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OTHER ABILITIES, EVOLVING AESTHETICS?

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Other abilities, evolving aesthetics?

This working session was about setting out a vision for diversity in the arts – focusing on opportunities and aesthetics specifically related to different abilities being represented in the arts. Four speakers from the dance sector shared their experiences and ideas on where disability should be represented on stage and backstage today and what opportunities this offers in terms of evolving aesthetics of performing arts.

The moderator, Kim Simpson from the organisation Shift in the United Kingdom, started the session by questioning the definitions of disability arts – a recurrent and very sensitive discussion during the entire session. According to Kim, the discourse should not be reduced to accessibility issues only, but the definition should be broadened including hidden impairments, neurodiversity, mental health issues or learning difficulties. In her opinion, we are often disabled by the society that surrounds us. Michael Turinsky from Vienna added that it is not so important which words we use to describe this art form (e.g. "disability arts" or "artists with other abilities") and that it is rather about the relationship between the individual and society. Henrique Amoedo, Artistic Director of the Portuguese Dance Company *Dançando com a diferença*, also confirmed that "it is not the word that is important, but the respect. If we have the respect, the word is nothing."

According to Meritxell Barberá, Artistic Director of the Festival "10 Sentidos" and Choreographer of the Spanish Taiat Dance Company, we all have a certain kind of disability, and we should be committed to living with it. She suggested to consider a positive side as well: just like having certain disabilities, each one of us may also have a special ability.

Moderator:

Kim Simpson - Shift, United Kingdom

Speakers :

Nadja Dias - Independent Senior Producer and Consultant, UK

Henrique Amoedo - Dançando Com a Diferença, Portugal

Meritxell Barberá - Festival 10 Sentidos / Taiat Dance Company, Spain

Michael Turinsky - Independent, Austria



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Nadja Dias, independent senior producer and consultant, rather than speaking of disability arts, prefers to speak of the art form, e.g. in this case dance and the way physical diversity encourages new explorations and artistic innovation. An impairment or disability is a sign of difference and does not have to be "fixed". It is possible that the art form is not about disability, it can stay

a contemporary performance. She also spoke about the social model of disability in this context: disabilities are caused by the way society is organised and not by an individual.

Nadja Dias and examples from the UK

Nadja has worked with a variety of artists who question mainstream aesthetics and form. She has been able to support the creation of work led by practitioners and artists with disability interested in questioning and challenging our understanding of 'dance'.

Currently she is collaborating with Claire Cunningham, one of the UK's most acclaimed and internationally renowned artists with disabilities. Claire's work is often rooted in the study and use/misuse of her crutches and the exploration of the potential of her own specific physicality with a conscious rejection of traditional dance techniques (developed for non-disabled bodies) or the attempt to move with the pretence of a body or aesthetic other than her own. She combines multiple art forms which she does not define as disability arts; although her work is shaped by the lived experience of disability, it revolves around a multitude of themes.

Claire herself admits that often her work is programmed because it presents something new around the issues of aesthetics, bodies, what dance is or should be. The programmers do not think so much about the "social cause". And in this regard, the long-term development of art by artists with disabilities in the UK has finally taken work to the level where its artistic value and the quality are not only possible but recognised, and indeed cannot be questioned. She thinks that it has been useful to reorient the focus of the programmers to see that dance, of all the art forms, has the most to gain from engaging with people." The lived experience of disability is a state of perpetual (re-)negotiation with the world around us – how our bodies move in space and time, acquiring different relationships with space and time – which is surely also a possible definition of choreography. The nature of this idea – how the lived experience of disability shapes our perception of the world – has been one of the core pillars of Claire's work for many years.

Nadja also mentioned the example of the Candoco Dance Company for which she has worked as a producer and which has more than 25 years of experience both with dancers with disabilities and non-disabled artists. Currently, they are involved in the 2-year EU project "Moving beyond Inclusion", bringing together six partners cross Europe to reflect on dance and disability.

Some statements in Nadja's presentation were also linked to the UK funding system which creates a favourable institutional framework for the artists she is working with: "Claire is benefitting from a political and funding infrastructure that has made it possible for her to "take risks" as an artist." She feels privileged in this respect and knows that the situation in other countries may be less supportive. One of Nadja's key messages was therefore to ask for better support structures, training and funding, since the majority of disabled artists still

come from the independent sector and they do not necessarily have access to traditional training/education.

Further, Nadja encourages artists with disability to consider the political and social impact their works can have, knowing that this type of art is still a disruption to the norm and mainstream; in this respect disability is not neutral. It is thus these artists that can show that disability is another possibility and that this is what contemporary performance is about. In the end, the diversity of bodies and people offers exciting opportunities for audiences. Hopefully the decision-makers will also realise and support it.



Guide Gods by Claire Cunningham © Colin Mearns

Example from Portugal: Dançando com a diferença

Henrique Amoedo has been working in the area of arts and disability since 1994, first in Brazil and then in Portugal, where in 2001 he founded the company "Dançando com a diferença" (in English "Dancing with the difference") located on the Portuguese island of Madeira. They started as a pilot project on inclusion through the art, willing to distance themselves from the more folkloric dance tradition in this outermost region. The company's philosophy is to work with guest choreographers and to create, teach and bring disability issues to their creations (by including people with disabilities in their cast).

Nowadays, Dançando com a Diferença's repertoire consists of more than 20 creations which can be divided into three phases of artistic evolution:

2001 - 2004

In the first phase there were creations choreographed by Henrique Amoedo himself, and by choreographers who knew his work in Brazil.

These include creations that he calls "Ballezão" ("Safe ballet"), and it was still relatively close to what the Madeiran public understood by dance in the sense of using a more academic language and beautiful images. These works did not hide the issue of disability, but they did not reveal it either. This first phase gave the opportunity to approach the public with new aesthetics.

2004 - 2008

In the second phase, a strong disruption was created through works of choreographers such as Clara Andermatt and Rui Horta. It was what Henrique called the "Hard programme", challenging for the audience. These were works that explored the differences in the bodies and questioned the social patterns. The objective was to shock the audience that already knew the company at that stage.

2008 – today

The third phase is called "Grand projects". The company incorporated other languages and is working with other groups. One of the flagship projects of this phase was "Grotox" produced in partnership with the Casa da Música in Porto. "Grotox" comes from the words Grotesque and Botox. The artists played with beauty and ugliness, with established standards, but under what they consider "different." In this phase, "Endless" was also created, as a result of a partnership between Germany, Poland, Lithuania, Estonia and Portugal financed by the Grundtvig sub-programme of the European Union's Lifelong Learning Programme. This community dance project explored the theme of body during the Holocaust.

For Henrique the presence of artists with disabilities in the world of contemporary performing arts is a fact. Nevertheless, he is aware that this has not always been the case. He reminded the audience of some key personalities that left a mark on the history of dance: Jaques Dalcroze, Rudolf Laban, Mary Wigman, Francois Delsarte, Isadora Duncan, Denishawn School, Martha Graham, among others.

Henrique called for a more inclusive model of the arts, based on the respect for human rights, and stressed that developments in different sectors of our society will influence the artistic work.

He also gave examples of other contemporary dance companies working with disabled artists, such as Giradanca (Brazil), Axis Dance Company (United States), Restless (Australia), Psico Ballet Maite León (Spain) and Candoco Dance Company (United Kingdom).

The Spanish Festival 10 Sentidos and the Taiat Dance Company

In 2011, Meritxell Barberá launched the [10 Sentidos](#) Festival in Valencia, Spain. The festival has managed to establish itself as a showcase of the most avant-garde performing and visual arts in Spain. It also serves as a platform where “artists of all abilities” can come together and reflect on art and its impact on today’s society. “Everybody has some form of ‘disability’ which makes us different from others, it can be age, lack of practice, lack of interest,” Meritxell says. One of the festival videos stated that “the worst disability is to be heartless”. The 2016 edition was focused on mental health and the next edition will be held in May 2017 on the theme of “elderly people”, aiming at reflecting on how time passes by, the role of the elderly in our society and remembering their experiences.

Meritxell is also a choreographer of the [Taiat Dance Company](#). Together with her fellow choreographer Inma García, she describes the company’s philosophy as follows: “Dance must be considered as a part of art, its history and evolution. We feel it is necessary to dance, create and choreograph with our focus on the here and now, with a laser focus on the contemporary social, ideological and artistic contexts. It is vital that we bring dance closer to those who are not familiar with it. That is why it is necessary to cultivate a closeness and complicity with the audience.”

They describe their style as “temperamental, moved by passion and driven by a rebellious spirit.” The two are motivated to constantly search for new languages of movement, the alteration of well-known dance structures and techniques. They work with the inspiration to distort and renew so as to discover anew the possibilities of dance and the body. Their pieces are



Jérôme Bel 'The show must go on' at Festival 10 Sentidos © Juan Miguel Ponce

constructed in a way that is closer to a cinematographic discourse than to theatrical parameters. The principal actor is always the body with its obsessions and conflicts.

One of their projects, “[Dance Generation](#)”, is an intergenerational community dance project taking place in different Spanish towns and dealing with the evolution of the body in time or appearances at different ages. The project mainly consists of a series of workshops during which a specific choreography is created, depending on the group involved in each location. Each workshop will involve 25 participants aged 10 years and up (seniors are welcome), all dancing together. The idea is to get together in the same space and break the barriers between dance, art and the masses.

The overall objective is to foster and increase public awareness on the practice, the creation and the history of contemporary dance.

Meritxell works with “artists with other abilities” which gives her a much broader perspective on body movement and the possibility to establish a new type of creativity. This will eventually lead to a broader audience and will bring new opportunities for all artists. Being inclusive means focusing on arts quality rather than on the fact of staging a disability or not.

Thoughts from Austria

Michael Turinsky, independent choreographer, performer and theorist from Vienna made a detailed theoretical declaration on the role of disabilities in the performing arts. The starting point of his reflection was the question of relevance. In what way and to which extent can choreographic or performative work engaging “functional diversity” claim relevance? Our sector works with a “normative idea of quality”, and Michael suggested: “Instead of referring to “quality”, let’s talk about relevance.” According to him, “the opportunity or relevance that ‘different abilities’ offer to contemporary performance / choreography should be understood neither in merely political terms nor in merely aesthetic terms but in terms of political aesthetics: how are “different abilities” or “different bodies” sensed and how are they made sense of?”

He distinguishes between three coordinates of political aesthetics:

1. Content: There is no need for choreographic or performative work to be about disability
2. Form: What kind of media does a work use and how are the media and materials dis/re/organised?
3. Production: How is a work produced? What kind of rehearsal rhythm does it follow, and do we adapt that rhythm so that it makes sense for the bodies involved? Who is claiming authorship and initiation and from which position does/do he/she/they do so?

There are two reference points that have oriented Michael in his artistic process of generating and organising material. First of all, his own body in its specific phenomenology, with his own specific embodied sense of being in the world in its relation to space, time, feeling or affect, pleasure or fantasy. And secondly, the complex set of ideas relating to aesthetic and political discourse.

Further Michael thinks that if the performing arts “mirror” society or if an artistic “form” is always a certain sedimentation of the social “real”, then the best would be to build coalitions. Instead of merely sticking to an affirmation of our particular identity, we should open up an aesthetic space in which our own “urgencies” can resonate with other progressive (queer, anti-capitalist, etc.) social forces and their means of expression.

Discussion

One participant asked about the visibility and locations of the artists' work, whether they would be presented in public space or rather inside theatres. Nadja Dias replied that the artistic landscape had changed considerably since 2012 and today more money is available for outdoor festivals. Claire Cunningham has been involved in street activities in San Francisco, for example, and she is making a public commission for an outdoor festival in the UK.

The moderator Kim steered the discussion towards the question of the gatekeepers: who decides if, where and when work is staged? There was no clear answer in the debate to this question, however it was recalled that IETM is preparing a new Fresh Perspectives publication on arts and disability with the support of the British Council. The publication seeks to offer a new perspective on disability in various artistic contexts. By privileging the artists' voice and experience, the research will present the 'real' experiences of those invested in this area of artistic theory and practice, and will focus on artistic practice rather than disability.

Conclusion and next steps

The session brought together a mix of interesting theoretical thoughts and practical examples of companies and experts working with "artists with disabilities" which show the progress we have made in society and as audience with this type of new aesthetics in the past years. It also opens the reflection on how much still needs to be done.

One participant stated that "Disability art is the last remaining avant-garde movement" which gives a unique artistic opportunity, because "If you are interested in the theatre and dance, you have to be interested in different speech patterns, sign language etc.; if you are not interested in this, you are not interested in contemporary arts." And the next step would be to work on the leadership of disabled people and to get more support from decision-makers in this context. So there is still a long way to go, but there are undoubtedly many exciting opportunities out there for "artists with disabilities".

Additional dance videos

[*Give me a reason to live, Claire Cunningham*](#)

[*Endless by Dançando com a diferença*](#)

[*Dance Generation at the IVAM, Valencia*](#)

[*Summary of the 5th edition of the 10 Sentidos Festival*](#)

[*Heteronomous male by Michael Turinsky*](#)