

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL
MEMORIAL TRUST OF
AUSTRALIA.

Report by: **Michael Parr.**
2000 Churchill Fellow.

Project description: **To train, study and perform with other
wheelchair Dancers in New Zealand, USA and UK.**

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Introduction.

My project was to dance, train, study and perform in a mixed Ability dance/theatre environment, with an emphasis on other wheelchair participants, in order to grow in this young art form and gain confidence in my capability as a teacher in school and community workshops and improve as a performer.

I would like to thank the 'Winston Churchill Memorial Trust' for this opportunity as well as the many dance companies and artists who were only too willing to take me in, dance, move and allow me to see and experience their art form.

And to all those many unknown people who helped me and my wheels get into, onto and out of those all too numerous inaccessible situations during my travels.....Thanks.

Executive Summary.

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Project description:

My project was to study mixed Ability dance/theatre, with an emphasis on other wheelchair participants, in order that I could pass on at a school and community level, these skills and improve my performance skills to carry his message further.

Highlights:

Catherine Chappel 'Touch Compass' dance trust in Auckland whose skills, as a teacher of dance to a diverse range of abilities was invaluable.

Ruth Zaporah with 'Action Theater' teaching the ability to be in the here and now to explore our creative options.

'Rubicon' dance in Cardiff, Wales. Whose community outreach projects touches all aspects of their locality.

Rachel Freeman with 'Blue Eyed Soul' Dance Company in Llanindidrod Wells, whose patient dynamic skills in contact improvisation and integration bring out the very best in her dancers.

CanDoCo in London for their professionalism in performance skills.

Major Lessons and conclusions:

The most important thing I learnt within the mixed Ability dance groups I visited was that *anything* is possible, and that those possibilities are endless, it was the probabilities that were unsure. There were situations where dance was taking place with people who were familiar moving around wheelchairs, where they took advantage of the chair, using its angles, fluidity, height and presence, and therefore expression expanded, a duet produced, a dance explored.

There were situations where the opposite was apparent, where dancers were not familiar with a wheelchair in their midst. Or the assumption that comes from unfamiliarity with integration “I need someone who can really dance” Then the wheelchair is a foreign object, something sharp, something to be avoided and therefore isolating its user and the opportunity of a potentially growing dance lost or avoided.

Sometimes the wheelchair is empty if I’ve slipped from it to the floor (to use that as another level) the wheelchair can have a presence on its own, or it takes another dancer to fill it to continue their expression of movement. One does not have to be a wheelchair user to bring it into their dance.

Dance, (da:ns.) *verb* - *dances, dancing, danced*. To move or cause to move the body in a rhythmical way.

It could be more than just the body; the wheel chair adds another dimension to the dance. A person in a wheelchair can perform a solo and yet separate from their wheels to create a duet. As for rhythm, well intent and content became the dance itself, rhythm is something we individually feel, and are able to portray with the capabilities we have, and we have a whole new dimension when a wheelchair is in use, those of speed, shape, mobility and dimension. These can be used to increase the content.

In both the UK and USA (where integrated dance first emerged coming from such dance forms as ‘Contact Improvisation’ in the early eighties) there are now many professional and community based companies, they are highly recognised in their field, well attended and in some cases readily funded. Companies like CanDoCo who have international recognition, and Axis

have harnessed the spontaneity, speed and presence of a wheelchair into their dance forms.

I conclude that mixed Abilities or integrated dance is the playing field for many dancers to find a common ground. A place that brings about an expansive, creative art form, that can be both challenging and able to push barriers and buttons of preconceived ideologies of what disability really is. That goes for the participants and the audience alike.

Mixed Ability dance must be seen for what it is and not some form of physical therapy. A wheelchair user is ultimately using that wheelchair as a form of mobility; how they came about to using it is different in all cases. If they choose dance as a serious physical activity then they must be open about their condition. Frequently dancers have stated that they feel they may hurt me, I think its an important observation, that needs to be addressed. I personally bounce well, but have my own issues about hurting others with any of my 'jutty' bits. I can take weight of all sorts any where on my body. I cannot feel on the right hand side of my body (so don't expect it to respond to touch unless I'm looking) and I cannot walk but can hold my weight on my left leg.I have given this description of my body as an example that can put to rest other dancers fears, now they know. In return I need to hear if they have a weak back, a sore ankle or what ever. We are not going to wrap each other in cotton wool, but have set some perimeters within which to explore.

Through the years people with a disability have constantly been put into a sub-category, things are changing, we are becoming "enlightened." Mixed Ability dance is one of those places where I can see it happening.

Dissemination and Implementation.

The experience and information I gathered during my time overseas can be dispersed in many ways. I believe performance is a great way of 'putting out there' that message of mixed Ability dance. Which I continue to do, but once that idea is set up it needs to be followed up. Community classes on a weekly basis prove to be the best way of implementing this, and occasional workshops with visiting teachers. However I have also found a lot of success in speaking to people, for example at our local TAFFE college for their carers and social workers course, local high schools where they have grasped the opportunity to explore mixed a Ability activity especially where they have students with special needs, bringing in outside help has encouraged that aspect of familiarity especially when that teacher (taking myself as an example) has a disability.

Using dance as your tool makes things fun, I love to take in as many wheel chairs as I can lay my hands on, there isn't many children or adults who for what ever reason (be it curiosity or just fun) who don't want to give a wheelchair a go, especially when they are light, nippy and responsive.

These are all positive messages one is able to advocate in the name of disability.

Without doubt there is discrimination for the disabled, if that attitude is to be changed then bringing it into the open in a fun way like dance, where abilities are shared and familiarity is achieved, then there is a good chance that these preconceived attitudes will change, and I feel that starting with our school age population is as good a place as any to be.

Programme.

NEW ZEALAND.

Catherine Chappell.....‘Touch Compass’ Dance Company, in Auckland for Mixed Ability Dance-Teacher’s Workshop series.

‘The Flying Piglets’ in Auckland.

USA.

Ruth Zaporah with ‘Action Theatre’ in Berkley California.

‘Axis’ dance company in Oakland. Integrated dance

UK.

‘Rubicon’ dances with Tracy Brown and Ruth, in Cardiff, Wales
Community out reach project

Rachel Freeman and ‘Blue Eyed Soul’ in Llanindidrod Wells, Wales.
Integrated Dance Workshop and Contact Jam.

‘CanDoCo’ Dance Company in London.
Choreographer’s workshop.

MAIN BODY.

My fellowship was to visit Mixed Ability or Integrated dance groups or dance companies and within those groups to particularly concentrate on the content of other wheelchair users dance/movement/involvement.

Although I did move with a lot of other wheelchair users, I think some of my more valuable lessons were learnt during the month I participated in Ruth Zeporah's 'Action Theatre' workshop the 'Improvisation of Presence', in Berkley, California.

There were no other wheelchair users there. She had never had someone in a wheelchair participate in one of her workshop. The 11 other participants had no other experiences with wheelchair users, but because of the nature of this type of theatre where you are working in the *Now*, improvising your movements and actions second by second, the reaction and interaction between us was phenomenal. I had found a place in theatre/dance/movement where the wheelchair was not of issue, where improvisation was of such a key factor that any differences between us were absorbed. This workshop ran for six hours a day for four weeks, working hard and socialising closely outside of the workshop experience. A unique experience brought about by the nature of Ruth Zeporah's Action Theatre make up.

Here was a type of fun movement that I know will be valuable incorporated into my own teaching.

When dancing with Catherine Chappell (Touch Compass) in New Zealand, 'Axis' in the states and 'CanDoCo' in England there was the opportunity to move with many wheelies, some manual others motorized, some customised and sporty, others more conventional, for me it was rare and valuable experience and an opportunity to set up or continue networking.

I discovered the playfulness around multiple wheelchairs, their advantages and strong points as well as the limitations. We were able to discuss how a teacher of dance is going to be taken seriously in the dance world, knowing

how much harder they will have to work to convince those in an already highly competitive art form that they are serious

With the professional performance skills of 'CanDoCo' under the direction of Celeste Dandeker, herself a professional dancer and wheelchair user, I really got to see how the notion of disabled people as dancers is no longer a surprise to their audiences.

They do an incredible amount of education work on the back of their performing commitments and consequently they have played a major part in accessing dance for those people with disabilities. Now with their international performing work that message is spreading further a field than their home in the UK.

With 'Rubicon' in Wales I experienced another way that dance can be delivered out there to the wider community to those of all abilities. I found in Cardiff an economic depression brought about by the closing of the Welsh mining industry and consequently all the social problems that brings into a community. However Tracy Brown with 'Rubicon' Dance Company seems to be singularly taking dance to all who want it in and around that city.

Travelling by bus, foot or bike lugging her sound system she runs this 'Out reach' programme, teaching in schools, hospitals, special needs centres, disabled groups, prisons, after school care centres, aged homes and detention centres, in fact anywhere that shows an interest and wants her. Her methods are all inclusive, fun and energetic. Rubicon also runs many other courses back at their studio, but it was this outreach program that impressed me, and the fact that it was heavily subsidised by the UK lottery fund, and therefore making it obtainable for everyone financially too, they were charging £1. (A\$3) per dancer.

CONCLUSIONS.

Primarily I started this fellowship in order to be around wheelchair dancers, which of course I did and consequently gathered an amazing amount of information. But my studies encompassed a mixed Ability network, people with different physical abilities, Down syndrome, intellectual challenges and more. It's hard to ignore their part in this whole 'Dance', and just concentrate on the wheelchair aspect. However I can come from a wheelchair users point of view. Also it is difficult not to have political and social views around this subject of disAbility because being a part of this minority, oppressed group I am continually faced with the consequences of discrimination, prejudice and often just lack of thought that could be alleviated from asking the people in question simple what they require or need.

So I feel that my studies have lead me to a position where I can see that one is able to use performance knowing that not all theatre is just entertainment, some can make an impression, change attitudes and preconceived ideas. To me that doesn't mean focusing in on the people with different physical abilities, because if that is all one saw then the message has probably been missed. If one can see the integration, the whole, then acceptance and understanding have been reached something has been reached and gained, entertainment begins.

For me the privilege of receiving this fellowship has given me encouragement, confidence and commitment to continue dance/theatre in this field, and hopefully fulfil some of my goals and entice those other 'Dancers' out of the closet.

RECOMMENDATIONS.

What could I do to bring about improvements in Australia?.....Continue community classes where ever they are needed. For things to be of use to the disabled community they need to be accessible, that's not just a ramp, but other considerations from wheelchair accessible toilets to the type of community or public transport that enables them to get there, which in Australia with its distances, sparse population in rural settings, lack of access and awareness, especially when compared to the access laws of the USA. and the lobbying that goes with it

Taking performance 'out there' it reaches a wider audience obviously.

What other improvements **should** be made in Australia?

Funding.....The arts are never going to be a self-funding profitable body, and that is never more obvious than the mixed Ability field. Where the majority of the participants would be on low incomes, social security benefits or disability pensions, purely as a consequence of their circumstances and a discriminatory society. Things are changing, I'm convinced awareness is on the increase; enlightenment is a long way off.

In the mean time paying for transport and classes or the groceries is still a dilemma for some, who want to attend and would benefit from attending, contributing a huge part to this art form. I would like to see community classes subsidised therefore making them at least financially accessible, a fact shown clearly by 'Rubicons' out reach programme in Wales.