

# A freak show or a real need to make freaks out of people

[Life](#), [Hobby](#)



“ If I was not taking pictures of them nobody would see them”, the photographer Diane Arbus made in the sixties and seventies a series of portraits of what we called at that time “ freaks”: dwarfs, giants, transgender people, mentally and physically disabled persons. She demonstrated that difference is human. Her innovative work even inspired Stanley Kubrick who used her picture of twin sisters as a reference for his movie Shining.

Since the Industrial Revolution, the disabled body has been marginalized and excluded from society. Performance has historically been about showing a perfectly able body. Different or disabled bodies were usually shown in freak shows. The freak show in its original form can be defined as an exhibition of people with a physical, mental or behavioral difference. They were usually happening in circuses or fairs. The popularity of such shows began in the seventeenth century in England and quickly spread around the world. P.T. Barnum started to make it a big business around the United States in the nineteenth century. The marginalization of the disabled body has only recently been questioned. According to the World Health Organisation, disability is “ an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions”, it is “ a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations.” Disability is a contested and non-neutral term and can be seen as discriminatory towards disabled persons and most dancers will describe themselves as ‘ temporarily able-bodied person’ or as having a ‘ non-normate body’. Giving a definition to the word disability is actually quite a difficult task because it is only showing the

difference and creating a bigger gap in between able and disabled body, also we need to be careful not to reinforce the normality of able bodies.

Associating disability and dance seems at first sight quite unusual but actually, it is about shifting the boundaries and legitimate a new body type. How can we change and challenge presumptions towards disability and dance? I will focus in this essay on physical disabilities. In order to answer this question, I will examine the work of three different dance companies and choreographers. In order to do so, I will be looking at the work of Candoco Dance Company, a dance company which is challenging the body and trying to enlarge its perception. After, I will explore the work of Cathie Leveillé-Porché who is using dance as a medium to make the painful body a pleasure body. And finally, I will analyze the work of Marie Chouinard, “ queen of the uneasy feeling” who is mimicking the disabled body. This will help me to demonstrate that dance has a strong potential to generate societal changes regarding perceptions of the physical difference.

Until very recently, dance tended to include only very specific bodies, this excluded not only every non-abled bodies but also many able bodies as well. Candoco Dance Company is probably one of the most famous dance company working with abled and disabled bodies. Founded in 1991 by Celeste Dandeker and Adam Benjamin Candoco is aiming to produce high standard dance performances, they are not a dance therapy group nor a modern freak show. When the disabled body is in motion it is often more obvious that it is different but also – because in that case, able and non-able bodies are dancing together – this is making the difference more obvious but

for which body? Which body is becoming the norm? Candoco is presenting the disable body not as something like a charity or to bring pity, they are willing to express and demonstrate the different capacities of the human body – they are articulating new capacities of human bodies that a human body can not do therefore it is not a disability anymore but an articulation of enrichment of the human capacities. Through its work Candoco Dance Company is posing the question of what is actually dance as people who have seen their work said that they saw a dance piece, not a dance piece about disability or just disability. I believe that in this context dance is a legitimate site for bringing positive changes in societal perceptions of society.

Dance can be a way of making “ a painful body become a pleasure body”. Disability then becomes medium, a way of improving the comfort of disabled people. As I was doing my research on this subject I heard about Cathie Leveillé-Porché’s work, I was able to interview her and then to assist to one of her lessons. I met Marine and Caroline her assistants and Céline, Laetitia and Didier, her students. All three of them have visibly non-normated bodies although Céline is actually the only one using crutches but during the lessons, she is using her crutches as a tool to create power and emotions, not as a symbol of her disability. When I interviewed Cathie Leveillé-Porché she told me that her students were really enjoying those lessons as it was the only non-medical physical contact they had, it was all about the transmission of her passion. Every lesson and performance is different and you have to really be at the mercy of the disabled persons, actually, the able

body is here only as a guide, a support but it is about magnifying the disabled body, not the able one. It is about the quality, not the way it is done. She is working a lot with the idea of overcoming the fear of being in pain or failing and is truly respecting the limits of each of them. As I was watching the lesson I realized that I was actually completely forgetting about the fact that half of the dancers had non-normated bodies, was it because they were fully dedicated? Or because the able bodies were adjusting their pace to them? Perhaps. Cathie Leveillé-Porché told me that during their last show the audience realized during the bows that two dancers couldn't actually walk and they only noticed because they came on stage to bow with their wheelchairs. As Caroline was guiding Céline I realised that the stage spacial references were not exactly the same as usual; as a matter of fact sometimes the able body is supporting the disabled body and it is more powerful to see the movement from the side so the audience can see the interaction and the link between the two bodies and the perfect symbiosis between the two.

Marie Chouinard, “ queen of the uneasy feeling” created in 2005 a show in which she was mimicking disability thanks to the use of crutches and prostheses and by adopting thwarted moves, Marie Chouinard is claiming that” gives rise to unusual bodily shapes and gestural dynamics and opens onto a universe of meticulous and playful exploration”. Her work is certainly a testimony of the pain and disability caused by the rigors of ballet but by forcing an able body to become disabled it is also emphasizing the difference between bodies with a condition and able bodies. By adding ‘ props’ to the

dancers she is actually limiting their movements instead of expending them as I first thought it would. I guess Marie Chouinard wants to explore how far a body can push itself and all the new improvements an extra prosthetic can make. The performance is about enabling movement rather than limiting it, dancers were told to emulate the differently abled. There is something in Marie Chouinard's work that I find very disturbing and particularly harmful, I can not really define what it is but perhaps it is because it gives me the impression that she is mocking the disabled body, the abnormal. She is creating a sort of ugliness which is still spectacular and impressive. There is something very particular to see completely able bodies 'having fun' with objects that are trapping others daily, it seems like they are pretending to be what is usually unfriendly and scary. In my opinion I would be more receptive to her work if it was showcasing as Candoco Dance Company both able and disabled bodies.