Award-winning dancer Michelle Ryan back at WOMADelaide, with support from NDIS

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It’s been nearly three decades since award-winning dancer, choreographer and artistic director Michelle Ryan first danced at WOMAD.

This year, Ms Ryan returns to Adelaide’s four-day festival (WOMAD - World of Music, Arts and Dance) as Artistic Director of Australia’s leading inclusive dance company Restless Dance, knowing she can fully access and enjoy the festival, thanks to support from the NDIS.

“When I moved to Adelaide with the Australian Dance Theatre, WOMAD was one of the first performances we did in 1993, so returning is pretty exciting,” Ms Ryan said.

“This year, Restless will be performing at WOMAD so I need to be able to get around easily to do my work as Artistic Director.”

Ms Ryan, who has Multiple Sclerosis, will be using an NDIS-funded powered device called a SmartDrive, to assist her to move more freely around the festival grounds at Botanic Park.

The device, which attaches to her manual wheelchair, will help her to move up hills and across grass and gravel.

Michelle Ryan - photo credit Maxx Corkindale

“It will be the first time I can actually go to WOMAD and experience it, as well as working there professionally,” Ms Ryan said.

“The SmartDrive will help me to get around the festival, so it’s a big support for me to be able to do my work.

I’m having ‘wheelchair lessons’, funded through my plan, so I feel comfortable and know how to use the SmartDrive safely.

“I’ll also have a NDIS support person with me on those days to make sure that I’m OK and I can get around and I’m safe.”

Ms Ryan, who began her 30-year career as a leading dancer with the Meryl Tankard Australian Dance Theatre, has since won numerous awards as a dancer, choreographer and artistic director.

After being diagnosed with MS at age 30, she returned to dancing in 2011, and was inducted into the South Australian Woman’s Honour Role in 2015.

She has won both the prestigious Adelaide Critics Circle Award and the Australia Council for the Arts Dance Award,

Ms Ryan works with dancers with and without disability and is dedicated to creating works, which ‘celebrate the human and difference’.

“When I acquired disability, I thought that I was sort of less of a person, so I’ve got a fire in my belly about people with disability being seen on stage and valued and acknowledged for their talents,” she said.

On International Women’s Day 2022, Ms Ryan believes it’s important to acknowledge the important role of all women in Australian society.

“I think it’s a day of recognition of the skills and passion women give to our society, and I’m very proud to be part of a group of women at Restless who get things done with passion and sensitivity and with one vision,” she said.

“Our creativeness is loud, bold and original, and we are constantly working towards providing employment for dancers with disability, creating work of excellence, and ensuring we are seen in a mainstream context.”

Ms Ryan says working at Restless would be a struggle without her NDIS support, which also includes support workers at home who help her to safely prepare food, transport assistance to and from her work, and physical and occupational therapies which help her to keep fit.

“The NDIS has changed my ability to continue to work in a way that I wanted to, and to keep my independence,” she said.

“Having those supports around me has been so important. It makes me feel relaxed about being in the world and the environment.

"If I didn't have that support, I wouldn't be able to continue working full time. And life would be a lot harder. One, I wouldn't have the energy to work full time.

But also, working gives me pride and a sense of self and self-belief.

“I doubt I would have the amazing opportunities I have to live a fulfilled life today, without the assistance of the NDIS."

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