



Adam Benjamin, Lecturer in Theatre & Performance, Plymouth University

Interviewed by Emma McFarland, Research & Mapping Lead, Diverse Futures

Adam is Lecturer in Theatre & Performance at Plymouth University where he is at the forefront of work to increase access to the Dance Theatre degree course for disabled people. He was joint founder and Artistic Director of CandoCo Dance Company and throughout his career has been passionately committed to increasing opportunities for people who are disabled in the performing arts.

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What is your experience of working with students with moderate to profound sensory, learning and physical disabilities on the course?

Plymouth University and the course team positively encourage disabled students to apply and enrol on the course. In addition to students with dyslexia, a number of students with more severe disabilities have studied at Plymouth, including students on the autistic spectrum, two wheelchair users and one hearing impaired student. The experience of working with these students on the course has had a profound and positive impact on other students and the course team. Working creatively with ‘difference’ has inspired many of them and added another dimension to their learning and artistic experience. Many other disability dance groups across the city use our studios and have strong creative links with students and staff.

How have you gone about making the course more accessible to disabled students?

- Dance and theatre strands are run in parallel so disabled students can choose from a wider range of options. This is important to ensure students who are disabled can access options which provide a satisfying and creative learning experience. For example a wheelchair user may find a voice or theatre skills class more meaningful than accessing a Cunningham dance technique class.
- The course has just benefited from a brand new theatre building which has been designed to be fully accessible.
- Three integrated companies will perform in our first season of dance at the university demonstrating our very real connection to integrated dance in the professional world.
- A number of lecturers are skilled in teaching in the community, while training projects help to build the skills of the team to work with disabled students. This year we will be welcoming Sue Smith (ex-CandoCo) as an associate lecturer, other associate lecturers have attended advanced training programmes in Europe and the UK.
- Any student with a disability is supported by DAS (Disability Assist Service) throughout their time at the University and Learning Support Assistants are available when needed. A Disability Assist profile is set up to identify access needs and ensure these are met, helping disabled students to benefit from, for example, a wider range of assessment types, longer time to complete their course or texts in larger font sizes. A good example of this is that one of our students who uses a head pointer to type, was given two years to complete his third year and write up his dissertation. A Disability Assistance Centre is sited on the ground floor where students can set up meetings or drop-in for help.

What was the motivation/ catalyst for developing the course?

The dance course was established in 2008 and providing opportunities for disabled students was a priority for Ruth Way, Head of Department, when she approached me to join the team. This emphasis has thus been embedded in the ethos of the course from the very beginning.

I have always been interested in artists, makers, thinkers and creativity. When I was 17, I met a young man in the USA who couldn't speak, who was in a wheelchair and communicated by selecting letters

from the alphabet which I would recite and he would select individually by using his eyes. It raised huge questions for me. I studied visual arts and dance before meeting Celeste Dandeker, an ex London Contemporary dancer who was paralysed following an on-stage injury. Together we founded CandoCo Dance Company, the first professional dance company for disabled and non-disabled dancers. These experiences reinforced my belief that disability can enhance the creativity of the artform and it kept the ethical and the aesthetic closely wedded in my mind. It is without doubt what kept me in dance. This has been at the heart of my work at Plymouth University.

Why do you think progress is so slow in terms of widening access to higher education for disabled students in the performing arts?

The combining of access and excellence (a policy I once firmly advocated), has I believe, over the past ten years begun to be rather unhelpful. The pressure on conservatoires to develop an internationally competitive, physically outstanding, 'ideal' dancer for mainstream professional companies is difficult to reconcile with the creative challenges of promoting wider disabled access. The linking of goals to develop talented dancers, create centres of excellence and promote disability progression has I believe 'stalled' development. If we focussed instead on a wider range of institutions, including those which can embrace a more 'messy' creative ethos, we might find a more productive way forward for disabled dancers who might be offering something different from the 'high achieving, Paralympic model'. We need to remember dance is an art form, and the subject of integrated dance is 'difference', while, in my view, conservatoires are interested in conformity... it is quite simply, not a good fit.

Another big reason is a lack of information in schools about opportunities in the performing arts for young disabled people and limited vision among parents, carers and advisers as to what disabled students can achieve and the viability dance might be as a career pathway. I believe this means many potential students are shepherded away from the arts.

Are you working on other initiatives to extend access to disabled students either in your institution or more widely?

PlymouthDance is hosting UDance (the national festival of youth dance organised by DanceUK) in 2015 and we are working together to create a strong integrated component, showcasing performances by integrated dance groups from across England. This includes working with the selection panels in the regions that choose the youth dance groups to make sure they understand integrated dance and assess it fairly. We would also like to offer integrated dance groups mentoring to enhance the quality of their performances.

UDance will help raise the profile of integrated performing arts across the city and will also raise awareness of the Plymouth University course among the talented young disabled dancers from around the UK who will perform there.

What advice would you give to a talented disabled young person who wishes to pursue a career in dance or theatre and who is interested in applying to your course? How can they increase their chances of success in their application?

Know that there is a future for you, that you are not aiming at something fanciful and unobtainable. Know that the audition at Plymouth will be accessible. Know that we will do everything we can do to help you succeed.

Be really clear this is something you can achieve and keep this focus in your mind. There will be challenging times. Every student, disabled or non-disabled, can feel moments of uncertainty at university. Don't give up. Stay with it and know that a career in dance is achievable.

In terms of your application, show you are informed about dance, that you have a knowledge of what's going on in the dance world, that you're engaged and interested. What did you last see? What did you like (or didn't like) about it? Which choreographers or companies excite you? Demonstrate your passion, your knowledge and your potential.