

### 'Access and the Arts'

**By Annie Delin, freelance consultant**

**This provocative article by Annie Delin was first published in the UK dance magazine 'Animated', in their Summer 2002 edition, and Accessible Arts has decided to republish it in ACE with a view to generating some discussion about the issues raised....**

In case you looked at the title and thought "This will be about building regulations and the lack of accessible spaces," can I suggest you read on?

Last year I worked on a strategy for the East Midlands region with a group of committed and professional disabled people. We engaged in an undervalued process called "thinking" – and we did it on funded time. During this process, we tried to unpick what it was that created blocks for each of us, or for other disabled people, in the course of working in the arts.

There is not space to do justice to a six-month process here, but some of the themes that emerged show the unexpected places where barriers can occur. How they affect access is for you to ponder, but these issues affect disabled people's ability to engage with dance, or any of the arts.

#### The role of gatekeepers

Gatekeepers are the people who have control over flow of information between disabled people and the arts world. In the most extreme cases, they also have control over what disabled people are allowed to do.

They may be parents, social workers, charity coordinators, editors of talking newspapers, out reach workers, volunteer drivers. They will almost certainly have the "best" for the disabled people they represent at heart. What they also do, however, is to judge what is acceptable information for "their" people, and withhold or dispense it accordingly.

When gatekeepers are present, the arts world may eagerly seek out disabled people, passing on invitations which never get to the people who might have wanted to go. Even if the information gets there, physical gate keeping like limiting evening activities because transport is expensive can create new obstacles.

It's not our job to beat up the people who do this – there are plenty of reasons why they may have no choice – but you are mistaken if you think passing on information is all you need to do. Here are two illustrations

The Drawbridge Group, based at Nottingham Castle Museum, wanted to run out reach involving disabled people from black and Asian backgrounds. We identified a partner in an Afro-Caribbean elders group in the city, and planned an event around reminiscence and nostalgia. We gained Awards for all funding for this session, and took nearly a year in planning.

Ten days before the event we were told the event would not take place. "Won't your members be disappointed?" we pleaded. "No, because I hadn't told them we were going," said the link worker.

During some research that I did for Amber Valley Borough Council, I asked groups about their access needs when attending events in the local touring program. I rang the secretary of a Blind Social Group – their own title – to ask if they were interested in taking part. I was told, tersely, that the idea of concerts and performances was of no interest. "Why is that?" I politely inquired. "These are BLIND people, dear" the organiser told me.

### **The issue of quality**

How can this be a barrier? Surely quality is what we all want? Yes, we do, but unfortunately among disabled people it is too easy to get away without it. It is easy to deliver sub-quality events, setting up a low expectation of what the arts offer to any disabled person making first contact. It is also easy for a disabled person to be praised without achieving as much as it would take another artist to be praised. We are commonly assumed to be too fragile for criticism.

All of us have been at an exhibition, a performance or workshop where the work is described as "moving" "inspiring" or "brave". The message is that it is a marvel that disabled people create anything at all. As an artist, I would prefer to be criticised using terminology related to the art form – about line and form, structure, plot, vision or content.

We want to hear praise, but we want to know that it comes in a context where, if our work, the event, or we were not so good, people would say so. Artists in particular want to be judged on the same artistic criteria as others are, making it easier to switch between integrated or disability arts and the mainstream world – in either direction. That is to say, a good disabled artist should be able to choose between participating in mainstream or disability arts depending on what their work of the moment says, not because there is only one place they can be sure of praise.

### **Bandwagon jumping**

You do something for a group of disabled people, and you realise there is funding there looking for projects. All the social workers you worked with are relieved to have activity for their clients, and the following year, it's easy to get the funding to do it again. A couple of the disabled people you worked with want more regular contact with the company, and you become an integrated company.

Integration is a great thing, but this relates to quality, and to power. Who is leading the direction of the company you have formed? Who formed it? Who is being paid to do the paperwork, or decides what the next year's program will be?

During the research I did for the Foundation for Community Dance a couple of years ago, several disabled people said "Please, no more contact improvisation workshops." Just because something has been done before, could be done again and will be funded does not mean it is what we want.



### Throwing good money after bad

Most local authorities and publicly funded bodies have an obligation to show that some of their activity is targeted at disabled participants. If you are lucky, and you live in the right region, there will be one or more agencies who can provide the invaluable service of knowing disabled people, being able to plan and deliver what they want and providing the funders with knowledge and support.

Less lucky regions have organisations that only *think* they know, or no organisation at all. In these, the convenience of funding people you funded before, for want of evidence to the contrary, can lead to declining standards in what is delivered. The money is going down the drain, without any investment in research or development of new and better initiatives that might meet our needs.

Most significantly, nobody thinks that it might be better if there were not an easy agency to pass your disability on to – if perhaps every arts organisation had disabled audiences as their own responsibility, not someone else's.

### Knowing what is out there

In our region, we found that no one (including ourselves) had a clear picture of exactly what we could access. Where would you go to get a good course about arts administration in an accessible college? Where would you find a recording studio? How would you find ten disabled artists to deliver an outreach program? There is no map, the essential companion on any uncharted journey. The first step in solving access problems has surely got to be knowing where they are.

### Not being in the loop

Despite all intentions to the contrary, there are far too few disabled people on boards, on staff, in volunteer workforces and among the decision-makers for the arts. We are simply not present when decisions are being taken at any level, from the most mundane day-to-day stuff to strategy forming.

I was once a board member, where I and an Asian man stood up when we joined and said "We know we are the minority representatives on this board, and we would like it to be known that we don't wish to deal with minority issues, as we feel that is a responsibility shared by all." Everyone nodded and said "Quite right". At the second meeting, we were passed copies of the equal opportunities statement to read through as they might be "of particular interest" to us.

It is no fun being intrinsically "other" all the time, and having people nod in your direction while ignoring your needs. However, we continue to be "other" because we are not present when the decisions get taken. As long as we are not around, what is planned will contain mistakes, which perpetuate exclusion. Find a way to involve us, and stop making it our responsibility that we are not there.

This is not an exhaustive list of what we discussed, but here, finally, is a bullet point list of the cultural changes we proposed the East Midlands should take on board as a background to solving some of the barriers:

- that initiatives which affect disabled people should be led, staffed and supported by disabled people
- that the ultimate ambition should be the integration of proper support for disabled people into the mainstream arts world
- that the application of quality standards should drive work by and with disabled people
- that funding structures should be capable of having positive effects
- that the language and culture of British Sign Language should be recognised as a form of cultural expression.

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Right: photographic image 'Cactus Starfishh' by Yvette Forster & Richard Ruiz