

Good, bad but never indifferent

In the midst of Edinburgh Festival madness, arts writer **Donald Hutera** listened in as the disabled arts community tried to answer the question – if not now, when?



Laura Jones, David Wildridge, Chris Pavia, Amy Butler and David Toole – Stopgap Dance Company, Artificial Things. Photo: Chris Parkes

Edinburgh in August 2015 was, per usual, a gigantic buffet of art and performance. The Fringe Festival alone comprised more than three thousand separate shows – some the equivalent of light snacks, others akin to three-course meals.

Out Of The Blue Drill Hall, where the conference iF Not Now, When? occurred, was spacious, bright, noisy and oppressively warm – like a sauna or slow-cooking oven. Sprinkled with savoury ideas, the event was billed by its organisers Stopgap Dance Company, in association with Unlimited, Forest Fringe, The Point (Eastleigh) and Colchester Arts Centre, as ‘a day of provocations and presentations’. Chaired by Unlimited’s Senior Producer Jo Verrent, the conference derived part of its title from iF or integrated Fringe, a showcase for UK-based disabled artists and integrated arts presented by Stopgap and overseen by Creative Producer Strategic Touring, Lou Rogers.

Funded through ACE, D’oily Carte Charitable Trust and a few private donations, iF was a new and bespoke platform supported the British Council and Unlimited with the intent of achieving a joined-up approach to enhanced visibility in Edinburgh. Their efforts appeared to be effective, what with thirty or so productions featured in the British Council and Made in Scotland showcases alongside the five artists or companies – Jo Bannon, Marc Brew Co, Touretteshero, Stopgap and Rowan James – chosen for iF from a total of 72 applications. This ambitious and highly diverse body of work was presented at various high-profile venues around town, such as Dance Base, where I saw Claire Cunningham’s Give Me a Reason to Live and Zoo Southside, where I caught Marc Brew’s For Now, I Am... All of it seems to have been selected, as British Council Officer Carole McFadden put it, on the basis of what would “stand up in an international context” while also challenging and expanding notions of what dance and theatre are and can do.

As for the conference, how to summarise the sessions I was able to attend at the conference? Both were predicated on giving voice to ideas that doubtless led from a pair of earlier sessions, one of which dealt with the issue of labels and, specifically, whether they should be used or refused. It’s worth considering this within the context of Cunningham and Brew’s 40-minute solos, both of which were ‘about’ disability itself: hers, in part, a pared-down response to the depiction of the human body in the paintings of Heironymous Bosch, and his a highly visual expression of the psychological, physical and personal impact of a 1997 car accident. Neither solo placed a performer who ‘just happened’ to be disabled in the spotlight. Disability was anything but incidental here as each work focused on who its maker is, and how their individual bodies are perceived by themselves and others.

But does what Brew and Cunningham do need to be identified as disability art(s)? This question feeds retrospectively into a conference discussion entitled When Is ‘Good’ Good Enough, and whether the work of inclusive companies and disabled artists be seen simply as art rather than as a sub-genre? The responses were varied and interestingly digressive. Artsadmin’s Judith Knight was pro-label “if it gives people [programmers and presenters, that is] confidence to book work”. Sarah Holmes, Chief Executive of New Wolsey Theatre, Ipswich, suggested not advertising work as ‘disabled’ at all. “Let it sneak up on them,” she said, referring to the public. But this stance was countered by someone remarking that there’s no need to be embarrassed by a disability arts label.

Labels are one thing and qualifiers another. Who determines what’s ‘good’ or ‘bad’ art, and what do artists do with the results? One way round it all could be to let go of the need to predetermine value. Although independent artist Jo Bannon wants her work to be judged as art, she finds such considerations exhausting. As she

explained, “I try to make good art but actively try not to think about that. If I try to make it good, it can’t be.” Her attitude arises from a feeling that the tag ‘good art’ means that “in some way you have to prove your worth, or start thinking ‘Is this good?’ as you create”. In short, it’s well-nigh impossible for artists to know in advance if what they’re doing is ‘good’ or ‘bad’. They just need to make the best work they can and try to make sure it’s seen and, with any luck, understood.

Amit Sharma directed Graeae Theatre Company and Theatre Royal Plymouth’s well-received Fringe co-production The Solid Life of Sugar Water. “Do artists have the right to fail, or to experiment?” he wondered, and then proceeded to answer his own query: “A lot depends on equal opportunity in terms of training and education.” Perhaps it’s only from a parity of opportunities for both disabled and non-disabled artists that the fruits of their creative labour might even begin to be judged fairly.

Judgment, of course, is fraught with peril. According to Forest Fringe co-founder Andy Field, the cultural mainstream ought to be pilloried for its “crude and contrived” means of evaluating artistic product. One of his chief targets is the media’s infamous and seemingly inescapable ratings system. As Field opined, “There’s nothing that creates a more artificial sense of value than star ratings.” And yet I know first-hand that this is exactly what many artists and companies (and not just those devoted to press and marketing) are chasing, especially during an enormous and costly festival where shows are unavoidably competing with each other to capture attention and secure the kinds of endorsements that will enable them to have a vibrant future.

“Art is the name we give to all things that bind us together,” Field also said, balancing a later statement about theatre being “a dying artform”. Maybe Field meant traditional or conventional theatre, because from my perspective, live performance – in the UK, at any >>

Disabled people

rate – seems to be thriving. As Verrent pointed out, the live art genre has been an especially valuable outlet for disabled creators because of its less rigid definition of expressive forms and ways of responding to them.

Perhaps, as panel member Aaron Williamson remarked, the collective task of disabled artists is to “invent a new aesthetic and the parameters for it”. But at some level don’t new aesthetics still require audience engagement? Conference dialogue inevitably came back to this topic. Colin Hambrook of Disability Arts Online sang the praises of SICK! Festival. Launched in 2013, SICK! is “dedicated to exploring the medical, mental and social challenges of life and death and how we survive them (or don’t)”. In a short time, SICK!, said Hambrook, “has built an exciting brand because it’s about real, nitty-gritty



Jess Thom and Jess Mabel Jones – Touretteshero, Backstage in Biscuit Land. Photo: Jonathan Birch

“Organise, educate, agitate. Take the fight forward and champion every opportunity. You have to keep banging away even when no one’s listening. We will get there in the end because it’s only right and fair.”

issues and how we cope with being human beings. Audiences want to see stuff about being alive.” In this regard, as Verrent indicated, 80% of spectators at the work of disabled artists are themselves non-disabled. But, she noted, “As soon as the word ‘disabled’ comes into it there’s a perception of lower quality. And yet the quality of the work being produced has been good for a while now. We have to keep getting the word out about that.”

Often it’s a matter of ensuring that the word is heard and, if necessary, re-heard by the cultural gatekeepers because, as Verrent put it, “If you can’t get in, you can’t be part of the party”. Stopgap producer Sho Shibata suggested “informing colleagues about what you’re doing and getting them on board. You can change the landscape in the long run, but you need to know what narrative you’re going to

tell someone and what message will change their perspective.”

Anthony Roberts, Director of Colchester Arts, elaborated on this with good-humoured militancy. Having presented work at the Fringe, he’s experienced directly the difficulties disabled artists and their advocates can encounter, often at the most practical levels, in order to get work seen. “Turn the heat up,” Roberts advised those involved in disabled or integrated arts in any context. “Organise, educate, agitate. Take the fight forward and champion every opportunity. You have to keep banging away even when no one’s listening. We will get there in the end because it’s only right and fair.”

Education and visibility go hand-in-hand. As Deaf actress Caroline Parker said, “Look at the word access. It’s not just buildings. It’s about educating

people who are outside of our society. They don’t know who we are.” It would seem, then, that among the best ways forward is to continue opening up buildings and minds. There’s still much to be done. A recently graduated dance student attending the conference said she’d not been given any opportunity to work with disabled artists during several years of training, or anyone who didn’t conform to standard shapes and sizes. What’s wrong with this picture?

“I’m not a political activist,” said Caroline Bowditch. Nevertheless as a high-profile, Scotland-based disabled artist she’s developed ways of “gently but firmly” asserting her presence in the cultural mainstream and instigating change. Partly, it’s a case of Bowditch repeatedly asking, “Why is it like this? Remind me.” As she summed, “You succeed far more by being a trip hazard, but also by becoming part of ‘us’ rather than ‘them’.”

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