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Translations. A dance for the non-visual senses

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Abstract

Dal 2015 collaboro con la compagnia canadese All Bodies Dance Project (ABDP) come danzatrice, coreografa e facilitatrice. ABDP è un progetto di "danza integrativa" che unisce danzatori disabili e non. Nel presente articolo contestualizzerò il termine "danza integrativa"; successivamente analizzerò la mia esperienza come danzatrice nel progetto *Translations*. *Translations* è un lavoro di danza contemporanea per i sensi non visivi, creato da All Bodies Dance Project in collaborazione con VocalEye, un servizio di descrizione di spettacoli dal vivo per persone non vedenti.

Since 2015, I have been working as a dancer, choreographer, and facilitator for All Bodies Dance Project (ABDP), a Canadian "integrated dance" project that brings together a diverse group of dancers. In this article I contextualize "integrated dance", a term that will be problematized, and then I will describe in-depth my experience as a dancer in *Translations*, a contemporary dance piece for the non-visual senses created by All Bodies Dance Project in partnership with VocalEye, a live descriptive service for the blind.

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Translations. A dance for the non-visual senses

Integrated dance emerged in the late 1960s and obtained more mainstream visibility starting in the 1980s. Hilde Holger is considered one of the pioneers, as she developed methodologies to teach dance to her son who had Down syndrome. In 1968, Holger presented what is considered the first integrated dance piece in London. One of her students, Wolfgang Stange, founded Amici Dance Theatre Company in 1980. The field has grown significantly since then, its popularity increasing thanks to companies such as CanDoCo (UK, founded 1990), Axis Dance Theatre (California, 1987), Dancing Wheels (Ohio, 1990), DV8 Physical Theatre (UK, 1986), and DanceAbility (1987)[1]. A full history of integrated dance that includes a worldwide view is rich, complex, and beyond the scope of this article[2]. For an overview of the Italian context refer to the website *Danzabile*, which connects people working in the field of "inclusive dance"[3], and includes a manifesto by newly formed collective Al.Di.Qua.[4].

This article focuses specifically on the work of All Bodies Dance Project (ABDP), a Canadian dance company founded in 2014 by Naomi Brand, Sarah Lapp, and Mirae Rosner. Based in Vancouver, All Bodies Dance Project (ABDP) is a dance company that provides a platform for dancers that

1. According to Gaia Germanà, DanceAbility operates in educational contexts, such as *ImPulsTanz*, but it is not a professional program for emerging disabled dancers. See Gaia Germanà, *In ascolto, verso un Atlante del bianco. Nuovi danzatori sulle scene dello spettacolo contemporaneo*, in «Danza e ricerca. Laboratorio di studi, scritture, visioni», n. 1, 2012, pp. 121-152, in particular p. 122.

2. For an overview see Ann Cooper Albright, *Choreographing difference: the body and identity in contemporary dance*, Wesleyan University Press, Hanover 1997; Ann Cooper Albright, *Strategic abilities: negotiating the disabled body in dance*, in «Disability, Art, and Culture», vol. XXXVII, n. 3, Summer 1998, online: http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.act2080.0037.313 (u.v. 24/4/2021); Adam Benjamin, *Making an entrance: theory and practice for disabled and non-disabled dancer*, Routledge, London-New York 2002; Adam Benjamin, *Cabbages and kings: disability, dance, and some timely considerations*, in Jens Richard Giersdorf – Yutian Wong (edited by), *The Routledge dance studies reader – 3rd edition*, Routledge, London-New York 2018, pp. 155-165, online: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315109695-15 (u.v. 24/4/2021); Hannah R. Irving – Audrey R. Giles, *A dance revolution? Responding to dominant discourses in contemporary integrated dance*, in «Leisure/Loisir», vol. XXXV, n. 4, 2011, pp. 371-389, online: https://doi.org/10.1080/14927713.2011.648415 (u.v. 24/4/2021).

3. *Danzabile*, online: https://danzabile.provincia.tn.it/eng/About-us (u.v. 1/5/2021).

4. Chiara Bersani – Diana Anselmo – Dalila D'Amico – Aristide Rontini – Giuseppe Comuniello – Valentina Alessandria – Claudio Gaetani – Giacomo Curti, *Al.Di.Qua. Artists*, online: https://www.disabilityartsinternational.org/resources/al-di-qua-a-manifesto-from-italy (u.v. 1/5/2021).

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would otherwise not have access to training, following a need for «a radical rethinking of the ways in which training is constructed and delivered»[5]. Through the creation of contemporary works that challenge the idea of the "norm" in dance and show the artistic potential of differences, ABDP provides a space for collaboration and for reciprocal artistic growth that orients itself away from therapeutic outcomes. ABDP not only aims to disrupt the idea that dance ought to look a certain way, but also strives to provide an «aesthetic of access»[6], which considers accessibility as the starting point rather than as an add-on. As Merry Lynn Morris, clearly writes: «Dance and dance education practice are ideally situated to continue intervening in the current constructions and perceptions of disability by intentionally disrupting current signifying codes that reify the disabled body as dependent, restricted, tragic, static, and powerless»[7].

Dance culture at large has been erasing and excluding marginalized bodies based on race, gender, and disabilities (to name a few). I am interested in reframing standardized systems of how to appreciate and experience dance through investigating the beliefs that support who is considered a dancer. I question how we can alter the landscape of contemporary dance so that it includes disability and differences, a deliberate change that transforms the way we comprehend dance aesthetics[8].

As a non-disabled dancer, I came to understand the creative and pedagogical potential of differences to foster a «new dance ecology»[9]; this means to work towards offering participants and audience members new dance aesthetics and experiences. Disabled dancer and choreographer Alice Sheppard

5. Owen Smith, *Shifting Apollo's frame: challenging the body aesthetic in theater dance*, in Carrie Sandahl – Philip Auslander (edited by), *Bodies in commotion: disability and performance*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 2005, pp. 73-85: p. 75.

6. See Joan Lipkin – Ann Fox, *The Disability Project: toward an aesthetic of access*, in «Contemporary Theatre Review», n. 11, 2001, pp. 119-136, online: https://doi.org/10.1080/10486800108568642 (u.v. 24/4/2021); Nina Muehlemann, *Interrogating wholeness through access aesthetics: Kaite O'Reilly's "In water I'm weightless"*, in «Research in Drama Education», vol. XXIII, n. 3, 2018, pp. 454-466, online: https://doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2018.1474092 (u.v. 24/4/2021); Carmen Papalia, *Open access*, 2015, online: https://carmenpapalia.com/2015/08/21/open-access/ (u.v. 29/4/2021); Carmen Papalia, *An accessibility manifesto for the arts*, 2018, online: https://canadianart.ca/essays/access-revived/ (u.v. 29/4/2021); Kaite O'Reilly, *A Playwright reflects on "alternative dramaturgies"*, in «Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance», vol. XIV, n. 1, 2009, pp. 31-35, online: https://doi:10.1080/13569780802655749 (u.v. 29/4/2021); Carrie Sandahl, *Considering disability: disability phenomenology's role in revolutionizing theatrical space*, in «Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism», vol. XVI, n. 2, 2002, pp. 17-32; Jenny Sealey – Carissa Hope Lynch, *Graeae: an aesthetic of access - (de)cluttering the clutter*, in Susan Broadhurst – Josephine Machon (edited by), *Identity, performance and technology*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2012, pp. 60-73, online: https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137284440_5 (u.v. 29/4/2021); Tobin Siebers, *Disability aesthetics*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 2010; Alice Sheppard, *Staging bodies, performing ramps: cultural, aesthetic disability technoscience*, in «Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience», vol. V, n. 1, 2019, pp. 1-12, online: http://www.catalystjournal.org (u.v. 29/4/2021).

7. Merry Lynn Morris, *Pushing the limits: making dance accessible to different bodies through assistive technology*, in «Journal of Dance Education», vol. XV, n. 4, 2015, pp. 142-151: p. 143, online: https://doi.org/10.28968/cftt.v5i1.30459 (u.v. 29/4/2021).

8. See Anna Hickey-Moody, *Integrated dance as a public pedagogy of the body*, in «Social Alternatives», vol. XXXVI, n. 4, 2017, pp. 5-13.

9. Adam Benjamin, *Unfound movement. Integration in dance training, it's potential pitfalls and prizes*, online: https://www.adambenjamin.co.uk/unfound-movement (u.v. 29/4/2021).

emphasizes the relationship between disability culture, aesthetics, and access. She describes access as «a process and a way of creating connection between people with disabilities, a way of knowing and being in the world» and points out that «disability culture and aesthetics are bound up with access»[10].

Words make a difference

When discussing dance, a discipline that has the body at its core, questions about the gaze, the stare, and the way we look at bodies cannot be escaped[11]. Dance scholar Ann Cooper Albright writes: «Dance, unlike other forms of cultural production such as books or paintings, makes the body visible within the representation itself»[12]. In defining inclusive dance, Urmston and Aujla write:

> Inclusive dance practice ensures that *all* participants have an opportunity to dance […]. In an inclusive setting, *dancers with and without disabilities* are taught together in an environment that natures creativity, aids development of specific motor skills, uses improvisation and set material, enables self-expression, and fosters a sense of belonging (emphasis mine)[13].

It is not my intention to undervalue the contributions of disabled dancers. Rather, I want to point out how "all" participants does not necessarily mean "all" bodies in the context of integrated dance practices; certain bodies (fat bodies, gender-queer bodies, racialized bodies, to name a few) are still not fully represented. Even within the literature on integrated dance, there is a lack of published research on dancers with intellectual disabilities. Most of the studies on integrated dance focus on:

> The experiences of dancers with physical disabilities, while accounts of dancers in integrated companies with other impairments remain relatively scarce. The lack of inclusion of dancers with developmental or sensory disabilities indicates that these individuals' artistic contributions are underrepresented in integrated dance and/or that their contributions are less valued amongst researchers examining this dance genre. This gap in perspective speaks to our cultures' understanding of dance and dancing bodies in relation to what we deem normal and abnormal[14].

Scholar and disabled artist Petra Kuppers points out that companies such as CanDoCo (UK) and Axis (California) are «professional integrated dance» companies that work in such a way that «ability and technique skills are developed, and traditional performance paradigms of stamina and

10. Alice Sheppard, *I dance because I can*, in «The New York Times», 27th February 2019, online: https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/27/opinion/disability-dance-alice-sheppard.html (u.v. 29/4/2021).

11. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Ways of staring*, in «Journal of Visual Culture», vol. V, n. 2, 2006, pp. 173-192; Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring how we look*, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 2009.

12. Ann Cooper Albright, *Choreographing difference: the body and identity in contemporary dance*, cit., p. 63.

13. Elsa Urmston – Imogen Jane Aujla, *Values, attributes, and practices of dance artists in inclusive dance talent development contexts*, in «Journal of Dance Education», vol. XXI, n. 1, 2021, pp. 14-23: p. 14, online: https://doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2019.1652755 (u.v. 29/4/2021).

14. Hannah R. Irving – Audrey R. Giles, *A dance revolution? Responding to dominant discourses in contemporary integrated dance*, cit., p. 376.

punctuality need to shape the work»[15]. Professor Anna Hickey-Moody argues that the work of CanDoCo: «Enables disabled performers to have access to high quality artistic work and firmly locates disabled dancers in the landscape of contemporary dance choreography»[16]. I would go as far as claiming that these integrated dance companies present an aesthetic that highlights bodies that are muscular, athletic and thin. Or, as Hickey-Moody writes: «aesthetics are a focus of CanDoCo's work and they deface "disability specific styles" […]. CanDoCo engages contemporary forms of aesthetic idealism in order to develop ways of understanding bodies with disabilities that are not confined to medical knowledges»[17].

The presence of marginalized bodies on stage and in the dance studio carries an important political and artistic message that challenges the hegemony of "dancers' bodies". But is this enough to reconceptualize bodies in dance? As Kuppers puts it: «An accessible dance culture needs not only accessible techniques, workspaces, training facilities and stages, but also wider educational work on the level of dance literacy, our ability to read dance and appreciate its manipulation of bodies, spaces and time»[18].

The risk of accepting or refusing to reconsider dance aesthetic ideals resides in what Sarah Whatley defines as a «passive conservative» strategy of viewing. In this position, the viewer «views from and with an internalized expectation of the classical aesthetic perspective. What Albright describes as the ableist gaze»[19]. As Joyce Sherlock points out: «the aesthetic of the dance is firmly located within a stratum of society and created by socially produced embodied individuals enabled and constrained by dance traditions, training, and audiences»[20]. In other words, ideals of the dancer body are spread through traditional dance practices and cultures[21].

15. Petra Kuppers, *Disability culture and community performance. Find a strange a twisted shape*, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2013, p. 123.

16. Anna Hickey-Moody, *Integrated dance as a public pedagogy of the body*, in «Social Alternatives», vol. XXXVI, n. 4, 2017, pp. 5-13: p. 10.

17. *Ibidem*.

18. Petra Kuppers, *Accessible education: aesthetics, bodies and disability*, in «Research in Dance Education», vol. I, n. 2, 2000, pp 119-131: p. 119, online: https://doi.org/10.1080/713694266 (u.v. 29/4/2021).

19. Sarah Whatley, *Dance and disability: the dancer, the viewer and the presumption of difference*, in «Research in Dance Education», vol. VIII, n. 1, 2007, pp. 5-25: p. 19, online: https://doi.org/10.1080/14647890701272639 (u.v. 29/4/2021).

20. Joyce Sherlock, *Dance and the culture of the body. Where is the Grotesque?*, in «Women's Studies International Forum», vol. XIX, n. 5, 1996, pp. 525-533: p. 526.

21. See Ann Cooper Albright, *Choreographing difference: the body and identity in contemporary dance*, cit.; Telory Davies, *Mobility: AXIS dancers push the boundaries of access*, in «Text and Performance Quarterly», vol. XXVIII, 2008, pp. 43-63; Michael Gard, *Neither flower child nor artiste be: aesthetics, ability and physical education*, in «Sport, Education and Society», vol. XI, n. 3, 2006, pp. 231-241, online: https://doi.org/10.1080/13573320600813382 (u.v. 29/4/2021); Lliane Loots, *You don't look like a dancer! Gender and disability politics in the arena of dance as performance and as a tool for learning in South Africa*, in «Agenda», vol. XXIX, n. 2, 2015, pp. 122-132.

Terminology within the dance field

To offer participants and audience members new aesthetics and new experiences is to offer the potentiality for a larger and necessary shift in the language that surrounds bodies and dance education. To change the language used when discussing dance, movement, and bodies is a first step toward becoming aware of the way the culture that surrounds dancing bodies is created. Thus, our language provides us with a framework for this necessary change. Other ways to support changing the culture include using images that represent difference or align with a narrative that hopes to expand the scope of what dancing bodies look like in promotional material and advertisement, choosing to only attend shows that occur in accessible spaces, and providing – and asking for – accessibility information to be included in all promotional material.

It is important to remember that difference is something we all share[22]; it is what makes us who we are. As Garland-Thomson puts it: «wide human variation is the norm rather than the exception. It is the ideology of ableism that tells us we should all look the same»[23]. Within dance pedagogy, a shift toward working with difference would benefit everyone and make way for embracing variations. Dance artist and scholar Lliane Loots critiques the "norm" in dance for consisting of «idealised, sexualised and often athletic super-bodies»[24]. Dance scholars Sarah Whatley and Kate Marsh write: «The image of the "normative" body is ingrained in our understanding of being human. […] We live in a world where the "normal" body rules. We are "accepting" of difference, but there is still an underlying narrative of curiosity and freakishness relating to the "different" body»[25].

Encountering bodies that do not look like ours within educational environments can support this change. To become more aware of the language we use when talking about dance, training, and bodies is a necessary step to keep fostering a more inclusive and accessible dance culture. Dance artist and professor Tone Pernille Østern writes: «In seeing each other as body categories, we continue creating dualistic dance worlds. In seeing beyond the worlds (and words) of categorisations, we have the possibility to create new dance worlds, more critical and inclusive language, and eventually, more inclusive dance pedagogy»[26].

22. See Minae Inahara, *This body which is not one: The body, femininity and disability*, in «Body & Society», vol. XV, n. 1, 2009, pp. 47-62.

23. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Dares to stares. Disabled women performance artists & the dynamics of staring*, in Carrie Sandahl – Philip Auslander (edited by), *Bodies in commotion: disability and performance*, cit., p. 40.

24. Lliane Loots, *You don't look like a dancer! Gender and disability politics in the arena of dance as performance and as a tool for learning in South Africa*, cit., p. 123.

25. Sarah Whatley – Kate Marsh, *Making no difference: inclusive dance pedagogy*, in Stephanie Burridge – Charlotte Svendler Nielsen (edited by), *Dance, access, and inclusion*, Routledge, London-New York 2017, pp. 3-11: p. 9.

26. Tone Pernille Østern, *Developing inclusive dance pedagogy: dialogue, activism and aesthetic transformative learning*, in Stephanie Burridge – Charlotte Svendler Nielsen (edited by), *Dance, access, and inclusion*, cit., pp. 12-19: p. 14.

A shift in language is a necessary first step, but it must come with a desire to challenge and change our perception of dance aesthetics, the "norm", and dance pedagogy. Østern, similarly to Kuppers[27], believes that: «the development of inclusive dance pedagogy is about both word-making and world-making. To create a dance pedagogy that is truly inclusive requires activism, determination, and willingness to change oneself as well as others, dance worlds and dance words»[28].

As an example, let us discuss the different ways dance companies describe themselves: inclusive, disabled, integrated, mixed-ability, to name a few. The word choices and images used in promotion materials already have an impact on our perception and understanding of what the dance company does and who is perceived as a dancer. In 1998, Dianne Gregory writes: «a ballet troupe which includes people in wheelchairs is "newsworthy" only because it breaks with traditional thinking about ballet and about people using wheelchairs. It is not, at least not yet, an assumed "everyday" occurrence»[29].

Since then, the discourse has changed and shifted, but not as dramatically as one would hope and expect.

Albright supports the importance of recognizing and naming disability as an opportunity to make a significant impact on dance. By assuming that «disability does not make a (big) difference»[30], we would in fact be «limiting the (real) difference that disability can make in radically refiguring how we look at, conceive of, and organize bodies»[31]. This standpoint was challenged by Adam Benjamin in 2002, when he questioned if it is at all necessary to prepare the audience for an experience of dance that might include wheelchairs on stage. However, in 2010, reflecting on the lack of a "disability" heading in the second edition of *The Oxford Dictionary of Dance* (2004) he writes: «no mention was made in the dictionary of integrated or inclusive dance, or of disability and dance at all»[32]. He points out how: «In 1990 this might have been something we would have been rather proud of, believing at the time that there was no need to mention "disability" to describe what we were doing, and that a disabled person being part of a dance company should not merit any particular mention»[33].

Benjamin goes on to recognize that: «the picture has altered beyond recognition: disabled artists are now embedded within the UK dance scene»[34]. He questions if the lack of the heading "disabil-

27. Petra Kuppers, *Accessible education: aesthetics, bodies and disability*, cit., p. 119.
28. Tone Pernille Østern, *Developing inclusive dance pedagogy: dialogue, activism and aesthetic transformative learning*, cit., p. 18.
29. Dianne Gregory, *Reactions to ballet with wheelchairs: reflections on attitudes toward people with disabilities*, in «Journal of Music Therapy», vol. XXXV, n. 4, 1998, pp. 274-283: p. 275.
30. Ann Cooper Albright, *Strategic abilities: negotiating the disabled body in dance*, cit., w. p.
31. *Ibidem*.
32. Adam Benjamin, *Cabbages and kings: disability, dance, and some timely considerations*, cit., p. 157.
33. *Ivi*, p. 163.
34. *Ibidem*.

ity" has to do with a belief, «at some deeper level» that «disability and dance constituted a diversion from "the real thing"»[35].

Petra Kuppers argues:

> When disabled people perform, they are often not primarily seen as performers, but as disabled people. The disabled body is *naturally* about disability. The reframings of this disabled body through the lenses of filmdance and performance […] point to the un-natural body in discourse and allow a different view on the active embodied person to emerge[36].

Sarah Whatley suggests that the word integrated «poses another potential dichotomy. Already, the dance and therefore the experience of the audience are likely colored by an expectation of bringing together two different components or categories of "normal" and "other"»[37]. Hickey-Moody describes the practice of «reverse integration»[38] and «cultures of intellectual disability»[39], two terms used by Australian dance company Restless Dance. The company employed these terms to «describe the practice of people without intellectual disabilities "integrating" to fit in with the styles of people with intellectual disabilities»[40]. The methodology used by Restless Dance acknowledges each «dancers' histories and identities' as lived and embodied (and hence located in their personal style)»[41]. All Bodies Dance Project uses the terminology of dancers with and without disabilities in all of the advertisement material, however, during class each person is addressed according to their preference. The terminology "dancers with and without disabilities" reverses the expectation that the person "without" something is the one with the disability; moreover, it models an example of people-first language.

Translations

Over the course of two years (December 2017 – December 2019), All Bodies Dance Project was involved in creating a new choreographic work, titled *Translations*, in collaboration with VocalEye – the first live descriptive arts service for the blind in Canada. *Translations* is a dance piece devised for small audiences as it brings forth an ethic of care that allows for an intimate and immersive experi-

35. *Ivi*, p. 157.

36. Petra Kuppers, *Deconstructing images: performing disability*, in «Contemporary Theatre Review», vol. XI, n. 3-4, 2001, pp. 25-40: p. 26, online: https://doi.org/10.1080/10486800108568636 (u.v. 29/4/2021).

37. Sarah Whatley, *The spectacle of difference: dance and disability on screen*, in «International Journal of Screendance», vol. I, n. 1, 2010, pp. 41-52: p. 43, online: http://dx.doi.org/10.18061/ijsd.v1i0.6144 (u.v. 29/4/2021).

38. Anna Hickey-Moody, *Unimaginable bodies: intellectual disability, performance and becomings*, Sense Publishers, Rotterdam 2009.

39. *Ibidem*.

40. *Ivi*, p. XV.

41. Anna Hickey-Moody, *Integrated dance as a public pedagogy of the body*, in «Social Alternatives», vol. XXXVI, n. 4, 2017, pp. 5-13: p. 8.

ence. Further, the work is designed to be experienced with the non-visual senses.

Translations is by no means the first project to investigate the possibility of experiencing dance without seeing it. In 2008, Bettina Neuhaus invited «blind observers»[42] to attend her dance solo *NEWS*. In 2013, Dutch choreographer Eline van Ark created a show titled *The invisible dancer*, which used similar descriptive approaches to those implemented in *Translations*. However, what makes *Translations* unique is that the process was driven by values rooted in an "aesthetic of access", which considers accessibility as the starting point rather than a post-production addition. Moreover, both *NEWS* and *The invisible dancer* are solo works choreographed on and for non-disabled dancers, whereas *Translations* is a group piece danced by an ensemble of very different bodies both with and without disabilities, such diverse representation is still latent within contemporary dance. This distinction is particularly relevant when it comes to description because the language around describing difference is still in its early stages[43].

Describing dance is a serious act and, although audio description of dance is becoming more common, the European Centre for Cultural Accessibility identifies it as «a rare and experimental feature for dance performance»[44] because it requires a considerable amount of preparation work. Audio describer Valérie Castan urges describers to find descriptive tools that are specifically for dance and unique to each choreography, rather than relying on the strategies used in film[45].

Live description, such as the typical work of VocalEyes, is primarily used to describe the visual elements of an existing theatrical performance or event. In the case of *Translations*, there was no existing dance ready to be described. The piece was in fact conceived of alongside the idea that the dance and the description would be created together, one in service of the other. Each dancer created new choreography that could be experienced through different senses, a dance of the mouth, of the hands, of the eyes, of the elbow, and of the whole body. This approach allowed for a result where «the line between what is the dance and what is the description is blurred beyond recognition»[46].

Translations was choreographed and performed by a cast of sighted dancers; seven guides/dancers that were part of the process from conception to completion (Naomi Brand, Romham Gallacher, Rianne Svelnis, Harmanie Rose, Danielle Wensley, Adam Grant Warren and myself), and four dancers/guides of a rotating cast (Andrea Cownden, Emmalena Fredriksson, Peggy Leung, Car-

42. Piet Devos, *Dancing beyond sight: how blindness shakes up the senses of dance*, in «Disability Studies Quarterly», vol. XXXVIII, n. 3, 2018, online: http://dx.doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v38i3.6473 (u.v. 29/4/2021).

43. *Describing diversity report published*, in «Vocal Eyes UK», 15th September 2020, online: https://vocaleyes.co.uk/describing-diversity-report-published/ (u.v. 2/5/2021).

44. André Fertier, *Dance & visual impairment. For an accessibility of choreographic practices*, Centre National de la Danse, Pantin 2017, p. 28.

45. *Ibidem*.

46. Carolina Bergonzoni – Naomi Brand, *Translations - A dance for the nonvisual senses*, in «Performance Matters», vol. V, n. 1, 2019, pp. 149-157: p. 152.

oline Liffmann, Joshua Ongcol and Daisy Thompson). Throughout the process, the cast worked together with artistic consultants from the blind, partially-sighted, and «non-visual learner»[47] community including key consultants Amy Amantea, Cathy Browne, Carmen Papalia[48] and Collin van Uchelen.

By working alongside a group of artistic consultants who are blind and partially sighted, the dancers and the choreographer were able to receive immediate feedback and visceral responses on what worked, what was clear, and what was redundant. Van Uchelen attended most of the rehearsals and provided responsive feedback throughout the process based on what did or didn't provide him with a meaningful connection to the dance. His «perceptions helped identify what was being distorted or lost in translation»[49] and this «informed the refinement of the piece through cycles of performance, feedback, revision and so forth»[50].

Translations is a choreographic work designed to be experienced with the non-visual senses and, as such, each audience member (never more than ten) is paired with a dancer/guide. This pairing facilitates the unique opportunity of having a one-on-one experience and centers an ethic of care. The piece begins in the theatre lobby where the dancers/guides first meet audience members. The initial meeting in the lobby gives the dancers/guides the time to provide an outline of what to expect during the performance, to introduce the descriptive techniques used in the piece that involve touch and to give sighted guests the chance to practice being guided without the use of their eyesight. Sighted audience members are offered sleep-shades in order to experience the piece from a non-visual perspective, «not to replicate the experience of blindness, but rather as an opportunity to focus on the information about the moving body being delivered through other senses»[51]. The cast of *Translations*, including myself, received training in "sighted guide" techniques from Steph Kirkland, the Executive Director of VocalEye. She describes the experience of being guided into the theatre as an act of intimacy and interdependence.

> For those who were sighted, this is [being guided into the theatre] perhaps their first experience of the intimacy and interdependence of the guide and the guided. These performance conventions, a familiar part of live description for the blind, made them the centre of their own experience, an audience of one, where they could observe their own powers of attention and imagination and ultimately access dance through that form of "seeing" that happens with the mind, not the eye[52].

47. Carmen Papalia, *You can do it with your eyes close*, in «Art21 Magazine», 7th October 2014, online: http://magazine.art21.org/2014/10/07/you-can-do-it-with-your-eyes-closed/#.YH8KEi297OR (u.v. 3/5/2021).

48. Carmen Paplia identifies as a "non-visual learner".

49. Naomi Brand – Steph Kirkland – Collin Van Uchelen, *Translations – A research project for blind and partially sighted viewers*, in «Dance International», 16th August 2019, online: https://danceinternational.org/translations-research-project-blind-partially-sighted-viewers/ (u.v. 3/5/2021).

50. *Ibidem*.

51. *Ibidem*.

52. *Ibidem*.

Kirkland talks about the «seeing that happens with the mind, not the eye»[53]. In describing her experience with audio description, blind scholar Georgina Kleege problematizes the idea of the mind's eye. She writes: «I am not sure that I have a mind's eye, or if I do, its vision is impaired precisely to the same degree as my physical eyes. I am not particularly adept at forming mental images to illustrate words I hear or read»[54]. Some of Kleege's insights on the relationship between language and images were brought up by the blind consultants throughout the process, such as the disconnect between "dancer language" and a more relatable "pedestrian language".

An important part of the piece's performance conventions is the conversation around touch. Here, consent is at the fore as each audience member is given the opportunity to choose how they would like to experience the piece. Some options include descriptive touch on the back, the arm or no touch at all, as well as a chair with or without a back. The one-on-one connection between dancers/guides and audience members supports individualized experiences of the piece that are based on consent, personal needs and trust. An example of group work that was not described but relied on touch is *The palm of your hand II* (2015) by European choreographer Vera Tussing, a dance piece «about touching and being touched»[55]. In this piece, four dancers move in close proximity to audience members, letting them touch their costumes and bodies. In *The palm of your hand II* touch is used as a choreographic element and becomes essential to the piece's existence. Similarly, in *Translations*, touch is used as a way to describe the piece, and as a tool to convey the dance that is not seen; touch is an essential aspect of the piece itself.

For *Translations*, the theatre is cleared of all traditional seating and stools are arranged in an intimate circle, where the audience members sit. This seating arrangement allows the dancers to move in close proximity to the audience members, and to provide descriptive touch during certain sections of the piece. The dance takes place in and outside of the circle, allowing for the sound of voices and movement to travel. Once seated, each audience member is introduced to the spatial configuration of the circle; the experiences of the dance are unique, according to each audience member's location in space. Collin Van Uchelen explains how the proximity to sound and the movement of sound allowed him to «begin to sense the shape of the space and realize we are all – audience members and performers – on the same stage together»[56]. Van Uchelen describes his experience of gazing into the sound as the dancers move around. For Van Uchelen, the inclusion of the dancers' voices and the

53. *Ibidem*.

54. Georgina Kleege, *More than meets the eye: what blindness brings to art*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018, p. 101.

55. André Fertier, *Dance & visual impairment. For an accessibility of choreographic practices*, cit., p. 28.

56. Naomi Brand – Steph Kirkland – Collin Van Uchelen, *Translations – A research project for blind and partially sighted viewers*, cit.

sound of their movements «reveals their identities in the darkness; the characteristic sounds of their movements serve as unique sonic signatures»[57].

Translations moves toward a multisensory approach to dance, towards more-than-language. «The project was driven by the question: "What if sight wasn't the intended way to experience movement?" which supported the creation of "different tools that might be used to shift dance away from the dominant visual sense toward other ways of sensing and perceiving"»[58]. Throughout the process, we looked at the possibility of interpreting a work of dance through touch and verbal descriptions – both literal and metaphorical – as a way to include more audience members; we asked how we might guide audience members through a sensorial experience of a dance work.

In *Translations* we investigated description that comes from the body and from the perspective of the dancers. Each dancer brought a unique perspective of their experience of dancing that would not have been possible to describe from an outsider point of view. The voices changed based on the shape of the body, the rate of the heartbeat, and the texture of movement.

In one section, one dancer performs a sequence based on Laban's Eight Efforts. The soloist repeats this sequence three times, removing one layer after the other. At first, the dancer uses her voice to describe the actions; then, only the Effort is described, each word delivered with the same quality and intentions. The third time, the only sound is that of breath, the swishing of clothing and the sound of the body (e.g. the stomp of feet). Throughout the solo the rest of the cast, located behind the audience's back, used their hands to tactile describe the piece.

Throughout the process, we researched the possibilities in layering as an artistic tool. Artistic Director Naomi Brand describes how *Translations* transmits information to the audience by «layering the language with the sound of the body moving, the breath of the dancer and the movement of the air to create a new understanding of the dance»[59]. *Translations* asks audiences to consider their own perceptions and the ways that they typically access art and the world around them. For me, as a sighted person, layering became an opportunity to reconsider my perspective. Often, when I don't find what I desire, or expect, I tend to look at what is lacking. By experiencing the development and application of layers, I was able to reframe my thinking to focus and enjoy what is present, rather than what is missing.

Translations shows how all experiences and perceptions are always already multisensory. As sensory ethnographer Sarah Pink points out: «the senses are not separated out at the point of per-

57. *Ibidem*.

58. Carolina Bergonzoni – Naomi Brand, *Translations - A dance for the nonvisual senses*, cit., p. 150.

59. Naomi Brand – Steph Kirkland – Collin Van Uchelen, *Translations – A research project for blind and partially sighted viewers*, cit.

ception, but culturally defined»[60]. In the Western world, the cultural understanding of sense often conceives of vision as "primary". *Translations* shifts this ocular-centric assumption and opens up new and unique means of interrogating the dance and the body through a multitude of senses. As such, the other (i.e., another person, another sense, or another way of perceiving) expands the field of experience and stretches the limits of the audiences' perception. Each person involved, either as an artist or an audience member, experiences a different aspect of the dance through different senses.

According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, when we incorporate an object into our phenomenal field, we change our world and alter our existence[61]. Philosopher Susan Bredlau expands on Merleau-Ponty's idea to include the possibility of incorporating people. She describes her experience of incorporating a person as an extension of her phenomenal field while exploring London with a friend who was very familiar with the city. After a couple of days, Bredlau explored the city alone and she realized that she could not perceive London as she had done when in the company of her friend. Bredlau concludes: «If, while with her [the friend] I could board the train nonchalantly, peer intently at the people passing by, and cross the streets with easy assurance, it was because I was perceiving these situations not on my own, but rather *through* my friend»[62].

The phenomenon of incorporation creates «a perceiver who was no longer confined to [the] individual body»[63]; but it expands into the other's body. During this process: «both the perceiver and what is perceived take on new identities. […] Incorporation may not only render perceptive what was previously not, as in the case of the cane and the blind man, but also render what is perceptive for itself also perceptive for another»[64].

In *Translations*, «the boundaries between perceiver and perceived»[65] were constantly redrawn. When discussing the possibility of "incorporating" another individual we should not objectify them, but rather consider the possibility of expanding our phenomenal field to include someone else's awareness, senses, perception, and experience. In *Translations*, the perspective of the "translator" – the sighted dancer/guide – inevitably affected the audience members' experience of the piece by facilitating their perception of the dance through different senses.

Translations requires audience member to engage in what Sarah Whatley defines as an "active witness strategy" of viewing. This means that the audience members allow «for disability to open up

60. Sarah Pink, *Doing sensory ethnography - 2nd edition*, SAGE, London 2015, p. 10.

61. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception*, Routledge, London 2012 (I ed. *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Gallimard, Paris 1945).

62. Susan Bredlau, *Perceiving through another: incorporation and the child perceiver*, in Kirsten Jacobson – John Russon (edited by), *Perception and its development in Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2017, pp. 81-98: p. 84.

63. *Ibidem*.

64. *Ivi*, pp. 82-83.

65. *Ivi*, p. 81.

new ways of seeing and new ways of interpreting the body in dance, thereby enabling a radical shift in aesthetic and a less judgmental view of their own and others' bodies»[66]. This process opens up new ways of perceiving. Although it is impossible to experience the world – and therefore the dance – as someone else, new ways of knowing, experiencing, perceiving, and learning can emerge by encountering the dancers, their dances and their differences.

When I dance on stage, I assume people are watching, but I don't feel a strong sense of focused attention. In *Translations*, the intimacy of having only ten-twelve audience members, the one-on-one experience of guiding them in and out of the theatre, and the experience of providing description through touch made me feel seen, felt, and witnessed in a way I had never experienced before. Translations is an example of redirecting the gaze, of reconsidering the way we approach, perceive, feel, look, and listen to bodies.

Final thoughts

Translations was conceived as an immersive performance for small audiences, with accessibility as the main objective. Part of the research process focused on establishing protocols around consent, trust, safety, and boundaries between the performers and the audience members. The piece was conceived, created, developed, and produced at the intersection of ethic and aesthetic, particularly an ethic of hosting and caring. The ethic of care that I refer to does not consider care as a gift[67], but rather it takes into account both the giver and the recipient of care. Care can be reframed as a pleasure, rather than a chore[68].

Reflecting on the experience of *Translations* a year later, and during a global pandemic, seems more relevant than ever. In 1999, dance ethnographer Deidre Sklar proposed the methodology of "kinesthetic empathy". According to Sklar, kinesthetic empathy is a «translations capacity that we all inherently possess»[69]. Through kinesthetic empathy, which involves bodily memories and intelligence, we can increase our capacity for «vicarious kinesthetic experiences»[70]. I cannot stop thinking of how relevant and important reintroducing people to touch will be post-pandemic, and how this may help them to redevelop a sense of «self-reflexivity about [their] own lived-movement and touch through

66. Sarah Whatley, *Dance and disability: the dancer, the viewer and the presumption of difference*, cit., p. 20.

67. See Bill Hughes – Linda McKie – Debra Hopkins – Nick Watson, *Love's labours lost? Feminism, the disabled people's movement and an ethic of care*, in «Sociology», vol. XXXIX, n. 2, 2005, pp. 259-275, online: https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038505050538 (u.v. 3/5/2021).

68. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care as pleasure*, in Adrienne Maree Brown (edited by), *Pleasure activism: the politics of feeling good*, AK Press, Chico 2019, pp. 313-315: p. 315.

69. Deidre Sklar, *Can bodylore be brought to its senses?*, in «The Journal of American Folklore», vol. CVII, n. 423, 1994, pp. 9-22: p. 15.

70. *Ivi*, p. 14.

experience»[71]. *Translations* is a piece that facilitates our ability to get in touch with the felt knowledge of our body and, as such, facilitates kinesthetic empathy.

71. *Ibidem*.