

The dynamics of dance and disability

Sue Williams has worked in the arts and disability field for over two decades in a variety of roles and organisations. She currently juggles studying for a Masters in Illustration and working part-time as a Disability Services Co-ordinator. Here she considers diversity and disabled people's voices as part of the dance sector

'Dynamics' – 1) the branch of mechanics concerned with the motion of bodies under the action of forces. 2) the forces which stimulate development or change within a system or process.

It's a bit daunting wondering how to encapsulate where the dance and disability sector is right now, in a sense the answer to that question is multi-faceted and is dependent upon where you exist within the dance ecology, what kind of contribution you make (as part of an organisation, a choreographer, dancer, educator, participant or audience member) and what you aspire to achieve. How can you best frame those multiple contexts in order to portray a snapshot of where things are now?

Describing the dance and disability sector perhaps isn't that useful a way of understanding where we are, that would represent a snapshot in time and would just offer a map with no pointers to a trajectory for the future. Also I don't subscribe to the notion of a dance and disability sector. If disabled people are making dance, dancing, participating in dance and watching dance then they are part of the dance sector and the question becomes much more about where disabled people and disability sit within dance.

The notion of dynamics seemed to be a constructive starting point to explore the features and forces at play inherent within disability and dance in the present day. What factors are influencing the changes within practice, infrastructure and engagement?

The nature of working in equality is that you never feel like the job is finished (this is true), which can create the perception that things aren't advancing at the required pace; that equality, access and opportunities haven't been fully realised and that there is still much more work to be done to ensure that inclusion exists (which of course there is). Often the intensity of focus on changing the landscape can mean that we haven't recognised that every time we address an issue or inequality we in turn expose a new one – it's a cyclical process. Each time any kind of advancement is made a new inequality is revealed and with it a new set of immersive tasks and issues. This ever changing dynamic and context is exciting as it generates constant flux which allows creative energy to thrive, it is a positive force. But

in order to utilise its value there needs to be ongoing space for reflection and recognition in order to realign our achievements to new goals.

There are lots of shifts taking place, not just within dance and the arts but within wider society, which like it or not have a profound impact on disabled people's engagement and participation in dance. There are two elephants in this room, the first being arts funding in general. Arts Council England has been clear that the next investment round for National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) will see new approaches to funding organisations from both Grant in aid and Lottery funds. The second elephant has been growing larger over the last three years – the shakeup of the welfare system and major attacks on disabled people's benefits and the funding of other support systems. These two issues create an environment of uncertainty and insecurity. Will the organisations that nurture and support disabled people's engagement in dance still exist? If they do will disabled people have the necessary personal infrastructures to extend to participating in the frippery of dance? Or will disabled people consider, under the new benefits testing, that perhaps dancing might not be a seemly activity. Whilst there are no immediate solutions, these elephants hold a powerfully fragile dynamic within the realms of dance and disability.

What you want is also dependent on where you are. I learnt this lesson in Australia when speaking at a conference where I met a lot of disabled artists; some were working with the big arts institutions and had fantastic track records. What they didn't have was access to a political disability movement embedded in the arts. So whilst they were engaged in the so-called mainstream they were not part of a bigger disability discourse that could lever change. This made me reflect on the different outlook here (not everyone's I acknowledge), that being part of the mainstream is an aspiration, with the implication that disability arts-focused work is 'second class'. Valuing what we have is important, also recognising that context is everything especially as the global perspective becomes ever dominant and has an ever-increasing impact on collaborations, partnerships, opportunities and perspective.



Fusional Fragments with Evelyn Glennie and Marc Brew Company Dancers, Unlimited Commission. Photo: Irven Lewis

What is emerging here is a mixed economy, where disabled artists have more choice about how they work, the narratives they articulate, who they work with and the elements of their identity that they do or do not expose within their work. This came through clearly within the 2012 Unlimited dance commissions – the diverse perspectives, personal narratives, diverse aesthetic and language were evident. Disabled dancers choreographing non-disabled dancers – watching Marc Brew’s piece became evermore powerful as I became more conscious of how the dancers were relaying movements envisioned and channelled by him.

Focus equals output. Scotland is testament to this. The focus on disabled dancers, embedding disability into the creative lifeblood of organisations through the creative process, has been a shot of adrenalin not only for disability but also for the dance sector as a whole. Caroline Bowditch’s role as Dance Agent for Change at Scottish Dance Theatre has been pivotal in creating a new model for supporting the development of (disabled) dancers within a high profile organisation. The focus and delivery of the programme within the creative process was one of the many reasons it succeeded. Organisations that commit to address and explore the value of disability within their sphere, invariably achieve success. Picking up the baton for a short burst rarely yields significant results. Commitment, channelled effectively, is a powerful dynamic and may help to banish those elephants!

The Arts Council England’s publication, ‘What is the creative case for diversity?’ is perhaps one of the single most significant drivers for change. Shifting debates about diversity and equality in the arts from compliance and good business ethics to the value of diversity within creativity it seeks to reconfigure how work made by diverse artists contributes to and advances arts practice. How do the

different elements of diversity bring new narratives, fresh perspectives to dance practice?

Creativity seeks to explore diversity in its broadest perspective, not through the lens of single-issue perspective but through shared experience of difference and marginalisation. This approach is something that could be utilised for greater impact by disability organisations and practitioners. The starting point though is what do disabled people bring to dance? What would be lost if those voices were lost and what impact would that have on dance and its future?

The future is an uneasy mix of contradictions including some dark shadows and a couple of hefty elephants combined with a positive increase in the presence and profile of disabled people (as dancers and choreographers). It is important for us all to keep focused to ensure disabled people remain within the big vision but also to be flexible enough to understand some of the detail in order to be responsive, inclusive and accessible. We need to be able to construct a sector that can hold those contradictions and multiple perspectives but remain open to possibility. And not define disabled dancers but give them space to unfurl their own narratives, choreography and paths.

Ultimately it’s not about dance and disability as a subsector – it’s about how disabled people, organisations working with disabled people and disability led organisations are part of the dance sector, locally, regionally and globally.

However, dance is a unique and important space in relation to disability, it lays bare the body; it exposes the darkness and light of human experience. The visceral nature of its manifestation means that to move forward without a disability sensibility would be to lose a significant part of life lived.

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