

Ableism in Motion. On Dramaturgy and Documentation of Diverse Dance

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We do know that the body and its movement transmit numerous meanings through dance. But do we actually know how a dramaturgy of a performance is affected by the fact that a performer moves with crutches, in a wheelchair, without a limb or with a prosthesis? Is there a difference between the disabled and the able-bodied 'vocabulary of movement'? How does a collaboration of those two groups influence dramaturgy and structure of dance? How to document work when a dancer uses Polish Sign Language? How is the creative process and its documentation influenced by performers' intellectual disability? That is just a handful of questions related to the junction of dance and disability. Some of which I cannot answer. But I do have the privilege of being able to share my experiences, reflections and feelings.

The (Non)Normative Body versus Dramaturgy and Structure of Dance

Each body affects the dramaturgy of a performance, while disability entails endowing that body with additional meanings. A non-normativeness of body and movement is visible, palpable, emotionally impactful.

An able, white or slim body is to an extent 'transparent'; less often does it become an object of endowment with additional meanings. An appearance of a non-normative body on stage produces a large tension, even if this goes against the artist's wishes. It does happen that despite a dancer's intention, their disability becomes a subject. Is an artist moving with crutches perceived the same as an artist who does not use them? Does a text in Polish Sign Language and in a phonic language have the same dramaturgy? Are the two people performing the same movement perceived identically: an artist with Down syndrome and one without this disability? In his *Disability Theory*, Tobin Siebers writes: "The social representation of impairment as negative or inferior, not the existence of physical and mental differences, defines disability discrimination." [1], which, in my opinion, exerts a powerful influence on perceptions of disabled people's movement. Their looks and ways of moving are frequently seen as funny, ugly or unprofessional.

It is more difficult for artists with disabilities to make art for art's sake, the so-called 'pure' art, stripped of other purposes than art itself. Their presence on stage goes beyond the domain of aesthetics and, regardless of their wishes, becomes political. An untypical body immediately "betrays" belonging to a minority. Mere body awareness and skills are insufficient. A disabled artist is forced to balance the visible and the invisible, the able and the disabled. They must also have an awareness of the audience's potential stereotypes and prejudices.

Influence of Teamwork on Dramaturgy

Let us begin with saying that an awareness that every person knows their own body best is indispensable. Of course, one has to practice and develop in order to expand its capacities and elaborate one's intended language of movement. We must remember, however, that there is a very thin line between development and an objectifying use of the body and coercion, which are forms of (self)violence.

Able artists and artists with disabilities are in a kind of on-going dialogue influencing subsequent dramaturgy. For the communication to be efficient, we must learn how to perceive the language of movement in bodies, the integral part of whom are crutches, a wheel-chair, a white cane, or a prosthesis. Without it, we are on a straight road to misunderstanding, abuse, condescension, contempt, or violence.

Diana Bastos Niepce, a Portuguese dancer, choreographer and dancer, once observed that: "A situation where only normative bodies are shown on stages, screens, in theatres and broadly conceived culture leads to an essential narrowing of the realm of our existence. When exhibited bodies are aesthetic and technical replicas of themselves, a fascist perspective on physical form widens. The act limits us all." [2]

Considering the collaboration, the able part of a company must be aware of their privileges. By these, I primarily mean:

- a body which is not stigmatised and does not constantly encounter insurmountable architectural barriers, e.g. inaccessible means of transport on their way to a rehearsal/performance, inaccessible rehearsal rooms/stages, inaccessible toilets in places where creative work is conducted;
- a fluent command of a phonic language used in work; a majority of spaces is communicatively inaccessible for people using only [Polish] Sign Language or employing alternative forms of communication;
- a knowledge of jargon understandable mostly to the so-called professionals – another barrier to people with intellectual disability, signing etc.;
- an easier access to knowledge and skills acquisition, contributing to a position of power and expertness.

Without raising awareness of the above-mentioned problem, a collaboration with non-normatively-bodied artists is certain to be hierarchical and paternalistic. Dancers will not be treated as people with a diverse vocabulary of movement, but rather as objectified re-creators, reduced to the role of curiosities whose bodies on stage can be randomly manipulated.

You might say: "But a disabled artist can say no!" Let us not forget, however, that disabled bodies tend to be bodies long socialised to submission, not speaking up, being abused. Able-bodied dancers, choreographers, dramaturgists' additional knowledge, skills and experience can be intimidating, which effectively hinders the actions of those who do not regard themselves as professionals. Moreover, minority members have to put a lot of effort into (re)gaining their voice and space, instead of concentrating on their creative work.

Therefore, a mindfulness and a constant realisation of their privileges is required on the part of the company so as to prevent the space of artists with disabilities from being taken over; in order to support them in expressing their needs and ideas, in experimenting and suggesting changes to choreography and/or dramaturgy.

Here, I would like to quote Magdalena Moskal, who in her *Emil and We. A Monologue of a Mother of a Large Family* wrote: "For privilege ... is like gravity: we notice it only once we have lost it." [3]

I am well-aware how frequent among artists with disabilities is the fear that they will be patronised by the rest of the company. This sometimes leads to their automatic resistance to an able-bodied choreographer's and/or dramaturgist's suggestions, which may hinder work or make it completely impossible. You might say: "But companies do fall out." True, but in how many of them is a fulfilment of such fears the reason? In order to prevent this, conversation is necessary: setting down rules, expressing needs and concerns in the course of working on a performance. An additional issue is a near-utter lack of people with disabilities in the position of choreographer/dramaturgist.

Adam Benjamin, British choreographer, improviser and movement artist, summed up the problem: "Historically, the role of a choreographer was one of power and sometimes of enablement. But if that rests solely in the hands of non-disabled artists, we are not moving forward." [4]

Alternative Methods of Creating Dramaturgy and Structure of Dance

I think that numerous able-bodied artists do not reflect on alternative methods of creating dramaturgy that would include people with disabilities in the process. Such methods of working are of key importance in building an artistic space accessible to a larger group of people. I will now refer to my experience from September 2021, when I took part in a laboratory held during the Oriente Occidente Dance Festival in Rovereto, Italy. The lab was part of the international Europe Beyond Access project. It was run by the dancer and dramaturgist, Gaia Clotilde Chernetich, and Giuseppe Dagostine, dramaturgist and designer.

For five days, we collaborated with artists with disabilities from countries including Italy, Greece, Columbia, Germany, Sweden, Ireland, and Korea on ways of composing dramaturgy and archiving work.

My intuition concerning an enormous role language and communication play in constructing dramaturgy and choreography was then confirmed. I mean their role in creating a relationship between a dramaturgist/choreographer and an artist with disability. For it to become a partnership, the language should be accessible and understandable to all involved. An extremely jargony or highfalutin language produces a relationship based in power and supposed expertness attributed to the section of a company regarded as able.

During one break at the lab we talked about our methods of creative work. There were five of us: an able-bodied artist from Columbia, an artist with vision disability from Germany, a performer with movement disability from Ireland, an artist with invisible disability from Sweden and me – an artist of short stature with vision disability from Poland. Our main

language of communication was English. On the one hand, it facilitated our collaboration and, on the other, it sometimes made communication longer lasting and more complicated. It so happened, because just as spoken language excludes Deaf people, the English language excludes those who cannot speak it.

In order to learn about and broaden methods of creating dramaturgy, it is necessary to become familiar with the work of Deaf dancers and those with alternative motor and sensory skills.[5] The number of people with disabilities creating dance is really quite significant. However, a majority of those artists remain invisible, because they are often deprived of their rights, creating in flats without a lift, or in closed centres under the watchful eye of able-bodied (pseudo)choreographers. Additionally, they cannot apply to art schools, lack promotion, clout etc. What is the dramaturgy of those “invisible” artists’ pieces? Do they influence its creation? Can their art be seen and by whom? I will leave those questions unanswered for you to find out for yourselves.

During the aforementioned laboratory in Rovereto, an artist with vision disability collaborated with an audio-descriptor throughout the entire creative process. Such a solution seems very helpful in avoiding the trap of hierarchy in performance reception. I have found that the mere presence of audio-description and the manner of its making substantially influence the dramaturgy and reception of a performance.

Before showing my work at the lab, I asked my interpreter to translate the words I would sing into English for the Greek Sign Language translator. Thanks to this, a Deaf artist from Greece watching the performance could concentrate on its visual side.

When working with an artist with movement disability from Italy, we benefited from the support of two people: a Polish-to-English interpreter who transmitted information from me to her English-to-Italian counterpart. She, in turn, passed it on to my Italian colleague. Then, this multi-stage communication happened the other way round. The four-person collaboration required huge precision in transmitting information and, despite our significant mindfulness of each other, communication barriers were difficult to avoid. It is highly probable that each of us interpreted received messages differently and focused on things other than the intended meanings. I am certain that this method of working exerted a powerful influence on how we prepared our dramaturgy and choreography. Our collaboration would have been much easier had each of us spoken English as our first language.

Documenting Creative Work

Artists with disabilities are often precluded from using typical instruments of creative work documentation as readily as able-bodied dancers or performers. By those I mean: writing, audio or video recording. People with alternative motor and sensory skills frequently have to invent their own way of recording work or adapt commonly used tools for their own needs.

Iwona Olszowska, with whom I completed a foundational course in choreography, taught me to record everything on small pieces of note paper. This helps in arranging/rearranging scenes, cutting them out, adding successive ideas. Nonetheless, I had to modify this method so it did not hinder my work. I replaced the note paper with large sheets and letters, and a

pen with a marker. Thanks to this, I can keep up the pace of my work and fully concentrate on its contents.

In Rovereto, I observed how another artist with vision disability, Sophia Neises, documented her process, recording its successive stages on a computer adapted to the needs of the visually impaired and had an on-going discussion of the process with an audio-descriptor. An artist with movement disability benefited from the support of an able-bodied person who recorded their thoughts. One person wrote down tens of questions in a notebook, which they attempted to answer in discussions with others.

In a collaboration between the able-bodied and the disabled, the former should take responsibility for adapting the tools used for conducting and documenting work. Hand-writing excludes those without able hands, audio recording excludes the Deaf, while video recording without audio-description – the blind and visually impaired.

You may wonder how artistic work by people with disabilities in daycare centres or special schools is documented. My experience has taught me that, in very many cases, this is done without involving those concerned! It often happens that a description of the so-called pupil's (in)complete plan of action is deemed "more worthy" of documentation than their dance. Precisely this is ableism in practice.

An Artist with Disability versus the Audience

In her text, *Take It Easy, It's Just a Performance*, published in the 2021 Ciało/Umysł Festival paper, Magda Przybysz writes: "as an audience, it is nearly impossible to attend a performance as the proverbial clean slate." [6] Watching non-normatively-bodied artists, the able-bodied spectator usually has their slate covered from top to bottom. It contains numerous stereotypes and prejudices. During a performance, the viewer confronts their beliefs about disability as well as gender, ethnicity or appearance; the confrontation is often multiple. Besides the intended dramaturgy of a performance, we are also dealing with a dramaturgy arising along the artist-addressee axis. Its quality is largely dependent not only on the artist themselves, but also on the extent to which the spectator is conscious of stereotypes and prejudices they bring into the theatre. They can substantially affect perception, lead to paternalism, marginalisation and unequal treatment of artists, and even hinder art reception.

In Conclusion

Summarising my reflections as well as broadening the subject slightly, I would like to quote Alicja Müller, who wrote about *Poruszenie* (a performance in Zofia Noworól's choreography), in which I featured in 2015: "The dramaturgy of her [Zofia Noworól's] project relies on subversive deconstruction of ableist model of disability as well as on reappropriation of instruments of tabooisation of bodily otherness from the dominant discourse and their transformation into elements of strategy of emancipation, also incorporating the performers' sexuality and their right to bodily pleasure." [7]

Willing to create diverse dramaturgy and structure of dance as well as developing varied methods of work documentation, we have to do everything we can to prevent them from

being ableist and sexist, and therefore abusive and exclusionary. The responsibility lies primarily with able-bodied choreographers and dramaturgists. We cannot speak about movement and its 'language' without understanding the social context. We need education, understanding, empathy, and dialogue. For all art makers, regardless of the degree of our (dis)ability, this is my wish.

The article was developed in collaboration with the British Council, as part of the Europe Beyond Access project, aiming to internationalise the careers of disabled artists and revolutionise Europe's performing arts scene.

[1] T. Siebers, *Disability Theory*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2008, p. 98.

[2] D. Bastos Niepce, *Naga i niepełnosprawna. Ciało jako obraz siły i piękna [Naked and Disabled. The Body as Image of Strength and Beauty]*, <https://taniecpolska.pl/krytyka/naga-i-niepelnosprawna-cialo-jako-obraz-sily-i-piekna/>, 14.11.2021.

[3] M. Moskal, *Emil i my. Monolog wielodzietnej matki [Emil and We. A Monologue of a Mother of a Large Family]*, Wydawnictwo Karakter, Kraków, 2021, p. 137

[4] A. Benjamin, *Why we need more disabled choreographers*, <https://www.disabilityartsinternational.org/resources/why-we-need-more-disabled-choreographers/>, 10.11.2021.

[5] I would recommend becoming familiar with the work of the following artists: Tatiana Cholewa, Patrycja Jarosińska, Nadia Markiewicz, Diana Bastos Niepce, Claire Cunningham, Marc Brew, Kate Marsh, Irini Kourouvani, Caroline Bowditch, Chiara Bersani; Teatr 21; companies: Per Art, Candoco, Axis Dance Company; as well as the work of the sadly departed Rafał Urbacki and Dave Toole.

[6] M. Przybysz, *Spokojnie, to tylko Performans [Take It Easy, It's Just a Performance]*, <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/65856007/gazeta-festiwalowa-cialo-umysl-2021>, 10.11.2021.

[7] A. Müller, *Let's (crip)dance! Choreograficzne emancypacje ciał nienormatywnych [Let's (Crip)Dance! Choreographic Emancipations of Non-normative Bodies]* <https://rcin.org.pl/ibl/dlibra/publication/240102/edition/204252?language=en&fbclid=IwAR3yFpRH137BfkdRpLffUgVRh1JFyAK35E-loXUmKjzexcXthUgAodcis>, 10.11.2021.