**(In)visible Difference**

As part of the 3 year AHRC-funded project - Invisible Difference: Dance, Disability and Law, we have been exploring the cultural value of dance made by professional disabled dance artists and finding out what issues they are confronted with when considering authorship and ownership of their work. The artists involved have been very generous in giving us their time and allowing us to be part of their making process.

One focus of the research has been to investigate why disabled dance is missing from our cultural heritage and why it is nearly absent from mainstream contemporary dance. We conducted a form of ‘discourse analysis’ where we gathered comments made by audience members on Youtube videos, blogs, websites and within reviews written by critics. Based on our findings, we claim that a critical discourse/language is missing, and without we are unable to speak and write about disabled dance. Audience members seem inhibited in their response to disabled dance and perhaps fear putting forward an honest critique of the work. However, our research findings suggest that there is a lack of education and understanding around disability in dance performance. Audiences’ comments reveal a lack of critical engagement with the dance and a reluctance to focus on the body as an expressive mode of communication.

Dance made by professional disabled dance artists needs to be taken seriously. Artists tell us that they want their work reviewed as an art form. There is a perception that the work is not of the same ‘standard’ as the non-disabled dancer. The work of professional independent artists such as Caroline Bowditch, Claire Cunningham and Marc Brew (and others) deserve to be platformed on the main stages. Venues and large companies have a key role to play here in educating audiences and changing attitudes by programming diverse work with an emphasis on excellence.

When companies decide to focus on dance and disability, it is often considered as a specific ‘project’, which means that a limited time is given to any work carried out. Chris Abbott has recently written an article in the *Guardian* newspaper and suggests that we move beyond this and that “accessibility should be part of everyday practice and not just a special event”. His call is persuasive; accessibility should be a compulsory part of programming and performance planning.

What does that mean for audiences? The body of a dancer is different to the next and this is what we need to ‘re-educate’ dance audiences. For a long time, the aesthetics of dance have been prescribed by traditional and codified techniques, but this now feels antiquated. Dance needs to embrace difference. We need to challenge these archaic patterns and let more robust ones emerge.

Please check our website: [www.invisibledifference.org.uk](http://www.invisibledifference.org.uk) and join our mailing list!

Reference

Abbot, C. (2014) [Accessed on 03/07/14] at http://www.theguardian.com/culture-professionals-network/culture-professionals-blog/2014/jun/26/accessibility-arts-practice-performance-ballet