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Stepping back: Reflecting on accessibility in integrated dance improvisation
Recul : Réflexion sur l'accessibilité de la danse improvisation intégrée

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Abstract

Finding more accessible ways to train, create, perform and work is a major concern of researchers and practitioners (Ajula & Redding, 2013, 2014) of integrated and disability dance. In the spring of 2017 eight dancer/researchers from CRIPSiE, an integrated, disability and crip dance company located in Edmonton, came together to investigate their practices of timing through a participatory performance creation process. Participatory performance creation values researcher reflexivity (Heron & Reason, 1997). In this paper I reflect on the way that collaboratively building an improvisation score, a series of tasks and prompts that the dancer/researchers responded to (Gere, 2003), created inaccessibility for one of the dancers/researchers, Robert. At the time I assumed that improvisation itself was inaccessible. Upon reflecting I realized that the improvisation was accessible and that Robert was improvising in ways valued by both the integrated improvisation literature and the other dancers/researchers.

Résumé

Trouver des moyens plus accessibles de s'entraîner, de créer, de performer et de travailler est une préoccupation majeure pour les chercheur·es et praticien·nes (Ajula & Redding, 2013, 2014) en danse intégrée ainsi que pour personnes handicapées. Au printemps 2017, huit danseur·ses/chercheur·es de CRIPSiE, une compagnie de danse intégrée de personnes handicapées et *crips* située à Edmonton, se sont réuni·es pour étudier leurs pratiques du synchronisme à travers un processus participatif de création-performance. La création-performance participative valorise la réflexivité des chercheur·es (Heron & Reason, 1997). Dans cet article, je réfléchis à la manière dont la construction collaborative d'une partition d'improvisation, une série de tâches et d'invites auxquelles les danseur·ses/chercheur·es ont répondu (Gere, 2003), a créé une inaccessibilité pour Robert, l'un des danseur·ses/chercheur·es. À l'époque, j'ai supposé que l'improvisation elle-même était inaccessible. Après réflexion, j'ai compris que l'improvisation était accessible et que l'improvisation de Robert avait de la valeur tant au regard de la littérature sur l'improvisation intégrée que pour les autres danseur·ses/chercheur·es.

Key Words: disability dance; memory; improvisation; access; reflexivity

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Introduction

The more I dance, the less I know. This is a source of joy for me. Working in integrated and disability dance¹, which brings together diverse bodies and minds to train, create, perform and play, forces me to constantly recognize and rethink my assumptions. When I first began dancing in integrated and disability spaces I assumed, like many researchers (Cooper Albright, 1997; Pallant, 2006), that improvisation was the most accessible form of Western concert dance. Improvisation, in the context of normative Western concert dance is “non-choreographed, spontaneous dancing” (DeSpain, 2003, p. 37). Choreographed dance is where movement patterns and their timing are pre-determined, learned by dancers and rehearsed. I assumed improvisation was more accessible because it does not require dancers to learn specific movements and timings that may be impossible, painful or fatiguing for their bodies and minds. While improvisation may not require dancers to move in particular ways, practitioners of integrated improvisation often value training for particular capacities, including dancers making clear choices in relationship to the other dancers and developing their facility to respond to the unexpected (Benjamin, 2002; Alessi, 2017).

During the course of my dissertation research investigating practices of timing in integrated dance through participatory performance creation, I was forced to revisit my

¹ In this paper I use the language most commonly use by the dancers/researchers in this study. The dancers/researchers understood disability in multiple ways and used many different words to describe their experiences, including *crip* which troubles the division of people into disabled and nondisabled (McRuer, 2006). The most commonly utilized language, however, was *disabled* and *nondisabled*, reflecting a social model of disability. In the social model of disability there is a distinction between impairment and disability. Impairment is bodily or mental difference and diversity; disability is the narrowing of opportunity and experiences created by inaccessible infrastructure, policies and attitudes (Shakespeare, 2006). *Integrated dance* refers to dance that brings together disabled and nondisabled people to create, train and perform (Cooper Albright, 1997) and *disability dance* refers to dance created by disabled people to express their disability identity (Descottignies, 2015).

assumption that improvisation was more accessible than choreographed movement. During the rehearsal/research² process I realized that using improvisation scores was a significant barrier to the involvement of one of the dancers/researchers, Robert. Improvisation scores provide a series of constraints or movement prompts to which dancers create individualized responses (Keefe, 2003). This assumes dancers have the capacity to remember a series of tasks or prompts. This inaccessibility was compounded by the collaborative way we built the score. When I reviewed the video from these rehearsals, however, I realized Robert was clearly supporting the choices the other dancers/researchers were making in the improvisation and the other dancers/researchers were responding to his choices. Both these actions are valued by practitioners of integrated improvisation.

I see this paper, and the way it traces my shifting thinking, as part of the ongoing work of reflexivity that is demanded of me as a teacher, dancer, choreographer and now, researcher in the field of integrated and disability dance. Disability and integrated dance practices demand that I be particularly attentive to inaccessibility and constantly seek ways to create more accessible dance practices.

In this paper I examine the literature on the accessibility of training for disabled dancers, including improvisation in normative and integrated contexts, and integrated and disability dance in Canada. I provide an overview of CRIPSiE, the integrated and disability dance company that I and the dancers/researchers worked with, the participatory performance creation methodology that we employed and the specifics of how the study unfolded. Then I examine my thoughts about the inaccessibility of improvisation scores during the rehearsal/research process, including

² Throughout the text I use rehearsal/research process and dancer/researcher to reflect the dual nature of participatory performance creation where rehearsal and artistic creation are interwoven with research.

the way that the collaborative design of the improvisation score created barriers to involvement for Robert. Finally, I critically reflect on my assumptions about those barriers using the literature on integrated improvisation (Alessi, 2017; Benjamin, 2002; Østern, 2009) to question my assumptions during the rehearsal/research process.

Dance, Accessibility and Improvisation

Accessibility is a major consideration in disability and integrated performing arts (Jacobson & McMurchy, 2010). Access, however, is a contested, historically determined term that often considers particular bodies and minds and not others (Hamraie, 2017). Grappling with (in)accessibility often means determining who is excluded from particular spaces/events, activities, or communities, considering the barriers that exist to entry or involvement, and then imagining things otherwise.

Access and barrier removal is a consideration in the literature on disability and integrated dance training and performance. Ajula and Redding (2013) map the barriers experienced by emerging disabled dancers engaged in vocational training. The barriers include finances, transportation, teachers' lack of knowledge, and negative attitudes towards disabled people dancing. Ajula and Redding (2014) then interview expert disabled teachers, choreographers and dancers to discover their strategies for creating access to vocational training for disabled dancers. Researchers also investigate accessible pedagogical practices in integrated vocational dance training (Band, Lindsey, Neelands & Freakley, 2011; Whatley, 2007). Whatley (2007) asks disabled and non-disabled students about their experiences of technique class and develops a series of recommendations around the role of learning support assistants, the technique class structure, and class content, including offering examples of inclusive exercises. Through an

ethnography of three vocational theatre and dance training programs that integrated disabled students Band, Lindsey, Neelands & Freakley (2011) determine that putting supports in place from the start of the program and building repetition into classes are two of the ways to support disabled students. Shifting dance teachers' thinking from a medical to a social model of disability is vital to enabling not just new ways of moving and teaching, but also new ways of viewing dance (Kuppers, 2000). Access and accommodation are also reoccurring themes in articles by disabled artists (Alick, 2019; Nelson & Maag, 2019) and arts professionals (Kelly & Poret, 2019) exploring their experiences in the performing arts and how disability shapes those experiences. All these researchers and practitioners consider accessibility by identifying barriers to participation and they sometimes suggest how to remove those barriers.

This attention to accessibility sometimes appears in the dance studies literature on improvisation (Banes, 2003; Cooper Albright, 2003; Pallant, 2006). In the 1960s and 1970s, during the rise of post-modern dance, white dance artists appropriated African American aesthetics and practices, along with Asian philosophies, particularly Zen Buddhism, to develop Western dance practices of improvisation (Foster, 2002a). Post-modern dance valued untrained bodies performing everyday movement, particularly walking, as the basis for dance and moved away from narrative choreography to abstract, procedure and task-based choreography (Foster, 2002b). This focus on everyday movement and untrained bodies was intended to make dance accessible to dancers who may not have had access to traditional Western concert dance training or whose bodies and minds existed in ways not compatible with the hyper-able ideals of normative Western concert dance forms (Banes, 2003; Cooper Albright, 1997; Foster, 2003). There are many improvisation practitioners and approaches to improvisation, but often practitioners value being present in the improvisation, learning to move in non-habitual ways,

and creating relationships (Buckwalter, 2010). The development of improvisation also led to the development of contact improvisation, which emphasizes relationships between participants particularly through the use of touch and shared weight (Novak, 1990). Two of the first dancers to develop integrated improvisation techniques, Benjamin (2002) and Alessi (2017), were practitioners of contact improvisation, although both note that touch and weight can be inaccessible to some people.

Beyond accessibility, other values of integrated dance improvisation appear in the writing of a variety of researchers and practitioners. For these researchers (Østern, 2009) and practitioners (Alessi, 2017; Benjamin, 2002) integrated improvisation is a way of cultivating dancers' responsiveness to the unknown, which involves learning to plan as little as possible. This responsiveness is often framed as creative problem-solving and building relationships through making clear movement choices in response to the other dancers in the improvisation and any tasks, constraints or scores shaping the improvisation. I have not been able to find literature that addresses the barriers that may be created by assumptions about how dancers remember improvisation scores. Theatre scholars have examined work made with (Basting, 2013; Gray, 2019) and performed by (Henderson, 2019) artists whose memory works in ways outside those deemed 'normal' by medicine and society. These considerations, however, do not seem to have come into discussions of integrated and disability dance.

Canadian disability and integrated dance practitioners have taken a wide variety of approaches to working with improvisation and choreographed movement. Gorman (2018) describes creating choreographed work that engaged with war, taking anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist stances. Momo Dance Theatre's practice was based in improvisation for much of their history, with Pamela Boyd, the former artistic director, describing their productions as

“scored rather than choreographed” (quoted in Johnson, 2008). Irving and Giles (2011) conduct an ethnography of a Canadian integrated dance company shifting from primarily working with improvisation to choreographed movement and the accompanying challenges, particularly the repetition required to memorize movement (Irving, 2011). McAskill (2019) documents students with *Les Muses*, a training program for disabled artists in Montreal, exploring improvisation prompts. Beyond these accounts, there are many artists and companies whose approach to dance has not yet been recorded including Frank Hull, *All Bodies Dance*, and the *Cyborg Circus Project*. Examining the diverse improvisation practices of integrated and disability dance artists is necessary to determine if improvisation is, as Cooper Albright (2003) suggests, particularly well-suited to “dancing that can integrate multiple abilities” (p. 210).

Study Context

At the time of this research CRIPSiE was an integrated, disability and crip dance company located in Edmonton. The company aimed to “challenge dominant stories of disability and other forms of oppression, through high-quality crip and mad performance art, video art, and public education and outreach programs” (‘CRIPSiE’, n.d.). The company generally worked with twenty to thirty dancers a year. These artists variously identified as disabled, Mad, seniors, hard of hearing, people of colour, Metis and queer (Acton, Chodan & Peers, 2016). The eight dancers/researchers, including myself, were all members of CRIPSiE. The dancers/researchers reflected the composition of CRIPSiE as two identified as seniors, one as hard of hearing, four as disabled, three as queer, and one as a person of colour. All had previous experience with integrated and disability dance. As the dancers/researchers were experienced in reflecting on

their lived experience, and critiquing broader social patterns through their art, a participatory performance creation process was an ideal way to investigate our practices of timing.

Methodology and Method

Participatory performance creation is a methodology that brings together performance ethnography and participatory action research (PAR). Performance ethnography is a form of arts-based research, which acknowledges “aesthetic knowing” (Leavy, 2018, p. 5) as one of the ways human beings make sense of their world. Arts-based researchers (Conrad & Beck, 2016) also value reflexivity and accountability to the people and communities involved in research. Performance ethnography is “a way of collaboratively engaging the meanings of experience” (Denzin, 2003, p. 31) that utilizes performance, and the creation of performance, to develop new knowledge. Scholars often emphasize the embodied nature of performance ethnography (Conquergood, 2013; Denzin, 2003; Hamera, 2011). This emphasis is intended to disrupt the assumption that language is the default medium of knowledge generation and transmission, and to value knowledge generated and communicated through physical embodiment, making it ideally suited to a disability and integrated dance community.

PAR values ethical community relations (McIntyre, 2008), suggesting that the needs of the community of study be centered in the research. This means that the research issue or question should come from within the community, and the community should be involved in shaping the study, often resulting in overlapping and multiple phases of research and action (Heron & Reason, 1997). Participatory performance creation draws together performance ethnography’s focus on embodied meaning making through creating performance and PAR’s emphasis on community accountability and overlapping phases of action and research.

Before embarking on this research, I informally consulted with members of CRIPSiE to determine if there was shared interest in the research issue I was interested in - examining our practices of timing. I had conversations with five different community members, two of whom joined the rehearsal/research process. All five community members agreed that practices of timing were an area that CRIPSiE had not critically engaged with, and therefore should be a subject of study. This study passed the University of Alberta's research ethics review in early 2017 and CRIPSiE's own internal research ethics review in March 2017. We began to rehearse in early April. During the first two rehearsals we reviewed the informed consent form, collaboratively built the rehearsal schedule and developed a conflict resolution process that we could follow if there were any tensions. Part of our review of informed consent was a discussion around anonymity and pseudonyms. Given the size of the integrated and disability dance community in Canada it was unlikely that anonymity was possible. All of the dancers/researchers opted to be referred to by their first names.

Both arts-based research and PAR are also deeply concerned with challenging the unequal power dynamics inherent to many research processes (Conrad & Beck, 2016; Heron & Reason, 1997). Researchers using PAR (McIntyre, 2008) and arts-based research (Conrad & Beck, 2016) suggested that to address these power dynamics researchers should engage in reflexivity. Throughout the research process I reflected on my position as researcher, choreographer and, at the time, Co-Artistic Director. I made it clear in recruitment and at the first rehearsal that participation or non-participation in this process would have no effect on the dancer/researchers' future involvement in CRIPSiE. I also wanted to mitigate these power dynamics by ensuring the dancers/researchers were in charge of shaping the rehearsal/research process. Each rehearsal we collaboratively determined both the rehearsal structure and the

artistic content. Practically, this involved me identifying and recording questions, areas of interest, or suggestions for movement exercises that came up in rehearsals, then offering these options to the dancers/researchers at the start of each rehearsal. The dancers/researchers would then discuss and decide what they wanted to prioritize that day.

We met and rehearsed for two to three hours at a time, usually one or two times a week, for a total of thirty hours between April and June 2017. I collected data by audio recording our rehearsals, writing field notes after each rehearsal, video recording segments of movement and runs of the improvisation score we developed, and sending out a concluding email interview. The dancers/researchers also conducted a first level of analysis by discussing exercises and choreography in rehearsals. I offered to involve any of the dancers/researchers who were interested in more traditional analysis. No one was interested. I conducted the analysis through Johnston's (2004) method of cultural analysis, which involved re-reading the transcripts, email interviews, field notes and re-watching rehearsal videos multiple times looking for connections within these texts and with broader social, cultural and political patterns. While the dancers/researchers were not interested in participating in analysis, they have reviewed all research outputs from this process including conference papers, talks, articles and my dissertation. Each time I sent a draft for review I provided a short plain language summary in the text of the email. In the case of my dissertation I also attached a single page plain language summary of the document.

In addition, I met with Robert twice, once to talk him through this article and once to talk him through the dissertation. I wanted to ensure he understood both documents, and to get his consent and input into how he was represented. Each time we met Robert was supportive,

although slightly irritated that I asked him several times – rephrasing to check for understanding – if he was okay with me describing how his memory worked.

That the dancers/researchers directed the rehearsal/research process, and continue to have the option to provide significant input into the research outputs is consistent with the ethical considerations of participatory performance creation. It was also artistically significant to the dancers/researchers. At the end of the rehearsal/research process, when we were reflecting on and evaluating the process, the dancers/researchers were clear that for many of them, working in this collaborative style where they developed their own movement and determined the structure of the final improvisation was deeply meaningful and an important part of the process. While we made other discoveries, one of the things many of the dancers/researchers learned was that they preferred a collaborative creation process, as opposed to other processes that they had experienced where the choreographer had provided significant movement content to be learned and was solely responsible for the artistic choices that shaped the dance piece.

Improvisation, Memory and Participatory Process

Despite the dancers/researchers' positive feedback the rehearsal/research process was not without its challenges. From the beginning of the rehearsal/research process the dancers/researchers were very invested in exploring improvisation. The dancers/researchers wanted to feel connected to their bodies and to each other when they danced. Sara said when building the improvisation score, "So my preference is not be, I'm going to rescue three people and they're going to be these people each time. I really like the organic feel". In this section of the improvisation score, which involved dancers/researchers rescuing each other from an imaginary black hole, Sara did not want to decide beforehand who would be rescued or how

many times she would rescue someone. She wanted to make those decisions in the improvisation. For Sara and the other dancers/researchers, working with structured improvisation as opposed to set choreography, where all the movement is predetermined, was about feeling “organic”, which in the context of our rehearsal/research process meant the dancers/researchers feeling connected to their bodies and not “in their heads” or worried about making the movement perfect.

The dancers/researchers were also invested in improvisation because they believed, like I did, that improvisation was a more accessible form of dance than set choreography. At the rehearsal before we began developing the final score, I asked the dancers/researchers if an improvisation score was preferable to developing set movement based on what we had so far explored and developed. The group indicated that they preferred an improvisation score, citing how “cool” the experience of reacting and responding to each other was. They also noted that improvisation was an accessible way to dance. Robert explicitly told me that for him, improvisation was more accessible because of his short-term memory capacity. He explained: “Like once I catch on and see things you know then I can do things. But if someone lays eight or nine rules on me – do this, don’t do that, stop over there at two o’clock, over there at two ten, I’ll get confused. And then I get stressed.”

Working with improvisation meant that the requirement for the dancers/researchers to remember set choreography was removed, making the experience of dancing more accessible to everyone, and in particular Robert. Or so we assumed. The moment when I realized the inaccessibility of improvisation and of the participatory process we were engaged in was in the shift from less structured improvisation from a single prompt or task to multi-prompt or task improvisation score. From the beginning of the rehearsal/research process we had employed

improvisation. These improvisations, however, were often solo improvisations meaning that the dancers/researchers explored movement prompts without engaging with each other. The prompts or tasks were very simple (e.g. explore connecting and disconnecting) rather than requiring them to manage interactions with other dancers/researchers or transitions between multiple prompts or tasks. Benjamin (2002) notes that this shift from very open improvisation to refining the movement or the score is typical of choreographic processes. In our process, rather than refining improvised material into set choreography, we refined an improvisation score, exploring and adding more structure – more tasks, more prompts and some short set movement phrases – as we developed it.

When we started building the improvisation score we were inspired by the way time slows near a black hole. This seemed to be an ideal metaphor to convey the relativity of time. We started to design the improvisation score by asking, could we portray how time slows as we near a black hole? Could we move slower closer to the black hole and faster further away from it? We began by the dancers/researchers experimenting with orbiting around Alexis, who represented our black hole, and slowly curving and slowing their movements until they came to stillness, as if caught in an event horizon. During this improvisation Robert would sometimes stop and look around at the other dancers/researchers. At one point he broke from the pathway of the orbits that the dancers/researchers were tracing around Alexis and walked in small circles. None of these choices were possibilities within the improvisation score that emphasized continually orbiting around Alexis. He looked serious, as if concentrating hard.

After each time we tried the improvisation we reflected on what we experienced, prompting changes to the improvisation. These changes imposed more structure on the improvisation, limiting the interpretations of the improvisational prompts and adding new

elements. We would then try out the new version of the score. This cycle would repeat with us improvising, discussing and changing. We added an entrance where the dancers/researchers slowly entered and performed a short choreographed sequence that we had developed from an improvisation exploring expanding and contracting. Then a transition took the dancers/researchers into the orbiting improvisation that we had initially developed. To these orbits the dancers/researchers added that occasionally a dancer/researcher would be drawn in towards Alexis and trapped in the event horizon. Countering the laws of physics, other dancers/researchers could free the caught dancers/researchers, using one of two movements we developed for escaping the black hole. The improvisation score ended when all the dancers/researchers were clustered around Alexis, caught in her gravity. Robert seemed to be confused by the improvisation score while doing it. As we worked through this process Robert did not remember the initial score and the changes we made to the score as it evolved. I noticed that he often stopped in the middle of dancing the score to look around to see what the other dancers/researchers were doing. When he stopped, he looked worried.

The process of developing the improvisation score also proved inaccessible to him. During our discussions, the other dancers/researchers eagerly contributed ideas about how to alter the improvisation score, but Robert's comments were often limited to identifying the moments he liked in the improvisation. These reflections were important, since they let us know what movements and sections to keep, but Robert was not as involved as the other dancers/researchers in shaping the structure of the improvisation score. We built a beautiful dance in a way that was deeply meaningful to most of the dancers/researchers, that expressed their creative voices, and that was inaccessible to Robert. There was a conflict between the way many of the dancers/researchers found meaning through improvisation, the collaborative

rehearsal/research process, and the barriers that process created for Robert. Scored improvisation was inaccessible to Robert, creating confusion and possibly frustration for him, and the process of creating the improvisation score was similarly inaccessible.

In retrospect, once the inaccessibility of collectively building the improvisation score became clear to me, I should have discussed this issue with the dancers/researchers and come to a collective decision about how to proceed. We sometimes opted to deliberately explore practices of timing, like unison movement, that seemed inaccessible. Those decisions, however, were made by the dancers/researchers after much discussion. Instead of relying on the collective wisdom, and creative problem solving capacity of the dancers/researchers, I made the inaccessibility of improvisation and building the improvisation score my own, individual, problem.

Reconsidering Improvisation

During the rehearsal/research process I assumed using improvisation scores was the problem and spent a lot of time after rehearsal struggling to think of ways I could support Robert recalling the score. At that moment I assumed that for Robert, accessing the score meant remembering the score. I still believe the barriers to Robert's involvement in the creation of the improvisation score were major errors on my part in managing and facilitating the rehearsal/research process. Now, however, I believe my assumptions about what access would look like for Robert in the context of an improvisation was wrong. When I reviewed the footage of our runs in those two rehearsals I saw that in the moments Robert forgot the score he consistently supported the movement choices of the other dancers/researchers. Revisiting these moments as I immersed myself in the literature on integrated dance improvisation (Alessi, 2017;

Benjamin, 2002) and considering the dancers/researchers' own understandings of improvisation, I can now see Robert made choices that were consistent with the values of integrated dance improvisation. Further, these unexpected choices meant that the other dancers/researchers practiced their own improvisation skills, by being present and responsive to Robert's choices.

When I examined the video footage of May 22nd 2017, the first rehearsal where we were doing full runs of the final score, I noted a number of moments where Robert stopped, not knowing what to do next. In the beginning of the score, after entering, dancers/researchers were supposed to perform a series of set movements. While we had rehearsed the movement in unison, they were now performed in canon, with each dancer/researcher beginning the sequence after they had entered and crossed to their starting position.

The dancers/researchers were all doing different movements so Robert did not have a visual cue, and therefore did not start the sequence at the beginning. He started the sequence with the movement he remembered best— the one he created. He performed the next two movements in the sequence, and then stopped, looking around. His gaze fell on Alexis, who was doing a series of floating and spiraling movements that would move her into position to be the black hole. The very first movement Alexis performed looked similar to the floating roll that was part of this set sequence of movements. Robert copied this movement, putting himself in Alexis' path of travel. She responded, curving around him, continuing to travel through the space.

The dancers/researchers began the transition from the unison movement sequence to the section we had developed about the black hole by rocking or moving in tight circular movements on the spot. Robert, after rolling into Alexis' path stopped on his stomach. He looked from dancer/researcher to dancer/researcher, taking in the whole space, and then started rocking from side to side on his stomach. The dancers/researchers moved into orbiting around Alexis. In this

improvisation the dancers/researchers circled the perimeter of the space at least once, and usually several times, before being drawn into the black hole. Robert got to his feet and walked to a corner. He stayed there, walking in small loops, as the rest of the dancers/researchers circled the perimeter of the room. Iris curved into the black hole, and Robert followed her. Iris made a small circular motion with her hands, indicating that she should be freed from the black hole by another dancer/researcher. Robert moved directly to try to free her.

Rather than Robert placing his hand on her head, however, where we had practiced the freeing movement starting, he placed his hand on Iris's back. Having been given the wrong movement to free her, Iris did nothing. Robert and Iris stayed still, frozen together in the event horizon. Eventually Sara came and freed Iris. Robert followed Iris away from Alexis and the black hole, but rather than circle or orbit the rehearsal space like the rest of the dancers/researchers Robert decided to immediately head back to free Sara. When he came to free Sara from the black hole, Sara was making a gesture that was unique to her, and was never used again after that particular rehearsal. She slowly moved her circling fingers from her right hip, up to her left shoulder and back again. As her fingers came up to her left shoulder her weight shifted to her left foot and her right foot lifted off the floor. None of the other dancers/researchers used this, but Robert repeated it. He came behind her and moved his circling fingers in a parallel pathway to those of Sara. Their tempo increased and after a few shifts of weight with Robert, Sara broke free. Shortly after, the dancers/researchers began to all get stuck in the event horizon of the black hole and I ended the run.

I knew Robert had forgotten what to do in all of these moments because he paused and looked around before copying another dancer/researcher's movement or made choices that were outside the score. In the rehearsal hall, I assumed these choices indicated that something was

wrong – that the improvisation score was inaccessible to Robert. Later, reviewing the video footage, I realized that in the moments where he forgot the score, Robert consistently chose movement that would put him into a clear relationship with other dancers/researchers, usually through copying the movement of the other dancers/researchers. At the beginning of the piece, when he forgot the unison movement sequence he mimicked Alexis’ movement. When the other dancers/researchers began to rock, Robert also copied them. When the other dancers/researchers began to rescue each other from the gravity of the black hole, Robert did this too, even if the ways he did this were outside of the choices the dancers/researchers had given themselves in the improvisation score.

Western concert dance improvisation practitioners value making clear choices in relation to the choices of other dancers (Benjamin, 2002; Gere, 2003). The choice should either support the group, often by mirroring it or taking up its quality, or counter the choices of the other dancers (Alessi, 2017). For example, if one dancer in the improvisation has established a pattern of doing soft, flowing side-to-side hand movements on the spot, another dancer in the improvisation might support them by coming beside the original dancer, mimicking their movements. This establishes the same type of movement in the same space. The second dancer might also do this same movement in a different space, or may kneel, using the same movement at a different level. Or they may transpose the movement into another body part, but keep the same movement quality. These choices support the movement choice of the original dancer. Or, if most of the group is engaged in this soft, flowing, stationary movement, a dancer may choose to counter it by moving with a staccato quality or moving through the space, countering an aspect of the movement that has been established. The choices of a dancer in an improvisation

are ideally made in relationship to the group and in relationship to the movement of the group (Alessi, 2017).

This understanding of supporting and contrasting choices in improvisation was familiar to the dancers/researchers. Sara explicitly referenced this when she asked for a particular order to the entrance of the final improvisation score. During this entrance the dancers/researchers breathed into a looper pedal, a device that records and repeats sound, one by one, establishing the initial soundscape of the improvisation. She said, “So for me, I really don’t want to go first because I have the fast breaths and I want them to contrast with the slow breaths”. Sara wanted Alexis and Iris’s longer slow breaths to go first to establish a pattern that would allow her to break that pattern and provide contrast. Within dance improvisation, including integrated improvisation, training often aims to improve dancers’ decision-making capacity to enable them to make clear choices that relate to the rest of the group and the improvisation through support or contrast (Alessi, 2017; Benjamin, 2002).

In all of the examples I give, Robert always made a clear decision to support the choices of the other dancers/researchers, rather than contrast them. Had I been able to let go of my assumption that the moments when Robert forget the score indicated inaccessibility I would have recognized this. Robert’s choices within the improvisation were strong, clear choices, consistent with the way the dancers/researchers understood good improvisation.

The other dancers/researchers were also developing their own improvisation skills by staying in the improvisation and responding to Robert. They did not stop the improvisation when Robert responded in ways that we had decided were outside the improvisation score. Benjamin (2002) suggests, “Improvisation teaches us on a daily basis to readjust our perceptions of occurrences that we might ordinarily regard as mistakes or distractions” (p. 49). The

dancers/researchers did not treat Robert's choices as mistakes. Instead, they chose to respond to Robert's choices in ways that kept the improvisation going. Alexis moved around him when he moved into her path of travel. Sara recognized that Robert duplicating her unique movement was an attempt to free her from the gravity of the black hole, and returned to orbiting the space. The dancers/researchers could have regarded Robert's choices that were outside the improvisation score that we had defined as mistakes. Instead they chose to stay engaged in the improvisation, practicing their capacity to respond to the unknown.

The dancers/researchers' continued engagement with Robert and with the score also created access to the score for Robert. Robert knew how he understood and accessed movement. When we discussed the choice between improvisation and set movement he said, "Once I catch on and see things you know then I can do things". Seeing movement allowed Robert to access movement. When he was improvising he would look around to see what the other dancers/researchers were doing. Seeing the other dancers/researchers dancing the improvisation score gave Robert access to the score.

While I may have failed to create a fully accessible rehearsal/research process I now understand that Robert and the other dancers/researchers' choices exemplified the values of integrated Western concert dance improvisation through the way the dancers/researchers stayed in the improvisation, making clear movement choices in relation to each other.

Conclusion

I understand ongoing reflexivity and examination of my practice as an artist and researcher as necessary to working in disability and integrated dance context. I must, however, be reflexive not just about inaccessibility, but what access is within the contexts I work in. In this

case, I initially believed that using an improvisation score created barriers to Robert's full participation. When I reviewed the footage from the rehearsals when we built the improvisation score I realized that while Robert did not fully participate in building the improvisation score, he did fully participate in dancing the improvisation score. Through the choices of the other dancers/researchers he had full access to the score and was consistently making clear choices in relation to that, consistent with the values of integrated improvisation. Kupperts (2000) wrote, "Accessibility does not only refer to impairment-specific alterations to the 'normal' performance encounter, but to providing conceptual space for a 'stepping back' to see our cultural framings" (p. 129). I needed to step back, be reflexive, not just about potential inaccessibility but about what access was. I needed to reframe what access was for Robert within integrated improvisation in order to value the ways he and the other dancers/researchers danced together.

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