

Eluned Charnley.
Photo: Ken Kamara



Towards a new vision of dance

Eluned Charnley, Dance Artist, makes the case for more inclusive opportunities and access for disabled people that would be of benefit to the wide field of contemporary dance

In the current UK contemporary dance world, a number of barriers present substantial difficulties for physically disabled dancers who wish to train as professionals. On a practical level, the most acute obstacles are a lack of specific training opportunities and a lack of accessibility within conventional dance courses. However, I would argue that prevailing attitudes towards idealised performance aesthetics and body types also have a profound impact on the inclusion and acceptance of disabled dancers, and indeed all dancers outside the perceived 'ideal' body type.

Training barriers

The most immediately obvious barrier restricting physically disabled people from accessing professional training in the UK is the sheer lack of training opportunities. Within the integrated dance companies in the UK, most disabled dancers have trained 'on the job', simply because of lack of provision elsewhere.

Of the 10,000 students training in dance and musical theatre subjects annually in Further and Higher Education, the vast majority of places are filled by non-disabled dancers. The lack of opportunity means a lack of choice in training options. Frustrations can stem from a lack of consideration of mobility and the need to adapt material, the onus often being placed on disabled students to constantly adapt technique themselves. Furthermore, diverse needs are often not taken into account by physical conditioning classes which are rarely tailored to individuals. As a result both disabled and non-disabled dancers are often left vulnerable to injury and unprepared for the intense physical reality of the professional dance world. Beyond the class structure, there is also an issue of physical accessibility. Unfortunately, despite recent legislation on public building accessibility, access to dance studios is not always easy or convenient for disabled users.

Conceptual barriers

In addition to the practical barriers, there are significant structural barriers embedded in the discourse of dance itself. The very way we define dance affects the access of disabled people to the professional dance world. In the current UK dance scene it seems that a preoccupation with the idealised human form, rooted in history and classical dance, continues to privilege the image of the slim, non-disabled dancer, at the expense of any body, disabled or non-disabled, that deviates from this norm. Whilst many contemporary dance pioneers have sought to move away from the exclusivity and homogeneity synonymous with ballet, there remains to a great extent a fixed and 'able-ist' understanding of what meets the contemporary dance aesthetic. Almost inadvertently, then, disabled dancers are excluded from the field of professional dance within its currently defined parameters.

By extension, the limited vision of a dancer leads to a limited understanding of what constitutes dance itself: if we view, for example, conventional movements such as pliés and jumps as integral to dance, then people who are impaired in one or more lower limbs are automatically excluded. A limited view of what type of movement can be considered virtuosic also threatens the entry of dancers with an alternative movement range into the current dance world. In my own experience, dancers are all too often judged on prior 'natural' facility at auditions for training places, rather than on their potential, individual style or creativity, or willingness to learn. Many talented individuals who do not match up to physical ideals of what a dancer should be are therefore ruled out before the professional level is even reached.

Whilst notable advances in accessibility for differently-abled dancers have been made in the community dance field, particularly in the context of improvisation and creative >

dance, progress in the professional dance sphere has been less impressive. Although the number of integrated dance companies in the UK at different levels is increasing, mainstream integrated companies such as Candoco and Stopgap are still exceptions in a largely non-disabled professional dance scene. The entry of disabled dancers into mainstream, not specifically integrated, companies is almost unheard of.

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Lack of training and lack of jobs, influenced by rigidity in the paradigm of dance, are mutually reinforcing constraints for disabled dancers. However, this vicious circle could be broken by introducing more training opportunities. This is not merely a matter of equal opportunities, but also has great significance for contemporary dance as an art form. Increasing opportunities for disabled dancers to reach and demonstrate their full potential through training and performance could radically broaden the artistry within contemporary dance. Greater diversity within dance would follow from the inclusion of well-trained dancers with a range of bodies. By setting a challenge to orthodox aesthetics and idealised body images, this would prevent the risk of an aesthetic stasis where choreography 'played it safe'. Rather than attempting to gloss over differences, the expansion of training opportunities to include and challenge disabled dancers would offer dance the chance to "contemplate and celebrate difference" (1). It seems that not only the acknowledgement of, but also the celebration, of individuality is often seriously lacking in conventional dance training. Opening up the field to a wider range of bodies and abilities, whilst nonetheless continuing to strive for high standards, could offer a breath of fresh air to the dance scene. The availability of a more diverse range of dancers would offer an exciting challenge to choreographers to work truly innovatively. After all, right from its conception in the early twentieth century, the very success of contemporary dance has arguably been in its constant attempts to challenge convention and break from the norm.

Approaches to training

Although opportunities are currently limited, progress is nonetheless being made in small sections of dance education and Continuing Professional Development, developments which are underpinned by the scarce but crucial research into dance and disability in education.

Within the UK the Candoco Foundation Course in Dance for Disabled People, (no longer running due to reallocation of funding) was instrumental in developing strategies for training disabled dancers in technique. Fundamental to this course was the partnership between each trainee and a Dance Support Specialist, who provided individualised support to help each student to focus on their own training needs. A small number of disabled dancers have also trained in





Left: Laura Jones, StopGAP Dance Company in Splinter at The Ministry of Culture, Bucharest. www.stopgap.uk.com

mainstream education. Coventry University has been particularly progressive in this respect. Through research and dialogue with disabled trainees, it continues to develop innovative teaching strategies and training techniques, from the altering of wording in learning outcomes, right through to developing ways of translating plié exercises, travelling and jumps for wheelchair users. The number of smaller scale training opportunities, both for performers and for teachers working in the field of inclusive dance, is also starting to increase. Notable opportunities offered by organisations such as Candoco and Blue Eyed Soul, and projects such as Gloucestershire Dance's Ignite training programme encourage optimism that progress, however small, is being made in the right direction.

As course leaders themselves acknowledge, dance training for disabled dancers will not be perfected straight away, and there is often a steep learning curve for both students and teachers. Nonetheless, the clear potential of a variety of approaches is encouraging. Whilst there is much scope for debate on the relative merits of teaching groups which are either integrated, exclusive or grouped according to disability type, the ideal situation would be to make all of these types of training available. The increased choice would not only help disabled dancers, but all dancers. A focus on nurturing the individual and humanising training, rather than the current focus on imitation and aspiration to homogeneity, could breathe new life into dance education and the profession as a whole (1).

If we are to truly enrich the dance world, it is imperative that professional training opportunities are opened up which challenge and enable physically disabled dancers to reach their full potential. On the question of inclusion in dance, it is not only equality that is at stake, but the very integrity of the art form. In excluding dancers from performance by denying fundamentally important training opportunities, the current dance infrastructure risks stifling the creative potential of contemporary dance. The inclusion of dancers whose body type or facility may deviate from the conventional ideal, has the potential to lead to groundbreaking innovation in choreography and performance. In doing so it may also radically reconfigure audience assumptions about professional dance. If contemporary dance is to continue as a vital force in the world of art and society, then it is essential that a range of accessible, challenging training opportunities are made available to enable dancers with all types of bodies to excel, in order to show the dance world how much more exciting contemporary dance can be.

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Reference

(1) Whatley, S. 2007 'Dance and Disability: the Dancer, the Viewer and the Presumption of Difference', in *Research in Dance Education*, Vol. 8, No.1, pp.5-25.