

Making an entrance into higher education

Adam Benjamin, lecturer at Plymouth University and author of the seminal text *Making an Entrance*, explains that access to higher education is key to supporting the next generation of disabled dance artists



Kevin French and Plymouth University students in performance. Photo: John Sanders ARPS

In 1991, Celeste Dandeker and I were faced with convincing the dance world that an integrated company like Candoco might have a place within the mainstream of British dance. It was an opinion regarded

in some quarters as an overly ambitious dream, and by others as an impossibility, pure and simple. There were, however, visionary people along the way who not only believed in us, but supported and encouraged us. People like the indomitable Shannie Ross, whose fundraising gave rise to the ASPIRE rehabilitation centre in North London where we first trialled our ideas, Theresa Beattie, an endless source of guidance and advice, our administrators, the late Inga Jones, Dawn Prentice and the many dancers and dance students, disabled and non-disabled, who gave their time and creativity to the infant company.

It was in 2002 that Routledge published *Making an Entrance, Theory and Practice for Disabled and Non-disabled Dancers*. *Making an Entrance* marked a decade of professional integrated dance, its title acknowledged that the obstacles to progress were not only ethical or aesthetic but equally, architectural. While Candoco's success had shaken us free of the restrictive notions of what dance might be, it was far less easy to dance our way through buildings that physically prohibited the involvement of disabled people; when we started our journey, this included just about every building used for dance training in the UK.

In the early 1990s, very few theatres were accessible, ramps were improvised and doors widened just to get the company on stage. I must have been one of the few artistic directors whose dance kit included screwdrivers and power drills. Only a handful of theatres had more than a couple of places in their auditoriums reserved for wheelchair users and most had to take out special licenses to accommodate the disabled audiences who came to see the company. For many theatres, it was the first time that disabled people in any number

had ever entered their premises. In the following decade increasing attention was given to the access, or rather lack of access, within mainstream education for disabled students to study dance.

This conversation started with the Access and Excellence conferences in the early 1990s where a handful of dance makers (Viv Freakley, Jo Butterworth, Alysoun Tompkins, Sarah Whatley and Louise Katerega) began to discuss the training needs of disabled performers.

Many people and companies have been instrumental in raising the profile of disabled people in dance since then; Stopgap Dance Company, Kiki Gale and Tardis, Jo Parkes, Clare Connor, Janet Smith, the list goes on and on. The many companies now working in the UK and beyond have proven that Candoco was not the exception to the rule but a new rule by which to measure progress. The last decade has seen an explosion in dance works (and dance conferences) led by disabled artists, such as Caroline Bowditch, Claire Cunningham and Marc Brew.

Although the voices of disabled artists have become far more evident within the field, the numbers of young disabled students applying for courses remains low. This is a reflection of the lack of real opportunities to train combined with a lack of access and, crucially, a lack of encouragement or information amongst schools career advisors and sparse information getting out to the parents of disabled youngsters.

In 2008, I was invited by Ruth Way, Head of Theatre and Performance at Plymouth University, to contribute to the creation of a new dance degree. It would be fair to say that, despite an excellent reputation for widening participation, the university had had no real insight into the needs of wheelchair users when it had created the building in which the performing arts were housed. With support from Benjamin Dunks, Nix Rosewarne and Jonny Cressey, I made a short film about access in the new building,

which was then presented in a variety of creative ways to committees across the university. By this time, I had enticed Tim Hardy (who had been production manager at The Place) to join us in Plymouth with the fanciful idea of building a new theatre or, more accurately, reviving a dream that had run aground. We received staunch (and patient) support from the Dean of the faculty of Arts and Humanities and then from the Vice Chancellor who came to see our first integrated student performance, which included disabled student Kevin French.

"Nothing really prepared me for the shift I experienced in being part of the audience invited to view the work of disabled and non-disabled students working together. I remember being utterly absorbed by the piece and aware of the physicality of the performers in their movement and stillness – and at the same time being both aware and unaware of their disabilities. Their form, actual and assumed, was fundamental to the dance and the way their bodies moved in harmony showed a dependency one with another built on trust and respect for the person irrespective of physical and/or mental challenges. I understood at a deep level the criticality of the academic work of dance and performance with wider societal messages about inclusivity and equity. This personal experience was critical to underpinning my drive to ensure we championed The House as a key project that expressed our confidence in social inclusion for all across all disciplines." Wendy Purcell, Vice-Chancellor, Plymouth University (2007-2015)

Tim Hardy continued to work tirelessly with architects and builders, the end result being an award winning dance/theatre space in the centre of the city. The House opened in September 2014. The journey from the street, to the ticket office, the bar, the changing rooms, the auditorium or the stage itself all accessible without mounting a single step. Our first dance season hosted three integrated companies; Stopgap, Epic >>



Kevin French, *The House*, Plymouth. Photo: Adam Benjamin

Arts (Cambodia) and Exim – a local graduate company directed by Claire Summers, which includes graduate Kevin French – along with a veritable feast of other works, including Wendy Houstoun, Headspace and Russell Maliphant. Next year we will welcome, amongst others, Candoco Dance Company and Caroline Bowditch.

The architectural imperative, implicit in the title of *Making an Entrance*, has been attended to. Integrated work in the city flourishes under the watchful eye of June Gamble, Director of Plymouth Dance, and this summer will see *U.Dance 2015*

taking up residence in the city with an emphasis on integrated work.

It is my profound hope that more disabled students will apply to the dance and theatre courses at Plymouth, to train alongside their non-disabled peers in an environment that will support both.

So if you are reading this and are harbouring an impossible dream (or know someone who is), now is the time to make it a reality. It feels once again that we are at the beginning of an adventure; it is time for the next generation to make an entrance, the door, and *The House*, is now open.

Info

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