

# Just a dream?

We may struggle to answer prejudice with words, so let us do it through dance says **Maggie Hampton**, Strategic Director, Disability Arts Cymru, who asks us for a comprehensive approach to turning dodgy assumptions on their heads

**“You dance even though you’re deaf? Wow!** How do you manage to hear the music?” Before I’ve had a chance to draw breath and answer, the questioner’s face clears; “Oh, of course, you get the vibrations through the floor! That’s just amazing!” and with that, my dancing, never more than just-all-right, is elevated to the status of near-miraculous and another assumption is made, along with the many, many misunderstandings around deaf people and disabled people and dance.

I have always loved to dance and as a small girl, nursed ambitions to be a ballet dancer and wear floaty dresses and dance on my toes. Either that or work on a farm. Neither of those dreams came true, but a circuitous career path spread across 30 years involving theatre in education, disability arts and loads of fun, led me to become an arts manager. For the last 20 years I have worked for Disability Arts Cymru (DAC) in Cardiff, where I am now the Strategic Director.

At DAC we work across all artforms with the aim of creating opportunities for disabled people and deaf people in Wales to have equal access to the arts and to be proactive in the arts if that is their choice. Whilst DAC is not a dance company, we have a long history of working with dance organisations in Wales with the aim of achieving greater inclusion and better access for disabled people who want to dance.

We also work with disabled dancers themselves. This may mean advising dancers on a range of practical issues, or pointing someone towards a particular company or event that has opportunities relevant to that individual. We also sometimes have opportunities within our own projects for disabled dancers and we are proud to promote dance by disabled people whenever the opportunity arises.

However, it is still not easy to find disabled dancers in leadership roles and I think this situation is pretty much the same in Wales as in the rest of the UK. There are rare, talented individuals who shine through, but even they meet barrier after barrier. A lot depends upon the individual’s circumstances; someone disabled from birth or from a very young age is unlikely to have been encouraged to consider dance as a career. Because ‘disabled people don’t, do they?’ And even if a child’s family is supportive, where are the tutors who know how to work with disabled dancers? Where are the training opportunities? There may be a few initiatives for the lucky ones, but these are hard to find.

There are dance leaders, or aspiring leaders, in Wales who

have become disabled later in life and who are trying to push the boundaries, but they too can meet with problems; for example, venues that do not want to take the risk of booking something different because ‘our audiences wouldn’t like it’. Hard times can bring back conservatism.

There are probably more opportunities for learning-disabled dancers than for dancers with other disabilities in Wales. This may be partly due to the fact that learning-disabled people’s lives are more highly organised; they are more likely to be taken to classes. Also being generally more mobile than other disabled people, learning-disabled dancers probably present less of a ‘challenge’ to dance teachers. A dancer with a mobility impairment has to be highly determined and motivated to get anywhere near to ‘leadership’ status. I can think of one or two individuals in Wales who are developing innovative dance work, but the opportunities only go so far and the barriers are many. There really is no established career development path as yet.

There have been initiatives within the dance community in Wales to provide placements and appropriate support for disabled dancers. There are plans for this work to develop more comprehensively, but this depends upon funding. In Cardiff every summer the Unity Festival provides a vibrant platform for disability related performance and dance is very much part of the programme. In 2013 Rubicon Dance and Artis Community ran a one-day event at the Unity Festival, Wales Millennium centre, where learning-disabled dancers could discuss their work, take part in workshops and perform at a showcase. This was a great start for those who are aiming to be leaders in their field and I hope this work will grow.

Leila Bebb (pictured on cover) is one of Disability Arts Cymru’s actors, a young woman with learning difficulties who is a very keen dancer. DAC and the dance community in Wales have supported Leila in finding opportunities to develop and perform, and she is now setting up her own dance group in Cardiff. It is so important that disabled dancers find their way into leadership roles; we are too often told ‘No, you can’t do that’ based on faulty assumptions that dismiss disabled people out of hand.

Until properly structured career development programmes are in place for disabled dancers, we will always struggle. We need a comprehensive approach; dance programmes with disabled children in and out of schools, opportunities for pre-school children; training for teachers and dance

Leila Bebb, Disability Arts Cymru's  
Unusual Stage School, Birds dress  
rehearsal, Sherman Cymru.  
Photo: Phil Cope



leaders; greater support for those who are successfully developing their careers (much needed as role models); initiatives to platform disabled dancers' work.

Everyone must recognise that disabled dancers may have specific access needs; for example communication support, transport, accessible accommodation or the need for a support worker. It is essential to look at how this support is identified and provided; these are the basics, often sadly neglected, but without the access in place many disabled dancers will simply not be able to train or work or participate. All of this not only needs healthy injections of funding, but also the will of the dance community and the wider arts community. It will not happen overnight and we must recognise that there is a good deal of work ahead if change is to happen.

Why the need for disabled dance leaders then? The answer may be obvious to those of us who are disabled or who work with disabled people. The words roll off the tongue pretty easily; equality of choice, diversity, level playing field, positive role models and so on. But others might (and do) question why disabled people would want to join a profession which is notoriously focussed upon fitness and body image. They may draw the conclusion that it is better to leave dance to the super fit with 'bodies beautiful'.

We are back to those dodgy assumptions again and it is time to turn them on their heads. We may struggle to answer prejudice with words, so let us do it through dance. We can challenge, assert, communicate through dance and it does not matter what exams we passed or failed in school. It does not matter that we speak, hear, see or move in ways other than the traditional 'norm'. As for the 'beautiful bodies', different can be, and is, beautiful too.

In November I went to see a fabulous performance of *Stuck in the Mud*, a partnership between GDance, Ballet Cymru and the National Trust. Choreographed by Marc Brew, a company of disabled and non-disabled dancers performed in the old Newport Market. The dancers' communication with each other, with the musicians, the location and the audience worked like a dream. Forget 'awareness raising'; this was enjoyable and beautiful to watch, and the disabled dancers added to the performance; only they could have moved and danced in the way that they did. Disabled dancers have something unique to bring to dance, and we should treasure and nurture that creativity.

We are fortunate that the Arts Council of Wales provides

revenue funding to DAC, led by disabled people and the only organisation of its kind in Wales. DAC acts as an agency, supporting individual disabled artists across all artforms and working with arts organisations in partnership and in an advisory capacity. DAC is ideally placed to work with Welsh dance organisations on disability issues as we have an all-Wales remit. There used to be several such agencies in England (Disability Arts Forums) but the majority have now lost their funding.

There are good networks in the arts in Wales; we have a history of finding creative ways to work in partnership and support each other. The dance networks in Wales are currently discussing ways forward, looking at what we can do together to improve the situation. One of the advantages that we have in Wales is that we are a small country with a strong cultural identity; this is recognised by the Welsh Government which funds the Arts Council of Wales and although there have been cuts in funding, they have perhaps not been so drastic as those in England. But we will see what the future brings. Of course the arts here are facing huge funding challenges as they are across the rest of the UK, but we still can, we must, work towards greater equality in dance leadership.

Although the only dancing I do nowadays is bopping with the grandchildren I am thrilled to bits to be part of DAC and linked with the dance network in Wales. Together we have the opportunity to make a difference and, despite the very difficult times we are all experiencing, we must look forward with confidence.

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