

An Overview of Performing Arts as They Relate to Disability in the United Kingdom

For disability theatre artists... to give permission to the artist in your body is an outrageous act of defiance

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The UK has a rich and complex history of Disability Arts practice in response to disability discrimination embedded within society and indeed still present within our performing arts sector, whereby disabled and deaf people still experience exclusion as part of their daily lives. In today's climate of austerity, whereby marginalized groups are still blamed, the performing arts are often used as a political tool to protest against the repeated rise of scapegoating in our British society. The performing and disability arts has historically been and continues to be a hugely powerful weapon challenging and shifting attitudinal barriers that prevent disabled people from accessing basic human rights. 2012 was an important moment in recent disability arts history, when Jenny Sealey, Artistic Director of Graeae, co-directed the London 2012 Paralympics Opening Ceremony:

[The London 2012 Paralympics opening ceremony marked a moment when disability arts came of age in the UK. Two ears on, cuts to Access to Work threaten all that has been achieved.](#)²

This article published in *The Guardian* on 29 July 2014 and cited above, offers a brief insight into some of the recent past and current developments in the UK of disability arts, disability and theatre, the disability-theatre binomial and the *crip*³ performance that is driving the field forward into new unclaimed territories.

1 – Bonnie Sherr Klein, cit. in *Arts Smarts: Inspiration and ideas for Canadian Artists with Disabilities*, Vancouver, Society for Disability Arts and Culture, 2002, p. 41; also in Kirsty Johnston, *Disability Theatre and Modern Drama*, London, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016, p. 23.

2 – www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2014jul/29/disability-arts-cuts-access-to-work-theatre

3 – Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, New York, NYU Press, 2006.

The political-relational model of disability⁴ will provide a framework for articulating the development of disability in the performing arts sector which will be followed with some examples of important UK disability-led organisations and companies that are making strides and bold steps, and which build upon the shoulders of the disability arts movement of the 1970s and 1980s⁵.

First, a little bit of background required. Traditionally, we often refer to the Social Model of Disability⁶, that was formed in response to the Medical Model of Disability — otherwise known as the Tragedy Model described by the WHO in 2001⁷ — whereby medical experts spoke for disabled people and articulated disability as ‘pity’ and ‘tragedy’ that belonged to individual people who needed fixing, and if they could not be ‘fixed’ then they were excluded, removed from society and kept in often inhumane institutions. In response to this, the Social Model of Disability was formed and led by disabled people themselves, paving the way for the Disability Discrimination Act of 1995/2005⁸, now in the form of the UK’s Equality Act of 2010⁹ protecting the rights of disabled people in terms of education, employment, housing and environment. However as argued by Shakespeare y Watson¹⁰, the Social Model is perhaps outdated now, and only allows for a limited understanding of disability in society.

Kafer coined in 2013 the Political-Relational Model of Disability as it “recognises the politics of engagement of disability in and through relationships, and not in isolation ... offer(ing) disability as a ‘site for collective reimagining’”¹¹. The Political-Relational Model of Disability offers a reframing of disability as a political force as it highlights the potency of the liminal space between audience and actor, of the in-between space. This space in between allows us to move away from the historical binary of disability and non-disability. Instead the Political-Relational Model of Disability positions disability as a cultural minority group that “actively works against the existing oppressive systems

4 — Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 2013.

5 — www.disabilityartsonline.org.uk/Chronology_of_Disability_Arts

6 — UPIAS (Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation), *The Fundamental Principles of Disability*, London, Disability Archive, United Kingdom, 1976; Michael Oliver, *The Politics of Disablement*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990.

7 — WHO (World Health Organization, 2001), *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF)*, in www.who.int/classifications/icf/icfbeginnersguide.pdf?ua=1 [accessed 28/03/2017].

8 — www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1995/50/section/21 y www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/13/contents

9 — www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents

10 — Torn Shakespeare, Nicholas Watson, “The Social Model of Disability: An outdated ideology?”, in Sharon N. Barnartt, Barbara M. Altman, eds., *Exploring theories and expanding methodologies: Where we are and where we need to go*, col. “Research in Social Science and Disability”, vol. 2, Bingley, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2009, pp. 9–28.

11 — Alison Kafer, *op. cit.*, pp. 8–9.

that adhere to the constructed norm, pushing towards a political and activist re-imagining of society instead”¹². McRuer writes about disability as *crip*, that is disability becoming something desirable as opposed to the “system of compulsory able-bodiedness, that should not be the norm and, (instead) [...] imagine(ing) bodies and desires that fit beyond that system”¹³. This desirability is what I believe is key to the driving force that is moving disability arts in the UK.

There are currently more and more individual disabled, deaf, learning disabled and neuro-divergent artists who are finally gaining the relevant support and recognition that they have been fighting for and so are becoming more visible and indeed informing the mainstream performing arts industry. On television and in professional mainstream theatre there are more disabled people, (e.g. Liz Carr, Sarah Gordy), with only a few actor agencies with disabled actors on their books. (including Simon and How¹⁴), being one of the leading agencies with learning disabled actors on their books.

Importantly it must be acknowledged that the richness of practice discussed here is based on the work of companies and disabled arts practitioners and political activists that were formed over 10, 20 or 30 years ago, including Graeae, Shape, Mind The Gap, Heart N Soul, Disability Arts Online, Matt Fraser, Katherine Araniello or Alison Lapper, which are some of the performing arts activities who have laid the foundation for new activists. The organisations described below offer examples of current types of practice that are leading the way in creating and forging new partnerships and new ways of working that offer a platform to disabled artist to create innovative and defiant work. Some of them — Diverse City, Unlimited, Creative Minds, Ramps on the Moon, A Different Way y Access All Areas — offer real examples of the shift in disability and the performing arts in practice, where barriers are being re-moved.

Diverse City was formed in 2005 in order to create platforms so that silenced voices, excluded talents and hidden stories are revealed. Diverse City always creates bold projects in partnership with mainstream performing arts industries, as well as providing training on disability inclusive practice. They are currently working in partnership with The Bristol Old Vic on *The Elephant Man* starring Jamie Beddard, a disabled actor himself, playing Joseph Merrick,

12 — Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory*:

13 — *Ibid.*, p. 32.

14 — www.thestage.co.uk/news/2017/talent-agency-theatre-company-team-represent-learning-disabled-actors/

an important shift away from the usual practice of casting a non-disabled actor, “acting disabled”. Another mile-stone was their *Extraordinary Bodies*, a trapeze-circus show with physically disabled performers performing risky and “unthinkable” acts and so really pushing limiting attitudes around disability through the art form.

Unlimited was formed in 2012. It is an arts commissioning programme that enables new work by disabled artists to reach the UK and international audiences across art forms, with its intention to, “change perceptions of disabled people by commissioning disabled artists [...] to make new, ground-breaking and high-quality work”¹⁵. From 2013–2016 Unlimited supported work seen by over 130,000 people. This is an ever-growing and important festival and offers spaces for vital debates and is central at moving and pushing disability artists and companies into main stream spaces. This is an important and innovative organisation, that celebrates, nurtures and promotes new disability performance aesthetics.

Creative Minds was formed in 2013 by a group of artists with learning disabilities who wanted to be in control of how they were being represented in the performing arts. Unfortunately, still today, learning disabled performers are seen as “not being able” to achieve, and never being quite good enough. They are often still placed into environments whereby they can only access the arts as a form of therapy or advocacy. Creative Minds initiated a series of national events over five years that involved conversations with the performing arts industry whereby learning disabled artists articulated their right to lead, and to make their own work rather than always being led. Jez Colborne (*Irresistible*) was the first learning disabled performer who was commissioned by Unlimited and who shared his experiences at the 2014 Creative Minds Conference¹⁶.

Ramps on the Moon was formed in 2014, bringing together seven UK theatre companies and Graeae Theatre Company. For over six years it has been touring, training and bringing in disabled actors into these mainstream venues and productions. Its purpose is to re-position disability into mainstream theatre venues, so that disability becomes an unexpected part of the industry. The programme aims to make profound changes in the employment and artistic opportunities for disabled performers and creative teams, and a cultural change in the participating organisations to enable accessibility, to become a central part of their thinking and to inform their making processes of theatre.

15 — weareunlimited.org.uk/

16 — disabilityarts.online/magazine/opinion/creative-minds-north-arts-conference-difference/

Each year inclusive shows are made and toured as well as staff training.

A Different Way was formed by Daryl Beeton, a disabled theatre-maker and actor, to address the lack of representation by Disabled Artists within the Theatre for Young Audiences sector. A Different Way creates opportunities to explore ways of enabling the “voice of young disabled people at the heart of the creative approach”¹⁷ by working with a number of established theatre companies to create the growth and development of the Theatre for Young Audiences sector in their approach to making “work with rather than for disabled young people”¹⁸.

Access All Areas is an “award-winning, urban, disruptive performance by learning disabled and autistic artists”¹⁹ that was originally formed in 1976 as Rainbow Theatre Group. The company operate from Graeae Theatre Studios, London, and its signature work is driven by politics, site specific immersive theatre, whereby performances happen in non-theatre spaces and places. Their most recent collaboration was *Madhouse Re:Exit*²⁰, which was a response to the economic cuts, isolation and mis-treatment and institutionalization of learning disabled people, and which ends in current times of the isolation at home. One of the actors, Cian Binchy comments:

We used to be locked away in institutions for life. Now we're just stuck at home, and in some ways it's like our bedrooms have become like institutions because we're stuck there with nothing to do. We're just ignored and treated like we don't exist.²¹

In 2013, Access All Areas also co-formed a one-year Diploma at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in response to the exclusion of people with Learning Disabilities²². This initiative, which in 2015 won the Guardian University Award for Student Diversity and Widening Participation²³, was created for a clear purpose:

17 — darylbeeton.com/a-different-way/

18 — Ibid.

19 — www.disabilityartsinternational.org/artists/profiles/access-all-areas/

20 — www.accessallareastheatre.org/madhouse-reexit/

21 — www.thelowry.com/news/learning-disabled-artists-platform-to-campaign-and-provoke-in-madhouse

22 — Liselle Terret, “Re-Positioning The Learning-Disabled Performing Arts Student as Critical Facilitator”, in Sheila Preston, ed., *Applied Theatre: Facilitation. Pedagogies, Practices, Resistance*, London, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016. www.cssd.ac.uk/course/performance-making-diploma-learning-disabled-adults

23 — www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2015/mar/19/student-diversity-category-award-winner-and-runners-up

[...] “in response to the exclusion of adults with learning disabilities from current professional HE performance-related training courses” and re-affirms the performer as co-creator in authoring devised solo and ensemble performances to develop new aesthetic performance forms and pedagogical practices that are post-dramatic, experimental and often site specific. It focused on “subverting and challenging hegemonic values and assumptions experienced by people with learning disabilities”.²⁴

The course is going from strength to strength, with 10-15 performance and acting graduates each year, and many have gone on to perform with professional companies, forming their own companies, their own solo performance art touring shows, and have landed roles in a number of television programmes.

In the summer of 2016, I worked with a number of the diploma students and co-created a political punk rock cabaret, *Not F**ckin' Sorry*²⁵ (NFS), which was then commissioned by Duckie and Soho Theatre. NFS was influenced by the autobiographical stories of discrimination, and personal struggle experienced by the collaborative company of performers. As a co-director/deviser of this production, we decided to return to the historical Victorian *freak shows* place where disabled bodies were performed as spectacle and to re-appropriate this discriminatory performance so as to turn around this disabling gaze.

Based on autobiographical experiences, but moving away from individual narratives towards finding a form to perform collective discriminatory experiences, we played with stereotyping, flaunting bodies, using metaphors to perform the pain of exclusion, breaking down of the fourth wall, to create a confrontational and outrageous political cabaret where the performers defiantly performed and vocalized “we are not f**ckin' sorry for who we are”: [...] “disabled people’s experiences, narratives, and stories [...] to highlight the serious politics of the discrimination experienced”.²⁶

We wanted to shift from pity into pride and ultimately into political activism.

24 — Sally Mackey, Liselle Terret, “Move Over, There’s Room Enough: Performance Making Diploma: training for learning disabled adults”, *RiDE, The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 2015, vol. 20, n.º 4, pp. 1-5.

25 — /performanceprocesses.wordpress.com/

26 — disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/Barnes-glasgow-lecture.pdf

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We transformed the personal experiences of tragedy into rebellious, sexy, confrontational, angry crip queer persons on stage.

*Not F**ckin' Sorry* re-appropriated the *freak show*²⁷ as a means of both exposing the enduring discriminatory and voyeuristic experiences of learning disabled²⁸ and neuro-divergent people²⁹, and moving the LD performers away from the objectified positioning inherent to a medical model of disability. An example in the performance included a crip re-visitation of stimming³⁰, a socially taboo behaviour of self-stimulation often associated with neuro-divergent people often performed daily by LD. The performers visibly flaunted and redefined how they wanted to perform their bodies on stage in their own terms. There is a re-positioning of identity that happens on stage when the LD person is revealed as a political and disability activist, saying “Damn right, you better look. Look long and hard... Look at me straight on, because for all your years of gawking, you are still not seeing me”³¹.

The performers did not want any pity from the audience, instead they seduced them, using the historical and continued *freak-gaze* that projects onto them the idea that people with learning disabilities are some kind of natural “phenomenon”. The opportunity of the audience’s tragedy model of disability-gaze afforded the performers to re-position themselves centre stage to then *crip* queer this gaze into a performance of proud sexuality, gendered bodies and a celebration of disability as “desirable”.

27 — Eli Clare, “Freaks and Queers”, in Margaret Hobbs, Carla Rice, eds., *Gender and Women’s Studies in Canada: Critical Terrain*, Toronto, Women’s Press, 2013, ch. xv, pp. 145-159.

28 — The term “learning disability” is a contentious label. For an in-depth discussion on the complexity and politics of such a term refer to Matt Hargrave, *Theatres of Learning Disability: Good, Bad, or Plain Ugly?*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire / New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 21-27. However, the British Institute of Learning Disabilities states on their website: “The term ‘learning disability’ is a label, and a label only ever describes one aspect of a person; a person with a learning disability is always a person first.” www.bild.org.uk/about-bild/aboutbild/

29 — Judy Singer, *Odd People In: The Birth of Community Amongst People on the ‘Autism Spectrum’*: A personal exploration of a New Social Movement based on Neurological Diversity, Sydney, Faculty of Humanities and Social Science University of Technology, 1998. Singer wrote: “For me, the significance of the ‘Autism spectrum’ lies in its call for and anticipation of a ‘politics of neurodiversity’. The ‘neurologically different’ represent a new addition to the familiar political categories of class / gender / race and will augment the insights of the Social Model of Disability. The rise of neurodiversity takes post-modern fragmentation one step further. Just as the postmodern era sees every once too solid belief melt into air, even our most taken-for granted assumptions: that we all more or less see, feel, touch, hear, smell, and sort information, in more or less the same way, (unless visibly disabled) are being dissolved”; pp.12-13.

30 — www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/obsessions-repetitive-routines.aspx

31 — Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability Queerness, and Liberation*, Cambridge, MA, South End Press Classics, 2009, p. 110.

Following this description of some of the disability-focused organisations and performing arts companies, I would like to close just by listing some more of the key companies that are also engaging in important steps forward in the UK: Birds of Paradise Theatre Company, The Lawnmowers Independent Theatre Company, Gatehead, Dark Horse Theatre Company, Hijinx Theatre Company, Lung Ha Theatre Company, Edinburgh, Vital Xposure, M-SET, Deafinitely Theatre Company, Oily Cart, and Extant Theatre Company.

What do all of these organisations have in common? Richard Tomlinson, Co-Founder of Graeae Theatre Company, said,

The very act of controlling the particular medium for a certain time in front of a largely passive, captive audience, actually does allow for the possibility of cleaning away much of the methodology that has been created about disability... So performance gives power... [...]³²

These organisations are creating public platforms and spaces for disabled artists who have been silenced and marginalised. In the above statement, Tomlinson raises questions about the potency of these platforms, to re-balance the disparity of power, of educating and challenging the mis-conceptions surrounding disability and indeed all those individual stories. We are in a time when those macro “pillars of certain truths” and knowledges are being torn down to reveal those silenced and pushed out, shining a light on how our language and historical institutions have re-enforced the disparity of power at play in our society.

To conclude, this article has brought together some of the current, dynamic political thinking around disability and inclusion in the performing arts through Kafer’s Political-Relational Model of Disability. Through this model the article has pulled together a number of organisations that are similar in terms of their ethics of practice that fits within this model. However, more than that, current developments challenge a more binary thinking of disability into one of desire and celebration as articulated by McCruer and Clare as they articulate this through their crip theory that recognises disability as an ideology, as a minority culture. Currently disability and theatre in the UK is driven by a political edge but equally is informed by new performance practices that works within traditional forms of theatre but equally sits more within

32 — Richard Tomlinson, cit. in Kirsty Johnston, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

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performance and live art and immersive theatre, striving for ways to really challenge audiences mis-conceptions around disability. It is an exciting time, even in a time of constant cuts and challenge after challenge.

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