

**Alternative Aesthetic Encounters: creating dance-  
theatre performance with artists with learning or  
intellectual disabilities.**

**Seven Published Works**

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## **Introduction**

Underpinning the works that comprise this PhD are four research questions that ask how people with learning disabilities might contribute new knowledge and understanding about theatre and alternative expressions of the world we share. Firstly, in what ways might the production of theatrical performance by people with learning disabilities contribute to a widening of the aesthetics of collaborative theatre making? Secondly, what kind of collaborations might emerge in this context and how might they produce alternative aesthetics? Thirdly, how can non disabled collaborators perceive and embody radically different expressions that may appear the result of pathology, defect, or feel unseemly and unaccountable within the context of normative systems and values? Finally, how might such expressions be understood as resonant and articulate within a crafted piece of work? The elements of this research, both practice and written publications contribute towards the development of an aesthetic that privileges the authorship of people with learning disabilities.

This submission by the route of publication comprises three recordings documenting public performances, one recording that documents elements of the process involved in creating one of these performances, three articles and one book chapter, all published between 2009 and 2015. These works have emerged from my practice based research project that focuses on devising theatre with people with learning disabilities. The performance work is made by Cyrff Ystwyth, a

dance-theatre company comprised of people with and without learning and physical disabilities. The methodology of my practice with Cyrff Ystwyth is to follow the lead of a person with learning disabilities and to support the production of a theatrical performance. This involves commitment to the ideas of the person leading the work, and reproduction, appropriation and learning of the physical and vocal material offered by the leader. I do not bring choreographic ideas or text to the work but instead depend on the presence of the leader for dramaturgical material. Cyrff Ystwyth work together every week for nine months of the year with our work culminating in a public performance.

The practice of following the ideas, choreography and imaginings of a person with learning disabilities involves a sophisticated balance between personal and collective need, expectation, and the wider context of contemporary theatre and dance aesthetics. By thinking about theatre by people with learning disabilities beyond the familiar frames of benefit and therapy, and instead taking this work seriously as a contribution to theatre, I seek to open up a political understanding of both learning disability and theatre aesthetics. Thinking in this way can open new understandings of both how learning disability is constructed in society, and how the terms of theatre might be broadened. In the items I present here I am fully aware of my own efforts to construct colleagues as competent artists. Such work also continues theatre's task to examine what it means to be human at a given point in time and what it might mean for audiences to experience the often radical differences of learning disability in performance.

The three documented performances, and process, the articles, and the chapter that comprise this PhD submission make an original contribution to the field of disability and performance by arguing for an expanded aesthetic field within live performance that is produced through the aegis of people with learning disabilities. My work has three interlocking aspects: The process and the role of director, the production of a final performance created from this process and academic research that draws from and loops back into the first two aspects. This ecology of practitioner/researcher brings to the fore questions of authorship, radical otherness, collaboration and co-creation and proposes that within such work, there might be information about alternative views of the world that contribute to a better understanding about living with a learning disability and our specific cultural and geographical location. It might be that people with learning disabilities have artistic contributions to make that add to our understanding of theatre itself. Such working practices may produce indirect advocacy such as greater understanding about creative capacities and different channels of communication. The research makes a claim for live dance-theatre work that seeks to contribute to mainstream dance-theatre and to understandings of power, social construction and marginalization. Considering western societies' discursive positioning of people with learning disabilities, Licia Carlson states that people with learning disabilities are understood and taken account of within abstract or theoretical concepts such as justice, and personhood. In these social and ethical contexts, people with learning disabilities function as examples, perhaps of use to

the policy maker, or theorist. Of direct relevance to my work she juxtaposes these conceptual considerations, that are plentiful, with the lack of consideration given to: ‘...concrete practices and the social and political context in which this group [people with learning disabilities] is situated’ (Carlson, 2010, 11).

It is exactly this situation that the Cyrff Ystwyth works I present, and the practice of devising that has produced the thinking that the final products contain, attempts to address. The concrete practice of dancing and making theatre is a collaborative endeavour between myself and colleagues with, and without learning disabilities. It is the means by which examples of a challenging aesthetic address to personhood, place, and location are offered to the public via performance. In the performances and in my writing I am concerned with the social, political and personal contexts of my colleagues in Cyrff Ystwyth. These conditions include: rural living and a struggling economy, the complex linguistic and cultural mix of Welsh language and culture, English language and culture, and other international cultural influences within the rural town of Aberystwyth itself. Common to those of us living in the rural heartlands beyond the town can be isolation and a disparate societal network. This network is characterized by traditional values within farming, nonconformist Protestantism, a tendency towards binary gender roles and the deep sense of identity that the Welsh language signifies to its speakers. Underpinning everything is an ailing economy resulting in neglected infrastructures and struggling services.

In my practice with Cyrff Ystwyth, creative proposals consistently occur because each choreographer, author and performer has a specific approach and goal to create their theatre. They appear as specific individuals within a group who present their work as concrete and formal creative acts rather than unmediated and non-reflexive responses drawn from the unconscious, as might be the case in a therapeutic encounter which seeks to use such unconscious material to offer insight to a client, as intervention that might improve quality of life or mitigate against a problem. My scholarly practice comprises creative and critical practice in three key parts: weekly devising process work with the company, final performance, the result of the former and critical thinking about the creative experience. The writing is an examination of knowledge and proposals that emerge from the practice and its aesthetics.

I recruit the philosophy of Roberto Esposito and his thinking on *communitas*, which offers a theoretical frame for my subjective experience, which is inevitably formed within the creative processes, and an analytical tool for understanding Cyrff Ystwyth's practice and contribution within its cultural context. Following this, I provide a brief account of the history of my practice and influences from the start of the 1980s. I include this section in order to make clear a consistent trajectory in both practice and theory that is located, that has produced my research and that enables its development. Setting the scene within the recent past reveals the concerns and connections that fomented in Aberystwyth at this time, which remains a key moment in the cultural life of Wales. Before concluding, I



situate my research and practice with Cyrff Ystwyth within the wider field of Performance and Disability with a brief account of both theoretical and practice works that have influenced me and supported my thinking, and to which I aim to contribute further understandings via my work with Cyrff Ystwyth.

The first published work is a video recording documenting the performance *Brighton Beach* (2009). This is the first example of the performance practice that underpins this long term research project. Its significance lies in its appropriation of techniques of performance by a person with disabilities to produce an alternative self-representation. *Brighton Beach* was authored by Edward Wadsworth, in collaboration with myself and Cyrff Ystwyth. Wadsworth took an autobiographical approach and used his childhood in foster care with a family in Brighton to examine experiences of having both learning and physical disabilities. His determination to be a creative contributor in his community is filtered through his account of rejection, love and struggle to both understand and manage the things that happen to a person. Here is an example of Esposito's dialectic between *communitas* and *immunitas*.

The second recording documents a performance by Adrian Jones called *Work* (2010), that foregrounded new approaches to choreography, drawing on Jones' embodied responses to memories and questions asked in rehearsals. It contributes to new thinking and paradigms of work in devising theatre and in developing and expanding understandings of forms of agricultural life by considering rural Welsh

experience through the author's particular choreography of gesture and movement through space. Jones focused on his experiences of life as farmer with themes that drew on the perils of this hard life: constant hard work, financial hardship, and serious accidents within the sustaining context of Welsh cultural practices.

The third recording is a documentation of another work by Adrian Jones, *Capel: The Lights Are On* (2012), part of the AHRC project 'Challenging Concepts of 'Liquid' Place through Performative Practices'. Jones shaped the output in response to questions about how he and other members of the company Cyrff Ystwyth perceive issues of belonging, dislocation, and place. It was performed at the abandoned Methodist chapel which still stands in the centre of his home village in Ceredigion. Once again he chose to examine rural Welsh themes drawn from his personal experience. This recording is accompanied by a fourth that documents aspects of the process by which the work was made. This is included as an example of the weekly practice where ideas are drawn out and shared, key thoughts are discovered, and how they eventually find their way into the final product.

The published writings are closer analyses of some of the themes and issues that emerge during the practice and in the completed performances. They form the means for a closer consideration of what knowledge might be held within the practice of devising and performing as well as a means to a wider dissemination of the practice. My awareness of the delicate and shifting relations between

myself, as director, the lead author with a learning disability, and the performers in Cyrff Ystwyth, is often a source of delight and frustration. Ethics in action is a process and an integral aspect of Cyrff Ystwyth's practice. Co-creating is an essential part of our work, yet I hold the aesthetics of the piece of work being crafted as the primary and necessary focus. My writing sometimes presents moments of concern and perhaps crisis in these relationships and in my actions and they are not separate from the formation of the final work as a contribution to contemporary theatre. In the first published article, 'Working with Adrian Jones, dance artist' (2011) I examine the working practice and relationship between myself, as director, and Cyrff Ystwyth performer Adrian Jones, as the focus for a consideration of how we work together and the power relations at play. As the academic researcher/director I wield the authority of language and make dramaturgical decisions. Whether or not Adrian Jones can arrive at the studio is in my hands. He, on the other hand, produces my research material, and the performance that will go before the audience is our joint responsibility. Alongside accounts developed from rehearsal notes and presented in a timeline between 2007 and 2009, I argue that his choreography emerges from his learning disability yet produces aesthetic manifestations that signal the complexity of human identity rather than an over determined single identity of being disabled. I understand this unlikely collaboration between an academic and theatre maker without a learning disability, and a person with a learning disability from a background in farming, through a phenomenological lens. This is an attempt at a description of the collaborative relationship and the emergence of a specific cultural expression

through movement, which is particular to the choreographer. I discuss his 2009 piece, *Work*, which examined his life on a beef cattle farm, daily tasks, the dangers of the agricultural industry, and the relentless nature of this work and way of life. His movement expression reveals his cultural context and his non neuro-typical status.<sup>1</sup> This article presents my interest in a phenomenological approach to comprehend our collaboration and the movement expressions offered by Jones. It also tackles my thinking about how Cyrff Ystwyth's work embodies and resonates with the philosophy of Roberto Esposito and his work on *communitas* and *immunitas* that posits a philosophical tension between an idea of community as only constituted through obligation to the Other and immunity from this debt in the form of the individual who must remain free of such obligation. This article establishes key theoretical premises that continue to develop through my practice based research.

In the second piece: 'Performing between Intention and Unconscious Daily Gesture: How Might Disabled Dancers Offer us a new Aesthetic Sensibility?' (2012), I present an example of aesthetic encounter in the work of Cyrff Ystwyth member, Edward Wadsworth. I take Eugenio Barba's well established theory of the daily and extra-daily body<sup>2</sup> and consider Wadsworth's performance in his own work *Brighton Beach* with Cyrff Ystwyth. I argue, via Barba, that the body of this performer works to redefine virtuosity and disability through an unstable reading of the body in performance. I claim that in Wadsworth's performance, his impairment becomes less disabling as he works as a theatrical performer and

briefly escapes society's 'ablist' constructions. Instead, his impairment manifests as aesthetic material; it is the particular detail of a body in action. Here I again consider the power relations that condition the collaboration between Wadsworth, the author with learning disabilities and physical disabilities, and myself. I consider the interplay between the person with an impairment, a social context which valorizes ability, and an aesthetic context. I argue that an aesthetic context demands either a commercially constructed ideal of body and skill, or a beneficiary performing their diminished status for their patrons, the audience. These relations of power are however, filtered through the work of theatre making and the responsibilities and rigour required in the process. This process is described as clearly one of artistic endeavour. I propose that by choosing to appear within the frame of theatre, Wadsworth activates agency and through his disability produces an 'arrest of disability' (Ames, 2012, 157). This however is not about overcoming disability, or the portrayal of the tragic hero. It is an effect of two physical states understood through Barba's notion of the daily and extra-daily body where the ineluctable condition of the daily disabled body is present along with the intention to perform for an audience, via the dilated and extra-daily disabled body. I describe the effects of this as a 'vibratory relationship' (151) that produces aesthetic encounter.

In the third article, 'Dancing Place/Disability' (2015) I extend these initial arguments about agency, collaboration, and an alternative aesthetics produced by particular people and bodies. I dispute dance dramaturg and theorist Andre

Lepecki's thesis on the political power of stillness in dance. I propose that Adrian Jones' work responds to Lepecki's proposition but through different manifestations that are not still, and do not conform to the movements or bodies of mainstream dancers. I concur with Lepecki's thesis about the political potential of non-conformist dances of stillness but dispute its discriminatory effects on dancers who cannot be still and who, because of disability, find placement of limbs and posture into quietude impossible. Here the argument considers the cultural context of the rural west of Wales via Adrian Jones' work and examines ideas of cultural minority within the context of Jones' work and his disability. I discuss embodied knowledge, emplacement, and cultural specificity within the terms of Carrie Noland's thesis for gesture as embodied cultural inscription and Lepecki's argument for choreography's political potential.

Finally, the fourth work is a chapter – 'Scenes and Encounters, Bodies and Abilities: Devising Performance with Cyrrff Ystwyth' (2016) – from an edited collection of essays that combine research in Occupational Therapy, Anthropology and Disability Studies. The chapter focuses on the concepts and realities of colonization and occupation and strategies of response and resistance in the context of disability. My chapter offers an overview of the potential significance of Cyrrff Ystwyth's work in its cultural context in the west of Wales and critiques the dominant concept of art work as therapeutic within the political rhetoric of regeneration, access, and benefit in the UK. I pay particular attention to social and political discourses of the arts as beneficial for people, and drawing

on Hannah Arendt and Jean-Luc Nancy, I place this at odds with Cyrff Ystwyth and Adrian Jones' work. The notion of being occupied with making theatre and choreography is not equivalent with political discourses of occupation as a means of producing capital nor as a means of management of otherwise problematic people whose lack of intellectual capacity in our complex post-industrial society renders them unproductive and in economic deficit. This chapter critiques neo liberal capitalist values through the lens of Cyrff Ystwyth and concludes by suggesting a parallel between the experience of marginal cultural life and that of the person with a learning disability.

These works contribute culturally specific examples of the possibilities for a radical expansion of aesthetic readings of dance and theatre made by people with learning disabilities. The work I discuss moves understanding towards a re-construction of artists with learning disabilities as contributors to the development of aesthetic appreciation. Across all seven published works, both practice and theory, there is a claim to cultural context and to the troubling of notions of community. The cultural context of the west of Wales, in particular Ceredigion, is far removed from centres of political and economic power. Defined as one of the remaining heartlands of Welsh speaking Wales, residents here experience a mix of inland rural and coastal life and Welsh and English languages. The University town of Aberystwyth provides a significant source of international connections and scholarship, a small cosmopolitan focus that also carries a cultural and historical legacy both within its

institutions and out on its streets. However, Ceredigion and its rural population remain on the periphery of more powerful national discourses within the context of Britain. My writing extends the reach and impact of Cyrff Ystwyth's performances, and in writing from a cultural margin I propose a specific context and set of circumstances from which Cyrff Ystwyth emerged. I understand that to write from the margins about this practice also means writing the detail of marginalized (disabled) bodies working to co-create particular statements through theatre. In this way a doubling or overlapping of marginalisation between learning disability and cultural context resonate together.

Central to this thinking is Roberto Esposito's tracing of what community is and how it is, in fact, impossible. However Esposito finds that this very impossibility is community's pre-condition and it is originary. Esposito analyses the concept of community in terms of what we have in common and as brought about by a continual obligation to the other, which cannot be fulfilled. If we are in common with one another it behoves us to understand our commonality with those people our systems of power and control have always excluded. Esposito contrasts *communitas* with *immunitas*. The OED Online gives a simple definition of *communitas*: 'community; a body of people acting collectively' ('communitas, n.' 2016). Victor Turner uses the term in a more complex manner. For him *communitas* denotes unity borne of common cause and practice on the one hand and on the other a more profound



experience that is subversive because it is anti-structural (Schechner, 2006, 70-71). Such phenomena are, according to Richard Schechner, usually brought about through ritual process. Turner defines his concept of *communitas* as: ‘...representing the desire for total, unmediated relationship between person and person, a relationship which nevertheless does not submerge one in the other but safeguards their uniqueness in the very act of realizing their commonness’ (Turner in Schechner 2006, 71). Esposito takes a less utopian view of the concept and positions community, or *communitas* as a duality: both essential to existence and as impossible to bring about. Vanessa Lemm defines Esposito’s position on *communitas*: ‘Community is a debt, a flaw, a lack. From this perspective, what we have in common by necessity is the impossibility of realizing community’ (Lemm 2013, 3). *Immunitas* by contrast, is an exemption. Immunity from the obligations made by community is, according to Esposito delivered in this way: ‘...*immunitas* returns individuals to themselves, encloses them once again in their own skin’ (2012, 49). Esposito parses the word *communitas* drawing on its Latin etymology. The shared root of *munus*, or a gift, he points out, is in the one case a positive concept and in another it is negative. Violence experienced in the name of community and in our desire for protection is pertinent with regard to people with learning disabilities. He asserts: ‘*Immunis* is he or she who has no obligations toward the other and can therefore conserve his or her own essence intact as a subject and owner of himself or herself’ (2013, 39). Immunization is a safety mechanism in a political and social context of power and

competition. It offers, 'sufficient distance so as to immunize each from everyone else' (40). Whilst Esposito considers humanity as a general category of species existence, his thinking is important for people with disabilities. Limits and boundaries are erected in the name of immunization that: '...defend them from the undesired and insidious contact with the other...' (ibid). For my purposes, the other is specific: persons with learning disabilities. This thinking can be extended to consider the ever changing vocabularies that attempt to define and describe persons who are not neuro-typical and who need care and support in order to survive. Esposito considers geo-political borders:

Borders, we recall, were initially erected so as to limit the sovereign territory of single states as well as to protect the individual bodies of single citizens. At a certain point, however, they are understood to be thresholds within human life itself that allow the division of one part that is said to be superior from another that is considered inferior. This continues until a point is reached at which such a life is no longer worthy of being lived. (Esposito, 2012, 130).

Whilst Esposito argues for a global community, the work I present argues that social immunisation against intellectual deficit supports hegemonic narratives of virtuosity and skill, capability, and the exclusion of people whose existences require the interpersonal care and support of others. The obligation at the heart of

global community also requires the acceptance of minority ways of life. If theatre is a means of communication, then artists such as those in Cyrff Ystwyth communicate both marginal embodied experience from within a specific cultural context and insert learning disability into the definition of community against the political term ‘inclusion’, which immediately establishes a hierarchy of power based on proper capacity. This is a resistance to *immunitas* where the border between human and non-human is policed and violence is perpetrated; rather, *communitas* is presented and enacted through alternative aesthetics, not through inclusion but as part of the series of acts of obligation towards others.

### **A Located History**

I stated earlier in the introduction to this work that offering a brief history of my practice and its influences is important. Personal development is inevitably conditioned by social context and prevailing conditions of the time. Location and cultural context are central to my practice with Cyrff Ystwyth. Of significance here is how the recent historical and cultural past that formed my practice is still today a strong feature in my thinking and weekly practice with Cyrff Ystwyth. The North Ceredigion Community Dance Project was formally established in 1987 and represents a major turn in consolidating and developing these early actions that I will describe here. Cyrff Ystwyth formed the keystone of this organization that eventually became Dawns Dyfed Dance and was funded by the

Arts Council of Wales until 2007. This short history foregrounds my developing practice and concern with group dynamics, the relationship between art as therapeutic and as aesthetic and the overarching question of why any of this might be important or have relevance in a world of increasing division and struggle. This work emerged from a particular moment when artists and cultural and political activists in Wales were engaging in linguistically and politically specific issues. In Aberystwyth during the early 1980s there was a certain energy and commitment to thinking and making in various disciplines and forms that coalesced around experiences of community, identity, language and minority representations and struggle. Esposito's work on *communitas* and *immunitas* speaks strongly to this time in the UK and is perhaps of even greater significance now. I find a resonance in the experiences of minority or marginalized voices and places, and Esposito's condition of community being nothing other than: 'the border and the point of transit between this immense devastation of meaning and the necessity that every singularity, every event, every fragment of existence make sense in itself' (2010, 149). Living in a marginalized community, making performance with people with marginalized lives draws me to consider theatre made by people with learning disabilities as a way for this precise border between meaning and the ideological appropriation of meaning that becomes meaningless, to be critiqued. The urgency of art for individuals, and the link between making and absorbing, viewing and doing, thinking and practice, and the constant hegemonic battle between those who establish culturally authoritative voices and make decisions on what might be suitable or unsuitable continue to underpin my

thinking about what people with learning disabilities might offer the discipline of theatre, in contrast to the more usual query of what might theatre offer people with learning disabilities. This issue, in ongoing debates in theory and practice will not be taken up directly here, but is a concern within the presented published works that form the body of this submission and the continuing practice of Cyrff Ystwyth.

Central to the events and developments of a temporary yet significant cultural moment in Aberystwyth was the old Barn Centre and the key figures who formed the Aberystwyth Community Association in this abandoned former foundry, opposite the railway station, which later became a university building. This vast site offered many different sized rooms, including a large black box studio theatre at its centre. It was Mike Pearson and Lis Hughes Jones who, in 1981, obtained keys from the Town Council and moved into one of the larger rooms, the former library, and began the work of what was to become a major internationally acclaimed theatre company, Brith Gof. Quickly others artists of a variety of disciplines took the initiative and began to populate the building. During the very early 80s I was employed by Dyfed Social Services and working in the Aberystwyth Day Centre. I began a programme of workshops and visits to artist's studios in the Barn Centre. My job description required me to organise activities for people with long term and enduring mental illness and for elderly users of the Day Centre. A strong relationship was formed between the two different user groups of the Day Centre and the artists in the Barn Centre, facilitated in no small

part by the close physical proximity of the two buildings. In 1982 the Aberystwyth Community Association was born from this committed grouping of independent artists and companies. With a constitution and agreement to undertake duties of public responsibility such as building maintenance, repair, overseeing occupants and providing space for local groups – such as the Band Practice Room and the Mother and Child Drop in Room – a programme of regular and more formalised events was organised. There were several Coordinators over time, who were paid a small sum for managing everything. However, it was Clifford McLucas (1945-2002) who became the prime mover in several initiatives that focused on aspects of artistic practice. McLucas refined, re-iterated and clarified his position regarding art and the work of the Association in the Barn Centre in notes dated July 10th 1985. In these he states that he was:

[...] concerned to develop other aspects of what I saw as the Barn Centre's potential centre for the arts – ie. [sic] a place where work of one kind or another in the arts is actively being produced. This, I see as being in contrast to the idea of a "showcase" where work created elsewhere is brought in to be "viewed". I am concerned that, if art is to be made real and 'urgent' for individuals, they need to be making it themselves (McLucas, 1985 RB/1).

He asserts:

If a series of attitudes adopted towards the creation or exhibition of performance work leads to low artistic or creative standards and the 'importation' [sic]<sup>3</sup> of "safe" or recognisably mediocre forms developed from a "West End" model, those attitudes need to be addressed with some urgency. If contemporary and challenging work in dance theatre music and performance is being filtered out by those who are in positions to do so, on the assumption that it is "unsuitable" then one needs to assess on what basis one section of a population has been persuaded that it is estranged from another, and who decides? (ibid).

There are crucial attitudes expressed here which supported and encouraged my thinking both then, and now.

I organised a series of workshops opened to people across Dyfed that followed particular themes: Dance and Film, Dance and Architecture and most importantly for this writing, Dance and Disability. I took the responsibility for the Dance and Disability events. In a draft application to the West Wales Association of the Arts entitled 'An Application for work in the Barn Centre during April, May and June 1985' and subtitled "Arts at Work", McLucas states: 'The "social" context for the arts is a fairly recent phenomenon and draws up all kinds of questions to do with "culture" "high art" "therapy" "community" etc.' (McLucas RB2/4 1984/5). A description of the proposed activities to be funded states that we would:

'...instigate a series of small, one-off projects to attempt to tackle some of the issues involved' (ibid). The projects he lists came under three main headings of Arts and Disability, Arts and Community and Arts and Education. The proposal states that two years' worth of work had already been going on in Aberystwyth in the context of arts and disability, by which he referred to my work at the Aberystwyth Day Centre with the Barn Centre and Gudrun Jones' work at Plas Lluest with the Barn Centre. The 3 themes were desegregated into 3 individual workshops and Arts and Disability focus formed around Arts and Therapy, Arts and Mental Handicap<sup>4</sup> and Arts and Physical Handicap.

In 1985 I changed my employment to begin work in the new acute adult psychiatric unit. This enabled me to persuade health service colleagues to attend some of the events, especially the Arts and Therapy workshop. It also enabled the development of my own practice of Dance Movement Therapy on the Acute Ward and at the Psychiatric Day Service known as the Gables. These experiences culminated in the establishing of the North Ceredigion Community Dance Project in 1987, which later became Dawns Dyfed Dance. Through this, two funded dance amateur posts were established in the North and South of Ceredigion for myself in the North and Yvette Vaughan Jones in the South.

My office was based in the Barn Centre. From here, my brief was to animate contemporary dance practice in the North of Ceredigion. Beginning from my established experience of work in health and social services and of organising



public workshops that investigated contemporary approaches to dance I proceeded to find groups of people in different organisations to continue and develop these initial experiences. In the autumn of 1988 McLucas presented a report that was commissioned by the Aberystwyth Community Association to a number of statutory and non-statutory organisations in Wales. 'Arts and Disability: a report on five years of work carried out in Aberystwyth between 1983 and 1988 together with some outline suggestions for its future development' was an exciting and challenging document. To my mind it retains its challenge with an engaging optimism and passion. McLucas makes clear at the start that it is the voices of those people who had engaged in the work of those years that form the basis for the report. These voices, and his critical discourse that ceaselessly raises difficult questions, continue as undercurrents in my work with Cyrrff Ystwyth: '...one simple question is asked about arts work with 'special needs' groups - "Why do it?"' (McLucas 1988, 2). Strangely I find myself quoted at some length in this report and it is interesting for me to hear this personal voice that is clearly committed to art as therapeutic – rather than primarily aesthetic – at this time. Reflecting on particular tensions that had emerged between the Barn Centre and Plas Lluest, McLucas observes that he has sometimes had to: '...worry over the attitudes embedded in both of our practices - one towards a 'normalisation' or 'socialisation' of the residents, and the other towards an 'experimentation' or a 'loosening' of attitudes - were we working at cross purposes?' (1988, 23). Such tensions remain embedded today despite closer alliances with staff within the statutory services. In this report from 28 years ago I am informed about a key

aspect of the work Cyrff Ystwyth make today and which sustains within it the notion of community as a political value. In 1988 the SAC (Social Activities Centre), now called Canolfan Padarn contacted McLucas at the Barn Centre. We created a programme of work with Gudrun Jones offering visual arts work, Andy Freeman offering photography, and me offering dance work. McLucas notes: 'Margaret concentrated her work at one crucial level - that of the group, its dynamics, its internal responsibilities and relationships and so on - all within a highly creative and abstract framework. As usual, she expected a lot' (1988, 31). After a short class once a week for ten weeks the group of people with learning disabilities that attended with staff at the centre decided that they would like to make a very short performance for others at the centre. The report quotes the then manager of the SAC, Sharon McAuley: " I was absolutely amazed, to be honest.....at the end of this ten week session there was a display.....a dance routine.....I just couldn't believe what I saw - it was fantastic!" (32). "They were ten individuals and each one had a specific purpose in the dance class, they were looking to each other, thinking about the one next to them. I thought it was wonderful" (35). "The music was playing, they dressed alike, they PERFORMED - they understood that they had an audience' (ibid).

This event was greeted with enthusiasm and a commitment to a long term regular evening meeting of people with learning disabilities who were interested in making performance. Our first public performance was shown in Theatr y Werin in the Aberystwyth Arts Centre and was called *Other Worlds*. As I was leaving

the theatre that evening a member of the audience came to speak with me. She was the mother of one of the performers. Eirlys P. Davies told me that this could not be the end, but was the beginning and of course we would need a name. She told me that the name should be 'Cyrff Ystwyth' and that it could not really be anything else.

Cyrff Ystwyth was established and settled in to a weekly regime of meetings to create performance. Dawns Dyfed was continuing to grow and to have impact. As time went on the collective of practitioners and board of management realised that there were fundamental differences in principles of practice between the North and South of the district. Each area had its own management group and both groups came together to report to each other at a central committee. The basis for the problems that emerged was political and cultural. In the North, the work of Dawns Dyfed was focused on classes in different contexts such as schools and in the hospital. Significantly, showing devised performances by these local amateur groups was a major feature of this approach. As the work focused on my commitment to the making of art that could be "urgent" for individuals' (McLucas 1985) and was concerned to make 'contemporary and challenging work in dance theatre' (ibid) within the communities of Aberystwyth and environs, inevitably the work was deeply inflected with Welsh language, culture, and ways of going on. In contrast, the South tended towards process based workshops and classes that did not tend to prioritise performance. Instead, with amateur Yvette Vaughan Jones, they offered a contemporary dance programme of professional practitioners to

their host organisation, Theatr Mwldan in Cardigan, alongside classes and workshops that tended to happen at Theatr Mwldan. Although there were classes that happened in schools and village halls they tended to foreground the imported character of contemporary dance practices, emerging from new dance practices in England and Europe, and were deeply inflected with English language and urban cultural values. Central to the debate was a disagreement between those who believed dance stood apart from language and could cross cultural and linguistic barriers and those who believed this to be a naïve and/or dangerous attitude laden with colonial undertones. Tensions inevitably surfaced about the identity of our work. Perhaps most significant was the joint two-day conference we held in 1990 at the Hotel Penbontbren in the South, that began as an attempt to find a resolution to this geographical and cultural divide. The crucial linguistic divide provoked the realisation of the fundamental political and cultural differences that were at the heart of this community project. This situation was both a reflection of the larger societal issues within which we circulated and that, until Penbontbren, had been felt but not openly acknowledged, and a reification of a political and social divide that characterised the large area of the three counties of Dyfed. It was a bitter dispute. Finally, we arrived at a new set of aims and objectives that attempted to honour both contexts. These were distilled into what we later called informally ‘The Four Sentences’:

1. Dawns Dyfed holds the view that the cultural production of art is inseparable from its cultural, political and social context.

2. In West Wales there is an indigenous culture based on the Welsh language, which is at risk, an indigenous culture based on the English language, and a diverse community of incomers. Within these groups there is the capacity for conflict based on different cultural values.
3. As a community arts project Dawns Dyfed will seek to interact sensitively and creatively within these contexts, and will positively encourage local initiatives in response to varying local conditions.
4. Dawns Dyfed views dance as a personal or collaborative art form which offers an immediate means of expression for all sections of the community to extend and explore both their individual and cultural identities.

(Personal Archive)

These Policy Statements became the guiding principles until 2007 when Dawns Dyfed's funding from the Arts Council of Wales was withdrawn and the company ceased. By 2007 I was working at Aberystwyth University in the Department of Theatre, Film and Television and it is no exaggeration to say that this department rescued Cyrff Ystwyth from the disaster of losing its funding and support mechanism, the umbrella organization of Dawns Dyfed. Whilst all other groups and activities were wound down, I took up the challenge of re-thinking the work of Cyrff Ystwyth as a long term research project, in isolation from the other aspects of Dawns Dyfed. The department offered a place to conduct our weekly practice, a place to perform the finished pieces and vital technical collaboration and support.

## **Performance and Disability**

Performance and Disability is the disciplinary field where my work makes an active contribution. By taking *Cyrff Ystwyth* forward as I describe above, my research focus became clearly defined as a practice that focused on devising work with people with learning disabilities. The wider field of Performance and Disability has grown from the practices of artists identifying with the Disability Arts movement. Matt Hargrave defines Disability Arts as:

an art practice that addresses the oppression of the disabled person a mechanism for self-advocacy and self-governance; the cultural vanguard of the social model of disability; a cultural weapon to be wielded against the twin oppressions of mainstream culture and therapeutically aligned art; and a component in the struggle towards emancipation for disabled people (2015, 27).

This enormously ambitious, multifunctional movement as he describes it, has become part of academic study and research that analyses and investigates these aspects.

Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander (2005) explain that the field of Performance

and Disability has emerged from cross disciplinary thinking in Performance Studies and Disability Studies. For them, as for Petra Kuppers (2003), it is both the performativity of disability as an embodied and lived reality and the making of live art performances in theatre and in alternative contexts that have become the focus of this specialist field. My contribution concerns the making of performances in theatre within our specific cultural context. Performance Studies scholars concern themselves with acts of reading cultural presence and action and/or the performances, images, acts, and events in the widest possible of media. This overarching approach to society and culture is well suited to Disability Studies scholars' understandings of how a person with a disability performs their disabled status or does not, by attempting to pass as 'normal'. Systems of control are key as social and political conditions may determine the frame and the content of what is performed, how it is performed, and what possible meanings may accrue. Disability Studies scholar Shelley Tremain applies Michel Foucault's thinking: 'Foucault argued that, in recent times, practices of division, classification, and ordering around a norm have become the primary means by which to individualize people, who come to be understood scientifically, and who even come to understand themselves in this mode' (2005, 6). Tobin Siebers (2008, 179-180) comments that this field of scholarly focus is particularly potent as it offers a bridge between a number of theories and considers disability rights as fundamental to any understanding of human rights. He encourages a reading of Disability Studies that foregrounds intersectionality with other areas of study and other areas of human concern and endeavor that might implicate us all.

In common with others who I consider in this chapter I propose community, ensemble, creative, and artistic modes of understanding different points of view and experiences. Sandahl and Auslander comment that it is through neglect on the part of Performance Studies scholars that disability has not been within its parameters (2013,7). Performance Studies and Disability Studies have been strong disciplinary fields for close on 40 years. However, Performance and Disability emerged some ten years later. Petra Kuppers is perhaps the most well-known scholar and artist working in the discipline of Performance and Disability. Her work has been situated within Community Arts and also Disability Studies, representing some of the diversity of approaches available. She is known for her contribution to Crip Theory, an interdisciplinary field that critiques the hegemony of normativity across a wide array of theories and concerns about bodies, identities, desires, and expressions, and which brings together activists, artists, and theorists who challenge normative political and social values. Having worked in Wales in the dance community for some 10 years before moving to the USA, Kuppers' performance work focuses on body practices and multi-disciplinary approaches that are participatory and environmentally informed. Her theoretical work spreads a net between the two disciplines of Performance Studies and Disability Studies and uses Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of the rhizomatic, the smooth, and the striated, and Artaud's notion of cruelty and theatre, to analyse performances by and with people with disabilities.



Sandahl and Auslander's (2005) seminal edited collection draws on different contextual spheres that highlight particular approaches. Their focus is disability *as* performance rather than disability *in* performance or performance *about* disability. Disability *as* performance ranges from performances in everyday life that foreground how an individual performs their disability in any particular situation, through to artistic and theatrical practice. Sandahl and Auslander take up the proposition that in common with understandings about how social roles such as gender are performed, disability is also a performative act. Giles Perring's research draws on the theatre work of people with learning disabilities during the late 1990s, in particular considering issues at the heart of collaborations between people with learning disabilities and facilitators without learning disabilities. He draws attention to power relations between those with learning disabilities and the usually non-disabled facilitator, and usefully offers three distinct approaches to this work which he classifies as, 'Normalising', 'Post-therapeutic' and 'Countercultural'.<sup>5</sup> Perring makes no claims as to which model might be most productive or desirable, but his models help situate my enquiry within the aesthetic countercultural, which as he explains is 'an objective that challenges mainstream cultural and aesthetic precepts and views about disability', but is not unaware of the potential to address 'marginalization and institutionalisation' (2005, 186). Most interesting for my purposes is his statement that funding bodies 'focus on a project's *benefit* - educational, therapeutic or otherwise - for learning disabled people, who are frequently cast in the role of "clients" or "service users" (187). Here Perring draws attention to the fact that for the most part, those

involved in organizing, funding and producing work by people with learning disabilities understand the work in this way. This attitude is connected to the Medical Model of Disability (Laing 1971) because artists with learning disabilities by and large require support from non disabled colleagues to realize their creative ambitions. Funders enjoy a straightforward means of justifying the work in economic terms as money well spent on benefit for people otherwise without means of positive self expression. He further cautions that, 'The choice made by nondisabled artists to work collaboratively with people with learning disabilities signals a construction of learning disability' (187-188). Such a reminder remains of critical importance to the practice I foreground in this submission.

Across the major contributions regarding Disability and Performance the category of learning disability remains a minority presence. The ability to articulate practices and to analyse and disseminate findings lies within cognitive function. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that whilst scholars, artists, and activists have written at great length regarding performance by people with physical disability, the work of artists who have learning or intellectual disability is less well discussed. Hargrave points out that this kind of artistic practice is still seen as either 'the therapeutic application of drama' or is 'viewed through the lens of varying types of 'social' or 'emancipatory' theatre (often known as 'community', 'participatory', or 'applied theatre')' (2015, 34). These categories limit the engagement that theatre scholars and artists have with performance practices by

people with learning disabilities. However, the situation is changing, with the work of Australian company Back to Back, whose first public performance was in 1987, and the Swiss company Theater HORA (with Jérôme Bel), being two high profile examples. Theater HORA was established in 1993, however it was their collaboration with Jérôme Bel that brought them major international recognition. Both these companies tour internationally with high production value works that bring clear aesthetic focus to audiences who attend for the art rather than to support disability arts. Internationally renowned choreographer Jérôme Bel's collaboration with Theater HORA, a company of people with learning disabilities, produced the performance *Disabled Theater* (2012). This controversial work continues to be performed around the world but earns its infamous and acclaimed status because it foregrounds the alterity of the subject before others within the frame of theatre. The subjects in *Disabled Theater* are people with learning disabilities. Sandra Umathum and Benjamin Wihstuz describe the production as: 'Eleven actors with cognitive disabilities appear as themselves before a mostly non-disabled audience and do nothing particularly sensational' (2015, 8). What is presented is radical and troubling difference as the marker of learning disability via Bel's well known style of framing the subject on stage in pedestrian and task based contemporary activities. In this work the performers have 6 tasks: they individually stand before the audience for one minute; they return to say their names, ages and professions; they return again to inform the audience about their disability; and then they perform individual dance solos. Next they tell the audience what they think of the piece that they are performing and finally they

bow. The work has drawn heavy criticism, mostly from disability activists and artists and practitioners who work with people with learning disability. Such criticism claims that the performers appear as reduced and reified within their disabilities. Other critics have found ways to appreciate the piece, such as Kai van Eikels (2015) who considers each performer, presenting themselves in the carrying out of the tasks, like musical tones:

As long as the performers figure as tones whose alternation endorses the row, any behaviour will be fine – not because this is a production of a disabled theatre company intended primarily for the players to have fun, but quite differently, because it will relate us to a form, one form that human matter can take on when used as a material, and that form will be beautiful in the most idealistic, Winckelmannian sense of that word' (2015, 134-135).<sup>6</sup>

Back to Back Theatre have international acclaim, and Theron Schmidt argues that the work makes specific aesthetic demands on the audience because of the *appearance* of disabled performers in both senses of the word. Discussing *Food Court* (2008) he examines this notion of appearance and being on stage and the impact of the work and its disturbing themes of violence and abuse. The devising process reveals:

... the extent to which the performance is the direct result of the actors

engaging with the challenges of theatrical appearance and representation. In addition to staging disability, the performance stages the complexity and challenges of staging itself. Rather than directly approaching broader issues of disability in culture, this piece might be understood as an account of the ways in which the actors negotiated their own experience of speaking on stage, of acting on stage' [...]

'When a disabled person appears on stage and begins to speak, then, it is not the reality of his or her disability that appears but the way that disability is already a representation – and the theatre is the place where representations are made and re-made where they are malleable (2013, 204).

Disability is not ignored here but the aesthetic encounter in theatre is Schmidt's concern. Helena Grehan also analysing the same work states:

Indeed part of the power of works such as *Food Court* resides in the fact that they are performed in the context of a society where there are still modes or acts of response that mark these performers as different or somehow lacking and at times peripheral to the workings of the mainstream. What is so significant about this performance is the ways in which it manipulates this dynamic and gradually strips away those preconceived responses to the performers and to the work. Whilst their bodies and voices act as markers that remind spectators that they are

disabled, the content and searing (or awful) power of their exchanges compels us to think and feel beyond a focus (solely) on questions of dis/ability (2013, 107).

Again, this is an example of a theatre scholar engaging with work by people with learning disabilities who considers the inevitable social context but, for whom the aesthetic event and its production of meanings and affects takes precedence.

My concern with the aesthetic event that foregrounds theatrical performance, that does not aim to ignore, relegate or disguise disability, but rather seeks to read impairment, alterity and difference as aesthetic material with its own grammar, takes further inspiration and provocation from Anita Silvers. Silvers critiques a postmodern aesthetics and proposes an aesthetic sensibility that challenges Disability Studies' indictment of how disability is represented in art. She does not focus on learning disability. Her account pinpoints Disability Studies' scholars' tendency to place: '...normalcy and disability in irresistible conflict' (2006, 236). Hers is a discussion about aesthetics and the representation of disability and impairment that is in contrast to representations of normalcy. In Silver's work, context and predecessors, history and connection are understood as part of the mechanism of aesthetic comprehension and appreciation. Silvers asks: 'Art's history thus receives rather than repudiates new forms of identity, for art's history is interpretive, not coercive. Is it possible for human history to do so as well?' (240). For Silvers, the exceptional and anomalous body has the potential to bring

about a new aesthetic interpretation that sidesteps the Disability Studies argument that depends on a binary opposition between normalcy and impairment, positioning disability as always in deficit and marginal. Silvers makes the case for: '...an expanded idea of beauty' (241). Her analysis has been influential in my argument for an expanded and alternative aesthetics via theatrical performance by people with learning disabilities. Silvers' provocation to the Disability Studies arena foregrounding the condition of the social construction of 'otherness', provides a context for my proposition that people with learning disabilities have serious aesthetic contributions to make to theatre. She states: '...the approach I am recommending neither assumes nor requires disability to be confined to 'cultural otherness'. To view anomalously configured people as we do novel art, we must appreciate them both as originals and as heirs of human biological history' (242).

Throughout this discussion has been a vital critical concept about the social construction of learning disability which was developed with the Social Model of Disability.<sup>7</sup> The formation of a category of person who has, in our current contemporary definition 'a learning disability' is understood as a complex mix of varying and unstable abilities and needs and who, at the heart of the matter, requires support to cope with our complex world. I am familiar with the incapacitating concrete realities of learning disabilities that limit a person's capacity across a broad spectrum of human interaction, independent action and communal engagement, personal care and survival, comprehension, conscious

awareness and conceptual thinking. However, I am equally familiar with the opposite of these material effects. In the weekly practice with my colleagues in Cwrff Ystwyth I am witness to and part of a creative process that evidences all of the above capacities and abilities. The essential feature is their instability as changing patterns of competence and contribution shift amongst us. Nor do I offer a stable unchanging presence of intellectual, cognitive, and embodied competence. We are human and we are all more or less reliable.

Despite the previous examples at the start of this chapter, theatre work by people with learning disabilities remains part of a minority discussion. Petra Kuppers, one of the foremost exponents of performance and disability and a key figure in both practice and theory, tends to focus on physical disability and mental health. However, in a brief discussion about French company L'Oiseau-Mouche's work *Le Labyrinthe* (2000) she considers how the piece presents society as 'an interrelated circulatory whole, within whose dynamic polarities actions occur and develop on a path that seems guided by principles of energy rather than psychology' (2003, 75). Such a notion of society as interrelated is the basis for an argument that challenges the very notion of intellectual disability and intelligence as a fixed and objectively measurable fact. Kliewer, Biklen and Petersen (2015) argue against the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) test that has been so significant in the pronouncement of a learning, developmental, cognitive, or intellectual disability diagnosis. Why we find it so hard to accommodate people with learning disabilities into the realm of aesthetic production, why we find time and again that



people with learning disabilities experience violence and hatred at the hands of other people, why this particular group, which is not homogenous, should remain so marginalised is not something I can answer here. However, it is something that needs to be acknowledged. Kliewer et al. evidence how the IQ test has been appropriated as a tool for exclusion. Exclusionary bias maybe an element of human nature, and the appearance of people with learning disabilities in theatre, before audiences, might be seen as a resistance to the dismal realities of our psycho-social condition that cannot manage these kinds of differences. Kliewer et al. comment that within an educational context people with 'severe intellectual disabilities [sic] remain excluded', and that, '...the minds and thus the humanity, of people labeled as severely impaired must be dismissed as irrelevant' (2015, 6). They argue for an interconnected and participatory approach to people with learning disabilities that offers a way to challenge and alter diagnoses that condemn a person to a level of deficiency and intellectual deficit that can result in actual human status being questioned. Their conclusion is, in common with other social science researchers, that learning disability is in many ways a social and ideological construct. Within appropriately participatory and circulatory, interrelated contexts, art, understood and read as art, might be oppositional to this social context driven by both politics and psychological anxieties. Kliewer et al. conclude by stating their awareness that, 'Fostering connectedness with an individual who has previously been treated as innately defective is an ongoing process that requires a complex reorganisation of the relationships surrounding that person' (23). They understand that 'valued connectedness' and 'presuming

competence' (ibid) is itself a construct. I contend that the evidence for my success in acts of construction is in the performance works themselves.

Cyrff Ystwyth's practice in Wales makes a specific contribution to the field of Performance and Disability by persistent production of live theatre once a year and through that regular appearance of performers and their work, exemplifying ensemble as a metonymic device for interconnected community that also suggests how the presumption of competence might support the production of alternative aesthetics in theatre. Here it is not a question of claiming personal contribution but of understanding that this scholarly contribution would not be possible without the relationships and collaborative endeavour of the whole company. To make this evident I have discussed Perring's analysis of the relations between the non-disabled facilitator and artists with learning disabilities and I have drawn on Silvers' provocation to consider work made by such artists as new aesthetic contributions. Whilst Cyrff Ystwyth has a strong collective ensemble identity, there is no expectation that all members will contribute equally to a project; each project is led by an individual whose work is taken on by everyone else. Further contributions come in response and the work remains in the hands of its author. Fran Leighton considers the collaborative process of creating a piece of theatre and she uses Perring's categories as a route to analyse her procedures. She mentions her early position in her research: 'For myself, I struggled with being receptive to the contributions of all the devisers and resisting the strong desire to develop and structure the 'random' material into recognisable performance which

would meet the expectations of the audience and examiners' (2009, 103).

Leighton's account of her practice based PhD research with theatre performers with learning disabilities reveals issues that my practice and writing also address, although I take a divergent view on these. For me, randomness is not necessarily problematic and decisions on what is included and excluded are often made based on our close interrelational working methods and our knowledge of each other and the lives we live. Communication routes may not always be verbal, but information may reside in gesture, posture, breath, repetition, emphasis, and focus. The expectations of the audience are never truly met as first we must negotiate social and psychological constructions of learning disability in the presence of performers who contradict such representations. Exclusionary bias is explicitly challenged. Here again, alternative aesthetics are at work in an encounter with an audience. It is pertinent to make clear that in accordance with Leighton, who notes that non-disabled researchers '... may be confirming assumptions that learning-disabled people are passive and in need of relationships with non-disabled people and generally live in an inferior 'world" (106), I am aware of my position as a non-disabled academic but also aware that my research participants understand and agree to support me in my work as I support the development of theirs. The network of relationships that I refer to in the writings presented in this submission are actualised in our weekly meetings and represent a micro version of the various communities that make up our geographic and societal networks. I understand and experience our process as community in the terms that Esposito sets out: *communitas* as obligation, community as a vacuum

that is filled by acts of acknowledgement, reciprocity, and fulfillment of duty towards one another. In this manner therefore, it does not matter what IQ or capacity for action a member of Cyrff Ystwyth has, it matters how we respond to one another. Leighton is clear that her purposes were to provide benefit to the performers in her practice based research project *BluYesBlu*. Leighton states: ‘*BluYesBlu* was proposed to provide an environment for learning-disabled people where they could challenge routines and strictures by being active, making respected choices and decisions, and performing in public’ (100). Our contribution is explicitly towards an expanded aesthetics that forms around an alternative grammar of movement, bodies, performance of action, image and a poetics of meaning which is unstable. On the other hand, Leighton reminds me that the constructions of self are a permanent negotiation and comments: ‘I found that the practice was fraught with the normalising/othering tension especially in the academic theorising and disseminating of the research and in the reading of the performance’ (111). If I am not quite so concerned by such tendencies it is because of my concern with the aesthetic and the potential for politics within the aesthetic, rather than socially and politically constructed agendas of inclusion, benefit, and, in Leighton’s terms, the ‘...attempt to produce a show which minimised the construction of learning-disabled people as ‘other’ as a challenge to conservative orthodoxies’ (109). Hargrave takes Leighton’s concerns a step further and disagrees with her cautious approach, suggesting that, ‘A counter-argument to this is that learning disabled persons have as much right as anyone to have their work criticised. Without acknowledging this, disabled performers are

denied the right to fail, and to learn through this failure' (2015, 38). I believe that Cyrff Ystwyth performers would concur with Hargrave's comment.

My concerns about alternative aesthetic contributions through theatre by people with learning disabilities are echoed by Dave Calvert as, via punk rock, he examines 'how the aesthetic structure reconstructs notions of learning disability and intervenes in its social experience' (2010, 513). Calvert however, remains firmly within the applied theatre context that takes an interventionist approach and sees theatrical performance as a means by which to 'combat the social alienation of people with learning disabilities' (ibid). Calvert proposes punk rock as a performance form that offers a means of artistic participation for people with learning disabilities because of the form's rejection of conventional aesthetic expectations. The anarchic images, sounds and presentation of this form of music allow accessibility to those who have no way into other disciplines which presuppose a level of formal educational achievement. He points out that for people with learning disabilities formal educational qualifications are for the vast majority, unachievable. Of interest to my enquiry is Calvert's account of how the punk rock band Heavy Load (the focus of his article) follows the speed and rhythmic dynamics of drummer Michael White who has learning disabilities. Calvert considers this as autonomy on behalf of the artist with learning disabilities who produces artistic work in contradiction to expectations and produces new music that Calvert describes as forming an 'anti-aesthetic'. Punk offers an anti-aesthetic which is able to include learning disability as a logical extension, and so

extend definitions of music and performance. A new space is opened where, 'new modes of being can be tested and imagined without stability or commitment. The invocation of learning disability inside the anti-aesthetic offers opportunities to examine two sets of values, one social and one aesthetic' (520). Calvert pursues these two agendas and draws attention to how art is always respondent to its cultural and political context, concurrent, resistant, or anarchic. He weaves these two strands of the aesthetic and the social and arrives at a conclusion that makes explicit how these strands interact. The rock band members with learning disabilities are both participants and practitioners. I have not explicitly framed *Cyrff Ystwyth* in such a way, however the constant awareness of the close weave between the social and the aesthetic is ever present. Calvert is clear that, 'Heavy Load's objective is the realisation of its own ambition for assimilation into an accommodating mainstream, rather than the anarchic destruction and rebuilding of social values' (526). *Cyrff Ystwyth* shares a similar ambition: not to critique mainstream dance-theatre aesthetics to a point of rejection but to find a form of assimilation born out of an extended and alternative aesthetic contribution. This idea is taken seriously and developed by Matt Hargrave in his recent publication on theatres of learning disability. Whilst beginning with an overview of the historical and contemporary context of disability rights he develops a different argument to which my own thinking is allied. Given the social, political, and lived realities of learning disability and cognitive difference we cannot ignore the implications of the actual practical necessities that people with learning disabilities live with and how these impact on practice. However, Hargrave seeks

to analyze learning disability theatre as a serious contribution to the mainstream world of theatre making. Hargrave unpicks the values that beset learning disabled theatre before arriving at a clear position similar to my own regarding arts practices as a whole, and specifically theatre, which is '...a multi-form aesthetic that 'belongs' to anyone able to use it' (38). He states, 'there is no learning disabled theatre - only theatre. The learning disabled actors who collaborate with nondisabled artists are part of that theatre' (ibid). However, in the works I discuss the functional realities of people without full social and personal autonomy are ever present. Along with these realities is an issue that Hargrave fearlessly raises: what is good theatre and why would people pay to see theatre made by anyone unless it offers something to its audience that takes us all beyond the witnessing of communal therapy for needy people with disabilities? He clearly signals an end to Disability Arts as a distinct field of endeavour. Being taken seriously by audiences and critics means an assimilation that presents a number of complex adjustments. I argue for alternative readings of bodies, dynamics, and representations and use the work of theatre and dance scholars to find a structure of appraisal to understand the work of Cyrff Ystwyth. Hargrave offers a 14-point list of 'the poetics of the theatres of learning disability' (228). In the context of Cyrff Ystwyth a selection of 8 from this list come close to the principles I work with in collaboration with the company and the person with learning disabilities whose project we develop each year. The first: 'Be rooted in complex embodiment that values cognitive diversity as a form of human variation'. The second: 'Be pragmatic in the pursuit of quality; that is, the measure of the art work's

soundness, its fitness for purpose'. Next: 'Privilege concrete experience of individual artists rather than abstracted beliefs about learning disability'. Then: 'View the actor as craftsperson, a labourer in the theatre economy, albeit one currently disenfranchised from most existing training systems' and 'Take its stimulus from anywhere it can find it'. The sixth: 'Be rooted in the collaboration between disabled and nondisabled artists, who have in common their cultural labour'. The seventh: 'Be able to work with and against dominant cultural norms in order to influence mainstream practices'. Lastly: 'Recognise the authentic in artworks rather than individuals' (228).

## **Conclusion**

My seven published works, offer argument and practice that foregrounds aesthetic value via radical difference. Radical difference is understood as both the inscriptions and effects of learning disability and as cultural specificity and life ways. Central to my argument is the notion of embodied knowledge that finds expression in the act of devising dance-theatre and the 'dilated' body of the performer at work. Multiple and differing iterations of choreography by a variety of bodies and capacities provide me with embodied and concrete aesthetic propositions of Esposito's philosophical analysis of community. The void which is community, and for Esposito it must be recognized as no-thing, as null, becomes a thing in the world, because of individual debt and obligation towards the other.



Aesthetic readings of learning disabled theatre afford a means of closing the unbridgeable gap between the other that requires therapeutic management and the other who appears as a performer with artistic agency. In these instances communicating from the margins of power (geographic, cultural, intellectual, social, biological, economic and artistic), a certain freedom of expression is discovered and used. I have described a moment in a work by Adrian Jones called *Capel: The Lights Are On* (2012) when:

They kneel or crouch as if praying. Billowing skirts and jackets of genuine period tailoring, the forties, some indeterminate are heavy with water. The wind and rain accompany this sequence of moves that happen individually, never in unison. One bends down. She pushes forwards, her laced gloved hands press into the wet gravel as she lowers herself onto the ground to lie prostrate. Others, at various intervals follow. At any moment slow moving people, appearing as if from another time, lie at our feet in the rain, dark patches of water collecting on their soaked clothing. The hymn Garthowen begins with the words “Dyma gariad, pwy a'i thraetha” (Ames 2015,17)

This non-conformist hymn<sup>8</sup> chosen by Jones to accompany his choreography completed an experience that exemplified embodied cultural specificity and yet merged with more generalized significations of religion in many other contexts. It signaled our precise location – geographic and temporal – as it evoked the

historical importance of these referents to our contemporary cultural experience. Yet above all, for me, as I think of it now, this scene invokes Esposito's question: 'How are we to fight the immunization of life without making it do death's work? How are we to break down the wall of the individual while at the same time saving the singular gift that the individual carries?' (2010,19). We might understand art as a proposition that has an answer to this problem. But we must also understand that people with learning disabilities have and continue to be comprehended as 'only marginally human, reduced to bare fellow-species status, thus placed not only at the margins of the moral community but at the margins of humanity itself' (Carlson, 2010,148). The importance therefore of developing a wider aesthetic appreciation and understanding of work made by people who are more or less unconsciously relegated to the status of not properly human, cannot be overstated. In the example offered above, one body of people performed culturally resonant actions at a location of deep cultural and communal significance for, and in close proximity to, another body of people, the audience.

My practice based research continues to expand since the publication of the seven pieces presented here. I have worked with 3 new choreographer/authors, all members of Cyrff Ystwyth, who have felt ready to make their own work. Over the year 2016/17 Adrian Jones will make his first solo, Lucy Smith will make her second piece, and two new choreographer/authors will create their first performances. What new insights will emerge from this practice remains the engine of the research. To further develop a knowledge base and disseminate the

work I am establishing a network of scholars with proven track records in both practice and theory. There is a strong international aspect to this small group of researchers who operate within the disciplines of Performance and Disability and Applied Theatre and are dramaturgs and project curators of work by people with learning disabilities. Our aim is to develop deeper understandings of the artistic contributions of such companies as Theater HORA in Switzerland, Mind the Gap in England, Per.Art artists in Serbia and of course, Cyrff Ystwyth in Wales. For me the next step is to connect with practitioners and scholars. The obligatory demand of *communitas* is an insistence on response to others who share similar ambitions. Understood through Esposito's concluding comments on the contemporary problem of community and nihilism, of geo-political boundaries and conflict, of destruction and death:

The only way to resolve the question without foregoing any of the terms will be found in bringing together community and nihilism in a unitary thought, seeing in the realization of nihilism not an insurmountable obstacle to community but instead the occasion for a new way of thinking community' (2010, 137).

Resisting both the desire for immunity from the contagion of others and their cultural contexts and practices and the contemporary realities of geo-political and ideological violence, along with a specific UK manifestation of extreme *immunitas* in the discourses around migration, I seek new manifestations and

creative responses that can honour Carlson's insistence that we do not see people with learning disabilities as mirrors in which we see what might have become of us, or that reflect our good fortune in not being like that (2010). Instead she proposes journeying into other's worlds and discovering how life is lived there. She is, of course, discussing a philosophical inquiry. I take this more literally and concretely and understand that by co-creating new theatre works with colleagues who have learning disabilities I come to learn how life is lived within my own cultural context and how perceptions and experiences may be illuminated via learning disability.

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<sup>1</sup> It is not within the scope of this writing to define or examine how we understand learning or intellectual disability. It is however of deep significance to understand the numerous terms that name people whose cognitive functioning means that they require varying degrees of support in order to survive our complex societies. Terminology continues to alter as do understandings of what forms learning disability takes and how it is an unstable category, dependent on individuals and circumstances. Crucial to the debate however is the fact that people with a learning disability are historically, and continue to be, categorised as deeply problematic to society and their actual human status is still queried by some. Rebecca Montelione and Rachel Forrester-Jones discuss the meanings and experience of learning disability and state that,

...while professionals, policymakers and researchers agree that the definitions used to categorize adults with intellectual disabilities have important and wide-

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ranging implications, very little research exists which has sought to understand the meaning of both the terminology of ‘disability’ and the embodied experience of it (Schalock and Luckasson 2013) from the viewpoint of the individuals with intellectual disabilities themselves. There is evidence, however, that people with intellectual disabilities – regardless of their awareness of their own disability status – experience stigma, or social treatment based on an ‘attribute that is deeply discrediting (Goffman 1974, p. 13; Craig et al 2002; Brown et al; 2003)’ (Montelione and Forrester-Jones, 2016, 2).

<sup>2</sup> Barba draws on Indian cultural understandings of bodies and actions and proposes that according to an Indian view, the daily body is one that accomplishes tasks with maximum efficiency but with the minimum of effort. The extra-daily body is that of the performer who transforms their body within the form of performance. It is a body of presence and power for the audience without exhibiting any virtuosic action.

<sup>3</sup> Phrasing as it appears in the original notes held in the Clifford McLucas Archive in the National Library of Wales.

<sup>4</sup> The terminology used to describe people with genetic difference or injuries that have produced neurological impairments has altered radically over many centuries. The term ‘idiot’ to denote a particular behaviour and set of symptoms was still in use in the UK as late as the 1970s. The British Institute of Learning Disabilities states:

Language changes all the time and the words we use to describe a particular impairment or disability have evolved over the years as a result of listening to people with personal experience and due to changing values and attitudes in society. BILD itself has reflected these changing social attitudes and so has made the progression over 43 years from terminology such as ‘mental subnormality’, ‘mental retardation’ in the 1970s, ‘mental handicap’ in the 1980s to ‘learning disability’ today. It is quite probable that the terms will change again in the future. (British Institute of Learning Disabilities 2016)

<sup>5</sup> These categories are drawn from Perring’s research methodology that he names ‘grounded theory’ (2005,182). This theory was developed by Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss whose work *The Discovery of Grounded Theory. Strategies for*

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*Qualitative Research* was published in 1967. Perring describes this theory as: ‘..based in the generation of hypotheses from themes that are grounded in the data and that progressively emerge as a research project unfolds’ (ibid). He likens this method with his creative practice and I concur. However he uses grounded theory in an ethnographic context that focusses on: ‘...what artists said about their work and lives rather than critiquing their artistic output’ (ibid). To this end he conducted interviews to investigate: ‘...the manner in which non-disabled arts workers come to be active in the arts-and-disability field (ibid). The categories he defines emerge from these interviews.

Normalizing is an aesthetic viewpoint that focuses on bringing performers with learning disabilities into mainstream theatre; normalising their presence and work. The Post-therapeutic is informed by therapy and is concerned with the personal issues and emotions of a person with learning disabilities that they bring to the creative process. He states that: ‘This approach often sets itself at odds with external or organizational imperatives for work to be exhibited or performed’ (186). Finally his category of the Countercultural is a viewpoint that sees work by people with learning disabilities as a challenge to mainstream aesthetics and to views on disability. It is a view that may address the marginalisation of people with learning disabilities. It sees value in non-normative or transgressive qualities.

<sup>6</sup> Johann Winckelmann was an eighteenth century early art historian credited with establishing the discipline of Art History. See: Potts, A. (1994) *Flesh and the Ideal. Winckelmann and the Origins of Art History*. Yale University Press: New Haven and London.

<sup>7</sup> The Social Model of Disability formed through the work of many Disability Studies scholars, such as Oliver, Finkelstein and Barnes alongside activists who critiqued and took action against the Medical Model of disability. This latter mode of understanding, categorizing and managing people with a disability puts emphasis on impairment as problem and as individual, pertinent solely to the person with the impairment. It was and is therefore, the role of medicine, science and social services to cure or support the individual who is more or less accommodated into society depending on the severity of their personal condition/problem. The Social Model was and is a political address to

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disability and foregrounds how society disables people with impairments. Dan Goodley, offers a clear account of how this model influenced his work with people with learning disabilities: ‘The problematic lives of intellectual disabilities were not caused by intellectual disability: many problems of access, support, community participation and acceptance were problems of a disabling society that threatened the very existence of people who were cognitively different to the mainstream’ (2014,7).

<sup>8</sup> The first line of this hymn translates as: ‘Here is love, who will proclaim it’. My translation). It is a well known tune accredited to Wyn Morris (1929 – 2010). The words are accredited to Mary Owen (1796- 1875) See:

<http://www.angelfire.com/in/gillionhome/Worship/Emynau/DymaGariadPwy.html>

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