

# 34 Dance and disabled people



**Above:** Jess Allen in TAKE; a dance in the park at Craven Arms Community Garden, Shropshire. Photo: Vaughan Grantham.

## Positive altitude

Free-lance dance artist **Jess Allen** offers her view on hidden disabilities and aerial dance in inclusive performance practice

**Labels have always been a thorny issue in the field of inclusive practice.** As Adam Benjamin asserts, 'The term "integrated" or "inclusive" actually tells us very little... it functions a bit like a road-sign warning the unwary... of possible encounters with wheelchairs.' (1). But what about when there are no wheelchairs? Has integrated dance in a professional performance context now become sufficiently mainstream that it's begun to develop an aesthetic, even a brand, of its own? Do audiences now expect to see the disability in order to validate the 'spectating' experience (or to justify the funding)?

These were some of the questions I was prompted to address when I was lucky enough to work with Blue Eyed Soul on one of its latest aerial pieces,

TAKE; a dance in the park.

Based in Shropshire, the company is highly regarded for its integrated work in community, educational and performance settings. Increasingly it has been exploring harness-based aerial dance in teaching and on tour nationally and internationally. Commissioned for the Darwin bicentenary as part of the company's Sepia festival, TAKE was an outdoor piece choreographed by company director Rachel Freeman. It was first performed at Shrewsbury's Quarry Park, then subsequently at a number of disability arts festivals around the country.

With this work the company found it had a good deal more explaining to do than usual, because the inclusivity wasn't at all obvious. I'm afraid I was

the culprit. I have a condition rather than a registered disability, and although at some point the former may end up resulting in the latter, I can appear quite 'non-disabled'. When I got back to dance after my initial diagnosis with psoriatic arthritis (PsA), which affects my joints and spine, I didn't see myself as a disabled dancer. My tutors, however, did. Perhaps this was because they saw me in the depths of my first serious 'flare' when I was very much 'disabled,' and encouraged me to think about integrated work as a way forward in any future dance pursuits. Ironically, I later came to observe that it's possible to be marginalised because of a condition rather than a more 'stable' disability. As an auto-immune disorder, PsA-sufferers tend to be at the mercy

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**Right:** Jess Allen, Rose Payne and Eleni Edipidi in TAKE. Photo: Vaughan Grantham.

of the whims of the body, the seasons, minute dietary fluctuations or, sometimes (seemingly) the way the wind is blowing. I can imagine that dancers with diabetes, epilepsy or a whole raft of other fluctuating, unpredictable conditions might be similarly afflicted.

The conditions vs. disability debate is very complex. Even in the world of inclusive practice, dancers with conditions that can have day-to-day unpredictability in their movement possibility might be much harder to ‘place’ and work with than those with a very clear and consistent disability, or those who are entirely non-disabled. I’m not naive as to why. For a choreographer making professional work, it could be very frustrating to have a dancer who is differently-abled from day to day, or week to week. Given that disabled dancers have had to work tirelessly to get themselves and their work accepted into the mainstream (even though the ‘inclusive/integrated/disability arts’ labels often still remain), it seems selfishly indulgent to propose that maybe we now need a new branch of inclusive practice which can deal with the unpredictability of medical conditions, and conditions that can mean dancers may be ‘non-disabled’ one day and ‘disabled’ the next. Of course as a field of dance practice, integrated dance is already in the right mindset to achieve this greater flexibility.

The very notion of flexibility was one of the chief joys, for me, about working with Blue Eyed Soul. While much about my condition is shifting and uncertain (even my initial prognosis has changed from ‘you will be

permanently disabled’ to ‘well, we’re not really sure, every case is different’), and I’m still trying to figure out the patterns, I was amazed and delighted to become stronger and more ‘well’ as the project progressed. This delight was never without an edge of guilt. Was I deceiving someone in being and appearing well? Was I disrupting the aesthetic of what people might want to see – what Professor Sarah Whatley calls the ‘presumption of difference’ (2)?

That aside, the company’s ethos played the biggest part in contributing to my ‘wellness.’ Also knowing that I had permission to have a problem if my body (or the wind!) threw one at me and, better, knowing that if it did we could collaborate to find an imaginative solution that would still allow me to perform and, most importantly, not let down the other dancers. The aerial element played a big part in this. Working in a harness is at once liberating and restrictive, but the restrictions and challenges often seem to be quite similar even for different bodies. For me it meant freedom, not just from gravity but from having to take so much care about impact on joints because, much of the time, the weight was either supported or entirely suspended. Sometimes it was positively therapeutic. Hanging and dancing upside down metres off the ground is perhaps a hitherto undiscovered form of spinal therapy! Overall there was also a sense of being nurtured by the company in a holistic way, and being valued for what every body has to offer.

Presented like this, inclusive practice sounds to be as much about inclusion into the often harshly inaccessible,

unforgiving world of professional dance as it is about differently-abled bodies dancing together. For this nurturing and acceptance to be universally possible in mainstream professional dance is, perhaps, too much to expect, too liberal, too good to be true... I don’t think inclusive practice should necessarily be the cotton wool wadding of the dance world, falsely indulgent or cushioning its dancers from the harsh realities of working professionally in any art form. But I’m not sure I can personally propose a clear solution for dancers like me, aware as I am of a company’s need to balance limited funding and demanding timescales for delivering work and the fact that there are so many genuinely talented performers who need work and don’t have health issues. For me, however, dance remains the best medicine. I know inclusive practice in professional performance never set out to present itself as a form of therapy or medication. Nevertheless, giving people with hidden or transient disabilities permission to participate and work seriously (and not just tokenistically) in dance - so that they are as empowered and ‘abled’ as they can be - has certainly been my experience of it through the positive lens of Blue Eyed Soul.

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(1) Benjamin, A. (2002) *Making an Entrance*, London: Routledge

(2) Whatley, S. (2007) ‘Dance and Disability: the Dance, the Viewer and the Presumption of Difference’ *Research in Dance Education*, Volume 8, Issue 1, pp. 5-25.