



# Creating and sustaining

In their second year of PhD research, disabled dance artist **Kat Hawkins** constructs a fresh idea of journalism and dance and their overlapping potentials, and offers insights into a Collaborative Doctoral Award

I'd often thought about how I could combine my interests of research, practice, film, dance and journalism together. How these elements of finding things out, of inquiry and curiosity could be brought together and located around themes.

I'd thought about what dance is and what film is, read thinking on both artforms, thought about disability and prosthesis, thought about extending the body, taking in time and space, thought about body/mind connection and disconnection.

And in ways, journalism and dance had often felt like two distinct and interconnected ways of exploring the world. For a long time after becoming physically disabled at 18, I thought I 'couldn't' dance, as in I was unable to imagine it for myself and my body, as in I thought about dance in terms of what it wasn't rather than what it is. Normativity had been drilled into my still very young and, for me at least, impressionable body/mind. And this is in part where the feelings of disconnect between journalism and dance came from. I 'couldn't' dance, so I would be a journalist. But as I learnt how to operate a camera, how to organise space to construct 'scenes', tell stories, highlight truths as I saw them, I began to construct a fresh idea of these two mediums and their overlapping potentials.

Through both, I am interested in how we reveal,

tell, explain, present ideas. So when an opportunity to apply for a PhD at C-DaRE at Coventry University, working with a partner organisation, Candoco Dance Company, came up, I was intrigued and excited. Funding was available, via Midlands4Cities, for a researcher to enter into a relationship with a partner organisation, working closely with them in order to have a site for research to emerge.

Candoco had highlighted a need for itself, and for inclusive dance widely, to research, gather information, and investigate the role of an understudy, and pose and begin answering questions raised by this role. It's a role that hasn't been researched much within an inclusive dance setting, or generally within contemporary dance, and is a role that raises many questions and areas for inquiry, including how material is shared, how different modes of communication are used to pass on information, what dancers need to get repertory work 'into' their bodies, and what embodiment can mean for individuals and collectively as a group.

A collaborative doctoral award is a privileged opportunity allowing researchers to work closely with a partner organisation. I'm now in my second year of PhD research and this relationship with Candoco has already allowed me to conduct



All images: Anna Seymour, Ihsaan De Banya, Liv Edginton, Meg Armishaw, Joel Brown and Ben Ash, Candoco Dance Company, rehearsing Jeanine Durning's Last Shelter and Set and Reset/Reset. Photos: Kat Hawkins.

research in the studio, working ethnographically by watching, listening, learning alongside the company. I've been gathering material through my dance and film practices in order to uncover new ways of thinking about the possibility of the role of an understudy. What might it look like? What role can accessibility play in how this role is organised and situated? How can a disability justice perspective shed light on how this role is actualised in inclusive settings? What can be learnt from the things we witness in the studio, in the present-ness of dance as an artistic inquiry? What even makes dance dance? And within that, what is inclusive dance and who uses the term?

I've been able to work with dancers and choreographers directly, allowing me to gain insight into making processes, and to witness and track how accessibility can be built into these makings and explorations. Candoco's latest work, made with Jeanine Durning, has given me a rich thinking ground for accessibility in dance, both in terms of access for the dancers in the space, and also for the audience and performance. I've seen how the company engages with sign language interpreters, parking, visual description, questioning in what ways accessibility should be and needs to be prioritised. It's offered me learning around the importance of embedding accessibility from the beginning, how creating pieces that are 'fully' accessible is an aim that is rich and fulfilling, as well as being critically important, and is as allusive as trying to define disability itself. Because as we know, impairment and access can be as individual as our fingertips, if they shifted and changed as regularly as each moment in time shifts and changes.

Working with Candoco has also given me the

opportunity to follow much of the latest re-staging of Set and Reset/Reset, originally a Trisha Brown piece. Watching and taking part in this process, joining class with Eva Karzcag (a dancer in the original piece), following a member of the Trisha Brown company, Jamie Scott, working in person with Candoco, seeing Abby Yager re-stage from Zoom, and having the privilege and access to speak with the dancers throughout this process has given me the chance to think about how a repertory piece is shared and learnt and translated. And learning parts of the phrase material myself has given me a closer touching of how disabled dancers can come to learn a work like this, one made in its originality for non-disabled dancers.

For me as a disabled dance artist, the amount of self-exploration that has been possible for me as a result of this partnership is really important to note. It's very hard and very rare to find projects that focus on intersectionality, where accessibility is centred, and where there are a number of disabled artists, so I don't feel like the 'only one', and where, cynically or realistically, I begin thinking that I am a 'tick box', a chance to secure more funding.

It's been rewarding emotionally, physically and mentally to be challenged to think and move academically, bringing theory and practice together, and think about what working alongside non-disabled people in all sectors of dance can reveal, and where the learning and sharing of information takes place. And to learn and absorb and make changes in a continual circle of progress.

#### Info

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