

**Right:** Janice Parker.  
Photo: Silke Goes.



## A light switched on

Inspired by a startling duet, **Janice Parker** reflects on the dance and disability movement in Scotland

**When we see dance by a disabled person do we see the art first, or the disability?** Does that even matter? Or is the work so fascinating, stirring or radically different that we don't know what to think or feel?

To answer these questions I'm going to start with a story about two dancers, one a choreographer and performer named Saburo Teshigawara and the other, Stuart Jackson, a performer. I first saw them dance together in a duet that was part of a full-length piece called Luminous that Teshigawara had choreographed. As a choreographer myself I'm interested in duets, and in taking two contrasting dance styles and two very different bodies to create a third and new thing. And there it was in front of me, and in an international work on a grand scale. It was thrilling to watch Teshigawara and Jackson create extraordinary images together.

I saw Luminous three times. I then went to the Edinburgh International Festival talk that Teshigawara was giving with Mary Brennan, the Glasgow Herald's dance critic. The public for these 'meet the artist' sessions is quite educated. They know their art and see a lot of it. Performance is not something unfamiliar to them. So I was surprised when all they wanted to talk about was Stuart Jackson, and not the art.

'He brings something to his performance that's outside the formal conventions of dance, created without mirrors or the possibility of comparison with others. His movement has the unusual purity of being made entirely from within and is as much a joy to watch as it evidently is for him to perform.' (1)

What the above review quote doesn't say about Jackson is that he's blind. The audience was so preoccupied with the question 'How does a blind man dance?' that the talk with Teshigawara verged on a freak show. I was horrified. Someone asked, 'How does he not fall off the front of the stage?' I immediately thought of all my sighted dancer colleagues who'd fallen into the orchestra pit, many times,

and knew that Stuart probably had less of a chance of doing so. After a thoughtful pause Teshigawara quietly replied, 'Well, he did fall once, but he never did it again.' The irony went right over the audience's head. They didn't hear what he had to say about performing with Stuart, what he had learned from him or about Stuart's skills as a dancer and performer. They were completely oblivious and, worse, totally reinforcing their own stereotyped thinking, judgments and prejudices.

Maybe I should've known what to expect. Coming out of one of the performances of Luminous I'd overheard an audience member say to her friend, 'I thought that man was blind, but he couldn't have been. But there was something wrong with him.' Wrong? There was something very wrong indeed. Once I calmed down I realised that no matter how incredible it seemed, nor how insulting, this kind of attitude was commonplace. It was what people really thought and believed and how they understood. And I saw that we, as professional artists, had better take this seriously. We had work to do.

### Past and Present

I started working with people with disabilities in the 1970s when issues about inclusion, access and equal rights were rearing their heads, and policy was starting to change. Marginally, maybe, but as a result public money was made available for people like me to offer movement classes in the local community. My first full-time dance job was in a hospital because in the late 70s and early 80s that's where most people with a learning disability lived. In dance back then it was all about us - the non-disabled - helping them - the disabled - to join in. It was at best educational and, in the main, therapeutic. At the time I didn't realise just how patronising and misguided this was.

There were glimmers of hope. Throughout the 80s the community dance movement began to flourish. The original 'bums on seats' concept - whereby companies offered

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education and outreach workshops based on their repertoire in an attempt to build audiences - had blossomed into the notion of ‘dance for all.’ In Scotland from 1988 to 1994 we had Tamara McLorg, artistic director of Dundee Rep Dance Theatre (now Scottish Dance Theatre), and Royston Maldoom in Fife as Scotland’s first dance artist in residence. Both were doing incredibly exciting, innovative work with people of all ages and abilities. In 1988 we also had the first Scottish Youth Dance Festival, conceived by Tamara and Royston and, from the outset, involving people with learning disabilities

What was exciting was that this work was primarily driven by the art of ordinary people dancing and creating performance. This was a new concept offering a potentially new aesthetic. Classes, workshops and performances sprang up throughout Scotland for people of all ages and abilities. In 1987 I was employed in the first arts and disability post in Scotland with the forward-thinking organisation The Arts In Fife. This was another job driven by the politics of the time. Equal opportunity, inclusion and access were the buzzwords. The idea was to develop provision for people with disabilities and generally fly the flag for the right to participate.

In general, however, there was still no concept of disabled people having their own contribution to make to dance, or indeed of the voice that said, ‘Thank you very much, but I am quite happy as I am and don’t need you to fix me’ or, as a colleague of mine put it, ‘I don’t have a problem with my wheelchair. It means the same to me as your legs probably mean to you. But I do have a problem when I can’t get into the building.’ We the non-disabled were being, quite rightly, told off. I’m ashamed to say it, but at the time this was a revelation to me. And a light switched on inside me. I saw that the real disability was in our attitude, and in the barriers that society created. Just turn the tables, and we were free of the burden of helping and service provision and could instead concentrate on the art.

By 1990 I had moved onto working with ProjectAbility Centre for Developmental Arts in Glasgow and brought Wolfgang Stange’s company, Amici, up to Glasgow to perform in Tramway. It was the first time Amici had performed out of London. This was an era of similar explosions and mini-revolutions, much experimentation and risk-taking, and the money to make new inroads that put dance by disabled people more firmly on the map.

Now, almost twenty years later, we have - to name but a few - Scottish Dance Theatre, which employed disabled

dancers as full-time members of the company to perform in Adam Benjamin’s Angels of Incidence in 2007; Caroline Bowditch as Scotland’s pro-active Agent for Change; Indepen-dance with its array of workshops and performances; my company, Traveller, that works experimentally on the fringes and margins; Alan Greig’s X Factor Dance Company, which has created work in collaboration with dancers from Traveller as part of its professional repertoire; Pilrig School, which is basing its curriculum on dance and annually filling the Festival Theatre with its performance work; Marc Brew, a former CandoCo dancer who has choreographed a National Theatre of Scotland production; Lighthouse, a new company based at Telford College; Claire Cunningham, who is developing her own distinctive vocabulary and aesthetic; Irky Pirky in East Ayrshire, WaterBaby in Paisley and countless classes, workshops and community companies throughout the country.

We’ve come a long way, but there’s always further to go. I’d like to quote from an essay by a colleague of mine, a visual artist very active in pushing the boundaries around disability and art and getting us to think:

‘There appears, particularly within the field of dance and learning disability, an overall need to sanitise difference, to hide it away or make it sentimental. For most people working within this area, a sophisticated aesthetic approach has not developed over time. Many seek to create images of people with learning disabilities that allow us to remain comfortable. People shy away from complex performance that challenges and further addresses our embarrassment over intellectual disability. As a result there is a tendency to stigmatise people further. It seems dance and performance for most people with learning disabilities attracts “professional” dancers of questionable quality, resulting in works entrenched in a late 70s community dance aesthetic. So, is there room amongst this community dance for a way of working which challenges notions of aesthetics? Can we remove the sentimentality, re-educate the audience, critically assess the work and still place the person with a learning disability central within the dance?’ (2)

Ouch! Harsh words. While I don’t one hundred percent agree with them, there are truths here to which we should take heed.

## Mission Statements

Recently I watched a performance involving people with learning disabilities as part of a community dance platform

**All photos:**  
*Solitary Citizen,*  
Making a Move '09 -  
Hamburg, Germany.  
Photos: Silke Goes.



event. It was done with the best of intentions and I'm sure the people in it enjoyed themselves, but the work shouldn't have been there. It was of poor quality, neither demanding nor expecting anything of its participants and showing such a marginal relationship to dance that all it did was reinforce existing prejudices and negative stereotypes towards people with disabilities. Is this what we want?

In a similar vein, the current Scottish Qualifications Certificate module in dance and disability asks for the following performance criteria from its students: 'Identification of the main type of dance participated in by clients with disabilities.'

What 'type' of dance do they mean? There's only one answer, and that is any type of dance. This is shocking because it perpetuates a limited perception of individuals with a disability. But what can we do about it? What do we as artists, policy makers, service providers, funders, participants and performers need to think about now, and what actions must we take? A few things come to mind.

### **Turning the spectrum from the vertical to the horizontal**

Getting rid of the hierarchy of one dance aesthetic and one body type so that dance involving other body types is considered no less than dance with highly trained bodies but is, instead, different than, with its own aesthetic parameters and vocabularies.

### **Diversity**

Dance involving people with disabilities is not a methodology or pedagogy. There's no single language, end product, practice or style. We need dance that is as diverse as the artists and the performers who engage with it. We have to advocate for, create and develop diversity of the art form and its development is ultimately about freedom for the individual.

### **Working in the political arena**

All dance operates within a field of prejudices, narrow expectations, stigma and stereotypes. Every workshop and performance, whether in the back of beyond or on a mainstage, operates in this political arena. Being aware of this and acting responsively and responsibly is part of our work. Otherwise we perpetuate and strengthen myths when what we need to do is lessen them and aim for change.

### **Working in partnership**

It's not about being unrealistic or pushy. It's about working collaboratively. Dance has to enter arenas such as the social services, and in so doing the dance artist has to be responsive and supportive. This can result in enormously creative work. Both process and performance might occur in a bedroom or living room, listening and observing, and working where people feel most at home. We shouldn't expect them to come to us. We also need to go to them on their terms and create work that is the result of that partnership.

### **Advocating for training**

I know of only one person in Scotland who's managed to train on a mainstream course. We have to find ways for more disabled people to access training. At the same time we need to create new training centred around people with disabilities and yet open to all.

### **Finding new contexts and new arenas for dance**

Where we place the work changes who sees it and how it's perceived. This enables it to be viewed with new eyes and received from different viewpoints.

In 1991, thanks to artistic director Nikki Milican, I initiated a work called Ooooh by Out of Order, a new company involving people with and without learning and physical disabilities. Liz Rankin, who was then performing with DV8, choreographed it as a commission by New Moves (now New Territories). This was a radical context for a challenging performance that went on to tour major venues in England.

In 2002 Arthur's Feet, a piece by Cesc Gelabert involving experienced dancers with learning disabilities in collaboration with dancers from the Gelabert Azzopardi Companyia de Dansa, premiered in the Edinburgh International Festival. I'd approached the Festival organisers with the initial idea, and they had the vision to take it on.

I arranged for two dancers with a learning disability to perform on stage alongside Baryshnikov in PASTforward, again in the Edinburgh Festival. This was a retrospective look at the work of the Judson dancers in the 60s who were experimenting with the non-traditionally trained body to find new aesthetics and dance forms. Just as I believe we're doing now. All of this is about lifting the glass ceiling by placing dance and dancers with disabilities into the professional arena, and finding new contexts in which to place the work.

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**Left:** Alberto Huetos and Alan Faulds in *Arthur's Feet*. Choreography: Cesc Gelabert. Photo: Douglas Gordon.

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### Questioning practice

We've got to keep questioning our practice. Is it still relevant? Is it enough? We need to take risks, be experimental and imaginative and cross new borders. Don't be boring and don't play it too safe. It's not just about access to people with disabilities who are easy to reach, nor about the 'best' or most obvious or borderline disability. We have to find ways to create professional, innovative and inspiring work with people with more complex disabilities and know how genuinely creative this is.

### Ditching instrumental values

We need to stop promoting the instrumental values of dance that arise from the prevalent cultural and political drives. Of course such values exist. We can 'feel better' by fostering social cohesion and levels of integration, and self-esteem can be raised, but if we just stay there then dance involving disabled people will remain in the realm of benign service provision and 'helping'. What surrounds the work is important. Context and language - how we present the work, what we say and think about it - really do matter.

### Developing potential as best practice and quality work

Never underestimate an individual's potential. Gerda Konig, of Din A 13 Dance Company, says that in today's climate of prejudice and limited expectations performers with disabilities have to reach a potential of 150 percent. That's where she pushes herself and her dancers. Every workshop and performance needs to develop each person's potential so that they function at their best in their own authentic voice. It's about making people have more of themselves available; it's not about changing their movement but, rather, maximising it.

### Thinking and feeling

In the words of that great performer and activist, Tom Shakespeare, 'Art is congealed thought. It is a way of going through a thought process and has an emotional intensity that makes people feel.' (3) We must let audiences see, and feel, more. They need to experience their responses and make their judgments on that basis. We can't take the disability out of the equation, and we don't want to. It will - and needs to be - visible, exposing an array of beautiful, strong images. We can't take audience

perception out of the equation either, but we can aim to develop and change it.

### Influencing the mainstream

We're realistic that barriers still remain, but we've made a start. The only way to get round these barriers is to keep making work and putting it out there so that people become more familiar with this way of working. Entering the mainstream is not the goal. Influencing it is. It will happen. It's already beginning to happen. In the meantime we need to look at critical writing in relation to dance, investigate the role of film, open up debate and continue to be creative in ways that challenge preconceptions of disability and dance. Above all we have to make good art for art's sake. It's out of this that everything else exists.

In conclusion, Teshigawara and Jackson sent me on a mission to work with audience perceptions, and to do what I could with as much good art as I could develop and promote. They led me to be more provocative and radical, to shake things up and work with what's missing and not yet happening. I know that dance involving disabled people is individual and diverse. It has its own aesthetic based on the difference of the non-traditionally trained body, as opposed to the sameness inherent in much of classical ballet. This new aesthetic is struggling for validity, and needs a new language of interpretation and understanding. If true potential - that of the art and the people who've made it - has been reached then the work will speak to everyone. It's up to us to make this so by taking risks and creating the most interesting, experimental, bold, beautiful, powerful, tender and humorous dance that we can.

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- 1) Alice Bain in *The Guardian* on Stuart Jackson's performance in *Luminous*, choreographed by Saburo Teshigawara, 2002
- 2) Alison Stirling in 'Oh Brave New World That Hath such People in it,' an essay to accompany Janice Parker's film series *Amplification and Restriction*, 2005
- 3) From a lecture presented by Tom Shakespeare at The Artist as Leader course in Hospitalfield House, Arbroath, 2008