

Welcome to this panel.

My name is Freddie Opoku-Addaie,
artistic director and chief executive
of Dance Umbrella International Festival London.

I am a black male.

6 foot five in my dreams, but in real life 5 foot 7.

Short back and sides hair, with a beard,

I have a few appearing grey hair in the moustache,
which I've tried to pull out a couple of times, but I'm not anymore.

We're gonna go around to meet our wonderful panellists.

Who will be joining me for this conversation,
starting with Kasia.

My name is Katarzyna Żeglicka, I come from Poland.

I'm a queer and crip artist and activist.

I'm also a theatre pedagogue
and a trainer in self-defence and assertiveness for women.

I'm quite short, I'm white, I go by they/them in English.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Hello, my name is Mark Brew. I use he/him pronouns.

I'm a 6 foot 2, slim white male.

I'm a wheelchair user.

I have a shaved head using and wearing a green cap, green eyes.

And a cute smile.

And also I'm an artistic director,
choreographer and dancer sometimes these days.

After this, it's hard to do a presentation.

My name is Diana Niepce, I'm based in Lisbon, Portugal.

I'm a dancer, choreographer, writer and activist.

I'm a wheelchair user.

I have dark hair, dark eyes, and I'm thin.

And... Thanks.

I am Aristide Rontini,
I come from Italy, I'm based close to Bologna
and I'm a choreographer and occasionally performer now.
I'm a community dance practitioner,
and I'm also an activist belonging to Al Di Qua Artists,
which is engaged in advocacy and rights
for artists with disability in the art sector in Italy.
I'm quite tall, I wear big glasses, I have a beard.
And that's it for now.

Thank you. Thank you for introducing yourselves.

So the themes we'll be looking at today is around the work of disabled artists
and its importance in contemporary dance,
and I would say in the sector, more than that,
but actually not necessarily why is it important,
but what is it you're doing that's important,
and how you're doing that,
and I just wanted to go around to just get your perspective
on where you're based as well as making work nationally and internationally,
but from where you're moving your work from,
what is it you're doing
that is important for you right now in your work.

I can go first. This is Mark speaking.

For me...

I feel work by disabled artists is important
because it brings a unique and different perspective, different voices
to be shared and to be learned from. For me, in my own practice,
I've now come from being five years as a destructor
of an existing integrated dance company where I was creating work.
But now I'm sort of going back to finding my own identity
as an independent disabled artist.

And for me...

My work is influenced by my disability

but it's not always about disability subject matter,
but I feel it definitely has influenced my choreographic practice.
And what I'm interested as a creator is exploring new and interesting possibilities
and ways of moving and interacting and engaging with the audience.
And then of course bringing accessibility into that
in regards to ensuring that there is a description,
captioning, BSL or sign language interpretation,
and finding creative ways as part of the process from the beginning
rather than an afterthought,
so I also feel that it's my responsibility
as a disabled artist to ensure that my work is as accessible as possible.
So it's not in... It's innate as a part of the work?

- Yeah. - Not an add-on.

Not an add-on, and also a creative opportunity, you know,
to really explore and push those boundaries
where I think more traditional companies or organisations
or artists used to coming from a traditional background of dance,
may think of it as an art form.
Anyone else wanna add to that from where your based, your practice?
I feel like for me the importance of disabled artists
on stage is like questioning these hierarchy of the performing body,
because it's very clear
that it's still not very thought about it in the academic world.
So it's also very important to give voice to the invisible
and the marginalised from society,
and when people stare or when people are available to watch
a disabled artist, they are also reflecting the norms of society
and the oppressions of the system and the violence that is constantly inflicting
in everyone.

So,

I think diversity is very important in my work,
but it's not about that at all.

What I'm really interested is to understanding the bodies,
how they work in physic and also the speech of violence
that is constantly happening everywhere
and the oppression of the bodies and how can I create beauty about that.
Also I'm super interested in the gravity,
that's the strength of the physic, how you can work with this.
I work between these language of tension or creating tension.
So it's super interesting to have this feedback
of how the attention is received and what comes from that.
And also, I'm interested in presenting bodies as they are,
or the exposition of the body, without trying to normalise them,
becoming very efficient.
No, I feel like the body has their own energy,
it's the most interesting and spectacular thing we have,
and we don't need to be all the same.
So this is the thing that interests me: how this body moves?
It's interested about this
and of course there is all these layers of accessibility
that I think is very important
and it raises a bigger problem that is the budget,
because putting sign language
and audio-description or to think about accessibilities
is a very big thing that some artists are not allowed to think about
because the budget becomes like...
And I'm a choreographer of author,
so my pieces are from author, I don't have a company
so this is a proportion that can kill the budget very easily.
But I think we should all do it as a practice always.
I try to do that, and now I have a baby in my...
My dancer has a baby there, so also we need to manage this.
Freddie speaking. So there's another economy
inclusive part of the practice that's... yeah.

Yeah. And I'm dancing and the baby comes to me
and she thinks I'm a horse
so it's quite funny also so how you are inclusive
and deal with the situations
that are all the time happening in rehearsals? So yeah.
For me as a person with disability,
I felt in society, and my disability specifically consists of having a shorter
arm
and sometimes people perceive me as a disabled
and sometimes not, and sometimes forgets about my disability.
So my position, my identities are all the time questioned.
So in my work I bring this sense of questioning the identity in many ways.
And I think it comes from my life experience of disability.
And so I'm very interested also
in how you expose your body in front of an audience,
how you can...
show invisible things that are also part of the disability
knowledge of your body,
how you experience word in your autochthonous way.
And...
as a person who is...
I'm marginalised, sometimes I'm not, so I'm sometimes in the border,
sometimes outside, sometimes inside.
I have these three positions of myself:
inside, on the border, very outside.
So I've somehow the privilege to look at things in different ways
and how societies and also structures, and how...
I question which values are forming the structure of society nowadays?
So all these questions, and I take it in my exploration,
because each of my project is quite autonomous.
Of course they have all the main question I told already,
but each time I'm exploring different values

and putting in question, so I create experience
that creates maybe more intimacy in a public space,
because I feel like sometimes
we miss this connection with ourselves
because of the high tempo and high functionality society requires us.
My practice as a dancer comes straight from me being an activist.
And because of this, the themes that I take up in my artistic practice
are exactly the themes that I've been taking up when while being an activist.
I use the fact that my body is political all in itself,
and that the private is political,
that the personal is political.
And it's extremely important for me, and I work hard to give a voice to that
while I'm on stage.
I wish to disrupt the binary opposition of "able" and "disabled",
so to speak, and diversity on stage
is also a thing that I'm hugely interested in.
And also the question of inviting as much diversity on the stage as we can
but also the question that we ask ourselves,
how much diversity we show and when it remains invisible,
when we allow it to remain invisible.
Up to now, most of the pieces I did or I took part in
did revolve around the topic of violence.
But what I also find very important
is to put a spotlight on the internalised ableism
that lurks somewhere at the back of our own heads
and lurks also in the heads of the audience.
And this is... and actually I wanted to appear,
make itself visible and not be so default anymore.
Where I'm based in Poland,
the things still look like art by people with disabilities
is still regarded as a kind of pretty art therapy,
or real therapy and stuff like that.

So it's also very important for me
to put a focus on the artistic values
to create aesthetics of different bodies to use the diversity of movement.

Does the frame of reference shift
and the way you approach your work
and what tools do you need to bring when you go into those contexts?

So the tools that you have and the way you work,
how does that shift to where you are
or where you invited to?

Whether it might be in a context of a commission,
invited guest artists?

How does that shift for you as a practitioner?

Yeah, it depends really on the context.

The context makes the difference
because when your commissioned
many things are already decided by other people
and you can negotiate a bit.

But I feel that many things you cannot time-wise,
some collaborators...

I mean it's a project which is commissioned,
so it's already thought by somebody else,
you need to somehow integrate with your vision.

When I'm doing my own project I have the freedom to shape it,
to decide also the length...

I'm a very long process-maker,
and having an empty space gives me advantage
to really question what is important for me
and to let things drop, digest and grow inside.

Another context,
when you are commissioned you have maybe 10 days to create something,
you don't have this opportunity to collect practices and thoughts
but you need to be... You are more in a project-oriented way

of creating because you need to make a lot of decisions at...

- a very short time - in a very short time.

So it's very different.

I'm going to let you go in that, because actually you touched on it

regarding the, tell me if I'm wrong,

the word I'm thinking of is responsibility

to make the work accessible in a way with the "be yourself" interpretation,

audio-description, all those things,

do you carry that weight when you go into different contexts?

- Diana, you want to touch on that? - It's hard because...

So I needed to decide that I only have time to do my own work.

So I stopped integrating projects of other artists

because I didn't have time to do everything properly.

Also because of the short time period

we have to do all the things we need to do

in order to do a creation or presentation

and not all the time matching my body needs,

so I have this kind of conflict.

When I start drawing a project

and usually I don't accept commissions,

like they invite me to do this thing and it's already prepared.

I'm not actually so interested because I want to do my things.

So I draw the things

and then I try to find people that are interested in my projects.

Since the beginning, I'm trying to find a way of creating full accessibility,

but it depends if it's a formation,

because I also create these formations for artists with disability,

because in Portugal we don't have it in the academic world, so...

Also bringing these access to new practices, more experimental.

My creations are very different always from each other

so it takes some time.

If I stop to use the wheelchair and crutches on stage, I have a problem:

how I locomote the bodies without using these?
And it's on the floor, but I work about non-gravitational bodies
so then I have this inner struggle: how I deal with this?
And usually as a director,
I said most of the times I'm just solving problems.
It's a creation of course,
but most of the time we are trying just to solve problems of things,
but I found it very hard to create full accessibility in my pieces.
And especially if it's a diverse team,
it can be very hard, not just for the audience
but to have a safe place for the team.
The conversation we had about equity and diversity and inclusivity.
And I think with the state of where contemporary practice and dance is,
what you guys are proposing is a way that we widen the form.
And it's accessibility.
So how are you doing that individually within your own work
that you feel is important for the sector?
When I'm creating my projects,
I don't like to be in this kind of...
I like to create a safe space of access,
but I'm not in a safe place, so I work about risk
and also in this kind of experimental way of working arts.
So it's about also provoking and how you provoke,
and how you create tension,
and also how you bring the perversion of society to this, that is the stage
and how you work with that in a very raw and beautiful, and also violent way.
So I have these layers all the time
that I'm triggering like the privilege of genetic,
why they are always the same, why we are all the same?
The rhythm of the market is super fast
and sometimes you cannot dive so deep in these waters.
Do you feel the same, others, about the time?

Or do you slow things down because of your practice?

And yeah, I mean I think that's also, especially for the world we're in, where we've gone so fast and it took a pandemic to say:

guys, we need to slow down. So how is that?

But you already have that in your practice because it needs that time to facilitate that everyone have an equal access.

I feel like I have a constant impression that this forced efficiency, this huge pace at which the world, the market is going forward it back.

It basically fuels capitalist and ableist approaches.

Yeah, I feel like I would like to put a bigger emphasis on slowing down in my practice, but truth is, the artistic environment that I'm in, the environment made mostly by able-bodied artists, hardly helps me out.

If I don't engage with this environment that goes too fast, then I will have hardly any opportunities to actually engage with the artistic work that I'm interested in.

Yes, I think it's a totally valid strategy, and I do cooperate a lot with collectives that deal with regenerative practice, and I'm interested into rest as a form of resistance.

But... and it's hugely important: not rest as we perceive it as a break in activity so that we're more efficient afterwards when we have rested but just rest.

And I wish I could focus on the creative process as such, without thinking so much about the outcome.

The truth is, the artistic process that happens is of more greatest importance to me.

I feel like I'm calmer, more creative.

However, when the process is at the end, and we have a product ready,
and it's funny how capitalist this word sounds,

like when you have a performance ready for a show,

and when this product is ready,

and we're on stage and performing,

I'm also interested in shifting the perspective a little bit,

because it's also me watching the audience

and due to the funny things that my eyes...

My eyes are dancing, they're constantly on the move.

Actually the audience is never sure where what I'm looking at.

This idea of slowing down, which I think is very important,

all the practitioners talked about. And I think there's this idea of also...

Not idea, but actually the practice of attention to multiplicity.

I think it's really important. Do you want...

I think you were about to say something.

No, I totally agree with Kasia.

And also I want to put in my practice much more emphasis

on the process and on the detail...

And now a simple thing connected to other element

of the performance can create a very complex environment,

even if it's very simple on the sense,

I mean it's not athletic,

it's just somebody looking at and then positioning.

Very simple elements can create complexity.

I have an academic education

and I was educated to push myself, my body,

and it was never enough what I was doing.

I mean, the message is always there: you're not doing enough.

"Go, classes everyday... Improve, improve, improve."

And I was losing the sense of myself

and just the single movement of my head

what effect can produce on me and on other people.
So I'm really into this
not capitalistic way of also train your body
and always push yourself... - In a limit.
In a limit but always up in the line, a never-ending line.
I feel more circularity.
I feel I'm in-between these concepts because I work about limits,
but also I feel what's the secret of movement,
what's the magic of this movement and what it means.
So I feel I'm in the middle of this.
As a performer, which is an academic education,
I also know a lot of languages and I use it.
I'm not avoiding them, and I like the contrast
between these many languages that can question the audience
because the coexistence of this little movement
or maybe athletic movement. What do you look at?
What... how do you relate to them?
And what's representing and meaning?
Yes, for you as an audience.
This leads me straight on to one of the nearly final question.
So what I've observed is this idea,
well, the responsibility as sector leaders,
as independent artist and artistic directors.
From what you do with your work, there is a commitment to educating
that is not the focus of the work, but it feels
there's a real strong commitment to educating as well as doing your practice.
How do you balance that with actually doing the work,
and having to be like a sector facing, how do you negotiate that?
Because that's also a way where you can get burnt out,
but have you got strategies that are important to you to get your work done?
This is for me, what I feel is why work by disabled artists
and the work that we create, the way that we find our ways

to create work and present work
is so important because we are challenging and questioning
societal structures and ableist ways of working
because this is our need as a disabled artist to make it work.
And it's been now the last 25 years
I've been working as a disabled artist,
and I've had to try to fit in to these structures that were already existing.
And what really excites me about all these wonderful artists
that are here and the up-and-coming disabled artists
that now have more opportunities than I did when I first began,
is that they're having more ownership over that
and ownership over what their needs are,
and expressing that.
I also want to be clear that it's not easy and as always,
it's going to be a constant struggle.
But I think this is why work by disabled artists
is key to the artistic growth of the contemporary art form,
because we are bringing that, and we are challenging that,
and we're not going anywhere,
so the world needs to wake up. Venues need to be more accessible,
funding needs to be made more available,
so all of these accessibility and integrating the work
and what its needs are to present this work
is supported and presented.