

Dance and “Dis”Ability

By Jodi Falk

Dance and “Dis”Ability: moments from working with CandoCo Dance Company in the UK and Remix Dance Theatre in South Africa

“The struggle to find a language to describe the ‘unfound’ movement of dance with an integrated dance company which includes physically challenged dancers is in itself an eloquent expression of progress into a new field, one that speaks of readjustments and ultimately of revisioning.” (Adam Benjamin, *Dance Theatre Journal*, Summer 1995)

I joined this struggle when I choreographed for two different dance companies that integrated able-bodied and physically challenged dancers: two works on the English contemporary repertory dance company, CandoCo, and another work, with co-choreographer and poet Ellen Kaz, on the South African dance company, Remix Dance Theatre, ten years later. Both had their versions of what constitutes integration, virtuosity, political awareness, and mixed ability, and yet they both agreed on the desire to be seen completely on artistic par with any contemporary dance company working today.

Due to the physical uniqueness and artistic success of both companies, they have broadened the view of theatre dance and the dancing body held by audiences, promoters, and other artists. The struggle mentioned above includes not only the language, but also ideological issues which are embedded in dance practice. Who can dance on the professional stage? What determines “good” dancing? Even the choreographic process itself is challenged and struggled with in this work.

The very definition of disability by the World Health Organization in the 1980’s presupposes a lack, or “inability”. “Any restriction or lack (resulting from impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being.” (The Attenborough Report) Impairment is defined as “any loss or abnormality of psychology, physiology, or anatomical structure or function.”

CandoCo and Remix Dance Theatre by their very existence play havoc with this definition of disability. Although many of the dancers have physiological impairments, each performs activities, by virtue of his/her profession, far outside the manner and range considered normal for human beings. How much they are

considered dancers, or “acrobats of God” as Martha Graham put it, is proven by their reviews, number of fans, and hectic international (CandoCo) and national (Remix) touring schedule. However, in the case of CandoCo ten years ago, their reviews, fans, and promoters distinguished in their writings and requests for pieces specific to particular disabled dancers, and thus begged the question of what kind of disabilities are acceptable onstage, what classifies a disabled dancer as virtuosic, and what is the nature of virtuosity in the making of “integrated” dances.

Historical Precedence

The Remix Dance Theatre is co-directed by Nicola Visser, a former Laban Centre London student who saw the CandoCo company and modeled the group after them. Both companies did not start out to be a political or therapeutic tool for the physically challenged in dance. The main goal was to be a company of dance artists, some of whom are physically challenged, performing professional works in professional settings. This is an outgrowth of the democratization in western concert dance that was born out of the Judson Church and Grand Union dance groups in the 60’s and 70’s in the US, and the X6 in the 70’s and 80’s in the UK. The philosophies of these generations of dancers were ones of inclusion; dance bodies could be relaxed, untrained, “non-dancers”, nude, eating, creating sexual imagery, etc. (Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*) However, it is interesting to note that the word sometimes used for this new dancer is “pedestrian”; even the inclusion was exclusive of those in wheelchairs or without legs.

Although the eighties became an era of greater control over body image and muscularity, as well as a time of greater virtuosity of the more traditional type, this history of expanding definitions paved the way for the dance world to accept varying bodies into its fold. And although the dance world accepted various bodily shapes and sizes, the records of physically challenged bodies in the history of professional theatre dance are very few. And the idea that a physically challenged body can be virtuosic is a relatively new concept in dance; virtuosity has represented the eternal struggle of “man against the threats of time, space and chance.” (Selma Jeanne Cohen, *Next Week, SwanLake*)

CandoCo

CandoCo itself, at least ten years ago, was hierarchical about the issue of the eligibility of the performer and the philosophy of inclusion. The existence of the company and its pioneering work in integrated community dance workshops throughout England is a strong statement for inclusion of all as participants in dance and for dance to embrace non-traditional bodies in its working processes and artistic products. However, not any “disabled” (their term at the time) or able-bodied dancer can join the company. Dancers audition; some get fired. One has to have the qualities that this company looks for; a company style develops. The issue of finding

replacements for injured dancers epitomizes the company's political stance on the physically challenged performers. Categorically, no able-bodied dancer can replace a disabled dancer, especially one using a wheelchair. This, they feel, would be unfair to the dancer and to their audience, a percentage of whom are disabled. This also means that many of the dances are performer-specific; once those company members leave, so do the dances. Yet, the company sought to build a repertory of work for large-scale touring. Therefore, CandoCo balances their inclusion ethos with the market forces of a stable repertory touring company.

The audiences and critics took time to accept CandoCo's performers as artists in their own right. At first, critics were overwhelmingly positive, almost giving what Clement Crisp of the Financial Times dubbed, the "sympathy vote." Adam Benjamin, one of the cofounders of the company, offered that CandoCo's arrival in the dance scene was only confirmed once they started receiving some negative criticism.

The reviews the company received during my time working with them, mid-nineties, were often about the virtuosity of one of its performers, David Toole, a man born without legs due to Thalidimide and a beautifully present performer. The virtuosic dancer is often seen as someone stronger, more fit, more beautifully facile than most dancers. Here, the virtuoso is a man without legs, and at times it is because of his disability that he is such a virtuoso.

To Please the Desert, 1992, premiered at Queen Elizabeth Hall in 1993, ("intense, still beauty" – The London Times, "*To Please the Desert* was the triumph of the programme" – Scotland on Sunday) is the first of two works I made on the CandoCo dance company of the UK. It began as a solo work for David Toole, who showed up at the Laban Centre London where I taught, new to dancing and new to us as a physically challenged student. The rest of my students were not physically challenged, at least not visibly, and the test was to integrate the class in order to challenge everyone. I began to make movement for everyone that was based on David's movement possibilities; torso use, hand details and contact improv were important foci of the class. He had at this time just begun working with the company, mostly dancing in his wheelchair. He had one duet in which he left his chair that made an impression on me. I began to choreograph on him for a faculty show; Adam Benjamin saw the work and invited me to choreograph for the company.

Certainly I was aware of a fine line to walk between working with David as a man with special limitations as well as capabilities and the possibility of abusing him as a was done with other physically challenged people in "freak shows" of the past. Clement Crisp said in a BBC interview, "if David were not so talented, it would be embarrassing. But he is incredibly talented. And so it is marvelous." (BBC, February 1996)

I worked with his virtuosity, and it was to include his unique facility. His body composition allowed him to create images that others cannot; he can look as though he is rising from the ground when he lifts himself from a resting position on his ribcage to standing on his hands. He could rest on one hand, while lifting the other arm spear-like into the air, an arm penche. A person with legs cannot do this. He could make us see the actual disability of being conventionally able-bodied.

I spent time with David, seeing what he can do, what could be translated from my body to his. And what in dance is beyond the body. What instead is about presence, energy, will, commitment. I watched him and both remembered and forgot his special body. Why? David seemed to prove that the dance is beyond a body and is something more, a lived, phenomenological connection between performer and audience. His virtuosity came not from struggling against “time, space and chance” but from playing with them.

To Please the Desert became a duet between David and Kuldip Singh-Barmi, a beautiful able-bodied dancer, at Adam’s request. My aim was to discover and enhance both dancers’ physical capacities, and not to disable anyone. I discovered two ways of getting there, one through working on weight sharing and relying on each other physically, and the other was using rhythm as an initiating factor. The studio was like a sound canvas where I asked the dancers if they could help create the sound I was looking for; I wanted to watch the rhythm of the different body parts in counterpoint with each other. I felt this to be a common ground on which to integrate the two performers. I focused on time over physical steps to integrate two very different bodies by me, a third body. And questions... can you? at first was met with a “no”, to which David and Kuldip would try anyway, and then do it.

When David was asked what a good dancing body was, he replied “one that doesn’t collapse.” (author’s interview with David, June 1996) The loosening of what a dancer is has opened the field to allow more the technique of the individual. Perhaps one of the legacies of CandoCo is to more fully embrace the modern dance’s main premise: the importance of the individual.

Remix


Ten years later, I directed and co-choreographed a new work, *Mapping the Wild Ground*, 2004, (“remarkable” – Johannesburg Star) with choreographer and poet, Ellen Kaz, on the Remix Dance Theatre of South Africa. This company, modeled after CandoCo, is fast becoming well-known all over South Africa. It carries many of the political and artistic missions of CandoCo. It not only integrates dancers in terms of “dis”ability, but also in terms of race, still quite a factor in the country ten years after the end of apartheid.

The issue of apartheid was in the forefront of my talks with Nicola before we began, mainly in her telling me straight out that no one would appreciate an American coming in and making a "post-apartheid" piece, this after a question I had about how the political milieu affects the dancers. So, there was no direct reference or focus on such a vast, indescribable issue. Yet, with one white Afrikaaner dancer in a wheelchair, (who is the co-director of the company, Malcolm Black) and one Black able-bodied dancer, Monwabisi Mraji, there was no getting around the issue. It was just there. There were other considerations. With my collaborator, Ellen Kaz, there was a debate about who should speak her words on the recording of the sound. If it was her voice, a fellow American, that would speak too much of cultural imperialism. If it was a male voice, and South African, then which dialect or from which race or class should the voice be? The piece ended up at the showing having Ellen's voice, and then a later version a white female South African voice. Even the title, with the word "wild", was considered and questioned.

Beyond these issues, were two male dancers, friends (although at this writing Monwa has left without a word and with some of Malcolm's possessions, another unfortunate nod to a history of injustice and despair) and interested in working. Again, the way forward for me was to create situations where each dancer relied on the other to make their movements happen. And when that wasn't the case, the two legs, four arms, and two wheels were the elements of mobility Ellen and I tried to craft and coordinate. Again, rhythm seemed to be the integrating element. Monwa's hands on the wheels of Malcolm's chair, moving in a two against a three rhythm, created a visual cadence that fused their bodies. Also, the focus of the piece was the idea that one needs to go through anything to get beyond it, including our bodies. So, the bodies leaned into each other, in struggle, in ease, and at the end, in both of them standing up (a feat Malcolm isn't able to do by himself). The rhythm of the movement was further accentuated by the rhythm of Ellen's words, a word poem that she created at the same time that the piece was being made.

Again, most importantly, was a process of questions. Can you, will you, what would this be like, are all questions that take on a different meaning in this context. The answer might be no, or only this way, and this way may be truly different due to wheels instead of legs, or the unpredictability of a physical disability. In any case, the questions lead to further inquiry and with an open mind, new possibilities that emerge from a coming together of diverse bodies and new options.

The legacies these companies leave, among their works and their artistic integrity, include larger access, not just physically, but in attitude, towards dance training and practice by other-than-optimal bodies. The choreographic process, here discussed not as an inviolable structure but a template of questions that serve to inform and



enlighten dancer and choreographer. This is a model for able-ism in dance practice. With or without socially defined disabilities, all dancers and choreographers have unique abilities and disabilities from which art can be made.

The legacy I have inherited from this work involves widening my notions of virtuosity in dance and altering my choreographic methods. Virtuosity becomes more than the manifestation of the will of man over nature; it becomes a more individualistic triumph over one's own "disabilities" within the framework of artistic expression. Physical presence can override anatomy. Choreographically, focusing on the elements or essences of a work serves to integrate very different bodies; vocabulary shifts to center on the performer(s) and above all open and direct dialogue serves to transform choreographer and dancer.

Questions of mechanics, fears and societal taboos surface between dancer and choreographer as they find mutual ground in the dance of integration. Dance, then, perhaps truly transcends the notion of the perfect body. The process also becomes one of transcendence; boundaries are broken and the choreographer must play not the role of leader of his/her vision of the dance but a facilitator of visions – the visions of the dancer about the dance and self, the vision of the dance as it shapes to the materials at hand, and the vision or "revisiting" of dance to audiences.