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Raising the Bar in Disability Arts

Hausser la barre dans les arts du handicap

Menka Nagrani

Bio

Menka Nagrani is an interdisciplinary artist, theatre director, and choreographer. She founded Les Productions des pieds des mains in 2004, an inclusive dance and theatre company. She has since created several socially engaged dance and theatre productions and short films that have been acclaimed worldwide. Menka Nagrani has received many awards for her work, including a *Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec* award for her artistic achievements in 2012 and was recently appointed Member of the Order of Canada. A leader in forming and including disabled artists in professional work, Menka is often invited to present at conferences and lead workshops in Canada and in Europe.

Abstract

This article discusses my pedagogical approach towards teaching dance, movement, and theatre to artists with cognitive disabilities. I have developed a training method for artists participating in my classes and productions that invites individual creative exploration and professional rigour. My inclusive dance-theatre company, Les Productions des pieds des mains, creates productions that are presented on professional artistic platforms and not limited to the context of disabled art presentations. Our productions are regularly subject to the same selection criteria as would be a non-inclusive company. With this in mind, I aim for excellence. I work towards creating high quality shows while helping artists with a disability push past their perceived limits and surpass themselves. In this article I will share my findings and strategies, perfected throughout my many years of experimentation, explaining how to reach a high-level of quality in inclusive productions, as well as how I help artists with a disability reach a level of quality in their performances which allows them to find gainful employment within the artistic domain.

Résumé

Cet article traite de mon approche pédagogique pour enseigner la danse, le mouvement et le théâtre aux artistes ayant des troubles cognitifs. J'ai développé une méthode de formation pour les artistes participant à mes cours et à mes productions qui invite à l'exploration créative individuelle et à la rigueur professionnelle. Ma compagnie de danse-théâtre inclusive, *Les Productions des pieds des mains*, crée des productions qui sont présentées sur des plateformes artistiques professionnelles et qui ne se limitent pas au contexte de présentations artistiques axées sur le handicap. Nos productions sont régulièrement soumises aux mêmes critères de sélection que le serait une troupe non inclusive. Dans cette optique, je vise l'excellence. Je travaille à créer des spectacles de haute qualité tout en aidant les artistes handicapés à dépasser leurs limites perçues et à se dépasser eux-mêmes. Dans cet article, je partagerai mes découvertes et stratégies, perfectionnées au cours de mes nombreuses années d'expérimentation, en expliquant comment

atteindre un haut niveau de qualité dans les productions inclusives, ainsi que comment j'aide les artistes handicapés à atteindre un niveau de qualité dans leurs performances qui leur permet de trouver un emploi rémunéré dans le domaine artistique.

Introduction

For more than 20 years, I have had the privilege to teach dance, movement, and theatre to artists with cognitive disabilities. I have created numerous shows with these artists that have been performed on professional stages locally and internationally. I have developed a training method for artists with cognitive disabilities which invites individual creative exploration and professional rigour. This method has a proven track record of success. As such, I am regularly invited to give workshops and master classes to groups that work with artists with intellectual disabilities (and mixed-ability groups) around Canada, France, and the United Kingdom. I am often struck by the low level of technique on display, and am surprised that the choreographers, teachers, and educators who work with these groups have not developed technical classes for these artists, whose end-goal is to perform on stage in a professional capacity. In recent years, one of my roles has been to initiate different production teams into my teaching and training approach.

In this article, I describe how I work to raise the level of quality in disability art performances through my work as a teacher of artists with disabilities, as well as in my own creative work as director and choreographer of inclusive dance and theatre company Les Productions des pieds des mains.

Forming Artists With Disabilities

One of the main aspects that raises the bar of the performances we put on at Les Productions des pieds des mains is the level of training provided to the artists; a pedagogy which I developed to a large extent at The Muses Centre For Performing Arts, otherwise known as Les

Muses. This Montreal-based centre offers full-time training to people offers full-time training to people with disabilities and special needs who, despite their great talent, do not have access to traditional vocational training schools. Cindy Schwartz, director of the Centre, had the original and visionary idea to set up a school catering specifically to this demographic to equip them for work in the artistic domain. I have been a teacher at Les Muses since the Centre's very beginning in 2000. At that time, Schwartz brought three teachers on board from three different domains: theatre, music, and dance. She entrusted us with the mission of forming students with cognitive disabilities into professional artists and gave us *carte blanche* with regard to the contents of the classes, leaving us to our own devices in determining how best to guide these emerging artists.

Initially, we were all a little skeptical: the idea of readying a group of students with cognitive disabilities for a career in the performing arts seemed somewhat unrealistic. Training professional artists, with or without disabilities, is a challenge in itself. Our students not only presented themselves with disabilities of different kinds, they already had reached their late twenties and had no experience in any artistic discipline. However, I very quickly discovered amazing talent and potential in the students. They showed great spontaneity and an absence of self-censorship combined with intense theatrical interpretations of raw emotions. I needed to find a way to best work with these qualities while teaching them how to follow artistic directions and meet specific criteria.

Having no model to follow, my teaching methods were developed and refined over the years through a process of trial and error, with each new class being a veritable pedagogical exploration. I found it easier to approach the field of dance with the students when linking emotions to exercises pertaining to theatre and bodily movement. This enabled the class to develop a greater control and awareness of the body-in-movement, and in turn allowed us to

move on to actual dance exercises. I forged a diversified dance program by pooling together different contemporary dance techniques, physical theatre techniques, educational kinesiology, ergotherapy, pilates, and a variety of performance and improvisation exercises of my own making. I believe being versatile is essential in teaching artists with disabilities. Each person is unique and so are their needs. Using multiple modes of teaching helps me effectively access and impact each student's optimum learning style.

My pedagogical approach encompasses the instruction of basic dance vocabulary, along with physical training specifically designed to meet my students' physical conditions, such as exercises to stimulate neuromuscular connections. I aim to develop muscle tone, good posture, endurance, bodily awareness, and precision in movement. I attach great importance to the development of the artist's creative skills, to improvisation and to interpretation, and to empowering them to take their place within the creation process. I set out with the idea that producers interested in working with these artists will find ways to build upon their strengths and particularities, just as I do in my productions. I try to give them as many tools as I can so that they may be in a position to meet a director or choreographer's instructions in the best way possible. My goal is that they maintain a level of precision and, above all, that they be present and engaged in everything they perform on stage.

This method of valuing each artist's original movement and encouragement of technical artistic development has been effective in making these artists marketable in professional Quebec-based productions. Our students also regularly get work in television series and even on the big screen, most notably in Louise Archambault's film *Gabrielle*.

Challenges in Forming Professional Disabled Artists

Instilling an awareness of movement and a notion of presence to people who are not given to self-criticism is one of the greatest challenges I face in my training program. On the one hand, the qualities that I admire most in artists with cognitive disabilities are their spontaneity and their readiness to try something new without judgment or the fear of what it will look like. Guiding them towards developing a critical eye regarding their performance, on the other hand, can prove to be rather challenging. I work to develop a critical awareness of their body and how it appears on stage and in film. To reach a certain level of autonomy, this critical sense is imperative to self-correction and self-improvement. It starts with simple exercises like looking at oneself in the mirror and learning to observe and correct a position, and moves on to peer observations and feedback, and learning to analyze one's own performances.

A big part of my job consists of teaching artists-in-training to maintain a professional attitude during rehearsal and in class. We work towards developing appropriate behavior and listening skills, as well as an openness to criticism. This is crucial in preparing them to integrate into the professional environment and work alongside non-disabled professional artists. Another obstacle to overcome is finding a way to impart the drive to disabled artists to transcend their perceived limitations and make them appreciate the benefits of putting physical effort into their training.

For the majority of students starting out at Les Muses, putting physical effort into something is somewhat of a foreign concept and it takes time for the students to acclimatize to the idea. Many students have never done any previous artistic or physical training. Most of them arrive with serious posture issues due to sedentary lifestyles and a lack of bodily awareness. For example, it is very common to find new students who are unaware that they are dragging their

feet while walking. I sometimes have to teach students how to walk before I can teach them how to dance. Students at Les Muses follow a demanding training schedule to help promote bodily awareness and professional physical rigour.

Technique Is Fun

Whenever I am invited to give workshops for other production companies or performance troupes, the group leaders are always surprised by the willingness of their artists to participate in my intensive training approach. The trick is to be dynamic, use positive reinforcement, play diverse and compelling music, make sure the exercises have a ludic quality, and turn discipline into a game. Maryse Blanchette, my former ballet teacher at the *Cégep de Drummondville*, was a big influence in my adoption of this idea. Like Maryse, I try to convey to my students the idea that energy creates energy. I try to make them understand that if they drop their energy levels during rehearsal or during class, even for an instant, it will be very difficult to climb back up to their previous level. It is therefore preferable to maintain a constant flow.

During discussions on artistic practices for people with disabilities, it is not uncommon to hear the argument that we cannot expect artists with intellectual disabilities to train at the same level as artists without disabilities. To a certain degree this is accurate. We can assume, as theatre creators, that the experience of working with an artist with an intellectual disability who begins training at the age of 26 will be different to that of working with a nondisabled ballet dancer who has been training since they were a child. That being the case, however, an artist with an intellectual disability can participate in an uncompromising training program specifically adapted to his or her access needs for several hours per week. The key is to start easy and progressively raise the level of complexity. For example, my students at Les Muses partake in an intensive twenty-five minute cardio exercise to develop their endurance. We start out by doing the exercise

for five minutes, and progressively work towards reaching the twenty-five minute mark. From an external point of view, this may seem too demanding for a person with a disability, but my students are now all able to complete this high intensity exercise, and they do so with joy. Since the standard duration of the vast majority of productions is 60 to 120 minutes, it is essential for their employability that these future professionals develop their physical endurance to be able to maintain a level of energy throughout the duration of a production.

Performing Professionally With Les Productions des pieds des mains

I launched Les Productions des pieds des mains in 2004. This inclusive and interdisciplinary company stages an atypical cast of dancers and actors with and without disabilities. Although the majority of my atypical performers are recruited at The Muses Centre for Performing Arts, the company is an independent entity. Our productions are at the crossroads between contemporary dance and experimental theatre. They therefore appeal to both a dance and a theatre audience. Our plays and short films have been presented on numerous occasions in Montreal (Tangente, Théâtre La Chapelle, Prospero, les Maisons de la Culture...) and at international festivals in Canada, Belgium, France, and Japan. Although they sometimes appear in venues specifically for disabled artists, our creations are featured mainly in artistic contexts unrelated to disabilities, such as within the official programming of professional theatre and dance or theatre festivals. In submitting our pieces to the same competitions as companies of nondisabled artists, we are required to meet the same selection criteria as any other production company.

Our shows are made up of danced *mises-en-scène* and our artists are required to embody characters and successfully master their roles in these complex constructions. Although we might use improvisational exercises early on in the creative process, the final product is a tight

performance which runs like clockwork. To get to this final stage, many strategies must be implemented.

As our artists with disabilities do not have the opportunity to participate in daily dance classes (which would be the norm for a non-disabled dancer in order to keep in shape and prepare for rehearsals), we offer extra training. The fact that our performers are enrolled in a program at Les Muses means that they already have a general foundation. Our company then provides the necessary extra training and personal coaching to artists selected to appear in one of our productions to help them make the link between what they have learned at Les Muses and the requirements of our particular show. We offer inclusive dance classes and individually tailored coaching to help our performers learn their parts. This is on top of their regular group rehearsal time (roughly 500 hours instead of the usual 100 hours of rehearsal time for a professional production), which is adapted in order to account for the different learning speeds of the people in the group. After every rehearsal, I provide feedback in personalized notebooks for each artist, using pictograms, simple key words, and drawings to help them memorize their notes. We also provide support workers who accompany the performers on set and when traveling on tour to help with their day-to-day needs.

An artist with a disability participating in one of our creations is usually expected to work and train for up to 20 to 30 hours per week. This requires much groundwork on my part to raise parents' and helpers' awareness regarding the realities of what building a career as a professional artist entails. One could worry that the amount of rehearsals we do is excessive and that the artist will become tired out due to this schedule. However, a visit to one of our rehearsals reveals just how much fun is had during these sessions and to what extent the participants are proud of their

ability to push themselves beyond their perceived limits. Being paid for a job that showcases their talents is greatly empowering and also becomes a great source of motivation.

My position requires me to wear two different hats: one as a teacher and a second as a director/choreographer. My goal as a teacher is to push my students to go beyond their limits. I assign them challenging exercises designed to bring them out of their comfort zone and incite them to transcend their personal limitations. As the director and choreographer, I use each of the performers' strengths as a starting point and try to put the spotlight on their best assets. This means constantly adapting the creation, adapting the text or the choreography, and being open to go where the actor might take me and not necessarily where I would like to go as a creator of a piece.

For example, in my play *Pharmakon*, I adapted the tremoring physicality of one of the actors, Marc Barakat, to my original choreography of the piece instead of working on overcoming his shaking. I asked all of the other dancers to take inspiration from this artist's unique way of moving and to explore the shaking quality in their movements. This brought an interesting texture to their gestures, and enriched the play emotionally and dramatically.

In another production *Le Temps des Marguerites*, a creation inspired by Gounod's opera *Faust* which questions beauty standards and aging in our society, I gave a singing part to an artist with Down syndrome who could not hit a single note in tune. In doing so, I wanted to make viewers question the norms of beauty icons and the star system currently in place. Geneviève Morin-Dupont, the amazingly talented artist who played this part, had no complex what-so-ever about her way of singing. I don't think she even realized that she was singing out of key. She sang with confidence and with all her heart and this enriched the play and addressed the very

subject of aesthetic norms and standards of beauty. As one of my concerns is to always present a high-quality performance, we worked with a vocal coach to improve her singing technique. Even though hitting the right notes was not something accessible to her, we focused on sound quality, projection and her interpretation of the song. I worked with a composer to create an atonal and contemporary track for the background which complemented the out-of-tune singing and brought out the qualities and the beauty of the singer's atypical sounds. My goal was to make this music into a unique artform.

My approach to the creation of this moment of song demonstrates both the rigorous work of the artist to perfect herself (and the support we provided her), and at the same time all the flexibility and creativity necessary when creating with atypical artists. By accompanying and guiding the artist to help her master her performance and by creating an atonal soundtrack that supported the artist's atypical musicality, we met halfway. She adapted her performance to the level of quality expected in the play and I adapted my creation to her capacities.

Understanding Aesthetics and Grant Politics

In my long-lasting adventure with atypical artists, I have had the opportunity to meet other companies in Canada and in Europe that work with artists with disabilities. In our exchanges about our varying approaches, we often discuss what it means to lead a professional company that includes disabled artists. Some groups support the idea that the public should be made aware of the limitations of artists with disabilities, in order to lower the spectators' expectations. Many argue that disabled art should not be subjected to the same criteria as that of non-disabled art, and that it is up to the public to adapt to the different aesthetics and abilities of these artists. I do not share this philosophy, but I find these discussions very interesting and they allow me to question my own approach.

If I work to achieve high quality standards in my productions, it is due to both personal preference and the professional context in which I operate. It is part of who I am and I use it to create complex bodies of work. I am interested in the fusion of disciplines, in virtuosity, in the superposition of concepts. I like dynamic, well put-together shows. I am also a perfectionist and enjoy overcoming pedagogical challenges. It goes without saying that my aesthetic, my tastes, and my personality are foregrounded in my creation process, whether I work with artists with or without disabilities.

At the same time, the artistic environment in which I work has influenced my art. The Quebec French-speaking artistic community is very competitive. The incredible number of talented artists far exceeds the number of venues to showcase these artists. It would have been impossible for my company to carve out a place for itself in the industry and present shows performed by artists with disabilities if it did not meet the same standards of quality and professionalism as the other non-inclusive shows. When I founded my company in 2004, I was one of the pioneers in Quebec in creating shows with atypical artists. The idea was completely new: diversity and inclusion were not a hot topic like they are today. Although this inclusiveness had existed for a long time in Europe, there were no references to these movements or traditions in Quebec. Promoters, performance venues, and audiences associated the work of disabled artists with art therapy and could not imagine that these people could be a part of a professional artistic process. While today my company is recognized widely and enjoys a good reputation, there has been a lot of prejudice to overcome along the way.

Not so long ago, the different arts councils were reserved for recognized professional artists. My grant applications were sometimes refused on the grounds that not all of the people involved in my project were considered “professional”, since they did not have diplomas from

conventional schools of professional artistic training. I encountered the same obstacles with theatre promoters when submitting shows for consideration. I was once told by a promoter that even if they liked the proposal, they were not going to select the show on the pretext that "it's so difficult to break into the industry, we're going to give that chance to 'real' dancers." The public also had prejudices before seeing our work. For example, writing a review of our play, *Leçons*, the journalist Ariane Clément commented: "I thought the praise for this show was more for human charity than for any real quality of interpretation or direction. I was stunned by the power of the show... it was rich in symbols, unique and moving..." (*Reflets de société*, 2010). The way to challenge these perspectives is to have art councils recognize the professional status of disabled artists. I have worked in collaboration with the various arts councils to raise awareness about disability arts, and, with other colleagues in the field, encourage them to adapt their programs to be more inclusive.

As for the promoters, in the past we have had to convince them one by one. This has meant inviting them to rehearsals or performances, and giving them the opportunity to witness the quality of our work. Since then, the company has performed in many professional theatres in Quebec as well as on international tours. It enjoys a solid reputation, glowing press reviews and loyal followers that ensure that the majority of our performances are sold-out events.

Despite the fact that the quality and the finesse of a performance's execution are two things that I hold in high regard, my aim in producing theatre is not to present a piece showcasing the feats and capabilities of artists with disabilities. My objective is to produce a work of art where the piece itself takes centre stage. My artists are selected based on the value that the unique qualities they possess bring to the production. In effect, the disability serves the artistic

aspect of the piece and enables us to put on works that question a variety of issues in art and society.

For example, in directing *Pharmakon*, a play with disabled artists playing patients who mechanically swallow mountains of pills without a moment's thought, I brought forth the topic of pharmaceutical consumerism in our society. This can be taken as a playful emblematic image of our society, critiquing the ways that we swallow information that is given to us without asking too many questions. The intention is to provoke, but to do so while maintaining the utmost respect for the performers on stage. Another example where disability is used to put forward an artistic theme is in our short film *Eurêka!*. The story takes place in a post-apocalyptic universe where the only remaining survivors are a group of people with Down syndrome who build their village on the grounds of an abandoned fun fair. This scenario allows us to imagine what a society run solely by people with Down syndrome would look like. The three main characters uncover a mechanical doll, played by the only person without a disability in the movie, which they appropriate and manipulate in such a way so as to prepare it for a circus act. As well as putting the unique gestural aesthetics of our artists with Down syndrome in the limelight, this piece questions standards of what is considered 'normal' and reverses the societal balance of power and strength.

At Les Productions des pieds des mains, we consider our shows to be a success when the audience and journalists talk about the piece before referring to the fact that there are people with disabilities in the performance. If they leave primarily reflecting on the themes, the aesthetics, the touching moments, and the underlying philosophical questions, it proves that we were able to go beyond the disability. This does not mean that we attempt to hide the disability in any way, just

that we want to put the art itself on centre stage. Most of the atypical artists I know prefer to be viewed and admired for their actual performance, not because they have a disability.

Staying Critical

Artistic practices of people with disabilities play an ever-growing role in the world of art. All art needs critics, however, and I hope that we will continue to be critical regarding the results and the productions presented to us. We should not hold our tongues or make allowances due to the fact that we are dealing with people with disabilities – that would be doing them a disservice. I sometimes get the impression that the audience is so impressed by the capabilities displayed by the artist with a disability that they forget (or hold themselves back from) judging the piece as a whole. I always welcome criticism from the audience or journalists regarding the performances we put on with Les Productions des pieds des mains, and encourage them not to censor themselves just because we integrate people with disabilities in our creations. Our artists have learned to accept criticism, indeed it is an important part of forming any person wishing to work professionally within the arts. We must be cautious not to lock away disabled artists in a box by not judging them on the same criteria we would any other performance with a cast of people without disabilities. Having a different scale for these artists would place them in a separate category and would not honour their art, or, for that matter, art in general.