

Inclusive Dance and Performance Projects in London



Amici dancer Bill Robbins

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*“What are perceived as limitations are opportunities for unique movement and
unique connections between people”*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September 2016 I travelled to London on a Winston Churchill Fellowship to research inclusive dance and performance groups in London. I was accompanied by my colleague Renee Ryan, who has been an integral part of Jolt dance since 2006.

My Overall aim was to gather information and practical experience about inclusive dance and performance programmes, especially in regards to working with people with profound and multiple disabilities and community engagement projects.

Specifically, I wanted to look at:

- Performances for people with profound and complex disabilities
- Dance training programmes for people with disabilities
- Community dance projects that engage marginalised groups
- Infrastructure of organisations and funding models – especially in relation to the artistic director role

On a more personal level I wanted to place the work of Jolt in an international context: What was the Jolt aesthetic and how did it compare to the work of groups in London? Were there new and innovative ideas we could learn from?

The original intention had been to work intensely with three companies: Oily Cart, Amici dance and Slide dance. However, due to programming changes and the difficulty of getting into schools to view Oily Cart performances (because of heightened security) I was unable to spend as much time with them as I had initially planned.

This gave me the opportunity to see more companies and over the course of the month I visited eight different groups. I asked questions, participated in classes, visited rehearsals and saw a wide range of performances.

The change in programme also enabled me to spend valuable time at the Unlimited Festival: a unique six day celebration of disability arts in London. I attended panel discussions, performances and open events and met a wide range of people working in inclusive arts.

During my month, I also visited and lead dance workshops in two schools which cater for children and young people with moderate and severe learning difficulties Paddock school in East Sheen and Lonsdale School in St Albans

This report focusses on two main areas: Oily Cart's performance of "Mirror Mirror" for people with profound and complex disabilities and the inclusive dance programmes of Corali, Blink Dance Theatre, Magpie Dance, Slide (South London Integrated Dance Experience), Trinity Laban Dance Ability, Cando 2 Youth and Amici Dance Theatre Company.

Information about the Unlimited festival can be found in the appendix.

Throughout this article I use the following as these are the terms currently in use in London..

- *PMLD* – profound and multiple learning disabilities
- *ASC* – Autism Spectrum Condition

INCLUSIVE DANCE – THE CONTEXT

The term Inclusive dance is used to describe dance which is available for any individual to take part. This includes both people with physical and intellectual disabilities and non-disabled people. Inclusive dance has been known by other names: mixed ability dance, or integrated dance. The aim of the dance form is to be inclusive and value each dancer's unique qualities and abilities.

Modern integrated or inclusive dance was first explored in England during the late 1960's. Hilde Holger pioneered inclusive dance teaching and performance after the birth of her son with Down Syndrome. It was her determination to allow him to dance that led to her integrating people with disabilities into her dance classes, eventually going on to stage an integrated dance performance at Sadlers Wells in 1968. Her work helped initiate the development of other inclusive dance companies in England – including Amici.

During the 1980's and 90's inclusive dance grew. Companies like DV8 (1986), Amici (1980) and Candoco (1991) were established in England. Axis company was founded in America (1987) and Touch Compass in New Zealand (1997).

As companies have expanded inclusive dance has become more part of the mainstream. There are now a large number of companies all across the world developing work based on the principals of inclusion.

Companies are also beginning to widen the range of disabilities they are engaging with. Dance for people with PMLD (profound and multiple learning disability) and ASC (Autism Spectrum Condition) is now being explored in a more significant and comprehensive way.

Jolt

<http://joltdance.co.nz/>

Jolt was established in 2001 following my time spent with Amici dance in London in the late 1990's.

Jolt is based on the belief that everyone has a right to dance and to access the arts in ways that are truly meaningful. There are currently nine Jolt classes teaching dance to all ages and abilities.

In the last four years, we have really tried to push our work further: creating a teacher training scheme for our dancers with disabilities, a performance company creating works for diverse audiences and community programmes for marginalised groups.

Inclusive Dance is still relatively new in New Zealand. Touch Compass was the only company operating when Jolt was established and our work has developed its own vision and aesthetic.

This isolation has been both challenging and liberating: offering enormous possibilities for innovation while also demanding the energy required to develop ideas from scratch without the immediate support of a wider community.

OILY CART

<http://www.oilycart.org.uk/>

Oily Cart is the United Kingdom's leading performance company creating works for people with PMLD and ASC.

Established in 1981 by Tim Webb MBE (Artistic Director), Claire de Loon (Head of Design) and Max Reinhardt (Musical Director), Oily Cart began as a children's theatre company expanding its work in 1988 to include performances for young people with disabilities.

Since then Oily Cart has become the most established and prolific company in the UK with substantial funding and public profile. They produce three to four major shows a year for both mainstream and disability audiences. Oily Cart tour regularly: both nationally and internationally. They are also recognised internationally as a leading company in this field and are mentoring groups all over the world.

Jolt Interactive is the first company in New Zealand to produce performance works for people with complex disabilities. My key aims in spending time with Oily Cart were to understand the aesthetic of their work and to make comparisons with Jolt Interactive.

The Aesthetic of the Shows

Oily Cart have developed a specific aesthetic for their shows that focuses on creating an *immersive multi-sensory experience* through song, props, set and character.

Development of the work:

All of the Oily Cart shows are scripted and a lot of time is spent in research and preparation. Before rehearsals begin, time is spent generating new ideas around multi-sensory experiences which form the basis for the shows.

There is a five-week rehearsal period which includes devising the music and exploring ideas with disability groups, and five weeks' pre-production. Often two versions of show: one for people with PMLD (Profound and Multiple Learning Disability) and one for people with ASC (Autistic Spectrum Condition) are created.

Production values

These are extremely high. All costumes, props and set are designed and made on site by an experienced team. There is a commonality to the different creative elements. The set is colourful, well-lit and uses different fabrics and texture. Costumes are based on character and use pattern and colour in simple defined terms. Sensory elements are paramount and a lot of time is spent discussing textures, colours, shapes.

Characters:

Tim's understanding of engagement through objects is clear in the work. Characters are often based on objects (Brush, Sponge and Mirror in "Mirror Mirror"). This provides a safe and accessible way for participants to connect to the characters.

Music and Singing

Music is integral in Oily Cart performances. All of the performers sing and music is written specifically for the shows by the musical director, Max Reinhardt.

There are usually three performers and a musician performing live.

Information:

Prior to performance social stories and information about the shows are sent to the schools and are also available on the website. These are designed specifically for use with people with autism and PMLD and are a valuable tool in preparing and supporting participants in accessing the show.

The Audience:

Each show has 6 participants and 6 support workers. There are a small number of people who are also able to watch – 2 in the schools shows and up to 6 in the theatre shows

For ASC shows Oily Cart set up an Oasis – this is a room where the audience come first for a few minutes to meet the performers before the show starts

Feedback:

The stage manager writes up a report at the end of each show which details everything that happened: from a carer leaving to get a camera to any difficulties with set or lights. These reports are collated and examined to identify any ongoing issues. Feedback forms are also given at the end of performances. These too are collated by a researcher and the findings used to support funding applications. Tim was on hand to watch the performances and give feedback as was Max with musical direction. The set designer was also present to deal with any issues.



Oily Cart performer Tom

Mirror Mirror

The Work

Mirror Mirror was an interesting work to see in rehearsal and performance as it was the first time that Tim had not directed or performed in an Oily Cart show. Director Ellie had worked with Oily Cart for the previous five years as a volunteer initially and then performer so she understood the Oily Cart aesthetic. Tim had written Mirror Mirror and continued to work closely with the production. He saw some rehearsals, gave notes and was involved in production and design meetings

Mirror Mirror is set in a beauty parlour and came in two versions: one for PMLD and ASC. Though these differences were subtle, they reflected the aesthetic of Oily Cart in creating work for specific audiences.

The show is a series of sensory experiences accompanied by singing and live music from the harpist. There are four performers in the show: Mirror (Griff), Brush (Tom) and Sponge (Fatima) and a harpist (Echo).



The six members of the audience sit in a circle around a large blue mat - either in wheelchairs or in the large hairdresser's chairs Oily Cart have dressed with silver and soft fluffy fabric.

The chairs are placed in front of large mirrors, painted silver and circled with lights. There is a black stool beside each chair where the carer sits.



Each of the performers has a silver tray on which are brushes, sponges, bubble mixture, containers of mud and towels.

Audience members are brushed with soft brushes, have mud and glitter placed on their hands, get washed by sponges in warm water and have bubbles blown around them.

The climax of the piece is when the front screen of the mirror is lowered so that it sits just above the head of the participant. Glitter is poured on the inside of the screen and a pattern drawn which is then lit by lights. The show ends with each child's name being sung.



Fatima as "Sponge"

Rehearsals

I saw the final days of rehearsal for Mirror Mirror. There had already been a five-week rehearsal period earlier in the year and the week I visited the performers were focused on refining and finalising the work.

Mirror Mirror is highly choreographed and very precise. The director Ellie spent a lot of time coordinating little moments: the lifting of the water bottles, the timing of the breaths. In many ways, it felt like a musical score. The coordination of singing to activity, text to movement, the lifting and moving of props was all minutely rehearsed and discussed.

This direction was due in part to Tim's concept for the overall aesthetic of the piece which was of a Japanese tea party. The aim was for every moment to be clearly defined and performed in calm continuous movement.

It was also a reflection of how Oily Cart controls and structures multi-sensory elements. It is the details which are important: from the minutely designed costume to the size of the brushes and sponges, everything is designed to work with the script and aesthetic that has been developed prior to rehearsal.

Engagement by the performers with the support worker was an important part of the rehearsals we saw. This was clearly structured. Each performer had two participants and two support workers to look after. Throughout the show, the performers were responsible for leading their two participants and support workers through the sensory experience.

The performers had developed the term "mirror me" to indicate when the support workers should copy what they were doing. In rehearsal, the performers practiced introducing themselves to the participants and discussing with the support workers anything they may need to know about the participant. They also identified the moments when the support workers would be asked to "mirror me"

There was a small amount of time was spent discussing possible audience responses and moments for engagement, (though this may have been looked at more closely in the workshopping period). The experience of the three performers in inclusive arts was varied and in some ways, it felt like a missed opportunity, but again it reflected the focus of the rehearsals which was on creating a high quality, multi-sensory theatrical experience rather than an interactive one.



Performances

I saw two performances of Mirror Mirror at Ickburgh school in Hackney. The first performance was for PMLD and all of the audience members were wheelchair users. The second performance was a mixture of people with PMLD and ASC (although it was meant to be a PMLD performance).

This was only the second day of performances and the performers were still finding the rhythm of the work. By the second performance the feeling of the Japanese tea party was becoming clearer.

Both of the performances stuck to the script. There were a couple of moments where there were individual responses, (Tom blowing bubbles over Holly was one), but the work basically ran as it had in rehearsal.

The performances relied on the multi-sensory elements to drive the interaction with the audience. The focus of rehearsals had reinforced this and consequently it felt that the performers did not have the option to step far outside the parameters of that direction.

The role of the support worker became more apparent in performance. While the performer works with one participant the support worker works with the other and they are also responsible for keeping people seated and engaged. This created disparity at times as some carers were more active than others.

All of the audience loved the music and singing. The moment when the glitter was lit by lights was also really effective. However, there was a range of reactions to the sensory experiences – some students loved the tactile sensations while others were more sensitive and needed encouragement.

There were also some students who struggled to stay in the space. This is accepted within Oily Cart performances and staff have the freedom to leave for short times with the students to give them time to settle.

Oily Cart work is clever, detailed, precise and offers high production value, sensory experiences. The music and singing held the piece together aesthetically and created an immersive environment.

I felt, however, that the written script and detailed direction, kept the experiences tightly controlled and this made it difficult at times for the performers to respond to the individual responses of the participants in more profound ways.

There were small moments that developed differently with an individual, but ultimately the work was not seeking to be shaped or changed by its audience.



Musical director Max, performer Tom and director Ellie on site

Articulating a Different Aesthetic

Seeing Oily Cart in both rehearsal and performance was really valuable in helping me recognise and articulate the aesthetic of Jolt Interactive. Both companies have the same intention: to create accessible theatrical experiences for people with disabilities. It was the differences rather than the similarities, however, that really impacted on me.

Some of these are obvious. Jolt Interactive is dance based and works on a much smaller production scale. There isn't the infrastructure or funding to produce and tour work on the scale of Oily Cart or the resources to create complex sets, props or costumes.

In some ways those limitations have forced us to become more creative and adaptive – the good old NZ number 8 wire mentality. But at its heart Jolt Interactive has a different aesthetic which became obvious after my time with Oily Cart.

Our work, while utilising multi-sensory elements, focuses more on the interactive nature of the performance: how can we engage with our audiences and incorporate their responses into our work? This in turn subverts the traditional roles of performer and audience.

There is more focus on an “open space” that is active and offers choices for the audience to respond in different ways. This means more risk as the performers have to respond to whatever happens and create genuine connections with their audience.

Aesthetically our work uses more narrative and more complex text and characterisation. There is definitely a children's theatre style in the Oily Cart work: simple text is used to support the multi-sensory experiences and Tim's philosophy of approaching people through objects is obvious in the stylised characterisations of the performers.

This is in part a reflection of our identified audiences. Oily Cart work is mainly for small, younger audiences. Jolt Interactive work is created for a diverse larger audience which mixes people of all ages and abilities.

Creating work for large diverse audiences creates challenges: it needs to be accessible to both adults and younger people. It also makes it difficult for the performers who have to respond on many different levels.

Before I went to London I was questioning whether to create targeted performances (for PMLD or ASC, or for different ages), but my trip really made me aware of the importance of offering different theatrical experiences. Performances for diverse audiences offer so much in terms of connecting diverse groups and creating work that is innovative and risk taking. It allows for a shared experience that is unique every time.

My time with Oily Cart allowed me the opportunity to see multi-sensory elements used effectively with live song/music, but it also made me more determined to push the interactive nature of Jolt Interactive performances.

To create profoundly original theatrical moments that integrate the unique responses of our audiences and are centered on the connections created between performer and participant.

INCLUSIVE DANCE COMPANIES

There are a large number of dance groups working in the disability community in London. Some have been working in the field for over 30 years and others are new groups. With the exception of Laban all of the groups I visited worked exclusively with people with disabilities (though some are beginning to integrate classes).

The time I spent with each group varied. For some this was only one class (Slide and Cando 2 Youth). For others, it was 2 or 3 classes (Magpie, Corali, Laban, Blink). Amici was 4 days.

Detailed information about each of the groups can be found in the appendix

My observations were based on the time I spent with the companies and the research I had done prior to my visit. Consequently, they can only reflect what I saw and experienced in that time and place. My observations also inherently reflect my own aesthetic and experiences.

Kaupapa: What are the intentions?

All the companies I visited were committed to creating and encouraging wider sectors of our communities to engage in arts in ways that were authentic and meaningful.

Their vision statements talked about inclusion, individual creativity and challenging perceived notions of both dance and disability.

All of the teachers, choreographers and dancers I met were passionate about engaging with marginalised groups and the importance of making dance accessible to everyone.

Who is being taught?

Most of the company classes I visited were for youth and young adults. Amici was the exception with dancers of all ages taking part.

Because many companies required a certain level of independence from their dancers, the vast majority of the participants in the classes we saw were mobile, and had mild to moderate learning disabilities.

We saw few dancers with higher or more complex needs, which is a reflection of both the focus of the class and the funding needed to provide support for those with higher needs. It also reflects the difficulties with transport. Dancers either need to be able to travel independently or have the support of their family or community home to attend the classes.

With the exception of Amici, there are very few wheelchair users in the classes and in some cases, we saw the same dancers at different companies.

There are targeted short term projects for people with more significant needs, but the core classes within each of the companies catered largely for people with more moderate learning difficulties.

What is being taught?

Inclusive dance companies in England work closely with the mainstream contemporary dance community and are generally staffed (teachers and choreographers) by professionally trained dancers.

While the extent of this influence varies, for most companies the overall result has been a focus on contemporary dance training outcomes and processes: teaching technique, choreography and dance skills that aim to create strong contemporary dancers in a mainstream model.

There is also a strong focus on performance which has resulted in the creation of targeted training for small groups of exceptional dancers within these companies. The work produced is of a high quality and showcases the ability of the dancers to adapt and participate in a mainstream model. There is also a competitive element to these targeted groups who compete against each other in dance platforms like U dance.

There are some exceptions. Amici, Blink and Corali employ more improvisational techniques that centre more closely on the unique movement of the dancers. Their performance work reflects this shift in focus and is less driven by mainstream ideals.

Laban's classes are designed more on a therapeutic model to support targeted groups: people with neurological impairment, the elderly and children with intellectual disability. They use movement to build coordination, neurological function and body awareness while also encouraging creativity.

Community Dance Projects?

All of the companies were either engaged in or developing programmes in the community.

Amici works closely with Hammersmith Fulham borough to provide community classes for a diverse range of people with disabilities. They also have an ongoing collaboration with the University of Roehampton's mainstream dance programme.

Magpie have begun developing special projects for adults with mental health and learning disabilities and adults with severe behavioural issues. Their work with Oxlea involved running classes for two ten week blocks over two years. While the classes were really successful, there were issues to be resolved with working in an institutional setting. The hope is to continue with the project, but this is dependent on funding.

Blink and Corali both run short term projects and workshops, in schools and summer programmes for young people and for adults in day service units.

Slide offers project based workshops for diverse community groups, including Parkinson's. They run regular fundraising activities that engage with the disability community in creative and fun ways – one of their fundraisers was slide with Slide which involved sliding down as many slides as you could in a set period of time.

How do companies measure success?

Magpie is the only company we saw that actively tried to measure success through their class scoring system.

Other companies rely on anecdotal evidence, videos and photos

Pathways

Pathways for dancers as choreographers and teachers is patchy.

Magpie has a teacher training scheme that is open to their dancers and Amici has an assistant in their youth class with a disability. Some of the companies also create opportunities for their dancers to choreograph works.

But in the groups we saw there is no formalised pathway or targeted teaching for people with disabilities to train as teachers and choreographers.

Candoco offers its dancers the opportunity to join a leadership group which organises social events.

Professional Development

It was difficult to find out information about specific inclusive dance training and ongoing professional development.

Most of the tutors were contemporary dance trained and had extended their skills on the job. There are opportunities to train in community dance through local college programmes, but there is currently no formalised certification for inclusive dance teaching.

Engagement with communities

The key ways companies engaged with both their own and other communities was through social media. All of the groups I visited had websites and Facebook pages which they used regularly to disseminate information about their activities.

All of the groups used performances to showcase their work and engage with the mainstream public. There are many opportunities to tap into festivals and special projects in London and there was a lot of collaboration with other artistic and community groups.

Funding activities were also an important way for groups to actively grow their communities and share their work.

Infrastructure/Resources

There was huge variation in the infrastructure of each organisation.

Larger companies like Magpie, Candoco and Trinity Laban were well established with funding streams and large production teams.

Smaller companies like Corali relied on a small number of people and were limited by funding and resources.

New companies (Blink, Slide) relied on the time and effort of their directors (most of which was voluntary) to develop their programmes.

Amici has a strong collaboration with the Lyric theatre, but still relies heavily on the voluntary administration by its trust board.

All of the companies are reliant on funding and consequently vulnerable to its availability and limited in long term planning by the need to constantly apply for it. The companies who had developed the strongest infrastructures were those that had taken a business approach and had the ability to hire a funding/resources manager or had been able to collaborate with a larger mainstream organisation.

All of the companies had had to curtail their work in some way because of funding.

The Artistic Director Role

The Artistic Director played a key role in the companies I visited.

Historically companies have grown through the sheer determination and passion of a few key people. Many have worked in the field for a long time. Wolfgang Stange at Amici, Avril Hitman at Magpie and Sarah Archdeacon at Corali have all grown their companies from scratch and are integral in developing and implementing their vision.

New companies Blink and Slide are in the early stages of developing their work and are working more collaboratively with two or more directors in leadership roles.

Programmes at Trinity Laban and Candoco, while influenced by the individual teacher, work under a wider umbrella that is more flexible to a change in leadership.

What was interesting in the time I was there was that both Amici and Magpie were discussing change. Shortly after I left Avril Hitman resigned as Artistic Director. Magpie has a strong infrastructure and Avril was no longer teaching classes so the change was manageable. For Amici it will be more difficult. Wolfgang has been a central, charismatic leader for the group for many years, both teaching and directing performances, and support for a new director when the time comes will be less clear.

CONCLUSIONS

London was where I first engaged with people with disabilities and where my journey into inclusive dance began. Returning I found a new, larger and more active community than the one I had left 30 years earlier, but a community that was still dealing with the same issues of resources and funding.

My expectation when I came to London was that I would discover a new model – a new way of approaching disability dance training and performance. In reality this didn't happen. I met committed, hardworking artists creating interesting work with really inspiring communities. But more importantly I found myself asking a lot of questions, basic questions about the nature of inclusive work.

The time I spent with Oily Cart was really important in making me question how our views about disability impact on the work we are creating.

- Are we assuming that disability is the most important aspect for our audiences to engage with our work?
- When do we stop seeing the disability and start seeing the person?
- How do we manage the balance between creating work that is accessible (often this means using multi-sensory elements) but has integrity in its own right?
- How do we gently go into the worlds of our audience and let it impact on us in meaningful ways?

Similarly, the work of the dance companies made me question a mainstream contemporary dance training model where the emphasis is on technique and the quality of movement. This is a valid and highly successful way of working that has achieved amazing results and we need this option for our dancers as it sets real and challenging expectations and challenges perspectives about disability in the mainstream community. But the difficulty is when this type of training and performance becomes the accepted face or ideal outcome of inclusive dance. While this training creates beautiful movement, it ignores what is unique about the dancers and it is a small number of dancers who can fit this mould.

I believe we need to acknowledge difference within our field and not accept a model of disability dance or a hierarchy that puts some groups above others, often depending on their ability to relate to a mainstream audience.

We must fight for choice and diversity. This offers more meaningful options for people with disability, enriches our own practices and widens people's perspectives about disability in the mainstream community.

We also need to embed a disability perspective into our work. Creating pathways for dancers as teachers and choreographers is essential if we are really going to challenge our perspectives about dance and disability. This means not only creating opportunities but offering targeted teaching that gives dancers the skills to take on leadership roles

On a personal level, I also really began to question where to really place our work. Should the work of Jolt sit in the category of inclusive or disability arts? At first glance this seems logical. Our vision centers on accessibility of the arts for all people and the recognition of the strength of diversity. But the question I found myself asking in London was does this label also create boundaries or expectations?

One of the key themes discussed at Unlimited was the choice to identify as a disabled performer. Claire Cunningham, one of the United Kingdom's leading dancers with a disability, said that she was currently choosing to do that with her latest work "The Way You Look at me Tonight" (see review pages 35-36), but may not choose to do so in the future.

In part this was because the burden of having to represent or work for the disabled community is one that can sometimes limit artistic freedom, but it was also a recognition that her work should be viewed as that of an individual, not as a representative of a community.

Can we as Directors, Choreographers and teachers also choose for our groups to identify either with the disabled or mainstream performance community?

We have a unique responsibility to the communities we work with. Communities who are not always able to express their own ideas or make their own choices. But as artists, our work inherently reflects our own artistic visions.

Is it possible for the work of Jolt to sit under an artistic rather than social umbrella?

THE IMPACT FOR JOLT

My research and time in London gave me an enormous amount of confidence in our work at Jolt. It helped me articulate our aesthetic and vision more clearly by seeing our work in comparison to other groups.

It also made me really determined to continue to push the boundaries of our work and ask some important questions.

- What do we mean by inclusive?
- How does this impact the way we teach, the work we create, how we run our organisations?
- What is my role as an Artistic Director working in inclusive practice?

These questions have already impacted on our development as a company.

In the short term we have already begun discussing establishing a choreographic **pathway** for our dancers (that may follow a similar path to our teacher training scheme).

Future professional development sessions with our tutors will focus on creating opportunities in classes for more decision making and **leadership** by dancers

We are intending to extend our **education and training programmes**. I believe that the best way for change to happen is by the sharing of ideas. Training and support for people to establish their own dance initiatives rather than continuing to expand Jolt programmes.

In terms of **infrastructure** we need to widen our funding base and look to support our existing programmes with more clearly defined administrative and management roles.

One of the biggest changes is in the leadership of the company. My role as **Artistic Director** is something that has grown substantially over the years as we have developed more and more programmes. My time in London reinforced my own instinctual feeling that the leadership of the company needs to be more fluid and collaborative. Jolt needs to be sustainable and not driven by the personality of the Artistic Director. The Jolt trust, tutors and myself are now working to develop a new model that allows for this collaborative approach.

Artistically we need to continue to evolve our work: challenging perspectives about who can dance and what that dance should look like. This means continually to critically reflect on what we are doing and how we are doing it.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The insights I gained from observing and meeting with all of the London groups was invaluable in shaping both a vision for Jolt, and for my own personal journey as a teacher and director in inclusive dance.

I went to London to find out how we fitted in. What I discovered was that I didn't want to. London changed me - not because it gave me new ideas, but because it helped me to articulate the work I was doing. It made me realise that it is our differences and the strength to be different that is important.

My trip ended with one final class at a day service for autistic adults in Acton. Taught by Amici tutor Lynne, it used many of the Amici's trademarks I love: an open space responding to individual movement, random choices of dancers and music decided by the spinning of a pen and individual improvisations that focussed on creating connections through mirroring and sharing movement. There was very little structure and few set activities but it was beautiful and completely worked with the diverse group we had in the room.

It was a reminder to me that as we develop our own ways of working, teaching and creating, that at its simplest music and movement has the power to transform, to connect us together as humans, to make us feel and to express the voices of people that are hidden.



Jolt dancers Ged and Phebe

APPENDICES

OILY CART

Meeting with Artistic Director Tim Webb

Tim was an incredibly inspiring and energetic person to meet. He is completely committed to the work of Oily Cart and has spent a lot of time learning about new ways of engagement.

He spoke about some of his inspirations and ideas:

- Temple Grandin's work with pressing/weight and her analysis of the neuro typical brain and how the autistic brain interrupts information viewing it as images in a film – an emotional and sensory map <http://www.templegrandin.com/>
- The “Gong” moment – where everything stops but the reverberations take a long time to resolve. The performers become still and the space opens for the audience to respond
- The idea of focus – from a close up to a long shot – offering options for people to see and engage with moments in different ways
- Approaching people through objects. This was a really important concept. Objects are tangible – so a blind or deaf person can understand what is happening through touch or recognition of a symbol (e.g. a towel for swimming). It also provides a safe way for performers to engage people on the autistic spectrum - they relate through the object rather than having the emotional intensity of person to person contact. Characters in Oily Cart shows are often objects (Mirror, Brush & Sponge in Mirror Mirror) or they may be movements (Bounce in their show performed on a trampoline)
- Phebe Cordwell's work on “intensive interaction”
<http://www.phoebecaldwell.co.uk/>



The Oily Cart Programme

Oily Cart first created a show for people with disabilities because they were asked to by a local special needs school. They now run a full year programme consisting of two tours for people with disabilities, two mainstream children's show tours and an all comers season.

Special Needs Tours are created for people with PMLD or ASC and are performed at both schools and theatres. Shows are around 50 minutes in length and there are two sometimes three performances per day. Performances in theatres are open to all disabled people and their supporters. The cost for schools is 900 pounds per day. Larger schools find funding but smaller schools struggle. There are a lot of return schools. Cost for theatre performances is 5 pounds.

All- Comers Tours are a new initiative for children aged between 2 and 6 with and without disabilities. The performances are enhanced: using a traditional aesthetic with more sensory elements. Individual theatres pay for the show. Audience numbers are larger – up to 50.

The Team

The team at Oily Cart is comprehensive. The original founding members: Artistic Director (Tim), Musical Director (Max) and costume designer/production (Claire) are all full time.

Each show employs a director, lighting designer, set designer and stage manager.

The administration team consists of a full time General Manager and Touring Manager.

There is also a full time Technical Site Manager.

Oily Cart have an office, workshop and rehearsal space at Smallwood School, Wandsworth



The golden lift at the Oily Cart office



Stage Manager Jo in performance

INCLUSIVE DANCE GROUPS

Corali

<http://www.corali.org.uk/>



Corali is a relatively small organisation but have been running for many years and have a broad project based programme as well as two regular classes: their professional dance class which meets weekly and a youth class “kick up” which only meets termly due to funding constraints.

There is a small staff of part timers - Sarah Archdeacon who is the Artistic Director (4 days) and Andrea Swainsan the participation officer (3 days). They run a small office and hire a venue for their classes.

A lot of Corali work is out in the community and they are well known for their site-specific projects and collaborations. Corali have worked closely with the Tate Modern and British Museum to create works on site and also perform and offer workshops for schools, festivals and hospitals.

Corali director Sarah and dancer Bethan rehearsing at the Tate

While I was in London Corali dancers were working with a freelance choreographer to create a new performance work and two of their dancers were rehearsing for a large on site performance project at the Tate Gallery. Funding for these performance projects comes from the venues and from their own fundraising.

The professional development class has 12 regular participants and works for 2 ½ hours every week on creative movement, building strength and technique and performances. The class is free, but is a closed class so membership is by invitation only. All of the dancers are mobile, but there is diversity within the group and a wonderful sense of engagement.

There is a similarity in the classes to Jolt. The tutors create structured improvisations and activities to encourage movement that build on the unique strengths of the dancers.

Blink Dance Theatre

<http://www.blinkdancetheatre.org/>



Blink are a newly formed integrated company comprising of 4 people (two with disabilities and two without). Their vision is “to promote the artistic potential in everyone and celebrate individuality”.

Blink have created one major show (which was really well received) and are currently working on raising funds to tour.

Blink also run workshops, in schools for dance, drama and sensory experiences and for adults in day service units. These workshops draw on the dancers’ background with Amici, but also adapt these ideas to include more theatrical elements.

I visited the Blink workshop at Hammersmith Mencap, a day service provider in Hammersmith). The sessions explore dance through fun activities and improvisational structures and the work is really engaging. Vicki uses different topics to generate new ideas (this term was carnivals from different countries) and has also used video.

The music is diverse and there is a focus on getting participants to create their own movement, though this is hampered by the small space and large group.

Francis and Delson from the company also support in the class and Vicki is working towards them teaching activities independently.

The classes struggle at times with number of participants, a very large group (up to 20), and working in a space that is small, often noisy and full of disruptions. These issues are being worked on and the Blink tutors have established good communication with the provider to resolve them.

There are also issues with funding and the second time I visited Vicki was leading the class alone as money had run out for her assistant.

Blink are still a fledgling company, but they are exciting and innovative in their approach to performance. They are also a genuinely inclusive company and are offering real opportunities for collaborative leadership in their teaching programme.

Magpie Dance

<http://www.magpiedance.org.uk/>



Established 30 years ago by Artistic Director Avril Hitman, Magpie are a long running and well established dance organisation providing a comprehensive programme for adults and youth with disabilities in South London (Bromley).

Magpie currently have seven classes running regularly throughout term time and recently (2014) created a “Highfliers” class for gifted and talented

dancers. This class runs one morning a week and currently has 5 members creating high quality contemporary dance work and performing regularly. This was a pilot programme established in 2012 and Magpie are currently looking at how to develop the programme, possibly to 2 – 3 days. The training for this programme is based on mainstream contemporary dance technique.

Magpie has an extensive production team with an Artistic Director (full time), General Manager (part time), Finance Manager (part time), Head of development & Partnerships (4 days) and an Operation Coordinator (fulltime). Magpie has recently formed a working relationship with Candoco, Laban and Greenwich dance Theatre where they will collaborate on projects and share resources

Magpie charges 10 pounds per 1 ½ hour or 2 session and fees make up around 10% of Magpies income. Most classes are large with between 20 and 30 people. Each class is taught by a lead facilitator supported by a paid assistant and 2 – 3 volunteers. People will be asked to provide a support person if needed.

I visited the Open Community class and the adults class (which was the original Magpie class). The classes are run by a tutor (Alison) and assistant (Sophie) with the occasional volunteer. Both classes were really large, but are extremely well taught with high expectations. Tutors keep the dancers participating for the full time (2 hours and 1 ½ hours respectively).

The Open Community class is larger and more diverse while the adult class is slightly smaller and works more intensely on technique and choreography (High Fliers are chosen from this class).

The classes use a mixture of warm ups (name and shapes), copying, travelling and dancing through the space, dance games, technique and creating choreographic ideas (the theme for this term was gardens). I especially enjoyed the TV activity. Alison had created a TV remote with bright buttons – as she pressed each of them the group responded in the space: Play (moving through the space), Pause (stop), Rewind, Fast Forward, Stop (everyone faces the same way in the same shape), Slow Motion and Eject (everyone leaves the space).

Visiting Artists are brought in on a project basis to work with both High Fliers and the adult class.

Alison is a really experienced teacher having been with Magpie for 17 years. The aims for the classes are for the dancers to fulfil their potential, express their individuality and be accessible. While the class is structured and there is technique, there is also space for the dancers to explore their own movement.

What is unique about Magpies work is their use of live rather than taped music. A drummer or pianist works with each class and the music is made to fit the movement rather than being the stimulus for the movement. This was an important part of the ethos based on the theory that music needs to support and enhance the movement of the individual and not initiate or suggest new movement.

What is also unusual about Magpie is their assessment of the classes. All of the participants are scored by Alison and Sophie every week on a tick sheet for cooperation, communication and confidence. The scores are used by Alison and Sophie for funding purposes and to keep a record of individual development.

Magpie have also begun developing special projects for adults with mental health and learning disabilities and adults with severe behavioural issues. Their work with Oxlea involved running classes (these are shorter – 45 mins) for two ten week blocks over two years. The classes were really successful but were also really challenging. There were issues to be resolved with going into the institution and training staff. The hope is to continue with the project but it is dependent on funding.

Magpies was the only company we visited which runs a teacher training scheme (Inclusive Dance Practice Theory). This is an in house practical programme whereby participants work in the classes developing their skills – first by watching and assisting then slowly taking activities. Participants keep a diary of ongoing reflection and receive a “Magpie” teacher training certificate at the end.

Slide (South London Inclusive Dance Experience)

<https://slidedance.wordpress.com/>



Slide dance was created by Gemma Coldicott and Anita Wadsworth in 2013 to “create engaging and exciting opportunities for people to encounter dance. Our work seeks to include all areas of society and to expand understanding of what dance is and can be”

I visited Slides’s regular weekly class for young people with disabilities at The Brit School, Selhurst. They have developed a collaboration with the school whereby the Brit School offer a free venue for the class and in return Slide take on 4 Brit students studying in the inclusive education programme per term. These students work in the classes with the dancers and lead warm ups and cool downs.

There are up to 20 dancers in the class which is taught by Gemma with Anita assisting. Classes cost 6 pounds per class, but dancers must book for a whole term. Most of the dancers are regulars, but a small number change each term.

The class I saw followed a traditional dance structure: warm up, using the space, technique work (ballet basis) and a structured improvisation task as a basis for creating a performance. There is a small emphasis on original movement, but this is not the focus of the class. There is more emphasis on basic movement skills, focus and technique. The class works to create performances 2 – 4 times per year, at U dance and Southbank festivals.

Slide also creates shorter project based workshops for diverse community groups, including Parkinson’s and performance projects.

The main difficulty for Slide is funding. Class fees pay for tutor and assistant wages, but there is no funding for administration or artistic director time. Both Gemma and Anita spend a lot of their time voluntarily running the organisation, creating projects and generating funding.

They run regular fundraising activities that engage with the disability community in creative and fun ways – one of their fundraisers was slide with Slide which involved sliding down as many slides as you could in a set period of time. The long-term aim is to find funding to create a general manager’s role two days a week.

Trinity Laban – Dance Ability

<http://www.trinitylaban.ac.uk/take-part-for-children-young-people/dance-ability>



Trinity Laban is one of England's leading dance training providers and have a comprehensive dance programme which runs from their newly constructed building in Greenwich.

Trinity Laban offer degree and masters programmes for contemporary dance professionals, but have recently begun to develop a health strand to their work which includes Dance Ability - dance classes for children with disabilities, Headway – dance for people with neurological or brain injuries and ‘Inspired not Tired’ dance classes for elderly people.

Dance Ability classes are 45 minutes long and cost 5 pounds per family. There is a tutor, assistant and volunteers and classes generally have between 8 and 10 students. This is still a relatively new programme and while there are some returning students, there is quite a bit of change from term to term. The classes adapt Laban movement activates to suit the needs of the participants. Dancers are encouraged to explore their own movement by using basic movement forms: rolling, jiggling, turning, jumping.

“Headway” uses a similar movement philosophy – encouraging movement in a safe way that is adapted to fit the physical and cognitive needs of the participants.

Cando 2 Youth

<http://www.candoco.co.uk/home/learning/youth-dance/>



Candoco are a well-respected and established dance company. Their main dance company integrates people with and without physical disabilities, but they have only recently begun training dancers with learning disabilities.

There are two youth classes. The class I visited on the Monday was a newer class of 8 dancers with a range of disabilities: mild learning disabilities, autism, sensory impairment and physical disability.

There are two tutors (one with a disability) and an assistant. Costs are 5 pounds for a two hour class and students book for a term. Parents and support workers are not allowed in the class so participants must be reasonably independent.

The classes follow a traditional format: warm up, finding ways to move through the space, technique and choreographic technique. The focus is on developing a mainstream dance aesthetic. Two members of each class make up a youth advisory group which plan events and performances with the support of Candoco staff.

Amici Dance Theatre Company

<http://www.amicidance.org/>



Amici was established by Wolfgang Stange in 1980 and is the UK's longest running integrated dance group. Wolfgang is one of the leading pioneers in integrated dance and works regularly in Sri Lanka and Europe.

Amici currently runs a company class (2 hours) and a youth class (2 hours). Wolfgang and other Amici tutors also teach community classes at Macbeth Adult Education Centre in Hammersmith.

Amici's company class has been running for over 30 years and produces an original major production every couple of years. They have a unique partnership with the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith which gives them the theatre free for performances and until recently gave them a free space for the class.

Amici also works with Turtle Key administration who find funding and provide all the administration for their major productions (around 50,000 pounds) and for Young Amici.

This means the Amici trust board only have to provide administration and pay wages for the company class. These collaborations have been really beneficial for Amici but they have also created issues around decision making: when productions will happen, fees for classes etc.

In terms of the classes Amici are the most alternative of all the groups in terms of how they use and view dance. Amici classes focus primarily on the unique movements of the dancers and there is much more diversity in the groups, especially in terms of physical disability and PMLD. All ages and abilities dance together in the main performance company.

The classes follow a simple structure of warm-ups and improvisations. Dancers are chosen with the random spin of a pen for improvisations and music is random, determined by a number called out. These techniques create an open space for people to find their own movement. There is no pressure to change or "train" dancers. The focus is on responding to the music and finding a way for dancers to connect together.

The three community classes are large with around 45 people (including support workers) in each class. The Company class is also large with around 30 regular members. Established recently the Youth class is much smaller and is still developing a regular core of students. There is also a pre-Amici class.

UNLIMITED FESTIVAL: 6th – 11th September at the Southbank Centre

www.Weareunlimited.org.uk



The Unlimited Festival began in 2012 around the London Para Olympics. Channel 4 coined the term “Super Human” which, while controversial in the disabled community, reflected a new commitment and awareness of disability in the wider community.

The festival offered performances, visual arts installations and films, talks, debates and workshops over a six-day period. Most of the presenters and performers were leading practitioners from the UK who identify as being disabled. The aim of the festival was to both celebrate and explore issues around disability.

The Background to Unlimited

Unlimited is a commissions programme whose vision is to support the creation of high quality “extraordinary work” by disabled artists, embed this work within the mainstream cultural sector and transform perceptions of disability.

Unlimited fund a wide range of different artists across the UK in all arts forms and at all stages of their careers (emerging and established). It identifies itself not as an organisation but as a programme and is funded by the Arts Councils of England, Wales and Scotland.

Unlimited commissions offer funding for three main strands.

- Established Artists
- International Collaborations between UK and overseas artists
- Emerging Artists

Commissions programmes like Unlimited not only provide funding, but advocate and create networks on both a national and international level.

Unlimited is a reflection of the commitment in England to disability arts which is gaining more recognition and status within the mainstream arts culture.

The work commissioned does not need to be about disability, but the artist needs to identify as being disabled. The choice to do this is an important one. Claire Cunningham currently calls herself “a self-identifying disabled artist” but recognises that in the future she may choose not to.

Southbank works in collaboration with the Unlimited Festival and is where all the events and performances took place. Southbank is an established and well respected arts centre on the South Bank of the Thames. Its vision is to use the arts to transform lives and it is committed to working with young, emerging and established talent across the artistic community. They currently support four Resident Orchestras, 14 Artists in Residence and over 100 other artistic organisations. Southbank believe that the arts must be accessible to everyone and their programmes support groups working with marginalised communities including the homeless, disadvantaged youth and people with disabilities.



<https://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/?gclid=CNXcx-S0o9MCFYRjvAod8zYBRA>

Talks and Debates

The Unlimited programme includes a large number of talks and panels with different artists and organisations. All of the talks had BSL (British Sign Language) interpreters as well as video screens with the text displayed.

Central to the discussions I attended were issues of:

- *Accessibility* – how can we integrate accessibility into the fabric of our work and not make it an afterthought? What was interesting here was the diversity of the community we are trying to be accessible for. The practicalities of providing access in one area can sometimes block access for another group.
There is also the question of accessibility and creativity. The majority of the artists talked about how there needed to be choice and how creating accessibility should not limit the artistic choices and aesthetic of the work.
- *Identity as disabled artists* –the choice for artists to identify either as disabled or non-disabled artists. The ideal was for work by disabled artists to be seen as the norm rather than a specialist area.
There are also issues around the pressure for disabled artists to be role models with the burden of having to represent or work for their community beyond their artistic practice and the need to recognise both visible and invisible disabilities.
- *Partnerships & Funding* – the importance of collaboration and establishing ongoing relationships between large organisations and grass roots groups.
- *Media representation and images of disability* - this was especially relevant following Channel 4's coining of the "Superhuman" label for the Para Olympians.



The **term disabled** was generally accepted as the preferred term in the talks because it acknowledges the social barriers that prevent people from participating fully in their communities. Any person can identify as disabled if they feel this barrier exists and the talks were attended by people with physical, learning and psychological disabilities, sensory impairments - visible and non-visible disabilities.

The talks also highlighted the **diversity of disability** experience, especially for people with hidden disabilities. One of the most interesting ideas around accessibility to come out of the workshops was the idea of **psychological accessibility**. Put simply this is being aware of how a space can be made more welcoming and safe by acknowledging hidden disabilities around mental health.

Because there is such a strong history of debate and the community is so diverse there were spirited discussions, but issues were never ignored and there was a strong sense of commitment to talking about controversial ideas - “are some more equal than others” was the title of one panel.

However, what felt frustrating at times was the feeling that the desire to understand and analyse work was overtaking the making of the work.

The line between artist and disabled person is often blurred. Lou Coleman, a disabled artist who was recently awarded some Arts Council Funding to develop her artistic practice as an artist and an inclusive arts practitioner, held a discussion at LADA (Live Arts Development Agency) to talk about this issue. Should she identify as a disabled or non-disabled artist? How should her work reflect her disability? There were no easy answers and I was left with the feeling that the issues had become bigger than the work she wanted to make.

One of the interesting projects discussed in the festival was **“Ramps on the Moon”**. This is a six-year project involving 6 theatre companies from across the UK. The aims of the project are to open up the mainstream theatre world for disabled people: as artists, audience and production/technical workers. Each theatre employs a person as an “agent of change” to develop ways of opening up accessibility and engagement with the disability community. The theatre also commits to producing a large-scale production yearly with a cast and crew of predominantly disabled people. This is generally a popular big name show to draw in the crowds. All of these shows are captioned, audio described and BSL signed.

<https://www.rampsonthemoon.co.uk/about/>

Leaps and Bounds Activity Morning

Leaps and Bounds was an activity morning for children with disabilities aged under 12.

Part of a project established by the Southbank and funded by the Arts Council, Leaps and Bounds aims to create inclusive events for disabled children that all the family can attend. It is an attempt to bring families together in an environment where everyone can participate.

There are four events during the year including a winter festival and Alchemy Festival. All of the events take place in public arenas to promote visibility.

For the Unlimited Festival, the event was staged in the main ballroom of the Festival Hall. Tea Dance had been commissioned to run the event. Tea Dance is a mainstream dance company for young children but one of the lead organisers also had a background in disability. <http://www.tdlp.co.uk/>



They used the theme of bees and created different stations. There was singing and dancing “bee training”, a shadow screen for “bee stories”, bee games, sensory play, a sound tent and a quiet space in a beautiful tent with lights.

The performers were wonderful and it was a really imaginative idea to use the bee theme. There had been a lot of thought put into how to communicate: signs for each station using images, earplugs available and different sensory experiences.

The majority of the children who took part didn't have a disability, and while the experiences were accessible and the performers really talented, the overall “culture” of the event felt mainstream.

This may have been in part due to limited experience by the performers in keeping the focus on those children with disabilities, but I also think it is indicative of how accessibility needs to be viewed on a more fundamental level. It raises questions about how can we create spaces where the voices of children with disabilities are more clearly evident.



Performances

There was a wide variety of performances by leading UK artists – including Claire Cunningham (*see review below*) Jess Thorn and Candoco. Most of the performances had admission fees, but there were two large free performances: the Inclusive Youth Dance Platform which featured leading UK youth groups and the Variety evening which featured a wide range of different artists.



Wheel Fever

The Youth Platform highlighted the depth and diversity within the disability dance community and featured a range of groups at different stages of their development.

Leading companies: Anjali, Candoco and Magpie all have youth groups that are led by professionally trained and artistically skilled dancers and choreographers. Their performances were technically and choreographically challenging.

Other companies were younger and had more of a community focus.

It was obvious that for all of the companies' performances are an important part of their programmes

The highlight of the platform for me was “Wheel Fever”, <http://wheelfeverprojects.co.uk/> a diverse group of performers from Plymouth. Their work was energetic, dynamic and raw. The movement drew on the individuality of the dancers and created a different aesthetic from the contemporary dance model.

The inclusive dance platform was the most well attended performance event of the festival and along with Claire Cunningham’s work was a personal highlight.



Anjali



Balletboyz



Magpie dance



Corali

Claire Cunningham and Jess Curtis/Gravity: The Way You Look (at me) Tonight

<http://www.clairecunningham.co.uk/about/>

The way you look (at me) Tonight is performed by leading UK disabled artist Claire Cunningham and international choreographer and performer Jess Stone, (who originally introduced Claire to movement), in collaboration with Dr Alva Noe, philosopher of perception at the University of California, Berkeley (who appears in video form).

Described as a social sculpture – a sensory journey for two performers and an audience, the work fuses dance, film, telling stories, asking questions, music and installation to look at how we perceive ourselves, our bodies and our relationship to the world.

The Way is trying to find a new aesthetic for performance. We were the first people in the theatre and were greeted by Jess and Claire on the stage who were casually welcoming people and informing them about their choice for viewing (or interacting) with the work.

There were three areas to sit in – the stage itself which had been set up with chairs and cushions in different configurations. Chairs just outside of the stage area and a high row of chairs that gave you an elevated view of the stage. We chose to sit on the stage and were warned that we may come into physical contact with the performers.



Above us hung delicate coloured glowing hoops that moved gently. There was a large ladder placed on the edge of the stage and video screens high up framed three sides of the performance space.

There was no defined beginning to the show. As soon as all the audience had arrived Jess and Claire began to introduce the technicians and invited us to come and go as we pleased throughout the performance.

This style of casual dialogue with the audience was a feature of the show, but while the stories and asking of questions appeared informal and colloquial, there is no doubt that it was cleverly crafted and well thought out dialogue.

Right from the beginning you had the sense that this work was a genuine journey – a real attempt to interact with the audience in a new way and to think about perception. How do we perceive ourselves as audience and our relationship to the performers?

I loved the warmth and openness of the spatial structure and the authenticity of the engagement by the performers with us and each other.

The work moved between movement sequences, discussions between the performers about themselves and their bodies and philosophical discourse via film by Dr Noe.

The movement sequences were raw, organic and highly sensory. Cunningham's relationship with her crutches is compelling. She talks about them as being alive and her ability to manipulate them creates movement that is fascinating and lyrical.

In one section, she uses her crutches to lift herself and push off Jess and various audience members. The movement was light and dynamic and I found myself really wanting her to push off me (unfortunately that didn't happen).

In the final moment, Cunningham lengthens her crutches and jumps up to stand face to face with Jess who steadies her and they lean in cheek to cheek and sway slowly together.

The Way finds a way to look at disability in a way that is both honest and compelling and artistically satisfying. There is a genuine connection between performer and audience and between audience members themselves.

For those of us on the stage we were all visible and the diversity of the audience was incredibly powerful. Headsets were provided for people with vision impairment and wheelchair users were able to have space and choice.

One of the audience members had Tourettes and the stream of words created a backdrop to the performance that was both comical and meaningful. There was no sense that they impinged on any moments – in fact the opposite was true.

The way looks at the relationship between what we say and think and the reality of our physical bodies. It created a space where the audience had choice to connect and engage in different ways and I think this is where its real power lies.

It is trying to find a new aesthetic for performance that recognises difference and accessibility.

It is at its heart a show about being human.



Observations

Unlimited was really inspiring and full of so much – information, performances and experiences. I met amazing people and learnt an extraordinary amount in a short period of time. It is obvious that England has a strong awareness of, and infrastructure to support disability issues and a broad and dynamic performance community.

However, what was disappointing was the small number of people from the learning disability community and the general public who attended during the days.

I had been to an African festival at the Southbank the Sunday before and had felt really immersed in that community. There were markets, music talks, performances and the space was full of people.

The unlimited festival offered wonderful opportunities for the mainstream public to engage, but those opportunities weren't as visible.

When it first began in 2012 a lot of the Unlimited performances took place outside. While there were some film and photos installations in the main building and a few activities programmed in the main ballroom, for most people walking in it wasn't apparent there was a festival.



There also weren't a lot of activities or interactive opportunities for people with learning disabilities or PMLD.

Consequently there weren't many people from these communities casually attending the festival during the week.

One of the mothers I met, Lauren (pictured left with her daughter Gabi at the fountain at Southbank), said she was disappointed with the festival because it offered little for Gabi.

Performances in the evenings were well attended and the vibrancy and energy of the learning disabled community were much more evident.

The disability community in London is dynamic and diverse and the vision of Unlimited is a wonderful one – to embrace the extraordinary qualities of people with disabilities and support them to be visible.

There is huge potential for this festival to reach more people and offer activities that engage more fully with the learning disability community.