

# “ A vibrant tapestry of inclusion...”: A South East Asian journey of partnership and progress

Credit: Dani Bower.



In this article, **Anthony Evans**, Co-Director of We Are Epic, describes the collaborative journey undertaken with Indonesian partners, Nalitari Dance Company in Jogja and Ballet ID in Jakarta, to reveal the rich tapestry of talent among the nation’s disabled dancers.

I’m Anthony Evans, the director of We Are Epic, an inclusive arts community interest company registered here in the UK, but operating internationally and over the past decade, I’ve embarked on a mission that’s been both challenging and rewarding.

At We Are Epic, our goal has remained crystal clear: empower disabled dancers in (East and

South East) Asia and foster dynamic collaborations between the UK and this diverse continent. In this article, I’ll take you through the twists and turns of our remarkable journey and the vibrant tapestry of inclusion we’ve woven along the way.

## **Our Roots: Epic Arts and the journey to Asia**

My story began at Epic Arts, an international NGO in Cambodia where I, alongside my wife Laura and our Cambodian colleagues, founded Epic Encounters, the first inclusive dance company in South East Asia. Epic Arts has a profound mission: to promote the rights of disabled people using dance as a vehicle for change. In 2012, I had my first taste of producing inclusive dance performances. By 2014, I had completed a UK Tour with the dance company at Epic Arts and by 2015, our work was influencing Cambodia’s National Government Policy.

Driven by the excitement of opening doors for others in Britain to experience Asia as I had, I founded We Are Epic in Leicester in 2017 with a clear vision to provide talent development opportunities for dancers from diverse backgrounds in every sense.

As the pandemic drew to a close, my yearning to head back to Asia intensified again. I was eager to explore new opportunities and form partnerships. My passion for Asia has deep roots, fuelled by its



Photo: Banyubara Productions.



Anthony Evans. Photo: Douglas Armour

cultural richness and the immense potential it holds for young people hold. However, the region is not without its challenges and it's not a place for the fainthearted. Political tensions, restricted access to free speech and divergent interpretations of basic human rights have all been hurdles we've encountered along the way. We've learned to tread carefully, seek counsel from local experts in order to navigate the intricate political landscapes and cultural subtleties of each country.

#### **A defining moment**

In October 2022, ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) Para Games (1) in Indonesia showcased a convergence of cultures, minds and physicalities. Epic Arts' Dancers from Cambodia took centre stage, setting a remarkable precedent. The event, however, served as a stark reminder of the limited representation of disabled dancers and led us to question: "Where were all the disabled Indonesian performers?"

In the UK, an event calling itself 'inclusive' with hardly any disabled representation would be shocking. However, in the context of the ASEAN Para Games, it was disheartening, but not surprising. The experience inspired me to act and undertake a mission to address the lack of inclusion and representation of disabled dancers, this time in Indonesia.

#### **Unearthing hidden talents: Our research project**

Our journey of discovery in Indonesia involved a three-month research project funded by the British Council. Our mission was twofold: to uncover the hidden talents and stories of disabled dancers and to address the multifaceted challenges they face.

From the outset, we were confronted with the stark reality of the landscape for Indonesia's disabled dancers. There was no active formal network. Collaborating closely with the leader in the field of Inclusive Dance in the country, Nalitari Dance, in Jogja, and the leading Indonesian Dance Company, Ballet ID, in the capital Jakarta, we embarked on a mission to gather data about disabled people who were dancing in Indonesia, where they were dancing, what they were dancing, why and how.

Indonesia is a complex tapestry of cultures and identities, with an archipelago of 17,000 islands. Each island has its unique cultural identity, making it challenging to roll out a one-size-fits-all approach. Additionally, limited understanding of the social model of disability (2), which has done so much to drive change in Europe and the United States, deeply rooted cultural traditions and poor practical accessibility in many areas pose significant obstacles.

To address these complexities, we concentrated our efforts on four main areas: Sumatra, Java, Kalimantan (also known as Borneo) and Sulawesi. >>

This journey reflected not just a decade of fostering talents of disabled people, but also a decade of mutual learning and localisation. Our international arts projects seek to consistently uphold the importance of respecting and embracing the diverse identities and cultures involved.

We are committed to equitable partnerships, and hold an understanding of the impacts of colonialism that help ground and define our approach. In a world where cultural sensitivity is paramount, our work aspires to stand as a beacon of respectful collaboration.

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#### Key findings illuminate the path forward

Our research uncovered fascinating insights into the world of disabled dancers in Indonesia:

- We identified a total of 137 disabled dancers, each with a unique journey
- Over 75% considered dance a hobby rather than a profession, because they had never been paid for dancing
- Dance styles practiced by disabled dancers in Indonesia varied astoundingly from traditional and contemporary to hip hop, ballet, jazz, theatre/commercial and visual vernacular (3).

Familiar stories echoed through the findings, resonating with an all too common message:

“Society in Indonesia still treats disabled people as incapable and like outsiders.” These artists conveyed the isolation and rejection they often faced from mainstream society, dance schools, communities, and even their own social and family circles.

Although there was lots of leveraging of online tools to ensure wider access, much of the research was eventually conducted over the phone and it highlighted the vast inequalities across the country with remote communities. For this reason, many of our findings were centered around metropolitan areas where connectivity and access to dance provision was more plentiful.

I can’t beat about the bush! We had great results, but surely we are just scratching the surface! And so the next mission begins. To turn these dancers into a network, to form the roots of something that will spread and engage more and more dancers, ultimately making more people feel less alone. We aim to build a sustainable network that will thrive long after we’ve left. As visitors in these diverse countries, we understand our responsibility to ensure that our work leaves a lasting impact.

Our partnerships with Nalitari and Ballet ID in Jakarta are grounded in mutual respect and a shared commitment to inclusivity. These collaborations aren’t just about transferring knowledge; they’re about nurturing local talent and creating an ecosystem of inclusive arts practice.



Tiara Brahmarani of Nalitari Dance. Photo: Reynald Setiadi.



Putri Desyana of Nalitari Dance (left) and Mariska Febriyani (right). Photo: Reynald Setiadi.

Local funders play a pivotal role. We work closely with them to secure resources and establish a financial foundation that supports disabled dancers and organisations long term. Our goal is to empower local stakeholders to take ownership of these initiatives and sustain them.

### **Looking ahead: The future of disabled dance in Indonesia and beyond**

The research conducted by We Are Epic and our wonderful partners connected 137 disabled dancers with inclusive arts organisations in Indonesia. These connections are the seeds of future opportunities and we hope to create more opportunities for exchange between these artists, these organisations and the rest of the world. The hope is that the next ASEAN Para Games, hosted in Indonesia, will spotlight a more diverse ensemble of disabled artists.

The commitment to our journey, while at times frustrating, with flat tyres, heat stroke, toilet troubles and political brick walls, remains steadfast and resolute. Our experiences in Indonesia, with its rich cultural tapestry and complex social dynamics, have shaped our approach. We've learned to listen, adapt, and work alongside local communities to effect meaningful change. Our commitment to inclusivity is unwavering and we will continue to strive to bridge the gaps that persist.

### **References**

1. The ASEAN Para Games is a biennial multi-sport event held after every Southeast Asian Games involving disabled athletes from the current 11 Southeast Asia countries: Brunei, Myanmar, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam and East Timor Participating athletes have a variety of impairments and conditions physical sensory and intellectual. It is under the regulation of the ASEAN Para Sports Federation (APSF) with supervision by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) and the Asian Paralympic Committee and is traditionally hosted by the country where the Southeast Asian Games took place.
2. The social model of disability is a term first coined by British sociologist Michael Oliver and states that people have impairments, not disabilities. and are disabled by barriers constructed by society. It developed in contrast to the Medical Model of disability, which can still prevail worldwide and implies it is the person's body is problematic for society.
3. Visual Vernacular is a unique physical theatre technique, with elements of poetry and mime, primarily performed by deaf people who use sign language, combining strong movement, iconic signs, gestures and facial expression to express the visual complexity of stories/ information swiftly and effectively.

### **Info**

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