

Oh Brave New World That Hath such People in it

Past Presence

In thinking about presence in relation to learning disability, confusion washes over me. Two particular memories emerge from a pool of ten thousand instances, informing opinions I hold with me today as strongly as when the events first took place. In fact, I can not when thinking about the notion of presence within performance, disassociate these memories from my understanding of the present.

We are sitting in a Baptist church. I am there with my mother and sister. I have been brought along to hold my sister's hand during a monotonous service. At the front of the church we sit together in a group. Some of us make moaning noises, others shift around anxiously, desperate to locate an exit. Without any warning, they remove a large part of our group. They take each person with a learning disability into another room. We, the family and friends, are left among the congregation to endure a sermon on acceptance and equality. It doesn't make sense. I am confused. Why, if we are all equal, has most of our group been relocated to another room half way through the sermon?

I am about 15. I am in the audience of the first dance performance I have ever been to involving people with learning disabilities. Trails of brightly coloured material float on stage as approximately 20 people of varying sizes and mobility run underneath the fabric. The stage is dark. Stragglers left behind from the initial surge stand centre stage, too excited to move, shouting to people they know in the audience. A second surge brings with it even more people, scooping up the noisy stragglers heading towards the other side of the stage. I recall being slightly confused by the mass movement, the anarchy on stage, the seeming lack of choreography. I am even more thrown by the tears streaming down my face. I look around and find the rest of the audience in a similar state.

Present presence pretence

There appears, particularly within the field of dance and learning disability, an overall need to sanitize difference, to hide it away or make it sentimental. For most people working within this area, a sophisticated aesthetic approach has not developed over time. Many seek to create images of people with learning disabilities that allow us to remain comfortable. People shy away from complex performance that challenges and further addresses our embarrassment over intellectual disability. As a result there is a tendency to stigmatize people further. It seems dance and performance for most people with learning disabilities attract professional dancers of a particular sensibility, resulting in works entrenched in a late seventies community dance aesthetic. So is there room amongst this community dance for a way of working which challenges notions of aesthetics? Can we remove the sentimentality, re-educate the audience, critically assess the work and still place the person with a learning disability central within the dance? *I'm not against some abstraction or some beauty, but for me actually often fallibility, vulnerability is beautiful and unfortunately most dance is often about a very limited notion of beauty, a limited notion of aesthetic¹.*

¹ Article 19 Interview: Lloyd Newson **July 22nd 2003**

Positioning and Responsibility

Imagine. 'The two dancers make use of a frenzied vocabulary, whether in quicksilver entrechats, whiplash pirouetting, or angst-ridden arm gestures. Add to the stark lighting charges, occasionally strobe-like and otherworldly, and the tableau is a fugue of swirling, dislocated patterns'². Imagine that one of the people being written about happened to have a learning disability.

In conversation, Janice talks of natural movement, about the way an individual moves, about building on a movement vocabulary, about being in the moment, about embodiment and presence. She aspires to great things. *I don't want to change a person's movement, I want to maximise their movement*³. She talks of a way of working in which moments of connection between dancers lasts for a whole performance, where dancers work together, where different strengths compliment each other, where it is the movement, its power, its essence, its quality, its inherent imagery, not the disability that matters. What she strives for means something.

In the Gelabert-Azzopardi⁴ performance of Arthur's Feet for the Edinburgh Festival initiated by Janice and performed by experienced and professional dancers with and without a learning disability, I watched it happen. There were real moments of connection, where people danced together, highly technical movement, perfectly balancing less contrived, more natural movements. They had, as Janice said herself, 'crossed a threshold'.

.....but.....

I'm in the car, the radio is playing. It's the Glasgow/Edinburgh M8 route. The old feeling of confusion is there. It's the films. If you are filming this natural movement, how do you edit the dance piece? The old question raises its head, used by everyone, the one about power imbalance. If you edit the film too much are you editing the natural from it, sanitising involvement in order to make it art? By Harthill Services, I'm thinking about where the person with a learning disability is in relation to the artwork, about equality, the responsibility of the artist to make sure that their presence is represented. By Livingston, I hear Germain Greer's voice on the radio⁵. She is talking about 21st century feminism in relation to her 70's polemic 'The Female Eunuch'.

She says, 'its not about equality, it's about freedom'.

The problem appears to be that we try to position ourselves within the formal conventions of art, viewing that as the ideal. Perhaps we are restricting ourselves, looking at what we are doing in the wrong way, allowing other people's preconceptions of intellectual disability to limit what it is we really can do? Making what we think they might think is unacceptable, acceptable. *Dance has been divided into such categories as classical*

² Dance Magazine review of La La La Human Steps UCLA's Royce Hall Los Angeles, California November 12-15, 2003

³ Janice Parker 2005

⁴ Cesc Gelabert and Lydia Azzopardi have worked with dancers with learning disabilities based in Scotland and dancers from their own company to create this new work

⁵ Start The Week, Radio Four 30th May 2005

ballet, modern dance, Butoh, post-modern dance, and so on. This categorization is very much like the conventions found in classical arts. Because Teshigawara was aiming at freedom, he saw the dubious barriers erected around those who were creating and discovering dance as a lack of freedom. In a sense, one could say that "the freedom of dance is the freedom of the dancer".⁶

Towards another Ideal - freedom

I talked with some visual artists about the complexities of working with people with learning disabilities, particularly people with limited communication. About how an artistic idea is formed around the person, the artist comes back again and again and again to make sure it is appropriate. Sometimes these re-visits can feel pointless with little gained. As with Janice and dance, they describe the point when all their work, time and effort eventually clicks. For a millisecond or for hours the individual connects with the idea or the movement and it all starts to make sense.

It takes time, the visual artists work in stages and film is a crucial part of that process. It's based on understanding, on empathy⁷, it is about putting oneself in the person's position and then working up the creativity. It's about understanding levels of dependency and then using creativity as a tool to ensure greater levels of freedom. It's about looking inwards and then with the small pieces of information you glean, you work outwards, building an artwork around the person. It must be co-owned, using the artist's skills to realize real potentials. It moves away from the notion of group workshop towards a more individualized partnership, where skills and interests compliment each other. *Within dance it is about seeing what is there, experiencing the movement kinaesthetically, its imagery, its expression, its quality. It is the movement and the way a person inhabits the movement, and the ways in which the dancer/choreographer works in response to that movement. It is a very particular partnership and it forces the dancer/choreographer into specifics about movement. Choreography emerges from what is constellated in that experience⁸.* To achieve this within dance and visual arts requires us to work with artists of the highest quality.

I keep going back to Teshigawara⁹.

He brings something to his performance that's outside the formal conventions of dance, created without mirrors or the possibility of comparison with others. His movement has the unusual purity of being made entirely from within and is as much a joy to watch as it evidently is for him to perform¹⁰.

The films have made me think, question presence in relation to the artwork, the role of the artist and just how important it is to keep the individual 'central'¹¹ within the work. I viewed the films out of context; they were made for a museum, to be viewed where they

⁶ VideoDance 2004

⁷ Empathy is defined as 'the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts and experience of another' (Merriam-Webster, 2001).

⁸ Janice Parker 2005

⁹ Saburo Teshigawara - choreographer, dancer and visual artist - is at the forefront of Japanese innovation in dance.

¹⁰ Ally Bain on Stuart Jacksons performance in Luminous choreographed by Teshigawara- The Guardian

¹¹ of critical importance or great influence

were filmed within that museum. In the end it became impossible for the museum to accommodate the developing ambitions of the project. Viewed away from the museum, out of context, they become a 'work in progress', a series of sketches which play with the idea of visibility. The artists use film as a tool to work through their ideas, assessing the ways in which they can capture improvised movement and in/visibility on film, playing with narrative and abstraction within the editing process. In some of the films individuals disappear and reappear or are barely visible within the museum, in others they interact beautifully within the space. These films, excluded from their intended location, have allowed the opportunity to question notions of presence, of preconceptions, of ability and portrayal. For that I am truly grateful. Had the films been shown in the museum, then perhaps that would not have happened.

I have to go back to my memories. I realize that the confusion I felt then and feel now is a natural consequence of using my past experiences to make sense of something which is not quite what it was intended to be. To ensure the quality of performance relates to the context within which it is made, the person with a learning disability must remain central within the artwork, in a way that allows us to use their and our own experiences to further examine ways of working. To meet these expectations and achieve art of the highest quality entails creating experiential situations for the artists, where knowledge and understanding shape the artistic. In the meantime we need to open up debate and remain constructively critical of what it is we are doing and why we are doing it.

We are realistic, that the barriers still remain, but we have made a start. I think the only way to get round these barriers is to keep making work, keep putting it out there, so that people become more familiar with this way of working. Entering the mainstream is not the goal. Influencing the mainstream is. It will happen. It is beginning to happen. In the meantime we need to look at critical writing in relation to dance, investigate the role of film, open up discussion and continue to be creative in ways that challenge preconceptions of disability and dance.¹²

If we can do that then we can really move on.

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¹² Janice Parker 2005