DisAbility on Stage – Exploring the Physical in Dance and Performer Training

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Abstract

This paper addresses the accessibility of dance and performer training for people with disabilities, focussing on two case studies at Swiss art universities in the context of the research project *DisAbility on Stage*. Two stage labs, at the Accademia Teatro Dimitri in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland and at the Zurich University of the Arts in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, aimed to develop skills at the intersection of educational practices, theatre, and dance, productions by and with artists with disabilities, and practice-based research at art universities.

Keywords

Performer training, disability, physical theatre, dance, stage lab.

The interdisciplinary research project at the Institute for the Performing Arts and Film (IPF) at Zurich University of the Arts, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, is the first

comprehensive examination of theatre and dance practices by and with artists with disabilities in Switzerland that include different language regions. In cooperation with the Accademia Teatro Dimitri in Verscio, the Universities of Basel and Berne, several theatre and dance companies and festivals in the German-, French- and Italian-speaking parts of Switzerland, the aim of the project is to encourage discourse on disability at art schools and universities and to put the resulting insights into practice.

Two model collaborations promote the participation of people with disabilities in educational dance and theatre training programmes: The Master's degree in Physical Theatre at Accademia Teatro Dimitri in Verscio, in collaboration with the dance theatre company Teatro DanzAbile from Ticino (Stage Lab 1); and the Bachelor's degree in Contemporary Dance at Zurich University of the Arts, in collaboration with BewegGrund in Berne and Teatro DanzAbile in Ticino (Stage Lab 2). Kick-off workshops, colloquia and several preparatory and evaluation meetings provided opportunities for critical reflection and exchange between different stakeholders from theatre and dance practices and art schools as well as art universities.

The aims of these stage labs were as follows:

– Raising awareness for disability within the art schools and universities (students and teaching staff, but also infrastructures, such as facility management etc.).

– Examining the potential and issues regarding the embedding of the collaboration between dancers with or without disabilities and/or performers in the curriculum.

– Presenting the work process, along with public podiums and audience discussions, at festivals.

This paper focuses on two case studies in the Italian- and German-speaking parts of Switzerland as a multicultural country. We will characterize the artistic and educational context before focusing on the two stage laboratories and their outcomes.

Background

Compared to other countries, accessibility for students with disabilities at Swiss art universities is an emerging field. Switzerland ratified the UN convention for the rights of people with disabilities in April 2015, one of the last nations in Europe to do so. The convention includes the right to participate in (Higher) Education (article 24), as well as access to the labour market (article 27). In contrast to the legal conditions, an interim report of the research project *Art.School.Differences* at the Zurich University of the Arts, in collaboration with other Art Schools, concludes that the results of the study demonstrate without any doubt that the legally requested quality of different social groups—despite all efforts and measurable changes—are not achieved yet in the domain of art universities.[1]

In contrast to this "status quo," there is a vibrant scene of performing artists with disabilities in all of Switzerland's language areas. Companies such as BewegGrund in Berne, Theater HORA in Zurich, Teatro DanzAbile in Ticino, and dansehabile in Geneva, as well as festivals in several cities, promote and celebrate dance and theatre with/by artists with disabilities. Since 2009, Theater HORA — the first professional theatre company of actors with cognitive disabilities — has run an actor training programme for people with cognitive disabilities separate from regular training programmes at Swiss art universities.

The disparity between the great success of artists with disabilities in theatre and dance and the exclusion of people with disabilities at art schools, led to the colloquium on *Disability and Performer Training* at the Institute for the Performing Arts and Film at Zurich University of the Arts in October 2016. The colloquium used best practice examples from European countries to show how people with disabilities can access Higher Education programmes.[2] At the the Staatstheater Darmstadt in Germany, a government-funded state theatre, there are two ensemble members with physical disabilities. Jana Zöll, an actress with brittle-bone disease who studied

at the drama school in Ulm, Germany, shared her experience as an actress in a state theatre ensemble.

In the performing arts, exclusive mechanisms are connected to particular conditions of the medium. Comparisons can be drawn with other artistic disciplines, such as design or fine arts. In dance, as well as in physical theatre, which is understood at the Accademia Teatro Dimitri as a theatre form where the body and movement are at the center of the dramaturgical process, the body is a tool for creating the work, and movement is a means of expression and the origin of the artistic form and content. The artist is connected to the (creative) work, and the body with disabilities becomes the medium, as well as the topic of the performance. This is the case whether the disability is visible or invisible. Historically and culturally shaped perceptions of bodies and humans—as well as traded techniques of appearing or exposure on stage—are "imprinted" into the performer's body (Roach 1989). Carrie Sandahl (2005) writes that the "tyranny of the neutral," which demands a "permeable" body, excludes people with disabilities from consideration as performers (p. 206). Yet dramatic literature suggests that disabilities have been used as a metaphor. For example, disabilities are employed to portray divine justice or depict superhuman powers, such the blindness of the prophet Tiresias in Sophocles' *Antigone*, or as a manifestation of moral vices—Richard III's severe limp in Shakespeare—while actors with disabilities themselves are often used to exemplify the outsider. According to Snyder and Mitchell (2002), more often disability serves as a "*narrative* prosthesis," a crutch on which literary *narratives* lean for their representational power (p. 15). On stage, however, disabled characters are often portrayed by non-disabled actors (Lewis 2005). Casting a performer with disabilities is a conceptual choice because, according to Siebers (2012), actors with disabilities are visible on stage, while "neutral" bodies are invisible. Thus, the Diderotian "Paradox of the Actor" turns into a "Paradox for the disabled Actor," as Sandahl (2005) states:

> [T]he body in crisis is described as appropriately represented by a symmetrical

> body in full, even incredible, control. Disabled bodies, whose parts often move in opposing, unnatural ways [...] are excluded from representing those whose bodies might most resemble their own. (p. 260)

To discuss disability performance *within* performing arts practices and discourses, not as isolated from them, leads to a "re-routing" of performing methods and discourse and to an investigation of normalizing processes in performing arts practices. This theoretical and practical knowledge laid the ground for the stage laboratories in the context of *DisAbility on Stage*.

Stage Lab 1 – "Dettagli"

In November 2016, six performers with disabilities from the Compagnia Teatro DanzAbile (Lugano, Switzerland) and eight Master's students in Physical Theatre at Accademia Teatro Dimitri (Verscio, Switzerland) met in a two-week physical theatre workshop. This workshop

Figure 1: Still image from Stage Lab 1's video

took place within the larger frame of the research project *DisAbility on Stage*, led by the Institute for the Performing Arts and Film of the Zurich University of the Arts.

Emanuel Rosenberg, the artistic director of Teatro DanzAbile and the ORME Festival in Lugano, directed the practical workshop. It was designed as a practice-based research approach to investigate connections between physical theatre and theatre/dance by performers with disabilities. Such an approach deeply engages the participants as well as the researchers in action and reflection.

The workshop brought two theatre and dance groups together that had never met before, consequently creating a space in which people who could not be more different had the opportunity to come into contact. Despite their heterogeneity, or perhaps because of it, the two groups became one, displaying an extraordinarily strong familiarity.

The workshop's structure can be divided into three phases or steps. First, the groups got to know each other. Second, there was a finding of trust with the participants and with Rosenberg. In the third phase, the performance was composed for the public.

First phase – Knowing Each Other

The first phase—knowing each other—was the basis of the workshop on which the next two phases were built. This was challenging, mainly because of the participants' different backgrounds. It is important to note that the dissimilarity was not only based on being "disabled" or "non-disabled." In fact, the opposition of "disabled" and "non-disabled" did not prove to be relevant in the way the workshop was designed, it was other divisions that were often the source of tensions and collisions: culture, language or identity, for example.

From the beginning, Rosenberg's goal was to find a common ground and to encourage participants' sensitivity to their bodies and those of others. Thus, "body" was one of the most important keywords for this laboratory; everyone has a body, their body, which is different from

other bodies. Each body has its "abilities," "disabilities," and "fragilities." Recognizing them in oneself and others was the foundation of the participants' encounters. Rosenberg began by guiding the participants through various exercises in order to learn everyone's name. According to him, the name is the first identification of a person that is completely free of judgement. The name is, therefore, the first presence of an individual and this must be perceived as the first step in getting to know each other. Only then can the next step of an approximation can be made.

Rosenberg chose the physical method focusing on the details of each body. At the beginning of the workshop, the participants were asked to pick five details on the various bodies, no matter what kind, and to memorize them in their own way. As a consequence, the process of getting to know each other occurred verbally (by name) as well as physically (through the body and its details). This method presents a logical approach: it provides the possibility for everyone to have knowledge of the other. By focusing on the body as the centre of the process of acquaintance, no one is excluded. Everyone present has a body that they use physically day-to-day, both consciously and unconsciously. This consideration, as simple as it may seem, should be the basis of any inclusive work.

Second Phase – The Finding of Trust

The first phase of getting to know one another and of becoming aware of one's identity as well as one's body, was important for the second step. Not until the participants know both themselves and others is it possible for them to meet on a personal and emotional level and build trust. Again, Rosenberg utilized the body and the possibilities of its physical access to other bodies. An essential part of this process were the warm-up exercises at the beginning of each day. During these exercises, the participants would connect with their partners through various points of their bodies, physically approaching each other. The physical contact through these "points of connection" was essential to experience a feeling of closeness and distance, as

well as to sense the limitations and fragilities of the other.

Finding trust was not easy, especially for the Master's students, because it was also about leaving their "comfort zone." They were accustomed to striving for the kind of perfection they had set for themselves, shaped by their artistic and academic career. This quest for perfection led some to feel that they had to retreat from the so-called "disabled" performers of DanzAbile, yet this contradicted the inclusive intentions of the workshop. The performers of DanzAbile had no notions of perfection, they simply experienced and indulged in the events without questioning them. The Master's students gradually began to let go of their perfectionist expectations and started to approach the unfamiliar and unknown. Regarding this issue, Rosenberg always made a point to say that he can "only" accompany the process of each participant, but not determine it.

A dialogue emerges only when each brings the grammar of one's own body; this is fundamental in building trust. Confidence rises from the common language and space that are created. Rosenberg's exercises offered many opportunities for body and eye contact, as well as finding a common rhythm among all participants. His goal was to engage physically and mentally with the offers, demands, desires, emotions, barriers, energies, encounters, fragilities and challenges of all those involved in the workshop in order to gain and accept confidence in oneself, in the project, in the participants, and in Rosenberg.

Third Phase – The Composing of a Piece

Once trust was established, it was possible to tackle the third phase: the composing of a piece. Rosenberg made this move transparent by announcing on the seventh day of the workshop that they were now working towards the performance. He also asked the group about the elements they wanted to integrate into the piece. Thus, there was a common decision as to what form the composition would take.

At some point, however, Rosenberg had to take responsibility for the final decisions, although he always took the group's comments, opinions and questions into account. It should be emphasized that Rosenberg had great patience with each performer. It was important that Rosenberg created the framing and determined the structure through which the composition would be compiled. Through his perspective as a viewer, only he could see from the "outside" what did and did not work on stage. This "outsider" perspective also gave the performers freedom, and the chance to relax and concentrate on the events on stage and their own positions, leaving the framing of the production to Rosenberg.

The rough composition happened relatively quickly. From this point on, there was work on the filling of the scenes and their transitions, which was more intense and required much concentration from everyone involved. Because the group had previously established a harmonious relationship, prior conflicts and problems were identified, worked on, and solved together. In the main, conflicts and problems were principally due to the timid perfectionism of the Master's students: because the results of this two-week process would now be presented to the public, pressure on the performers increased.

Rosenberg was always aware of feelings of insecurity and fragility, the central themes of the workshop. He was also aware that the opening of a performance to an audience needed packaging, because "making something public" on stage is a fragile venture that must be protected.

The opening night in Verscio on 18 of November 2016 was a success, which was felt in the subsequent public discussion. Both the audience and the performers raised important issues and talked about them. We can say with some certainty that the output of the two-week workshop produced food for thought in various directions.

Figure 2: Still image from Stage Lab 1's video

Stage Lab 2

The second stage lab with students from the Bachelor Contemporary Dance programme of the Zurich University of the Arts, as well as with performers who work with the inclusive company BewegGrund in Berne and Teatro DanzAbile in Ticino, took place in spring 2017 under the artistic direction of the Israeli choreographer Emanuel Gat. Gat's choreography has been described by a French critic as "visual music, interpreted through the body," which met the specific repertoire of movements by the dancers. The decision to engage a famous choreographer was made by the head of the training programme. Preparatory workshops with the participants formed the basis of this collaboration. It was also helpful that the research team and the directors of Teatro DanzAbile and BewegGrund—Emanuel Rosenberg and Susanne Schneider, respectively—supported the workshops by offering warm-ups, mentoring, facilitating the communication in different languages (including sign language) and conducting daily small group

interviews. The setting was modified on a daily basis. For example, some participants felt the need for a group warm-up inspired by contact improvisation. This wish was implemented into the working schedule as soon as it had been expressed: a flexibility that was important for communication between all participants and for their well-being.

The workshop began with a song that everybody knew. This was the first task Emanuel Gat gave to the group, consisting of almost 20 dancers. In smaller groups, the participants created a movement. Over the course of two weeks, Gat gave them different tasks that each of the dancers could adopt according to their own physical grammar and "body archive." His unique method provided freedom for the dancers who shared in the authorship. At the end, the excerpts developed by the dancers were put together like a random generator, following a numerical algorithm.

A variety of issues emerged in discussions during the process. The dancers with disabilities had different levels of stage/theatre/dance experience. The need to create their own material was challenging for some dancers with little experience. In contrast to the students, they felt that they did not have access to such a rich "archive" of movements imprinted into their bodies. Professionalism and experience, as well as different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, dominated disability. At the same time, the dancers with disabilities introduced alternative ways of dancing. A deaf dancer read from lips, for example, provoking debate on speaking/lip reading as a form of communicating through movement.

The dancers with disabilities described the work with a professional choreographer and the students as a valuable experience that extended their dance skills. The students appreciated learning other ways of training or working that they were not used to, particularly in the preparatory workshop led by BewegGrund and Teatro DanzAbile. There was an exchange of knowledge on both sides.

Interest from the non-disabled students is evidenced by the fact that three Bachelor students

chose to write their BA thesis on dance and disability. Another student applied to Candoco Dance Company and a further student collaborated with a dancer with visual impairment who participated in the stage lab.

Consequences and next steps

Evaluation of the overall project is in its early stages, but includes the rich debates within the art schools and universities and during the festival tour in summer 2017 (consisting of showings/performances and vibrant discussions with the audiences). Even now, the stage laboratories show a sustainable impact, both at Accademia Teatro Dimitri and Zurich University of the Arts.

The Accademia Teatro Dimitri is currently designing a new Advanced Studies Program, or competence centre, focusing on inclusive training in physical theatre that includes people with disabilities in higher education. The project gained attention in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland, and was awarded second place in the Credit Suisse Award for Best Teaching.

At the Zurich University of the Arts, the stage laboratory has become a fixed part of the curriculum in the BA Contemporary Dance and will take place every two years. We consider this achievement a first step, and hope that it will encourage people with disabilities to apply for the BA programme.

Community performance artist and a disability culture activist Petra Kuppers (2003) stated:

> The physically impaired performer has to negotiate two areas of cultural meaning: invisibility as an active member in the public sphere, and hypervisibility and instant categorization as passive consumer and victim in much of the popular imagination. (p.48)

By not focusing on the bifurcation of "disabled" and "non-disabled," the two "DisAbility on Stage" laboratories showed that these cultural meanings are not inevitable. From a social,

cultural and artistic perspective, the research project also showed how physical theatre and dance can allow performers with disabilities to be subjects of their own creative work.

Video Description

As part of the Stag Lab 1, the Accademia Teatro Dimitri organized the production of a video that accompanied the whole workshop phase: `https://vimeo.com/216864689`. The video made by Dante Carbini, Sara Bocchini and Demis Quadri represents a series of statements of the workshop: "To explore through movement and the body the stories contained in each individual" (details), "To create together complementing each other's individual resources" (encounter), "To be aware of the generative power inherent in fragility" (fragility), "To express in a personal way one's own artistic need" (necessity) and "To discover the knowledge stemming from practice and experience" (knowing or being?).

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Notes

[1]See Saner, P., Vögele, S., & Vessely, P. (2016). *Schlussbericht Art.School.Differences: Researching Inequalities and Normativities in the Field of Higher Art Education* (p. 4). Retrieved from https://blog.zhdk.ch/artschooldifferences/files/2016/10/ASD_Schlussbericht_final_web_verlinkt.pdf. (translated from German to English).

[2]See the project "Rethinking Bodies" at Royal Conservatory Antwerp or Sarah Whatley's study "Moving Matters. Supporting disabled students in Higher education," which focusses on the situation in the United Kingdom, for example.