

Clair Beckett: Axis Dance Company Summer Intensive Report

To the Secretary of LUTSF,

Please find enclosed my report sharing my research and experience of working with Axis Dance Company in Oakland, California from 02/08/2013 - 13/08/2013. The report is a reflection on my experience prior to, during and after the course. The writing reflects my opinions and new found knowledge of integrated dance.

In August I travelled to Oakland to work with Axis Dance Company to gain more of an understanding of dance technique in an integrated setting. I was interested in how each dancer equally and individually could feel worked, trained and technically challenged. I was fascinated in how people with such different bodies could work together and achieve similar goals. I am continually developing my own inclusive dance technique that I am now sharing in my teaching practices at the University of Plymouth, within my community classes and PDP.

Since returning from my inspirational time with Axis Dance Company I have led a professional development workshop with the members of the Attik Dance team to share new approaches to the integrated work that we do, and how we can implement them into our existing practice. I have also taken influences from Axis and taught some of their creative processes and technique in my integrated community classes. Next month I will be leading a professional development day open to local practitioners, I feel it is important to share this experience with dancers outside of the company and inspire more people to teach in a similar and open minded way.

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The most interesting part of this experience has been sharing new approaches with my 1st year dance students at the University of Plymouth. I will be further developing a more accessible technique opening more doors into education for aspiring disabled dancers. This course aims in the future to be a fully integrated course and I am looking forward to being a part of this journey.

In November I will be teaching a day of integrated dance at Middlesex University, where I studied my BA in Performing Arts, and will again share my experiences of working with Axis. I feel that it is important to spread this new found technique with dancers far and wide and change the way people think about dance technique.

It has been truly a life changing experience for me as a dance artist; I have finally found some answers to questions I have been asking of my practice for years. I am excited to share the work, and see how the dance ecology changes over the next few years with more and more dance artists opening their minds and bodies to integrated dance.

I feel as if I met the purpose of this project, but will continue to challenge my practice and other peoples. I feel there is still a long way to go for integrated dance, but I got a taste with Axis and the wonderful people I worked with, of what dance could be like, and I don't want it any other way!

I hope you enjoy reading my report and thank you for this truly inspirational opportunity,

REPORT

Background

For the past five years I have been working as a Community Dance practitioner with Attik Dance in Plymouth and I am also a freelance performer and dance artist based in the South West. My time with Attik primarily focuses on the accessibility of dance in the city and surrounding areas. In 2011 Attik Dance was granted funding from the Big Lottery to develop a programme of dance for people with disabilities and this work has become an integral part of my personal growth and has impacted on Attik's vision and ethos greatly.

'Attik 360' is now a three year integrated dance project for disabled and non-disabled dancers which is shaped by the participants through their involvement in different aspects of the programme. The name Attik 360 describes the project and people involved, the 360 degree notion reflects the diverse range of movers, and their creative ideas. 360 has the ability to naturally twist and turn in new directions as we respond to the participant's influence. The project surprises us all the time and can change in a flash. Attik 360 is made up of weekly classes, performance work, professional development opportunities, and one off community workshops and projects.

My Research Project

My passion as a dance artist is to utilise my background and training to open doors for people interested in dance regardless of disability, and to provide dance opportunities that equally challenges the mind and body. I am discovering a technique that explores movement potential and new possibilities through ideas that challenge accepted and rigid structures. This is then expressed in a class that is limitless and doesn't leave dancers feeling isolated by stereotypical and aesthetic expectations of the body.

As we continue to plan for the future of Attik 360, we question the provision of dance for disabled people within the city. It has become apparent through research, personal experience and feedback that those who wish to access Higher Education and follow a professional route can be limited by choice, inaccessible teaching practices, and unsupportive environments. In response to this we aim to improve accessibility by



offering training and mentoring opportunities for dancers to help prepare them for education and employment. This will be our focus for Attik 360 over the next few years, and will become an essential part of the 360 offer.

To support the development of this new initiative I applied to the Lisa Ullman Travelling Scholarship Fund. When I was told I had received the scholarship, I planned a wide ranging exploration of practices and philosophies with leading practitioners and companies in the UK in preparation for my intensive with Axis Dance Company. So this funding not only sent me to Oakland, California, but it also enabled me to frame my research of other practices in the UK.

I started by visiting a number of integrated dance companies and conferences within London, Leicester and Nottingham to discover what provision was available nationally for disabled dancers, and what opportunities were offered to dance in 'mainstream' training that were not only targeting those with disabilities.

I attended Dance4's research presentation 'Changing Perceptions' based on the identification of barriers to dance training for young people with disabilities and I participated in a class with Kate Marsh, a former dancer of Candoco Dance Company. Kate taught us a technique that she has been developing as a disabled dance artist herself and expressed how she has always had to 'learn on the job!' She never felt that she received the training she deserved and wanted.



According to Dance4's research many performing artists with disabilities take routes into the profession that is most commonly within a disability-specific company or class for disabled people, rather than through 'mainstream' training routes. Most classes have a recreational focus with the emphasis on creativity and fun missing out any technical dance training. (Verrent, 2003)

For years I have felt that improvisation alone wasn't enough for the Attik 360 dancers in training. I began to generate a new dance language, using non body part specific instructions and explorations that followed a traditional class format. We investigated a structured class consisting of roll downs, travel sequences, and floor

work using improvised scores and imagery. I wanted to discover a universal dance language that could physically challenge each dancer's body, regardless of body differences.

I wanted to look at traditional formats and mess them up, and question why we still teach contemporary technique in the way we do. Is contemporary dance technique always relevant to the people we are working with and their context?

We need to prepare disabled dancers like anyone else for what they are to expect when training and working in the dance world, and not leave them feeling untrained and inadequate to their peers. By continuing to train dancers to be open minded and creative in our teaching methods, within integrated dance communities, we are preparing them as thinking dancers. But how do they translate this into an educational setting where the expectation of a dancer is different? Will dancers who have been taught in such an imaginative way suddenly feel as if they are restricted by conforming to more rigid class formats and inflexible taught material?

There needs to be a balance, we need to give these dancers the tools to prepare them for education but at the same time, the current framework needs to change. This could enable all students to experience the exhilarating work that we are emerged in within the inclusive dance world. I feel integrated dance practice in some ways, is far ahead in its thinking and processes and all contemporary dancers could in some way benefit from a more open minded technique. These worlds need to collide, and if moulded together in some way could form a technique that is quite unique.

ADAPTATION (No) TRANSLATION (YES!!!)

With these experiences and explorations of technique behind me, I applied to work with Axis Dance Company to see if I could develop my technical ideas and find an answer to some of these issues. I became interested in Axis Dance's Integrated Summer School last summer after reading about their dance program and status as a high profile and commercially recognised Integrated Company. I was fascinated to experience the companies teaching methods and techniques for disabled and non disabled dancers.

The first conversation I remember from my Axis week, which has had a huge impact on my delivery since returning, was a discussion with the director Judy Smith and the members of the company. They spoke about what we were going to experience within a technique class, and the adaptation of movement when learning taught repertoire. They explained that when learning taught movement the company encourages dancers to play with it and explore it, so that everyone 'adapts' not only the 'disabled dancer'. But Axis feel strongly that adaption is not the word to describe this process, they use 'translation'. Adapting carries the idea that you are changing something because you can't do it in the same way. But in fact, translation is a process where everyone can find a voice and an individual movement language, and is a valued process rather than a necessity.

Many disabled people I know have found themselves in dance classes where they are the only one adapting movement, and they are expected to do this very quickly without having time to process. Or 'able' bodied people have said that whilst working with disabled dancers they don't feel pushed and have come away feeling

unchallenged. Both these experiences make me feel very uncomfortable, this problem needs to be addressed.

The word translation refers to the construction or rephrasing of the movement and in the Axis process everyone does it. They gave us the opportunity to try out exercises in different spaces and in different neutral positions, and where we also talked at length about breaking our own movement habits and patterns. I found this liberating, as in a classic technique class we spend a great deal of time figuring out our teacher's movement patterns and not our own. We were allowed to feel, and explore movement, and get to know our own bodies. I think to many people, and this was my experience on returning and discussing this, the Axis idea doesn't present itself as a valid technique class. But I feel the Axis idea is revolutionary, it put us all on a level playing field, and this practice strips away any barriers.

In 'Making an Entrance', Adam Benjamin wrote 'Perhaps one day we will see training programmes in the mainstream that respond to physical difference in a way that musical school responds to different requirements of those studying string, wind or percussion; where every student is given time to understand the unique requirements and possibilities of his or her own instruments as well as being expected to participate as part of the orchestra ensemble.' (Benjamin:2002) After my experience with Axis I think this quote is more relevant than ever.

Structure



The structure of the day offered us Technique Class, Improvisation, Wheelchair Technique, and Composition class. For my own research, I was most interested in technique class, and the approaches they used.

Axis encouraged people to explore movement through guided improvisations first. Once you had explored all the lines, curves and edges of your body the

improvisation became more structured. The class still followed a traditional format, but with dancers using their minds creatively and intelligently by making movement choices.

This class removed the two dimensional feeling that I experience in a traditional class. I felt a real sense of unison as a group even though we were all doing something different. Axis were very strict with us with regards to what they wanted us to achieve, whether it was timing, or memory of our own movement and being precise with it! We had to be quick, responsive, flexible, open to try anything, work with others, whilst sticking to strict timing, rules and expectations of the leaders. Surely this is what most dancers face when working in a professional contemporary company? Arguably this is much harder than any regular technique class where you are 'just following steps' and being told by someone what is right and wrong, here you are pushed to feel and to discover what is right and wrong for yourself.

Responsibility... We all need to change

Emily Eifler, one of the company dancers, had expressed at the start of the week that this was a relatively new way of teaching for the company and technique has not always been something they had taught. I was interested to know why they thought it was important to introduce this to their week intensive. Emily said: 'Disabled dancers have far fewer opportunities to train in basic dance technique because many teachers are uncomfortable having disabled students in their classes. This means disabled dancers when working in a professional company are less trained not just in common steps or arm movements but in the alignment and safety techniques that help keep dancers safe and uninjured. The solution is just more disabled dancers taking more classes and getting teachers more exposed to us.'

We have a responsibility to embrace a change; disabled dancers for years have adapted or found a way to 'keep up' in a technique class. But if we were all encouraged to adapt, play and question what we are taught, this could enable dancers to be more open and adaptable in their futures careers. We shouldn't be thinking that dance technique should change to enable more disabled people to dance; it should evolve so that we all think, and know how to look after our bodies, instead of forcing our bodies into old fashioned ideas. Let's have long and healthy dance careers, and not cut them short by teachers forcing our bodies into foreign positions since childhood, that cause us to have hip replacements at 40 years old.

We could all benefit from a new approach that not only physically challenges us, but mentally challenges us and prepares us realistically for what we are to expect when working in the dance world. We should be delivering a technique that supports dancers to think creatively, to be able to make quick and also thoughtful decisions, and to discover the bodies' potential for movement, and not always be faced with limitation and criticism based on our bodies capability and physicality. I feel it is important to recognise and be grateful for our dance history, for Doris Humphrey and Isadora Duncan for teaching us to break away from the constraints of dance to feel and to breathe. This is a quote from dance pioneer Doris Humphrey that still feels relevant and inspirational to me today:

'The Dancer believes that his art has something to say which cannot be expressed in words or in any other way than by dancing ... there are times when the simple

dignity of movement can fulfil the function of a volume of words. There are movements which impinge upon the nerves with a strength that is incomparable, for movement has power to stir the senses and emotions, unique in itself. This is the dancer's justification for being, and his reason for searching further for deeper aspects of his art.' (Doris Humphrey, 1937 (<http://www.dorishumphrey.org/>))

Since my return I have led a professional development workshop with the members of the Attik Dance team to share these new approaches and to influence the integrated work that we do, so that we can implement these into our existing practice. Artistic Director of Attik Dance, Benjamin Dunks, has since said of this CPD session, 'This was an inspirational and challenging experience, where we were all confronted, in a gentle and generous way, with our own limitations and experiences of what we each thought a technique class could be. We are always looking to challenge our practice at Attik, and this work with Clair has certainly done this. I think these ideas are the way forward and I look forward to being part of the evolution of them in the coming years.'

I am also sharing this new technique with my 1st year students at the University of Plymouth, which has not only brought new challenges and experience to the dancers, but to the course itself, offering these students an accessible technical class once a week. This is a step in the right direction for the University and one that will help encourage more disabled dancers to access the course. I have felt a sense of relief and excitement towards these new ideas from the dancers, stating that they feel like they are really dancing in this class and it is like nothing else they have experienced.

In November I will be teaching a day of integrated dance at Middlesex University, and will again share my experiences of working with Axis. I feel that it is important to spread this new found technique with dancers and change the fixed way in which people think about dance technique.

Conclusion

One day I hope that categorisations of people will vanish within the dance world... there will no longer be a label, dance will be dance and integrated dance will no longer be needed as a title to convince people that they are 'allowed' to participate. When audition notices and call outs are announced, all dancers will feel as if they can apply... and not look for the part where it says 'Integrated Company' or 'we are looking for disabled dancers'. Dancers will be valued as thinkers, and not judged by physical ability only. What is perfect? Perfection is an unachievable. Yet we all strive to be perfect in all aspects of our lives. We can never achieve it in life, or dance.

I may have ended up with more questions than I started and there are some questions I set out with that I still don't know what the answer to, but by asking questions and pushing peoples thoughts on training and technique I hope people will begin to think differently about what they want to see or expect to see when they watch a dancer.... We need to start challenging what dance is, who it is, and who it could be.

The Lisa Ullmann Travelling Fund has enabled me to experience an idea, philosophy and practice I wouldn't have otherwise been able to, and this experience has

radically changed my own understanding of dance, dance technique and how we can truly integrate physical practices across a spectrum of people. I think this is what this fund is for, and with the continued sharing of my experience across the dance community, the learning I experienced will be spread far and wide.

(Verrent, J) (2003) Barriers to Dance Training for Young People with Disabilities, *Dance4*, 3

(Benjamin, A) (2002) Making An Entrance- Theory and Practice for Disabled and Non Disabled Dancers, 8

(Doris Humphrey, 1937 (<http://www.dorishumphrey.org/>))