- to 10-week classroom residencies for Oakland schools. With the support from The Clorox Company Foundation, the program Dance Access Day provides K–12 students with excerpts from their choreography.

“Children are traditionally taught not to look at those who are



different. At the school assemblies, we give kids permission to stare so that disabilities become normal and less scary.”

In addition to its school programs, Axis’ inclusion and accessibility workshops for universities, corporations and government agencies like the U.S. Social Security Administration are highly sought after. “Our work takes us into a lot of places where most dance companies do not go,” says Judy. Performing in more than 60 cities in countries such as Croatia and Germany, Axis has garnered international acclaim.

Now located in the Malonga Casquelourd center in downtown Oakland, Axis has evolved from an all-volunteer organization to one with paid staff and dancers. “We’ve grown from a grassroots organization to a professional institution that has maintained strong community ties in Oakland.”

