

The Creative Arts as an Integrative Model of Training in Special Education - A Canadian Perspective

Persons with disability are seldom allowed to exercise their voice let alone develop the sense of empowerment and self worth that creative expression can bring about. Pioneering work in Canada, uses the dramatic arts to develop 'integrative education' whereby disabled and non-disabled persons learn to work in a mutually supportive fashion.

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INTRODUCTION

In many ways Canada is similar to Ireland. The country's population is concentrated in a few urban centres with large distances in between. Our national identity has been strongly influenced by other countries, most notably England, France and more recently by the United States. However, our practice is different from all of these and we would like to think that, despite the harsh economic realities of the modern industrial world, we have already achieved and wish to retain the "kinder gentler nation" that the U.S. President, George Bush, talked about during his first election campaign.

In talking about special education in Canada it is important to recognise that education falls under provincial not national jurisdiction. This means that special education provision is not uniform. Though educational integration is the prevailing educational ideology in Canada today, in some provinces children with special needs still attend special schools, in other provinces they attend special classrooms in regular schools and in still others they are integrated fully within the mainstream of education (Winzer, 1989). Given the diversity of provision available it is difficult to talk of a national picture of the arts in special education.

THE ARTS AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

More than almost any other area of education, in special education students are often confined to a state of powerlessness. They are seldom consulted in matters related to their personal aspirations or well being. Many decisions are made for them in an 'omnipotent' fashion on the basis of their "disability" rather than their individuality. Persons with a disability are seldom allowed to exercise their voice let alone develop one that is creative. However, we have found that the arts allow individuals to re-create and express the self irrespective of their capabilities. This often leads to empowerment through a sense of achievement and self worth.

One of the values of participation in an artistic activity is that there is no single way of doing 'it': there are no right or wrong answers. This attitude is essential if we are to enable individuals to fail successfully: to learn from their 'mistakes' and thus build on previous knowledge. This approach also implies that imposition of an external standard, particularly in relationship to technique, is often counter productive if one wishes to encourage expression and empowerment as opposed to what one might refer to as excellence or artistry. This is not to suggest that we do not feel a responsibility to an art form; rather, from a developmental perspective it seems best to proceed from empowerment initially to artistic criticisms eventually.

FINDING AND SHARING THE CREATIVE VOICE

Our overriding concern is not that individuals with whom we work become the architects of our culture, the reminders to this and future generations of what can be achieved in any particular artistic discipline, but rather that each individual finds his or her own creative voice. Our intention is to help people feel confident enough that they will continue to explore and refine their creative voices. Ultimately all the artifacts created through artistic activity, whether a 'smudge' on a piece of paper or Picasso's "Guernica", Graham's "Clytemenestra" or a simple hand dance are windows on an individual's explicit, personal and practical knowledge; they are a reflection on that individual as a unique human being.

Each artistic discipline i.e. dance, drama, music, etc., and each activity within a given discipline, has an intrinsic structure which contains, supports and guides the novice in the activity. However, the structure alone is not enough. We should never forget that in teaching, despite some current directives to be objective, it is

at the moment when one engages and shares one's self that the most powerful learning moments are created; for it is only through sharing that a relationship can be encouraged. Once the relationship is 'activated', motivation may be sparked and the structure inherent in artistic forms can provide the support necessary to cultivate successful and enjoyable participation in the arts activities themselves.

Creative activity occurs in the space between the self's unspoken thought and the received expression of that thought by another. Many people see this space as something that needs to be filled constantly. They are scared by silence or stillness. Yet these spaces are essential to works of art. Similarly, it is this space created between disciplines, those ideas and activities that cannot be easily contained, which is fascinating¹. Once this space, this gap in our understanding, has been articulated, it becomes less threatening. One is on the road to bridging it. We would like to think that at least some of the work being carried out in Canada is starting to bridge the gaps between the arts and special education and more importantly between professionals delivering and persons with a disability receiving 'service'.

THE ARTIST WITH A DISABILITY AS TEACHER

Over the years both of us have been instrumental in the development and teaching of a number of courses on the use of the arts in Special Education. Although each course has been different, the underlying philosophies of integration, of creative expression as a right for all individuals and of each individual's voice being unique, have run through all of the courses. A number of our students have been disabled and, in common with other students of these courses, many of them are now working in the field or teaching others from their experience. One particular example comes to mind. In response to intense pressure by a small group of teachers, The Faculty of Education at The University of Calgary agreed to develop a course entitled "using drama with visually impaired students". As part of the process a former student was invited to be involved in the design and teaching of the course. This person was herself legally blind. However, rather than handicapping her, and the course, her visual impairment created a number of 'spontaneous learning moments', the most notable being the occasion when she was unable to find a babysitter for the day.

¹ When one works in a number of art forms, as artist, teacher and therapist often moving fluidly from one to the other, one naturally goes beyond boundaries created by established academic or artistic disciplines. One works betwixt and between disciplines (Barrett, 1989), for one is dealing, without the restrictions imposed by disciplines, in those shadows somewhere between disciplines. This is what Courtney (1989) refers to as the *really real*, for what is of greatest importance is what is happening at the moment. It is not drama, but it is *not not* drama; it is not therapy, but it is *not not* therapy (Schechner, 1989).

After some discussion it was decided that she should bring her three week old infant son into the class. It was felt that his presence might help our discussions concerning the competence of visually disabled students. We were not disappointed. The sight of a blind woman breast-feeding her young baby, successfully caring and nurturing for him without help, while at the same time teaching a drama class was an incredible "eye-opener" for the participants. One of those moments when everything being discussed makes sense: when theory and practice come together.

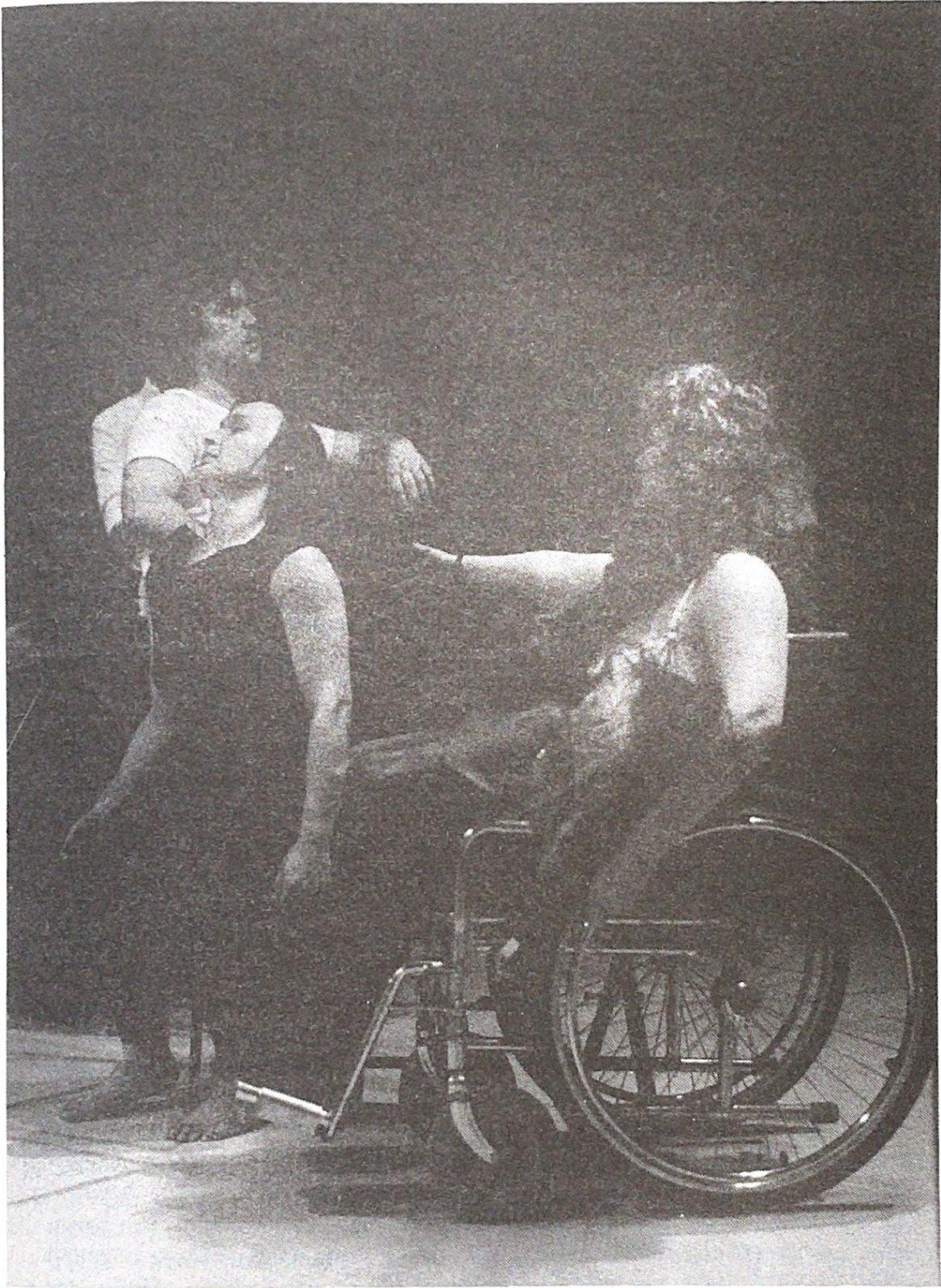
DISABILITY AND THE PERFORMING ARTS

The inclusion of persons with a disability into the mainstream of performing arts, whether in professional capacities or in the schools, has been minimal in Canada. We have seen companies founded primarily for persons with a disability: e.g., Mackay Centre Stage (Montreal based dance company for persons in wheelchairs), and Famous People Players (Toronto based puppet theatre group for persons with mental handicaps). As significant as these groups and others have been in affording persons with a disability the opportunity to develop within their art forms, they still foster the notions of segregation and separate-but-equal status. Audiences appreciate the performances of these groups, but tend to see them in the context of disability.

The work of Dr. Leslie O'Dell and Lynne McNab at Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario, Canada has made an enormous step in bridging the gap between art and persons with special needs. They have created a company called ACTSENSE Theatre for Young Audiences. ACTSENSE performs participatory theatre (none of the company members is disabled) that is specifically designed for young profoundly handicapped children. Their work uses sound, touch, taste, and smell as well as the more conventional movement and speech to create the total environment of the piece. Throughout their work, research has been done into what sensory effects best support theatrical narratives for different combinations of multiple disabilities. Their project is probably the first that has attempted to research this area.

THE 50/50 THEATRE COMPANY

In 1988 we founded the 50/50 THEATRE COMPANY, a Montreal based company dedicated to total integration of performers who are disabled and non disabled performers. The first company was comprised of 8 performers, two of whom used wheelchairs and two of whom were profoundly hearing impaired.



Cast of *Another Day* in rehearsal
Father: Ron Richard; Daughter: Julie Ortynsky; Demonic Figure: Sammantha Tremellen

Our first production, a non-verbal theatre piece entitled *Another Day* was created specially for the company and premiered in Montreal, receiving rave reviews. The success of the first production spurred us on to many subsequent creative works including: a version of Seneca's *Oedipus*, several collaborative creations, three street theatre productions, and to the most recent production of *Lorca Y Bernarda*, a dance and drama work on the life of Federico Garcia Lorca.

The company does not present works which deal solely with disability, this tends to perpetuate a Theatre of the Ghetto, but rather presents classic and new works of the highest artistic standards. The prime objective of the company is to afford individuals with a disability the opportunity to work in integrative theatre² as performing artists. Our focus is on art, not disability. Other objectives are to offer performances in order that the general public may begin to destroy stereotyped preconceptions about persons who are disabled, and to explore techniques which enable performers to work successfully in integrative theatre.

INTEGRATIVE EDUCATION

Being teachers as well as artists, we noted, as we began to formulate approaches to be used with the theatre company, that one of the problems in special education is the lack of distinction made between *integrated education* and *integrative education*. Integrated education suggests the placement of persons with a disability or handicap into regular education and offering the necessary supports so that they are maintained within the non-segregated environment. Integrative education suggests an ongoing process whereby persons with a disability and nondisabled persons must work in a mutually supportive fashion to guarantee the continuation of normalisation practices. The act of integrating persons with disabilities into regular classrooms is not sufficient; rather, the classroom environment must be such that all participating individuals - students, parents, teachers, administrators - are aware of the value of what they are accomplishing and work together to ensure success. This becomes an integrative process. The failure of many special education programmes to accomplish integration can frequently be traced to the lack of integrative thinking and praxis. This realisation became the basis of our work with the 50/50 Theatre Company.

It has always been our experience that the persons with disabilities with whom we work often teach us as much as we teach them. One offshoot of 50/50 THEATRE COMPANY has been the development of a Summer Institute for

²For the purposes of this discussion *Integrative Theatre* will be understood to mean Theatre which involves persons with a disability, in an environment which seeks to encourage integration. Implied in this definition is the notion that theatre does not stand apart from the community in which it is created.

Research and Training Integrative Theatre. Situated at Concordia University, the Institute has operated successfully for the past two Summers. The concept for the Institute is that by providing a supportive setting, persons who are disabled and non-disabled persons - whether they are performers (actors, dancers, directors, designers, choreographers), teachers (arts, special education, general subjects), or students - can teach one another through working together on an integrative theatre production.

The techniques which were developed to encourage integrative theatre evolved out of need from both the Company and the Institute. We noted that there were a number of problems that had to be dealt with. Initially, persons with a disability and nondisabled persons tended not to interact with each other except in the context of the production. Offstage, nondisabled performers seemed reluctant to cross imagined boundary lines to be with performers with a disability for fear of intruding, or fear of seeming to be condescending.

Tasks which centred around the care of performers who are disabled fell to the directors and their assistant. Some of the performers who are disabled needed help with toileting, feeding and drinking. Others had difficulty learning and recalling text and dance sequences. All of the nondisabled performers had some limitations. Some nondisabled performers were not good turners or jumpers, while others had body types which were awkward in certain kinds of movement. Everyone in the theatre group had a disability of some sort. We became rapidly aware that an integrative theatre company would not succeed unless all members offered each other support and shared responsibilities. We began by instituting *Circles of Friends*.

CIRCLES OF FRIENDS

Drawing on the experience of the Joshua Committee from Toronto (R. Perske & M. Perske, 1988) which was initially established to assist Judith Snow, a national Canadian leading expert on the political and social situation of people with disabilities, we created *Circles of Friends* to include every member of the company. Thus, our ultimate goal of integrative theatre would begin in small groups, eventually expanding to include the company as one large group. The goals for each *Circle of Friends* were put forward and each Circle was required to address the issues and possible ways of achieving the desired outcomes. Goals included the ability to dialogue openly and honestly about disability, the need to commit oneself to the concept of integrative theatre, and the realisation of the need to be responsible for each other.

1. Each Circle discussed principles of normalisation and what members thought the term meant. Members with a disability were asked to explain what sorts of things annoyed them in the treatment they received from people in general. Members who are not disabled were asked to discuss their concerns about working with persons with a disability.

2. Given that members were asked to commit themselves to the concept of integrative theatre, it was essential that they begin to formulate notions of what that meant in practical terms and how they could begin to operationalise what they believed.

3. Since all the members of a Circle were responsible for all other members of their group, it was necessary that they begin to identify definitions and parameters.

CONFRONTING ISSUES OF DISABILITY

The Circles were advised that eventually the entire company would be one big *Circle of Friends*, but that initially intimate relationships could best be started with smaller working groups. The Circles had many issues they had to confront:

1. Basic physical needs which had before been dealt with by the directors now became a responsibility and learning experience for members of each Circle. Interestingly, there is an intimacy which develops out of caring for another's basic needs.

2. Transportation for persons with a disability is a frequent problem. Sometimes buses come late, and sometimes not at all. Members of a Circle had to prepare themselves to wait until their friend was safely transported. Great learning took place for nondisabled friends as they began to understand the indignities persons with a disability regularly endure. Sometimes nondisabled friends became annoyed and angry at the bus company for prolonged delays. Persons with a disability are so used to waiting for transportation that they began to perceive their nondisabled friends' annoyance at the bus company as annoyance with them for being an inconvenience. These occurrences sparked interesting discussions among Circle members and provided much learning.

3. Some members of a Circle were capable of travelling to and from rehearsal by public transportation alone, but had not been travel trained to do so. Members would take it upon themselves to travel train their friends. This gift of increased independence was a source of great satisfaction to all.

4. All actors and dancers experience frustration in the creation of a theatrical production. Statements like "I can't do that dance step" frequently mean "I think

I'm incapable of doing that dance step". The gentle and patient help from trusted friends almost always brought positive results.

5. Throughout rehearsal and performance times, friends were alert to the well being of other members of their Circle. It was not unusual to see a member warming the hand of a friend in an electric wheelchair so that he could have full use of his fingers to manipulate the joy stick of his chair. Friends watched to be sure others did not forget entrance cues.

Out of the creation of the *Circles of Friends* came the mutual supportiveness so essential to good theatre production. Company members began to realise, and articulate, that how one performs determines to a great degree how others are seen on a stage. Concern for helping others perform to the best of their ability was born.

EPILOGUE

Piagetian developmental stages and concepts of age appropriateness, which underpin most special education and rehabilitation practice, are currently under scrutiny. If the research by such people as John McLeod (1989) is correct and human development occurs not only in linear sequences but also in quantum leaps and on vertical axes, then it is essential that the arts - which are non-linear, non-sequential and rely on the Eureka moment for their effectiveness - become a larger part of the lives of persons with a disability. For too long special education and rehabilitation have been characterised by professionals doing things for or to persons with a disability. Slowly, this is changing. Finally, persons with a disability are being allowed a voice, to have some say in their learning and in their lives. Participation in artistic activity can only help persons with a disability to find their creative voices.

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