



Kevin French, Performing Arts graduate, Plymouth University

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

Kevin graduated from the BA Dance Theatre degree course at Plymouth University in 2013. He has Cerebral Palsy and is 'severely disabled'. In his words, he 'lives life to the max' working as an artist and life model, standing for election as an MEP and travelling all over the world independently. He is a strong advocate for the opportunities on the Dance Theatre degree at Plymouth University for disabled people.

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Could you tell us a little bit about yourself and briefly outline your impairments / disabilities.

I have had cerebral palsy from birth. Since 1982 I have lived in my own home and employed my own carers. It may be helpful to give you some details about my disability so you have a more complete picture of who I am! I can get around my flat on my knees and can get in out of the bath. I'm unable to clean, wash, shave, dress, feed myself or do household chores (thankfully!) Very few people can understand my speech. I can take drinks if they are placed on the table with a straw in them.

For the last twenty years I have been offered many kinds of communication aids which I have turned down for two reasons. Daily I speak to many different people about a large array of topics and because these devices have limited vocabulary, I find them limiting. They are also hard to setup unless you have received training. Lately, my iPad has become my communication aid because most people can operate it and I write my words in Pages for people to read by using my nose or head pointer.

I acknowledge that I am very lucky because I have masses of self-confidence which allows me to do more than most. I think if I was growing up today, I would not be as independent because it's the default position that disabled people should be accompanied by carers. My confidence, self-belief, my emotional and creative horizons are constantly growing and developing.

How did you become interested in the performing arts?

I didn't wake up one day and think I like the performing arts! It was something I was aware of but as my confidence grew and the internet developed, so did my exploration. Before university I had no training in the performing arts. I still don't think of myself as an artist. This is not because I'm disabled, it's down to who I am personally, I have many other interests and talents. In the 1990s I ran for parliament and the Home Office had to seek legal advice because I was the first candidate who was unable to sign their nomination papers.

How did you find out about the Plymouth University course?

When I met Adam Benjamin, my university lecturer, nearly five years ago, I didn't know anything about him. After he auditioned me, I googled him [and found out about his work with disabled people]. I was going to ask him if I could attend some lectures on the course but he said "why not do the whole degree"? That wasn't a challenge I could wheel away from. Until my second year, I would have been happy with just passing but I realised I could do far better!

What do you regard as your biggest success on the course?

Just being another member of the student body and completing my degree like everyone else.

How did the team at Plymouth University help make the course accessible for you? What support did you receive from them?

I was the first disabled person to do a BA Dance Theatre degree at Plymouth University. Before I started the course I stated I did not need or want a carer to accompany me while at university. Although the whole department was greatly concerned about this, it was agreed we would try it for a month. Although some students found it hard, most students and lecturers found I could cope and the whole department embraced the fact that working with me, things could and would go wrong, so my fellow performers would have to improvise.

In class I often work out of my wheelchair on my knees, if I fall over, the class does not stop, someone helps me up and I get on with it. When class or rehearsals finished, students or staff helped me to get my coat on and assisted me into my wheelchair.

Verbal communication is not really an issue for me because of several things. I never had a carer with me so people had to communicate with me. The iPad has broken down many barriers because most people can operate them. If I want to make a small point I will spell it out with my nose. Major points I will use email and / or iMessage. Apart from the first term at university I did not meet my lecturers for tutorials, we chatted via email. Even in lectures, my main lecturer had his iPhone with him, so I could ask questions.

Apart from getting my books from the library in pdf format [and being given an extra year to complete my dissertation], I did not ask for and need any special support, much to the university disability assist department's surprise.

What would be your advice to other young disabled people who would like to study performing arts at university but are nervous of taking the next step?

I'm never good at giving advice because I rarely seek it. For most of my life I have been told by many people I could not do something by many people and I have proved them wrong many times. Don't think why you can't be a dancer, because a non-disabled person wouldn't think why shouldn't they go to college or university and nor should you!