



LOUISE KATEREGA, MARIJKE SMITS AND SIMON ROWE, UTRECHT, MARCH 2000 PHOTO: ROSA VERHOEVE

## GAINED IN TRANSLATION

Louise Katerega, independent dance artist and co-artistic director of FOOT IN HAND, on learning as a dancer/choreographer through working in integrated dance

**N**ot really being tied to one organisation or institution for much of the last ten years has allowed me to look around – quite literally – the world of disability dance.

I have taught and advised in a number of settings in the UK, in educational organisations from primary level through to degree, recreational groups, day centres; I have sat on national committees and attended national conferences. I have been fortunate enough to work in South Africa and Holland, independently and as assistant to my long-standing friend and mentor in this work, choreographer Adam Benjamin, Co-founder of Candoco.

For me the world of integrated dance has proved full of treasures, which have enriched me as a person certainly, but more importantly enhanced my technical skills as a dancer, clarity as a teacher/director and my range as a choreographer.

My official story begins in November 1994 when I was dance leader on a BTEC National Diploma in Performing Arts in Coventry. I went along full of curiosity to

the first day of a CandoCo residency at Hereward FE College for physically disabled students. Ostensibly, I was there to make sure my four (non-disabled) placement students didn't sneak off home at lunchtime, but Adam was short of non-disabled bodies and so I joined in... and I've never looked back. Until now. Below I share a brief retrospective of that decade, draped loosely round some prevailing myths about dance and disability I've variously inherited, overheard and witnessed in action, ultimately to watch them explode in my own face, the face of mainstream dance and most profoundly in the face of the many lived experiences I have had thanks to that largely accidental encounter with integrated dance.

I'd seen Candoco a few months before then. I'd stared at the disabled dancers for the first 15 minutes, then settled down and enjoyed it for what it was: captivating performance and choreography. Do I stare now? A bit. I'd say I've got it down to about 15 seconds- but I stare at non-disabled dancers for that long when they first come on stage too, take time to register height, shape, hair colour,

costume. In a disability performance I register wheelchair, crutches, absent limb, physical manifestations suggesting learning disability... And they really have the same significance to me as... height, shape, hair colour, costume

Ever since I wrote my best friend in primary school who had spinabifida into two school plays incorporating her chair as a prop or throne, I have never been able to see disability as a barrier to performance. I didn't see it as one. I didn't see Candoco treat it as one. If anything, disability was just a stimulus to creativity, good dancing and choreography. Those were my expectations for a professional dance performance and I got them. I still ask them of what I see and make now, whatever kind of bodies are performing it.

Here was the state of my career November 1994: I was 25 and wondering if there was a future for an overweight (by industry standards) community dancer Not Based In London. My late teens were a hellishly negative experience involving two illustrious dance training institutions – all centred round how supposedly unsuitable MY “able” body >

LOUISE KATEREGA & TOM ST LOUIS, JOHANNESBURG, OCTOBER 2000 PHOTO: JOHN HOGG



was for a professional dance career, despite it being trained from age 3 in a number of techniques.

This is the background to...

**Myth 1: dance and disability are strange bedfellows**

Hey all you out there! Never mind which box you might tick to describe yourself:

Ever been told your body was wrong for dance? Ever felt your culture is under-represented or misunderstood? Are you a poor relative to the average income in this rich Western country? Feel there is no career structure for you? That you have no political voice?

Do I hear a “yes” regardless of dance form or disability? Before I seem to presume that my experience as a professional dancer in the UK – or as a woman of colour – is identical to that of any disabled person, I understand my position to be relative. But you cannot look at me and tell me I know nothing about prejudice. I feel there has been no accident in my ending up where I have. Led there by, Adam, a Jewish man. But



MARIJKE SMITS AND LOUISE KATEREGA IN REHEARSAL, UTRECHT, NOVEMBER 2000 PHOTO: ROSA VERHOEVE

relative is exactly what I believe dance and disability are. Related, sometimes closely sometimes less so. We share more than divides us, more than I ever thought when I began this journey.

I have come to believe that dance and disability are a natural alliance – it's undeniably a thin end/thick end of the wedge affair, but there are genuine similarities prejudices disabled and non-disabled dancers face from inside outside the profession. More cheerfully, there are the artistic benefits I have seen the one offer the other, which leads me on to...

**Myth 2: non-disabled dancers have nothing to gain by interacting with disabled people**

In my experience, the potential gains for non-disabled dance students working alongside disabled ones are: increased physical inventiveness rather than relying on familiar patterns, risk taking and giving clear direction to others. I frequently find these skills abound in my disabled students where they are lacking in my non-disabled ones. As one student with cerebral palsy once said to me,

simply: "For me everything is choreography"

Those with little movement or speech who have had much opportunity to watch the world go by, used to directing personal assistants, can be extremely efficient at arranging bodies in space. The young deaf people I've worked with are clearer, stronger and more facially expressive than their hearing peers. In terms of partnering, I have experienced double-work with dancers with downs syndrome with whom I have had to do none of my usual arduous coaching, as my partners instantly and instinctively felt how to negotiate and invent whilst securely supporting my body.

To this list I add: a respect for the power and detail of small movement that has extended the range of my choreography no end; the ability to see my non-disabled students as true physical individuals for whom movement may need to be adapted in subtle ways in order for them to achieve what I set. This all stems directly from my experiences of leading, assisting and dialoguing with

disabled dancers. I'm still wearing my L-plates as the driver of the choreographic process. But boy, does it help in getting the best out of my dancers that I'm a skilled mechanic. And speaking of skill...

**Myth 3: there is some unique gift or complex formula for the teaching of disabled dancers**

Adam Benjamin remains for me the benchmark of what I am trying to achieve as a teacher and choreographer of integrated work. And after ten years watching his work grow from small scale and community works to award winning standing ovations at International Festivals, after much intellectual struggle I arrived at this conclusion: It comes down to being as simple and as complex as just being as good as you can at teaching and choreography. I no longer believe in a magic formula or special gift for working with integrated groups of dancers. There are strategies yes, there are guiding thoughts, but at heart you just have to know what is going on with movement and communicate it. And there are lots of books and courses and teachers who deal >

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with those things that have nothing whatsoever to do with disability, or sometimes even dance. Hope I haven't disillusioned anybody...

To continue my own story of earlier, after a sum total of eight days of CandoCo residencies and a five day Summer School, I taught students from Coventry University Performing Arts and Hereward FE College for a year on the first ever BTEC National Diploma accessible to disabled students. As I began to develop my own approach to technique that included yet challenged them all, that year became the hardest yet richest professional development experience of my life. What sustained me through that uncertain territory was the drive, openness, wisdom, patience and support of my first students. Their input is the

basis of any reputation I might have today. My attitude remains: "I bring 50% of the knowledge (dance), my students bring 50% (they know their bodies - often in advanced anatomical detail due to years of medical examination). Together we find a way." Such pioneering spirit brings me on to...

#### **Myth 4: the perfect course will solve everything**

We set about the 1995 course at Hereward College with high ideals: this course would open the floodgates for disabled dancers into higher education and the profession. You will know for reasons too many, varied, and complex that it hasn't really happened.

The Hereward course still exists, one of the many unique disability dance treasures we have in (the UK or my

Midlands neighbourhood), but, in my view, the ball labelled "integrating disabled students into dance courses" had gone over the neighbour's fence by late nineties. I was asked out into the field very infrequently at that point. With the Disability Discrimination Act now current, the elite of our dance education system have had to go ask nicely and pick that ball back up. Thus I often find myself debating the contention "but established courses for non-disabled dancers are also failing to prepare them for the dance industry!"

Many disabled dancers I know bemoan the fact that they cannot access training institutions or paper qualifications; that they train piecemeal and 'on the job'. Now don't get me wrong. I still believe there's room for codification and

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qualification. However, I cannot help feeling that the several models of work-based learning for dancers – such as Anjali's - developed due to these dire circumstances, could in fact address many CPD difficulties for emerging non-disabled professionals. From those who aspire to teaching such courses, at least in the UK I tend to hear:

**Myth 5: I need a long-term, full time course in order to work effectively with disabled dancers**

Simply put, all the best things I have learned about working with disabled dancers I have learned either by taking the plunge and doing it with their support or over a cup of coffee or a pint with them afterwards. NEVER underestimate the value of the social time on a residency. I also strive to team teach with a disabled



partners, because they will have physical expertise with impairment and social perspective that I may never have. Having worked abroad, this notion of the perfect course throws up, for me, our Western tendency to be addicted to mastery. In other words: 'If I can't do it perfectly there's no point in doing it at all.'

In October 2000, I made the first of four visits to South Africa to assist Adam and disabled Black dancer Tom St Louis in the delivery of a British Council project introducing the new concept of dance for (their term) "people with disabilities".

Disabled people in South Africa, not least as a result of Apartheid, are the poorest of the poor in a developing world economy. Post-Apartheid law however dictated that disabled people be instantly re-integrated into society. Sound familiar!? It is typically South African to look to Arts and Culture to address an issue, hence Adam was called in. Feeling strongly that input from Black artists as role models was fundamental he invited Tom and myself along too.

Nervously, we faced our group of thirty disabled and non-disabled teachers of disabled people, professional non-disabled dancers and disabled sports and community leaders - a triumph of national networking by Johannesburg based administrator Jill Waterman. We asked people why they were there; "To learn as much as possible to pass on to my community" And after a two week course they went off and did just that. Got on with it. Empowered to learn as they went. Perhaps a useful model of efficient integrated practice for us, here, in the geographically much smaller, financially much richer UK?

**Myth 6: ballet is the enemy of disabled dancers**

In December 2001, I mentored 5 young dancer/teachers from Birmingham Royal Ballet on a project called Footbeat with my musical partner annA rydeR. To my surprise, despite their institutionalised background and stereotypically ballet-dancer shaped as they all were, not one demonstrated any of the elitism, conservatism or closed mindedness I went in spoiling for a fight about. I felt accepted and respected as a dancer and discovered, moreover, we had many goals and aspirations in common for the future of dance in Britain. They'd had limited creative input into their training, but were bursting with enthusiasm to try to

choreograph, communicate, to reach outside their world. Two went on to do further education and disability projects within BRB. They more than any disabled person I have ever met shamed me into in the lesson that one shouldn't judge a person's skill, creativity or intelligence by his or her physicality. Subsequently, I became a BRB Education committee member. BRB have a longstanding partnership with Fox Hollies Special School and this has lately flowered into Freefall, a professional company for learning disabled dancers led by company soloist Lee Fisher.

It was during that mentorship that a conversation with one of the ballet dancers, sparked off what is now the company annA and I run, Foot In Hand.

So ten years on, how would I describe my career? Blossoming all over! I think now I can pretty much describe myself an integrated dancer. My countless encounters in the disability dance field have joined up my skills in technique and improvisation, inspired me to strive equally for magic and mechanics. I, who seemed to have no place in it, have become integrated into the profession, connected to many aspects of it. Worldwide. I was a broken artist made whole thanks to a chance meeting which opened the door to a decade of illumination. I remain hungry for more – more opportunities to teach integrated technique, make integrated choreographic work, to continue in the proper business of integration – reaching out to those who are also reaching out, whatever walks or wheels of life they reach from or to.

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