

«Brückenschlag zwischen Behinderung und Bühne»

Symposium, 5. Juni 2007, Kultur- und Begegnungszentrum Union, Basel,

Referat Adam Benjamin: The sum of its parts. Choreographing for integrated companies

Adam spoke about the state of integrated dance in a historic and global context, in relationship to what is happening today in Switzerland. He spoke without a paper and these therefore are notes rather than a formal representation.

Until the early 1990s the majority of disabled people involved in dance were doing so as some kind of dance therapy. This had two overwhelming effects; it perpetuated the belief that disabled people's involvement in dance could only be as recipients and meant that most independent disabled people kept away or expressed their interest in physical activity through sports (hence the growth of the Paralympics in the 1980s while dance remained out of sight).

When I began this work with Celeste Dandeker in the early 1990s we determined to see everything that we could that was being shown publicly. We were often surprised at the poor quality of what we saw and equally surprised by the very positive response to the work by those watching. It was clear to us that audiences were responding not to the art but to the disabilities and we were convinced that whatever we were to put on stage must be capable of surmounting this 'sympathetic response'.

Today 17 years on the scene in the UK has changed radically. There are a range of companies performing and there is a complete acceptance that a young disabled person can, if they are talented enough, find employment in the dance sector.

Why should we be optimistic about the advent of disabled people coming into dance?

Adam talked about some correspondence he had come across shortly before traveling to Switzerland from a young girl who had been in an accident but had wanted to continue her dance studies using her wheelchair. Adam had replied at that time that she should, she could, but she may have to re-educate her teachers along the way! He noted she has for the past 7 years been employed full time as a professional dancer.

Standing on the shoulders of giants.

Adam asked how many of the audience were not dancers or were not familiar with dance history. He then gave a flying history of dance from the 1930s to the present day!

Since the early modern dance pioneers there has been a movement away from classical form and line toward an appreciation of the individual and their relationship to moving in and through the real world. Thus when Martha Graham danced bare foot on the ground in the 1930s (as opposed to dancing en pointe on a stage) she was on a journey that was continued by figures like Cunningham in the 1960s (who did away with the need for a central soloist - insisting that all dancers were equally important) and Paxton and the Judson Church group in the 70s (who questioned the restrictions placed on what could be considered dance). The current highly integrated dance scene in the UK and US is a result of a long history of community dance (Laban, Sherbourne), a combination of political movements (the Disability Rights campaigners and in the USA, the post Vietnam influx of disabled people into the public arena). Companies like CandoCo in the UK and Axis in the US are the natural continuation of the evolution of dance history and one that can be seen in the many and varied dancers participating

professionally with choreographers as diverse as Teshigawara (Japan), Petronio (USA) and Newsom (UK).

Integrated practice has been seized upon in various countries around the world, for example some wonderful work is happening in Ethiopia and in South Africa and there is a risk that some of the western European countries are going to be left behind. (Adam suggested that Switzerland might be one of those countries!!)

Critical Eye

The difficulties in assessing work that involves disabled people. There is still a lack of criticality in dance audience and lack of understanding amongst professional critics about how to comment on the work.

Need to present work that allows all the human range of emotions rather than just sympathy - work that challenges both performers and audience.

Importance of placing work in the mainstream and avoiding the disability arts ghetto to spread the message that this is relevant to all of us in society. Importance of creating archives and history. CandoCo is still producing work 17 years down the line, so too are a host of young integrated companies across the UK and around the world. It is now possible to assess a company's work in relation to last year, or the year before, or the year before that, to view the varied approaches of different choreographers and to compare one integrated company with another, and from one country to another. Criticism is now possible and that is to everyone's benefit. In fact when an integrated company gets its first bad review, it can be said to have arrived!

Evolution

Enormous progress has been made in the UK since the early 1990s. The numbers of disabled people actively involved in dance has soared, as has the number of disabled people employed in the dance sector. The rest of Europe is lagging behind in this respect and there are still too few professional companies or indeed any companies that can place their work in mainstream theaters. Switzerland has a small and dedicated group of practitioners and there seems to be plenty of interest but the work has struggled to find acceptance or the kind of funding to help it develop into the professional arena.

Once again it is important to realize that this movement represents the most exciting and important development in dance perhaps since the 1970s, it is not a side show or back water, it is a hugely important evolutionary shift in the art form with very important social and political messages and about diversity and acceptance.

Once a country has a dance company that is doing something extraordinary, the shift in attitudes from funders, from the public, from young people wanting to be involved, from dance educationalists and dance schools quickly follows.

Biog.

Adam Benjamin. Award winning choreographer, Rayne Fellow, Co-Founder and Ex Artistic Director CandoCo Dance Company, Author of Making an Entrance. Theory and Practice for Disabled and Non-Disabled Dancers. A dance artist working internationally, his most recent works have been for Remix Dance Company (South Africa) and for Scottish Dance Theatre. Adam is a board member of Derby Dance and Russell Maliphant Dance Company.