

The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust

Churchill Fellowship 2004 Report

Report by
Gaelle Mellis
2004 Churchill Fellow

To research leading professional UK & European Dance-Theatre Companies that specialise in work for people with disabilities looking at theatrical practice for the inclusion of disabled artists in mainstream theatre.

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Dated

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Introduction

This report details my Winston Churchill Memorial Fellowship research trip to United Kingdom, Belgium and Paris where I had the opportunity to research disabilities arts and inclusive arts practice in particular the professional performance realm. Study included:

- Design
- Training and Mentoring
- Accessibility
- Advocacy
- Extent of Inclusive Arts Practice

Of course, some benefits were immediate and quite profound, other benefits such as to the Australian community will continue to present themselves. The personal and professional benefits as a result of my fellowship trip are already presenting themselves.

Acknowledgements

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A very special thank you to all the individuals, organisations and artists who extended such warm hospitality and openness to share information, experience and their stories. And to all the incidental people who enriched my experience but are not mentioned in this report.

I am grateful to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for believing in my project, resourcing my research trip and providing me such an extraordinary opportunity.

Executive Summary

Gaëlle Mellis
3/565 Portrush Road
Geleunga, SA 5064
Australia

gaelle@adam.com.au

Freelance Theatre Designer

To research leading professional UK and European Dance/Theatre Companies that specialise in work for people with disabilities looking at theatrical practice for the inclusion of disabled artists in mainstream theatre. Focussing in particular on how these companies integrate design practitioners and design elements of their work into their artistic and disability cultural rationale.

I spent 8 weeks talking, watching, listening, observing and experiencing. I found that in my chosen field, that of design practice, it was similar to my own practice and experiences. I found only a few companies that were truly incorporating new ideas and work practices of design. However, in close examination of events and companies I studied, I found vast differences between the ways accessibility is treated, particularly in the United Kingdom from that of Australia. There is a healthy disability arts culture in the United Kingdom that is underpinned by the quest and implementation of a vast array of training programs. Accessibility, good training and professional opportunities is leading to excellent and high quality performance outcomes. The companies and organisations that are truly successful in the disability arts sector are those that action their own policies.

In Australia, we need to bridge the gap between how existing disability related performing arts is seen as community cultural development and the need for more

professional opportunities for disabled artists but we have to most importantly we have to address the need for accessible vocation training for disabled people. We also need to truly address accessibly and inclusive practice..

- I will seek to educate and advise funding bodies, performing arts companies and educational institutions such as AIT Arts and Flinders University on the necessity to readdress the lack of vocational training for disabled people in the performing arts
- I will influence the performing arts companies that I work with to make their product more accessible
- I will encourage the performing arts companies that I work with to truly implement their existing disability action plans
- I will use as examples, the high quality performance examples and styles of work that I experienced abroad, particularly working with colleagues in the creative development environment, where these companies are usually exploring new ways of creating work
- I will seek to bring South Australia in line with other Australian states and overseas in regards to accessibility and to help reclaim the position of leadership in this field
- I will continue to keep in touch with the friends and colleagues meet whilst abroad, to keep abreast of developments, seek their advice and learn from their experiences
- I will in all situations present myself as a professional disabled artist and lead by example

Programme

Choreodome I

Liberty Disability Rights Festival

Salamanda Tandem

CandoCo

Graeae

The Fourth Plinth

Cultural Shift

Theater Stap

The FATHoM Project

Xposure05 Disability and Deaf Arts Festival

Performances, Galleries, Museums, Rehearsals Attended

Performances:

Fewer emergencies – Royal Court
My name is Rachel Corrie – Royal Court
William Forsythe Company – Sadlers Wells
Bache - Ballet C La B
Aristocrats – National Theatre
Signs of A Diva – Drill Hall
Just for Show – DV8
Maguy Marin – Royal Festival Hall
Forced Entertainment - Bloody Mess; Exquisite Pain — Riverside
Anjali – East London Dance
Grace - Quarantine
Yasime Gooder – The Place
Of Mice & Men – Jackson Lane
Moments in Motion – Jacksons Lane
Bill Shannon – East London Dance
Weights -Extant — Oval House Theatre
El rey Pescador – Spain – Theatre Montansier, Versailles

Showing

Jemima Hoadley Choreiodrome
Cultural Shift

Rehearsals

Missing Piece Graduates
Girl Jonah
CandoCo
Choreodome – Jemima Hoadley
Theatre Stap
Indigo

Galleries/Exhibitions

Paul Stopler Gallery
White Cube
Serpentine gallery
Tate Modern
Tate Britain
National Gallery
National Portrait Gallery
Picasso
Atlas gallery
Jackson's Lane
Oval House

Museums

Theatre Museum
British Museum

Forum

Learning New Steps

MAIN BODY

Choreodrome – Inclusive Dance Practice

Shortly after arriving in London I heard about the Choreodrome project underway at The Place – a centre for independent contemporary choreographers developing and researching new work.

One of the many developments taking place was a project directed by choreographer Jemima Hoadley. Jemima was undertaking a creative development working inclusively with artists both disabled and non-disabled. She was using this creative development to explore the integration of film and dance within live performance.

Jemima had also been awarded a Churchill Trust Fellowship for her ongoing integrated dance work with Corpuscule Danse in Quebec, Canada. The Choreodrome project was research and development for Jemima's work with Corpuscule. She was interested in exploring the film medium to make work that could prolong the performance life of her work with Corpuscule and has potential for touring outside this company's limited touring abilities.

I contacted Jemima and she invited me to attend rehearsals and a showing of the work on September 11th 2005. Project participants included Jemima as project director and choreographer, two video artists/film makers, a composer, a writer, BSL sign language interpreter and four dancers.

With Jemima, the video artists, they were researching and developing the layering of dance and film and were aiming to produce a DVD of their research. Whilst interesting, this area was not my major interest as many companies I work with in Australia also explore the integration of dance and film. It was the rehearsal room environment that was of particular interest.

As the first project of my fellowship study, it allowed me to experience a truly inclusive professional work environment. In Australia, my personal experience has been that I am usually the only disabled arts practitioner on a project in the professional arts realm or in the disability arts sector my experience with disabled dancers has been either that it is a project which is disability focused or that the dancers are community or youth participants.

The development was an international project with dancers from New Zealand, France and Australia involved. Jemima had met three of the dancers at the CandoCo Easter Lab earlier in 2005. The two Australians on the project were disabled dancers Marc Brew and Phillip Channels.

Jemima is committed to inclusive dance practice and she also, has had experience in integrated performance as a dancer. Jemima says that working inclusively with people with and without disabilities brings unusual challenges that invite interesting and creative responses.

At one rehearsal, Adam Benjamin was also attending. Adam is a pioneer and leading practitioner of integrated dance practice. Although it was brief, it was excellent to meet and talk with him. Adam was spending most of the year working on projects abroad but he gave me many contacts and offered to help in any way possible.

At the showing I met Theresa Beattie, Director of Artist Development at The Place and I asked her about design in dance in the UK. She explained that for independent artists and small dance companies the money wasn't available to engage designers on their projects. This was an unusual concept for me as in South Australia; design is considered an integral part of creating professional work.

Liberty - Disability Rights Festival

Trafalgar Square is a very high profile location and this was where the Liberty Disability Rights Festival was held on Saturday September 3rd.

In his address at Liberty Disability Rights Festival, Lord Mayor of London Ken Livingston said he wanted London to become the most inclusive and accessible city in the world, and that Liberty is part of his on-going going commitment to make sure that the contribution of disabled people is fully recognised and promoted.

By coincidence whilst I was in the UK in an effort to continue to make public transport more accessible the last of the iconic route master buses were phased out in London. I find London Lord Mayor Ken Livingstone very interesting, an advocate for good urban planning and inspiring as an outspoken advocate and supporter of disability rights.

Other speakers at the Festival were David Morris from the Greater London Authority (GLA) and Trish Ashley the CEO from Greater London Action on Disability (GLAD). Both have a disability and talked passionately about the ongoing fight for disability rights

Held annually since 2003, Liberty is a free festival organised by the Lord Mayor and the Greater London Authority (GLA) in association with the Greater London Action on Disability (GLAD) to champion the rights of the disabled. Although not an arts festival, the work of many disabled artists and performers were showcased on the day.

Liberty is the most accessible outdoor festival in London and this is achieved by providing services on the day that included: the event program being available in large print, Braille and tape formats, information points, trained stewards, audio description headsets, BSL interpreter, palantypists, an assistance dog area, accessible toilets and changing area, a wheelchair loan service, a charging point for wheelchairs, lifts, a free mobility bus running between Westminster Tube and Trafalgar Square and limited disabled parking was available.

Disabled comedians Steve Day and Liz Carr compered, with other disabled artists, performers, musicians and dancers featured at the event.



Dancers Claire Cunningham and Jamie Quarrell from integrated company *Blue Eyed Soul* performed their aerial performance *Touch/Don't TOUCH* on the plaza in front of the National Gallery using the most fabulously designed aerial rig

Other performers on the day were: Dead Beat International (performance and music); Sign Dance Collective (previewing a new work *But Beautiful*); Besta Vista Social Club (community based percussion and samba group); Caroline Parker (Sign Song Artist) (see page. Signs of a Diva); Heart n Soul Club Posse (with special guests Mat Fraser and Minika Green); Minika Green (singer); Totlyn Jackson (Veteran Jamaican jazz vocalist, accompanied by her band); Susan Hedges (songwriter and keyboard player) and Unity & Devision (Urban folk duo)

Family Arts Workshops with disabled artists ran throughout the day and there was a large number of stall and displays representing numerous organisations.

Shape – Addressing Accessibility

One of the many organisations represented at the Liberty Festival was Shape, a disability arts organisation set up in the mid 70s aiming to improve access to the arts for Deaf and disabled people; support Deaf and disabled artists; develop audiences and promote Deaf and Disability Cultures.

Working with major London venues Shape run a specialised arts booking service which offers discounted tickets to Deaf and Disabled people. In conjunction with their ticket scheme they also offer a volunteer driver/escort service for people who cannot use public transport or need assistance. The volunteer's ticket is paid for by Shape.

Another program run by Shape, *Open the Door* offers disability access training and audits to organisations.

Back to Liberty, Trafalgar Square packed with disabled and non-disabled people; the high quality entertainment on offer provided me with a great opportunity to sample of the work of many accomplished disabled artists working in the UK and the large number of stalls provided lots of valuable information on many organisations and upcoming events

Salamanda-Tandem – collaboration and respect for difference

Based in Nottingham, performance company Salamanda-Tandem is not easily defined. One of the most prolific companies that I have come across their work covers a wide spectrum of areas. Founded in 1989 by dancer and musician Isabelle Jones, the company is committed to working with people who have limited access to the arts, these being primarily disabled people and creating work shaped around the distinctive abilities of participants.

Salamanda-Tandem collaborates with artists who work with a wide range of people to create art primarily derived from sensory experience. Isabelle herself has been exploring touched based movement with blind, visually impaired and sighted people specifically with performance group Eye Contact and body and voice work with autistic children for over two decades.

While music and dance the core of what they do, the company also embraces sculpture, photography, film, poetry and the visual arts collaborating with artists interested in crossing the boundaries of these disciplines to create collaborative multi-media performance events.

Discussing design with Isabelle, she told me that Salamanda choose to make work for non-theatre venues breaking down the 'fourth wall' and thereby making their work more accessible particularly from a sensory viewpoint. They also prefer to work with visual artists for this reason. When I showed my portfolio, they were surprised by my design approach in theatre venues as they felt that my style fits with the approach that they take for non-theatre venues. This led to a discussion the possibility of me returning as a collaborator to work with the company in the future.

In parallel with its commitment to the creation and performance artworks, Salamanda Tandem equally devotes itself to research, professional education, training and consultancy.

Of particular interest, was one of Salamanda-Tandem's projects in partnership with Derby Dance Centre, integrated dance project *Indigo*, which aims to provide access for learning disabled people to dance and potentially a career in the arts. Company Manager, dancer and choreographer Lisa Craddock founded *Indigo* in 1996 and dancer and choreographer Julie Hood currently directs the project. Whilst in Nottingham I had the opportunity to travel with Julie to Derby to observe *Indigo* at work.

The project runs an integrated workshop open to all regardless of experience, which feeds into the *Indigo Performance Group*, for dancers committed to creating their own work and public performance. The *Indigo* performance group members are very focussed and experienced. Two of the more experienced members participate in a training and mentoring scheme offered by Salamanda-Tandem to lead and co-lead dance workshops and to also be supported in choreographic opportunities to create and show their own work. Isabel and Lisa told me that the company has access to funds to provide good quality training and workshops they have been facing difficulty in sourcing money for *Indigo*'s performance work.

Some the many ongoing Salamanda-Tandem performance and education projects include:

Osmosis, a Salamanda-Tandem and Architects of Air collaboration with Salamanda-Tandem artists running workshops and creating performance events in Architects of Air's incredibly designed luminaria/inflatable structures.

Make A World, a training and participation workshop using music, dance and film to work with young people with autism. Isabelle is a pioneer in this field and this long-term project aims to train staff and next generation of artists working in this field in a practical environment at Rosehill School.

a: w: p Arts Work With People Project, a professional education project in collaboration with Leeds University in developing and delivering a new Post Graduate Program launched in January 2005.

Working in primarily in three different but linked ways, Salamanda Tandem creates and tours work for public presentation; fosters creativity thru workshops and provides training and education. Salamanda-Tandem's work output is impressive and always underpinned by their political commitment to accessibility, mutual respect and true collaboration.

CandoCo –Mainstream Integrated Dance

Celesete Dandeker and Adam Benjamin originally founded CandoCo in 1991. Disability led by Artistic Director Celeste Dandeker, CandoCo is a contemporary integrated dance company that provides employment for professional disabled and non-disabled dancers, one of whom is Australian disabled dancer Marc Brew.

One of the world's leading and best-known professional integrated dance companies CandoCo seeks to create contemporary dance work that is of the highest quality and does this by commissioning some of the world's leading choreographers to create new dance works which tours extensively throughout the UK and internationally.

I attended a company rehearsal run by choreographer Fin Walker from the WalkerDanceParkMusic. Fin had choreographed a new work *The Journey* as part of a double bill for CandoCo's latest tour. CandoCo have very excellent facilities that include a purpose built rehearsal studio and performance space

CandoCo also have an educational arm and provide fully integrated dance education and training projects which include workshops, dance residencies, choreographic residencies, professional development courses, international summer schools and run integrated youth dance company Cando II for young people between the ages of 14 and 20.

CandoCo's integrated methods of dance practice make dance accessible to everyone.

More than 6000 people in the UK participate in CandoCo's education programs every year. Because of CandoCo's pioneering work, there is a proliferation of integrated dance companies across the UK and this has created a demand for education institutions to open their courses up for disabled students.

In 2004, CandoCo launched a Foundation Course in Dance for disabled students. Delivered by professional teachers, dancers and choreographers, the course was specifically designed to address the lack of professional training for disabled dancers and aims to prepare disabled dance students for vocational training. Entry is by audition and the one-year course is free to students living in the United Kingdom

Celeste explained to me that since 2002 it is unlawful for education providers to discriminate against disabled people but because there has been a lack of preparation training for young disabled people wanting to pursue a dance career, a foundation course was sorely needed. Many of the tertiary dance training institutions felt that CandoCo was in the best position to provide a course to help readdress this.

In Australia, integrated dance practice is currently viewed as community but CandoCo's performing company's equivalent in Australia would be a professional major arts organisation. CandoCo is a very established and successful company that succeeds from its grass roots education through to its performing company. Because of their international exposure touring CandoCo have also played a vital role in introducing integrated dance practice in many countries around the world

Graeae – Actions Reflecting Policy

'A company that refuses to be relegated to the sidelines.' (Lyn Gardner, *The Guardian* 2002)

The first professional theatre company of disabled people in the United Kingdom, Graeae was founded in 1980 By Richard Tomlinson and Nabil Shaban, Graeae is

Britain's leading professional theatre company that profiles the work of artists with physical and sensory impairments.

Disability-led by Artistic Director Jenny Sealey and Associate Director Jamie Beddard (Jamie resigned late 2005 to take up a new appointment), Graeae present a diverse program of theatre work.

By collaborating with and employing disabled artists (actors, writers, designers, musicians & production staff) Graeae produce productions of both new and existing texts, tour nationally and internationally, does educational and schools work and provides needed training opportunities.

Speaking about design, Jenny told me that Graeae's policy is to employ disabled designers if they are available. Practical design solutions sometimes need to be found in direct relation to the disability that a particular performer may have. I showed Jenny my portfolio, and her response was very encouraging and in fact led to an invitation to extend my stay in London to design a forthcoming project. I was extremely honoured to be offer such an opportunity but unfortunately this wasn't possible, but I am hoping that this will be possible in the future.

As a leading company of professional disabled arts practitioners, I found that Graeae 's actions reflect their policies. For example, Graeae is always disability-led, and as with their policy, they only cast disabled performers. Graeae, tour only to venues that are fully accessible to both audiences and performers. At times, this means that Graeae have to say no to an invitation to perform at a venue that is not accessible to both performers and audience. Graeae believe that if venues want their work than they will address the access issues of their venues.

When touring, Graeae tours necessary support workers for performers. The company also provides presenters and venues BSL interpretation and/or captioning, audio description, recorded introductions, touch tours, large print and Braille written information.

Current artistic director Jenny Sealey studied performing arts majoring in dance and choreography. She co-founded Common Ground Signed Dance Theatre in 1986. A touring actor for eight years she was then awarded the Calouste Gulbenkian director-training bursary with Interplay Theatre Company. She was also director of the Leicester Deaf Youth Theatre. Her professional acting debut had been with Graeae and she returned in 1997 appointed as artistic director.

Creating a new and innovative aesthetic, Jenny's work for Graeae integrates audio description and sign language (BSL) in every production. The use of stage directions spoken live on stage to make the work even more accessible for a blind and visually impaired audience.

Jenny is a true advocate for disability arts practice, well respected in all art sectors for her work as a director, artistic director and disability arts practitioner. I found Jenny generous and inspirational. During my fellowship study and my extended stay in London, I developed a relationship with her, which brought with it discussions for future collaboration. We talked about work, life, art and also the survival program for disabled people *Beyond Boundaries* who were looking participants for a new series to take place in South America that we were not up for that but, if they ever decide to do disabled girls survive New York that we would be the first to audition.

Blasted – Graeae Performance

During my stay, Jenny was in the early stages of planning Graeae's next production, Sarah Kane's *Blasted*. One of Britain's finest playwrights of the 20th century, Sarah Kane's work by anyone's standards is difficult work to perform and produce.



Blasted – Photographer Patrick Baldwin

Blasted is a shocking play, full of violence and brutality and tackling a work of this breadth and depth is very significant and is another example of what relevant and amazing theatre company Graeae is and where it is positioned both in the disability arts sector and contemporary theatre scene.



Blasted – Photographer Patrick Baldwin

Graeae is one of the world's leading theatre companies creating and presenting work by disabled people. By placing disabled artists at the fore, Graeae challenges attitudes and delivers high quality theatre.

Graeae also have an educational arm with one of their major programs being *Missing Piece*. In partnership with London Metropolitan University, Graeae created the first fully accessible and accredited actor-training course for disabled people in the United Kingdom. *Missing Piece* is a nine-month, free course that aims to readdress the lack of vocational training for actors with physical and sensory impairments and provides a comprehensive and solid foundation in performance training.

Theatre practitioners and lecturers from the London Metropolitan University both disabled and non-disabled deliver the course. The course culminates in a showcase/audition package. This takes place at a venue in central London to an invited audience of theatre and casting directors, TV and radio producers plus representatives

from Tertiary Institutions. Students may then also audition for a professional touring production for the graduates at the end of the course. Many graduates have gone on to join companies such as CandoCo, David Glass Ensemble, Unicorn Theatre and Theatre Workshop.

The aim of Missing Piece is to increase access for disabled performers in gaining employment within the performing arts sector and/or increasing access into further education for example, Performing Arts degree courses.

I attended a rehearsal of some recent graduates who although missing out on the graduate/professional touring work had been employed by Graeae in a professional capacity to work with then Graeae associate director Jamie Beddard in devising a new work. I also had the opportunity to observe a voice class with the latest intake of students. The energy and atmosphere in the room was palpable and exciting as these disabled artists were getting access to high quality actor training.

Deaf Culture and Disability Arts

Many Deaf people consider that themselves part of a linguistic community rather than disabled people. But many Deaf artists have played a significant role in disability arts. In disability arts, sign language is treated as an essential part of good access.

Graeae is a company that integrates sign language (BSL) in every production in innovative ways that becomes integral to both the performance and performance style of their work.

I travelled with Jenny Sealey to Manchester to see *Grace*, by performance company Quarantine. The performance we attended was BSL interpreted by Alex McDonald and after the performance; I had the opportunity to talk to him about his ongoing work in sign language interpreting for theatre.

Alex having been an actor has a thorough understanding of theatrical practice and styles of performance. In *Grace*, he had been place onstage amongst the action and

told me that because of the physical style of some of the performance he was able to tell Deaf audience members at times not to look at him interpreting but rather read the physical actions of the performers. He and his partner have an ongoing commitment to seeing all text based performance companies have their work sign language interpreted. This work also explores the 'casting' of an appropriate interpreter in regards to age, gender and race to suit the work and also looks at the most suitable positioning of an interpreter spatially.

Signs of a Diva – Accessible Theatre

An original idea from Caroline Parker and Jenny Sealey resulted in an amazing show '*Signs of a Diva*'. Developed through the Drill Hall's Under Construction programme I had the privilege of seeing it after it had returned to London's Drill Hall 2 following a sell-out season at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and before it was embarking on a national tour.

Written by Nona Sheppard, directed by Jenny Sealey, *Signs of a Diva* is a one-woman show performed by the generous and charming Caroline Parker. A cabaret performance of monologue interspersed with song signing songs of great divas - Roberta Flack, Ella Fitzgerald, Whitney Houston, Dolly Parton, Dusty Springfield and Tammy Wynette.

Caroline is one of the best-known Deaf actors and cabaret performers in the United Kingdom, and is famous for her innovative song signing, which she has been doing professionally for 20 years. Caroline is a Deaf woman but also uses her voice in this performance which was a conscious decision made by herself and director Jenny Sealey. The show incorporates captioned dialogue and signed songs. (BSL) which makes the performance a perfect example of truly accessible theatre for an integrated audience of both Deaf and hearing people. Song-sign interpretation is growing in popularity and some music channels are now having videos signed.

'she makes popular songs accessible to deaf people and makes signing accessible to hearing people' (Signs of a Diva publicity material)

The Fourth Plinth – Attitudes Towards Disability

What a twist of fate that not only was I in London for the unveiling of a new sculpture in Trafalgar Square but that this sculpture was of a disabled woman.



The fourth plinth, installed in 1841 in the northwest corner of Trafalgar Square had remained empty until 1998 when the Royal Society for the encouragement of the Arts, Manufactures and Commerce commissioned a series of works to be temporarily displayed. So well received, the Mayor's office appointed a specialist panel to oversee an ongoing programme of commissions.

The first, Marc Quinn's *Alison Lapper Pregnant* is a beautiful sculpture of a naked, eight and a half month pregnant, disabled woman. The sculpture was carved from a single piece of Carrara marble from a quarry in Pietrasanta, Italy; the sculpture stands at over 3 metres high and weighs over 12 tonne.

In light of my fellowship study, I found the reactions to this work of public art very interesting as it caused so much controversy. It seemed that it was not nakedness, gender or pregnancy but disability that divided opinion amongst art critics, disability campaigners and the general public. Personally, I have long been interested in Marc Quinn's art because of his representation of the body and was very excited by the prospect of having disabled representation in such a major public space. I think that the sculpture is stunning and if it confronts people and raises questions of aesthetics and beauty than that is a good thing.

Marc Quinn said that his inspiration came from the fact that there was 'no positive representation of disability in the history of public art' while Alison Lapper said, 'I regard it as a modern tribute to femininity, disability and motherhood' and that 'it makes a powerful statement about where we are trying to go in the 21st century – a future with truly equal opportunities for all'

On the day of the unveiling it poured with rain, even with a raincoat I managed to get completely drenched ... ah but for the kindness of a stranger with an umbrella. Officials present at the public ceremony on September 15th, were Lord Mayor Ken Livingstone, who again showed his willingness to be associated with disability, artist Mark Quinn, Alison Lapper and her son 5yr old Parys with whom she had been pregnant with at the time of the sitting. All the speeches were sign language interpreted including an aria performed by an opera singer.

The sitter, Alison Lapper herself is a disabled artist who has been awarded an MBE for contribution to art and had also recently published her autobiography - *My Life in My Hands*. The statue will remain in Trafalgar Square for 18 months and then *Alison Lapper Pregnant* will be available for sale in an edition of 3.

'Marc Quinn's Alison Lapper Pregnant is a much more arresting, impressive and strange work than photographs can convey.' (Adrian Searle Friday September 16, 2005; The Guardian)

Cultural Shift - Supporting the development of disabled choreographers

Held at East London Dance at Stratford Circus, Cultural Shift was an exciting pilot project aimed at supporting the professional development of disabled choreographers. The first program of its kind in the United Kingdom its central aim was to address the lack of disabled choreographers in both the integrated and mainstream dance sectors.

The program included choreographic workshops, seminars and individual creative development time with the support of a mentor. The choreographers also showed their work during the Xposure05 Disability and Deaf Arts Festival.

Following an application and audition process five disabled dance artists were selected to take part in Cultural Shift. The choreographers, at different stages of their careers were given the opportunity and resources to work on choreographic ideas. Among those selected was Australian dance artist Caroline Bowditch who currently lives in the United Kingdom. Australian dance artist Philip Channels was on the project acting as specialist assistant to one of the choreographers.

Professional dance artists were engaged to deliver the workshop program (Australian Marc Brew among them) and there was a mentoring scheme in place for the choreographers at the completion of the workshop phase of the project.

I had read a little information on this project in Australia when the call went out for participants but wasn't aware that the project would be coinciding with the timing of my fellowship until I had arrived in London. I contacted project director Jo Parkes and discussed the possibility of me spending some time observing the process. Jo was open to this happening but finding an appropriate time proved difficult because of the intensiveness of the workshop program and the number of artists involved. I started to meet some of the participating artists at other events so I was even more eager to learn more about the Cultural Shift project. Finally it was decided that I could attend the last

day of the workshop phase of the project. During my visit I was lucky enough to see some small pieces of choreography that had been created, meet the choreographers and meet with Jo to talk about the project.

During my discussion with Jo about the project, I asked whether there had been any involvement by a design practitioner during the workshop process. Jo's answer made me reflect again on my conversation with Theresa Beattie as she explained that there was so much to cover during the workshop program that it was premature at this stage to involve a design.

Cultural Shift was an important project, as it was readdressing the lack of professional training for disabled choreographers by providing a different pathway and training opportunity to a chosen vocation. A significant project, it presented an opportunity for the five selected disabled artists to identify as a choreographer and within the framework of professional development workshops and a creative development process it led the artists to explore their individual potential to have a creative voice that was not only heard in the disability arts circles, but also in the mainstream.

Theater Stap - The Work and not the Disability

Based in Oud-Turnhout, Belgium, and founded in 1985, Theater Stap is a professional Flemish theatre company with an ensemble of 15 actors with learning disabilities,

Artistic Director Marc Bryssinck told me the company's history and explained that in its early days funding was difficult because the welfare ministry classed it as an arts project and the arts ministry classed it as a welfare project.

Today, Theater Stap receives money from both ministries, operating as both a day care centre and a full time professional theatre company. By combining the day care centre with a professional theatre company, the Theater Stap model offers the actors both an interesting and stimulating work environment, and a day care centre that provides an exciting social environment.

Theater Stap believes in equality and as such, believes that talented actors with a learning disability should be allowed to develop their craft fully and to the highest standards. Some of the actors have been with the company since its early days and because of such experience and the on the job training provided, skill levels are extremely high. The actors show great maturity and professionalism.

Theater Stap creates work by adapting classic stories and plays or devising work. Theatre Stap's work is not 'disability' or 'issued based' nor do they position themselves exclusively as disability arts. Like many professional theatre companies Theatre Stap create work that explores universal and timeless human themes.

Theater Stap sits within the main stage realm of the performing arts, performing at main stage venues in Belgium and the Netherlands. Touring is extensive and they are invited to many major European arts festivals. Theatre Stap has created and toured 25 works in its 20-year history.

The actors receive training in acting, voice, movement etc to maintain their skills, create new work, rehearse and tour existing work. Because of the day care centre, the weekly program can be varied to not only cover theatre training but also include social activities. During some breaks I was taught a game on a pool table which I had never seen before and unfortunately don't remember the name of the game, suffice to say I actually managed to win one game!

Lunch is provided everyday and one day a week the actors do all the lunch preparation as happened the day I arrived. The actors had prepared a delicious three-course meal that all the company shared. After lunch the actors clean up before starting with rehearsal.

Theater Stap has created an environment where disabled actors work with non-disabled artists with mutual respect. Professional guest directors are invited to create new work for the company and are under no obligation to use all of the Theater Stap

ensemble. These directors may also choose to engage other performers without a disability for the new work that they are creating for the company. This sits in line with mainstream theatre practice.

By inviting outside professional directors, choreographers, designers and musicians to work with the company, and touring to major arts venues and festivals, Theater Stap is in a position to change people's perceptions of learning disabled people and create a more inclusive work environment.

In 2002, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, a dancer and choreographer from the internationally acclaimed Les Ballet C. de la B. created 'OOK' with 10 of the Theater Stap actors. This work is still in repertoire touring to major European arts festivals. Some of the actors have worked with other professional companies. Marc Wagemans, one of the actors and company member since 1992 is touring with Les Ballet C. de la B. performing in two works, *FOI* and *Tempus Fugit*.

During my visit, Theater Stap was creating a new adaptation of Donkijot (Don Quixote) that was to premiere February 3rd, 2006. During my visit, I connected with and appreciated the European aesthetic and performance style.

In 2002, Theater Stap started a weekly theatre workshop for young people with a learning disability. Some of the youth participants have already had professional performance opportunities including one member who has been given a TV role and some participants have now become actors with the company. Again, this is a fine example of how important access to training is for disabled people and that companies exist with the expertise to deliver such programs.

The FATHoM Project – A New Inclusive Company

Originally from Australia, Caroline Bowditch moved to the UK in 2002. Caroline was a founding member of mixed ability dance company *Weave Movement Theatre*, based in

Melbourne but since living in the UK her access to dance training, performance opportunities and work opportunities in dance and the performing arts has increased immensely.

In early 2004, Dance City the National Dance Agency for the North East of England brought three dancers from CandoCo to Newcastle upon Tyne for a week to mentor Caroline and work with artists interested in inclusive dance practice.

After that week, Caroline and 5 other professional artists decided to pursue creating work together and the FATHoM Project was created. The FATHoM Project is a new performance company that aims to be inclusive and accessible to all. It is an inclusive collective of artists from a range of backgrounds, dance, theatre, filmmaking and music that create interdisciplinary and inclusive performance. They also run workshops and have a strong interest in site-specific work.

In late 2005, they were preparing for two works at the new Dance City venue. The first, *In Their Homes* was to be a weeklong installation with improvised performance and the showing of seven newly commissioned films. The second project, *Home Truths* was to be a site-specific work performed in different spaces within Dance City. As well as ongoing workshops with schools and communities that the FATHoM Project run.

The FATHoM Project invited me to visit and attend planning day. I was very interested in witnessing the beginnings of a new inclusive performance company and hear the collective talk about their vision. I was also given the opportunity to talk them about my own experiences and practice. We discussed many things including the importance of design and image not only in performance, but also in all ways that the company represented itself. I look forward to watching how this new company develops in the coming years.

The following morning, I attended a rehearsal at Dance City in which Caroline was working with Fiona Wright on a duet *This Two* for the company Girl Jonah. *This Two* is a work devised and performed by Caroline and Fiona, one disabled performer and one

non-disabled performer. In the work they were exploring the detail in movements, performed by two different bodies.

Xposure05 - Disability and Deaf Arts Festival

Xposure05 the London Disability and Deaf Arts Festival was held from the 1st November until the 12th December. Established in 2002, Xposure is an annual disability arts festival under the leadership of Jacksons Lane (Theatre). The festival aims to be accessible to its artists and audiences; bring Disability and Deaf arts into the mainstream; program professional work by integrated and Disabled/Deaf-led companies; present existing work from London, the regions and overseas; commission new work; program workshops, talks and schools out-reach; provide arts education and information for disabled people with mentoring available to artists performing and involved with the festival.

In its fourth year in 2005, the London Disability & Deaf Arts festival presented over 20 productions. The program included five theatre productions; nine dance performances, club nights of music, cabaret, dance and multimedia; dance workshops and a small visual arts component including a giant chess set created by and for people with a visual impairment with professional artists - *The Chess Set* by Eye For Art.

As with the Liberty Festival, accessibility was addressed in numerous ways. The Xposure05 program guide was available in alternative formats including Braille; Large Print & Audio on request and all participating venues were fully accessible. The seven participating venues were extremely spread out across the city, which ironically made them less accessible.

Festival Highlights

At Xposure05 the following four projects were highlights.

Learning New Steps held at Sadler's Wells in the Lillian Baylis Theatre. The choreographic forum was to discuss and share ideas in making choreography with learning disabled choreographers. The companies who attended on the day were companies of dancers with learning disabilities and these were Corali, High Spin, Anjali, Magpie and Flex.

These companies are exploring ways to support their learning disabled dancers to choreographic opportunities. Discussion and centred around mentoring programs and training programs that these companies have been exploring and implementing.

This forum was of particular interest to me in regards to Restless Dance Company (South Australian based integrated Youth Dance Company) who have been looking to provide choreographic opportunities for its members.

Motions in Motion

Daryl's beauty is second to none, his talent shines like the brightest star and his legs are a bit funny... but we love him **Daryl's mum** (*Moments in Motion* publicity material)

Moments in Motion was commissioned by Jacksons Lane, devised and performed by Daryl Beeton, directed by Georgina Lamb and premiered at Xposure05 Deaf and Disability Arts Festival.

As a performer, Daryl uses his disability, sexuality and his viewpoint of society as his driving creative force. He uses his personal experiences and viewpoints to explore and play with the perceptions and attitudes that surround disability and more specifically mobility. Daryl creates theatre that re- addresses the balance between disability and

mainstream. He pokes fun at the perceptions and misunderstanding of both sides, leaving the audience to re-evaluate their own preconceptions about the divide.

Daryl told me that 'As a disabled person who works in theatre, I'm always going to be challenging somebody's perceptions, just by walking on stage.' He therefore plays with this idea and has lots of fun doing so. He teases the audience, he lulls them into a false sense of security by posing the idea of the weak, disabled person who can't do anything and then shatters their perceptions. He explodes people's ideas about what he can and can't do.

The performance style of *Moments in Motion* is a combination of text and movement. It addresses and pushes many unspoken issues around disability in a dark comical way taking the audience on an unpredictable journey. The narrative follows that of a gay man searching for Mr Right, anxious hours waiting for the phone to ring trigger a flashback to a childhood of hospitals and operations. *Moments in Motion* is a random selection of moments taken from life, and in Daryl's show, there are also mobility aids and a trapeze.



Moments in Motion - photographer Patrick Baldwin

In *Moments in Motion*, the shapes and designs of the mobility aids influenced and inspired the movement. The work was lead by how the mobility aids helped and informed or how do they restricted and restrained the movement due to their design.

Daryl takes mobility aids beyond their original design. As disabled person from birth, who uses crutches, he experiences the common perceptions regarding people who use mobility aids, one being that the person's movement is restricted, that it is limited. Daryl says, that 'When I climb the stairs or walk faster than most non-disabled people walk, strangers often approach me and comment and compliment me on, what I perceive to be my everyday movements. What is not acknowledged is that fundamentally the mobility aids are there to enable movement, not restrict. All that is created is a new form of movement, a different from the norm'.



Moments in Motion - photographer Patrick Baldwin

Daryl has been performing and directing in theatre for many years. Before his performance of *Moments in Motion*, he had recently participated in a four-part BBC 2 programme, *Beyond Boundaries* where he was one of 11 people with a disability attempting a trek 220 miles across the Nicaragua Jungle in 28days If you get the chance to see it Daryl is the man in the cowboy hat!

The aim of the program was to highlight the possibilities, (cap) abilities & opportunities for disabled travellers. Daryl was one of seven who completed the trek and said that the arguments and falling outs probably did more to challenge disability stereotypes than the horse riding and white river rafting. 'The way that *Beyond Boundaries* changed

people's perceptions is actually the seeing people crying, making up, being bitchy, snotty and all that stuff,' he said.

In early 2006, was appointed Artistic Director of Kazzum Theatre Company, a theatre company for young people.

Of Men and Mice

Mind the Gap, a theatre company of learning disabled performers and the largest disability related theatre company outside of London presented a new adaptation by Mike Kenny of John Steinbeck's *Of Men and Mice*.

It is an extraordinary tale of friendship, loyalty and the power of dreams and follows drifters George and Lennie in their search for the American Dream. This powerful and moving production was originally staged by Mind the Gap in 2000. Performer Kevin Pringle is the first learning disabled actor to play the role of Lennie, a learning disabled character, in a professional production.

Formed in 1988, Mind the Gap also readdresses the lack access and training opportunities for learning-disabled people by providing outreach programs and accredited training programs, including a three-year theatre apprenticeship scheme.

Like Graeae this company is producing high quality work and theatre of excellence. This production had high production values, high quality acting and this play was performed using American accents. While, Graeae specialise in work for people with sensory and physical impairments, Mind the Gap specialise in offering opportunities to actors with learning disabilities. Again, this is a company that does lots of touring which supports the longevity of its work.

Regarding The Fall

Bill Shannon aka 'Crutchmaster' presented his show *Regarding The Fall* during Xposure05. Humorous and provocative, Bill Shannon presented a 'lecture demonstration' with a live DJ and video about his work. Bill Shannon addresses the politics of disability and the role of the disabled artist within society. In the performance, Bill Shannon talked about his life, career, observations, philosophies, theories and his street performance.

From the age of 5, until 12 and again from age 24 it has been necessary for Bill Shannon to use crutches to walk. During the ages between 12 and 24 when Shannon didn't require crutches, he began to explore street based culture such as b-boying (break dancing) and skateboarding. He talked about how as a child he developed different ways of moving on his crutches. For example, it wasn't great when his younger brother could outrun him so he learnt to run on his crutches.

Bill Shannon has developed his own unique dance technique aptly named Shannon Technique. He discussed and demonstrated some Shannon technique. Shannon technique combines hip-hop, break dancing, house, skateboarding and performance art on specially designed and modified rocker-bottom crutches. Like other dance techniques, there are specific and defined body positions and movements but unlike other techniques these positions are in relation to crutches that can take him from the floor to standing.

In some of his street performance he looks at the social manifestations of the public's 'awkwardness' and responses towards disabled people. He tells of a performance trip to Russia in which he explores negotiating his way around public spaces. In one sequence, of which he shows footage, he explores the action of making his way up a flight of steps. Shannon doesn't just take these steps as one would imagine someone on crutches it is rather an improvised dance. The video sequence showed people not knowing whether to stare or look away. As a society we have been told to look at street

performance but we have also been told not to stare at the disabled! There is also the idea of 'Good Samaritan', people in the street didn't know whether to 'help' or 'not help'. An old woman attempts to 'help' the disabled man negotiate the stairs but rather than helping becomes a hindrance.

In more video footage he shows himself skating in New York traffic – 'I grab cabs in the city for speed and for saving my legs and arms.... a type of urban skating'. Shannon is using his skateboard and crutches and literally gabs onto the back of a cab!

Shannon talked about taking risks and that if you appear to have a physical disability than you shouldn't take risks because it is 'not fair to those around you'. He would attempt some moves and fall....but then skaters go for moves and fall...but, then, he has a disability...Bill Shannon constantly challenges peoples perceptions of what it is to be physically disabled.

The Crutchmaster is a consummate performer, who is well known and respected in the hip-hop scene, club scene, skater scene and the disability arts sector. His work is groundbreaking – he is a leader in his field.

Watching Bill Shannon, I felt inspired, exhilarated and empowered.

Conclusions and Recommendations

My Churchill Fellowship has given me personal and professional experiences more profound than I ever imagined possible. Personally, I feel empowered as disabled person and professionally, I feel empowered as a disabled artist. I have to acknowledge the benefits of meeting people face to face as it makes for better understanding and communication and definitely provides a more open and honest environment to share information.

This report is couched and informed by both my experiences as a disabled artist and my experience in the South Australia performing arts industry and disability performing arts sector. I have concentrated the my findings of my study in the United Kingdom as it was there that I spent the longest time and had the opportunity to look at the broader context of disability culture.

Disability arts is generally defined as 'art made by disabled people, which may or may not reflect the experience of disability'. Disability arts has developed over a period of 20 to 30 years in the United Kingdom and today the work produced in the disability arts sector is prolific. Much of the activity is disability led. There are professional companies, arts festivals, magazines, film festivals, exhibitions, training courses, conferences and a large network of organisations that support and promote the work of disabled artists.

Of course there is still much to do as many mainstream doors are still closed to disabled artists but many companies and individual artists are proving that access and inclusion leads to excellence. These artists are also challenging society's preconceptions about ability and aesthetic.

I found it interesting that I came across a number of Australian disabled artists (not all mentioned in my report) working abroad because professional opportunities in the performing arts are extremely limited in Australia whilst, access to training, performance and work opportunities in the performing arts abroad increases immensely.

We need to bridge the gap between how existing disability related performing arts in Australia is seen as community cultural development and the need for more professional opportunities for disabled artists but we have to most importantly we have to address the need for accessible vocation training for disabled people.

I saw many excellent and accessible training courses available to disabled people and saw some world quality dance and theatre with in the disability arts sector. In Australia, Back to Back is currently the only disability related professional theatre company. Back to Back's ensemble of five actors identify as having an intellectual disability and create work of excellence. The only accredited training in the performance arts sector is Ignition Theatre Training in Melbourne for people with an intellectual disability.

Whilst I am aware of some very good and successful initiatives and practice in place in Australia, I feel that there are many opportunities missed for the great work happening in individual states in Australia to be reproduced nationally particularly in relation to accessibility.

What I learned:

- Access and inclusion leads to excellence
- Importance of vocational training for disabled artists
- The importance disability led practice
- The need for professional opportunity
- It is possible to action policy
- Being inclusive is achievable
- Different models exist for establishing 'disability- related' companies
- The importance of advocacy
- The term 'disability' covers a diverse group of people and 'disability art' covers a diverse range of styles and product
- Specific projects and programs are necessary to readdress lack of opportunity in a professional context
- There is much to do

- Arts organisations and service providers need to and can address access

‘Only when disabled artists have a fair and representative degree of exposure will exclusion and discriminatory attitudes start to shift’ Jenny Sealey, Artistic Director, Graeae

How I intend to share my knowledge and influence the community:

Since returning to Australia, some opportunities have already presented themselves and others I have sought out to enable me to share knowledge gained during my study trip. These include, becoming a mentor for young disabled artists in a mentoring and advocacy project being run by Arts In Action. I have joined Disability Arts Forum South Australia. I have started to meet with individuals and organisations within the disability arts sector to share both general information and information directly relating to and relevant to their disability arts practice. I am learning Auslan. Also, for a specific example, just recently I was part of a discussion at DFSA regarding autistic people often being excluded from live performance as audience members. We discussed what could be done to support autistic people to access this experience and the possibility of developing a project, which could address this. Because of my fellowship study where I meet Isabelle Jones a world expert in this area, I will be able to seek her advice in relation to this.

I plan to continue to remind the arts companies and organisations that I work for about the need for access for all and will support them to implement their disability action plans and will also encourage directors that I work with to consider casting more inclusively and companies to more inclusive employment practice.

I will also keep talking to fellow arts practitioners and colleagues about the work that I saw overseas to be able to position our work in a more inclusive international context.

South Australia thinks of itself as the festival state and I am planning to talk to festival directors and programmers about Australian and overseas disability related performance that may be appropriate for inclusion in their festivals.

I see myself as playing an important advocacy role for the introduction of vocational arts training for disabled people and am now in a position to challenge ill-informed responses to this idea armed with greater knowledge and authority because of the

success of such training that I have seen in practice abroad. I hope to influence Art/Education bodies especially the Arts Minister to invest in disability arts particularly in the area of training.

Already seen as a leader in the arts industry, I have made a conscious decision to always identify myself as a professional disabled artist, continue my strive for excellence and encourage and support other artists, particularly with hidden disabilities to 'come out'

An intensive experience such as my Churchill Fellowship brings with it a lasting and profound impact in all areas of my life and as I continue to reflect, I discover more ways to both disseminate the information and more opportunities to share the information present themselves.

Future possibilities of implementation and dissemination:

- Present myself as a positive role model for emerging disabled artists
- Continue to address access for audiences
- Continue to address access for performers
- Continue to ask why organisations are not implementing their disability action plans
- Advocacy
- Influence Art bodies especially the Arts Minister to invest in disability arts
- Attend national disability arts conferences
- Engage in national debate and discussion in relation to disability arts
- Support disability arts practice to be disability-led
- Encourage mainstream companies to create new work by working with disabled artists
- Encourage discussion and debate about the quality of work produced in the disability arts sector
- Encourage more open criticism by arts critics

- See the establishment a master class workshop program for disabled artists working in South Australia, based in South Australia and open to national participation.
- Support the introduction of the theatre companion card scheme in South Australia
- Encourage companies to take more placements of young artists with a disability
- take risks
- Encourage agents to represent disabled artists
- Encourage SA Ausdance to run a integrated technique class and to also address integrated dance practice at the national level
- See a Disability Film component to be included as part of South Australia's International Film Festival
- Address the notion that there is no point training disabled performers because there is no work for them
- Challenge non-disabled people who 'make decisions' for disabled people
- Foster the idea that disability is worth celebrating
- Encourage South Australia who has a history of being leaders in social policy to reclaim this position and become a national leader in the disability arts sector
- See the establishment of a professionally disability related performing arts company established in South Australia
- To realise the possibility of international collaboration