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Above: Candoco Dance Company. Dancers: Sue Smith & David Toole. Photo: Anthony Crickmay.



Above: Fiona Campbell.

Re-constructing the image of the disabled performer

Fiona Campbell, dance writer and facilitator, gives some serious thought to how we watch disabled dancers

The historical representation of the disabled body on stage was “the freak display...and the medical theatre” (1). Their disappearance in the 1970s, coupled with, for example, the rise of pioneering ‘integrated’ dance companies, such as Cleveland Ballet Dancing Wheels (Dancing Wheels) in 1980 and CandoCo in 1991, has catalysed a change in the socially constructed image of disabled performers.

Tom Shakespeare’s article ‘Cultural Representations of Disabled People: Dustbins for Disavowal?’ discusses how images of disabled individuals in society seek to reinforce and/or germinate negative stereotypes. Though it is also worth considering the implications and role that the performing arts play in inhibiting such images. The term “dustbins for disavowal” tends to present a view of the disabled as inferior and incapable: a figure of pity, prompting one to query whether physically disabled people are represented as substandard, minor human components in the performance world, and whether there is contrast erected between the disabled performer and the non-disabled performer?

Otherness and integrated companies

The term ‘integrated companies’ is used to describe those incorporating both disabled and non-disabled performers. While this has helped to establish disabled people as respected performers in mainstream performance, it should be questioned whether the traditional dichotomy of classical and grotesque has indeed been replaced in the way that audiences ‘read’ a performance by disabled dancers.

Tom Shakespeare’s theoretical model discusses disability as defined through the comparison of opposite forms: the concept of “otherness” (2) common also to

groups such as women and black people. Applied to disabled people, the idea of otherness suggests their categorisation as sub-human, giving definition to their non-disabled “counterparts”. The explicit juxtaposition of disabled and non-disabled performers adopted by integrated companies may be argued to propagate this position. The conspicuous pairing of disabled dancers with non-disabled dancers in such early CandoCo work as *Inside Out*, project an image of the disabled performer as a separate component that echoes the traditional dance partnership of female reflecting male.

The OED defines integrated as “the combining of diverse parts into a complex whole”, and “the bringing into equal membership of a common society those groups... previously discriminated against” (3). The separate parts suggested - when this definition is applied to ‘integrated performance’ - are the disabled performers, subsequently integrated with non-disabled colleagues. Former CandoCo Artistic Director and Founder, Adam Benjamin proposes the current function of the integrated label seems to be merely to warn the prospective viewer that there will be disabled performers involved (3) thereby shifting the context of the performance before it has even begun.

Conversely, there are examples of disabled performers not being fully integrated into performances, where their presence simply evokes a sense of ‘tokenism’; their individual physicality and talents are not exploited (3). In some performances, the presence of the wheelchair alone seems to represent integrated performance, with little investigation into its meaning or contribution to the performance as a whole. Performer credibility, meanwhile, is damaged by the misuse of disabled performers on stage; tokenism elicits sympathy that helps frame the disabled as in some way pitiable. >

Liminality

Some dance performances can be seen to propagate this suspended identity of the disabled performer. Ann Cooper Albright argues, for example, of *Dancing Wheels*, that “their work is still informed by an ethos that reinstates classical conceptions of grace, speed, agility and control within the disabled body” (4). In other words, although *Dancing Wheels* uses both non-disabled and disabled dancers, they fail to utilise the disabled performer’s body to its full potential. However, it could also be the case that they are simply reframing the idea of ‘classical conceptions of grace’.

In contrast, Albright’s own performances as a dancer expose her disabled body and contradict the traditional representation of the dancing body. Cooper Albright’s “dance about disability” (4) sees her sitting in a wheelchair, back to the audience. The back of her wheelchair, however, is cut out to reveal the back of her naked disabled body. This frank showcasing of her impairment contrasts the more common tendency in integrated dance to subordinate disability by playing to a non-disabled style, and perhaps helps to move the evaluation of disabled performance away from classical, non-disabled-centric conceptions of grace and control. To her, disability is merely an unexplored possibility: “while a dance performance is grounded in the physical capacities of a dancer, it is not limited by them”(4).

Victim art

Proposed by dance critic and writer Arlene Croce and similar to the “charity cripple” (2) “victim art” is criticised as existing simply to evoke sympathy from the audience. Croce would not review Bill T. Jones’ *Still/Here*, a depiction of the struggle of people with life threatening diseases performed by terminally ill dancers. Croce labelled the piece “victim art” (5), arguing that she “couldn’t review someone [she feels]...sorry for or hopeless about” (5).

Sympathy, such as that reported by Croce, is highly subjective, and it may be that the spectator is partially responsible for creating the ‘victim art’ label through their own perspective. But the practical issue remains that a performer’s credibility can be jeopardised by allowing disability to become the true focus of a performance: the artist risks being seen as ‘a disabled performer’, rather than simply ‘a performer’.

Watching a ‘hero’

The concept of ‘overcoming disability’ as a negatively reinforced aspect of dance theatre also occasionally arises. In DV8’s *The Cost of Living*, dancer David Toole - whose torso ends at his upper thighs - watches a ballet class through a dance studio window, before entering and duetting with a ballerina. This two-part sequence firstly evokes pity for Toole, who seems too long to join the able-bodied dancers, before surprising the viewer with the grace of his subsequent deeds.

This would appear an explicit example of the “fallacy of the inspirational over-comer” (6). The image is, of course, patronising: in context, Toole may be watched as a heroic disabled dancer, rather than simply “one of the most beautiful and extraordinary performers” director Lloyd Newson states he has ever seen (7).

As with the concept of victim art, this raises a question mark over the credibility of the work and the role of the disabled performers within it, further engendering views of disabled performance as ‘gimmicky’ and so lessening the importance, and/or impact, of their perceived artistic contribution.

Reversing the gaze

The concept of the ‘gaze’ can be used to describe the way in which disabled people are subjected to staring. Since “the ability to scrutinise is premised on power” (2) this connotes a hierarchy in which disabled people are positioned under non-disabled people.

However, in the world of performance, these suggested power-roles may be reversed. Many performers describe the position of being on stage as empowering them, providing a platform to manipulate rather than simply evoke reactions from ‘gazing’ onlookers.

In *Back to Back*’s piece *Small Metal Objects*, the audience watch as actors interact with the general public. This performance is an innovative example of the power held by a disabled performer, and blurs the boundaries between images of disabled people on-stage and off. While the audience observes an actor in performance, they also watch the unconsciously exhibited attitudes towards disabled people by the unaware general public. Such performance art enables artists to use the general public’s fascination with disability to their advantage, bending the

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perceptions of a captive audience to their design in an arena where the power and preconception of the onlooker may be reduced.

Shakespeare also discusses the notion that whilst the gaze may help the non-disabled onlookers feel more powerful, it also “remind(s) non-disabled people of their own vulnerability” (2). Disability can only be used as a crutch to cheer or induce fear in the non-disabled if it is seen to be truly debilitating; yet many people do not consider their disabilities such at all. Used in the appropriate context, Toole’s graceful and unique style is a rejoinder that his physique permits him to dance in a way that the non-disabled can admire but not replicate: appreciation (and even envy) are likely to supersede sympathy.

Though unpalatable, and slightly controversial, the traditional dichotomy between the classical and grotesque bodies persists. History teaches us that the perception of disabled performers is improving, and performance companies featuring disabled artists are key to this. But they are still open to criticism on several fronts.

In dance, ‘otherness’ can be emphasised by inconspicuous matching of disabled and non-disabled dancers, and the labelling of ‘integrated’ companies. This reinforces the perception that the disabled performer can be contrasted to non-disabled. Furthermore, such performance may also be labelled ‘victim art’ if disability itself is given too prominent a focus therefore falling prey to any of the pitfalls or blatant stereotyping highlighted by writers such as Croce and Shakespeare.

Yet the disabled performer is still empowered by their position: from their position they can expose themselves as credible artists, with or without mention of their disability. This helps counter the view of disabled people as liminal beings, allowing audiences to see the disability second, and the performer - or the person - first.

Performance demonstrates that disability can bestow uniquely beautiful capabilities, rather than only diminish the individual, and so helps to remove the automatic equation of disability with loss. This counters any allusions that the non-disabled are somehow ‘made aware’ of their own fragility, or vulnerability.

Ultimately, disabled performers can help to reconfigure traditional artistic or aesthetic norms. Also, due to the fact

that beauty is equated most strongly with the arts, the images that performance media project play perhaps the most prominent role of all in helping disabled people disavow themselves of their ‘dustbin’ label.

By illuminating such images it can help both audience members and artists to move towards a future that is free from the preconceptions of how a dancer could or should look within a dance company. These very images alone are all highly subjective and while they do not define the way in which all aspects of integrated dance companies choreography is viewed the very mention of them opens up alternative perspectives, raises awareness and provides a platform from which integrated dance can evolve thus helping dispel the past and re-construct the future image of the disabled performer.

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