

# Transcending Boundaries: Improvisation and Disability in Dance

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## Chapter abstract

This chapter explores the relationship between disability and improvisation within dance, drawing from a number of dancers' own views about the place of improvisation in their making and performance practice, and referencing work that deliberately incorporates improvisation as a device to blur the boundaries between the fixed and the fluid. The chapter focuses on the role of contact improvisation in the work of disabled dancers. By prioritizing the interaction with different bodies, contact improvisation can support an aesthetic based on sensory adjustment and accommodation. Conversely, contact improvisation might be seen to 'smooth over' disorder and involuntary motion that disabled dancing bodies offer as a reconceptualization of the acceptable aesthetic in dance. The discussion also includes reference to *Notturnino* (2014), a work of choreography by Thomas Hauert, which was commissioned for the Candoco Dance Company and offers a way to examine how dance improvisation has adopted disability in its shifting physical aesthetic.

## Chapter keywords

disability

contact improvisation

Catherine Long

Steve Paxton

Candoco Dance Company

Claire Cunningham

Kate Marsh

Caroline Bowditch

Tanja Erhart

## Part V

### Agency and Transformation

## Chapter 23

### Transcending Boundaries

#### Improvisation and Disability in Dance

Sarah Whatley

This chapter will explore the shifts and turns in the relationship between disability and improvisation in dance in recent years. Drawing from disabled dancers' own views about the place of improvisation in their making and performance practice, the discussion will reference work that deliberately incorporates improvisation as a device to blur the boundaries between the 'fixed' and the fluid in dance. Moreover, examining the writing *about* improvisation in relation to the writing *through* improvisation offers another way of recognizing the labile nature of the practice, which can never be fully captured in writing alone. In tracing, and recounting, these different journeys and artist recollections, I hope to demonstrate that improvisation can be a means to be able to transcend the borders between 'disabled' and 'non-disabled' in dance. I do this also to argue that these labels ('disabled' and 'non-disabled') are also not meant to be fixed, reflecting the fluid and inherently fragile nature and status of the human body as it naturally ages and may become impaired or disabled and so resists fixed categories.

#### Dance and Disability in Context

It is more than a decade since Adam Benjamin's book *Making an Entrance* (2002) entered the world and offered an important resource for anyone interested in inclusive dance practice and particularly for those wanting to teach dance with disabled and

nondisabled dancers. Emphasizing the positive role of improvisation within a variety of dance contexts, Benjamin offers a range of strategies to support teachers, students, and artists in integrating improvisation within the dance studio. Benjamin's considerable experience, accumulated in part as cofounder and codirector of the UK-based Candoco Dance Company until 1998 and as an improviser himself, affords this text authority and wisdom 'from the inside', and it continues to have relevance today. Perhaps a disappointment is that we have seen so little real change in how dancers with disabilities access dance training in the years since the book's publication, although Benjamin has continued to combine improvisation and inclusion in his own performance work.<sup>1</sup> Improvisation may now be more firmly embedded within the training and education of dancers more generally, and within the community dance sector, but few inclusive training opportunities exist, and consequently only a small professional independent disabled dance community exists in the UK, and the dancers in that community have varying experiences of improvisation within their practice.

A handful of other texts provide a valuable overview of the role of improvisation within dance teaching and practice, frequently including a range of exercises and activities to bring attention to improvisation as a vital aspect of a dancers' experience (Blom and Chaplin 1988; Nagrin 1994; Cooper Albright and Gere 2003; Hagendoorn 2008; Biasutti 2013; Schwartz 2000). Because of the openness and freedom that is associated with improvisation, it is a practice that is often enjoyed by differently-abled dancers.<sup>2</sup> On the positive side, improvisation is inherently emancipatory, embodying values that enable disabled dancers to participate on more equal terms with nondisabled dancers. As an approach to artful moving with its own distinctive and underpinning

principles, improvisation values human diversity and variation and so finds a place in many corners of the dance sector.

Less positive is that there is often an assumption that improvisation is the only dance practice that can be relevant for differently-abled dancers because it allows for individual 'free expression', thus avoiding the difficulty of adjusting other technical dance practices to accommodate a range of bodies and abilities. Consequently, differently-abled dance artists have understandably had an uneasy relationship with improvisation, yet improvisation has at the same time enabled the disabled dancer to find her own movement 'voice' and a means to be fully involved in the dance. This paradox has meant that on the one hand improvisation is the 'best tool' for inclusion and has provided an entry for disabled dancers into the dance profession (as set out in Benjamin's book), and on the other hand this inclusion means that disabled practitioners can feel marginalized by the very method that enables them to fully participate.<sup>3</sup> However, the increased inclusion of improvisation within the working methods and performance outcomes of established nondisabled choreographers and dance artists<sup>4</sup> has shifted the collective perception of improvisation within professional dance practice, and consequently the previous tension between improvisation and 'technique' within disability dance has been diluted.

Improvisation is now playing a more positive role in disabled dancers' daily practice, as well as within performance, which grows as much out of the dancer's individual body and movement patterns as the choreographer's vision or intention. As I will discuss later, the disabled dancers who have contributed reflections on their

experiences for this chapter testify to the positive role that improvisation plays within their daily practice as well as, for some, within performance.

In addition to Benjamin's text, which not only offers tools for teaching but also provides a vivid insight into his own practice, several other texts offer a useful context for considering the extent to which improvisation is incorporated in the teaching and/or practice of differently-abled dancers (Morris et al. 2015; Cheesman 2012; Davies 2010; Koppers 2011; Whatley 2010). In particular, Cooper Albright and Gere (2003) bring together a number of essays with a distinctly North American perspective from practitioners and theorists to counter the view that to improvise 'is to engage in aimless, even talentless, noodling' (Gere 2003: xv). In *Taken By Surprise* and elsewhere (Cooper Albright 1997), Cooper Albright has written of the 'intriguing possibilities of interdependence' (1997:262 ) that mark out improvisation and in particular contact improvisation (CI), which she has taught and practiced for many years.

## Contact Improvisation and Disability

As a particular duet form of improvisation, CI has played a significant role in validating the work of disabled dancers since its wide uptake within the dance sector over the last four decades. Contact improvisation prioritizes interaction with different bodies, evolving an aesthetic based on sensory adjustment and accommodation. It calls for a revised gaze that makes space for physical disorientation, disrupting the privileging of the upright, Apollonian, and vertical line of ascension in the dancer.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, CI has been crucial in making it possible for disabled dancers to join the dance community because 'it widened the range and definition of acceptable dance bodies, and it fashioned a movement practice that parallels certain experiences of physical disability' (Davies 2010:



44). Furthermore, as CI has become more embedded in dance training,<sup>6</sup> it has been taught in increasingly codified modes, resulting in it being bound within recognizable and somewhat limited aesthetic territories. It might be argued that through practising CI, disabled dancers ‘force’ a return to the initial values of the form as a way of bridging the divide between its origins and contemporary approaches.

Steve Paxton, the American dancer who initiated CI in 1972, talks about CI as prioritizing responsiveness and the emerging, ‘becoming’ nature of the practice (2003: 90). Paxton is the subject of extensive writing about CI, and his own words reveal a lifetime’s practical research into improvisation.<sup>7</sup> He writes about the borderland between two aspects of physical control that are accessed in CI—conscious control and reflexive control and claims that when we linger in the borderland on purpose we become our own experiment (Paxton 2003: 177). Conventional dance techniques may be useful—though not necessarily, in his view—for examining the gaps in consciousness during unexpected movement (178). As an alternative to the specific physical or aesthetic goals that are core to conventional dance techniques, CI emphasizes the play with the unexpected and the relinquishing of control and desire for completion. Improvisers may find the play with the unexpected appealing even if it may induce a concurrent fear of the unknown, which can be destabilizing at different moments, whilst ultimately liberating. It is perhaps a different dimension of the ‘borderland’ that Paxton refers to, where CI can elicit the sensations of either fear and freedom, or both.

Over the years, Paxton has worked with many disabled practitioners, and although the practice was not conceived to bring disability into dance, CI does seem to have ‘disable[d] conventional notions of the body in classical and modern dance techniques’

(Davies 2010: 45). Contact improvisation also became the primary practice for a movement in the United States, DanceAbility<sup>9,8</sup> which has brought together disabled and nondisabled dancers to fulfil the promise of postmodern dance in the 1960s in the United States and to promote access and the egalitarian, democratic idea that dance is for everyone. Regarded as a radical site for questioning ability and disability in dance (Cooper Albright 1997: 84), CI has also been a regular part of the practice of AXIS Dance Company, based in San Francisco in the United States. This company is an ensemble of performers with and without disabilities, performing what they describe as ‘physically integrated dance’.<sup>9</sup> Performance and disability studies scholar Telory Davies discusses how AXIS employs CI in their work with choreographers Bill T. Jones and Stephen Petronio, describing the role of falling in CI and how ‘the prostrate position of the dancer’s body in a contact fall places all bodies in a non-hierarchical movement framework’ (Davies 2010: 46). Davies also observes that AXIS incorporates CI so as to redefine all body surfaces and external object surfaces as dance sites; thus the wheelchair and other assistive technologies are as valid a dance partner as another human body (48).

Contact improvisation is characterized by its emphasis on using weight and momentum and on freedom, disorientation, friction, vulnerability, and spatial conditioning (Smith 2003: 166). Contact improvisation can be gentle and quiet, and very physical as well. For example, the aikido roll is one of the skills traditionally taught as part of the training. It therefore can be virtuosic and spectacular as well as casual and individualistic. Such contrasting qualities might suggest that CI can be inaccessible for dancers who are unable to participate in such physical spectacle. These contrasts are observed by Cooper Albright, who recognizes that within the larger CI community there

are two kinds of dancing: ‘one that emphasizes virtuosic movement skills and one that emphasizes movement communication that is accessible to any body’ (2003b: 210). But these two kinds are perhaps more properly seen on a scale that readily accommodates variation and diversity, thus reconciling the extremes of the virtuosic and the pedestrian. Cooper Albright goes on to argue that the CI aesthetic focuses on the process of the dancing communication between two bodies, pointing out that more than any other genre of dance, ‘Contact Improvisation has nurtured and embraced dancing that can integrate multiple abilities and limitations’ (210).

In relation to scale, Cooper Albright speaks from her own experience of CI about the empowering experience of being passive when in the continuum from active to passive in the CI duet (2003a: 264). She discusses how improvising with differently-abled dancers provided a means back into dancing for her during a period of temporary disability (265). It may be that it is this mode of engagement continuum that is so appealing to disabled dancers who are able to negotiate in equal terms with a dancing partner, secure in the knowledge that passivity is as generative as activity, revising the frequent assumption that disabled dancers are always necessarily passive (and thereby dependent on others). Conversely, the equalizing properties of CI might be seen to ‘smooth over’ the disorder and involuntary motion that disabled dancing bodies offer as a reconceptualization of the acceptable aesthetic in dance.

In the same collection by Cooper Albright and Gere, Bruce Curtis discusses his somatic experience of spinal cord injury and its impact on his dancing in a wheelchair that he states has become a part of his body (2003: 14). He describes his early encounters with CI and how for the first time he ‘felt truly equal in the creating of the dance’ (15).

He talks of the conversation when improvising with another and his recognition that CI enables him to feel supported against the flow of gravity, not afraid to let go of holding on (16). Curtis points to the liberation and joy he feels when improvising in contact with another, and the pleasure in the intimate communication and vulnerability that CI gives him. What Curtis draws attention to is the potential for improvisation, and specifically CI, to unfix identities, in his case a wheelchair user 'bound' to a particular spatial, dynamic, and relational contact with the world, and thus CI becomes a political act of emancipation.

Curtis's journey into CI and his wider performance practice was a significant influence on British multidisciplinary performer and choreographer Claire Cunningham.<sup>10</sup> Cunningham began her performing career as a singer, gradually discovering an affinity with dance and acting that is now core to her work. She describes her formative experience with Curtis, and with dance and improvisation, as 'a "road to Damascus" that all dancers should experience'.<sup>11</sup> She talks of CI providing her 'with a new way of thinking about my body that began with honing my proprioception; with eyes closed, how do I know where my arm is?' This investigation brought her into dance from a sensory place, 'from the inside out'. She describes how 'for the first time, I left my crutches at the side of the studio space and moved without them. At the same time, Curtis was intrigued by the way I incorporated my crutches in everyday movement—sitting on them, hanging from them, often to relieve the pressure I felt on my back due to my impairment—and he asked me to improvise a pathway across the floor'. This opened up new possibilities for how Cunningham could use her crutches in performance 'as pivot points, for shifting my weight', and enabled her to recognize that her impairment was

core to the work she makes; ‘my crutches became my route to creativity and virtuosic performance’. No longer, she realized, did she need to transcend or ‘overcome’ her disability to be a dancer; her developing virtuosity in its own terms enabled her to rethink the boundaries between ability and disability, and the language of disability, which is continually fraught with debate about the discriminatory nature of terminology. As Cooper Albright points out, ‘[t]he politics of naming are, needless to say, fraught through and through with the politics of identity’ (1997: 59). More particularly, Cunningham’s individualistic ‘crutch dancing’ vocabulary shows that whilst her crutches become an extension of her own body, much as the wheelchair becomes part of the expressive wheelchair dancer’s body, she uses them as part of the dramaturgy and to confront the gaze,<sup>12</sup> drawing attention to her unique physicality and her own history of exclusion.

## The Role of Improvisation in Dance

As an improviser myself, I am fully aware of how improvising dance forces me, willingly, into a physical awareness which I rarely find elsewhere. Contact improvisation enables me to confront a fear of ‘losing control’, and I enjoy the dizzying feeling of falling and flying in the fluid and mobile exchange with another. But I am also aware that CI can induce a fear of the unknown, which can be uncomfortable. As a dancer I am all too aware of how improvisation reflects back to me the changing abilities of my aging body; what is liberating for me might be terrifying for a disabled dancer who is more used to contact with another person being about control, restraint, and support to prevent falling. But not for wheelchair dancer and choreographer Caroline Bowditch, who describes her first experience with CI as ‘the first time in my life that I felt like I had landed in my skin. I discovered what this strange and awkward body, that had felt so

wrong in the world for so long, could do, rather than worrying about what it couldn't do'.<sup>13</sup>

Not all improvisation involves contact with another, whether framed as CI or not, but all improvisation does require training to open the body to new possibilities, to develop trust and curiosity. The physical and conceptual demands of improvisation may not be so apparent to the outsider. As Cooper Albright observes, 'improvisation often creates an awareness of aesthetic priorities, compositional strategies, and physical experiences that may, at first, be less visible or less easily discernible' (2003a: 261).

Dance improvisation also fulfils several functions. It can be a method for seeing what happens, between the dancers and between the dancers and the dance (Marks 2003: 135). It encourages an acute awareness of awareness—what Susan Foster describes as a 'hyperawareness of relationalities' and 'playful labor'—bound up in the space/time of the dance itself rather than directed toward the origin of the work prior to the artist and the artwork' (cited in Peters 2009:29). It can be a tool for finding dance material or an end in itself (De Spain 2003: 27).

Improvisation is also principally a marking of the space. Drawing on philosophical readings of the dance artist's occupation and mobilization of space through improvisation also indicates that the space of, or created by, the dance is hardly neutral. As cultural theorist Gary Peters claims in his philosophical account of improvisation, the 'interdependence of the artist and the artwork, ensures that the marking of the unmarked space is not a singular, momentary act but the initiation of a process that ties the artist not to this or that work, each with their own beginnings and endings, but to the *working* of the work that produces both the artwork and the artist' (2009: 13–14; italics in original).

However, whilst Peters's argument that the work and the artist are created through the *working* of the work is plausible, it may not be the case that the differently-abled dancer begins in the same 'unmarked' space as does the nondisabled dancer.

Disability tends to mark the space before the dance begins. It marks the audience's expectations as well as the performer's history. It also marks the marketing and preperformance statements that together establish the general milieu in which the performance takes place. As it happens, Peters later acknowledges the problematic of the 'unmarked' space, stating: 'clearly, all spaces are in reality marked by the presence of other works, not least the artist's own, which implies that the ingenuity of origination must find ways to erase or forget the presence of the given in order to both avoid imitation (including self-imitation, perhaps the most common form) and open up the path to be followed' (Peters 2009: 37). The difficulty with the privileging of origination, though perhaps desirable for a 'successful' improvisation, is that it calls for erasure, which implies the need for neutrality. In dance, where the body is both materially representative and physically present, physical difference is made very visible—to cover up disability would be to negate the richness of diversity and difference (Cooper Albright 1997: 58). However, when the disabled dancer enters the 'nondisabled' space, as in the main stage theatre,<sup>14</sup> difference can result in unqualified or unfair discrimination. Bowditch recalls when she was touring with Scottish Dance Theatre and performed in *The Long and the Short of It*: 'it was once written up as a community dance piece, obviously based on the fact that I have a disability . . . it's not seen as the same quality, it's therapy . . . and the reviewer was kind of saying 'is it right to have it sit alongside such a professional dance company?''<sup>15</sup> The potential richness provided by Bowditch's

different physicality and her queering of the mainstream theatrical space, marked as preserved for the able and virtuosic, seemed to be lost on the reviewer.

The potential for difference and diversity to be source material for improvised performance seems to be a key concern in Adam Benjamin's recent work. In his FATHoM Project, a collective of disabled and nondisabled artists, he explores a range of improvisational strategies that ensure that the individual performers retain agency within the work, free to inhabit the work according to their own abilities. In particular, improvised tasks are given to the performers, and choreographic structures are devised to fully incorporate the wheelchair of Bowditch. Bowditch and her chair are in many ways a central focus for one of the project's works, *Slight* (2008), which provides the movement range for the whole work. Much of the movement seems to be sourced from Bowditch's unique habitation of the collaborative theatrical space. Movement focuses on surface, on changing levels (Bowditch raises and lowers her chair to shift her relationship with other performers), and on the exploration of 'seated' movement. Benjamin's other improvised performance practice similarly develops out of his deep interest in integration in dance, the dialogue between different and unfamiliar bodies and an ongoing commitment to ensuring the equal contribution of all performers onstage.<sup>16</sup>

Improvisation is thus part of processing, of making the 'work', and improvisation might be 'the work', and if so, then whilst it may be fluid it will still conform to some ontological conditions of 'work', in that it has at least some structure (and/or intent) and context, which might be determined or decided by a director or might be collectively established. Each instance will thus be different, but subsequent iterations will be connected through title or structure or intent. However, it may not always be clear in



performance whether a dance work is improvised, or includes some elements of improvisation. One such work that has a clear theatrical presentational form and choreographic structure but is largely improvised is Thomas Hauert's *Notturmino* (2014),<sup>17</sup> commissioned and performed by Candoco Dance Company.

Candoco Dance Company is a repertory company that tours works commissioned by a wide range of choreographers. Their repertoire and artistic policy has been the focus for many in writing about inclusive/integrated/mixed ability dance and has attracted both praise and criticism for positioning itself within contemporary dance's mainstream. But their consistent commitment to inclusion has made an important challenge to the 'corporeal homogeneity and exclusivity' (Smith 2005: 75) that characterizes the mainstream, 'through their rewriting of the dominant dance manual that insists on the exclusivity of a limited physicality' (75).

Improvisation has not been a particular feature of Candoco Dance Company's work thus far, so *Notturmino* represents something of a departure. Hauert's work has required the dancers to 'be in a specific head—and body—space' and 'bring[s] some of the private processes that happen in the studio to the stage'.<sup>18</sup> Hauert talks about the dancers needing total alertness and presence and how the resulting creative unity produced a kind of utopia.<sup>19</sup> His interest in improvisation is what allows the dance to be more complex if the dancers can invent without consciously commanding movement. He talks about his curiosity in seeing how methods devised for his own normative body worked differently on different bodies. The dancers were required to tune in to each other and to narrow and consider the choices available to them to drive on through the piece.<sup>20</sup> Pedro Machado, previous co-artistic director of Candoco Dance Company, refers to the

demands that *Notturnino* also made upon the audience, stating how improvisation gives a new dimension to the unspoken agreement between performers and audiences, who are asked to make sense of some aspects of the theatrical experience, to sense a different mode of performance.<sup>21</sup>

*Notturnino* is performed by a range of bodies, both nondisabled and disabled. The improvisational structure is informed by the particularities of the dancers' bodies and gives agency to the dancers and so produces an equalizing, collaborative manner of performance. However, there are moments in the dance that are memorable for the focus on the particular physicalities of individual dancers. For example, one dancer, Tanja Erhart, has one leg (although as she says herself, when dancing with her crutches, she also has three legs);<sup>22</sup> in one section she is standing, balancing on her one leg without crutches, surrounded by the other dancers, who are lying on their backs 'doing an exercise for hands and feet' with their legs floating in the air towards her. The image of an abundance of legs set against an absence emphasizes difference whilst also creating an abstracted 'leg dance'. The other dancers' legs and hands are a support for Erhart to assist her in balancing. Together they help to bring more attention to the unique expressive physicality of her dancing as well as the (different) effort involved in what is a familiar challenge for dancers: standing on one leg. Although retaining an improvisational element and quality, the structure at this point is determined.

The unique nature of Erhart's body contributes a particular dynamic and expressive register to the whole dance, which might then appear to be dependent on one dancer's unique contribution. Writing when David Toole was dancing with Candoco Dance Company, Cooper Albright proposed that the work of Candoco Dance Company

upheld the distinction between the classical (virtuosic) and the grotesque (passive) bodies in the company because of its focus at that time on one exceptional performer (Toole) (1997: 78).<sup>23</sup> The improvisational form in *Notturmo* manages to avoid a similar criticism by emphasizing a democratic, collaborative performance mode (as permitted within the narrative structure) and thereby softening the attention on Erhart. But it is probably unavoidable that a dancer who is visibly *more* different will draw more attention or curiosity and thus be more prominent in the work.

Elsewhere, Erhart's singularity becomes a source for an ensemble section in which all the dancers improvise with crutches, to modify the difference between her and the other members of the company (which includes Rick Rodgers, a wheelchair dancer). The attention switches away from the corporeal to the mechanics of the crutches and the new aesthetic that is created through the way the crutches become extensions of all the dancers' limbs. Erhart believes that the work enables the dancers and the audience to be aware of the changing body and how we may all become disabled. She regards disability as an everyday issue, reminding us all of our own fragility.<sup>24</sup>

## Writing through and between Improvisation

The slippery nature of improvisation (Cooper Albright 2003a: 260) makes it particularly difficult to talk about and write about, but the growing corpus of writings and reflections that emerge from the practice of dance improvisation are particularly valuable in helping to build a discourse and a theoretical framework for the practice. The contribution of differently-abled dancers to this discourse is valuable and as demonstrated in the writing of those referred to earlier, can bring new insights. But not all appear to welcome the emerging discourse of improvisation. Though not talking specifically about dance,

Peters's view is that 'for the last four decades the discourses of improvisation have become increasingly submerged in a collective language of care and enabling, of dialogue and participation, a pure, aesthetically cleansed language of communal love' (2009: 23–24). He refers to improvisation as an exercise in healthy living, claiming that 'the cultural turn toward the spirituality of the East, the self-sufficiency of the land, the concern for peaceful coexistence with the Other 'man', the concern for the ecosystem, the concern for the downtrodden and silenced, all of this has left its indelible mark on the dominant discourses of improvisation as they can be found today (Peters 2009: 23).

Whether or not the specific discourses of *dance* improvisation are part of Peters's critique, dance artist-researchers have acknowledged the challenge in writing through and alongside an embodied practice and have understandably resisted a theorization of improvisation whilst acknowledging the need to find a language for it if it is to be fully included in intellectual discussion.<sup>25</sup> One such practitioner, Kent De Spain, has been concerned with thinking about how to extract meaning from the experience of dance improvisation, describing improvisation as a movement based somatic state (2003: 28–29). His work in exploring the role of language and literacy in dance improvisation acknowledges that language has limits and argues that improvisation is primarily an attentional practice (29). He recognizes that it is important to find a language about the experience but is mindful that what is recorded by each dancer is affected by conscious awareness of proprioception (30), which is a highly individualized condition.

Nonetheless, including the voices and experiences of differently-abled dancers is important for expanding our taxonomies of improvisation and the textual reflections on experience.<sup>26</sup>

Building on De Spain's project, I hope that the documenting of some of the experiences of differently-abled dancers working within this sphere of practice who are mentioned in this chapter will contribute to the growing discourse of dance improvisation. Kate Marsh, independent dance artist, researcher, and former performer with Candoco Dance Company, describes an uneasy relationship with improvisation. She says that 'there is often a view of improvisation as "easy" and "accepting" of difference whilst "set" dancing is "challenging" and "proper."' She reports that throughout her career she has been involved in many debates about improvisation being the 'best tool' for inclusion, which can convey the feeling that 'disabled practitioners are limited to improvisation'. Conversely, she believes that the wider incorporation and acceptance of improvisation within the context of the UK professional dance industry has shifted the collective perception of improvisation, and it is now included more readily in dance teaching, blurring the boundaries between 'technique' and improvisation in class. During her time working with Candoco Dance Company, improvisation was often the way in to the creative process, which in practical terms allowed for better access for all the dancers (although she wasn't sure whether the same choreographers would use improvisation for their own choreographic processes).

In her own work, Marsh 'uses improvisation as a way of generating and exploring movement material and rarely as a performance mode'. However, in a recent duet project, she incorporated an improvised solo within a set spatial parameter, so 'timing and spacing were constant but the movement material changed every time and was influenced by various factors; my own movement, the audience, the other dancer and so on'. Her choice to explore improvisation and CI in her practice is based on her belief that

‘improvisation and CI offer a greater equality of participation’ and therefore offer her greater integrity as a performer: ‘there is less emphasis on body specificity, which means that as a dancer with a disability I can explore ways of moving that are more organic for my own body’. As a dance-maker, she explains, she ‘is interested in what improvisation offers in terms of allowing each dancer to explore on her own terms, finding it exciting that improvisation affords space for individuality, for change and is less static as a creative form’.<sup>27</sup> Stasis is not a condition readily associated with dance, but what Marsh seems to be referring to is a different kind of relationship with the compositional process. By retaining fluidity in the devising and performing process, improvisation allows for equality in each dancer’s contribution, thereby resisting the veneration of virtuosic and augmented disabled bodies that can unintentionally reinscribe the classical body within the body of difference.

Caroline Bowditch also incorporates improvisation within her creative process as a choreographer. Aware of her own very particular physicality and the individual ranges of movement of each of her dancers, she has developed a method that elicits movement from her performers as a response to tasks or concepts that she asks her dancers to perform or reflect in their movement. From this raw material she creates the work. Whilst not unusual as a method, it is informed by a deep awareness of her own nonnormative body and the strategies she needs to develop to direct her company performers. Bowditch has also worked with Fiona Wright as Girl Jonah, and their website explains their working process, referring to improvisation as part of their workshop’s offering: ‘we will use simple improvisation scores to include dance and text to develop individual inclinations and collaborative structures’.<sup>28</sup>

Artists who blog often share their working process, providing a more informal way of contributing to the discourse of improvisation. For example, StopGap Dance Company provides a very full blog that records the experiences of company members, who post frequently. In documenting reflections on Artificial Things, a creative residency project in 2013 at Pavilion Dance, the National Dance Development Organisation for the South West of England, Lucy Bennett, the artistic director, describes a rehearsal session in which the participants devised a movement-making system developed from ‘improvisation that involves quick fire adaptations’. She continues:

I ask Laura to ‘stream’ from one end of the studio to the other exploring and repeating a sensation—the other dancers look for alternative adaptations. They take a close look at rhythm, eye line and details such as hand shape and arm line; they quickly dive in and offer their movement translations. Streaming from one side of the studio to the other. If I see something that works, connects or is unusual—we pause and all try it and Laura often finds an adaptation of an adaption of her original movement . . . There is a buzz in the studio when we are catching a language—the dancers love to throw ideas into the melting pot, experiment and capture the results. The quick-fire energy aids the instinctive reactions and often the best adaptations.

Laura Jones, to whom Bennett refers here, is a long-standing company member and wheelchair dancer. Jones also blogs about her developing duet with David Toole in the same project, in which they experiment with moving in and around each other, pushing into body parts. She adds: ‘we then involved my chair, dismantling it, giving more

opportunities for improvisation. This was a more difficult task than expected as we were both so used to moving in our chairs rather than out. However, after investigating further it came together rather quickly'.<sup>29</sup> These blog entries tell us something about the continual investigation that is not only about movement selection and choreographic structure but the additional processes of translation, adaptation, and negotiation of different bodies and physicalities that enrich the practice of improvisation for differently-abled dancers. These other considerations also present the company dancers with additional challenges in and pressures on their creative process.

Catherine Long, a disabled performer, has sought writing from others in response to improvising with Laura Jones.<sup>30</sup> To support her own development as teacher and dance-maker, she invited dancers to give her feedback about being part of a movement group in the United States with a diverse range of experiences, movement ranges, and abilities. Long was the only person in the group with a visible impairment. In particular, she wanted responses to improvising with her visibly different body,<sup>31</sup> and about the awkwardness and fear when entering a space and moving with people one is not familiar with. The workshops were focusing on CI, so most of the responses refer to dancing in contact with Long.

One dancer talks about the warmth, strength, and power exuding from her contact with Long, which shocked this dancer in its intensity. The same respondent shares how she observed others treating Long as a 'fragile being' and reflected on how she realized that by contrast she herself was seen by others as having strength, neither breakable or fragile. These and other responses talk of 'problem solving', 'movement dialogue', and intermingling' with Long. Another member of the group talks about her excitement at



working with ‘another skilled dancer with a different set of tools and ways of moving’. She continues: ‘I actually found it much easier to move with you because you were so consistently conscious of the movement decisions you were making, it forced me to slow down and become more conscious as well. There is also an ease, simplicity and efficiency in the way you move—perhaps the way you need to move . . . I didn’t see you as someone who ‘lacked a limb’ but rather a dancer who had learned how to move without a limb—such an interesting skill set’. Some recognized that Long’s openness and honesty about her physical condition (‘my knees didn’t fully develop’) put them at ease but also recognized that having to explain herself was probably a burden for Long.

Long’s own response to the workshop is also revealing. She acknowledges how she ‘felt apologetic and awkward when working with some’, believing that her body made her partner feel uncomfortable. But she also recognizes that the question about discomfort is very often present for her, regardless of who she is partnering, so she tries ‘to be present with the full experience and go into it’. But when she feels huge discomfort, ‘it can result in a sense of almost paralysis’, so she does what she can. She talks of ‘trying to experiment with how the feeling could be more embodied’ but instead resisting it and pretending to do something else, and ‘this doing is something else, not reflective of the fear or paralysis, so it feels fake, like I am pretending’. However, Long has also talked about how her process has developed since that time, enabling her to incorporate her experiences into a later solo, *Impasse* (2014). She explains: ‘in *Impasse* I performed the awkwardness and incapacity with which my body tends to be associated. The dance included losing balance; stumbling; seeming to be paralyzed, frustrated or debilitated; moving with rigidity or exploding from constraint’.<sup>32</sup>

The discourse of improvisation rarely acknowledges or records the awkwardness that is about discomfort and pain. Although CI can lead to injury, the rhetoric favours the positive impact of freedom, play, collaboration, and democracy, much as Peters argues. Long's approach involves her being honest and clear about her physical impairment and functionality. As she asks: 'if one person has a significantly different range of motion to the other, how is that worked with without it "restricting" one or highlighting the "limits" of one? With essencing/mirroring, is it appropriate for one dancer to not use their left arm? Or reference the fact that they are using it in relation to my absent one, and I reference their "two limbs" with my singular one? (when creating a duet). Do we directly bring the issue in or not?' In these comments, Long reveals what for her is the awkwardness of partnering. She acknowledges the fakery that sometimes results in partnering, which is refreshing and introduces a necessary recalibration to balance the positive, life-affirming rhetoric that might in itself exclude those whose experience is 'other'.

## Conclusion

This brief survey of the meeting between disability and dance improvisation indicates that improvisation has enabled greater participation in dance by differently-abled dancers and on more equal terms with their nondisabled cop performers. Improvisation enables dancers to find ways of negotiating physical difference and to confront the realities of the moving body. This reality includes accommodating physical and mechanical movement aids and recognizing the actual effort involved, what Davies describes as 'actualism' in her examination of AXIS Dance Company (2010: 44). The integration of CI as a particular strand of improvisation seems to have had a significant impact on extending

movement ranges and choreographic strategies for disabled dancers, expanding the possibilities for integrating wheelchairs, crutches, and canes as part of the topological, spatial, and theatrical dance landscape. Contact improvisation is a source of validation and teaches how to interact with different bodies. It also provides space for honest responses to the discomfort of moving, as well as the positive, liberating aspects of improvisation.

The inclusive philosophy that underpins improvisation and has infused professional dance practice as much as community dance practice has enabled more disabled dancers to find a route into dance that has largely shaken off its assumed relationship with therapeutic practice that is based on a medical model of disability, which stigmatizes it as something to be cured, casting ‘people with disabilities as “patients”, a role that is often infantilizing, pathologizing, and disempowering’ (Sandahl and Auslander 2005: 129). Yet there is still more to do before disabled dancers and their presence in dance are no longer a novelty and become the norm. Improvisation enables disabled dancers to find their own movement voices, uninhibited by the external demands of a codified technical practice. But this can reinforce the view that the disabled dancer needs another way of participating in dance, which is separated from the rigours of a professional company process. The division between the ‘hard’ work of set choreography and the more accessible process of improvisation is now softening, with appropriate respect being afforded to the challenge of improvisation as a performance mode. The incorporation of improvisation with mainstream dance, including within the repertoire of inclusive dance companies (such as Hauert’s commission for Candoco Dance Company)

has helped to support this shift. As a consequence, dance improvisation is much richer for adopting disability in its shifting physical aesthetic.

Dancers are now finding more platforms for writing through and about dance improvisation. The increasing number of artist blogs and websites has helped to extend the means by which dancers can share their experiences and reflections on or about improvisation. My intention in this chapter has been to highlight the value of these records whilst also bringing attention to UK dance artists who may have received critical attention through performance reviews but have not been the focus of scholarly writing thus far. I hope I have shown that improvisation can be a powerful tool in reducing the binaries that have long plagued disabled dance—between ability and disability, fixed and fluid, active and passive, and so on. At the same time, disabled dancers have forced a revision in traditional ways of working, moving, thinking, and looking at dance.

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## Notes

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see <https://invisibledifferenceorguk.wordpress.com/>, accessed 25 March 2017.

<sup>1</sup> See Adam Benjamin's website for a chronology of his improvisation work:

<http://www.adambenjamin.co.uk/home.html>, accessed September 20, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> I use both the terms 'disabled' and 'differently-abled' in the chapter but no distinction is implied. I incorporate 'differently-abled' because some dancers with disabilities prefer this term.

<sup>3</sup> The dancers who comment in this essay make reference to this tension. Another example of the problem that can ensue when 'improvisation' is assumed to be the best way of accessing dance for disabled people is captured in a published conversational essay between performance practitioners Petra Kuppers and Neil Marcus. Reflecting on a contact improvisation festival, Marcus comments: 'I am not easy with the word crip. Still. But I'll use it here as shorthand. . . . We were crips at this contact festival. They were thrilled to have us as some of their focus was 'mixed abilities', an awful term in my mind. Reminds me of dog breeding. They were very interested in being sensitive to the needs of crips . . . but they ended up being so 'careful' and 'sensitive' it was very irritating. And I felt very insulted. yuck! and excluded anyway'. (Kuppers and Marcus 2009: 146).

<sup>4</sup> For example, in the UK such choreographers/companies include, amongst others, Siobhan Davies, Russell Maliphant, Motionhouse, Charlie Morrissey.

<sup>5</sup> See Smith (2005) for more reference to disability in relation to the Apollonian frame.



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<sup>6</sup> A quick glance at course content indicates that most university and conservatoire dance programmes in the UK include improvisation in the curriculum, either as a focused studio-based practice or woven through other activities. Improvisation also features in most of the prominent dance training institutions across Europe and in North America. A more extensive survey of the place of improvisation worldwide is beyond the scope of this chapter.

<sup>7</sup> The journal *Contact Quarterly*, founded in 1975 and coedited by Nancy Stark Smith and Lisa Nelson, is the principal publication about contact improvisation, presenting ‘the artist’s voice in the artist’s words’. Paxton is a supporting editor, and his work features regularly in the journal. ‘Mixed-abilities dance’ is specifically mentioned in the description of the practices that are presented within the journal. See [http://www.contactquarterly.com/cq/cq\\_contactq.php](http://www.contactquarterly.com/cq/cq_contactq.php), accessed 27 September 2014.

<sup>8</sup> DanceAbility International states that it ‘continues to pursue its vision of using art as a means to change people’s preconceived ideas about disabilities through performances, workshops, educational programs, teacher training and choreography in the U.S. and throughout the world’. The cofounder and artistic director is Alito Alessi. See <http://www.danceability.com>, accessed 20 September 2014.

<sup>9</sup> See <http://axisdance.org/about-us/>, accessed 20 September 2014.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.clairecunningham.co.uk>, accessed 17 September 2014.

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- 11 All these comments are taken from an interview with Claire Cunningham by the author, 18 July 2013.
- 12 There isn't space here to discuss the different ways the disabled dancer is looked at, but Cunningham's performance work confronts the ways both women's bodies and impaired bodies are looked at. A number of theorists discuss the gaze in relation to disability, notably Garland Thomson (2009).
- 13 See interview with Caroline Bowditch by Victoria Wright published on 15 September 2014 in Disability Arts Online, a website showcasing arts and culture: <http://www.disabilityartsonline.org.uk/caroline-bowditch-falling-in-love-with-frida>, accessed 15 February 2015.
- 14 By 'main stage' I refer to traditional, proscenium arch Western theatre venues. In dance, large and middle-scale companies, including repertory companies, are generally those programmed in these venues. Few disabled dancers have the opportunity to perform in them, one notable exception in the UK being Candoco Dance Company.
- 15 See interview with Caroline Bowditch by Victoria Wright published on 15 September 2014 in Disability Arts Online, a website showcasing arts and culture: <http://www.disabilityartsonline.org.uk/caroline-bowditch-falling-in-love-with-frida>, accessed 15 February 2015.
- 16 For example, Benjamin's work *5 Men Dancing* (2004–present).
- 17 Thomas Hauert is a Swiss-born choreographer who is particularly interested in improvisation-based processes.

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18 Pedro Machado, previous co-artistic director of Candoco Dance Company, in his blog 'Candoco's improv dnnce brings the spirit of rehearsal to the stage', *Guardian*, 27 February 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/dance-blog/2014/feb/27/candoco-improv-dance-rehearsals-stage>, accessed 2 April 2014.

19 Hauert speaking on the film, 'Notturnino – Candoco Dance Company' Candoco Dance Company website, <http://www.candoco.co.uk/productions/repertory/current/new-company-work/> accessed 26 September 2014.

20 Hauert speaking on the film, 'Insight: Making of Notturnino by Thomas Hauert: Candoco Dance Company' Candoco Dance Company website, <http://www.candoco.co.uk/productions/repertory/current/new-company-work/>, accessed September 20, 2014.

21 Pedro Machado, previous co-artistic director of Candoco Dance Company, in his blog 'Candoco's improv dnnce brings the spirit of rehearsal to the stage', *Guardian*, 27 February 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/dance-blog/2014/feb/27/candoco-improv-dance-rehearsals-stage>, accessed 2 April 2014.

22 Erhart speaking on the film 'Notturnino – Candoco Dance Company' Candoco Dance Company website, <http://www.candoco.co.uk/productions/repertory/current/new-company-work/>, accessed 20 September 2014.

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- <sup>23</sup> David Toole was born without legs. He danced with Candoco Dance Company until 1999 and has since performed in his own work, with other companies, and as part of the 2012 Summer Paralympics opening ceremony in London, 29 August 2012.
- <sup>24</sup> Erhart speaking on the film, ‘Nottturnino – Candoco Dance Company’, Candoco Dance Company website,  
<http://www.candoco.co.uk/productions/repertory/current/new-company-work/>, accessed 20 September 2014.
- <sup>25</sup> Cooper Albright speaks to this point in her own writing (2003a: 260–261).
- <sup>26</sup> The lack of writing documenting the work of disabled dancers is one of the areas of study conducted by the research team in the Arts and Humanities Research Council funding project InVisible Difference; Dance, Disability and Law. See <http://www.invisibledifference.org.uk>, accessed 26 September 2014.
- <sup>27</sup> Kate Marsh, email communications to author, July–September 2014.
- <sup>28</sup> Girl Jonah website, <http://www.girljonah.org/workshops.html>, accessed 26 September 2014.
- <sup>29</sup> ‘Artificial Things – An Insight from the Artistic Director Lucy Bennett’ Stopgap Dance Company blog, posted 12 February 2013,  
<http://stopgapdance.com/blog/artificial-things-creative-residency-at-pavilion-dance>, accessed 26 September 2014.
- <sup>30</sup> The comments from Long and her workshop attendees were shared with me by email, September 2014.

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<sup>31</sup> Long is very clear with her respondents about her disability, describing to them the nature of her physical impairment.

<sup>32</sup> Email correspondence with author, September 2014.