Dance as a Powerful Tool to Advance Disability Inclusion: Reflections from an Interdisciplinary Collaboration

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This article discusses the collaboration between the academic socio-legal project DANCING, funded by the European Research Council, and the inclusive dance company Stopgap Dance Company (Stopgap). DANCING, among other objectives, aimed to identify barriers and facilitators to cultural participation experienced by disabled people. In pursuing this objective, DANCING established a partnership with Stopgap aimed at the creation of a choreographic piece in which accessibility measures, intended to facilitate the participation of dancers with disabilities and the enjoyment of the choreography by audience with and without disabilities, were intrinsic to the creative process. By presenting findings of qualitative research conducted with Stopgap and audience, it explores how inclusivity and accessibility were experienced by both performers and spectators. This article focuses on three interlinked themes, which elucidate processes, challenges, and outcomes of engaging in inclusive dance at a professional level. In doing so, this article situates at the intersection of disability and dance research and endeavours to provide a theoretical and practical bedrock for future dance projects wishing to adopt more inclusive processes. Further, this article aims to contribute to broader scholarship in the field of arts that positions disability as a cultural identity worth celebrating.

Keywords: Dance, Disability, Accessibility, Inclusion, Co-creation, Human Rights Model of Disability

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, dance research has intertwined considerably with other academic disciplines within the remit of interdisciplinary and multi-method projects. In that regard, McGrath et al. (2021) highlight the value of placing 'the

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traditionally more "peripheral" corporeal knowledge generated by dance' on an equal footing with other cognitive ways of knowing. When it comes to dance and law, as noted recently by Mulcahy and Seear (2023), there is a growing body of research looking at how they intersect. For example, scholars have discussed the ownership of dance focusing on the practice of disabled dance artists (Pavis, Waelde, and Whatley 2017). Other authors have emphasised that dance is a 'powerful vehicle for revealing, resisting, and rectifying differing forms of abuse and injustice' and supports the promotion of human rights (Jackson and Shapiro-Phim 2008: xv). Legal scholars have also posited that 'embodied learning through dance can aid some participants in remembering processes for asserting rights' (Waldorf, Marambio, and Blades 2023) and that an embodied understanding of normative concepts can add to traditional legal research (Ferri 2024).

There is also a well-developed body of scholarly work on dance and disability (among others, Albright 2001; Kuppers 2004; Hermans 2016; Whatley 2010, 2023; Whatley et al. 2018). As Whatley (2007: 23) notes, dance can be 'a radical and dynamic site for debates surrounding the disabled body'. Research has also used dance as a tool to assert disability rights (Blades 2021) and to challenge inequalities and barriers to access (Mills 2017; Bergonzoni 2020). Hickey-Moody (2017: 5) draws attention to the fact that dance has a 'radical history of offering new ways of relating to bodies', and highlights how dance theatre devised and performed by dancers with disabilities can contribute new social and cultural meanings of disability. Furthermore, professional inclusive dance companies have been a major source of expansion of what are considered 'acceptable bodies in dance' as well as of modifying society's views of disability (Boswell, Ko, and Yoon 2023: 508). Research has shown the emancipatory value of inclusive dance and its role in challenging current perceptions. This tallies with scholarly work that recognises the broader field of disability arts as a source of aesthetic innovation in the arts (Hadley, Paterson, and Little 2022). Notably, notwithstanding the persistence of barriers to participation in the arts (Leahy and Ferri 2023, Ferri and Leahy 2025) and the fact that there is still a long way to go before dancers with disabilities are treated on equal terms as those without disabilities (Pavis, Waelde, and Whatley 2017), scholars have contended that the arts contribute to increased participation and visibility of people with disabilities in society (Swartz, Bantjes, and Bissett 2018). There has also been considerable debate within disability studies around how artists with disabilities participate, represent themselves, and are represented within all forms of display and artistic expression (see, amongst others, Darke 2003; Hadley and McDonald 2019; Swartz, Bantjes, and Bissett 2018).

Building on and bridging these different and inherently varied strands of research, this article discusses the collaboration between the academic socio-legal project entitled 'Protecting the Right to Culture of Persons with Disabilities and Enhancing Cultural Diversity through European Union Law: Exploring New Paths' (DANCING) – which explores the right of persons with disabilities to take part in cultural life as an essential aspect of enhancing cultural diversity in the European Union (EU) – and the inclusive dance company Stopgap Dance

Company (Stopgap). DANCING, among other objectives, aimed to identify barriers and facilitators to cultural participation experienced by people with disabilities and how they affect the wider cultural domain. As will be further expounded in the following section, a collaboration with Stopgap was deployed as part of the arts-based research of the DANCING project, which on the whole is characterised by a broad socio-legal research, combining traditional legal research, empirical and arts-based methods (Ferri and Leahy 2024). Such collaboration with Stopgap aimed at the creation of a choreographic piece in which accessibility measures, such as audio-description and captioning, were intrinsic to the creative process to facilitate participation of dancers with disabilities and enjoyment by audience with and without disabilities.

The arts-based research revolving around the collaboration with Stopgap had different aspects and phases to it. It was qualitative and entailed observation – by the first author of this article – of dance classes and creative processes, boosted and complemented by informal discussions of dance practices with the artistic director and choreographer Lucy Bennett. The research then included semi-structured interviews with members of the dance company. It also encompassed research with audiences who were invited to see the choreography at different stages of the creative process. Three themes were identified through a thematic analysis of the findings. First, the role of collaboration and co-creation in inclusive dance. This theme tallies with the idea of artists with disabilities, and more generally persons with disabilities, as holders of human rights and co-creators, which is a backdrop of the DANCING project. It also tallies with the view of accessibility as collaborative process (Ferri 2024), and with the third theme identified below. The second theme involves a focus on individual traits, which enhances the way in which disability is represented. The third theme is about the practice of embedding accessibility in the creative process and the impact of this practice on the members of the company and on audiences.

In this article we use the term inclusive dance to refer to professional contemporary dance including disabled and non-disabled dancers, and, more broadly, to indicate a dance setting open to both dancers with and without disabilities and characterised by equal participation and respect for individual difference (Boswell, Ko, and Yoon 2023). We also embrace the view that, as noted by Whatley and Marsh (2017: 5), 'inclusive dance' displays 'an interest in exploring both common ground and individual differences'. We acknowledge that sometimes 'integrated' dance and 'inclusive' dance are used interchangeably to refer to professional dance contexts where people with disabilities work alongside non-disabled people (Boswell, Ko, and Yoon 2023). We further recognise that employing dancers with and without disabilities to dance together takes planning and preparation, and finding professional dancers with disabilities involves a number of different routes and sometimes drawing on personal contacts, which reflects the lack of accessible training opportunities and conventional pathways for young dancers with disabilities, which has already been highlighted by scholarship (see, for example, Aujla and Redding 2013; Seham and Yeo 2015; Whatley and Marsh 2017). After these introductory

remarks, the analysis carried out in this article is contextualised within the broader DANCING project. Then, the theoretical background and research methods are expounded. The following sections discuss the themes identified. Some concluding remarks highlight the gist of the article and its aim to elucidate the processes, challenges, and outcomes of engaging in inclusive dance at a professional level. On the whole, this article aims to be relevant to artists and performers with disabilities and dance companies or projects wishing to bring ensembles of artists with disabilities together with non-disabled artists. However, more broadly, it contributes to disability and dance research, to the multifaceted scholarship in the field of arts that positions disability as an identity and culture worth celebrating rather than a condition to be cured (Hadley and McDonald 2019; see also, Houston 2011), as well as to the strand of academic work discussing 'new modes of spectating' involving people with disabilities as theatre audiences (Hadley 2015: 168; Hadley and McDonald 2019).

CONTEXT, THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND METHODS

Context: The DANCING Project

As noted above, this article builds on the arts-based research conducted within the DANCING project, which explores the extent to which the protection of the right to take part in culture of people with disabilities and the promotion of cultural diversity intersect and complement each other in the EU. DANCING is underpinned by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which represents the global legal standard on disability rights (Broderick and Ferri 2019).

DANCING deploys a socio-legal approach by combining legal, empirical, and arts-based research to achieve its objectives. While there is not a fixed and shared definition and there are differences across countries (Herklotz 2020), socio-legal research generally encompasses the interdisciplinary study of law that focuses on how law interacts, affects, embeds or is shaped by social structures and behaviours (see generally Creutzfeldt, Mason, and McConnachie 2019). It can be theoretical, or make use of empirical methods, including arts-based research, to generate a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the law.

In DANCING, arts-based research (that is qualitative research that employs the premises, procedures, and principles of the arts) has been used as a data collection method to understand barriers and facilitators to cultural participation. In particular, arts-based research was key to identify what features are experienced as exclusionary by people experiencing different types of disability, both as audience and as artists. It was hence vital to advance the understanding of what supports the fulfilment of the right to cultural participation of persons with disabilities, but also to get a deeper understanding of key concepts of disability law, such as accessibility. Further, arts-based research has supported the understanding of cultural diversity, with the inclusive bespoke choreography

providing an actual demonstration of the diversity brought by and inherent to disability.

Theoretical Background: The Human Rights Model of Disability

Being underpinned by the CRPD, this article and the broader project DANCING are informed by the human rights model of disability (Degener 2017; CRPD Committee 2018).

As discussed by Skarstad and Stein (2018: 2), the CRPD is considered as a landmark because of the 'human rights empowerment of persons with disabilities by recognising their equal dignity, autonomy, and worth, and by ensuring their equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms'. In that connection, the CRPD places an important emphasis on accessibility as gateway to the enjoyment of all human rights (Lawson 2018), and as a precondition to achieve equality. The human rights model of disability, that the CRPD embraces, recognises that disability is a social construct and values impairments as part of human diversity (Degener 2017). Further, while this model 'does not explain disability', it does provide 'a framework to conceptualize agency, rights and the content of rights' (Degener and Gomez-Carrillo de Castro 2022: 35). In that regard, Degener (2024) states that the human rights model of disability 'further adds a concept of personhood which demands that impairment may not be taken as an excuse for human rights violation' and that 'personhood means being a human rights holder and human rights agent'. In fact, the human rights model sees people with disabilities as subject of rights and requires their involvement in all what regards them, including policy making and research. As recalled most recently by Degener (2024), the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD Committee) – the treaty body set up by the CRPD – used the terminology of the human rights model of disability since the inception of its work and more and more consistently throughout the years. General Comment No. 6 on the right of disabled persons to equality and non-discrimination states *inter alia* that the human rights model of disability 'acknowledges that disability is one of several layers of identity' and that 'disability laws and policies must take the diversity of persons with disabilities into account' (CRPD Committee 2018).

Consistent with the human rights model of disability and its tenets, this article uses people-first (or person-first) language (that is 'people/persons with disabilities'), and only to avoid repetition and in an interchangeable fashion, 'disabled person/people'.

Methods

As mentioned earlier, the arts-based research deployed in the DANCING project revolved around inclusive contemporary dance and entailed a collaboration with Stopgap for the creation, development and performance of an inclusive piece of

choreography, titled 'Lived Fiction', which encompassed accessibility measures for audiences as an intrinsic part of the creative process (Ferri and Leahy 2024). Consistent with Houston's approach, DANCING conceived of inclusive dance as key to a 'greater understanding of the complexity of human existence, people's perceptions and actions; the lived experience' (Houston 2011: 331, 335).

In particular, the arts-based research that informs this article was characterized by qualitative methods. These encompassed observation as well as interviews with Stopgap, and focus groups and surveys with audience, which will be outlined in turn.

In this particular research, the first author of this article observed the dance company at various junctures of the inclusive and creative process in the rehearsal room and on stage, and watched videos of their rehearsals. While, as a researcher, she was not creating the choreography, she felt active participant in the mutual exchange. Consistent with best practices discussed by scholars, she was immersed in the day-to-day aspects of the company's activities and interactions (Marshall and Rossmann 1995; Glaser 1996).

The research also entailed semi-structured interviews with nine members of Stopgap. As is typical in semi-structured interviews, this involved an interview guide used flexibly and a series of open-ended questions (Given 2008). Interviews addressed the company members' experience of contributing to creating the piece as well as the approach to accessibility measures, including whether and how the experience differed from other dance work they might have been involved in, to what extent they experienced the process as inclusive and how disability was represented in the piece. The nine participants had various roles within the company. They included six dancers, and three people working in various behind-the-scenes roles. Four of the participants self-identified as people with disabilities and they referred (either in interviews or in published profiles) to diverse impairment types. We do not, however, focus on the specifics of participants' impairment types or of the dancers' diverse bodies.

Research with audience members aimed to explore how accessibility measures were experienced, to inform how these measures would continue to be developed by Stopgap and to hear how/whether 'inclusivity' and 'disability' were perceived as highlighted in the piece. It was carried out at two junctures in the development of 'Lived Fiction'. In the first instance, a written questionnaire was administered to an audience whose members had been invited to attend a 'scratch' performance of 'Lived Fiction' – that is, a performance without lighting, staging or scenery – which took place in February 2023. Invitees were drawn mainly from people working in the arts in a wide variety of capacities, with many of them involved in dance. The questionnaire contained some closed questions and some open-ended questions or open text answers that enabled people to respond at more length. In advance of attending, audience members were informed about the research and the questionnaire, which was given to them as they arrived at the venue. They were invited to complete it immediately after the event and to deposit it in a box as they left or to take it away, if it was more accessible for them, or to complete it using a screen reader on a computer

and to return it afterwards. All audience members completed the questionnaire (n=25). Research with the audience also involved an in-person focus group held with six audience members after the first theatrical performance of the piece in April 2023. All invitees to the focus group self-identified as people with disabilities of diverse types. The focus group allowed for participants' discussions to generate data that would be less accessible without that interaction (Morgan 2019). Thus, we aimed to elicit audience members' experiences of the accessibility of the piece, and how they perceived that it represented disability. Their interaction in the focus group, as people with differing requirements, was considered a potentially important contribution to these questions.

Interviews and the focus group discussion were recorded with the consent of participants and afterwards transcribed verbatim. We analysed the data using the reflexive approach to thematic analysis, developed by Braun and Clarke (2019). In particular, transcripts (of interviews and focus group discussions) and questionnaires were analysed employing the following procedures: familiarisation; systematic coding; generating initial themes; developing and reviewing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and writing up (Clarke and Braun 2013, 2017; Braun and Clarke 2021). Three themes were identified arising from this analysis, which we discuss in the next section. Notably, we have anonymised the contributions of participants, and we do not identify the gender of participants, choosing to use the term 'they' for all participants to help preserve their anonymity.

Ethical approval was obtained from Maynooth University ethics committee. All participants were provided with an information document in advance, and they gave informed consent in writing. The information document outlined the research purpose, process, data-collection procedures, voluntary participation, confidentiality and data-protection issues. Attention was paid to accessibility issues relative to the documents used in all aspects of the study, making the questionnaire, the information sheet and consent documents accessible for screen readers and available in alternative formats, including easy-to-read versions (Ferri and Leahy 2024).

INCLUSIVE DANCE AS COLLABORATIVE WORKING AND CO-CREATION

The first theme that we identified is the role of collaborative working and co-creation in making dance inclusive. During the interviews, members of Stopgap talked about co-creation, or working closely together and collaboratively to contribute to the development of the piece overall in a rather open-ended ('two-way') process in which all participants are creatively engaged. Such a collaborative approach is consistent with the human rights model of disability and the idea that people with disabilities are subjects of rights. It involved several features, including ongoing communication and 'translation' of movements as well as a focus on the individuality and strengths of each member of the company.

As interview participants explained it, all the dancers are included from the outset in the creative process and in informing the themes and the direction of the production, and these processes have evolved over time by learning from the lived experience of people with disabilities in the company.

As noted by Anderson (2020), 'the adaptation of choreographers' practices changing with injury, illness, or a bodily change – from aging or disability – has the potential to create disability aesthetics and new practices for creating dances'. In Stopgap, there is a shift from adaptation of choreographic practices to co-creation, which goes further than co-creative practices in contemporary dance as pursued by traditional companies such as, for example, Cullberg Ballet. Interview participants described a process whereby people learned from each other's movements. These processes were experienced as two-way in which dancers learn not only about other bodies but about their own unique traits. As one explained it, 'not everybody has the same flow as you and you can learn from other people's flow and then put that into your exercise' (Interviewee 1). One disabled dancer talked about the process of having their movements translated and how this could involve realising that their ways of moving were new (and not as easy) to others:

> So just being asked what I need to make sure they get the best out of me is very revolutionary for me … And realising that sometimes I am moving in ways that aren't so easy, I guess, but to me it is very easy but seeing other people doing it I am like, oh, okay. (Interviewee 4)

Participants stressed that collaborative ways of working required ongoing communication. They also emphasised the need to incorporate the unique traits of each dancer into the development of the choreography and to learn from each other – not conforming to one pre-ordained way of thinking or of moving or speaking. For example, one participant mentioned barriers created by conventional approaches to dance, including that the way things are explained and discussed can be exclusionary, contrasting this with the Stopgap approach, where 'the material and the choreography is generated by the dancers and from the dancers initially, so you are not seeking to replicate anything' (Interviewee 7).

Other participants also described a process whereby the dancers' movements were translated across different bodies. 'Translation' for Stopgap involves finding a correlative version of a movement made by someone who has a different physicality to you and where non-disabled dancers do not assume that the disabled dancer is imitating traditional dance steps (see also Whatley and Marsh 2017: 7). For example, one participant mentioned:

> I think what is really unique in an integrated company is that you see that same process go out to the dancers. If what they are communicating is like the kind of movement I want to see is like big, expansive, it is not so dictated as 'put left arm up' … it is more like people have to decide what that means to them because of that inherent translation across different bodies … And I think … it is all about communication … I find being in a space that is that intentional in its communication really like exciting. (Interviewee 3)

Improvisation, especially at the outset, communication, and the back-and-forth nature of the approach to translation was also highlighted by others: 'we build movement together and … we learn from each other, the translation goes backwards and forwards' (Interviewee 5). Thus, as an example of their working methods, several members of the company talked about what it meant to translate movements in an integrated company where people had diverse bodies. One member of the company, described their experience of translation, or how their solo piece had to be translated by the other dancers and how this differed from other kinds of approaches:

> I was teaching translation, so I had a solo piece and showed them my solo piece and they had to translate it. Whereas usually in the world it is the other way around so a disabled person, especially a wheelchair user, would have to translate on their own what a standing dancer is doing … It is very new to me, but I love it. We will do our little thing and because we all move so differently especially in this piece it is just really nice to, number one see how you move when you don't realise and see it on other people. (Interviewee 4)

That company member added that this was a contrast with previous dance experience where it was assumed that everyone using a wheelchair would move in a similar way, and 'the disabled person [was seen] as a prop sometimes' (Interviewee 4).

On the whole, all interviewees suggested a process of exploring how different types of bodies can move and support one another, be that as a standing or wheelchair dancer. This captures the emphasis on the diversity which characterises the human rights model of disability. They also indicated that this requires all participants to recognise each other not as persons with disabilities, but as artistic creators, capable, as Veal (2017) puts it, 'of physically demanding and aesthetically innovative choreography'.

It is also true that the open-ended, collaborative way of working described is not without its challenges. It means including dancers at the outset and giving them sufficient time and space to inform the direction of the production. While the dancers were typically positive about communication, collaboration and supportive relationships, they acknowledged that the open-endedness of the process could be challenging. As one participant said, it could mean 'going into the unknown together' (Interviewee 1) or, as another put it, 'I don't want to say easy, because it has been really difficult at times trying to muddle through what we actually want to show, what we want to do. But it has been really smooth in terms of how we can work together' (Interviewee 7). Overall, regardless of its challenges, the open-endedness of the process is viewed as inherent to being creatively engaged contributors.

FOCUS ON INDIVIDUALITY AND 'LAYERS OF IDENTITY'

The second theme that we identify is the focus on individual approaches and ways of moving. Such focus clearly tallies with the acknowledgment that

disability is one of several layers of identity and with the CRPD understanding of personhood, which is key to the human rights model of disability (Degener 2017, 2024), and in turn affects how disability is represented within the performance. In that connection, one participant mentioned that the choreography 'is using everyone's unique traits to add to the piece' (Interviewee 2). Another characterised this as investing in the person:

> When the investment is in the person and their talents, their personality and then also how the personalities mesh with everyone else in the group, I feel you are then able to really push, support and encourage that person to develop and to go in the direction of being the best that they can be … We are all incredibly different but we have this common language that we find together. (Interviewee 5)

Another participant suggested that Stopgap was about helping people to 'discover new abilities, develop their own skills', which they contrasted with some approaches to inclusive or community dance as underestimating what people can do and a tendency to end up with 'the lowest kind of denominator approach' (Interviewee 3). The fact that people were so different could be seen as a strength, as asking for an 'outside eye' could, as one participant said be 'valuable', adding: 'I think and especially pairing up with people who are disabled or non-disabled, yeah they have different, well everyone has different views on how you can look at it' (Interviewee 6). Thus, in the development of 'Lived Fiction', all company members, including those with disabilities, get to perform in a way that is unique to them, and as part of an integrated whole, where disability is not the primary focus, although it is integral to the approach. One might say that heterogeneity (rather than homogeneity) of body types is central to this process, in contrast to traditional approaches rooted in ballet and still (at least to some extent) embedded in contemporary dance (see Whatley and Marsh 2017).

This means that the choreographic work can be distinguished from a mainstream approach as it involves 'reshaping stories', and not just casting performers with disabilities in an arbitrary way (Interviewee 1). One participant summed up that the performers with disabilities are 'represented for their skill, their talent' saying also that this raises awareness of disability and shows 'the power, the presence on stage … [which] is incredible and it is beautiful coming from everyone on our team' (Interviewee 5). Consistent with this, one participant, a dancer who identified as a person with disabilities, said that they valued 'being together but then also having the opportunity to move in your own way in your own style' (Interviewee 4). Another, also a disabled dancer, reflected that many people with disabilities never get the chance to train or to perform, and emphasised the equal representation that a performance involves, based on how everyone moves in a unique way and adding that:

> Because every person, they are unique, the way that they move, and if you do not show it who is going to know? … So everyone has the same right, the same level, equal to do things and it is really good to show to everyone. (Interviewee 9)

Our research with audiences also highlights how disability and inclusivity were perceived by audience members. This is drawn from analysing the questionnaires completed by audience members at the 'scratch' performance, and based on the focus group with participants who were people with diverse disabilities. Participants who completed the questionnaire were almost unanimous in their responses that 'inclusivity' or 'disability' was represented or highlighted in the performance, and all agreed that inclusive dance could challenge stereotypes or preconceptions about disability. Most also felt that the piece challenged their ideas or assumptions about professional dance, and/or the body of the dancer. Those who disagreed with this clarified that they were already familiar with dance by performers with disabilities. These issues were also discussed by focus group participants. One stated that 'the beauty of Stopgap is to recognise the fact that it is a huge step forward for us and society to see people with disabilities coming together with non-disabled counterparts'. Several focus group participants said that they appreciated seeing diverse people represented in dance, with one saying that it was good to see 'such diversity and all working together so well', but that participant also went on to query if there should have been more persons with disabilities amongst the performers and if there were any amongst the crew/backstage staff. The latter led, in turn, to a discussion about visible and invisible disabilities with one participant stating that not everyone should have to disclose disability. One focus group participant suggested that a delicate balance had to be struck – involving difference but 'not making it about difference'. They said:

> In a way that is what I feel Stopgap is about, celebrating difference and not making it about difference … I felt like there was a diverse group of people performing. I felt for the most part people were represented. … I felt like the audio description gave me little hints into their life. And there were certain things that were said that I connected with, but it was without making it obvious, so it was almost like if you have been through it … you know it.

Arguably, as Veal (2017: 311) suggests, in such contexts, 'the boundaries between mobility and disability productively intersect and blur'. All of this, we suggest, contributed to an inclusive performance, where disability was represented as enriching diversity on stage and where disability stories and characters were fully represented (Hadley, Paterson, and Little 2022).

EMBEDDING ACCESSIBILITY FOR A MORE HOLISTIC EXPERIENCE

A core aim in the development of 'Lived Fiction' was that of embedding accessibility and treating it as an artistic element of the work itself, with attention to visuals, sounds, and senses. Accessibility measures included audio-description as well as attention to colour contrasts and to the sound made by costumes (all intended principally for blind and visually impaired audiences), live captioning

and visual representations of the sounds (typically for deaf and hard-of-hearing audiences). Notably, attention was also paid to the soundscape and to the lighting with neurodiverse audiences in mind. There were further accessibility features articulated at the start of performances, such as making it clear that it was acceptable to leave and go to a quiet room during performances. An Access Guide who acted both as a member of the company and as a contact point for audience members as they arrived was also present.

Several members of the company discussed as a factor that was facilitative of their participation that accessibility was considered at the outset of the creation process and remained integral to the process at all times. This was perceived to have profound implications for the performers and for the nature of the piece created, which is the first sub-theme discussed in this section. It was also considered integral to the experience of the audience, which we discuss as a second sub-theme.

Embedding Accessibility – Implications for the Performers and the Performance

Integrated accessibility measures were closely linked to the already discussed collaborative approach to creating the piece. For example, one participant highlighted accessibility measures built-in from the outset and stressed the collaborative aspects of the work that this facilitated: 'If [accessibility] is embedded from the very beginning then your mind and your thought processes are already with that so I feel it will make you almost a more considerate team … ' (Interviewee 5).

This could mean, as one participant put it, that there is no need to explain why an accommodation is needed, adding that 'it doesn't feel like you are having to do all of the work yourself, which a lot of the time as a disabled person you are' (Interviewee 7). Relatedly, accessible language and approaches were described as integral to the dance processes involved – that is, using terms that can be readily applied by dancers with diverse bodies. One dancer contrasted the 'open language' approach with what they had learned in dance school: 'I think open language is such a great tool … There is a vast variety of language options that we can use to indicate one thing … I remember at school it was very much, this is the technique, and this is [it] … ' (Interviewee 6).

Kuppers (2014) uses the term 'crip time', associated with the fact that providing an equal amount of preparation time can result in an unequal experience for people with disabilities, and, Whatley and Marsh (2017), focusing specifically on students with disabilities in dance training, suggest that it takes time, resources, willingness and systems in place to provide the right level of support for each student. These issues are highly relevant to the methods employed by Stopgap as an inclusive dance company. Thus, factors that were identified by participants as facilitative of embedding accessibility included allowing extra time for rehearsals. This is because many of the approaches involved require that extra time be built into rehearsal processes – and

participants sometimes highlighted the importance of this, particularly important for some performers who needed extra time, and sometimes different methods, in order to be able to contribute and to learn. For example, one participant suggested the need for different modes of input: 'some people really need sensory input to help learn about things or they might need things written down or pictures and things like that' (Interviewee 7).

The longer processes also allowed for building relationships within the group, which in turn contributed to a collective approach to facilitating access. It also required a flexible approach to the company's work, which one participant felt was more feasible in a small company: 'I suppose with Stopgap everyone is briefed but is prepared to help in whatever field it may be' (Interviewee 2). It almost goes without saying, and yet it is worth noting, that the kind of access discussed goes well beyond what can be characterised as 'logistical access' (such as ramps, adapted wheelchairs, or sign-language interpretation) and involves also 'methodological access' – which requires embodying disability culture in training, rehearsal, production and presentation processes (Hadley, Paterson, and Little 2022).

Embedding Accessibility – Implications for Audiences

Members of the company suggested that the accessibility measures were intended to be experienced and enjoyed by all audience members – including those with and without disabilities. Thus, captions and audio description were there for every audience member who could see or hear them, and the performance was also intended to be experienced as 'relaxed' by all audience members. As one participant explained it:

> It is not relegating disabled audiences' experiences, it is sort of not really an over-representation of disability but it is reminding people that through this access we are making sure that disabled people can be part of the audience. (Interviewee 7)

That participant also made the point that accessibility measures like audio description can help a range of audience members, including people not familiar with contemporary dance. Indeed, a similar argument is put forward by scholarship addressing cultural experiences such as visiting museums – that accessibility measures for people with disabilities, including multi-sensory experiences, can facilitate greater enjoyment and engagement on the part of wider demographic groups, including older people, children, and tourists or people who don't speak the local language (see, amongst others, Eardley et al. 2016; Flys and Amidei 2021; Muscarà and Sani 2019; Rappolt-Schlichtmann and Daley 2013). Thus, Stopgap members perceived that there was a difference in how audiences would experience the show: 'you will offer people a much fuller experience by embedding it in the process … you are experiencing that in multiple ways and so we will all have that experience in whatever senses we have available to us – that is quite a unique representation' (Interviewee 3). It was

also somewhat confirmed in the focus group with audience members, which we come back to below.

Overall, for members of Stopgap, accessibility measures were seen as contributing not only to the artistic experience of all audience members, but also to a more inclusive and integrated society, which is consistent and aligns with the human rights model of disability. This approach was also perceived to contrast with other approaches, where, as one participant put it, accessibility is often thought about at the end, which 'doesn't allow that process to inform making the show' (Interviewee 3).

Both the questionnaire administered to the audience at the 'scratch' performance, and, especially, the focus group discussion following the first performance of 'Lived Fiction' shed light on how people with diverse disability types experienced the performance in practice, including its accessibility measures. In fact, as suggested by scholarship (Hickey Moody 2017), the questionnaire points to the fact that inclusive dance can be a way of 'non-disabled' people learning to fit in with people with disabilities. However, at the focus group, there was also much discussion about what made 'Lived Fiction' challenging for some audience members, and it was clear that facilitating access for a diverse group of people with disabilities is extremely complex. For example, one focus group participant described the performance as 'a great development', but said that it 'was quite chaotic' for them, as 'there was a lot going on, almost like a sensory overload'. In contrast, another participant described it as 'quite a relaxing performance'. The 'soundscape' was too loud for some participants, whereas another suggested that they would have liked it louder.

As participants talked through conflicting access needs, some interesting points emerged that allude to the need for 'compromise' and 'care' as well as the efficacy of integrating a range of accessibility measures and how they can benefit people with different impairment types (Ferri 2024). That was expressed by one participant, who, while finding the lighting and the sound a bit overwhelming at times, also felt that, even if they had had to close their eyes at times, they had an 'artistic experience' by listening to the audio description. That participant went on to say that they did not feel 'resentful' in the way they might have done in another performance, and that – even if they felt 'a little frustrated' – they also valued being in a theatre with others (that is, in having a communal experience) and they knew that different people need different things. Thus, despite the challenges that facilitating access for an audience with diverse requirements brings about, several focus group participants articulated appreciation for the effort and care that were evident in trying to embed accessibility for all.

Overall, the discussion at the focus group signals the challenges that face an inclusive dance company, or any performance company, in facilitating access for diverse audiences, contributing to knowledge about how these issues are beginning to be engaged with. As Hadley (2015: 155, 168) contends, there is still little written on disabled people as theatre audiences – that is, as 'individual spectators, and collectives of spectators, who perceive, interpret and attach value to theatre practices in particular ways based on their own position in the public

sphere'. It is also important to note that the survey and the focus group discussion took place as 'Lived Fiction' was being developed, and that the findings discussed here have informed that development since then. Furthermore, as mentioned already, as the final piece will be performed for different audiences, we would hope that it may continue to generate further insights and perspectives.

CONCLUSION

In this article we have presented some of the findings from the arts-based research carried out within the remit of the socio-legal DANCING project. The collaboration with Stopgap was key to understand barriers and facilitators to cultural participation of persons with disabilities, but also to better comprehend and provide a representation of the diversity brought by disability in the cultural sphere.

Our analysis suggests that the collaborative approach adopted by this inclusive dance company involves ongoing communication and translation of movements by people with different physicalities, as well as a focus on the individuality of each member of the company, requiring that all participants are recognised as artistic creators. This is consistent with the conceptualisation of disability as part of human diversity and the principle of inherent personhood of persons with disabilities, which are at the core of the human rights model of disability and inform the socio-legal research of DANCING.

Access is facilitated by a range of factors operating at different levels which are not always present in arts practices, and are not fully understood in their potential complexity. Accessibility measures can include 'logistical access' (involving, for example, ramps and interpreters), which tends to be the industry focus, but also stories, characters and inclusive language (or 'ideological access'), and also inclusion of disability culture, relationships and concepts in rehearsal and presentation processes (or 'methodological access') (Hadley, Paterson, and Little 2022). Approaches by Stopgap in the creative process such as using a range of communication styles, two-way communication and incorporating translation of movements by diverse dancers as well as granting extra time for rehearsals (not to mention ensuring logistical access through ramps etc.) allow for different levels of access, including what Hadley, Paterson, and Little (2022) characterise as ideological and methodological access. Our findings also suggest that embedding accessibility from the outset makes for a more holistic experience for both performers and audiences. The discussion at our focus group highlights some of the challenges and complexities involved, on account of diverse, and sometimes conflicting, access preferences of audience members. However, it also showcases the importance of taking different access needs seriously, which helps to communicate care for diverse audiences.

Furthermore, we found that Stopgap's performers with disabilities see their participation as a site of the enactment of equality and inclusion (Cone and Cone 2018). This involved a rather open-ended and at times challenging process

in which a focus on individual strengths affects how disability is represented in the resulting performance, which involved, as an audience member who participated in the focus group put it, 'celebrating difference and not making it about difference'. As Hall (2013: 246) articulates it (considering creative arts and people with intellectual disabilities), when people interact 'emotions, bodies, and creativity cross boundaries, getting through to blur distinctions between inside and outside, and excluded and included positions'.

On the whole, this article and the research expounded in it intend to support and provide a sample course of action for future performance projects that aim to be inclusive and align with the human rights model of disability. In that regard, this article also provides new insights on the relevance of the human rights model of disability for inclusive dance companies. Further, and more broadly, this article adds to the existing multifaceted scholarship on art and disability as well socio-legal scholarship, showcasing the relevance and value of inclusive dance in multi-methods projects.

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