

Welcome everybody!

I'm very happy to be here with these fantastic deaf, disabled artists today...

discussing around the topic of deaf and disabled artists largely having no access to cultural, higher education, and I'm very curious to know about your experience.

How have you developed your own training?

How did you get where you are?

So first we introduce ourselves.

I'm Aristide Rontini. I'm a performer, choreographer, dance community practitioner and activist in the collective Al Di Qua Artists, which is Association of artists with disability in Italy, which advocates the rights of people with disability and artists with disability in the art sector in Italy.

I am quite tall.

I'm in my late forties.

I have dark brown hair, dark brown eyes, very dark brown beard, and I have a shorter right arm.

So I would ask you to please introduce yourself.

Should I go?

My name is Kate.

I am a self-identifying crip artist researcher.

I have a background in choreography and collaborative practice with other deaf and disabled artists.

I am a white woman in her late forties.

I have long brown hair with a fringe.

Hello everyone.

My name is Chisato.

My sign name is just tapping on the nose.

As my background... I'm a deaf artistic director, a performance artist, and also a BSL art guide.

In terms of my appearance,
I'm wearing all black today
and I've got dark hair.

I've got a black top and bottoms.

In terms of my appearance, I have East Asian features
and I was born in Japan.

And I'm now based in London.

My name is Katarzyna Żeglicka. I come from Poland.

I'm a gender queer, crip artist and activist.

On top of this, I'm also a theater pedagogue
and a trainer in self-defense and assertiveness for women.

I'm short, I'm white. I'm also in my forties,
and I go by "they, them" for pronouns in English.

- Thank you. - Thank you very much.

So let's go to the first question.

I would really love you to tell us what is your official education
and how did you get in touch with artistic practice.

To art sector in general.

I got a formal higher education and technically I was educated
as a cultural animator.

Recently I also completed a course in theater pedagogy.

Actually, my artistic education is fully informal.

I was mostly struggling to get access to it myself.

And funded it myself.

My artistic education comes from my path as an artist.

It's, in a way, an extension of me being an activist.

And the point where it intersected was my participation
in the "One Billion Rising Flash Mob", which is an international action,
made on Valentine's Day to raise awareness about...

trigger warning date rape.

Ever since... first taking part in the radical dancing,

I was looking for opportunities to develop myself

and get further education.

Well, it was a constant battle.

I was able to finish a course in stage choreography,
and I was the only person with a disability in the group.

- Thank you. - Thank you.

In terms of my educational background...

Previously I lived in Japan and my degree was in art.

At that time, in terms of art, I felt a real connection to...
that there was something that wasn't right at the time.

I was given a letter that said...

one man said a British individual was coming over to Japan,
who was going to teach us about...

deaf and disability,

and it was specifically relating to a dance workshop.

And I thought, "I'm a deaf individual, but I've never engaged with dancing."

And I knew dance, as a concept, meant to following music,
which I wasn't able to do.

And I thought,

"I've had this invitation, why not come and get involved?"

So I've got involved in the workshop.

And it was almost like dance is a 3D art form

and I was so astonished by it.

And I really fell into a rabbit hole and fell into the world of it.

I was with the Japanese company that funded me...

to go and travel the world and learn...

more about dance and get more of a dance education

and research...

The education around the world for deaf and disabled individuals

in terms of dance.

I found there wasn't much out there for deaf and disabled individuals,
but I saw it in Britain,

Laban.

So I went over to the Laban Center and...

I had a one and a half year learning experience.

At the same time, I also traveled,

I did different dance workshops.

I tried to get involved in lots of different ones,

and of course, I did some workshops in Japan.

In Butoh.

This is a really good opportunity for me to learn about Japanese dance styles

and how that could relate to the learning I'd done at Laban,

which is very European contemporary and how those could work together,

and that's been part of my journey.

Thank you very much.

I have some similarities to Kasia and Chisato.

I was always interested in moving my body and dancing,

but at the time that I was growing up, there were no role models.

Deaf and disabled people were not on the stages.

Or on the screen.

I had no idea that it was a possibility.

So I did a training in dance and related arts at university.

But I was very much encouraged that I would have a career in dance management.

At this point there were no deaf and disabled artists performing,

but it was felt that I could be an administrator or a manager,

and I was kind of happy with that.

And then in my last year at university, similarly to Chisato,

I suspect it was the same person.

I did a workshop with Adam Benjamin in my third year.

And...

it was the first time I had encountered dancers

with bodies any way similar to mine.

It was such a good timing for me to understand

that I could pursue a career as a dancer.

And I didn't have to kind of be behind the scenes and hidden away.

So then I worked for one intensive year with Candoco Dance Company as a trainee.
And then actually...

through my own choice, when I finished that traineeship,
I then did work in dance management and administration,
which now I'm really glad I did.

And then I joined Candoco as a dancer and a teacher.

That's where I would say my dance training really happened,
just tutoring, and being around, being with peers and learning in that way.
And working with different artists, different choreographers.

And then I just worked as a dancer for many, many years, and as a teacher.

And when I was in my thirties, I began to become very interested
in research.

I had lots of questions around the philosophy
of disability and deaf and disabled experience.

And I was more and more frustrated with...

a lack of representation. I had many questions.

So almost as Kasia was saying, I pushed into doing
a Master's qualification.

And then after my Master's, I had the opportunity to study for a PhD.

So I came to that part of my education quite late.

But, in a way, my formal education came in two halves.

One was very much about practical training in dance,
and the other one was about my frustration
and my own questions around what I wanted to experience.

Thank you very much.

Very different, but at the same time, many common things.

How everyone of you found their own way,
following their desire to get knowledge, training opportunities
and keep on dancing in a way.

I'm very glad to hear.

And my next question would be: what strategies did you find to...
overcome the lack of access to higher education?

In a way you already answer, but I ask you to give more details...

Ask you to go into more details.

I feel like I was mostly empowered by my previous activist practice because this is where I started having the experience of working in groups that put emphasis on awareness about violence, discrimination, and group process and so on and so forth.

And I think this is where I came into contact with good practices that have actually informed the way I learn and also the way I teach.

In fact, me learning about consent, about creating safer spaces is a direct outcome of being in and working with the queer feminist communities.

And it was among these people that I also encountered individuals who were interested in dance, in studying movement.

I also feel like the Education in the WenDo training Academy, the self-defense and assertiveness for women with disabilities, even though self-defense might not relate that much toward dance directly, but the high emphasis on body work

Is what informed my way of thinking very strongly, and also the part where assertiveness comes into question, has influenced the way I'm actually...

trying to reach for the resources that I require.

I would also like to add that my strategy is developed on the basis of assertiveness.

Sometimes makes me act...

which has closed me a couple of doors.

- Thank you. - Thank you.

I think it's a really interesting topic.

I think I didn't realise at the time that I did have those barriers in place.

For example, when I was in Japan, I was studying with no interpreter, with no sign language interpreter.

And that was seen as normal in that scape.

So I felt...

Now looking back, I can recognize that was a barrier to me.

I did not have access to an interpreter growing up in Japan.

But I have learned a lot through my education and being in that environment.

Then, looking at my experience in Britain and studying at Laban,

I didn't understand English at that time.

So the educators at Laban said, "we can bring an interpreter for you."

I said, "okay, an interpreter".

Does that mean a British sign language interpreter?

Not a Japanese interpreter?

It's going to be a British sign language interpreter.

Let's have a go.

I must say I was quite lucky,

because Laban is an international school.

This means I wasn't the only dancer with English as second or third language.

There were lots of other individuals in similar circumstances studying there.

So we were together in that.

So this means you're in lectures or...

most of us would be looking at interpreters rather than the lecturer.

All eyes would be on the interpreter, everyone would be watching

because it would help all of us,

as international people understand. It was quite a funny situation.

It was raining, the interpreter was late because of the weather.

And the lecturer could actually understand "please, we need the interpreter in place."

"Can we wait for the interpreter?"

So the lecturer would hold off. Sometimes the lecturer would say,

"I'm teaching..."

the interpreter is not the teacher. Please, do remember that."

I think that's quite nice. That the interpreter...

was there for my access, but actually became access for all of us

watching the interpreter.

And I think looking back at that,

I think it was nice that my access became quality of many individuals there.
Setting that example aside, I'm a deaf individual...
and there were a lot of instances with issues coming across
in the dance sphere.
For example, the music would start...
So it was how I could know to follow that.
So, Laban or being in that dance world for the first time,
thinking
"how can we get a deaf individual in? How can we include them?"
That was some barriers in place, at the first.
It depends on the individuals, whether they're open-minded,
they're ready to roll up the sleeves and to take on the challenge
and say, "come on, Chisato, let's work together."
It really depends on some people that might bear with it and say,
"okay, we've got a deaf person."
and they'll kind of force me and say, "okay, you're on now".
That sort of attitude.
And that has happened to me.
I think as I've gone on, as I've learned over time...
I think it's quite similar to Kasia's experience.
I have had to become more assertive in this,
and I've had to say, "I'm a deaf individual...
I need a clear mental picture of what is going on
And telling people that...
I sometimes need time to research concepts and understand them,
so I can understand the different concepts for myself.
It's really interesting for me listening to all of you,
and trying to think how...
Trying to reflect on the strategies that I've used,
because I think it's important to...
identify that...
barriers to education in dance are...

Yes, there are practical barriers where we require access, interpreters, access into spaces.

Although there's some improvement, we also must recognise that many barriers are attitudinal and based on...

the model in education is based on a normative body.

We are taught technique and choreography based on a normative body.

And as someone who exists in a non-normative body,

there's this tension all the time

that my body doesn't fit, and that's my own attitudinal barrier of me feeling my body doesn't fit.

And then the attitudinal barrier of peers and teachers of "your body doesn't fit"

"There's a problem with your body"

This was the biggest barrier, I think, for me.

And I'm really interested in what both of you have said,

that going back to my point about my education being early on in my life, and then much later.

When I was younger, like 18 to 25 and training in that way, I really wanted to fit in.

I didn't want to be the... I was always the only one.

I keep hearing this today, "the only one".

I was always the only one in the class,

and I really didn't want that.

I wanted to fit in.

So the first half of my training, I was trying to assimilate, trying to be as close to normal as I could.

And the strategy for that was actually...

keep my head down, fit in, do the work, do what's being asked.

And in the second half of my education, which is where I started to engage with my own questions,

my strategy was and still is to position myself.

Around all of you.

To position myself really clearly in these deaf, disabled, and crip spaces.

And that's been a clear... that's a strategy.

And I feel kind of glad that I've done both,

but they're very different ways.

So my strategy now is funny because I'm maybe the opposite that I was.

Not at all angry or aggressive in my younger training,

but as I've become older, I'm much pushier,

I'm much more assertive in what I want to learn and do.

I feel very similar to you, I guess.

But there's also one thing that nags me about this assertiveness,

because more often than not, when I'm trying to learn something,

I actually have to be very focused, very aware, and very suspicious.

It's kind of like I feel distracted from actually learning something

because I'm trying to detect things that detect those invisible barriers.

It's a job I shouldn't be doing while learning.

Because I was never taught anything by a teacher or a trainer

that would be deaf or with disability.

I wonder if I can just comment on something you've said there

around educating educators.

For me, there's something really important,

because in my career,

so much of my work has been educating teachers.

And in different contexts.

I think now I'm at a point in my career, where I don't want to do that anymore.

I think after 20 years,

I don't want to talk about making a ballet class accessible or inclusive.

I want...

I don't want that to be my job anymore.

And I want to be careful, because I absolutely want access in education,

and I absolutely want any deaf, disabled artist to do a ballet class

if they want to.

But I have questions around how our knowledge and our bodies
are instrumentalized to teach people
who still hold on to these very normative systems of teaching.

And I guess I also question
what difference does one day of workshop or a week of workshops,
to teaching teachers how to teach inclusively?

I'm not sure.

I think we need the change to be more systemic, more radical.

Yeah. If I can add to that,

I think that's a really true point for deaf and disabled individuals.

For example, myself as a teacher,

It reminded me of back in 2012,

we had the London Paralympics and we had the opening ceremony for it.

I was involved in the opening ceremony

with a lot of other deaf and disabled artists.

There were two directors.

The first was a deaf woman, Jenny. That was her sign name.

And her aim was...

So far the Paralympic opening ceremonies hadn't actually involved disabled
people.

And she questioned why this was.

And she thought,

"for this paralympic opening ceremony, we have to make sure we've got
deaf and disabled people involved."

It was a long process, and I remember...

At first, Jenny really wanted to include some aerial work.

The people were saying

"Deaf and disabled people getting involved with aerial work is quite dangerous."

This was what people thought in the past

and around 2010, I believe it was, or 2009...

Some deaf and disabled people weren't involved

and they set up a course.

So there were some aerial teachers who never taught

deaf and disabled individuals,
and they were trying to work out how we could make it accessible.
And we got the teacher and some deaf and disabled people together,
and every week we would look at different work
and see how we can make it fit.
We end up creating a short performance from this,
and I was looking at that process.
That was successful and we were looking into the experience,
"Look deaf and disabled people can do this and are confident in it."
And the teacher was feeling more confident in their teaching for this group.
So the group expanded.
We ended up having 50 deaf and disabled performers involved.
So we had 50 deaf and disabled people involved in this,
for the final performance.
And training started in April to August.
It was a four month progress and every day,
50 deaf and disabled people would be together training.
We had around 10 aerialist teachers.
We had lots of deaf and disabled people, but everyone had different access needs
within that.
So we almost had to teach ourselves, teach each other,
and it was a collaborative effort working with each other.
And the same time, we had to make sure we were being safe
because we'd be up in a harness in the sky
and it was quite a dangerous activity.
But in this process, there was a lot of respect for the individuals.
There was a lot of open discussion
and exchanges within that.
And we had the teacher saying,
an individual might not have lower limbs, but they could create beautiful
things.
This is something that, perhaps, the able-bodied aerialist teachers

couldn't create themselves.

And deaf individuals would be seeing what deaf individuals could do as well.

It was truly astonishing.

And it really was a good education, I would say.

So, the paralympic opening ceremony finished, but it continued from that and some aerialists want to continue involving deaf and disabled people in their performances. So that's continued from that.

And I think it wasn't the teachers being taught,

It was looking at how deaf and disabled pupils could become aerial artists within that.

I hope that's clear.

I really just would like to point out some things that came out from this discussion.

And then you can also add things that maybe I forgot.

One thing that is very important to me is...

the change of position in leadership.

Deaf and disabled artists should be hired as...

Sorry... should be hired as leaders, educators...

This is making a very good difference as far as I hear.

And also the method is more horizontal way more than vertical.

And also another thing that's very important to me is...

about the normative model of body,

which is an ableism, I think, that comes together.

And also about how higher education in arts

is structured and what kind of disciplines I have to teach.

This needs to change the structure, because there's...

What I feel sometimes is keeping on adapting, in a way, and trying to fit.

And okay, there is access, but it's still...

Try to fit there more than the other way around.

So, this is not the model I want to have access.

I want to have access about dance.

We are talking about dance here.

And what can be dance?

Not what is dance, or what was dance...

what can be...?

Thanks to my body, my experience, my living experience...

So it makes very...

Radical, subversive way of thinking of reframing education.

So I really thank you...

very much for all the things you have been raising up

these last two hours almost.

It was exciting.

- Thank you. - Thank you.

Let's go for a change.

Go for a change!