Response to Arts Council report – The Value of Arts and Culture to People and Society

The Invisible Difference: Dance, Disability and Law project is an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project that is exploring the issues surrounding professional disabled choreographers and ownership and authorship of their work. The project commenced in January 2013 for a three year period. Members of the team include Professor Sarah Whatley, Coventry University; Professor Charlotte Waelde, University of Exeter; Dr Abbe Brown, University of Aberdeen; Dr Shawn Harmon, University of Edinburgh; Dr Karen Wood and Hannah Donaldson, research assistants; Mathilde Pavis and Kate Marsh, Doctoral candidates. This research carried out for the project includes investigating the cultural value placed on works created and performed by dancers with disabilities, and how audiences’ perceptions affect the works and their position within the mainstream contemporary dance world. What follows is evidenced in the findings we have collated so far.

We have spent time over the past year interviewing, working with and observing three artists: Marc Brew, Claire Cunningham and Caroline Bowditch. We also have strong links with Candoco dance company and other independent disabled dancers. From our research to date, it seems that access to funding for this artform and these artists does depend on geographical location. Creative Scotland has a strategy for the support of disability art through which they (the funders and those funded) are able to take risks. By contrast the Arts Council England seems not to have such a clear strategy. Two of the artists we are collaborating with previously lived in England. All three now live in Scotland. The latest Arts Council review suggests that part of the value of arts and culture depends on how talent and innovation is developed in England. Perhaps, with a clear strategy on talent development, these and other artists would be encouraged to create work and tour their performances in England which would bring social and educational benefits to communities throughout the country.

The project research shows that these artists make high quality work that should be part of our cultural heritage. However, at present, the works of these artists are missing from this. Part of our research is exploring the lack of critical discourse that surrounds professional disabled dance and we will be investigating audiences’ perceptions of work produced by disabled artists. If audiences were more widely exposed to the work and educated on attitudes and language used to describe it, these high quality works would be better placed to enter our cultural heritage and have a rightful place next to work recognized in the mainstream contemporary dance world.

In the Arts Council review, one of the main objectives is to assess the circumstances in which value for arts and culture is experienced. This report does not identify dance by and for disabled artists specifically and perhaps our robust research can contribute to the inclusion of this work within the review. Our research methods and project publications can be found here: <http://invisibledifference.org.uk/research/overview/>.

To understand the impact of arts and culture on society, the review concludes with a need to understand and deliver the requirements of artists in England. To do this, the review needs to produce a strategy that will better support the work of disabled artists. There are some excellent examples of disability arts strategies from around the world. Australia is one: <http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/about_us/strategies-policies/cultural_engagement_framework/disability>

Closer to home, we would applaud the public funding of Disability Arts Cymru. In England, the response to disability arts seems piecemeal. A joined up approach would enable disability arts in general, and for our project, disability dance, to take their rightful place within our cultural heritage from which they are currently conspicuously absent. It would also contribute to enabling the UK to meet its obligations under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006 most notably those relating to access to and participation in our cultural life.

Partnerships with higher education institutions are one of the key aims in the review to ‘better inform and support the sector in meeting our key strategic goals’. In addition, these partnerships will contribute to cultural policy changes. Our research is aligned to these requirements and Arts Council England would be welcome to further discuss a partnership with the project and the higher education institutions involved.