

Wheelchair aerial dance at center of ‘Wired’ at the MCA, a performance that centers disability

By Lauren Warnecke

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Jerron Herman rehearses for Kinetic Light's "Wired" performance on April 22, 2022. (Herman is suspended several feet above the stage and seen from the side, with legs bent and right arm cocked forward in a gesture of striding. His back, arms and feet are bare, the rigging that holds him is visible. The stage is lit with concentric circles.) (Chris Sweda / Chicago Tribune)

Alice Sheppard does not shy away from a challenge. In devising her latest dance, “Wired,” she and her Bay Area disability arts company Kinetic Light had to first write the rule books for wheelchair aerial dance.

Kinetic Light’s mission is to create art that centers disability. Sheppard and the rest of the company are disabled artists who make work for disabled performers. Key to that vision are

questions and advocacy around access — who “gets” to dance and who “gets” to watch or experience art? Since the company’s founding in 2016, Sheppard’s work consistently explores the intersections of disability, race and gender. “Wired,” premiering May 5-8 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, is no exception, though it’s the first of Kinetic Light’s growing catalog to incorporate aerial dance.

Actually, the first step for Sheppard was to read everything she could find about barbed wire. Sheppard, a dancer, choreographer and scholar with a doctorate in medieval studies from Cornell University, devoured the literature on this sharp-edged, steel wire’s fraught history.

The initial spark for “Wired” came from a visit to the Whitney Museum, where Sheppard viewed Melvin Edwards’ 1969 barbed wire sculpture, “Pyramid Up and Down Pyramid.”

“My guts just kind of slipped. I literally laid on the floor,” Sheppard said in a recent phone call. “The security guards were like, ‘What are you doing?’ I realized I wanted to get as close to this thing as I could.”

It led her down a barbed wire rabbit hole. Sheppard’s source material lends multiple metaphors to what has become her latest multimedia dance piece. Indeed, few pieces of steel are saddled with so much context. Barbed wire is primarily a strict form of forced separation, used in trench warfare and applied in the United States as a means of keeping incarcerated people in, for example, or livestock in and intruders out as ranchers in the American West increasingly claimed land as their personal property.



Laurel Lawson during rehearsal for Kinetic Light’s “Wired” performance at the studio for C5 Create With No Limits in Chicago on April 22, 2022. At the request of Kinetic Light, the Tribune is adding photo descriptions that can be used by screen readers for those who are blind or vision impaired. (Lawson is suspended and inverted above the stage, steadying herself on one arm as she looks to her left, gesturing with her other arm, fingers pointed. Her suspended wheelchair, the stage and arm are lit in blue.) (Chris Sweda / Chicago Tribune)

Throughout the piece, the dancers wrestle with this unwieldy, unforgiving object, their bodies enclosed by a tangle of wires and barbs. As she continued to explore, Sheppard knew “Wired” had to be an aerial dance. “It kind of made sense. If you’re making a work about barbed wire, of

course it would be aerial.”

Having never studied aerial dance before, Sheppard and Kinetic Light company members Laurel Lawson and Jerron Herman started from scratch. With support from some 30 artists and engineers with backgrounds in rigging, automation and flight, Sheppard, Lawson and Herman took to the air.

“This is a new thing,” Sheppard said, drawing out “w” in “new” for several seconds, followed by a deep belly laugh.

“We are not the first disabled artists to fly, by any means,” she said. “There is, of course, in circus arts, a deep and rooted history of disability and flight. That’s not random or new. And there’s a history of disabled dancers also doing aerial work in the UK, New Zealand and the U.S. Part of that history and legacy is to recognize that flight isn’t random. It is perfectly within the tradition and the culture for disabled dancers. What is new here is the construction of the show. It’s not a circus.”

The process for “Wired” started at Chicago Flyhouse in late 2019. Before the dance and other artistic elements could even begin to take shape, Kinetic Light was faced with huge technical considerations.

“Before we could even get to ‘here’s a pretty dance, here’s the choreography,’” she said, “we had to get to, ‘how does this thing fly?’”

With input from Mark Witteveen, Chicago Flyhouse’s lead project manager, the team figured out the physics of taking off and landing from their wheels and hands using different apparatuses. They worked on the logistics of harnessing wheelchairs and built custom harnesses. Their performance chairs, different from those used day-to-day, were light and strong enough to withstand flight.

“A regular day chair could not fly; it’s not built in this way,” Sheppard said.

Lawson, who is also an engineer, assisted in developing the chairs and harnesses needed for her and Sheppard safely ascend into the air. Company member and dancer Herman completes the cast of three and has yet another setup. Herman, who has cerebral palsy, dances sections of “Wired” with a girdle-type harness used to suspend him above the stage.

Lawson additionally designed the costumes and makeup for “Wired.” Josephine Shokrian created the performance wires and other scenic elements. And musicians LeahAnn “Lafemmebear” Mitchell and Ailís Ní Ríain composed the original scores used in the performance. Lighting and projection designer Michael Maag, a founding member with Kinetic Light, completes the artistic team for the live stage production. Complementary audio and visual elements coincide with the dance for blind and deaf audience members.

Sheppard reiterated that she and Lawson are not the first disabled artists to fly, nor the first wheelchair users — Maori dancer Rodney Bell, who danced with Sheppard in the Bay Area company called AXIS, performed wheelchair aerial work, to name just one. But they are the first disabled dancers in the U.S. to explore a thorough compendium of techniques, which includes low flying on hard lines and bungees, as well as flight patterns suspended from joystick-

operated, motorized cables. The pandemic enabled Kinetic Light to make connections with then-unemployed entertainment workers with expertise in automation who would not otherwise have been available.

In a way, “Wired” serves as a primer on wheelchair flight.



Jerron Herman rehearses for Kinetic Light's performance on April 22, 2022. “Wired” premieres May 5 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. (Herman is in a crawling position on stage, his right hand reaching forward with fingers spread. His head is up and his eyes are open and looking toward the camera. Textured green lighting illuminate him and the stage.) (Chris Sweda / Chicago Tribune)

“Understand, this is not actually documented,” Sheppard said. “There are no books. There are no teachers ... All of these questions that are easily available to non-disabled aerial artists because there’s a history and tradition here — we just had to figure that out bit-by-bit.”

“Wired” premieres May 5-8 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 220 E. Chicago Ave.; tickets are \$30 at mcacheicago.org and 312-397-4010. The performance is presented with American Sign Language and audio description. Additionally, there is a tactile lobby exhibit and accommodations for neurodiverse audiences. A pay-what-you-choose livestream with live captions and audio description takes place May 7.