

## Undressing the (w)rapper: disability dance

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### Abstract

The artistic expressions of dancers with physical and mental handicaps/ impairments/ disabilities is for many audiences an indulgent, simple past time. Why do we relegate some dancers to the margins of dance performance? How is this played out in relation to rurality and shifting notions of urban culture for the person with a disability? Cultural theorists – Richard Schechner and Rustom Bharucha works are drawn to suggest a frame for the re-contextualisation of disability dance within notions of popular dance and the mass and high cultural space. This paper explores the difficult terrain of who can and should not dance by accessing Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligence. It will raise many questions around the context that is disability arts chiefly in South Africa to suggest a unique position for contemporary dance by people with disabilities that profoundly rocks notions of perfection, dancing and black bodies in dance.

**Key words:** Dance for disabled. Perfection. Portuguese Language – Euphemism.

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## Despindo o (*w*) *rapper*: dança da deficiência

### Resumo

A expressão artística dos bailarinos com desvantagens/ deficiências/ incapacidades físicas e mentais é para muitos espectadores um simples passatempo indulgente. Por que afastamos alguns bailarinos dos espetáculos de dança? Como isto acontece em relação à ruralidade e à variação das noções da cultura urbana para a pessoa com uma deficiência? Os trabalhos teóricos sobre cultura de Richard Schechner e Rustom Bharucha sugerem a re-contextualização da dança da deficiência nas noções da dança popular e no espaço cultural elevado e de massa. Este artigo explora o solo difícil daqueles que podem e não dançariam com acesso à teoria das inteligências múltiplas de Howard Gardner. O presente artigo aborda diversas questões a respeito da predominância das artes da deficiência na África do Sul e sugere uma posição única e exclusiva para a dança contemporânea de pessoas com deficiências que abalam profundamente as noções da perfeição, da dança e de corpos negros que dançam.

**Palavras-chave:** Dança para deficientes. Perfeição. Língua Portuguesa – Eufemismo.

## Introduction

The plight of Cape Town's wheelchair dancers highlighted in Cape Town journalist, Cosmo Duff-Gordon's (2008, p. 10), recent newspaper article "Re-inventing the wheel" intrigues me on several levels. The commentary provides a welcome affirmation of disability arts in a South African context on the one hand and a mournful recognition of its self relegated category – dance sport (a term which needs further exploration) for this contemporary, and largely urban dance form on the other. For many uninitiated audiences of disability dance (another term to which I will return) these artistic expressions of dancers from the disabled<sup>1</sup> community are often seen as harmless, simple past time. For me, this unique space offers much insight into notion of contemporary theatre dance particularly in the South African context. Why do we cage these aspiring Western Cape dancers who wish to fly like birds? This paper will raise many questions around the context that disability arts finds itself in the high culture, mass culture debates and in the urban (and I would like to add rural) understandings – whose dance, when is it dance and how does a claimed position in dance evolve in order to suggest a survival cloak of the body.

As we grapple with this broad topic more questions emerge in the negotiation of a difficult terrain that also asks who can and should not dance, what is the dancing body, when is it dance and where is the place of modern educational dance and creative movement for someone with a physical or mental disability who performs in a contemporary and or urban setting? The complexity of the dancer confined to a wheelchair within the praxis of contemporary theatre dance is thus added to this mixed masala.<sup>2</sup>

Duff-Gordon's (2008, p. 10) bold assertion that "dancing is one of those things that defines us as human" allows for deeper reflection and hints at the fundamental humanity of such dancers who are differently-abled. In my view, her<sup>3</sup> entry into the trajectory that is the development of so called high-, mass- and urban culture reveal notions of the body as contemporary survivor and reservoir.

At the outset what one needs is to consider is a few working definitions for disability dance and my location of the form under the umbrella of contemporary theatre dance in South Africa. In my view, the body's artistic impulse to music, crime and violence, religion, socio-economic circumstances and a myriad other stimuli is filtered through movement to which the artist's

need for story-sharing is layered. Through my own contemporary theatre dance praxis with children and youth with disabilities in KwaZulu – Natal and in Denmark, these glimmers of hope provide unique insight into our common humanity. These dance explorations suggest that as theatre performances they are distinct voices not unlike rap artists – uncomfortable poets in our contemporary music society. Therefore, as one undresses the wrapping and rapper of disability dance a basis for my paper emerges.

From my subjective position disability arts choreographer I am simultaneously insider given my heritage as classical trained ballet dancer and choreographer of children's theatre works with and for young people with disabilities, and outsider defined by my so called able body status and overwhelming urban experience. Feminist author Gayathri Spivak's (1990) comment 'For me, the question 'Who should speak?' is less crucial than 'Who is listening?' is apt in this sense. Much of my work foregoes the authenticity argument as I enter into the fight for the recognition of disability dance as meaningful theatrical art.

### **In front of the closet mirror: a few questions laid bare**

When examining disability dance in a contemporary urban setting in Africa what new knowledge of the subject Dance emerges for those who are in the rural frame on the one hand and for the city dweller on the other? How will the mushrooming of multi-disciplinary Arts Festivals in unkempt (sic) rural settings such as the Klein Karoo Kunstefees shift notions of the subject of Dance for the local/indigenous populace as well as deviant dance-makers? Who is being bumped onto the margins? Does disabled dance choose to speak from the edge or is it coerced into the wings of our mainstages?

I posit that the experience of rural based dance groups and dances with disabilities can be paralleled to illustrate the degree to which both groups are isolated and largely voiceless.

As contemporary theatre practices evolve chiefly in the city spaces, many farming communities face isolation and deal with the stigma of ignorance. With rapid technological advancements, cellphones and televisions, gaps between city stages and rural community halls are shrinking and groundbreaking performances by Pather and others are beginning to occur in unconventional performance spaces such as escalators in shopping malls and hotel rooms. It is conceivable

that such works can now be beamed live into the remotest of communities in an unprecedented manner thus radically altering the contemporary rural landscape. It can therefore be argued that these acts of theatre can be seen as acts of subversion and of celebration of popular and sub-cultural expression. On the one hand such performances shatter the myth that contemporary theatre dance can only be considered serious performance when in formal theatre space. By taking such works to public spaces, the educative interaction with the man(sic) in the street is as much for the performer as it is for the passing viewer. With new layers of communication beginning to be explored cracks in the foundation of contemporary theatre dance become exposed.

For many the confrontation of the wheelchair dancer in the territorial boundaries of a formal theatre space stirs uncomfortable feelings of the body, aesthetics and in the South African context the particular difficulty of unwrapping the "black dancing body" (STEEVES, 1973, p. 91) – exotic and noble savage falls under the spotlight. Thus, the author's witness of Vincent's (a single legged man) dancing Capetonian at a social gathering in a community/school hall in the Southern suburbs of Lansdowne in April 2008 could be interpreted as his deliberate exhibition of subversive dance and can be seen as a thread in the formation of urban subculture. As struggling, wheelchair dance pioneer in Cape Town, Gladys Bullock and award winning choreographers like Nicola Visser and Malcolm Black of Remix Dance Project,<sup>4</sup> also assert their subversive work and constantly argue for legitimacy of the disabled as dancer and valued human being.

It is useful to remember that this difficult fight occurs within the progressive space and world renowned new constitution of South Africa. One can only imagine the limitations to success for those in disability arts in countries such as Zimbabwe and a global perspective of prejudice which millions of others endure. When one contemplates the difficulties of the new South African scenario, then the extent to which education for the acceptance for people with disabilities as dancers in many other *verkramp*<sup>5</sup> governments globally that still needs to be undertaken can truly begin to be understood. Can any elitist culture in dance maintain its relevance whilst the onslaught of such contemporary comets such as performance art, disabled dance, hip hop, new musical theatre works, reality TV dance shows collide?

Where does one begin when undressing the wrapping that shrouds the dancer with disabilities? Who is being protected the rap poet-dancer or

the audience? And what is it about the dancer confined to a wheelchair that some of us may not want to have knowledge of or to know? KwaZulu-Natal educationist and scholar Nyna Amin (2008) offers some insight by suggesting that 'knowledge' could be interpreted as precise and 'knowing' as tentative with a shifting notion of implicit truth. This can be extended to problematise a fixed aesthetic for contemporary theatre dance.

For South African choreographer, the shifting spaces and tilting times to echo the title of Pather's dance work in 1999, in which one operates is ever mindful of the fluidity in which the work will be performed and received by dancers, audiences and the media. Any notion especially by a powerful media of who should dance in such contexts must be challenged for the deepening of one's understanding of the dancing body. The central position of the physically fit, youth and able body types should therefore be contested sites for exploration. The dominant aesthetic of white female dancing bodies in South Africa that still persists in many theatre spaces, and the subversive role that disability arts could play becomes even more urgent in this kaleidoscope. The position of 'black is beautiful' and disability dance as beautiful could be likened to a consciousness movement,<sup>6</sup> redefining the very nature of what constitutes a dancing body and can begin to address many social ills through its performance. In boldly arguing for dance to be performed by all persons/human beings much could be taught to a 21st c. youth obsessed cultures and xenophobic societies.

These and a myriad other challenges to notions of the perfect ideal dancing body need further debating as one forges notions of popular culture for some, mass cultural experience by a few and urban-culture explored in farms and villages.

### **The unhinged closet: some historical contexts for disability dance in KwaZulu-natal**

Whist there is undoubtedly dance practices by persons with disabilities prior to 1990s in South Africa, in KwaZulu- Natal in particular a resurgence of interest in dance by the disabled by the provincial cultural institution – The Playhouse Company in KwaZulu-Natal coincided with the birth of the new South Africa. Durban based, John Mthethwa had undertaken pioneering work through his KwaZulu-Natal Ballroom Dance Association for Disabled

form as early as the 1980s. The organisation was based at the infamous (sic) Stable Theatre, Alice Street, Durban – an arts venue noted for its ‘protest theatre’ works. For many artists with disabilities opportunities for performance was largely limited to a few concerts in school and or community halls and failed to attract a wider recognition within the performing arts industry and thus contemporary theatre dance practitioners. The re-birth or renaissance of disability dance could be located in the flowering of the Human Rights culture of the new South Africa post 1994. As equal rights for the disabled became enshrined through many improved laws greater access to funds and spaces for these fledgling artists with disabilities more performances and dance projects followed.

The demise of apartheid also saw a repositioning of contemporary dance as a vehicle highly suited to a maneuverability between dance forms as former separate dance "cultures collided" (SCHECHNER, 1991, p. 30) in newly established neutral zones. Multi-cultural presentations, productions and festivals became the vogue for much of the 1990s in South Africa. The disabled were encouraged by local and foreign government initiatives to participate in collaborations and experiments such as the In Touch Tshwarangano disability integrated arts project funded in part by the British Council. Many small companies such as Gladys Agulhas's Agulhas Theatre Works<sup>7</sup> based in Johannesburg sprung up in former townships and found themselves in established/and formal theatre spaces that was once the sole prerogative of high cultural expressions like classical ballet.

The dismantling of the collective baggage of the past at these events saw many dance forms battling on a uneven playing fields as the claiming and re-claiming of the all important centre position for new role-players was argued. For some dance forms such as classical ballet their reserved position, as government fully subsidized high art form was unquestionable whereas for others such as many so called traditional/cultural African and Indian dances any hint at relegation to the ‘back of the bus’<sup>8</sup> was fiercely resisted. Therefore, transitions and transformations in the notion of mainstream contemporary theatre dance have been a feature of much dance making for the past 14 years. A plethora of newspaper dance reviews of South African events and festivals provide much insightful information of new labels in dance for the intrepid dance researcher and are beyond the scope of this paper.

### **Euphemisms and other stitched labels**

In her seminal work, British psychotherapist and poet Valerie Sinason (1992) based at the Tavistock Clinic illustrates the pattern of euphemism and harmful labelling for persons with disabilities. Sinason (1992) reflects that from as early as 1500s English words such as retard, dunce, idiot, sub-normal, moron, mad were created around our painful reaction in the face of an encounter with a person with disabilities. If we accept Sinason's (1992) notion that 'numbed with grief' is the original definition of the word stupid then it is we who stupidly insulate ourselves from their experience. This loaded position and placement as 'the other' (BRUSTEIN, 1991, p. 45) for the disabled is also a lived experience for many persons of South Africa's Apartheid past who were defined by the potent race classification and dehumanised as individuals. The effects of these discriminating practices are still manifest in our society and provide a crucial link to interpreting a deviant characteristic that is manifest in some contemporary dance forms.

Whilst the category of abnormal and deviant pre-supposes a norm or mainstream position its remains important that this position is reserved for the able bodied. In the South African context of theatre dance this has also meant white and female. This is problematic as the context of a person with disabilities as deviant separates "them" from "our" society (sic) and inflates the position of power and superiority for able bodied, white and female persons.

For the person with disabilities the forced removal to a lowly position through the corrosive labelling is not only a disruption of self-esteem but an insidious denial of her potential and presence. It is noteworthy that Sinason (1992) maintains that "No human group has been forced to change its name so frequently" (SINASON, 1992, p. 39-40).

With the constant adaptation of her euphemistic name one can imagine how for many people defined as disabled their identity and cultural formation is scarred and positioned as weak and value-less.

Dance academic and KwaZulu-Natal based choreographer Lliane Loots' (1999) offer of 'multiple identities' could be appropriated and thus extended for an understanding of such complex identity formation for the artist with disabilities. The suggestion gives one hope that "none of us bear only a single cultural, racial or gendered identity and part of the politics of our 'nationality' is how we mediate amongst identities" (LOOTS, 1999, p. 5).



Thus, Sandra Shabane who is simultaneously defined as black, mother, LeftfeetFIRST<sup>9</sup> dancer and high school learner at a special needs school in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal could be seen as the complete antithesis of weak and unworthy. Her constant mediation of these diverse roles could be seen as skilful and powerful as the manipulation of her wheels onto the dance stage. This dancer's central position on that stage becomes more than her participation at a dance festival but mirrors a complex desire to be taken seriously as a young black, female artist, not to be assigned to the margins or wings, not to be spoken for, but given a space in which she can "cough out what I want to say" (MTSHALI, 2004, p. 56).

As a choreographer who has been working with Shabane and several dislocated others for over ten years, my own experience attests that the opportunity of a performance space provides a world in which these developing artists can share their insights be thus interpreted and are able to defend a fight for their work as future artists. Through their interaction with other contemporary dancers and performances the possibilities of their dancing bodies are legitimized and their untold human stories can be celebrated.

### **New cloaks for contemporary theatre dance**

For the person who is defined as disabled a constructed notion of her humanity has over many years been infested by various theoretical constructions including medical-, historical-, political- and I would even posit a cultural definition<sup>10</sup> which could obscure her human presence as a complex dancing being.

Disability dance has the unique power to reposition contemporary theatre dance notions and it is my hope that it will relax its hold onto various Sport codes (from which it currently receives some support and funding) and rather pursue the so called artistic route for its long term survival. As enabling choreographers and dancers that work alongside young dancers with disabilities one needs to question why one is more comfortable celebrating award winning sprinter Oscar Pistorius as a supreme athlete and not potential supreme dance artists.

The notion that the body is a vessel of the human experiences both genetic and of environmental (de)construction could be argued for in terms of an ideal body image. We are thus blessed or cursed by our genetic make up and at risk to the elements of road rage and other environmental mishaps

in relation to a perfect body. This may explain the implicit acceptance of the dancer's body as whole, incredible machine needing to be manipulated (e.g. through plastic surgery) and or controlled (e.g. by low calorie dieting, steroidal misuse) in order to be defined as perfect. Thus, we turn our eyes away from any broken parts of the body as any acceptance thereof could make us more vulnerable, fragile and imperfect.

In this sense, as expressions within popular and mass culture Hip hop and pantsula dance forms offer unique opportunities to examine the latest trends of the ideal dancing body. Thus bold, armor plated, body hugging actions and violent gestures by young men and women become the order of the day. The ubiquitous reach for the crotch, a potent reminder of virility of man (sic) as we out-size our clothes – buying them to be bigger and better than ourselves offers a resistance to imperfection. Has our internalization of the threat of violent crime manifest itself in the “light footed, broken rhythmic pattern and dart-like side steps as if avoiding a switch blade” (SAMUEL, 2002b, p. 54).

The strong emphasis on the body's ability to break dance – re-assembling and breaking down shoulder –, arm – and leg-parts are akin to this idea of perfect machine. One notices the many hours that are spent to honing dance (sic) skills as if any other form of uncontrolled movement could not be perfect dance. These and other isolated movements such as the stab of fingers in the air from the safety of hooded gear that characterize Hip hop as one of the most popular dance forms suggest an unwritten code for the dancing body.

Our fixation with well-oiled Body-machine extends across the global village through powerful media and thus movement is interpreted as valuable only when it remains in the realm of exercise and sport – a glorification and sublimation of the blood and guts desire for ultimate conquest. When movement is chosen to serve a higher purpose this creative production is labeled as a trivial activity – dance and thus the making of so called high art.

## **Conclusion**

The problem for disability dance as it asserts its position within wider debates of contemporary theatre dance is how will it be received and understood in light of the transforming of Dance and of Sport in the mass society and in the rural constituencies?

As dance scholars, the need to acknowledge and further investigate our changing environments, before we impose our knowledge and knowing as suggested by Amin (2008) of a universal aesthetic for the complexity that is contemporary theatre dance is of critical importance. What is clear is that ‘a one size fits all’ for the dancer makes any process towards a final presentation difficult and the range of review of such art works greatly problematic. Perhaps we have something to learn about what action to undertake and the harvest we could reap from Siyanda Jaca (2007) a 17-year wheelchair dancer from Port Shepstone, in KwaZulu Natal who writes,

I planted my beans-  
Brown, beneath baked soil-  
Sandy, clay and rocky-  
Giant, green and slowly growing  
My mother will harvest tomorrow.  
I planted hard – sweat and tears

And harvested...  
Education

If we are to accept our complex urban, rural, mass and high cultural differences, integrate and include one another’s dance practices as we shape a tolerant, ubhuntu contemporary world then our hard work and effort will celebrate our deviance and value the individual spirit of dancing human beings.

## Notes

- 1 The use of the term ‘the disabled’ is used as collective for all persons with disabilities and accepts the complex differentiation that exists within these communities.
- 2 Masala – the Indian word/term used for a mixture or blend of many aromatic spices is used here to highlight the many layered contexts in which the dancer with disabilities find herself.
- 3 The subject position of male is contested throughout this paper to subvert any linguistic hegemony and to question the position and role of female in Dance.
- 4 Remix Dance Project, based in Cape Town, is an acclaimed contemporary dance initiative that brings together performers with physical disabilities and performers without.

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- 5 The Afrikaans word for conservative, narrow minded is used here to highlight the restrictive, dehumanizing Apartheid regime that was the old South African government effect for people with disabilities.
- 6 The Black Consciousness Movement which began in the US in the 1960s and was jettisoned to prominence by human rights activist Steve Biko in SA, had as an underpinning value that beauty was also in black in a highly racially charged and separatist apartheid environment.
- 7 Agulhas Theatre Works is based in Johannesburg and is led by pioneering artist and award-winning choreographer Gladys Agulhas. Their unapologetic approach to integrated arts has been strongly influenced by UK dance pioneer Adam Benjamin of Candoco.
- 8 On 1 December 1955 Rosa Parks a black/ African American woman in the United States of America's deep South acted in defiance of her order to sit at the back of the bus sparking the Montgomery bus boycott. The event galvanized much support for the work of human rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. and jettisoned the fight for freedom and human dignity for all Americans black and white.
- 9 LeftfeetFirst Dance Theatre is a contemporary dance based company of young people with disabilities which is located at the special needs – Open Air School, in Durban KwaZulu-Natal, since 2001. The group's artistic leader and choreographer Gerard M. Samuel has pioneered several integrated and disability arts programmes most notably 'Who says , The Ugly Duckling?' in collaboration with educationalist Lene Bang-Larsen of Klubvest, Albertslund Denmark.
- 10 Samuel G. (2002b) MA thesis contends in part for the recognition of disability as a cultural formation in and of itself and an intersection with multicultural contemporary dance practices in KwaZulu-Natal.

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