

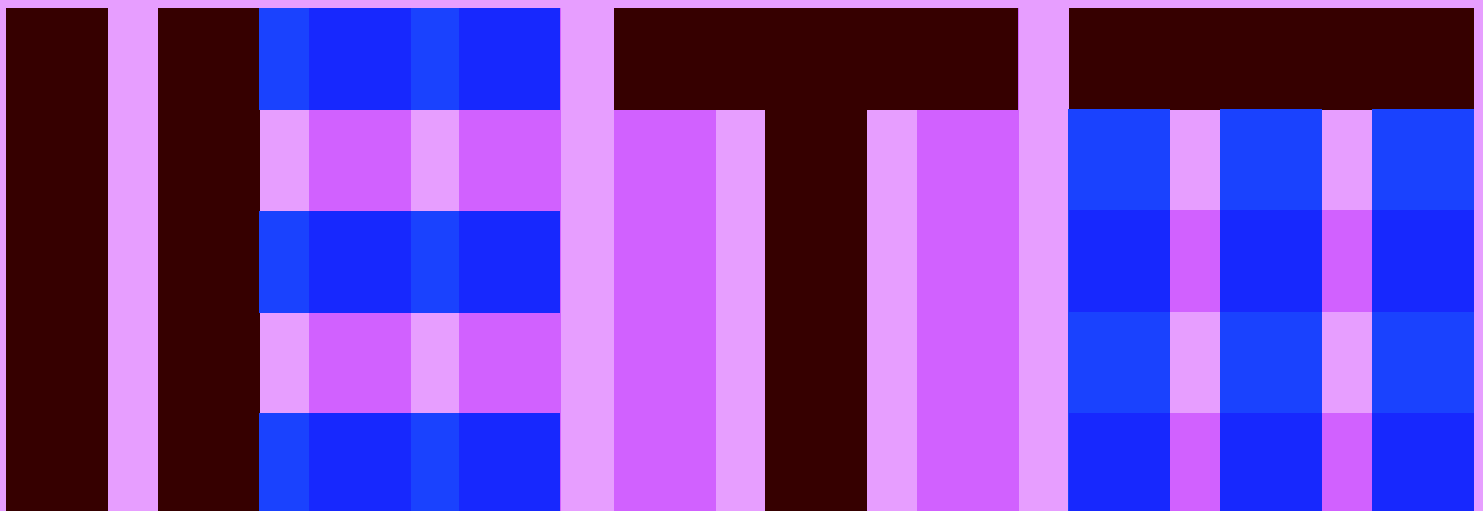


Report

Work & disability in the arts

from the IETM Belgrade Plenary Meeting

By Fanny Martin



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**Report from the IETM Belgrade
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Synopsis

Recent research in the sector has shown that there is a significant lack of awareness about what it means to work in the arts for professionals with disabilities.

This discussion tackled the notions of working conditions, including working with disabilities and the recognition of its unique artistic quality.

Work & disability in the arts

13:00 - 14:30 (CET) (12:00 - 13:30 GMT)

FRIDAY 30 SEPTEMBER

BY FANNY MARTIN

Moderator:

Filip Pawlak

Artist and Cultural worker - IETM Global Connector 2021-22, Poland

Speakers:

Jovana Rakić

Artist and choreographer, Serbia

Mindy Drapsa

Riksteatern, Sweden + Interpreter (both joining via Zoom)

Rachel Marks

Relaxed Performance & Disability Access Consultant, Canada

Note: this discussion amongst disability arts leaders was repeatedly disrupted by technical issues, destabilising the presenters and preventing Mindy and her interpreter, both joining via Zoom, to participate fully in the panel.

Moderator Filip Pawlak opened the discussion by inviting panellists to imagine the future they want, building from reports, studies and toolkits on disability in the arts (see On The Move's [Time to Act international survey and report](#), which formed the basis for an Arts & Disability session at IETM Lyon 2021).

While there are signs of change across different countries – such as some funders now including access support in eligible expenses, and creating new funding streams dedicated to disability arts and disabled artists – Filip reminded the room that the notion of 'inclusion' is fragile, as disabled artists and audiences are still at risk of being 'last in, first out'. The task proposed to the panel – and the sector – is therefore to channel our imagination, ambition and collaboration while remaining constructive and realistic, especially by acknowledging the huge discrepancies in resources & working conditions across different economies.

Vital signs: What is growing?

A. Change is palpable

Panellists and participants shared signs of structural change around them: funding frameworks, production models and touring practices that raise the bar by enhancing the visibility of disabled artists and audiences and centering their needs. Examples included:

In Canada

- A recent production by a Theatre for Young Audiences company ([Roseneath Theatre](#), Toronto) involved a cast of Deaf artists touring for hearing-children schools with American Sign Language interpretation, reversing the model of the more common 'inclusive' performance with a full hearing cast and one or two dates with interpretation for Deaf audiences.
- Arts Councils at municipal, provincial and federal levels have started to include accessibility costs (including childcare) as additional budget lines.

In Sweden

- [Riksteatern Crea](#) has been producing performing arts in Swedish sign language, with and by Deaf and sign language artists and cultural workers, since the 1970s. Their current production of [A Doll's House](#), with a cast of 3 Deaf and 1 hearing actors, uses Swedish sign language as primary language.

In Wales

- [Highjinx Theatre](#) is an inclusive company that works equitably with autistic people and learning disabled people by fostering collaboration with neurotypical artists (of whom 90% have reported a significant change in their practice as a result of collaborating with disabled artists). They currently run 5 training academies in Wales and provide a professional infrastructure to artists, such as dedicated agents.
- The Arts Council of Wales has a separate budget line for access funds, enabling interpretation and description for a wide range of performances. However, these efforts are still undermined by the current disability benefit system set up, which effectively limits the earnings of professional artists, who would lose their long-term disability support if they take fees for professional activities.

In Latvia

- [New Theatre Institute of Latvia](#) takes a bottom-up DIY approach to inclusivity and accessibility by "doing it anyway", including self-funding their access lift, inventing new terms to describe emerging realities and embedding access throughout their programming.

B. The sector IS knowledgeable

While reports such as [Time to Act](#) evidence how the lack of knowledge about accessibility and disability arts is slowing down the pace of change, there is in fact much expertise to celebrate in the arts & culture sector. During the session, the following key frameworks and examples were shared:

Relaxed Performance

Also called 'Chilled Performances' or 'Sensory-friendly Performances', Relaxed Performances were originally devised to make performances more accessible for people disabled by the usual rules of theatre etiquette. The principles encompass everything from clear, understandable advance information, to taking a relaxed approach to movement and noise coming from the audience. (Source: [Battersea Arts Centre's Relaxed Venue initiative](#)).

Social Model of Disability

Under the Social Model, disability is framed as a social construct created by barriers which can be changed and eliminated, providing a dynamic and positive model which identifies the causes of exclusion and inequality and proposes a solution. It is on society to make changes, not on the disabled person; for individuals and organisations to understand and then make the adjustments required to stop marginalising and excluding people whose bodies and minds don't comply with society's idea of what is normative and acceptable. (source: [Shape Arts](#)).

Inclusive & Equitable Production Models

To rethink how we produce, we need to consider three dimensions:

Representation:

- Who is in the room? Are disabled, Indigenous, Black and People of Colour artists equitably involved in all aspects of the creation, production and distribution of the work?

Content:

- What is the work about? Is the form as innovative as the topics? Are people who are directly concerned truly involved in advising, devising and critiquing? Are they paid equitably for their work?

Process:

- How is the work made? Who is making decisions, what are the working conditions and financial structures?

Indigenous and traditional approaches

In the Indigenous societies of Turtle Island (North America), everyone had a place in the Long House, whether their disability is from birth or acquired. This culture of inclusivity contrasts with comments from Jovana about Belgrade, where the physical infrastructure makes mobility an everyday struggle and where disabled people — for example wheelchair users, blind & visually impaired people — are scarcely present in public space as a result.

Looking ahead: what do we want?

A. Hopes & Dreams

As panellists and participants were invited to propose strategies for change and pledges for the future, a healthy discussion developed across five themes:

Reconfiguring norms

Setting the bar high means going beyond 'inclusion' and aiming for a truly accessible world instead of simply 'more' accessible. The right to 'freely participate in the cultural life of the community' is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 27). Our current efforts should be directed towards normalising access to the point of eliminating the need to constantly have to request special consideration.

Education & Children

Making sign language part of the national curriculum, creating more opportunities for encounters between disabled and non-disabled children and ensuring that the talent pipeline is inclusive at all points (in particular by ensuring that spaces for education & play are welcoming and suitable for all needs) were some of the strategies proposed to address inclusivity at root level.

Representation & Ownership

To channel the power of celebration, participants discussed the possibility of increasing funding for disabled artists to represent themselves on their own terms and tell their stories in their own voice, celebrating elders and past achievements, and learning from POC and LGBTQ+ positive affirmation movements such as Pride.

Internationalisation & Solidarity

Working across borders is a priority to combat isolation and distribute resources - but which strategies are truly applicable between territories with vast discrepancies in resources and societal contexts? What can be learnt from the margins, instead of using colonial centres of power as the yardstick? Participants envisioned dedicated international training schools for disability arts, new distribution of resources and support for increased transnational collaborations amongst an international community of disabled artists.

Slowing down

To produce better, we need to produce less. Funding structures and production practices are still geared towards quantity and deadlines and continue to put at risk our physical and mental health. By contrast, 'crip time' requires a radical change in attitude to time, instead of centering neurotypical, abled-bodied needs as 'universal' and anything else as not valid. Similarly, the necessary steps to undertake as part of a new project in Indigenous cultures — engaging in circle discussions and Elder-led ceremonies — are not considered eligible for funding.

B. Next steps

Working themes that emerged from this future-oriented discussion include:

Terminology

The words we use matter, and co-devising shared terminology — including how to hold each other accountable for using the agreed-upon terms — should always be part of a room agreement, be it in the studio or at a professional conference.

For example, Rachel indicated that she is no longer using the term 'person with disabilities' but instead chooses to self-define as a 'disabled person' as she considers that she is being disabled by society (see Social Model of Disability above). In the same vein, 'inclusion' and 'access' can take different meanings depending on context. In some languages, words may not yet exist to describe emerging realities. How would a shared terminology across international performing arts peers be developed, and what would it enable?



Time

The desire to slow down and to work less to live better was a leitmotif across the sector during COVID lockdowns. As the burn-out rate doesn't seem to abate, what are the barriers to make this happen? What can be done at an individual level, and what are the systemic forces that are preventing arts workers from reclaiming their own pace?

Taking collective action

Advocacy efforts need to be tactical and sustained. Many funding applications require arts workers to be fluent in bureaucratic jargon or to use formats that may be What can be done at an individual level, and what are the systemic forces that are preventing arts workers from reclaiming their own pace? How can staff at funding agencies be empowered to accelerate this change?

Conclusion

As we look ahead toward a future where 'inclusion' is a given, and a society where everyone can participate because their needs are being met, what can the performing arts sector do to build on from the knowledge evidenced through this session? A significant step towards this would be to ensure that all future gatherings are co-conceived with members of equity-seeking communities – including disabled people – and continue to integrate the practices modelled in this exemplary panel, such as visual descriptions, simultaneous interpretation and room participation.



