

inspired by the photos and their experience of living with PD and MS.

My work at CI was an eye opener. The wonderful, selfless staff were rushed off their feet but never showed any stress. Their care for patients came from the deepest place but the relationship between staff and patients carried the traditional hierarchy where 'the Doctor is always right'. I, in contrast, came in as neither a patient nor medic – I was a visitor of sorts – and could provide an opportunity for them to find a place to fit in on the sterile ward. Strangers became companions who would hold hands when dancing together; a gentle squeeze in silent recognition of 'you're okay, you're not alone'.

On the neuro ward where language for some was affected by a brain injury, stories in response to images, such as a bird swooping over the fells or a hike up Scafell Pike, were told vividly through eyes, facial expression and gesture, and then, with gentle encouragement, through the body. All patients had a voice that could be fed into the collection of moving stories. Over the weeks, I let each group know of the other sessions taking place and used ideas from one to inform another.

During the project, I have met artists who have struggled to start dance projects in hospitals or get support from community healthcare to signpost people to groups. I feel enormously fortunate to have come across extraordinarily generous, open-minded physiotherapists and OT's in Cumbria, but we cannot rely on the keen OT or physio who 'used to dance as a teenager and loved it'. The work needs to be seen as an integral part of supporting people living with an illness and of their recovery. As a sector we need to pull together to ensure the work of dedicated dance artists is not lost within the mechanics of healthcare structures, especially in rural settings where the dance infrastructure is not as well established. We may feel like a square peg in a round hole, but that is also the beauty of our work: we will find a way to fit in that does not push and shove, but happens through connecting with others.

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Breakdance and visual impairment

Breakdance and visual impairment seemed like an unlikely link to Artistic Director **Nathan Geering** until he decided to learn more about the experiences of visually impaired theatre audiences and practitioners. In this article, Nathan shares how this journey of discovery provided new perspectives, unlocked creative possibilities and motivated him to create more accessible experiences for people in the arts

With over two million people in the UK living with sight loss (that's one in 30 people), the chances are that over the course of your life you will either know somebody who is visually impaired or perhaps become visually impaired yourself. But how many of us are actually emotionally prepared for this? We can all become visually impaired at any time due to a variety of factors such as illness, being involved in accidents or by simply getting older. In some cases people become visually impaired overnight. I was once asked the question, "What if you were to wake up tomorrow and you weren't able to see your four year old daughter again?" I was not emotionally prepared for that possibility. It was this that motivated

me to find out more about visual impairment.

I got in touch with the Partially Sighted Society of Doncaster and began working with visually impaired Director Andrew Loretto with the aim of exploring aspects of accessibility in breakdance. Andrew and I had worked closely at Sheffield Theatres and CAST in Doncaster – he was a great mentor who encouraged my honesty about, and inquiry into, visual impairment. Andrew then suggested inviting internationally acclaimed playwright Kaite O'Reilly to work on the project too and after many emails back and forth between us, she could feel my interest in the work was genuine and we developed a strong mutual respect. This solidified when Andrew >>



Photo: Leigh Redhead

and Kaite worked on a residency with my company, Rationale. It was during this residency that Andrew identified that we weren't just investigating visual impairment but different ways of seeing the world.

Whilst talking to Kaite, who is an advocate for many disability arts organisations across the world, I discovered that there are very few visually impaired breakdancers. This struck a cord with me – I knew that international disabled breakdance theatre company ILL-Abilities has no visually impairment members – and I felt there was a gap here that needed addressing. Both Andrew and Kaite also said that many people with visual impairment can find audio description boring and this inspired me to find out if there were elements of Hip Hop that could be used to make audio description more accessible and enjoyable.

I approached other local visual impairment organisations, such as Sheffield Royal Society for the Blind and the Visual Impairment department in Rotherham council, to deepen my understanding. I learnt that some people with visual impairment don't go to the theatre as they find performances quite inaccessible; it can be hard to see the performers' movements clearly enough and to differentiate between characters on stage.

The first part of our research took the form of interviews and focus groups, and aimed to find out what types of movement are most accessible to people with visual impairment. We discovered that, generally speaking, movements needed to be very dynamic as intricate movements are difficult to detect. Also, a lot of people with visual impairment tend to see things better when they look down towards the floor. This sparked my curiosity as breakdancing (b-boying) is extremely dynamic and much of the movement happens down at ground level. I wondered if breakdance could help enhance accessibility for people with visual impairment when going to the theatre.

This was something that I spent the next two years exploring with Rationale. With the support of ADAD (now part of One Dance UK), who

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made me one of their Trailblazers, I was able to conduct research into the visual accessibility of three different dance forms: ballet, contemporary and breakdance. People with visual impairment watched these different dance styles – without musical accompaniment, which could have influenced their experience – and then answered specific questions about the visibility of each dance form they had just watched. The participants' answers revealed breakdance to be the most visible of the three dance forms.

We are now in the process of taking the research a step further and have partnered with Dr Aneurin Kennerley, a Neuro-scientist from the University of Sheffield, who wants to better understand brain activity when people with visual impairment watch breakdance, ballet and contemporary dance. We hope the results of this research will help to shape accessibility for visually impaired theatre audiences and inform character development within physical theatre.

In my latest theatrical production, entitled *Sight Specific*, the choreography is focused on the most visible dance movements identified in the research (e.g. the dynamic power moves and freezes). We also

invented a form of audio description utilising the skills of a beatboxer to provide a richer soundscape to help stimulate visually impaired audiences' imaginations. We have named this the Rationale Method of Audio Description. To complement this, I am currently working on a new form of notation, similar to Labanotation, which has specific sound effects matched to certain movements to ensure the highest level of accuracy is achieved when we audio describe our shows. This method of audio description is intended to be made available for any professional theatre company to benefit from and eventually we intend to offer it for use in mainstream television and film productions.

Breakdance is potentially a valuable life skill for people with visual impairment as it can greatly improve spatial awareness and act as a form of injury prevention; breakdance is a form that specialises in 'falling with style'.

In November 2015, I worked with a visually impaired group in Rotherham. Within two sessions participants were doing handstands and some were even doing front somersaults into foam pits! By the end of the 12-week course, all participants exhibited heightened confidence as well as improved spatial awareness and body coordination. Some of the participants have now joined mainstream breakdance sessions and are fully included alongside the sighted dancers.

It is extremely important to me and my company to find ways of bridging the gap between sighted and visually impaired artists and audiences.



Photo: Leigh Redhead

Photo: Foteini Christofilopoulou



Having an understanding of visual impairment has enhanced our lives in ways we could have never imagined and we strongly feel that non-disabled artists and audiences could benefit from it too. This puts an interesting slant on things as people often think about how a non-disabled person can help a disabled person. Our approach flipped that way of thinking by introducing sighted artists to new ways of exploring creativity. This is achieved by raising awareness with sighted artists by utilising a unique method known as The Rationale Method of Creativity whereby artists wear special Sim Specs that simulate experiences of different types of visual impairment. The aim of this is not to focus on the challenges that might be associated with sight loss but rather to show people the beauty that can be found within visual impairment. During a master-class, the artists are invited to question what it truly means to see. They are taken through a series of tasks and exercises, and are encouraged to explore different types of visual impairment as creative starting points, thus offering new possibilities for creativity that are often overlooked. As artists we are often visually led when creating work, which could mean that our creativity will only go so far if we rely heavily on our full field of vision. The Rationale Method unlocks new possibilities by altering not only our vision but our perceptions of ourselves and the world, and has been explored by professional dancers, actors, painters and writers throughout the country. It has also been used to enhance productivity within businesses as it offers a technique for directors, managers and team members to utilise different view points/ perspectives in highly productive ways.

Taking a genuine interest in visual impairment has not only changed my approach in how I view and make art but, more importantly, has helped me become a better human being. I believe that visual impairment is more than a disability...it is a unique and valid way to see the world.

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