



Caroline Bowditch (right). Photo: Matthew Andrews www.matthewandrews.co.uk

What am I leaving in my wake?

Caroline Bowditch is a performance artist and choreographer, and between 2005-18 a Trustee of People Dancing. She is leaving the UK to take up the role of Executive Director at Arts Access Victoria. Surrounded by boxes, and in preparation for her return to Australia, she pauses for a moment to reflect on the last 16 years and what an adventure it's been

When I moved to the UK, in 2002, I knew no-one but the person I was going to marry and one friend in Cambridge. I am now leaving with a whole new family, made up of dear friends, an incredible network of colleagues and allies across the world and a whole cargo ship full of memories and knowledge I could never have imagined.

If I'd said to my 16-year-old self, one day you're going to move to the other side of the world, away from everyone and everything you know and love; you're going to have a successful career in dance, performing and teaching tens of thousands of people all over the world and you're going to influence the landscape of the arts industry in the UK, and further afield,

I would never have believed it.

Thinking about my time in the UK, there are two metaphors that emerge: one is about mosquitoes, the other is about dandelions. The mosquito metaphor emerged for me in 2010 when I learnt the African proverb (also attributed to the Dalai Lama and Anita Roddick) that states, 'If you think you're too small to make a difference, try sleeping with a mosquito in the room'. This spoke to me because it felt like I was being a similar irritant within the arts industry. I regularly asked questions of individuals and organisations about the ways they were or weren't being inclusive or accessible. I regularly received a response, asked some questions, left them to carry on and

then returned to ask again. I started to describe myself as a mosquito buzzing in the ear of the arts industry.

We all probably have a memory of blowing a dandelion clock as a child. Watching its tiny umbrellas being carried on the wind knowing that wherever they landed a new dandelion would grow (I only learnt this later in life. As a really young person I just imagined that I was sending umbrellas to the fairies).

From 2008-2012 I was lucky enough to have the role as Scottish Dance Theatre's (SDT) Dance Agent for Change. While there I performed and toured with the company, co-choreographed three pieces, taught as part of the Creative Learning team, supported the development and

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embedding of several policies around inclusion and access, and facilitated disability equality training for all SDT and Dundee Rep Theatre staff, where SDT is based.

It was Janet Smith, Artistic Director at the time, who was instrumental in this role coming into being. Janet and I both left SDT within months of each other to move on to other things. Of the 22 staff that were there when we were only four remain at SDT. The rest are scattered around the world. As so regularly happens, much of the work and development we did at SDT has perhaps not been as embedded as we hoped but I've been reminded recently that each one of those 18 people that left, carries with them the skills and principles we developed while working together. Ex-SDT dancers are leading the way in ensuring that work they are involved in now has integrated sign language and/or audio description, others are ensuring that marketing produced by their organisation is accessible and inclusive and the dancers that are teaching aren't terrified or worried if a wheelchair user turns up for their class; they just have a dialogue with the person and get on with it.

So, what have I learnt?

- That the best way to bring about change is to position yourself/a disabled person, 'within an organisation'. Be present - become a 'trip hazard'. The only way they will stop considering any diverse group as something that needs to be 'serviced' is to employ us and realise that we are just as regular as them
- That change takes time. I discovered that it takes at least 18 months for any new thinking or behaviour to change within an individual
- You never know the impact you're having on someone just by being there, often in the places you're least expected
- We need to 'practice access'. It was to become just part of what we do rather than an add-on or after thought - it has to be habitual, embedded and thought of from the outset
- We need to be in those board rooms, at those tables, on the stages and screens (large and small). We need to not be a mythological or



Caroline Bowditch, *Falling in Love with Frida*. Photo: Anthony Hopwood.

anthropological group that you talk about under the heading of 'access' once a week but real people that are your friends, colleagues, lovers, students, teachers and leaders.

In a skill share session I led recently

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for *Imagine*, as part of my 'Weren't you expecting me?' project, one of the artists encouraged me to write a plan for the future, a list of the things I'd like to see happen, a Manifesto of sorts. Below is an outline of the world I want to live in. I'm leaving it as a bit of a parting gift.

I want to live in a world where:

- Every disabled child receives their creative entitlement
- Children have a chance to see bodies like theirs on stage and screen
- Work made for young people, from babies to teenagers, is seen as valued and valuable
- We employ positive action until we redress the massive imbalance that currently exists
- Young disabled people can receive the education they are entitled to that pushes them and allows them to thrive from nursery to PhD
- Where the 'value added' that disabled people bring is acknowledged rather than using a deficient model

- People are aware and acknowledge their unconscious bias towards people outside of their 'inner circle'
- The innovation, lateral thinking and organisational skills utilised and generated by disabled people is acknowledged
- I can be spontaneous and have just as much choice as everybody else
- I can take risks - artistically and in general
- Everyone feels valued and valuable
- We're more interested in what makes us individual than the same
- I can Google disabled leaders and not be faced with a barrage of inspiration 'porn'
- We talk about access not a diagnosis
- Access is viewed as an artistic opportunity not an after thought
- I make art.

Thank you to all of those who have been part of my incredible journey. Thank you for sharing your wisdom and reflections, for being brave and questioning the status quo, yourselves and me, and in your own way beginning to create a more equal world.

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