



Laura Jones with Chris Pavia leading at People Dancing Summer School 2019. Photo: Rachel Cherry



Laura Jones, Stopgap Dance Company. Photo: Chris Parkes

Constant trailblazers?

Laura Jones is a fierce advocate for disabled people in dance, working across the UK and internationally. Since joining Stopgap in 2001 Laura has been integral to the growth and direction of the company. Here, she invites us to look at what's changed in her world since then through the lenses of art, disability, expectations, worthiness and responsibility

I have been dancing professionally for 18 years. During that time, I have worked primarily with Stopgap Dance Company as well as other freelance work - from the Paralympics to the CBeebies Nutcracker panto. At the start of my career I had a crazy, naive dream:

Wouldn't it be great if the need for companies like Stopgap, who specifically work with dancers with and without disabilities, was obsolete in 10 years' time - because all dance companies welcome and value dancers of diverse physicality and learning styles. And that the dance sector as a whole would embrace diversity.

I knew in reality 10 years was a pretty unrealistic hope, but as we're approaching 20 years on, has anything changed? And if not - whose responsibility is it to have affected that change and what needs to happen for it to take place?

Lets look at where are we now

Things have improved. Actual physical access to theatres has improved.

Although backstage areas have taken longer than front of house, there was a time when as a wheelchair user you could watch a performance, but not necessarily get on the stage yourself. I've lost count of the number of times over the years that I've had to change in the (usually very cold and dark) scene dock because the dressing rooms were not accessible. But that is becoming a far less regular event as access improves.

Technique is no longer a dirty word. At the start of my career, I had many heated discussions about the importance of technique for all dancers, including disabled dancers. Sure,

technique can be a daunting word, but it's not necessarily inaccessible. It just takes some rethinking - of what the purpose of the technique is and finding bespoke ways to make it work. I wanted to be the best that I could be and I would never be able to get there if I only improvised and stayed within my comfort zone. Rigour is an important part of training, and can work alongside inclusion.

There are, I'm pleased to say, more opportunities for disabled dancers. I've been lucky enough to have some amazing opportunities I could never even have dreamt of back in 2001 when I joined Stopgap, let alone as a non-disabled child, before my spinal injury, dreaming of a career as a dancer. However, I've heard of worried parents not wanting to encourage their children to take dance to seriously, as they fear there are not enough opportunities out there for aspiring disabled dancers.

In fact, the inclusive dance world is crying out for more disabled dancers - if only the training was available. Whilst the professional dance scene has opened up, the training institutions are still lagging behind. Because of this shortage of accessible training, sometimes a disabled dancer is put on stage, in a professional setting, when they are not ready for it. This can end up having a potentially negative effect. You would not do that with a non-disabled dancer, so why does it happen with disabled dancers? I believe it is often because the disabled dancers are just not getting the training opportunities they deserve. Stopgap is working to address this issue and create opportunities through its inclusive development pathways within

the company. Starting with its wide range of community work and several youth groups, with opportunities for talented individuals to receive further development, these feed into open class, placements, shadowing, artist labs, and ultimately Stopgap's apprentice company Sg2. Stopgap has succeeded in nurturing professional disabled dancers from the grassroots to the international stage, and I am pleased to be working as its Head of Talent Development to facilitate this.

So 18 years of lived experience later, has the dreamer become the philosopher?

I've been thinking a lot recently about expectations and responsibility. I was recently at an event where there was a discussion around why there was a stronger perceived expectation of inclusive companies to affect social change, in comparison to the expectation of, for example, a ballet company. In reality, I know that many dance companies (not just inclusive ones) have fantastic outreach and community programs that make a huge difference to people's lives, so why does that perception exist I wonder? Maybe because disabled people are still so under represented. But I think the dance world as a whole has a responsibility to address this, not just inclusive companies.

As a company, Stopgap has never made political work about being disabled. We are first and foremost a dance company whose aim is to make high quality, engaging art. The belief being that the act of existing is political enough. I believe that more can be said by focusing on quality art made

Inclusive practice

through an honest, inclusive process, done with integrity, rather than trying to force a message onto your audience. For those who are yet to understand the value of true inclusivity facilitating innovative creative excellence, it could be off-putting to have a message about inclusivity forced on them through a narrative or a theme.

However, I do believe there is a responsibility to be aware of the statement that you are making, whether it is intentional or not. People have a tendency to read meaning into things even if the original intention is purely abstract. This is particularly the case with dance. It is human nature to see bodies interacting (or not) and to look for relationships and stories, just as we see faces in slices of toast and rock formations!

If you are choreographing on a diverse group of dancers, whatever that diversity is, there is also a responsibility to be aware of how your creative decisions could be read. If a dancer is constantly separated or excluded on stage, people will read something into that. If that dancer happens to have a visible impairment, there is likely to be a natural assumption that this is the reason for the segregation, whether that's because of making a statement through the work, or because of the individual dancer's capabilities.

I do not think, as a choreographer, it is acceptable to just 'shrug that off' as coincidence and not take responsibility. The times I have seen this kind of unintentional imbalance are, I believe, often down to two reasons. Firstly, it might be due to a lack of experience of working with disabled dancers; not having the vocabulary, understanding of their physical potential to ask them for something or the experience to know how to get the best from them, or understanding that it may just take a little longer for the movement to settle in their brain or body, but it will get there. These dancers then get side-lined, treated differently from the other dancers and segregated from the group. There may also be an element of a lack of understanding of the sensitivities of a lived experience of being disabled and the issues surrounding how people with impairments are portrayed (or not) within media and the arts, and

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therefore, if or how their work is reinforcing a positive or negative image of disabled people.

With all that in mind – why would a choreographer want to work with an inclusive group? Well, I always say that my inclusive teaching practice helps inform, improve and revitalise my 'standard' teaching practice, and I think the same can be true of choreography. Understanding and working with the individual potential of diverse dancers and honest integration can enrich movement material, leading to an exceptional, innovative outcome.

Pushing back (literally) – resisting under-use of talented disabled people

As dancers we all have a desire to please, a desire to be challenged and to show our full potential. I think, as a disabled dancer, that's heightened, because you spend so long feeling the need to justify that “yes, I can dance”, “no, I don't just teach”, “yes, it is more than just synchronised floor patterns, a couple of arm gestures and the odd wheelie thrown in for good measure!” It is art and it is mainstream, or at least should be appreciated as such, and it is highly skilled.

My advice to disabled dancers who feel they are being side-lined in a creative process? If you are not being given direction – ask for it. Be bold. Try out ideas. You don't always have to wait for the choreographer to challenge you. Show what you can do. It might not get used, it might not get put in, and that's ok, that's the choreographer's choice. But... particularly if it's a piece you have to perform over and over – **you're the one** who will be up there on stage, so



Top left and above: Laura Jones leading at People Dancing Summer School 2019. Photo: Rachel Cherry. Top right: Laura Jones, Stoppgap Dance Company. Photo: Chris Parkes.



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you need to feel comfortable with your representation.

I think back to when I was most challenged in the studio and, in fact, it was when I was being completely ignored by the choreographer! So - I decided to challenge myself and figure out how on earth I could manoeuvre myself from sitting in my wheelchair to hanging upside down in it and (even more challenging) back to being upright, all without any assistance from anyone else. I think it's still one of the most physically challenging things I've done on stage. I certainly have a clear memory of getting halfway round and, at the most precarious moment, teetering between success and landing in an undignified heap on the floor, thinking "why did I think this was a good idea?!" But I'm very pleased I did. Not least because I felt that it was important not to be passive and to show independence and ownership of the move.

And always encouraging all to put art first

On a number of occasions, I've been told after a performance, in positive

tones from an appreciative audience member - "I totally forgot you were even in a wheelchair!" Now I know it's supposed to be a compliment, but let's look at it for a moment. It's a very ableist way of thinking - that the wheelchair is negative and therefore not seeing it is positive. I generally feel that ignoring or not seeing the wheelchair totally undermines all the work that has gone into getting to that point. I work hard to blend the functionality of moving my chair with creative movement ideas, becoming one while avoiding being just be a passenger in my chair. I think (at least, I hope) what they really mean is they realised they were just watching great dance, done with great skill, by great dancers.

Having said that I am all for owning the fact that I'm a disabled person. That's one of the reasons I love performing. I am used to being stared at on the street, but when I am on stage in a piece of art, it's my choice to not just allow, but actively seek being looked at. I control that and that is empowerment.

When it comes to making art, I just

want to make good art. Something that speaks to everyone, regardless of whether they are disabled. Over the course of my career, I've worked hard to be on par with non-disabled dancers who had access to the conventional advanced training and I feel comfortable working alongside them as their equals. Therefore, I want to focus on dance and not on what I have 'overcome' as I feel my contribution to a creative process has a much wider scope. If I only made work that was about that fact that I'm disabled, how far reaching would that impact be? Why would someone who has no link to disability in their daily lives be interested in seeing it? Wouldn't that just perpetuate segregation and alienate members of the audience?

I want future dancers to have clear pathways and training opportunities. To not have to be constant trailblazers. And I don't want to be part of just a niche culture, I want to be part of culture as a whole.

Info

www.stoppapdance.com