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**American Association of
Community Theatre AACT
NewPlayFest Winning Plays:
Volume 4 (2020)**

Proprioception by
MARILYN MILLSTONE

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Proprioception
(A Play About the Delicate Dance of Living)

By
MARILYN MILLSTONE

Proprioception was premiered by Rover Dramawerks (Carol M. Rice, Artistic Director) in Plano, Texas, on Sept. 9, 2021.

CAST:

MIKE SHEFFIELD Jason R. Davis
ESTHER ABRAMSON Sue Doty-Goodner
RANDY AYERS Bennett Frohock
KYLIE JASPER..... Jill Lightfoot

PRODUCTION:

Director Carol M. Rice
Set Design Erica Remi Lorca
Costume Design/Production Photography Stacy Winsett
Lighting Design Kenneth Hall
Sound Design Robbi D. Holman
Dramaturg Kathy Pingel
Associate Production Dramaturg David Cockerell
Stage Manager Sara Jones

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“Proprioception was premiered in the American Association of Community Theatre’s AACT NewPlayFest by Rover Dramawerks in Plano, Texas.”

Proprioception

(A Play About the Delicate Dance of Living)

CHARACTERS

MIKE SHEFFIELD: A 33-year-old Black man of average height, muscular. Loves to party but still graduated at the top of his doctoral class in physical therapy.

ESTHER ABRAMSON: An elegant 89-year-old woman who speaks with a slight German accent.

RANDY AYERS: A 27-year-old Caucasian graduate student, muscular, congenial. Also plays **FERNANDO**.

KYLIE JASPER: A 28-year-old Caucasian prima ballerina, slender, muscular, luminously attractive. Even though she is currently walking with a cane, she maintains the regal bearing of a dancer. Also plays **MIME** and **SAMANTHA**.

TIME: October 2015.

PLACE: A physical therapy building in Santa Fe, N.M.

PRODUCTION NOTES: The scenes involving Esther should be paced to reflect her background: she's an elderly lady from a slow and distant time and place. Also, transitions between scenes should be as brief, fluid and seamless as possible.

Proprioception

(A Play About the Delicate Dance of Living)

PROLOGUE

(Lights rise on a life-sized plastic skeleton of the human body, DC. Enter the MIME, dressed androgynously, perhaps in a black bodysuit with hair tucked in a black cap and wearing a full-face mask. The MIME circles the skeleton, then begins gently, curiously, lifting—then dropping—first a finger of the skeleton's right hand, then the wrist, forearm, arm. Turns the skeleton's head slowly, gently, curiously from side to side. Raises the skeleton's left foot, bends the ankle, then the knee. Tilts the torso; rights it. Waltz music begins to play. The MIME faces the skeleton like a lover; then slowly, tenderly lifts the skeleton's right arm and grasps the right hand; then MIME and skeleton begin to waltz—gingerly at first, in small steps, then in ever bigger, grander steps, until MIME and skeleton are waltzing quite gracefully around the stage. After perhaps three minutes, MIME waltzes the skeleton UC, drops the skeleton's right arm and exits. Waltz music ends.)

ACT I

SCENE 1

(Lights rise on MIKE SHEFFIELD's physical therapy office. A life-sized plastic skeleton of the human body stands UC. A set of ankle weights, a large floor-exercise ball and a stationary bike are in a corner. Nearby is a freezer for cold wraps and a cabinet for warming wraps. DL is a desk with a swivel chair behind it. On the desk is a neat stack of papers, a laptop, a standing photo [with the image facing away from the audience] and a baseball mitt with a ball in it. Hanging on the wall behind the desk is a portrait of baseball great Roberto Clemente. DR are two patient therapy tables. ESTHER ABRAMSON is lying on her back on one of the tables, her legs bent with a bolster under her knees. MIKE is standing next to her. RANDY AYERS is near the warming cabinet, folding towels.)

MIKE. Great job today, Esther. Lots of progress in your range of motion. We're gonna ice you down now, OK?

ESTHER. It's freezing in here already, my dear man. Why add insult to injury?

MIKE. You already know the answer.

ESTHER. Then why ask me the question?

MIKE. Just to get a rise out of you. Makes my day more entertaining.

(MIKE pats ESTHER's arm affectionately and signals RANDY to come put an ice wrap around ESTHER's left knee.)

MIKE *(cont'd)*. By the way, Esther, we keep the office a balmy seventy-six degrees.

ESTHER. Uh-huh. When's the last time you had your thermostat checked?

(MIKE and ESTHER share a laugh.)

RANDY *(to MIKE)*. Your next patient is here. You know who she is, right?

MIKE *(shrugging)*. I read up on her. Why?

RANDY. Nothing. It's just that she's—she's—

ESTHER. Randy, you're blushing!

RANDY. I am not, Esther. I got sunburned biking yesterday.

ESTHER. Uh-huh. It rained all day yesterday. *(Reaching out and patting RANDY's arm.)* I have bad knees, Randy. *(Touching her temple.)* Not Alzheimer's.

MIKE. Nice comeback, Esther. *(To RANDY.)* If she's here, please bring her in.

(RANDY exits and returns with KYLIE JASPER, who walks slowly, with a cane.)

ESTHER. My goodness! You're Kylie Jasper, aren't you?

(KYLIE glances at ESTHER but does not reply.)

ESTHER *(cont'd)*. I've seen you in everything. We have front-row seats! You were like floating lace in *Les Sylphides*. And in *Le Corsaire*—

MIKE. Esther! You know the rules! No fraternizing.

ESTHER. I just want Ms. Jasper to know how much I—

MIKE (*warningly*). Esther!

ESTHER (*hand up, indicating she has just one more thing she must say to KYLIE*). I just wanted to say that you're even lovelier close up than on stage. And I'm sure I speak for all your admirers when I say that I'm *so* sorry about what happened to you. (*To MIKE.*) There. I'm done. Wasn't such a crime.

(ESTHER smiles at MIKE and lies back down. MIKE shakes his head and smiles, allowing ESTHER to have the last word.)

MIKE (*to KYLIE*). Why don't we go sit at my desk. We'll have more privacy there.

(MIKE gestures toward his desk, watches as KYLIE slowly walks there with her cane. He gestures for her to sit at the chair next to his desk—deliberately making no move to assist her—then sits in his chair behind the desk. RANDY busies himself with towel folding but steals glances at KYLIE.)

MIKE (*cont'd*). Give me a moment, please, Ms. Jasper, to review your records.

(MIKE pulls out KYLIE's file and tries to read. KYLIE interrupts.)

KYLIE. Could you call me Kylie? "Ms. Jasper" makes me feel ... about as old as that woman over there. Don't bother reading my files; it doesn't matter. If I can't dance again before the end of the season, I'm out. They won't renew my contract.

MIKE. They actually said that to you?

KYLIE (*bitterly*). They don't have to. Do you know how many "sweet" supple young ballerinas there are in the *corps*, nipping at my heels, hoping I'll bow out?

MIKE. OK, let's try to ease up a little on the anger.

KYLIE. Oh yes, *let's*.

(Beat.)

MIKE. Pardon me?

KYLIE (*heatedly*). “Let us try to ease up on the anger?” Like you and I are in this together? We’re not. Not unless you’ve been getting up at dawn every day of your life to go to dance class. No sleeping in on Saturday mornings, no coming home after school to watch TV and eat a snack. Just practice, practice, practice, practice and then, two months ago, I finally get what every ballerina dreams of: I get promoted to principal dancer. Then this. (*Pointing to her injured leg.*) I’m twenty-eight years old and my career is over.

MIKE. That’s how you see it?

KYLIE. That’s how it is.

MIKE. And yet here you are.

(*MIKE and KYLIE make and hold eye contact.*)

MIKE (*cont’d*). I seem to have forgotten my manners. Let me introduce myself. I’m Mike Shef—

KYLIE. I know who you are, Doctor Sheffield. I read that big *Sunday* magazine profile about you. Said you’re the best at what you do.

MIKE. I don’t know if I’d say that.

KYLIE. Oh I see. You’re the modest type.

MIKE. Nope. Just don’t evaluate myself that way. (*Beat.*) So why don’t you tell me what’s led you to come here today.

KYLIE. You don’t read the papers? Watch TV news?

MIKE. I do. But I’m interested in your perspective.

KYLIE. On what?

MIKE. Well, for starters, tell me exactly how you tore your ACL.

KYLIE. *I* didn’t tear my ACL. My ACL *tore* when the puny little apprentice subbing for my partner dropped me during a lift.

MIKE. A freak accident, then.

KYLIE. Or an accident involving a freak.

MIKE. Well, it was an accident. At least we can agree on that.

KYLIE. A totally preventable accident, but yeah, OK an accident.

(*Beat.*)

MIKE. So your records indicate that the surgery to repair your ACL went well.

KYLIE. Really.

MIKE. In that there were no complications.

KYLIE. Right. The career I've been building since I was six ends in a single snap and ... there are no complications.

MIKE. There were no *physical* complications, nothing out of the ordinary that would impede your recovery.

KYLIE. That's a comfort to hear, Dr. Shef—

MIKE. Call me Mike. I'm not into titles. *(Beat.)* Your records also indicate that you started rehab at another practice in town that specializes in working with dancers. I'm more of a ... general p.t. guy. So what brings you here? *Why me?*

KYLIE. I read your reviews online. People said you work them hard but you're not judgmental. *(Long pause, then in a hoarse whisper.)* I'm sick of being judged.

MIKE *(quietly)*. I know what you mean.

KYLIE. I doubt it. No one calls you on the carpet if you gain an ounce. Or you don't quite raise your arm high enough. *(Demonstrating, with exaggerated effect, then dropping her arm.)* Do you think I'll be able to dance again?

MIKE. That depends. On you. On your body. How you heal. *(Beat.)* Do you want to dance again?

KYLIE. Wow. What a ridiculous question.

MIKE *(evenly)*. Is it?

KYLIE. I've just been promoted to principal dancer. Prima ballerina.

MIKE *(calmly)*. Yes. You mentioned that. *(Beat.)* Do you want to dance again?

KYLIE. Dancing is all I've ever done, since I was six. Like I said.

MIKE. That's a long time. Did you ever think about quitting?

(Beat.)

KYLIE. No. Well. Yeah. Sophomore year of high school. I quit for a while.

MIKE. Why then?

KYLIE. Jesus. You ask a lot of questions.

MIKE *(smiling again)*. Occupational hazard.

KYLIE. It was stupid. *(Beat.)* I wanted boys to like me, and boys like girls with breasts. Ballerinas can't afford to have breasts;

companies won't hire you if you do. They spoil the vertical line—you know, that anorexic look men are so drawn to. How come boys like girls with breasts and men like them flat as pancakes?

MIKE (*smiling*). Some men. (*Beat.*) Anyway, clearly you went back to dancing. Why'd you change your mind?

KYLIE. Boys turned out not to be worth it.

(*Beat.*)

MIKE. Uh-huh. (*Beat.*) Has to be more to it than that.

(*Beat.*)

KYLIE. You don't let up, do you?

(*MIKE smiles, waits.*)

KYLIE. So a couple of months after I quit, I ride my bike over to the dance school. Peek in through the window. All the girls are at the barre. Stretching. Giggling. Then Jonathan strides in, sits down. Tosses back those gorgeous blond curls. Strikes the first chord. The girls lift their chins. Press their shoulder blades back. Do their first *port de bras*. (*Demonstrating.*) I feel this stab of longing. That's when I realize: dancing isn't just something I do. It's *who I am*.

MIKE. I can work with that. (*Beat.*) Randy, I need to do a private exam on Kylie. Time for our dear Esther to go.

(*RANDY crosses to the table where ESTHER is lying.*)

RANDY. Spa day's over, my lady. Let me remove the wrap and help you down.

(*RANDY removes the ice wrap from ESTHER's left knee and extends an arm to help her off the table. ESTHER ignores his help and eases off the table by herself.*)

RANDY (*cont'd*). And that's why they call you all the greatest generation.

ESTHER (*tenderly touching RANDY's arm*). My dear, if only getting down off a table was all we had to do to earn that label. (*Smiling warmly at him.*) But thank you.

(ESTHER leans down, puts on her shoes, unfolds her walker, stands up and smiles at everyone.)

MIKE. Come brighten my day on Wednesday, Esther.

ESTHER. Wouldn't miss it for the world! *(To KYLIE.)* In my religion, we have a saying: may you go from strength to strength. *(Beat.)* I would wish that for you.

(KYLIE offers a tight smile and nods, watches as ESTHER, shuffling with her walker, slowly exits.)

KYLIE. How long has she been in rehab?

MIKE. That's confidential.

KYLIE. Jesus. I just wanna know how long—

MIKE. Kylie. Let's get you up on the table.

(MIKE motions to RANDY for assistance.)

KYLIE. Oh yes, "let's." Why can't you just say, "Get up on the table, Kylie?"

MIKE. Because you can't. Not—

(Ignoring MIKE, KYLIE sets down her cane and attempts to mount the table on her own. MIKE stands, arms folded, watching, choosing not to intervene. KYLIE supports herself using her non-injured leg, but she cannot bend her right knee and so cannot push herself up onto the table. Without the cane, KYLIE begins to lose her balance. Just before she falls, MIKE catches her. He signals to RANDY. Together, they lift her onto the table, placing her on her back, legs extended.)

MIKE *(to RANDY)*. We place a bolster under her injured knee, like so, *(Sliding a bolster under KYLIE's right knee.)* so there's no strain on it.

KYLIE. I'm sorry. I just—

MIKE *(maintaining composure, but just barely)*. I get that you're an athlete, Kylie, and athletes always feel the need to test their limits. But don't test *my* limits that way again. *(Beat.)* Now. I need to examine the surgical site.

RANDY. May I observe?

MIKE. You may, Mister Ayers. With Ms. Jasper's permission.

KYLIE. Ah! Now we're back to titles. *(With great pomposity.)* But of course, Mister Ayers. Permission granted! You see, Doctor Sheffield? I aim to please. Now could we *please* drop the formalities?

(RANDY tries, unsuccessfully, to stifle a laugh. MIKE shoots him a "don't encourage her" look and begins gently probing the area around her right knee. KYLIE watches him carefully.)

KYLIE. Look. There's something I should tell you. It's not in your records. I didn't report it to my surgeon. I was afraid he'd tell Sergei—the artistic director of the ballet. My boss. Promise me you won't tell him. He'll never let me come back if he finds out.

MIKE. Everything we say in here is confidential.

KYLIE. I was whisked off to the ER two weeks ago. By ambulance.

(MIKE stops the physical exam, looks at her.)

MIKE. What happened?

KYLIE. I was practicing stepping off curbs on my injured leg.

MIKE. Two weeks after surgery? Why would you do that?

KYLIE. Because that's what my physical therapist told me to do. *(With derision.)* Jeff-rey. *(Beat.)* I'm a professional dancer, Mike. Tell me to do a certain step, and I'll do it. So I did it. And this pain rips through me and everything starts spinning and I literally go deaf and it feels like I'm dying. *Really dying.*

MIKE *(quietly, glancing at RANDY)*. The vasovagal response. Did you faint?

KYLIE *(nodding)*. Passed out right on the street.

MIKE. Hit your head?

KYLIE. Yep. Got a knot the size of a ping-pong ball on my forehead.

MIKE. A concussion?

KYLIE. No. That was the first thing the ER guy checked. Should I sue him?

MIKE. The doctor?

KYLIE. No. Jeffrey.

MIKE. Your physical therapist.

KYLIE. Yeah. I went to see him a few days after it happened. He'd never even heard of—what did you call it?

MIKE. The vasovagal response.

KYLIE. Yep. That. He acted like it was all in my head.

(MIKE returns to examining KYLIE's knee.)

MIKE. Just so I know, are you in the habit of suing people?

KYLIE. No. I'm in the habit of dancing.

(Beat.)

MIKE *(carefully bending her injured knee)*. How does this feel?

KYLIE. Stiff. Sore. *(Beat.)* Have you ever seen me dance?

MIKE. I'm not really into ballet. But my assistant is, I think. Randy, you were certainly impressed when Kylie came through the door, weren't you?

RANDY *(deeply embarrassed)*. Uh. Yeah. I—greatly—admire ... I mean ... like Esther, I'm ... transported by the way you dance.

KYLIE *(almost hissing)*. Danced. Past tense.

MIKE. What are you doing to take your mind off this? Are you getting out?

KYLIE. You're joking, right? Have you noticed that I can't walk?

MIKE. I didn't ask if you were running marathons. I asked if your ... companion? Friends? Family? Are they getting you out?

KYLIE. My parents are back east. I don't want them to come out.

MIKE. Why not?

KYLIE. My father thinks I should be married by now and tending to babies. He'd be thrilled if I packed it in and came home.

(KYLIE turns her head away.)

MIKE. What about your mother?

KYLIE. All she'd do is feed me lots of food and sympathy. I don't want that either.

MIKE. What about friends?

KYLIE. Yeah. I thought I had a lot of them. It's called being part of a ballet company. *(Beat.)* They all came to the hospital right after it happened, brought me bouquets and feather boas and stuffed animals and things. It was all so ... theatrical. But after that ... nothin'. *(Quietly.)* Just nothin'.

MIKE. That must be hard on you. *(Beat.)* Let's test your quad strength.

KYLIE. Oh yes, *let's*.

MIKE *(smiling)*. Lie on your back, please. Can you do a slow straight-leg lift with your non-injured leg?

(KYLIE quickly and easily raises her left leg straight up, nearly touching her knee to her nose.)

MIKE. And slowly lower back down.

(KYLIE complies.)

MIKE. Good. Now your right leg.

KYLIE. I can't.

MIKE. Try.

(KYLIE visibly exerts herself. Her right leg remains flat on the table.)

MIKE *(cont'd)*. I see.

KYLIE. You said there were no complications!

MIKE. There aren't.

KYLIE. I don't believe you.

MIKE. I'm not asking you to believe me. I'm asking you to believe your body. The body has its own wisdom. Its own internal clock for healing. We just have to find ways to make the clock tick again. Meet your body where it is and work from there. *(Beat.)* I think the first thing we need to do is deal with your isolation. I don't think it's healthy for you. So. Kylie. I have a proposition for you.

KYLIE. Really. And we've only just met.

MIKE. I want you to do your first month of sessions jointly with Esther. Assuming Esther agrees to it, which I think she—

KYLIE *(incredulous)*. ESTHER? YOU MEAN THAT OLD WOMAN WHO WAS JUST HERE?

MIKE. I mean that LADY who just got down off that table by herself, at age eighty-nine, after having had knee replacement surgery a month ago. And who said she adores you.

KYLIE. This is ridiculous. Am I not *worthy* of your undivided attention?

MIKE. The way I see it, my job is to help you achieve the results you want. And in my professional opinion, I think you'll benefit from sharing time with Esther. I think she'll benefit too. In all the years I've been working with her, I've never seen her sparkle the way she did when she saw you today. So I think it's a win-win for everyone.

KYLIE. Win-win? What you're proposing is ... ludicrous! It's insulting!

MIKE. I'd call it unorthodox, which is what I'm known for. Insulting is what I'd say you've been to me since you arrived. Not that I mind. Just that I noticed. *(Beat.)* Look. I enjoy working with athletes of your caliber. But for this to work, it has to be on my terms, not yours. So ... Esther's appointments are Mondays and Wednesdays at nine a.m. Call the office if you'd like us to schedule you in. *(Smiling.)* If you'll excuse me, I need to prepare for my 10:30.

(MIKE extends his hand to KYLIE, but she does not shake it.)

MIKE *(cont'd)*. Mister Ayers, if you would please show Ms. Jasper out.

(MIKE exits. KYLIE stands, leaning on her cane, looking in the direction where MIKE has exited, dumbfounded.)

KYLIE. You have *got* to be kidding me!

SCENE 2

(Lights slowly rise on MIKE's physical therapy office. MIKE is sitting in his desk chair; RANDY across from him. They are drinking coffee.)

RANDY. It isn't like Esther to be late. Has she ever been late before?

MIKE. Not that I can recall. But it gives me a chance to serve as your esteemed mentor. Your adviser emailed me that you've got a big exam on Friday. You feelin' good about it?

RANDY. Only if you agree to take it for me. *(Beat.)* I kind of clutch under pressure.

MIKE. So lemme quiz you.

(RANDY groans.)