

Move Over, There's Room Enough:
Performance Making Diploma: training for learning disabled adults

Sally Mackey and Liselle Terret*

In its second year, the Performance Making Diploma at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London (Central) won The Guardian University Award for Student Diversity and Widening Participation 2015.¹ A one-year, part-time diploma, the first cohort has graduated and many have undertaken their first venture into professional work. This Points and Practices piece is an edited version of an email interview between Sally Mackey and Liselle Terret. Together with Nick Llewellyn from Access All Areas, Liselle created the Diploma.

SM: With this first year successfully completed, and the winning of the award, it's a useful time to reflect on your work. Could I start by asking you how the course started?

LT: Access All Areas (AAA) is a theatre company based in East London (at Graeae Studios), making professional performance with learning disabled people with and for the local East London community as well as for professional national touring. Nick Llewellyn, the Director of AAA and I (whilst lecturer at Central) had a long-standing professional relationship with AAA members and had worked with Applied Theatre students for over 7 years, facilitating training workshops on inclusive performing, drama-workshop practice and facilitation. We felt frustrated and passionate about the exclusion of learning disabled people in further and higher education within the performing arts. We began conversations with Central and at the same time initiated a new opportunity for AAA members and Central's Applied Theatre students to collaborate on an annual touring performance project for schools (now in its second year). However, we wanted more than this. We wanted an exclusive course for learning disabled adults in performance-making at Central. We applied for a Leverhulme Trust three-year Arts Scholarship bid with the 'go-ahead' from the outreach-focused department at Central, *Central Connects*, and we were successful.

SM: What 'is' the course?

LT: The course draws on learning disability culture, politics and disability aesthetics and re-affirms the performer as co-creator in authoring devised solo and ensemble performance. It develops skills of the performer with specific classes in physicality, 'giving voice', collaboration and devising, politics of disability arts, performance art and the performing arts industry.

SM: What was the vision for the course, its location in discourse, if you like?

LT: The vision of the course responded to the severe exclusion of learning disabled adults situated in the margins, excluded from higher education and by the professional theatre industry. The course is about developing a new generation of theatre makers and performers and aims to advocate a new performance aesthetics, as well as develop a pedagogical practice that could potentially inform other performance making courses. Seibers challenges the current ideology of 'ability' that currently sits within performance training and points to the exclusion and discrimination experienced by disabled people. Echoing Seibers, we wanted this new performance-making course to 'bring disability out of the shadow of the ideology of ability, to increase awareness about disability and to illuminate its kinds, values, and realities' (2013, 279).

SM: What experience influenced you in setting up the course?

LT: In terms of setting up the course, both Nick and I have many years of experience working with learning disabled young people and adults in education and within performance environments. Nick

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founded the outreach work at Hijinx Theatre, Wales, who now manage four training 'academies'. As well as being the Director of Access All Areas, Nick is also Director of Advocreate, an organisation he formed that offers, 'Creative self advocacy training for community and educational groups to include people with a learning disability, carers, and support staff and those working in the public and private sector' (Advocreate n.d.). Nick was a graduate of Central's undergraduate applied theatre course over a decade ago and has worked at Central as a visiting lecturer since then, contributing ideas to the course.

In terms of my own relevant experience, I first worked with learning disabled children as a 'Special Needs' teacher at Bromley Hall School, Tower Hamlets, and from there I became Senior Education Officer at Half Moon Young People's Theatre (London, UK), where I developed a 3 year programme for learning disabled children and young people in devising performance. As part of this I curated a conference, *Off The Page* (Diverse Futures n.d.) funded by the Arts Council that explored issues of accessible theatre-making with young disabled people. Claire MacDonald from Forced Entertainment, Jenny Sealey, Director of Graeae, Celeste Dandeker, co-founder of CandoCo and Daryl Beaton, Director of Kazzum were some of the presenters at this event. When working at Central, much of my research focus was in this field. In 2007 I worked with a group of learning disabled adults at The Croydon Clock Tower creating several performances, one of which was performed as part of *Heart N Soul's Beautiful Octopus Club* (documented in Terret 2009).

SM: Have there been specific academic influences that have impacted upon the thinking behind the course?

LT: We were influenced by the writing of Matt Hargrave and Emma Gee (2011) and Dave Calvert (2009) who articulate the challenges that still exist within current actor training courses and provokingly discuss the 'Pygmalion' effect of a learning disabled actor having to 'fit into' an accredited conservatoire training course (Gee and Hargrave, 2011: 44). Calvert develops this further by suggesting that such 'hegemonic values are masked or promoted' (Calvert, 2009: 77) by a type of training that is used to legitimise the exclusion of learning disabled people from access to Higher Education training in the performing arts. Sandhal (2008) also criticises current conservatoire training that often still condones the 'able-bodied' student to 'try on' disability identities, and so making huge assumptions about individuals and about intelligence. Sandal calls for a 'critical look at the metaphors that create the foundation to actor training practices' (2008, 265).

She is also very critical of the enshrined idea of the 'neutral' state that suggests that actors can be 'cured' of their 'socially-developed idiosyncrasies' (ibid). This of course just reinforces the stereotyped representations of the disabled actor as being physically and emotionally 'inflexible' (ibid) and/or portrayed as either victims or villains. Cian Binchy, one of the graduates from the first year of the course responds to this stereotyped idea by saying: 'I don't want pity ... we want respect we do ... I like ... [to show] how ridiculous it is just giving somebody just pity when (we) are capable of doing so much and to offer society ... we don't want sympathy' (Binchy 2014). We have wanted to engage seriously with such tenets in this course.

SM: Can you identify a particular style and influences on the course?

LT: The course is perhaps best described as situated – broadly - within a post-dramatic frame, so the work is experimental, non-linear, devised and also makes social and political comment on society. Such a performance style encourages the students to challenge and go beyond the single narrative and to re-present themselves. The students are encouraged to develop their own creative-making processes and to bring in their own life experiences to inform their artistic choices. The ethos of the course is one that adheres to the belief that disability is a social construct. The students explicitly have agency, therefore, and the work created has the potential to stimulate social and cultural change.

In terms of performance style, we are influenced by those satirical performance artists such as Katherine Araniello and Matt Fraser who use performance to challenge and subvert ideas around

disability through humour and parody. The Australian theatre company, *Back to Back Theatre*, has also influenced the performance styles explored on this course. The company makes theatre that challenges the 'moral, philosophical and political questions about the value of [learning disabled] individual lives' (Back To Back Theatre n.d.).

SM: And what of its future? What do you hope for?

LT: In December 2014 we held a symposium at Central ('Move Over, There's Room Enough') where some of the course's pedagogical processes and performance-aesthetics were articulated and performed. Sarah Hughes (Casting Agent) and Professor Sarah Whatley (Coventry University) and others shared their own insights about the course. The course at Central has been welcomed by the institution and has also 'impacted upon the culture at Central' (Gardner 2014) with some tutors teaching across courses. Students from different courses have also engaged in this Diploma as 'Creative Partners' with open-door performance sharings.² The publicity arising from this, together with the recent *Guardian* award, suggest a really exciting future.

We would like to see this course developing from strength to strength within Central but also to impact upon other performance and actor training courses in Higher Education in terms of access and to challenge limiting ideas of ability and disability. I would like to see learning disabled adults being accepted in conservatoire training courses, for example, so that one day there will be integrated courses that genuinely work with difference, producing a body of actors able to create profound and important performance that reflects our diverse society rather than marginalising those who cannot adhere to prescribed norms.

It is important to acknowledge that there have been and still are a number of established UK theatre companies specifically for learning disabled people who also offer training, including Mind the Gap (with Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts), Heart n Soul and Dark Horse, and many of those learning disabled performers and actors continue to create professional work. There are other training courses for disabled adults that have come and gone, and I hope this course, part of a drama conservatoire and University committed to actor training as well as work in the applied theatre field, will continue to occupy a vital and unique position.

It was a monumental event for the course to be awarded *The Guardian* University Award for Student Diversity and Widening Participation 2015. Hopefully, this recognition will seep out to other learning disabled adults who might now seriously consider coming on the course and gain a training opportunity they deserve. We would like it to expand. Finally, we have a co-researchers' working group embedded within the course that comprises a number of the students who are currently on the diploma and whose role is to interrogate, evaluate, critique and document the processes and outcomes. Working within an emancipatory research model the co-researchers engage in relevant research-training so that they are equipped with the appropriate skills and experience to fulfill and extend this vital role – one that also challenges the traditional tutor/student binary. The outcomes are constantly fed back into the course content and structure and help to ensure that the course remains relevant, accessible and of a professional standard.

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Sally Mackey is Professor of Applied Theatre and Performance and Pro-Dean at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London. She is on the editorial board of *RiDE: the Journal of Applied Performance and Theatre*, started the first UK undergraduate degree in applied theatre and developed Central's research centre Theatre Applied: the Centre for Research in Performance and Social Practice. She publishes on performance, place, community and the environment in co-editing themed editions in *RiDE*, for example, 'On Site and Place' and 'Environmentalism'. Together with Dee Heddon, she is co-editing the new Palgrave series on *Performing Landscapes* and her own contribution will be *Performing Landscapes: Homes*.

Liselle joined the Performing Arts department at Coventry University in 2014, following ten years as Applied Theatre lecturer at The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. In 2014, Liselle completed a curatorial practice website (www.lipsickqueerfeministneoburlesque.wordpress.com) that archives and articulates a series of 'low art' symposiums. She also makes queer feminist neo-burlesque as Doris La Trine, critiqued by Nally C, (2012) *Naked Exhibitionism: Gendered Performance and Public Exposure* and has performed with Annie Sprinkle (The Chelsea Theatre 2008). With Access All Areas, Liselle founded and developed the Performance Making Diploma with learning disabled adults at Central and this course won The Guardian University Award for Student Diversity and Widening Participation in 2015.

¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2015/mar/19/student-diversity-category-award-winner-and-runners-up> [Accessed 14th May 2015]

² Creative Partners was a term coined by Housni Hassan (known as DJ) during the evaluation meeting following the first year. Creative Partners were originally called 'Buddies' but students felt this was not a useful term. The Creative Partners are students from other courses at Central and they attend some of the sessions, evaluation and co-research meetings.