

London calling disabled dancers

Dance artist **Marc Brew** reflects on his experience of dancing at the Beijing Olympics in 2008

I was offered the opportunity to be a guest artist with CandoCo Dance Company, alongside Zonation and Royal Opera House, as one of the three companies to be representing London 2012 in the London Handover Ceremony as part of the Olympic and Paralympic Games Closing

Ceremonies in Beijing, China 2008. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity, one I was very excited and proud to be part of, representing London and the UK as a disabled dancer and choreographer. In the history of the Olympic Handover it was the first time a continuing theme for a show and the

same cast was used for both the Olympics and Paralympics, which included artists with and without disabilities. It's a pity the sporting events couldn't do the same.

I was the only dancer who used a wheelchair permanently amongst the cast of dancers from various



Clockwise from top left: Beijing Olympic Games Closing Ceremony, London Handover 2012 – Marc Brew at the Bird's Nest stadium; Marc Brew and cast from Royal Opera House and Zonation in a rehearsal at Camp Freddy; London bus and bus-stop sign. All photos: Philip Channels.

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Above: Marc Brew at rehabilitation hospital.

backgrounds of ballet, street dance, jazz and contemporary dance. The blend of dance disciplines added an interesting mix of styles and physicalities - which was the intention: to represent the diversity of London. We spent the final weeks of rehearsal for the big show at Camp Freddy an old airbase under the gaze of the Great Wall of China, chosen by the London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) as it was private, away from the smog of Beijing and we could mark out the distance and spacing of the stadium. This was needed, as we were not to have a dress run or tech rehearsal in the Bird's Nest stadium. I was lucky to have a personal assistant who helped me with my access needs while on tour in China e.g. to perform daily chores (shopping, banking and travel). But disability equality went out of the window having to be lifted daily out of my chair to get on and off the inaccessible bus - in which we would travel daily for 1½ hours. Having to perform on an inaccessible bus and carpet flooring – a wheelchair users ‘best friend’ posed additional

problems. I did however have to keep reminding myself I was not in the UK and I should just put up with it. Should I have? What good would speaking up do? The last thing I wanted was to be seen as being difficult and not a team player.

The creative process for the London Handover was an interesting one. It was obvious that a lot of money was spent in making the creative idea a reality. Bringing dancers together from CandoCo Dance Company, the Royal Opera House and Zonation was most certainly an adventurous and exciting idea, but how were these three styles of dance going to work together to create a cohesive work that would:

- Represent their style and show the high quality of their work and
- Fuse together these different disciplines to create one language and a common goal of representing the diversity of London and the UK to the best of our abilities.

It was decided that director and founder of Zonation was to be the choreographer for the London Handover. What an amazing job it was in bringing us all together, however

having the expertise in street dance - and little knowledge of contemporary and ballet techniques - didn't create much opportunity for fusion. I strongly believe that to have maximized the skills of all the artists involved so they were represented equally. We needed to have one choreographer who understood all three disciplines and dancers with and without a disability; or had an assistant choreographer for each style that fulfilled the vision of an overall choreographer and directions and ideas of the creative director.

I don't believe we fulfilled our second aim - achieving a cohesive language of fused dance styles - but rather we all become street dancers, whether that was the most popular style of dance or more pleasing to an audience I will leave the answer up to you. I know however that I felt under used and unsatisfied in representing my art form of contemporary dance and the country I live in to the best of my abilities.

On the other hand, what an amazing experience it was to perform at the Olympic stadium for both the Olympic



Above: Marc Brew and Li Yuan at rehabilitation hospital organised by LOCOG. All photos: Ben McMillan. www.benmcmillan.co.uk

and Paralympic Closing Ceremonies: the flashing cameras, waves of crowds and an energy that was explosive. The crowds went wild and were very receptive to our performance but maybe that was because we were so different to their disciplined and respectful nature. I remember clearly walking down the corridors under the stadium to get into our beginners position. All the Chinese performers were all in their straight lines, organised and looking immaculate and then there were we, the London crew, unable to walk in a single straight line and not always attentive to direction.

In between the Olympic and Paralympic performances I was fortunate to watch the opening ceremony of the Paralympic Games. It was beautiful but there were also reminders of some of the hardships that China has faced in the recent past. One section featured 12-year-old dancer Li Yuan who lost her leg in the Sichuan earthquake earlier that year but still has the dream of being a ballerina.

She took centre stage in a version of

Ravel's Bolero which saw her lifted high above the rest of the performers wearing a single red ballet shoe. I was inspired by this performance and felt I just had to meet this young girl and reassure her in achieving her dream to be a ballerina. I was very grateful that LOCOG kindly organised for me to meet with Li Yuan at a rehabilitation hospital in Beijing.

My background in dance is very similar to Li Yuan's, having started out as a ballet dancer before acquiring a disability I wanted to share my experience with her and let her know the possibilities that lay ahead - that despite having a disability she could still dance and has an exciting journey of discovery that lies ahead. One that will enable new possibilities with the exciting potential of developing her own movement vocabulary. She just needs to keep her mind open to opportunities, but having her debut performing at the opening ceremony of the Paralympic Games is a fantastic start and I am sure she will continue to go from strength to strength

On personal reflection after meeting with Li Yuan I realised that a big part of

what I do and why I continue trying to push boundaries and put myself in vulnerable situations is for the love of my art. I have the strong belief and hope that through my work as a disabled dancer, choreographer and teacher that it will make a change to preconceived ideas and traditional perceptions of what a dancer is and enable dancers such as Li Yuan to follow their dreams to dance. And it may just be an easier road to travel, with more doors open to possibilities. Diversity, I believe is the key to growth in the arts.

Being a part of the London Handover at the Olympic and Paralympic Games Closing Ceremonies has truly been a once in a lifetime experience. If I were so fortunate to be involved in London 2012 I would hope that London learns from the Beijing experience and has better support and equal opportunities for disabled artists to be involved in both the Olympics and Paralympics Cultural Olympiad both on and off the court.

visit www.marcbrew.com