

Kate Marsh.
Photo: Andrew Baxter



Finding your way

Following a visit to Hanoi, Vietnam, in 2013 dance artist **Kate Marsh** reflects on different perceptions of disability and dance in a place where the visibility of disabled people dancing is just beginning to emerge

After being in Hanoi, for five days I still hadn't found the nerve to cross the road; this is not all bad, the city is saturated with restaurants and street food vendors, many on the same block as my hotel. At some point however, I wanted to extend my exploring beyond this limiting circumference.

As accessibility goes Hanoi is a difficult place to negotiate. With uneven ground and streets that are beyond crowded, I got a sense that there is an innate skill to crossing these roads and navigating the crowds. Without knowing the rules, these journeys felt like a venture into unknown territory. Negotiating shared space is something that I explore regularly in my dance practice, considering how we can find a shared understanding that allows us to dance together on equal ground, whilst being true to our own journey. These early experiences of Hanoi made me wonder how the disabled dancers we were there to meet had adapted to life in this frenetic city.

As an associate artist of Candoco Dance Company I was asked to co-lead workshops and mentor two of Candoco's associate artists, Victoria Malin and Andrew Graham, during a three week tour of Vietnam taking in Hanoi and then Ho Chi Min City. This was part of a tour that ran throughout 2013, supported by the British Council, which included visits to Georgia, Armenia, Turkey, Croatia, Palestine and Jordan. The brief for the project was to introduce the Vietnamese group we were to be working with to Candoco's ethos and practices and to create a

'curtain raiser' to be performed by the participants, prior to the company performance at the Hanoi Opera House.

When we arrived at the venue we were met by a group of 12 participants who were disabled and non-disabled, and with a range of dance experience. None of the participants' disabilities meant they could not gain physical access to the dance studio, which was a good job too as on day one the lift was out of order!

Within the group there were four disabled participants. Given the scale of the project and the profile of the British Council in Vietnam this struck me as quite a low number. This combined with a lack of obvious presence of disability in the city led me to ask, where are the disabled people of Hanoi? Residency participants included users of the Will to Live (WTL) centre in Hanoi. The centre was formed in 2008 by Nguyen Cong Hung and is a facility for disabled people, primarily offering courses in information and communications technology.

Nga, a dancer in our group and regular user of the centre, described a collaboration between corporate information technology (IT) organisations and WTL whereby graduating students are offered employment or work experience. This relationship between productivity and validation seems prominent, with a value placed on being trained to participate in the workplaces of Vietnam. When I asked Nga about opportunities in dance for disabled people in Hanoi, she says these are

limited, adding that, prior to attending the dance residency, she felt that dance was not an option for her. She had never seen anyone with a disability working in dance.

As a dance artist with a disability I have encountered this perspective from disabled people in many contexts, a feeling that dance participation is for others and not accessible to them. Interestingly, this was supported by comments made by our Vietnamese hosts. When asked how the participants were selected, we were told that there were no specific criteria, however, that it was felt that the wheelchair users from the centre would not 'cope' with ten days of dance activity.

This imposed restriction is frustrating to us as experienced dance practitioners: the assumption that only the 'less disabled' people will benefit from or be able to engage with the residency. This led me to think about the ideas of leadership and disabled role models. If one lives in an environment with sparse representation of disabled people in dance or indeed leading positions generally, this would surely restrict the extent to which a person feels they can be part of an activity where they cannot see themselves represented in any way.

So, what is it that inspires us into dance? For me, a well-timed flyer for a Candoco workshop – for others a ballet, a show, or a street dance crew on Britain's Got Talent. Whatever it is, we do seem to look for our own reflection in dance or at least a reflection of what we are aspiring to be.



Candoco Dance Company, Choreographic Residency in Hanoi, Vietnam.
Above photo: © British Council Vietnam. Left photo taken by Kate Marsh

If aspiring disabled dancers in Vietnam do not have this reference, it makes sense that a totally new encounter would seem daunting. Add to this an emphasis on ‘employability’ without any evidence of viable career options in dance, the prospect of prioritising time and effort to follow this aspiration could feel fruitless.

Tsu, the coordinator of Life Art (a social enterprise set up to bring together artists and communities for creative social development) and participant says that, “disabled people have less opportunities to approach social and arts activities, because they are not confident enough and because other people think they can’t do it.” There is a suggestion here

that as much as the physical and psychological barriers that exist for disabled people in Vietnam hold them back they may also feel limited by societal perceptions of them as less able to participate in dance.

By the end of the residency Tsu told me that if it were to be repeated, she would feel confident to open up the opportunity to more people, adding that she felt the tasks would give access to everyone. Her views were supported by my observation of the residency, I have seen the transition from two ‘teams’ into a company of people working equally and learning from each other. I leave Hanoi hopeful that this will be just the start of their work and dancing together.

The choreographic residency in Vietnam is not the first time I have been reminded of the different perceptions of disability and dance around the world. It is a reminder to me that with progression in the sector, we should also have an eye towards other countries and cultures. As a disabled dance artist in the UK I am aware that when I undertake my work I do so with an assumption that, to a large extent, we all want similar things for disabled

people working or aspiring to work in dance: access to training, equality of opportunity and potential for longevity and development in the sector.

I am currently undertaking my own PhD research at Coventry University, focussed on exploring current discourse and perceptions relating to dance and disability, specifically on the development of leadership roles for disabled dance artists. My study sits within a larger research project, InVisible Difference; Dance, Disability and the Law (www.invisibledifference.org.uk), led by a collaborative research team from Coventry University and Exeter University drawing together experts from the field of dance and law.

My research, together with the project in Hanoi, has given me a unique opportunity in my practice to consider shifts and developments in the dance and disability sector, asking how can we inspire, work alongside and support continued inquiry from those just starting to address inclusivity in dance, and to not just settle for where we are now.

contact kate.marshdance@gmail.com
visit www.invisibledifference.org.uk