

# Dance & Visual Impairment

For an Accessibility  
of Choreographic  
Practices

**ANDRÉ FERTIER**

**Cemaforre-European Centre for Cultural Accessibility**

# **Dance & Visual Impairment**

For an Accessibility of Choreographic Practices

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Practices

Translated and adapted from the French original  
by Marcus Weisen

**ANDRÉ FERTIER**

**CEMAFORRE-EUROPEAN CENTRE  
FOR CULTURAL ACCESSIBILITY**

**CAHIERS DE LA PÉDAGOGIE**

**CENTRE NATIONAL DE LA DANSE**

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**WE ARE SINCERELY GRATEFUL TO ANNE-MARIE SANDRINI.** Without her deep commitment to the accessibility of choreographic practices for all, and in particular for people with disabilities, this collection of publications on 'Dance and Disability' would not have happened. The wealth and depth of her experiences as a dancer, teacher, honorary dance inspector for the Paris local authority and president of La Possible Échappée have nurtured the development of this project and the writing of this publication.

**WE WISH TO THANK THE MANY PEOPLE** who contributed to the publication of this teaching resource, in particular: Gilbert Lozachmeur and Claje, Frédéric Crocq, Georges Nikolaidis and Julie Galopin for the Gradisca collective, Jean-Yves and Chantal Scipion, Christian Barets, Thérèse Da Mota, Caroline Duez, Corinne Houisse, Tamara Jouanis, Félix Oreste, Zahia Ouisti, Jacqueline and Roger Tollard, the participants and the residence Saint-Louis des Quinze-Vingts, Gihane Besse and the Atelier de Paris-Carolyn Carlson, Patrick Guillem and Alain Bonte of the conservatory of les Landes, Marie-Annick Socié of Sidvem, Dominique Bouchard and Circuit-Est centre chorégraphique, Valérie Castan, Bruno Joly and Isabelle Richard du CCN of Caen/Basse-Normandie, and, at the national dance centre Marion Bastien, Philippe Crespín, Claire Delcroix, Marie-Odile Guellier, Alice Rodelet, Françoise Vanhems, Nicolas Villodre and Agnès Wasserman.

**CEMAFORRE HAS ORGANISED A RESEARCH LABORATORY** on the theme of 'Dance and visual impairment' in partnership with Claje in the context of its initiatives supported by the city of Paris. It has also undertaken research thanks to the European Centre for Cultural Accessibility on which it leads with the support of the Île-de-France region. Cemaforre particularly wishes to thank all its partners.

# FOREWORD

The first version of this book was published in 2014 by Centre national de la danse in Paris as a manual to support dance teachers working with blind and partially sighted students. By translating it into English, thousands more teachers, artists and organisations now have the opportunity to learn from the information, insights and examples of good practice it describes.

**THE TEXT RAISES QUESTIONS** of how our senses are used in dance teaching practice. In considering how we might develop a more inclusive teaching methodology for blind and partially sighted learners it also exposes other questions: how might traditional ocular-centric teaching models be denying the potential for everyone of a more multi-sensory approach to learning dance? What possibilities might there be for a pedagogy that embraces touch and hearing as equals with vision?

**THIS EDITION OF THE BOOK IS NOT ONLY ABOUT TEACHING.** The English translation was initiated by a separate project. In 2015, four of Europe's most active commissioners of contemporary dance performance came together for a project called The Humane Body: Ways of Seeing Dance. This Creative Europe supported project aimed to bring ideas of accessibility for blind and partially sighted audiences into the heart of the choreographic process. Could we encourage a way of creating that considered the sensory experience of dance performance differently? This book captures the reflections of the artists and audio describers who joined in this experiment. Their journey of creating performance experiences that do not primarily rely on an audience's vision is fascinating and complex. The project challenged both preconceptions of the nature of blindness and assumptions about how all of us connect to dance. By examining how to communicate differently it inspires another approach to 'taking care' of the spectator.

**QUESTIONS ABOUT LANGUAGE ALSO EMERGE IN THIS TEXT.** Audio description is an established, refined access tool for blind and partially sighted people. But is the way of describing a film suitable for describing a dance? How can words be used to capture the poetry of a dancing body without imposing interpretation on what is essentially enigmatic? Because dance is an experience

we somehow feel in the body, even when we are only observing, does this change the vocabulary we need to talk about it?

**THE SOCIAL MODEL OF DISABILITY** demands that organisations and institutions remove barriers to participation for all disabled people. Dance practice all over the world has grabbed this idea and transformed in response. But dance can go much further. Through inclusive practice in teaching, creation and performance we can develop the art form as a whole. Our creative approach to inclusion will lead us to achieving extraordinary things. I hope that as well as being a source of information this book serves as a provocation to keep us taking steps on this journey.

Eddie Nixon  
Director of Theatre and Artist Development, The Place, London.  
May 2017.

On behalf of:  
Centre national de la danse, Pantin  
ImPulsTanz, Vienna  
Kaaithheater, Brussels

# PREFACE

By Mathilde Monnier

Dance is without doubt one of the disciplines that has engaged in disability for a long time and that has given this engagement a dual creative and reflective dimension. Generating a multiplicity of artistic gestures, dance has shown just how expansive the poetic dimension of movement is and that it escapes confinement in limitations. On the contrary, dance has been nurtured through encounters with others. We still remember the 1984 choreography entitled *Le Rêve d'Helen Keller* (The Dream of Helen Keller), by Catherine Diverrès, an emblematic work on the life of a young blind woman. The piece, which had been awarded the first prize of the international dance competition of Bagnolet, aroused considerable enthusiasm among the audience and sensitised the viewers to the worlds of imagination and debates on disability opened up by dance.

**THE CENTRE NATIONAL DE LA DANSE**, the French national dance centre, has launched a series of educational publications on 'Dance and Disability' in the context of its information, training and awareness raising activities for dance professionals and in partnership with Gemaforre—the French national resource centre for cultural accessibility and the European Centre for cultural accessibility hosted by it.

**THROUGH THESE PUBLICATIONS**, the Centre national de la danse wishes to express its commitment to non-discrimination and equal opportunities and to fully play its part within the dynamics of the implementation of the legal framework for cultural and artistic accessibility, at a time when the difficulties of fully implementing the French law of 11 February 2005 on the equality of rights, opportunities, participation and citizenship of people with disabilities have become apparent.

**THE NEED IS CONSIDERABLE**, for many citizens with a disability do not have access to dance education. People of every age— with a visual, auditory or mobility impairment, with learning difficulties, mental health issues, autism or multiple disabilities, as well as older people in need of care—are all too often being steered towards group leisure style activities and remain deprived of any possibility of engaging in structured learning pathways which lead to new discoveries and skills in dance. Thus, they are not truly 'included' in cultural life.

**WHATEVER THE AESTHETIC APPROACHES AT PLAY**—from ballet to ballroom dance, from traditional to contemporary dance—there is a great need to assess the power of choreographic art to question, to move and to connect people beyond differences.

**THE OBJECTIVE OF THESE PUBLICATIONS** is to provide an overview of know-how regarding the accessibility of dance practice and to disseminate it. They build on the experiences of a large number of dance professionals and bear witness to their skills in responding to complex and often unusual situations. Every educational approach involves a sense of sharing, empathy and the capacity to innovate.

**WE NEED TO CHANGE THE ATTITUDES OF DANCE TEACHERS** towards people with disabilities, their responsibilities and the learning pathways available in their professional practice that avoid a compassionate view that focuses on inability rather than ability.

**OUR HOPE IS**, that the reflections, case-studies and guidelines presented in these publications benefit everyone: students with and without a disability, dance professionals in their teaching roles, dance audiences, as well as choreographic creation and research. It is our wish that these publications lead to new initiatives and approaches!

# INTRODUCTION

Dance teachers and professionals can make use of the concept of cultural accessibility in their commitment to a professional ethics of inclusion of people with a disability, to develop practices that are respectful of the principles of non-discrimination, equal opportunities, citizenship and access for all to services to the public.

**THE CONCEPT OF ACCESSIBILITY** originated in the nineteen-eighties in the context of the built environment, transport, housing and many products design. Its use in the context of cultural and artistic life is more recent.

## EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR CULTURAL ACCESSIBILITY'S DEFINITION OF CULTURAL ACCESSIBILITY

**'CULTURAL ACCESSIBILITY'** is the conceptual tool for implementing this right, avoiding the perpetuation and creation of discriminations, as well as physical, sensory, mental, psychological, cognitive, social, financial and cultural barriers. Cultural accessibility covers access to media, works of art, cultural heritage, digital content, as well as arts and cultural practices, amateur and professional. The concept applies to cultural venues and all outreach work, including places in which people with a disability and older people experiencing loss of autonomy live.

**IT ASKS** that all citizens are taken into account in their diversity in the development and implementation of cultural policies, in the creation and management of cultural institutions and their cultural offers, in their policies for audiences, as well as in the production of the products of the cultural industries. It builds on the concept of "design for all" (in several European countries), also called "inclusive design" (UK) or "universal design" (e.g. USA) and the concept of "mainstreaming". The concept of cultural accessibility is inseparable from the notion of "quality of use for all", and thus requires putting into place specific services and products for specific requirements (such as Braille, audio description, sign language, sub- and surtitling, mobility aids and easy read information, etc., called e.g. "auxiliary aids" in UK disability legislation).

**THE INVOLVEMENT OF PROFESSIONALS** is a central tenet of cultural accessibility. Depending on the levels of cultural engagement and the specific requirements of people with a disability, this involvement may require little more than an open mind and professional ethics, or an adaptability of professional practices, as well as training for cultural accessibility, and in some cases, the involvement of specialist organisations (active in the field of cultural accessibility or disability).

Cultural participation presupposes that **EVERY PERSON, WITH OR WITHOUT A DISABILITY**, enjoys at least minimal access to essential information, to means of transport, as well as to physical, psychological and financial means. A person with a disability has the same requirements as everyone, but to be fulfilled, specific additional measures may need to be taken, such as the provision of information in accessible formats and/or an accessibly conceived cultural offer, technical aids and facilitators.

Its implementation requires **POLICIES AND ACTION PLANS**, which dynamically and collaboratively involve all local stakeholders. To achieve true cultural accessibility, for all and for each person, it is indispensable to think in terms of "cultural accessibility journey", so that all stakeholders play their part. The concept of cultural accessibility generates research, knowledge, skills and new professions in the cultural sector.

✓ More information: <[www.cemaforre.asso.fr/zoom.php#english](http://www.cemaforre.asso.fr/zoom.php#english)>.

## CULTURAL ACCESSIBILITY: A LEGAL DUTY

**ACCESSIBILITY IS NOT JUST A CONCEPT.** It is the subject of legislations, policies and regulations, as are the cultural rights of people with a disability.

**THE RIGHT OF ACCESS TO CULTURE** is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948, article 27): 'Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits. Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author'.



Article 30 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) states that: 'States Parties recognise the right of persons with disabilities to take part on an equal basis with others in cultural life, and shall take all appropriate measures (...)'.

## LEGISLATIVE AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK: KEY POLICIES

### INTERNATIONAL

#### Universal Declaration of Human Rights, United Nations (1948)

Art. 27: 'Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits. Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author'.

#### Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, United Nations (2006)

Art. 30: 'States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to take part on an equal basis with others in cultural life, and shall take all appropriate measures (...)'.

#### Exception on copyrights, Treaty of Marrakesh, WIPO (2013)

This treaty aims at increasing access to the published works to blind and partially sighted people, and people who are otherwise print impaired.

✔ More information: World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). <[www.wipo.int/treaties/en/ip/marrakesh/](http://www.wipo.int/treaties/en/ip/marrakesh/)>.

#### Recommendation R (92) 6 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on a Coherent Policy for People with Disabilities, Council of Europe (1992) (The Council of Europe has 47 Member States)

Art. 8.5: 'Government institutions, leisure and cultural organisations should develop comprehensive access policies and action programmes designed to bring significant and lasting improvements for all people with disabilities'.

### EUROPEAN (EU)

#### Treaty of Amsterdam (1997)

Art. 13: 'The Council (...) is entitled to take appropriate action to combat discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation'.

#### Charter of fundamental rights of the European Union (2000)

Art. 21: Non-discrimination. Any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation shall be prohibited.

Art. 25: The rights of the elderly people. The Union recognises and respects the right of the elderly to lead a life of dignity and independence and to participate in social and cultural life.

Art. 26: Integration of persons with disabilities. The Union recognises and respects the right of persons with disabilities to benefit from measures designed to ensure their independence, social and occupational integration and participation in the life of the community.

#### Council Resolution of 6 May 2003 on accessibility of cultural infrastructure and cultural activities for people with disabilities (Official Journal C134 of 7 June 2003)

Invites the Member States and the Commission to take new measures to improve access to cultural infrastructures, cultural activities and the media.

#### Council Resolution of 5 May 2003 on equal opportunities for pupils and students with disabilities in education and training

Invites the Member States to take new measures concerning full integration of children and young people with special needs in society through their appropriate education and training, and their insertion in a school system that is (...) adapted to their needs.

#### Committee of Ministers Recommendation CM/Rec (2013) 3 on ensuring full, equal and effective participation of persons with disabilities in culture, sports, tourism and leisure activities

Invites Member States and the Commission to take new measures to ensure full, equal and effective participation of people with disabilities to culture, sport, tourism and leisure.

#### The European Accessibility Act (proposed in 2015)

The proposed directive relates to the harmonisation of legal, regulatory and administrative measures of the Member States regarding accessibility standards to apply to products and services.

✔ More information: <[ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=2400](http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=2400)>.

#### The European Disability Card (pilot phase in 2016)

To enable people with disabilities to travel more easily from one country to another, the EU is putting a system into place established on mutual recognition based on a European Disability Card. This will entitle people with disabilities to equal access to specific advantages in the areas of culture, sport, leisure and transport throughout the EU.

✔ More information: <[ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1139&langId=en](http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1139&langId=en)>.

#### EU Directive 2016/2102 on making the websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies more accessible

On 26 October 2016 the European Parliament approved the directive on making the websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies more accessible. Member States have until 23 September 2018 to transpose the Directive into their national legislation. The European Commission will adopt implementation acts by the end of 2018. This will ensure uniform conditions for the implementation of the relevant provisions of the Directive.

✔ More information: <[ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/node/373](http://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/node/373)>.

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# 1 Dancing without sight in the history of dance

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We all know how to let go and dance with the eyes shut in a dimly lit disco or blinded by its stroboscopic lighting effects. It is more difficult, however, to imagine a blind person and dancer interpret the most famous choreographies of the classical dance repertoire or be a famous dancer him/herself... Yet, some examples highlight the wide scope of possibilities, even though there are too few of them to date.

# 1 | Professional dancers and choreographers with a visual impairment

**BEYOND THEIR DISABILITY**, personalities such as Alicia Alonso and Saïd Gharbi have claimed their place in the heart of artistic life. They demonstrate the ability of people with disabilities to establish themselves as professionals and to leave a mark of their talents in the world of dance. Their careers explode a number of preconceived ideas on the skills needed for dancing.

## ALICIA ALONSO

Alicia Alonso is a blind dancer and choreographer who founded the National Ballet of Cuba. She built it up into one of the best classical dance companies in the world. 'Dance is inseparable from human nature'<sup>1</sup> is her motto. The woman 'who made dance as popular as football in her country'<sup>2</sup> has been nearly blind since the end of her teens. She kept dancing until late in her life and spent the major part of her career on the dance floor without seeing her partners. 'Her remarkable technique and exceptional dramatic skills, writes dance critic René Sirvin, enabled her to perform the biggest roles of the repertoire, as well as a large number of creations from Balanchine to Béjart without the audience ever noticing her visual problems'.

Alicia Alonso had an eye condition (retinal detachment) that deteriorated with the years and had eye surgery some ten times. After one of these operations, she was strictly forbidden the slightest muscular effort. At that time, says her biographer Isis Wirth, she 'lay in bed, immobilised, her head trapped between two cushions filled with sand. (...) She could only move her fingers and toes. That's how she memorised ballet performances, which she said she saw in her mind. She mentally remembered each step, figures and movements and accompanied them with her finger movements... While lying in bed, she danced with the tip of her fingers, so to speak. The technique she thus invented to "visualise" ballet performances with her fingers was of a great help when she reintegrated the dance company. With an iron will, the strength of her talent and the mastery of her art, she could persuade her partners to help her out (...). Ways were devised to inform her about her whereabouts on the dance floor. Subtly choreographed light effects and invisible wire stretched out on the edge of the wings avoided the risk of her falling into the orchestra pit or losing her way behind curtains. She received support from her partners. Fernando, her husband and professor, experimented with her and other dancers techniques suited

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**'MY VISUAL PROBLEM** led me to become more disciplined and concentrated. I had to find out how to continue to dance and reach into myself'.

Alicia Alonso

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to her blindness: he made them rotate and execute combinations of steps the eyes shut'.<sup>3</sup>

A legendary figure in the history of dance, Alicia Alonso is a role model on the path to accessibility. 'Each and everyone of us puts up a fight when we see something that's going to destroy our lives. This fight makes us everyday be more in love with life. My visual problem led me to become more disciplined and concentrated. I had to find out how to continue to dance and reach into myself. Dance is a mental work before becoming a technique. I measure everything with my body and my head. This way, I take possession of space and I dance freely, for you have to be free to dance'.<sup>4</sup>

‘Sometimes, sighted people  
are blinded  
by what they see.  
Then they forget to feel’.

Saburo Teshigawara

## SAÏD GHARBI

Saïd Gharbi, a dancer of Moroccan origin who lives in Belgium, became blind at the age of fourteen. He took part in several performances of the well-known Belgian choreographer Wim Vandekeybus' company, *Ultima Vez*. When the troupe performed at the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris, in 1994, the media were unanimous in praising the immense stage presence of the pair of non-sighted dancers, which he and Machtelt Philips formed in *Her Body Doesn't Fit Her Soul*. 'In this universe in which everything is violence, Saïd Gharbi brings his softness and fluidity of gestures to the piece. It's him, the non-sighted one, who illuminates, poeticises, guides the performance and triggers its rhythms with movements which are all his own'<sup>5</sup>, writes journalist Christelle Prouvost. 'The power of this performance, confides Wim Vandekeybus, resides in mystery, in intangibility. In fact, Saïd is the centre point from which all the threads unfold. I am fascinated by his aura. He has the intensity of those who had to get used to living without the security of the visual factor'.

Together with his wife and choreographer Ana Stegnar, Saïd Gharbi created his own company in 2002, the Ballets du Grand Maghreb (now called Ballets du Grand Miro). He is involved in Ana Stegnar's projects around blindness. *Shining Sound of Dance*

(2010) is a performance 'irrigated with poetical images and punctuated by speech that never ceases to question our relationship to appearances (...). In a world dominated by a zeal to cast light on everything, we end up discerning nothing. [This choreography] blinds us, disorients us and shakes us in our certainties'.<sup>6</sup>

Composed for Saïd Gharbi, the 'aesthetic and sensory performance in which the eyes give way to the ears', *Shining Sound* (2009) invites the audience to 'enter into the world of a non-seeing person, experiencing space through the noises that surround us'. In 2012, Saïd Gharbi took part in the creation of *Clairières* (Clearings) with Delphine Demont (Acajou dance company), which they performed as a duo. They created a 'listening space' in which they 'played with the risks of disorientation and disrupted our familiar perceptions'.<sup>7</sup>

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**'SAÏD IS THE CENTRE POINT** from which all the threads unfold. I am fascinated by his aura. He has the intensity of those who had got to get used to living without the security of the visual factor'.

Wim Vandekeybus

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## 2 | Choreographers including dancers with a visual impairment

### **MANY CHOREOGRAPHERS ARE INTERESTED IN BLINDNESS, DARKNESS, THE VISIBLE AND THE INVISIBLE...**

Some choose to work with visually impaired dancers in their creations, research and teaching. Others set up workshops or devise ways of integrating blind and partially sighted dancers in choreographic works. The approaches differ, but, in their own way, they all illustrate the richness of such experiences.

### **LONG-TERM PROJECTS WITH DANCERS WITH A VISUAL IMPAIRMENT**

#### **EXAMPLES**

Choreographer **Alvin Ailey**, founder of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (USA), has created many dance schools, including one for blind children. In 1982, the Alvin Ailey Dance Theater and Very Special Arts (VSA) launched the New Visions Dance Project for young blind people from schools in New York. The programme was gradually extended to all ages; involving participants aged seven to seventy-four. The courses were recorded on audiocassette, to support teachers in their work. 'We believe that art is for everyone and not only for elites, states Alvin Ailey. Our aim is to provide blind people with the opportunity to liberate themselves, to explore space and air, and to develop their sense of self-worth. When they realise that they can create something by themselves with their own body, they feel more integrated into life and have enhanced self-confidence'.<sup>8</sup>

**Suleiman Rifai**, born in Tanzania, who has a deteriorating eye condition, first engaged in dance when he settled in the United States in 1979. He entered the Lighthouse International rehabilitation centre for blind people in New York and took part in dance therapy workshops. His skills got noticed and he was invited to join the New Visions Dance Project. Suleiman Rifai received a study bursary from Alvin Ailey, which enabled him to become a member of the dance company.

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**'OUR AIM IS TO PROVIDE BLIND PEOPLE** with the opportunity to liberate themselves, to explore space and air, and to develop their sense of self-worth'.

Alvin Ailey

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**Carol Penn** was in charge of the first sessions of the New Visions Dance Project, District Columbia, which she founded in 1985, and became its director. She worked with visually impaired children and organised events that gave them the opportunity to perform in front of big audiences. In the course of many workshops, she trained people wanting to undertake dance work with people with disabilities. 'I knew that these experiences would give meaning to my dance. I always thought that it is a profound injustice, that people living in institutions do not enjoy access to artistic activities'.<sup>9</sup>

**Fernanda Bianchini** is director of the Associação de Ballet e Artes para Cegos, a classical ballet school in São Paulo (Brazil). She trains young visually impaired people with a method she developed to make her teaching accessible. With Geyza Pereira, a non-sighted teacher and dancer, they trained blind members of the association, who took part in the closing ceremony of the London 2012 Olympic Games with two Brazilian stars, Roberta Marquez, first ballerina, and Thiago Soares, principal dancer of the Royal Ballet of London.

✓ More information: <[www.associacaofernandabianchini.org](http://www.associacaofernandabianchini.org)>.

**Ashok Kumar**, founder and director of the Natyanjali School of Indian Classical Dance, Bangalore (India) has taught classical Indian dance, including Bharata Natyam and Kuchipudi dance to visually impaired students. He created a troupe of dancers with blind men guided by sighted women, which has toured all over the world. Ashok Kumar conceived a method called 'touch and feel' to teach visually impaired people dance, on the initiative of one of his students, Buse Gowda.

✓ More information: <[www.natyanjalibangalore.org](http://www.natyanjalibangalore.org)>.

**Kjersti Engebretsen**, a choreographer from Norway, holds dance workshops with blind and partially sighted people. In 2004, she created *Fragile*, a choreography involving four dancers, one of whom has a visual impairment. She has since initiated an international collaborative project about dance and visual impairment with partners in Portugal and Estonia.

✓ More information: <[www.fragiledance.com](http://www.fragiledance.com)>, and <<http://kjerstie.org/index.html>>.

**Ana Rita Barata** is a choreographer and founder of the Lisbon (Portugal) based contemporary dance company CiM (Companhia Integrada Multidisciplinar) that works with dancers with a disability. In her piece *Edge*, created in 2013 in Lisbon, two of the four dancers are blind: Bernardo da Gama and Joana Gomes.

✓ More information: <[www.companhiacim.jimdo.com](http://www.companhiacim.jimdo.com)>.

Since its foundation in 2005 by **Delphine Demont** and **José Luis Pagés**, the French company Acajou has started a choreographic exploration that questions the place of sight in dance, literature, in reaching and learning danced movement in combination with other sense perceptions.

✓ More information: <[www.acajou.org](http://www.acajou.org)>.

American dancer, teacher and choreographer **Steve Paxton** has played a major role in the development of dance activities with people with disabilities, notably in 'contact improvisation', a form of dance of which he is one of the founders. With Anne Kilcoyne, he created Touchdown Dance at Dartington College of Arts in Totnes (UK), in 1986. Now based in Manchester, the organisation is recognised for its expertise in leading dance workshops. 'Our methods and modes of action are based on techniques of touch and sensory feedback. We work specifically on the inclusion of people with a visual impairment, but our workshops are open to people with disabilities and non-disabled people'. Touchdown runs a dance company with six professional dancers, three of whom are visually impaired. 'The work is inspired by dance scores which combine words and movements or use sound and touch to connect visually impaired and non-disabled dancers in an environment in which everyone moves about freely. (...) At Touchdown, we are involved in creating dance scores, which allow visually impaired dancers to move freely on stage. There is the safety of the frame provided by the score. This sets up a structure of predefined themes and atmospheres within which the improvisation can unfold'.<sup>10</sup> Blind and partially sighted dancers Janee Hall, Jerry Covington and Bill McKinlay are actively involved in Touchdown Dance. Bill McKinlay was deputy director and has also worked with choreographer and teacher Alito Alessi, who is well-known in the field of contact improvisation, dance and disability and is cofounder and artistic director of DanceAbility.

✓ More information: <[www.touchdowndance.co.uk](http://www.touchdowndance.co.uk)>.

**Candoco Dance Company** was founded by Celeste Dandeker and Adam Benjamin in 1991 out of workshops that explored the creative potential of working with disabled and non-disabled dancers. The impetus of dance, and not disability, was established from the start, leading swiftly to the creation of a professional dance company, commissioning world-class choreographers to create new works for national and international touring focusing on mainstream presentation.

In its first twenty-five years, the company performed in over 60 countries with over 50 new works from choreographers as diverse as Javier de Frutos, Stephen Petronio, Nigel Charnock, Hofesh Shechter, Trisha Brown, Jérôme Bel, Hetain Patel and Alexander Whitley.

Candoco's commitment to learning has always underpinned all of the company's activities providing participatory and professional development opportunities alongside its live performances to widen participation in dance by disabled people and to showcase the quality and excitement created through difference. Candoco's ground breaking approach to teaching was a precursor to formal programmes including the Candoco Foundation Course in Dance for Disabled Students (2004-2007), and the addition of *And Who Shall Go to the Ball?* by Rafael Bonachela to the GCSE Dance Specification (2012-2016), the first time a work featuring disabled performers had been included.

Visually impaired dancers were among the cast in the company's critically acclaimed restaging of *The Show Must Go On* (2015 and 2017), an iconic work by the choreographer Jérôme Bel, and performed as part of the Candoco's *Friday Night Spectacular: Display* at the Wellcome Collection in 2016. During the company's Foundation Course in Dance for Disabled Students (2004-2007), Candoco worked with several visually impaired dancers, and it continues to develop this work through partnership projects across Europe and learning programmes throughout the UK. The company collaborates with venues across the UK and internationally to develop audio description and touch tours for its productions, encouraging theatres to engage in and expand their accessibility.

✓ More information: <[www.candoco.co.uk](http://www.candoco.co.uk)>.

**Extant** is the UK's leading professional performing arts company of visually impaired artists. Based in London, the company was founded in 1997 by blind artistic director, Maria Oshodi. The name 'Extant', defined as the opposite of extinct, was chosen by a group of professional visually impaired artists to describe the emergence of a new dynamic space, intended to redress their invisibility as artists and explore new creative territories. Since then, Extant has been at the forefront of debate around access to theatre and produced various projects that span different art forms, always aiming to break new ground, provide uniquely shared experiences for sighted and visually impaired audiences, and promote embedded accessibility. Productions have ranged in artistic ambition and scale over the years, with ongoing research and development providing an acute critical inquiry into the state of creative approaches to access. As well as running its regular programme of activity, Extant has produced tours in the UK by international visually impaired artists, led arts consultancies, seminars and research in access and technology and delivered training in education, business and the arts.

✓ More information: <[www.extant.org.uk](http://www.extant.org.uk)>.

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**THE NAME 'EXTANT'**, defined as the opposite of extinct, was chosen by a group of professional visually impaired artists to describe the emergence of a new dynamic space, intended to redress their invisibility as artists and explore new creative territories.

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## INTERWOVEN PATHS AND ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN CHOREOGRAPHERS AND PEOPLE WITH A VISUAL IMPAIRMENT

### EXAMPLES

**Martha Graham**, a key figure of American modern dance, and Helen Keller, who has been deaf and blind since the age of two, met in the nineteen-fifties. When Helen Keller visited Martha Graham's studio, she felt instantly at ease. She didn't see the dance, but let herself be invaded by the vibrations stemming from the dance floor. Martha Graham prompted her to 'see' the dancers' movements through touch and invited her to take part in a choreography.<sup>11</sup>

Contemporary Japanese choreographer **Saburo Teshigawara** conducted workshops with teenagers with disabilities from the École régionale pour déficients visuels in Loos (France) and from the Institut national des jeunes aveugles in Lille (France). The work culminated in the performance *Prelude for Dawn* shown at the Opera of Lille in 2004. Teshigawara also collaborated with blind dancer Stuart Jackson on the creation of *Luminous* (2001). According to Teshigawara, students with a visual impairment have another approach to dance. Working with them, he had to 'develop another way of teaching dance techniques'.<sup>12</sup>

✓ More information: <[www.st-karas.com](http://www.st-karas.com)>.

**Émilie Hernandez**, a French dancer met theatre critic, writer, and stage director Wang Mo Lin in 2002 in Taiwan. Mo Lin entrusted her with the project of creating a performance with visually impaired people he had been working with at the Taiwan New Bodo Arts Association for the Visually Impaired. Participants were fifty-to-sixty of age. Not all were born blind. 'Blind people see much more than one thinks'<sup>13</sup>, says Émilie Hernandez, who had been impressed by the techniques they acquired within only a few weeks. 'Some are the material of the best dancers... I also like the fact that they do not have an aesthetic body. Their grace resides entirely in movement, and movement only'.

**Bruno Danjoux**, dancer with the troupe of French choreographer Odile Duboc, worked for one year with four visually impaired members of the Valentin Haüy association in Lyon (France). In 1998, the experience resulted in an exhibition and in 'choreographic instants' titled *La Nuit du corps* (Night of the Body). Talking about the dancers to journalist Marie-Christine Vernay, the choreographer said: 'I thought that they were more experienced than I was. They did not want to walk into the night. It would be different, no doubt, with blind people, but partially sighted people want to be with the light they have. They keep their eyes open. The night I want to talk to you about is also the night of the dancer, when one plunges into the dark, when one doesn't know, when one is looking for what, in principle, one doesn't see'.<sup>14</sup>

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**STUDENTS** with a visual impairment have another approach to dance. Working with them, explains Saburo Teshigawara, he had to 'develop another way of teaching dance techniques'.

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Cofounder of the association Danse Contact Improvisation, **Didier Silhol**, teaches contact improvisation at the Conservatoire national supérieur de musique et de danse in Paris. En 2002, he started a 'meet-up workshop' at the Centre national de la danse (Pantin, France) titled 'Who is guiding whom?' in which artists, choreographers, dance teachers and non-sighted adults can share and experiment with each and everyone's skills. Didier Silhol draws on contact improvisation for sharing body weight, bodily sensations and experiences, but the work also involves the construction of space and imaginary gestures. Didier Silhol says of his experience: 'When a sighted person shares what s/he sees with a blind person, whatever the interactivity between them, s/he guides. But when the blind person leads the sighted person, both of them are doing something they are not used to doing. When the blind person becomes the guide... no one sees any longer. The blind person is endowed with a new kind of responsibility. To reach that point, sensitivity needs to be worked on and physical preparation is needed; it's the same thing when I dance. This helps shake off some conventional behaviour. It is known that blind people feel their way in everyday environments, but it's to avoid the worst. If everyone allows themselves to be vulnerable, one realises that it becomes a strength'.<sup>15</sup>



French choreographer **Edwine Fournier** was involved in a dance workshop organised in 2005 by Muriel Venet, in charge of dance at the education department of the Centre Pompidou (Paris, France). Some participants were blind or partially sighted, other were professional dancers. Edwine Fournier stresses that paradoxically, something can open up when one of the senses is shut down: 'I wanted to work with non-sighted people after discovering in the practice of tango that a very special kind of encounter with the other can take place with the eyes shut, owing to his/her movement; the encounter is totally different to what one clings to, if there is only sight and speech!'<sup>16</sup>

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**'I WANTED TO WORK WITH NON-SIGHTED PEOPLE** after discovering in the practice of tango that a very special kind of encounter with the other can take place with the eyes shut'.

Edwine Fournier

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### 'INTEGRATED DANCE' AND 'DANCE INTEGRATION'

The terms 'integrated dance' and 'dance integration' originated in the nineteen-eighties. They are being used frequently by dance companies that open up their activities to people with a wide range of disabilities (particularly so in contact improvisation and in contemporary

dance). These experiences gathered in this context are often of an undeniable richness and infused with human and ethical qualities that nurture reflection on the accessibility of dance practice. It is, however, regrettable that they are sometimes being presented as 'the'

solution in terms of dance accessibility, as this contributes to people with a disability continuing to be denied access to the diversity of dance training provided in the majority of public and private dance schools.

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1 Motto borrowed by Alicia Alonso from Alejo Carpentier. Quote from: 'Le Cuba libre d'Alicia Alonso'. Interview by Jean-François Abert and Marie-Christine Vernay. *Libération*, 3 October 1992.

2 Terms used by Guy Darnet, former director of the Biennale de la danse, Lyon, quoted in René Sirvin's article, 'V<sup>e</sup> Biennale de Lyon, hommage à Alicia Alonso: 72 ans et toutes ses pointes!'. *L'Aurore*, October 1992. *Ibid.* next quote.

3 Wirth, Isis. (2013). *La Ballerine & el Comandante*. Paris: François Bourin Éditeur: 131-139. Journalist Rosita Boisseau adds: 'The one who was partner to Rudolf Nureyev and Opera star dancer Cyril Atanassoff found her whereabouts on stage thanks to their voices, as well as the green and red stage lights'. *Le Monde*, 20 July 2007.

4 'Rencontre avec Alicia'. Interview by Dominique Frétard. *Le Monde*, 27 August 1992.

5 Prouvost, Christelle. 'Rencontre avec Saïd Gharbi, danseur chez Vandekeybus: palper les limites du corps'. *Le Soir*, 15 December 1994. *Ibid.* next quote.

6 Website of the company: <www.lesbgm.be>. *Ibid.* next quote.

7 Quote from the performance leaflet: <acajou.org>.

8 Allen, Anne, and George. (1988). *Everyone Can Win: Opportunities and Programs in the Arts for the Disabled*. Mc Lean: EPM publications: 45-53.

9 *Ibid.*

10 <www.touchdowndance.co.uk>. Also: 'On the Braille in the Body: an Account of the Touchdown Dance Integrated Workshops with the Visually Impaired and the Sighted'. (1993). *Dance Research*, vol. 11: 3-51.

11 Documentary *The Unconquered: Helen Keller in Her Story*. Rennes: Les Champs Libres. See also Arthur Penn's movie on the life of Helen Keller *Miracle en Alabama/The Miracle Worker*. (1962). Please note: deaf blindness is the subject of *Danse et handicap auditif*, published by CND in 2016.

12 <www.st-karas.com>. Also: the publication *What's Special* by Reseo: <www.reseo.org>; Coronel, Élisabeth. (2005). *Saburo Teshigawara, danser l'invisible*. Produced by Abacaris Films, Arte France, CNC-Images de la Culture, Cie Karas and Opéra de Lille; INA: En scènes, le spectacle vivant en vidéo. 'Danse en aveugle'. (2004). (<fresques.ina.fr>).

13 Grévoit, Nicolas. (1 December 2002). 'Rencontre du sixième sens'. Viewed in 2012 on <taiwanauj.nat.gov.tw>. *Ibid.* next quote.

14 *Libération*, 26 May 1998. Interview by Marie-Christine Vernay.

15 <www.centrepompidou.fr>.

16 Glon, Marie. (2006, unpublished). 'La danse, au-delà du visible'. Downloadable on: <tangible.free.fr>. On visually impaired people learning to dance tango, see 'You move me tango (Argentine tango) on YouTube.

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## 2 About visual impairment

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More than a billion people have a disability according to the United Nation's World Disability Report<sup>1</sup>. Approximately 285 million people worldwide have a visual disability. 39 million of them are blind and 246 million experience a loss in visual acuity. Approximately 90 % of all visually impaired people live in developing countries.

# 1 | Understanding disability

**UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY** is essential for developing better relationships with people with disabilities in daily and professional life.

## CHANGING MODELS OF DISABILITY

**IN 1980**, the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) of the World Health Organisation (WHO) used notions such as deficiency, incapacity, disadvantage in its functional definition of disability. In this now dated definition, the organic or functional alteration (deficiency) of a person results in a limitation of the person to perform this or that action (incapacity) and provokes disadvantage or disability in a physical or social environment that hasn't been adapted, and the person thus becomes 'disabled'. This definition remains rooted in a medical model of disability. It has been largely contested by organisations of people with disabilities.

**TWENTY YEARS LATER**, the definition has been replaced by a more environmental approach. The 2002 definition takes a more social approach to disability and points out environmental, physical, social, economic and cultural factors as potential obstacles

that generate 'situations of disability'. These arise from an interaction between the environment and the person. The social model of disability, moreover, strongly emphasises that barriers are the product of society and emphatically lays the responsibility for removing and avoiding the construction of barriers on society and institutions.

**THE UN CONVENTION OF THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES** (2006) recognises the weight of attitudinal barriers: 'disability results from the interaction between people with impairments, and attitudinal, and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others'.

At this point, the disabled person is no longer exclusively considered an object of health care. S/he must enjoy the same rights as his/her fellow citizen in a society designed for all that welcomes everyone's diversity.

## INVISIBLE AND DECEPTIVE DISABILITIES

### Invisible disabilities

Many disabilities and health conditions are not visible, or immediately visible. A wheelchair, a white cane or a guide dog make disability instantly recognisable, but convey an extremely limited image of the diversity of people with disabilities. Hearing impairment, chronic fatigue, visual difficulties, mobility difficulties or difficulties with speech, heart condition, etc. are often not immediately

apparent. People with invisible disabilities often make considerable efforts to overcome a number of obstacles, unless the environment is accessible.

### Deceptive disabilities

Some forms of disability can be deceptive. Some people with a loss of central vision will be able to walk without too many difficulties, but are unlikely to recognise you from close by. A person with

very high intellectual abilities may be perceived as having learning difficulties, because a neurological health condition makes his/her speech difficult to understand. Actor Pablo Pineda has Down syndrome, but also a university degree. These examples show that disability has much to do with public perceptions of disability.

## 2 | Knowing about visual impairment

**IT IS SOMETIMES SAID THAT 80% OF OUR SENSORY PERCEPTIONS ARE VISUAL.** Such a statement is a gross simplification, of course. In reality, seeing, perceiving and sensing are extremely complex processes, which we use for functioning in everyday life, in learning, and in aesthetic experience. The statement highlights the huge importance attributed to sight in anatomy and also in a long tradition of the visual and performing arts. So many fine details are there only for the eyes; at least, that's how it seems at first sight!

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR A BLIND OR PARTIALLY SIGHTED PERSON TO ENJOY A PERFORMANCE?** How can dance companies and venues share the immeasurable riches of a living dance culture and its choreographic heritage with visually impaired people? How are they to make provision for visually impaired dance students to experience these riches with their bodies, in a dance education that welcomes them as equals? To do this, they will learn an enormous amount about visually impaired people and accessibility from direct contact with individual students and their audiences, through discussion, feedback and mutual learning.

### FACTS AND FIGURES

**KNOWING KEY FACTS AND FIGURES HELPS,** of course. However, the most important fact to bear in mind is that there is a great deal of diversity among visually impaired people, this reflects diversity in society at large. Meeting visually impaired people means meeting individuals, not numbers.

**ACCORDING TO THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION,** approximately 285 million people worldwide have a visual disability, amongst them 39 million people are blind and 246 million experience a loss of visual acuity.

**THE EUROPEAN BLIND UNION** estimates that there are 30 million blind and partially sighted people in geographical Europe: 1 in 30 Europeans experiences sight loss. There are four times as many partially sighted people as there are blind people. 90% of visually impaired people are over sixty-five: 1 in 3 senior citizens experiences sight loss. The number of born blind people is very small. Visual impairment heightens the risk of social exclusion: the average unemployment rate of blind and partially sighted people in working age is over 75%.

Some people are born with limited eyesight, most acquire an eye condition later in life (such as retinitis pigmentosa, a deteriorating eye condition). Age-related eye conditions are the most com-

mon cause of sight loss in Europe (the eyesight of seniors may be affected, for example, by macular degeneration or cataracts). Eye health practitioners are scarce in the poorest regions of Africa and Asia. Worldwide, about 12 million children under the age of fifteen have preventable or treatable blindness.

These facts change the way we think of visual impairment: most visually impaired people have some remaining eyesight and use it every day. It means, for example, that audio description (see chapter 3, p. 30) not only provides a verbal commentary of what goes on on stage, it also supports many partially sighted people to better see the performance. Most visually impaired people will be interested in knowing the colour of the stage set, stage dress, etc. Most visually impaired people have visual memories; optimal conditions of visibility and audio description can help revive these memories. Well-lit spaces and colour and tone contrasts in the venue and on stage can make a great difference to the quality of visual experience afforded visually impaired audiences.

Born blind people, and many blind people, rely on touch to gain knowledge on the environment and objects. Touch is then a vital and essential resource for learning. However, many people who lost their sight later in their lives have not grown accustomed to using touch and may not be interested in it.

Dual impairments are common: about 1 in 3 visually impaired people aged over sixty-five have hearing difficulties. Deafblind people experience varying degrees of both hearing and sight loss. Two sensory impairments multiply and intensify the impact of each, creating a disability with a high risk of isolation and exclusion. Inclusion is enhanced with e.g. loop systems, dance forms that nurture body awareness, use of the deafblind alphabet.

### DEFINITIONS

**THE DEFINITIONS OF BLINDNESS AND PARTIAL SIGHT,** as well as the registration criteria vary from one country to another. Many peo-

ple who register as blind do have some remaining sight, which can be limited to the perception of light and shadows. The benefits and support that come with registration vary from country to country.

**THE MOST COMMON CRITERIA** used to define visual impairment are visual acuity and the width of visual field. WHO defines visual impairment as low vision and blindness. A person has low vision, if his/her visual acuity is between 20/70 and 20/200 (with the best possible correction), or has a visual field of 10-20 degrees (the visual field is normally of 120 degrees). Blindness is defined as a visual acuity of less than 20/200, or a visual field of less than 10 degrees.

**THE MOST COMMONLY USED EYE TEST** is the Snellen chart. A person:

→ **has low vision**, if s/he can only read the top letter of the chart from six metres or less.

→ **is blind**, if s/he can only read the top letter of the chart from three metres or less.

The leading causes of visual impairment include: macular degeneration, glaucoma, cataracts and diabetes mellitus.

✓ *More information: <[www.euroblind.org](http://www.euroblind.org)>, <[www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs282/en/](http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs282/en/)>, and <[medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Visual+Impairment](http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Visual+Impairment)>.*

## SOME FORMS OF VISUAL IMPAIRMENT AND ACCESS AIDS

Eye diseases express in a loss of visual acuity or field of vision. They affect sight in different ways, resulting in e.g.:

**Blurry vision** which affects seeing things precisely, including colours and contrasts. This makes walking and reading very difficult, as well as perception of depth. People with blurry vision are usually highly sensitive to light, that can be experienced as dazzling.

It is necessary to look at objects or dance demonstration from close by.

**Blurry and patchy vision** means that the blurry field of vision is not seen entirely, and is like covered with greyish-black patches. This often makes reading impossible.

Audio information may be necessary.

**Tunnel vision** is a reduced tunnel-like field of vision. It affects seeing movement, visual searching, and night vision. Walking with tunnel vision is a big challenge. Colour perception usually remains good.

It is necessary to view objects from a distance. A dance movement may be demonstrated in slow motion first.

**Peripheral vision** means loss of central vision and affects the depth of the visual field. The person does not see what s/he seems to be focusing on. Minute aspects of eye-hand coordination are difficult. Walking in a familiar environment does usually not present any particular difficulties.

It is necessary to look at an object from close by. Eye-hand coordination may be enhanced through bodily awareness of movements and postures.

## SIMULATING EYE CONDITIONS

It can be intriguing to better understanding how various eye conditions affect eyesight. Visual awareness training and disability awareness often include the use of 'simulation spectacles', which simulate different forms of visual impairment.

Well used, they provide insights into a number of obstacles and barriers visually impaired people face in buildings and in learning environments (e.g. wayfinding, visibility of the welcome desk, accessible signs, quality of lighting, stage set, demonstrations of dance movement, reading, etc.). This temporary immersion into other ways of seeing is often a trigger that motivates a strong commitment into making access improvements.

In no case do simulation glasses give an understanding of the many lived experiences visually impaired people have of these difficulties and barriers, nor do they teach an understanding of the daily lives of visually impaired people. Meeting visually impaired audiences and students and listening to them is a fundamental requirement.

✓ *More information: the 'Inclusive design toolkit' of the School of Engineers at Cambridge university, UK, proposes simulations of different visual and hearing impairments. It is one of the more sophisticated simulation tools. It seeks to avoid stereotyping and conveys an idea of the variety of eye conditions: <[www.inclusivedesigntoolkit.com/betterdesign2/simsoftware/simsoftware.html](http://www.inclusivedesigntoolkit.com/betterdesign2/simsoftware/simsoftware.html)>.*

## ACCESS AIDS

Visually impaired people use a number of tools, aids, accessible services and forms of support to lead independent lives. These vary from person to person. A number of them can be adjusted for personalised use. Some have been designed as inclusive options of mainstream products (e.g. 'speech output', the option of increasing font size and colours of text and background on mobiles).

**AIDS INCLUDE:** glasses, looking glasses, white cane, information in accessible formats (digital access, large print of which the size, boldness and font can be personalised, Braille and audio); audio description, touch tours, tactile images and 3D models; service animals (e.g. guide dogs), facilitators, guides, as well as financial allowances, all that vary from country to country. Several of these will be presented in the following chapters.

**ACCESSIBLE ENVIRONMENTS** are a fundamental cornerstone of accessibility. Whether it is for a new building, an extension, refurbishment or maintenance work, inclusive design (UK, Italy), design for all (several European countries) and universal design (USA, France) are the way forward. These are principles and approaches for the changing demographics of an inclusive 21<sup>st</sup> century society. The past twenty years have seen the rise of new

aesthetics of inclusion by design, which is, as yet, to unfold all its potential. Be part of it!

✓ *More information: the RNIB shop provides many examples of everyday products designed to be accessible for people with a visual impairment: < [www.rnib.org.uk](http://www.rnib.org.uk)>.*

✓ *More information: < [www.designcouncil.uk.org](http://www.designcouncil.uk.org)>, and <[www.humancentereddesign.org](http://www.humancentereddesign.org)>.*

## INTERNATIONAL AND EUROPEAN ORGANISATIONS WORKING ON BEHALF OF BLIND AND PARTIALLY SIGHTED PEOPLE

### ASSISTANCE DOGS INTERNATIONAL

[www.assistedogsinternational.org](http://www.assistedogsinternational.org)

### EUROPEAN BLIND UNION | Union européenne des aveugles (site Inter- net en anglais)

[www.euroblind.org](http://www.euroblind.org)

### EUROPEAN DISABILITY FORUM

[www.edf-feph.org](http://www.edf-feph.org)

### IDA | International Disability Alliance

[www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org](http://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org)

### ONCE

[www.once.es](http://www.once.es)

### WORLD BLIND UNION

[www.worldblindunion.org](http://www.worldblindunion.org)

### EUCREA INTERNATIONAL

[www.eucra-international.org](http://www.eucra-international.org)

1 WHO/World Bank. (2011). 'World Report on Disability'.



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# 3 Accessibility of choreographic heritage

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It seems difficult to envisage dance practice without any access to dance performances and to choreographic culture. The desire to dance and the passion for a choreographic practice often arise from aesthetic emotions experienced while seeing dancers express themselves through their art. Dance history keeps nurturing dance practices and aesthetic choices. Yet, people with a visual impairment face real difficulties to access these encounters and discoveries. Everyone, according to their roles and responsibilities, can contribute, create initiatives and perhaps even lead on projects aimed at opening up access to choreographic heritage.



# 1 | Various approaches

**THERE ARE VARIOUS APPROACHES AND TOOLS** for providing access for visually impaired people to dance performances, to the body of choreographic works and its history.


**AUDIO DESCRIPTION** is one of these (see box next page). It is a technique that consists in describing visual elements of a work (films, visual arts, performance arts...) for blind and partially sighted audiences. Audio description facilitates understanding, for example, of stage set, characters, action, gestures and also atmospheres and a performance's poetry. It makes an immense contribution to the enjoyment of visually impaired audiences. Audio description can be used in a wide range of contexts, including for the discovery of the venue, the stage, meetings with artists, sensory discoveries, etc. Nowadays, a number of performance arts venues provide tactile tours. The tactile visit of the stage starts ahead of the performance and sets the scene for the audio description of the performance. Tactile visits and touch tours or handling sessions in museums include audio description and sometimes other tools for cultural mediation.

 Please note: see sample audio descriptions and tactile visits provided in the context of *The Humane Body*, p. 38.

## ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION

**INFORMATION IN ACCESSIBLE FORMAT** is essential for visually impaired people. This includes information for example, on the layout of the spaces (information desk, journey, lecture rooms, dance studio), facilities and the accessible cultural offer. Information in large print, Braille, audio, as well as tactile models, plans and drawings make a huge difference to the accessibility of a venue or a class.

**IN THE DIGITAL AGE**, website accessibility is a must (websites should meet technical Web accessibility standards of the World Wide Web Consortium, W3C, but also provide accessible cultural content). Digital content can be communicated through smartphones, tactile screens and computers, provided they have built-in accessibility features, such as speech output or the option of magnifying content.

 Please note: softwares have been developed for audio, subtitle and audio description output: for example, the application Twavox (on Internet, Google Play or Apple Store) downloads soundtrack, audio, audio description and subtitles in venues and transmits them to smartphones.

✓ More information: <[www.twavox.com](http://www.twavox.com)>.

These access features enrich the enjoyment and understanding of a choreography. In most cases, do seek specialists' advice.

✓ More information: <[www.w3.org/WAI/](http://www.w3.org/WAI/)>.

## PARTICULARLY ACCESSIBLE CHOREOGRAPHIC CREATIONS

Some choreographic traditions have made a research material of sensory perception and seek ways of giving to 'see' dance without sight. These investigations can present advantages in terms of accessibility. Choreographers such as Pedro Pauwels, Didier Silhol and Nicole Seiler, for example, propose choreographic works that give sight a miss and stimulate all the senses. Vera Tussing and Anne Juren work along similar lines in the context of the **project The Humane Body** (see p. 33).

## ACCESS TO AESTHETIC EMOTIONS

Aesthetic emotion arises often in the immediacy of felt sense experiences, at the moment of experiencing the work. In visual arts and in performing arts, the images and resonances brought alive by their poetry let aesthetic emotions arise, more so than descriptive language, which is more suited to shed light on the organisation, structuring and conception of the work.

We take aesthetic emotions to be the affective response to the multisensory experience of a performance, art, nature and anything that can move us. It is an embodied experience involving all our senses and faculties. It's not first and foremost about abstract meanings of 'high art', though this can be part of the experience.

**Inner mechanisms of mental reconstruction**, which can be very powerful and fast, play an essential role: if everyone of us can recreate works of art in our imagination, this process is particularly active for blind and partially sighted people. The mechanisms for doing this are the same for sighted and visually impaired people, but the sensory pathways may differ, e.g. for audiences who are born blind and those who experienced dance performances and choreographies before losing their sight.

### Steps for widening access to aesthetic emotions in the experience of choreographic performances

→ This takes place through **resonance with memories of previously experienced aesthetic emotions**.

Most people who have become visually impaired in the course of their lives (and after early childhood) will bring previous visual experiences, practices and memories into play when attending a dance performance. More so than purely perceiving, we tend to see what we already know. 'I paint what I know, not what I see', said Picasso. Sculptor Bourdelle drew most of the sketches he made of Isadora Duncan by memory, after having attended her dance performances.

→ The **imaginative reconstruction** of a dance performance involves processing a wealth of information conveyed partly, e.g. **by its music** or soundtrack, as well as drawing on any previous knowledge one may have of the style of the dance: a blind person will actively involve perceptions, memories and imagination to construct their own choreography.

→ **Resonance and imaginative reconstruction** is helped by information relayed **by the voice of a friend**, a teacher or an audio describer. Audio description is at the service of the work of art and of the listener. While it will aim at precision and objectivity that

empowers visually impaired audiences to create their own experience of the performance, the audio description will also suggest emotions that the work of art lets arise (this often happens spontaneously in a change of tone, and in a skilled audio description, it's in tune with the work of art and its ambient feel).

→ **Lived experience of aesthetic emotion:**

- **From inside**, through the practice of dance: the experience of aesthetic emotion is, of course, not limited to audiences. It should be open to blind and partially sighted people as dancers, interpreters and creators. Aesthetic emotions arise frequently in dance practice. This is true for blind participants, as it is often true for sighted participants as they dance in the dark, with blindfold eyes.
- **By touch**: in dance practice, a person can experience aesthetic emotion in the process of tactile exploration of e.g. curves, the sinuous and soft forms of the human body, still or in motion, but also the dancers' costumes and any object with real formal and textural qualities.
- **By multi-sensory experiences** involving smell/perfume, plays of light and variations in heat, all kinds of music, the dancers' breath, etc.

## AUDIO DESCRIPTION AND TACTILE STAGE TOURS: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE CENTRE CHORÉGRAPHIQUE NATIONAL IN CAEN (NORMANDY)

In France, the Centre chorégraphique national of Caen/Basse-Normandie (CCN) has made a dance performance accessible and raised awareness about visual impairment. Bruno Joly, CCN general administrator, shares his experience:

'In 2014, CCN of Caen/Basse-Normandie engaged in visually impaired audiences with the discovery project *Une douce imprudence*, duo

*chorégraphique* (Sweet imprudence, a choreographic duo) by Éric Lamoureux and Thierry Thieû Niang. Prior to providing the audio description, Valérie Castan attended several performances to get to know the choreography, its themes and content. The day of the audio description, the visually impaired audiences were invited to join the CCN an hour and a half before the performance, to socialise with

the dance centre's team and hear about their work. Then, an hour was dedicated to the tactile exploration of the dance hall. Each audience member had a guide. This "wandering" on stage conveyed much about the choreography and the choreographic space created: the walls that framed the actions, the volume of the stage, the floor textures, the lighting. The only prop of the choreography was a heap of

blankets made of highly elastic textile. To start with, everyone explored the object, its material, its qualities. The audio describer then explained the role the blankets were going to play in the dramaturgy of this performance.

In the auditorium, the visually impaired audiences were handed out headsets. The audio describer provided the description live from a soundproof booth with a view on stage. She conveyed movements, changes in rhythm, atmospheres... Although live audio description is more difficult, it allows for greatest closeness to the feel of the performance and to the way the dancers embody the choreography on stage.

We also invited a class of sighted students from a secondary school that has a partnership with the CCN to temporarily experience visual impairment, with the aim of challenging stereotypes of disability. The class was invited to experience the visit of the dance hall blindfold. Placed temporarily in the uncomfortable situation of having sight blacked out, they had to try to adapt and to lean on new resources (hearing, smell, touch...).

At the end of the performance, the sighted students and the visually impaired members of the audience met again, to share and reflect on the feelings they experienced. It was also a way to change perceptions of disability'.

**The comments made by participants highlight the role of audio description, and, sometimes, differing views on what the audio description method should be like:**

'Apart from feet sliding on stage and the beautiful songs that were part of the performance, we would really not have got much out of attending the performance without the audio description. It was bustling with many expressive verbs and was well in tune with what we could imagine for ourselves as being the rhythm and the flow of the dancers' movements (...), sustaining the rhythm or, at the

very least, the idea of rhythm. Dance was very important to me in my teens. Blindness disrupted my engagement in an art form in which the visual sense plays a big part. Without your description, it is clear that I wouldn't even have considered attending a performance again and applaud the dancers'.

**Caroline Beaujour**

'Well done, this was a really good audio description. But some improvements can be made:

-sometimes, **the sound of the performance's music overlaps with the audio description in the headset;**

**-think of describing any mimicry of the dancers' faces, the colour of costumes...;**

**-pay attention to providing descriptions that leave the audiences free to imagine things for themselves.** It's about making a difference between description and interpretation (...).

For example: the connection with the river when the two men roll together on the floor, or the scene with the oldies when they are "as if sitting on a bench".

There is a positive aspect to this information: it helps one create an image that has meaning. Furthermore, the meaning may be congruent with the dancers' interpretation of their role, especially if the describer and the dancers have had an exchange before the audio-described performance. There is a limitation however: such information orients the imagination of the listeners, whereas sighted people create their own imagination when seeing the performance (...).

**Axel de Louise**

'I may be a little bit odd, I use a hearing aid, and I try to avoid being noticed. [In French politics], holding multiple (paid) positions is being challenged, but you will encounter people who, like me, "cumulate" (are *cumulards*), who are visually impaired and hard of hearing. I could follow the performance, but spent my time pressing the headset

against my hearing aid, and that wasn't comfortable (...).

It goes without saying that without the describer the performance wouldn't have been accessible. I even think that some sighted people would have enjoyed listening to it. (...) As has been said during our gathering at the end of the performance, it's the images that help us "get into the performance". When you say: "Thierry and Éric are dancing; they rotate etc.", and don't add any information regarding the quality of the movement to complete the description (e.g on fluidity, speed, etc.), this rotation without any image associated to it remains just a rotation. That's true for blind people, and particularly born blind people who have never seen a dance (and even less so contemporary dance).

As to me, I got a bit more hooked from the moment with the scene with the "bundle", precisely, because from that moment on, you multiplied the use of images and gave a poetic feel to something that would otherwise have been a mere gesticulation. But how is one to render the subtlety, the aptness of the movement?

To us blind people, as the audio describer, you are part of the performance the same way the dancers are: when you speak of a serpent, of a pirogue, etc., you speak to our imagination, as much as an image can do that (...).

**Jean Poitevin**

✓ More information: <[www.ccnbn.com](http://www.ccnbn.com)>.

✍ Please note: ask the supplier of the audio equipment for equipment that makes audio-described performances accessible to people who are both visually and hearing impaired. It is also good practice to give the choice between headsets (improved hearing) and single earpieces that keep one better in contact with the atmosphere and the audience response. In some countries, e.g. the UK, there are usually two audio describers per performance.

## ACCESSIBILITY OF CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS IN AUSTRIA: AN OVERVIEW

**With The Humane Body project, Wiener Tanzwochen (in cooperation with ImPulsTanz) has opened up new ground in Austria's cultural life. Making dance accessible to blind and partially sighted people did not happen before, nor are there any blind dancers or choreographers active in Austria.**

Major theatres, such as Burgtheater Wien and Volkstheater Wien have been offering audio descriptions for some years now, but the creation of theatre productions dedicated to a blind and partially sighted audience has not happened yet. On the contrary, visual arts act as pioneers in addressing the issue: the renowned museum Belvedere is partner of the EU project **AMBAVis**, funded by ERASMUS+. The project AMBAVis aims to be a driving force for

the development and the dissemination of tactile and 3D practices in museums, in order to improve cultural access for blind and partially sighted people. Innovative 3D technologies and multi-sensory approaches are offering new solutions for blind and partially sighted people, by enabling them to get in touch with exhibits and allowing them to participate in museums' educational programmes. **Belvedere** is not only using 3D prints of paintings, but offers audio descriptions with background information on the artists and works. Blind and partially sighted people hence enjoy improved access to the exhibitions at the Winterpalais, 21er Haus and Belvedere.


Coming back to the dance and the performance scene, though, working with people with impairments is

nothing new, particularly in the performing arts scene where young audiences inclusion has always been a natural thing to do. The **ImPulsTanz-Vienna International Dance Festival** has been offering workshops for and presented performances with and by people with physical and mental impairments ever since. In Austria, several companies by or working with people with impairments exist, such as dancers and choreographers Michael Turinsky, Vera Rosner and Frans Poelstra, as well as the dance companies Ich bin O.K, Tanzmontage, Mezzanin Theater, to name but a few.

But creating for and addressing a blind and partially sighted audience is new terrain. So let's hope we have opened a new chapter in the Austrian book of culture.

## ONLINE ACCESS TO CHOREOGRAPHIC WORKS

**At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, most people look up cultural information and content online,** regardless the format (written text, audio, video). Digital culture has become a major phenomenon and Internet access a necessity. Live and video versions of choreographic performances can be viewed on many websites and dance video libraries exist. Some make some of their content accessible to visually impaired people.

 Please note: some organisations of visually impaired people, such as RNIB, sometimes list contents on their website or on radio: < [www.insightradio.co.uk/](http://www.insightradio.co.uk/) >.

### Some useful links:

→ <[www.numeridanse.tv](http://www.numeridanse.tv)>.

→ Disability Arts International, promoting increased access to the arts for disabled artists and audiences around the globe (British Council) <[www.disabilityartsinternational.org](http://www.disabilityartsinternational.org)>.

→ The Opera Platform website promotes the enjoyment of opera. Every month, one opera staged by one of fifteen opera partner organisations is being broadcast with subtitles in six languages and available to view on request free of charge during a period of six months: <[www.theoperaplatform.eu/fr](http://www.theoperaplatform.eu/fr)>.

## 2 | Focus on audio description

**WHILE AUDIO DESCRIPTION IS QUITE WIDESPREAD IN THEATRE, it remains a rare and experimental feature for dance performance. New initiatives are emerging, however.**

**IN FRANCE, AS IN THE UK, A NUMBER OF OPERA HOUSES AND THEATRES** provide audio description services. In France, many audio-described performances are provided by NGO Accès Culture, specialised in the accessibility of performance arts. Blind and partially sighted audiences can also enjoy a personalised theatre audio description by describers (often called *souffleurs d'images*, image whisperers, in France). This facility has been put in place by the Centre recherche théâtre handicap (Theatre and Disability Research Centre, CRTH), in partnership with some theatres, and involves drama students. They accompany visually impaired theatregoers and describe the stage, costume, stage set and actions to them on request.

**WHILE AUDIO DESCRIPTION IS QUITE WIDESPREAD IN THEATRE,** it remains a rare and experimental feature for dance performance. New initiatives are emerging, however, and a few choreographers have provided audio descriptions for their recent creations. This is the case of Christian Rizzo with L'Oiseau-Mouche (Hummingbird) company (*De quoi tenir jusqu'à l'ombre*, Enough to Keep Going 'til the Shadow), of Dominique Brun (*Sacre #197*) (Rite #197) and of Nicole Seiler (*Amauros* and *Small Explosion With Glass and Repeat Echo*). Yet, these initiatives remain rare. The audio description of a dance performance requires a con-

siderable amount of preparation work. Valérie Castan develops methodological research about the audio description of choreographic performances. She is convinced, that it is necessary for dance to look for 'other descriptive tools than those in use for film description and different descriptive strategies for each choreography'.<sup>1</sup> The audio description of dance brings up a number of questions. What vocabulary to use for the description of visual elements, movements and complex actions? How to let emotional responses to dance arise, if at times there are no prior experiences to draw on in one's memory and imagination?

**THESE QUESTIONS ARE PART OF WIDER QUESTIONING IN THE FIELD OF CHOREOGRAPHY:** how is one to describe dance and movement? Séverine Skierski expresses the difficulty in the following terms: 'I read in a research publication that describing dance is a serious act. I agree. Because looking at dance is to escape from structured language. It is well-known, that words reduce dance, that words, even when they are precise, are wanting when it comes to evoking the singularity of a gesture. However, a dance that one could not talk about would not have a human face. Describing dance. If this is not a solemn act, it is at least a serious act'.<sup>2</sup>



## EXAMPLES

'I never go to dance performances, because music is the only thing I access in it. If I don't like the music, I get really bored'.<sup>3</sup> This comment made by one of the blind participants of a dance workshop led by the company Axis, prompted the American **Esther Geiger** to ask: what information could allow the participant to 'see' the performance as completely as possible and assist him/her in understanding a choreography and not only images of single movements? According to her, it is not enough to describe what someone is doing (bodily action), but one has got to describe how it is being done. She defends the idea that Laban's movement analysis offers valuable tools for observing, selecting and describing movements. The Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) is a method and language of description, visualisation and interpretation, which originates in the work of dancer, choreographer and theorist Rudolf Laban. It can enrich the visual field and nurture a vocabulary specific to the description of movement.

✓ Find out more about audio description in the performing arts on <[www.adlabproject.eu/home/](http://www.adlabproject.eu/home/)> and <[vocaleyes.co.uk](http://vocaleyes.co.uk)>.

✓ Also: Fryer, Louise. (2016). *An Introduction to Audio Description: a practical guide*. London: Routledge. Louise Fryer teaches audio description at London's University College, and has extensive experience in describing TV programmes, films, theatre and museum collections since 1993.

*Independent Television Commission/Veronika Hyks, 'ITC Guidance for Audio Description', London, 2001.*

RNIB/ Mattes, Jodi. (2001). 'The Talking Images RNIB/ADA Audio Description Survey'. London. A survey involving 89 visually impaired theatre-goers and 16 theatres in the UK. PDF copy.

Contact RNIB Library. <[www.rnib.org.uk](http://www.rnib.org.uk)>. 100% of the 62 visually impaired audience members who had taken part in a stage touch tour found it 'very good' or 'good'. 86% stated that audio description makes a very important contribution to their theatre enjoyment.

In 2011, choreographer **Nicole Seiler** makes audio description into an essential ingredient of her creation, *Amauros*. 'Amauros' means 'blind' or 'dark' in Greek. The piece is based on the absence of images and is conceived as a way of stimulating the imagination of the audience. Theatre director Christophe Jaquet recalls how the project originated in the creation of *Playback*, the previous piece by Nicole Seiler, in which six dancers interpret famous hits the titles of which appear on a screen. 'The team attended film screenings "for the ear", conferences exploring the relationship between sound and image. They viewed movies with audio description and met audiences with the aim of unpacking the relationships existing between sound and image. It became rapidly clear that this theme yields material for more than one piece. Far from being a mutilation, the substitution of sound or images by text enriches the reading of the works and opens the doors to the viewer's own imaginary (...). In *Playback*, the absence of music was a way to stimulate this imaginary, in *Amauros*, the absence of images performed that role'. In the first part, four dancers respond to images that they are alone to see on a suspended screen by making noises, with the help of a bric-a-brac of objects painted in black that have been arranged on the floor. The images remain invisible to the audience. Audio description comes in in the second part. Journalist Marie-Pierre Genecand writes: 'Jubilation, however, is reserved for the second part, when an audio describer, and that's her profession, describes historical dance sequences in a voice-over. Famous choreographies are being conjured back to life again with precisely evoked gestures (*Swan Lake*, *Café Müller*, *Le Corsaire*, *The Pirate*, etc.), while, at the same time, the noise makers keep playing the acoustic texture of the episodes in total darkness. Here, you dream your own film. And when the sequence is the embrace and ensuing parting in *Café Müller*, this self-generated cinema has something heartrending'.<sup>4</sup>

✓ More information: <[www.nicoleseiler.com](http://www.nicoleseiler.com)>.

The result of an encounter between French choreographer **Christian Rizzo** and five comedians of the company L'Oiseau-Mouche (translated as 'Hummingbird'), the performance *De quoi tenir jusqu'à l'ombre* (Enough to Keep Going 'til the Shadow), which was on show in 2013, has been audio-described live several times by Valérie Castan for partially sighted and blind viewers. The audience was invited to a tactile visit of the stage, to gain a better idea of its size, purpose and costumes. The show's DVD is also audio-described.

✓ More information: <[www.lassociationfragile.com](http://www.lassociationfragile.com)>, and <[www.oiseau-mouche.org](http://www.oiseau-mouche.org)>.

At the end of 2013, the **Centre national du cinéma** (CNC), in France, committed to the audio description of series of dance films. Some ten movies, chosen from the collections of the CNC, are to be audio-described and posted online in the Ministry for Culture series 'Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication-CNC-Images de la culture' on the website Numeridanse (translatable as 'Digidance'), an international online dance library developed by the Maison de la danse (House of Dance) of Lyon, in partnership with the Centre national de la danse (CND), with the support of the foundation BNP Paribas. This research project is being carried out in collaboration with Acajou and audio describers Valérie Castan and Séverine Skierski.

✓ More information: <[www.numeridanse.tv](http://www.numeridanse.tv)>.

## AUDIO DESCRIPTION OF *SACRE #197* BY DOMINIQUE BRUN, REPORT BY VALÉRIE CASTAN

**Dancer Valérie Castan followed the audio description training for cinema provided by the translators and interpreters' school École Supérieure d'Interprètes et de Traducteurs (ESIT), in Paris. She carried out research on methodologies for the audio description of choreographic performances in the framework of the CND's fund 'Aide à la recherche et au patrimoine en danse' (2012-2013), for research into dance and on support of the development of choreographic heritage.**

She selected the piece *Sacre #197* (Rite #197) by Dominique Brun for several reasons. Firstly, *Sacre* is part of dance heritage; *Sacre #197* is a recreation of the legendary *Sacre du printemps* (Rite of Spring, from the Russian title *Vesna svyashchennaya* or *Sacred Spring*) by Nijinski, created in 1913. In this context, the audio description project intended wider accessibility to a shared choreographic culture. The fact that the original idea of the piece, the ritual sacrifice of a member of the community, is rife with potential stories, made it possible to focus on the research question of how to describe movement in a singular way. It also allowed one to address the question of how to insert the audio description into a ballet music, which is recognised to be an integral part of this eminently dramatic piece.

In the audio description methodology for cinema (in France), describing is a way of deciphering a visual message,

of translating its meaning. In cinema, the storyline induced by the dialogues forms the basis on which the audio description grafts itself. The question of meaning of the visual message in dance is more complex. To watch bodies in movement involves sensory, affective and motor experiences, leads to a felt sense response and creates a

**'IN THE AUDIO DESCRIPTION METHODOLOGY FOR CINEMA, describing is a way of deciphering a visual message, of translating its meaning.'**

**Valérie Castan**

kind of kinaesthetic empathy. What frameworks for understanding is one to use, what editorial conventions, which semantic fields, which syntax to put in place and to invent in order for the description to provide a translation that supports blind and partially sighted audiences respond with their own feelings and imaginary representations of a dancing body? In the case of a choreographic performance and in the absence of any verbal narrative, the staging of the relationships between dancers through the spatialisation

of their bodies and the dynamics of movement are to be considered the narrative weave of a story without words.

Let's add to this that, regarding audio description of choreographic performances, the many improvisational moments and some elasticity in the duration of each performance make live description, using a scripted text as a basis, a necessity. In the course of the performance life of a travelling choreographic show, changes in rhythm and the organic development of a choreography may require adjustments to the audio description.

**Preparing the audio description required several phases:**

→ **attending and observing** *Sacre #197*, during rehearsal and dress rehearsal, provided insights into the intentions of the choreographer, the performers, the lighting designer and enabled to identify the choreographic materials. The instructions given by the artist for the creation of movements provided a semantic field that enriched the description and made it complete;

→ **writing** the audio description **at one's desk**, based on the notes taken during rehearsals, dress rehearsal and the performance;

→ **re-reading** the first description with Séverine Skierski, audio describer (also sometimes called 'image describer' in France), then with blind comedian and writer Claire Bartoli, who is also

President of the NGO Retour d'image (which could be translated as 'Image Come-back'). This promoted the experiencing of emotions together through shared experiences of accessible movies.

→ **rehearsing verbal delivery** of the description;

→ **carrying out a live audio description** at the performance at Vivat, a theatre grant-aided by the city of Armentières, and at the Quai in Angers for the Centre chorégraphique national. The live audio description at Vivat was made possible thanks to the NGO Canopée and Éric Taquet, who provided the necessary equipment (headsets, mixing table, transmitter, microphone for the describer);

→ **studio recording** the audio description by Gérome Nox, a musician; this file is being held as a new audio resource (CD) available at the media library of the CND;

→ **developing a programme of the performance** in accessible formats: including a Braille version with thermoformed raised images produced by Patricia Welinski, a graphics teacher.

#### **Extract of the audio description**

**'Ania, in equilibrium in her half-pointe shoes, legs crossed, directs the palm of her hands towards us. She places her elbows in front of her chest and holds her head down, a melancholic posture.**

Her chest is sagging. She is losing her

balance backwards. Ania returns with determined paces, facing us. She stands steadfast, cross-legged, elbows raised. A little spasm unsettles her equilibrium towards the back. A hand stretched forward helps her back towards her position. Ania seeks to re-instate her balance, tenaciously. Out of balance, Ania moves backwards. Two arms stretched forward draw her back, elbows crossed against the chest, in balance. Olga, who is hidden, sings. Ania is again sucked towards the back. She comes back and opens her arms to the sides, as if irritated. She resumes her unstable equilibrium leaning backwards, her back rounded, head down. She comes again towards us, obstinate, chest facing forward, hands wide open' (Valérie Castan).

1 Castan, Valérie. (December 2013). 'L'audiodescription de spectacles chorégraphiques contemporains pour le public déficient visuel'. Rendu de recherche 'Aide à la recherche et au patrimoine en danse': 20. Contact the library of the Centre national de la danse.

2 Compagnie Nicole Seiler. Folder for the media *Amauros*. <www.nicoleseiler.com>.

3 'LMA as a Tool for Developing Audio Description: Making the Arts Accessible to People Who Are Blind'. *International Council of Kinetography Laban/Labannotation: Proceedings of the Twenty-Fourth Biennial Conference*, vol. 2 (29 July-4 Aug. 2005): 119-126.

4 Genecand, Marie-Pierre. *Le Temps*, Saturday, 15 October 2011. Switzerland. Folder for the media for *Amauros*, Nicole Seiler company. <www.nicoleseiler.com>.





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# Focus on The Humane Body: ways of seeing dance

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Through the project The Humane Body, Wiener Tanzwochen (Vienna, Austria), Kaaithheater (Brussels, Belgium), Centre national de la danse (Pantin, France) and The Place (London, UK) have been working together to develop a new audience for contemporary dance performance amongst blind and partially sighted people by creating and touring dance.

The heart of the project, which is going on until the end of 2017, consists in creating three performances by Vera Tussing (London and Brussels), Volmir Cordeiro (Pantin) and Anne Juren (Vienna) and performing a piece by Simon Mayer. Although the choreographers' approaches are very diverse, they share in common the idea of inviting blind and partially sighted people to accompany the process as experts right from the start of the creation, and the intention to facilitate an equal performance experience to visually impaired and seeing audiences alike.

# 1 | Volmir Cordeiro / *L'œil, la bouche et le reste*

**VOLMIR CORDEIRO INCLUDES AN INTRODUCTORY TOUCH TOUR** as well as audio description as an artistic means in his piece *L'œil, la bouche et le reste* (The Eye, the Mouth and the Rest of It).

## **L'ŒIL, LA BOUCHE ET LE RESTE**

Look out, open your eyes! With this new work for four dancers, the Brazilian choreographer, who can see everything, invites you to perceive the issue of 'seeing' differently. Starting from the eye and embracing all that is globular, like the sun, the egg, the moon or the arena, Volmir Cordeiro has created a dance that expresses the functions of the eye and then evokes its physicality and actions—crying, staring, winking, spying, etc. The eye is a tool for exploring interiority, latency, the pre-human, the tactile, the animal, the excitement of thought, darkness and intensity.

With this new work, Volmir Cordeiro is seeking to make 'the eye that searches dance, the one that will look for the invisible, deep, hidden, mysterious mass of the world. That's what I call the rest; the thing without a name, which cannot be looked at, subterranean, lost and unattainable; this matter capable of making us close our eyes and then cry out inside, and open our sight towards what we dare not look at. Dancing a dance that is embodied by the eye, dancing what the eye is unable to retain when it is in the process of looking, dancing what is left over in us, forgotten, rejected, set aside, dancing the obsessive fear of what one sees'. Like Volmir Cordeiro's previous works, *L'œil, la*

*bouche et le reste* is a flight into abstraction, life and the world, a dense, almost obsessive search during which nothing is ever left to chance.

## **VOLMIR CORDEIRO**

Born in Brazil in 1987, Volmir Cordeiro first studied theatre, before collaborating with the Brazilian choreographers Alejandro Ahmed, Cristina Moura and Lia Rodrigues. In 2011, he joined the Essais training programme at the Centre national de danse contemporaine in Angers (France) under the direction of Emmanuelle Huynh, and is currently writing a thesis at Paris-8 university on marginal figures in contemporary dance. He has performed in works by Xavier Le Roy, Laurent Pichaud, Rémy Hérítier, Emmanuelle Huynh, Jocelyn Cottencin and Vera Mantero. In 2012, he created his first solo work in France, *Ciel*, followed by *Inês* in 2014, and in March 2015, the duet *Époque*, with Marcela Santander Corvalán. He has just completed the first season devoted to his work, made up of the solos *Ciel*, *Inês* and *Rue* (premiered in October 2015 at the Musée du Louvre in collaboration with the Fiac).

## EXPERIENCE REPORT BY VOLMIR CORDEIRO

### The experience

**I would like to reflect on our meeting with Mariam El Gouzi and Reynalde Nicolin, two visually impaired dancers, and sighted dancer and choreographer Delphine Demont from the Acajou dance company.**

All three had been invited to a four days long artistic exchange during the process of the creation of *L'œil, la bouche et le reste* at the Centre national de la danse, in January 2017. The core of this piece is about being face-to-face, addressing the other, looking and speech as foundational tools for a singular form of sociability that takes place between the artist and the audience during the performance. It seemed interesting to me to make these choreographic factors meet with the reality of visual impairment and witness the artistic resonances of this encounter. The starting point for my enquiry was to find out how these fundamental elements of my choreographic practice might be perceived by a group of visually impaired dancers. It was of great importance to me to see how our choreography in the making could open itself up to and be affected by the perceptions, sensations and gestures contributed by Mariam, Reynalde and Delphine.

### Discoveries and questions

This meeting was both a journey of discovery and an opportunity to ask ourselves new questions. Our work had two aspects. **Firstly, we shared a few introductory exercises.** They consisted in responding to the other's invitation to meet him/her in his/her own world, a world strongly related with the perception of space, one's body space and the other's body. To do this,

we were blindfold most of the time. A good part of our practice was to get used to this constraint, so as to experience a degree of sensory disarray relative to our (deeply) ingrained visual habits. **Secondly, we performed short bits of dance** that had already been written down and asked Mariam, Reynalde and Delphine for their feedback about the feelings and sensations they had given rise to. **It was all done without audio description and in the silence of a dance piece** that was yet to get its soundtrack. This activity was interesting, because it enhanced our listening skills and allowed us to welcome the criticism of the visually impaired dancers. Their words helped us understand how they think of dance, what they take to be the art of performing dance and the creative process of choreography, and why audio description is necessary. They stressed the need for an experience that opens up a poetic space and lets them imagine the gestures by themselves, even though they may not see them 'entirely'. Modest as it was, this work was an initiation to us. **Its objective was to become aware of the differences between our practices,** our teaching methods, our talk about our dances and our ways of perceiving and receiving a gesture.

### Audio description

Preparing an audio description involves a great deal of receptiveness. I was lucky to gain close insights into dancer and writer Sabine Macher's audio description work. Our exchanges were very engaging. The descriptive text she composed is very sensitive to the formal elements of the piece, the dancers, the sounds being made... It was re-assuring to see that Sabine's audio description

arises from the form of the piece, that she doesn't follow a pre-established external model. This way the audio description collaborates with the visually impaired people who do not see all of it and conveys a tangible image of the work. I often work with text when creating dance; language is always part of my stage work. I was able to witness the process of the development of the audio description. This contributed enormously to the writing of the piece itself. **The audio description made it possible for the piece to be seen.**

### A shared experience

From my point of view, the notion of 'visual disability' has much to do with social processes and the way these create norms about the body, the intelligibility of the body and about what it means to be part of history. Normative frameworks often define what deserves to be seen, perceived and experienced, and who has the skills to see, taste and attract. At any rate, there is no single form of visual impairment. There are many forms of visual impairment. To recognise this does not in any sense weaken political commitment and the presence of visually impaired people on stage. On the contrary, it reminds us that **it is time for our ways of sharing to be in a state of crisis** and that this could go together with a recognition of our impairments. It is time for any boundary between a valid body/performance and an invalid body/performance to become blurred and to result in new aesthetic projects that make us, all of us, responsive to life, to bodies and to the world of others.

### Interview by Hervé Pons

## SABINE MACHER'S AUDIO DESCRIPTION EXPERIENCE OF *L'ŒIL, LA BOUCHE ET LE RESTE*.

*This piece by Volmir Cordeiro was performed at CND on 8-10 March 2017.*

### How did you come to put your writer's career up to the service of a more technical narration?

Description plays an essential role in my work as a writer. It is the implement of it: I write what I see. It is also the basis of literature, where the story substitutes itself to direct perception, whether real or imagined. Furthermore, perception is never rooted in a single sense; all the senses and memories of previously lived situations collaborate in a synaesthetic way.

Thus, **I wrote what I saw** for someone who sees through language. With her unsighted vision, Reynalde Nicolin guided me all along the work process started with *L'œil, la bouche et le reste* (The Eye, the Mouth and the Rest of It).

**Describing dance** is a particularly exciting headache, because of its physical nature, dance 'speaks' very concretely and produces an abstract narration. This is ambiguous and each viewer interprets it his/her own way.

**To provide support** to this work for audiences with visual impairment, the audio description has to represent a number of facts which 'go without saying' for sighted people: localisation of the performers on stage, their orientation, the direction of their movement, the dynamics, the progression, the light and of course 'the dance' itself in its form and mood. All this generates masses of text that I have tried to keep fluid and 'audible'.

**To build a passage** between the concrete image and the mental one, I alternated analysis—the description of 'facts'—with analogy, which proposes a

short-cut to understanding and sensing stage situations.

### What type of metaphors did you use?

**Metaphor, metonymy and comparison are precious tools** for the formation of a mental image, but the problem of 'visual pre-requisites' arose fast, and that of their lack of validity for blind and partially sighted audiences. The questions Reynalde Nicolin asked gave me quickly to understand, what makes sense to her and what doesn't.

For example, 'fast as a spring, as a devil that comes out of box' made complete sense to her, while 'the ice skaters' I saw in the duo between Marcela and Calixto did not provide any information to her, as she had never seen this movement and the skates. By contrast, the description 'they jump diagonally while they bring their hand close to their foot, then straighten up, jump to the other side and repeat the same crossing of legs and arms again', allowed her to visualise and follow the movement.

### How did you work with Volmir?

Producer Margot Videoq let me read documents: **memos, interviews, reflections about the work** in the making. I could exchange extensively with Volmir, who also shared the feedback he had received from two blind people who had attended a dress rehearsal at the CND in Pantin.

I started writing a rendering of the first stage of the development of the piece. Later, in Brest, I attended rehearsals for three days. **I listened, observed and filmed.** Work on stage was intense and the piece evolved, going through many cuts and re-arrangements. As to the dancers, they engaged in

every sequence without knowing if it would make it into the piece to be performed. In my writing, I closely followed the work in the making, even if I had to delete it the next day. **On the last day, I read out the twenty-first minutes of my audio description to the performers** who actually saw themselves from outside, translated into language. Their responses to the reading taught me much for the next steps.

### Can you tell us a few words about the tactile visit that accompanied the performance?

**The tactile visit** took place just before the performance, the dancers were all on stage, in stage dress. In addition to the exploration of the dimensions and materials of the large studio at the CND (concrete, textiles, wood), it sparked a special relationship between the blind and partially sighted people and Volmir's team.

**The dancers stretched their hands out** for a greeting, a gesture usually followed by the same gesture appearing in the mirror. Yet, as the visitors did not see these stretched-out hands, they did not reciprocate. The dancers then went to seek those hands closer to the bodies of the visitors to shake them, a somewhat unfamiliar gesture between strangers.

**The presentation of the costumes** was both moving and funny. To feel the material of the stage dress, the visitors also touched the bodies of the people who wore them.

Smiles and light laughter on both sides gave expression to the surprise and kindness that surround unfamiliar, refreshing situations.

## 2 | Vera Tussing / *The Palm Of Your Hand* #2

**IN *THE PALM OF YOUR HAND* #2, VERA TUSSING CONVEYS HER CHOREOGRAPHY by a most of all tactile handling of the audience by the performers, by 'moving yourself' and 'being moved'.**

### **THE PALM OF YOUR HAND #2**

The dance takes place in the active, engaged, tactile negotiation between performer and audience, in their tacit agreement and understanding. **Arranged in an ellipse, the audience itself forms the bounds of the theatrical space. The fourth wall becomes the skin.** This is a journey that, by definition, performer and audience discover and create together.

The very homogeneous and organic choreographic works of Londoner Vera Tussing are an invitation to joint engagement and reflection.

With *The Palm Of Your Hand*, a work dating from 2015, the choreographer continues in a vein she began exploring many years ago centred around the question of movement and tactility. Dancers and audience share an elliptical space, a half-moon, with the people around the performers embodying the limits of the theatrical space, their skin forming a fourth wall. For tactility in the choreographer's work is not an empty word, but a social act that comes into play, for example in the simple act of shaking hands. The simplicity of the relationship manifests itself in more classical choreographic motifs, the layout of the ellipse creating a dynamics between the centre and the periphery, intimacy and distance, nearness and distance. This distance between dancer and spectator ends up disappearing, the latter being invited to take

part, discovering and shaping the space homogeneously. It's like a beautiful conversation between friends, skilfully and delicately balanced between listening and speaking, without one position winning out over the other.

The piece is sometimes preceded by a touch tour. The performance is addressing seeing, visually impaired and blind people alike.

### **VERA TUSSING**

A graduate of the London Contemporary Dance School, choreographer and performer Vera Tussing leads a European-wide career accompanied by The Royal Opera House and The Place in the United Kingdom, as well as the STUK art centre in Leuven and the Monty in Antwerp (in Belgium), among others. In 2007, she began collaborating with Albert Quesada, and together they created *Trilogy*, three experimental pieces investigating the listening experience through an exploration of very different types of music. That gave rise to an exploration of movement as an auditory experience, exemplified by works like *The Icarus Project* and *You Ain't Heard Nothing Yet*. Since 2014, Vera Tussing has been working on a new project, *T-Dance*, which brings together the main themes of her work, of which *The Palm Of Your Hand* is a major opus.

## EXPERIENCE REPORT BY VERA TUSSING

**When did you first approach disability, and especially blind/partially sighted people, through your practice? What did you feel about it? Was it already an issue for you or a real discovery?**

I had several experiences as a dancer when working with mixed ability groups of people some years ago in the UK. I also taught a dance class for many years in a retirement home for 'elderly active women'. Most of these women were in their very final stages of life and most sense organs were very reduced in their function. This gave me an insight into thinking about movement and physical practices for people with very varied abilities. But, reconfiguring my piece *The Palm Of Your Hand* with the Humane Body Project was the first time that I tried to open up my own work to a group of people who rely on other senses than sight.

**What was interesting from your own point of view?**

I was very conscious of the responsibility that came with this project, as I had no previous track record of producing work for blind audiences. Most of my working processes are very empirical by nature, and I decided to keep this working method in place for the recreation. I was lucky to have had a lot of input from Saïd Gharbi and others from the blind community in Brussels. The group was very open in both their encouragement and their criticism during the process.

**How did you proceed? What did you do? Did you recreate something new or did you just adapt things? Was your artistic view easy to share with blind people or did you have to come up with new ideas on this occasion?**

We went through several stages. I was pretty certain from the start that I did not want to use the usual method of an audio description. The show has a very specific set-up, with the audience standing in an ellipse, while the

performers move within that shape. At several moments during the show the performers make contact with the audience. This contact, the **touching and being touched** relation between performers and audience, **is the core of the performance**. In short, one could say *The Palm Of Your Hand* is a dance piece about touching and being touched.

So, for the recreation (*POYH#2*) I came to realise that despite the tactile focus of the work... most of the negotiations, if they weren't based on language, were very much based on eye contact. This is something that became pretty clear in our first try-outs. The optical bias for the communication of our actions and interactions was a lot stronger than I had anticipated.

For the recreation we eventually made several major changes. All sensory elements of the piece were enhanced. **We used more sound**, to emphasize the movement and physical development, and **made costumes from a material that produces sound** when we are in touch with the audience. We made **small cards with tactile information** to communicate to the audience the position in which they're standing in the room. We also created a **touch tour**, specifically to introduce blind and partially sighted audience members to the work. During this tour, we explored several of the key insights that are usually communicated through vision in the show. I think you could say that this 20-minute touch tour functions like physicalized/embodied program notes.

**Did you need to recreate a 'story' through the text for the audio description? How did you do? Has it changed the way you see your own works? Has it led you to explore new ways of creating, by using closeness, touch and body sensations?**

With *The Palm Of Your Hand #2*, several things have shifted for me and I am pretty sure it will continue to do so in the future. It forced me to realise just

how much of a visual bias my work has always had.

I also noticed how our language is full of references and comments linked with sight. This became very apparent within the process of the recreation. To give a basic example of this: we often display disinterest through small physical actions, like swiping our phones or walking away while others talk. **How you choose to communicate can have a very direct impact on how you include or exclude people** in your immediate surroundings. It also holds up a mirror to your own communication techniques.

**What did this experience change in your practice and in the way you address these particular audiences?**

When we started to perform *The Palm Of Your Hand #2*, it became clear that it's not only my team and I that were experiencing something new. Our audiences were also going through a journey of discovery in their own way.

Quite often, in my experiences as a performer and as a maker, theatre audiences that we perform to are rarely diverse. I would be excited by the thought of working towards theatre as a place where we are not primarily labelled and perceived by our differences. The start of this might be a bit clumsy, we might have to label the work for blind/partially sighted audiences, But, in the long term, I am interested in working towards ways where we don't need to label and call out people.

**Did this experience give birth to new projects, ideas?**

I am working on new research under the title of 'Both, Two and Many' with Esse Vanderbruggen. The working methods and encounters we experienced with The Humane Body project are very much present in the research of this new work.

**Interview by Hervé Pons**



## 3 | Anne Juren / *Blind Spot*

**IN ANNE JUREN'S *BLIND SPOT*, the members of the audience, guided mainly by voice and sound, are taken onto a meditative choreography through their own bodies.**

### **BLIND SPOT**

How can a choreography be conveyed through kinaesthetic sensation only? With *Blind Spot* Anne Juren has created a choreography of one's organs and body functions. While the audience will be lying on mats with their eyes closed, Juren will provide a setting open for everybody: a guiding voice and sounds will invite on a trip through body and mind. In the research phase, the French choreographer will work with partially sighted and blind people in several private choreographic sessions, relating to the notion of 'blind spot' and the premise that the body is a fiction and does not 'exist'. Their experiences will influence Juren's 'choreography inside the body'. Juren will conduct interviews with the participants and collect their feedback, physical impressions, kinaesthetic reactions and created visual images, especially emphasizing on the notion of 'pleasure' and 'desire'.

### **ANNE JUREN**

Anne Juren, born in Grenoble (France) is a choreographer, dancer and performer based in Vienna. In 2003, together with the visual artist Roland Rauschmeier, she cofounded the association Wiener Tanz- und Kunstbewegung. Her choreographic works and artistic researches have been extensively presented in international theatres, festivals, and different art spaces and venues. In her work, Juren tries to expand the term choreography in engaging the body in different states of physical, sensorial, kinaesthetic and mental experiences, questioning the boundaries between private and public spheres. Since 2013, Anne Juren is a Feldenkrais® practitioner. She is currently part of the artistic committee for the Master in Choreography at DOCH, in Sweden, and is doing a PhD at UNIARTS Stockholm University of the Arts.

### **EXPERIENCE REPORT BY ANNE JUREN**

#### **Experience**

**I'm a choreographer, a dancer, and since 2009 a Feldenkrais® practitioner. I also did a specialisation to work with small children, children and adults with disabilities.** In this practice, I encounter many people with different disabilities. In my work with children, I meet the families and encounter the medical professions, the drug industry and the impact of medical treatments. I'm in touch with many different realities of the impairment: the needs, the family, the medical

environment, the drug industry, the hospital, the traumatic, the therapeutic, the psychological, and the physical limitations of the body... All these parameters have their own realities, ideologies and ambiguities. These layers are the platforms for my choreographic approaches. The choreographic work is situated in the limit of the real and the fiction, where the notion of normality, functionality, orientation, and development becomes not just irrelevant but almost obsolete. The body here is a fragmented body, is a fiction.

#### **Discovery**

Where does the limit of our body start? Skin, touch, images, relationship with others, things around, impossibilities... The question is simple, yet it is not so easy to answer. This variability, this uncertainty, this oscillation is a movement. This is interesting especially with the work on blindness.

**Blindness proposes the potential of becoming blind.** The potential remains active if one perceives blindness only in terms of relation and not anymore in terms of competence or function. The



specific relation between the body and its movements are here to be invented.

**For the project**, I had many interviews with different blind or visual impaired people and created many individual and group choreographic sessions. It's like a case study. Each narrative is specific. Each disability is different. It is all relative. One aspect of the project is what to do with so many variations and differences? What does it mean to see or not to see? Basically, blindness cannot be defined as blindness.

**Spending time with blind people**, I started to observe not only the relation with the surroundings, the culture, the education, the body, the others, the use of the senses but also the places of danger, the borders, the signs, the places of immobility, the possibilities for movement, the surveillance... For example surveillance is also a way of looking, a sort of scanning; to survey a landscape. It's a particular kind of gaze, in which one looks without direct personal engagement. What is actually possible here is to be invented. It's almost like as if I suspend my naturel attitude to be able to open up to some universal experience and not only a cultural or functional one.

### Invention

**My ongoing research** is entitled 'Studies on Fantasmical Anatomies'.

This research is based on my artistic experience in unfolding the relation between movement and language. As a method of investigation, I create choreographies in the pattern of experimental choreographic sessions. The choreographic sessions explore how phantasms trouble some established notions of anatomy. How can the images of the body be integrated into the sensation itself? Do the images create the body, or does the body create the images? Is an action possible inside this entanglement of perceptive events? How far can I go with the body's transformation, with its disfiguration, together with the person in whose body the choreography is taking place? I want to propose **disorientation as an experimental way to re-establish unsuspected and improbable relations between body and mind**, imagination and sensation, experience and language, action and non-action. I've been essentially working with the idea that the body is not a localized entity. In this sense the artistic work didn't change. What will be emphasized here is that the spectator becomes 'as blind as a blind person'. The blind becoming will be present as a movement of displacement (or more, a movement of a trans-placement). In the choreography, there is a collective transposition. We can sense blindness as a blind person without knowing what it

really means. Therefor the 'handicap' disappears as a place of division. In the end, this may lead to the discovery that the transfer of becoming blind would emerge only when it's collectively shared.

### Audio description

**I did different experiments and practices** with groups of blind and visually impaired people. For this project, it is clear that I'm not interested in translating for the blind what a seeing person can see. So, in this way, I'm not interested in the idea of audio description for a dance. Blind people are the experts here and I should learn from them. So, how can the language of 'blindness align this one's body with other bodies? If blindness is a state that cannot be felt bodily by other bodies, how can blindness become a demand for collective politics, as politics based not on the possibility that we might be reconciled, but on learning to live with the impossibility of reconciliation, or learning that we live with and beside each other, and yet we are not as one?' as Sara Ahmed asked in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Here, there is recognition that sympathy is inadequate and empathy is impossible; it is this recognition of impossibility that becomes the basis of community.

### Interview by Hervé Pons

## 4 | Simon Mayer / *Sons of Sissy*

**IN *SONS OF SISSY*, SIMON MAYER PRESENTS A HUMOROUS KIND OF FOLK SHOW, between music and dance. Performers create a dance that you can hear as well as see.**

### **SONS OF SISSY**

Enter the universe of the Upper Austrian countryside, where traditions, folk dance and music reign supreme. Simon Mayer's ingenious and experimental choreography liberates the four performers/musicians on stage from the traditional alpine conventions. Part weird folk-music quartet, part playful ritual dance combo, *Sons of Sissy* defies categorisation and pigeonholing and uses humour to radically disrupt the male role models in old traditions. In *Sons of Sissy*, the performers use their bodies and instruments to create a dance that you can hear as well as see. On certain occasions, an audio description and a touch tour for blind and partially sighted audiences are provided.

### **SIMON MAYER**

Simon Mayer is a performer, choreographer and musician, born in Austria in 1984. He studied at the Vienna State Opera Ballet

School, at the Performing Arts Research and Training Studios in Brussels (P.A.R.T.S.) and was a member of the Vienna State Opera Ballet. In 2009, he founded his band Rising half-moon as a singer, songwriter and guitarist. Simon worked for Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker, Wim Vandekeybus and Zita Swoon. He choreographed several solos, duos and group pieces, which are internationally presented. Simon was an artist-in-residence at the Theatre de L'Île in Brussels, and together with his association M-arts he organises the international art festival SPIEL. Simon grew up on a farm in Upper Austria. Folk dance and folk music are part of his background, and at the moment also the central theme in his artistic career. Both his last piece *SunBengSitting* and his latest choreography *Sons of Sissy* deal with folk art. As a guest lecturer, he taught contemporary dance and folk dance at the Vienna conservatory and in various festivals (ImPulsTanz, Nueva Verta Festival Kuopio, Games Festival, etc.).

### **EXPERIENCE REPORT BY SIMON MAYER**

When you are eighteen years old in Austria, you can choose between military and civil service. I chose civil service and I signed in to work with disabled people with various disabilities. At that time, I was at the State Opera Ballet School in Vienna where I did dance projects with people

with disabilities as I did also as a freelancer. That's why I chose to do civil service in a school for children with a disability. In fact, I signed a contract with the Vienna State Opera Ballet, so I didn't have to do my civil service. Nevertheless, it was clear to me since then, that if I hadn't been an artist,

I would probably have been a social worker/therapist/coach or... a farmer. Or maybe both!

My interest in social and therapeutic work is especially related to my interest in spiritual work that brought me closer to the research on compassion and the interest on how people that don't

have all the natural possibilities that I have deal with the world. **You realise through this reflection process, that if there are many different ways of living, they all have the same value.**

Besides, what brought me close to the work with blind people was music. I'm a musician. I grew up as a musician with a tremendous curiosity for sound, and very early in my own work, I started working on the **concept of 'audio performance'**. I started to record CDs of my stage shows to try to imagine how it would be to attend my performances with the eyes closed and only hear the show. Then I recorded these reveries on CD. It has always been part of the concept of my shows to **make the sound element really strong** and the sound and musical dramaturgy interesting enough so it could also be simply listened to without being seen. I make a point of being understood by 'only' listening.

Therefore, when I was asked to perform my creation *Sons of Sissy* for a blind audience it was not, in a way, really new for me, even though it was the first time, because what I was asked for was close to the way I approached my work. But it is great to have eventually the opportunity to bring this interest on sound and hearing to a kind of peak with an audience that is also especially interested in the sound because of being blind. There is finally an audience

that really values and appreciates my effort to create 'audio performances'!

For us, **performing the show for blind people is a very good way to remind us to really listen to each other when we are on stage.** We have performed this piece over forty times now and somehow we have lost the original concept of 'audio performance' a bit and the wish to really play music with everything we have... The dance we do is music, the gestures we do are part of the musical composition, the breath we take is music... So, performing for blind audience was a good reminder to come back to this original concept. In my work, I never did a division between sound and movements, which is what has made it accessible since the beginning for a blind audience. I guess that is why I was asked to be a kind of prototype for this network and the work on performance for blind audiences.

What was really nice for me was to learn from Valérie Castan, with whom I worded the audio description of *Sons of Sissy*, and to discover how she translates our movements and what happens on stage for blind audiences. I learned a lot from her and her experience, especially the touch tour concept was a nice discovery for me and another amazing reminder that **every surface also has a different frequency**; it's like touching sound when you touch different surfaces (props, instruments,

bodies, stage set...). I trusted her. We talked a lot about what can be said: What is too much? What is not enough? How to get to the core of the work with the audio description? How to really describe a ritual? In the end, I realized through Valérie, that it was **very important to take care of how you say things**: with a calm voice or with a loud voice; how much silence there is in-between.

So, at the moment, I would be very interested in composing the audio description also (maybe for the next piece...), in including the audio description in the musical composition of the piece. I would like that sometimes the description even takes over... and that also sighted people can be included and have headphones.

After this experience, I guess I know more about the technology blind or partially sighted people use to see a bit more, hear a bit more, find their paths... This was a big discovery... All the gadgets already available for smartphones to see better, to hear all you would normally read. These can all be nice tools for a new show, I guess!

Anyway, today, I want to do more works with and for blind people and social groups that are not included yet, or not enough, into this field of performance of contemporary dance.

**Interview by Hervé Pons**

## EXPERIENCE REPORT BY VALÉRIE CASTAN

**Valérie Castan, dancer, choreographer and audio describer writes about the tactile tour before the performance of *Sons of Sissy*.**

Before Simon Mayer's show *Sons of Sissy*, I hosted a tactile stage tour for visually impaired audiences, as well as a workshop that provided the opportunity to physically experience some moments of the performance and to become familiar with dance vocabulary. The piece is based on the circle, the tower and dancing in pairs.

The workshop explored those themes through bodily felt experiences and the sensations that come up when walking inside the circle, on the circle, turning around the circle, dancing in a circle and turning around oneself. Dancing to action verbs is a current practice in contemporary dance and, actually, it relates to the descriptive text. We also danced a Viennese waltz, even though it is not evoked in the piece, because I felt it was important to create a link between a dance known to the

participants and this workshop. Then, I asked each of the visually impaired dancers to turn, as dancers do, in pairs, while moving on a circle. One of them guided, the other one moved in rotations. This can lead to dizziness or exhilaration, depending on the participants. One of the workshop's aims was that the experience of the audio description and the performance would involve kinaesthetic empathy and connect with a bodily lived experience.

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# 4 Policies for teaching dance

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The provision of dance education for audiences with a disability, whatever the disability, requires that a number of factors are taken into account: the built environment, customer care, cultural offer, staff and teacher training, accessible communication and information, partnerships, etc. It takes the commitment of the senior management, of a variety of services and staff, of the students and their parents within a joined-up, holistic and structured approach.

The information below aims at helping establishments that teach dance put in place an effective action plan and make it integral to the institution's strategic plan.

## *When art education institutions feed their access initiatives into a* **flow of innovation...**

### INVOLVING MEMBERS OF STAFF

- **Consult with** and seek the commitment of all members of staff and the organisation's departments and teams.
- **Make access** for people with a disability **an item on the agenda** of staff meetings. Think of involving external specialists to raise disability equality awareness for all staff.

### NOMINATING A DISABILITY LEAD PERSON

Experience shows that it is a condition for success in a commitment to accessibility. **The disability lead person** holds wide-ranging knowledge on accessibility and liaises with audiences with a disability:

- s/he **monitors policy implementation** on the inclusion of people with a disability (progress monitoring of the action plan, making access integral in new projects, documentation of the specific requirements of audience members, etc.);
- s/he is **the primary contact** for partnerships and people with disabilities who want to make use of the cultural offer of the organisation;
- s/he **ensures** that **the requirements** of people with a disability **are being taken into account** in all building and maintenance work, as well as in the organisation's cultural offer.

### UNDERTAKING AN ACCESS APPRAISAL, AND PREFERABLY A PROFESSIONAL ACCESS AUDIT

- **Assess all aspects of the accessibility** of the venue (entries and exits, spaces, offices, services and information for all groups of people with a disability).

In France, disability legislation of 11 February 2005 requires that all users, whatever their physical, sensory or intellectual

challenges, can circulate independently in spaces used by the public and use the equipment and services provided to the public.

Even if access appraisals—and much better, professional access audits—have been undertaken within the framework of a country's legal obligations, it is important to ensure the ongoing development of the accessibility of the built environment, the cultural offer and the partnerships with disability organisations.

### DEFINING ORGANISATIONAL PROCEDURES

- **Put into place a procedure for providing access** to the disabled students, as well as to guides, facilitators, service dogs, where this applies. Allow for a wide variety of situations.
- **Create a file about safety procedures** with all the information needed to respond to an emergency (e.g. people to contact). In case of particular support needs, e.g. for visually impaired people with additional disabilities, record these on a file (which may remain sealed until opened by rescue staff).
- **Implement existing rules and regulations regarding students with a disability**, when your organisation offers him/her a place on the basis of a competition or an exam.
- **Set time aside for an evaluation of the student's abilities and skills in the presence of the teacher**; who may be assisted by a specialist in the anatomy of dance.
- **Offer the student a trial period** of two or three sessions, in the form of a placement with an interview to measure his/her ability to adapt to a particular artistic practice.
- **Define a spectrum of possible measures** to be taken, for each student concerned: the inclusion of the student in the class, within or outside the curriculum, with or without adapting the

# ... and research *about accessible education,* everyone benefits.

## ASSESS ALL ASPECTS OF THE ACCESSIBILITY

of the venue (entries and exists, spaces, offices, services and information for all groups of people with a disability).

teaching methods; holding workshops in places of medical and health care; inviting the student to inclusive master classes (with non-disabled and disabled students), etc.

## DEVELOPING AN INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION POLICY

Audiences with disabilities require information in accessible media, plain language or sign language, etc.:

→ **Provide accessibility information** in your standard communication media, as well as in accessible media used by people with disabilities, including on your website. Pictograms with disability symbols can signal accessibility features for people with different disabilities (this is of particular use in wayfinding, but inclusive information does not necessarily requires the use of pictograms (see: <[www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-britain#visit](http://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-britain#visit)>).

→ **Develop partnerships with local intermediaries.** Various organisations can be effective partners for the dissemination of information aimed at disabled audiences:

- organisations of people with a disability;
- resource centres catering for people with a disability;
- specialist organisations for sports, leisure, culture, and disability;
- medical and health care centres and residential homes in

which people with a disability live;

- support, education and home care services;
- social media on the Internet, information and experience sharing spaces for people with a visual impairment.

## DEVELOPING PROJECTS WITH ORGANISATIONS OF/FOR VISUALLY IMPAIRED PEOPLE

→ **Develop partnerships with community organisations** of/for visually impaired people, and places where older people in need of care live.

It is of great importance to make your commitment to access and equal opportunities integral to your internal policies, practices and procedures, and to spell out the duties to access for members of staff and professionals working with your organisations (artists, suppliers, etc.).

The commitments described here are essential elements for building a whole organisation approach to accessibility. Accessibility is a state of mind. It is therefore important to nurture a culture of accessibility, which dedicates time to sharing experiences, reflections and networking. When art education institutions feed their access initiatives into a flow of innovation and research about accessible education, everyone benefits.



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# 5 Dance tuition

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In every apprenticeship or teaching programme, the teacher and the student are fellow travellers. They form a 'duo', in which the teacher learns from the student and the student from the teacher. This vision of education is particularly valuable when welcoming a student with a disability.

Dance tuition usually takes place in a group, it is a privileged space for inclusion and diversity. Meeting the new challenges of working with students with a disability appears to be within reach of the teacher: it's about opening their treasure trove of creative resources to a heterogeneous audience in terms of skills and competences, and devise activities that stimulate progress.

Every teacher does actually possess the requisite skills for working with disabled students. S/he will adapt the tuition to meet the individual student's need, and has the ability to give a coherent tuition to all, in which everyone can achieve their individual objectives.



# 1 | Defining the student's project

**A PRELIMINARY MEETING WITH THE STUDENT** about his /her individual situation is essential to devise student's learning project. Where appropriate, external professionals and family may attend. This interview aims to meet several objectives: to become well-informed about the student's ways of learning, to advise him /her of the type of dance that might be the most suited. The student's learning project can then be adapted, in the light of his /her abilities identified in the meeting.

## FINDING OUT ABOUT THE STUDENT'S REQUIREMENTS

- His/her **level of independent mobility** to get to the venue (some cultural venues provide a member of staff to meet a person with a disability at the nearest underground station or bus stop).
- In case of need, are there **possibilities** for the student to **have a guide** to come to the venue and a facilitator during the tuition, and also in-between dance classes.
- His/her **preferred means of communication** when in contact with the venue and the teacher: e.g. mail, mobile phone, text messages (e.g. that may be received in audio), Braille, large print (and preferred font size and typeface).
- What makes for **visual comfort** (e.g. lighting levels, contrasts, etc.).
- Can the dance class be mindful of his /her **visual abilities** (e.g. seeing well from close by or from a distance, seeing colours, not seeing etc.).
- **Vision and mobility aids** used (e.g. glasses, magnifying glass, binoculars, magnifying equipment, white cane, service animal such as guide dog and their needs).

**It will be important not to allow preconceived ideas about disability to limit the range of choices offered to the student.**

## ADVISING ON THE CHOICE OF DANCE

When it comes to artistic practices, it's essential to always give priority to the student's own tastes. Some styles of dance may seem more suited to people with a specific form of disability. It's the case, for example, of tap-dancing for blind people, of more physical forms of dance in which women are often guided, of contact improvisation or of contemporary dance that offers the possibility to start off around the student's abilities and explores

personal modes of expression. However, notwithstanding the qualities and riches of each of these dance forms, it will be important not allow preconceived ideas guide the choices offered to the student.

So, the administrative team, and, where involved, the family and an external professional can reflect together with the student about the choices of classes that are available in terms of dance aesthetics, as well as the medium-term developmental pathways available. The cohesion between this collective approach and the personal and/or professional development project of the student will guarantee the quality of the tuition for several years.

Dance style choices seem to be difficult to make for a born blind person. The use of aids and adaptations (e.g. the provision of 'auxiliary aids' or 'alternative means' in UK disability legislation) will be necessary to support the discovery of different forms of dance.

## MAXIMISING INDEPENDENT MOBILITY AT THE VENUE

It is important to give the student a visit of the premises, spaces and facilities provided (auditorium, library, lecture rooms, changing rooms, showers and toilets) and to indicate circulation within the venue. In many places, non-sighted students can find their way on their own, provided they can get to know them, and, if possible, when appropriate means of wayfinding have been installed.

In France, many music schools (*conservatoires*) employ blind piano tuners who move fully independently about the venue with the help of wayfinding aids, such as Braille stickers that have been installed. Clear, colour contrasted wayfinding signs and adequate lighting levels make mobility considerably easier for partially sighted people.

## ADJUSTING THE PROJECT TO THE SKILLS AND ABILITIES OF THE STUDENT

- **Prioritise a class with a small number of students:** this will simplify the integration of the visually impaired student into the class.
- When necessary, **think of a way of providing individual support** to the student during or outside the class (given by the tutor or someone else). This could relate to the content of the course, or on stumbling blocks experienced by the student (e.g. body schema, equilibrium, wayfinding in the dance studio). These may have been identified during the assessment meeting, or, later, in the dance class. It is not unusual that individual tuition is required. The dance organisation will be actively seeking to meet all possible support needs identified.
- Consider **the possibility for the student to take part only in some parts of the course** and/or to work on other exercises than those offered to the group (while balancing this with the need for inclusion).
- **Clearly define the role and responsibilities of each person**

involved with the student (other students, support teachers, carers, etc.). Set time aside for meetings between these people.

→ It may be possible to **draw the know-how of people and organisations** active in the fields of art and disability that may be in a position to provide advice about approaches to learning and teaching dance with visually impaired people.

→ **Allow time for regular discussion** to successfully adjust the project to the student.

→ **Call on the directorate of your organisation** to ensure the fullest integration of the student into the class, as a range of measures may be necessary in terms of physical, sensory, technical and pedagogical adjustments.

→ **Invite involvement of professionals**, such as mobility officers.

The measures taken for a visually impaired student have to be considered within the context of their compatibility with the needs of the other students, including those who have other forms of visual impairment. On occasion, this means finding compromises.

## WEARING GLASSES IN CHOREOGRAPHIC PRACTICE

**Wearing glasses is common among people with various levels of visual impairment. Some blind people will sometimes refuse to work without glasses for aesthetic reasons.** It is necessary to be aware of this and to be able to exchange with the student before deciding to impose a blanket rule that would be experienced as brutal by him/

her. If glasses are indispensable to the student, the task will be to find a way by which they remain solidly attached, while also allowing mobility of the head in all situations. In certain dances, this mobility, as well as the relationship between the head and the whole vertebral column are essential: they play an important part in the stability

of the vertical posture, while ensuring the mobility of the vertebral column and, this way, of the body in space. To avoid glasses becoming an obstacle to the discovery of this bodily mobility, the student needs to be assured, that his/her glasses hold in their place: a rubber band that connects the two sides of the spectacles may be all that's needed.

## AN ATTITUDE FIT FOR QUALITY COMMUNICATION

→ **Introduce yourself** by name and speak **clearly** when making contact or speaking.

→ When addressing a student or a teacher, **mention his/her forename**. In some cases, it is possible to address the student by making contact with the hand, for example on the shoulder.

→ **Say when you are leaving** or moving away from the person.

→ **Don't leave a blind or partially sighted person alone** in the middle of a room at the end of a class or a performance. Think of accompanying him.

→ **To guide a blind person offer him/her an arm**, s/he will be walking a little behind you and avoid obstacles this

way. The person may hold your elbow (which provides much information on your movement).

→ **Avoid expressions such as 'it's here' or 'it's there'.**

→ **Use e.g. the image of a clock** to indicate the location of objects: they may be located e.g. at '2 o'clock', or '9 o'clock' in relation to the student's position. This method can be used both horizontally and vertically.

→ **Manage sound and noise** levels in the environment for optimal verbal communication.

→ **The tutor** needs to be aware, that his/her **voice may not carry far enough** or may be masked by music or noise. This recommendation applies to

all students.

→ Teachers want to know that **blind people** who do not have access to visual information regarding the activities taking place **may be less quiet and listen less** than sighted people, yet are not aware that they may disturb. Teachers will draw the students back to the attentive listening of their tuition.

→ **Offer demonstrations of movements** and their exploration by touch as a complement to verbal information.

→ **Invite the visually impaired student to partner up** with you for a demonstration.

→ **Announce beginnings, stops and pauses** verbally, not only with gestures.

## 2 | Preparing for the arrival of the student

**THE ACTIONS DESCRIBED IN THIS CHAPTER DO NOT NECESSARILY INVOLVE THE TUTOR AND THEY MAY NOT BE PART OF HIS/HER JOB.** Some are about technical services. Others may have been part of an access appraisal or audit (although this is not often the case) or are in the process of being carried out. Whatever the situation, a meeting needs to take place between the directorate, the teacher and the various professionals concerned.

### ORGANISING ACCESS TO THE VENUE AND THE DANCE STUDIO

→ **Offer to accompany the student** from the nearest bus stop or railway station in case of need (this may be organised with the support of volunteers or other students).

→ **Identify access obstacles** or difficulties, in order to put in place adaptations required.

→ In particular, **avoid obstacles at the height of a person's face**. Install protections on points of danger (e.g. a wall with a sharp angle, spaces underneath flights of stairs, protruding beams, etc.).

→ **Do not let objects lie on the floor**; avoid safety hazards when opening of doors, windows, cupboards; put away any chairs that may be in the way...

→ A visually impaired person learns to know his/her environment thanks to stable spatial reference points. **Keep students informed**, if you change the layout of the space.

### SUPPORTING INDEPENDENT MOBILITY IN THE DANCE STUDIO

In addition to the abilities of some individual students to find their way on a dance floor, adjustments should be made. These depend in part on the specific aesthetics of the dance styles taught.

The visually impaired student may have difficulties identifying a given direction in the space, if s/he has changed position (e.g. after several rotations):

→ **Keep the sources of sound and light diffusion** (light can be experienced as dazzling) **fixed and stable**. They are reference points that help memorise the configuration of the space (e.g. its principal axes). Tiny spots may be sufficient.

→ **Remember informing the student each time these sources of sound and light get moved.**

The student needs to be enabled to locate zones of dance work, entries and exits:

→ **Use contrasts**, textures and materials: e.g. tactile flooring and wayfinding, contrasts between materials (e.g. adhesive or magnetic string, floor carpets or slabs/floor tiles, curtains, elastic cord or a stretched-out rope with knots to remember positions, bubble wrap...).

→ **Mark the zones** in which the blind dancer will be positioned during his/her dance with e.g. a tactile T-shape or a square.

## 3 | Welcoming the student to his/her first class

**WELCOMING THE STUDENT TO HIS/HER FIRST CLASS IS A VERY IMPORTANT MOMENT.** It will lay the positive foundations for the successful integration of the student into the group and the course. This first welcome is not about making things heavy, but simply addressing questions and issues that may arise for the disabled student, the other students or the teacher.

### FACILITATING WAYFINDING IN THE DANCE STUDIO

- Take time at the start of the course for the **discovery and exploration of the space**, the room and the layout of objects.
- **Describe the rooms**, their length, width and height **as precisely as possible** (clapping hands in each corner may help picture the volume of the space), as well as the location of doors, windows, furniture, equipment and facilities through a tactile exploration.

### THE BEST PLACE FOR THE STUDENT

- Offer the visually impaired student to take his/her place **in the first row or in the middle**, depending on the type of dance being taught.

Having a place near the teacher is interesting for a blind student, as s/he can easily hear the verbal instructions. His/her position and movements can then also be easily adjusted during the class. Some partially sighted people, however, do not want to be in the first row: if the teacher moves away, they will not have anyone whose demonstration they can follow. They may prefer to be seated or placed in such a way that they can perceive other students on all sides.

- To facilitate a good integration into the group, the teacher may include an **experience of a temporary blacking out of sight** for the class at a specific moment in the workshop (e.g. exercises in the dark, or with the eyes shut or with a blindfold).

- Inform the students about the **safety measures and protocols** adopted.

### BRIEFING ABOUT THE CLASS AND ITS ORGANISATION

- Present the **rules that apply to the class** (outfits, shoes, socks, headaddress, etc.), the sequences and exercises that will be carried out, the positioning of the students, teaching materials. See to them being available in accessible formats, etc.

### INTEGRATING THE STUDENT INTO THE DANCE WORK

- **Invite all students to introduce themselves.**
- Mention to all **how the visually impaired student will be integrated into the class**, and also his/her facilitator if this applies, the types of support the students themselves may provide (e.g. as a guide when walking, etc.). Depending on the situation, this introduction may be provided by the teacher and/or the student.

## 4 | Learning paths

**GONE ARE THE TIMES OF PRESCRIPTIVE PEDAGOGY.** To pass on essential information and tips, however, there are supports the teacher can adjust to the student's needs and the dance styles being taught. Awareness of the student's ways and needs is a motivation towards an artistic practice accessible to all.

### MAKING SPACE ONE'S OWN, SHARING IT AND KNOWING IT

The relationship with space is at the heart of the work of the student's, and the teacher's work. It is vital that the teacher imagines possibilities of making adjustments for blind and partially sighted students for the entire duration of the course. S/he needs to have an awareness of the way the blind and partially sighted students perceive space and the representation they develop of it, sometimes from childhood on.

Before even walking, the child explores his/her environment by palpating the objects that are within immediate or close reach. S/he perceives objects that are beyond that space and they stimulate him/her to move and explore beyond immediate body boundaries.

For a blind child, this process requires awareness of the permanence of objects and of their existence, although they are not seen. However, very few objects signal their existence through the permanent production of sound. Even if this is the case, the

child needs to be given the opportunity to touch the object and the object needs to be placed within grasping reach during the time s/he gets to know it.

Blind children do not follow the same early developmental journey as sighted ones. During their first years, they need as many opportunities for tactile exploration as possible, by hand and feet. They stay longer in their 'prehensile space' (*'espace de préhension'*), which is the space within grasping reach, and receive very little information about the space beyond; the far away space that invites exploration. They are slower to understand what to use their feet for. They usually learn to walk later than sighted children, whose bodily behaviours are stimulated by the flow of visual information that invites moving into space.

The distinction between 'prehensile space' and 'locomotor space' remains more or less strongly active for some blind children, teenagers and adults and for some people with a severe visual impairment.

### PREHENSILE SPACE AND LOCOMOTOR SPACE

**'Prehensile space' defines space close by that is within reach of touch without requiring the body to move. 'Locomotor space' defines the entire exterior to prehensile space and requires locomotion or movement by the body to be reached.**

Information that comes from those two spaces allows the child to obtain intelligence about his/her body and the objects around it. The child will, for example, be interested to see the

object. S/he will also like to touch it. The integration of those various sensory cues enables him/her to develop a representation of his/her own body, the objects, their qualities, as well as of space. By seeking stimuli coming from a same source and transmitted through different sensory channels, the child is stimulated to move into space, for example to touch the object s/he has seen. This way, s/he moves from the space within reach of his/

her hands, the prehensile space, to distant space, the locomotor space. Prehensile space can be compared to the notion of 'kinesphere', developed by choreographer and theorist Rudolf Laban, as the 'sphere around the body that can be easily reached with limbs stretched out, without the body standing on one foot moving away from its point of support'.<sup>1</sup>

## SPATIAL WAYFINDING CUES FOR BLIND AND PARTIALLY SIGHTED STUDENTS

These include the provision of:

→ **Fixed reference points** in the dance studio (wall, column, bar...). Dancer and choreographer Julie Galopin held workshops with blind people at the Résidence Saint-Louis des Quinze-Vingts, in partnership with Cemaforre/Gradisca, Paris (2010), involving contact with the wall.

→ **Lighting spots** installed to help memorise the spatial configuration (principal axes...).

→ Easy to find, **stable, fixed sources of sound**, etc.

→ **Counting the number of steps** during movements in space.

'We work on wayfinding in space anyway, but blind and partially sighted people have great abilities to memo-

rise the movement patterns and paths; they have a well developed kinaesthetic memory, because their lives depend on this all the time. When we perform on a new dance floor, we get there two or three hours before the performance and walk on the stage so that dancers can take note of the number of steps from the back of the stage to its front edge'.<sup>2</sup> (Carol Penn, dancer).

→ **Auditory cues**: e.g. sound generated by the movements of slippers, shoes and their sound on different floor surfaces.

→ **Aroma smell dispensers**.

→ **Variations in the volume of air**.

→ Devices that produce **heat contrasts**, as in the choreographic performance *La Sphère de lumière* (Sphere of light) at the Palais des Fêtes (2006, Strasbourg), etc.

→ The **breath of the dancers or their smell** (auditory and somaesthetic cues).

According to choreographer Saburo Teshigawara, students with a visual impairment have a 'different approach to dance'.<sup>3</sup> He adds: 'We see forms that surround us with our eyes, but those who do not see use another sense than sight to perceive space in different ways'. He asked his blind and partially sighted students to use the breath: 'Breathing and air are the main themes of *Prelude for Dawn*. (...) Breathing has become a way of counting time, the transcription of space and the centre of the actions. (...) When I met blind people, I had to develop another way of teaching dance techniques. (...) Sometimes, sighted people are blinded by what they see. Then they forget to feel'.

## EXAMPLES OF LEARNING PATHS

→ Encourage the student to the **tactile discovery of the wall of the room**: ask him/her to walk along it, touching it with his/her hand, with his/her body, and then to walk along it without contact.

→ Use **different textures**, mark the main spaces of the room with tactile markers (on the floor, on the walls).

→ Use **objects, fixed or movable, that produce sound** to support the student to orient him/herself in space. They can perhaps be integrated into the stage set as meaning-making props.

→ Use a **bubble wrap floor**. The intensity of the interaction between dancers can allow for a non-verbal auditory mode of communication.

In the duo *Clairières* (Clearings) (Acajou company, created at Centre Chorégraphik Pôle Pik in May 2012), Delphine Demont and Saïd Gharbi used bubble wrap to delineate the dancing ground from which Saïd does not exit, and subverted this functional element making it an integral part of the stage set and a source of choreographic material.

✓ More information: < [www.acajou.org](http://www.acajou.org) >.

→ Use **ropes, strings or headscarves** held by dancers and/or fixed (horizontally, vertically, on a dance path, etc.), visible or invisible, to assist dancers in their movements in space.

The choreography *Her Body Doesn't Fit Her Soul* by Wim Vandekeybus with the duo of blind dancers Saïd Gharbi and

I Machtelt Philips at the Théâtre de la Ville (Paris, 1994).

✓ More information: < [www.ultimavez.com](http://www.ultimavez.com) >.

→ Encourage **work in pairs and larger groups**: the blind dancer is guided, surrounded by one or more dancers.

→ Encourage the student to **bring the space around him/her alive**, investing it with qualities (such as liquid, solid, dense, soft, hard, compact, light) that transform the substance of the dance.

Four female dancers are moving on an inflatable floor made of transparent plastic, the ebb and flow of which suggests the tide. This dance decor itself dances and makes dance, because the floor gets distorted under the steps of the dancers, retaining traces of past steps and develops a menacing presence to the point of swallowing up the fleeting forms which the dancers seek to make emerge in the air. *Ad Astra* (Towards the Star), a choreography by Emmanuelle Vo-Dinh, Mâcon: Scène nationale. (2010-2011 season).

→ Provide a **tactile map** of the choreographic pathways.


Acajou proposes the following exercise: 'We use a board made of cork on which we fit strings and pushpins. The strings represent the trajectory the dancer is to undertake, first in walking, then responding to more complex instructions that disrupt the rhythm of the walk or the orientation in space'.<sup>4</sup>



## USING ONE'S BODY WEIGHT

Like everybody else, the dancer is subjected to the force of gravity. Gravity constrains us and helps us find equilibrium. It is often easier to experience imbalance in order to reach a state of balance. However, for blind and partially sighted people, loss of balance represents a real risk of falling. It is very difficult to make visually impaired people surrender a stable position, even if it is a bit shaky. The teacher can propose to work in pairs, so that the blind or partially sighted student can experience bodily pleasure in both a state of balance and imbalance. In time, these skills can bring rotation and jumping within reach.

Work on balance with the eyes shut helps sighted students optimise the quality of their balance, by developing other systems of postural adjustment than visual ones. Certain balancing exercises and spinning rely on visual concentration on a fixed point. A fixed source of sound can be used by a blind student. The dissemination of music doesn't allow for the clear perception of a source of sound. An electronic tuning fork that emits a single frequency can be used. Yoga concentration techniques enable the construction of internal bodily reference points in various parts of the body and outside it, which can serve as fulcrums of balance. The teacher can involve the entire class in exercises with an alternating focus on different fulcrums to fine-tune everyone's sense of balance.

 Please note: in access to dance, some visually impaired people may enjoy dancing in the dark, but this is not always the case. Some will be attached to their remaining vision and are likely to find such exercises difficult to accept.

Wim Vandekeybus came to the idea of working with blind people when he noticed one day, while dancing, that he shut his eyes when he performed dangerous movements. It is a fascinating engagement to him, but this is no reason to be oblivious of the difficulties of such a let go. In everyday life, blind people always have to seek control of their environment and to sanction their inner instinctual energy.

## EXAMPLES OF LEARNING PATHS

- Encourage **mobilisation of the whole body** to experiment different movements. Make students explore different levels: lying on the floor, sitting, rolling, moving at half the body height while being guided, depending on the type of work being done.
- Encourage awareness of **balance and imbalance in the same session** to stimulate the student's proprioceptive awareness.
- Fine-tune the **sense of balance, using** real and imaginary **fulcrums**.
- Make students explore **different ways of shifting from one fulcrum** to another, which is the first learning step towards the *pas de liaison*.
- Make students explore **different relationships to gravity for the same movement**: coiling and uncoiling vertebral column, raising an arm while in a lying, and while in a standing position.
- Work on the **sensation of falling** of one part of the body, and the whole body.

## THE JUMP: DELPHINE DEMONT AND JOSÉ LUIS PAGÉS' REPORT

**Even if there can be big differences between born blind people and people who became visually impaired in the course of their life, the prospect of working on the jump is, understandably, often met with apprehension by visually impaired students. Adaptations are needed.**

'We use the barre to reassure the dancers: two fingers on the barre, and facing it, they repeat bending and raising several times, experimenting with different rhythms. This is sometimes enough to arouse the desire to jump, sometimes not. We also suggest to the dancers that they perform the same rhythms with a ball close to the floor. The ball has to be carried, or, on the contrary, it bounces on its own. In this exercise, the ball is the imaginary projection of the hips.

Students quickly realise that they want to jump, and jumping comes from bending.

The ball allows one to learn to link jumping with other steps, for example: I hold the ball in a different hand when I walk, I throw it with one hand back into that hand when I jump. All sorts of combinations can be tried out: walking-jumping (hopping), walking-walking-jumping (with a more pronounced sense of thrust), etc.

We also work with the imagination and the desire of people: we guide them to discover everything they can do within their kinesphere without changing the fulcrums on the floor, while being able to change the level. We then invite them to move their kinesphere by modifying their fulcrums or by jumping. If need be, we place objects to be reached high.

Sometimes we work with the acaJOUET© because the dance score allows us to demonstrate the fact that there is no fulcrum when one is in the air. We propose simple jumps that allow the analysis of the movements of which most students do not have a representation and have never experienced before, for example jumping and moving with feet joined. This surprises students and gives them the desire to take the plunge and explore new directions.

We have programmed several workshops focused on the technique of jumping around the "Coffret Giselle" (Giselle suitcase). The jump is then being worked on in relation to very precise notions: a particular kind of physical work, or a work involving imagination and

interpretation. For example, in relation to the first entry of Giselle on stage, students take up a position they have already worked on (walking slowly, fast, changing levels by changing their relationship to the floor, changing direction, changing rhythm, and thus also jumping) and to retain the position in the air during the jump. The first dance of Myrtha in act II is the opportunity to work other aspects: the coordination of arm movements with the jump (arms taking up their position before or after the call), the link

between the jump and different ways of carrying it out in space (a jump which moves little or much). The attention brought to the stress of the jump can be another entry point: upwards jump (the imaginary act of “flying” for the Willis in act II of *Giselle*) or downwards jump (the imaginary scene of the wine growers who tread the soil in act I).

However, we notice a difficulty of getting back into jumps in improvisation: jumps remain a risk-taking act. A playful approach facilitates risk-taking. We encourage changes in

rhythm and surprises in our students’ dancing (this can ease them into jumping) sometimes making them work with a musician who improvises following the rhythm and musicality of each dancer. We then discover their ability to throw themselves in a race, to jump, to roll backwards’.

■ ■ For further reading on the use of the ball, see: ‘Objet-Dansant, application de la méthode des “Barres flexibles” by Wilfride Piollet, for an initiation into dance for visually impaired people on <[www.dailymotion.com](http://www.dailymotion.com)>.

## SENSORY PERCEPTIONS BEYOND THE FIVE SENSES: DEFINITIONS

**Most of us have grown up believing that perception is essentially a matter of the five senses. Few of us can name the sense modalities that enable us to feel our legs move, our heart beat or to be aware of our bodily sensations while breathing. The same is true in the world of dance. Even if some of the terminology is known, we sometimes mix it up. Here is a little reminder of the main sense modalities:**

### Somaesthesia

The term ‘general somaesthetic sensibility’ designates the conscious sensations awakened by the stimulation of body tissues. These sensations are not visual, auditory, gustatory or olfactory. They are generated by the excitation of nerve ending receptors of various types situated in the skin and some more deeply laying tissues: visceral connective tissue, fibrous capsules and joined ligaments. These receptors are sensitive to a certain number of specific stimuli: mechanical, thermal, pain. Within somaesthesia, we shall thus distinguish between tactile, thermal and pain sensitivity, as well as conscious kinaesthesia that comes from the articulations and informs the subject on the positions and movements of different body parts in space.

### Proprioception

This allows awareness of the position

and the movements of every body part (e.g. the position of fingers in relation to the other), and unconsciously supplies the nervous system with the necessary information for the adjustment of muscular contractions needed to move and maintain body postures and balance.

Source: <[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proprioception](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proprioception)>.

### Kinaesthesia

The kinaesthetic sense, or sense of movement, is considered to be a sixth sense that interacts with the other senses, notably with sight and hearing thanks to a network of specific sensory captors. These are sensitive to variations in the length of muscles, captors of rotation in the articulations, captors of pressure in the skin, captors measuring head movements and accelerations in space in the inner ear. One talks of kinaesthetic sensations to refer to information gathered by these receptors and kinaesthetic perceptions to refer to their treatment and selection.

Source: *Le Moal, Philippe (ed.). (2008). Dictionnaire de la danse. Larousse.*

### Interoception

This is the domain of sensibility relating the perception by the nervous system of the modifications or signals coming from the viscera through the autonomic nervous system, and the muscles,

tendons and articulations by the central nervous system.

Source: <[www.larousse.fr](http://www.larousse.fr)>.

### Vestibular system

The vestibular system is the sensory system that provides the leading contribution to the sense of balance and spatial orientation for the purpose of coordinating movement with balance. Together with the cochlea, a part of the auditory system, it constitutes the labyrinth of the inner ear in most mammals.

Source: <[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vestibular\\_system](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vestibular_system)>.

### Synaesthesia

Synaesthesia is a neurological phenomenon in which stimulation of one sensory or cognitive pathway leads to automatic, involuntary experiences in a second sensory or cognitive pathway. The subject associates several senses to a single stimulus. For example, a person can associate a sound with a colour, a letter with a position in space, a date with a personality.

Source: <[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synaesthesia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synaesthesia)>.

✍ Please note: among the five senses, the sense of smell, which is the object of social taboos just like touch, plays an important role for visually impaired people, notably for the recognition of people, places and objects.



## FROM CENTRE TO PERIPHERY

As we have seen, we can distinguish between space within immediate reach and distant space in the dance studio. A similar difference operates in the body of the dancer between minute and more ample, more 'visible' movements. Awareness of our body, and its many ways of motions, isn't just a matter for sensing. It is also a mental representation that is being formed throughout our lives through visual perception. The teacher may suggest various experimentations to the visually impaired student involving experience of gestures of different amplitudes.

## PERCEPTION AND BODY SCHEMA

Dance involves and nurtures the development of the awareness of the body schema in all its component parts for everyone. This awareness is not only a lived sensory experience, nurtured by information supplied by proprioception, kinaesthesia, interoception, touch and the sense of smell. It constantly evolves in the course of time, through our physical but also cultural changes. It is shaped by attitudes, prevalent cultural codes, such as head-dress, but also by customs and taboos in the way of apprehending our environment by touch, people being part of it. Some blind people tell that, in the course of their whole lives, they have only ever been offered to touch the head of some four or five people, close relatives included.

It seems that the representation we have of our body relies predominantly on sight. We learn to identify with the bodies of those who are close to us early on in our lives. We look in the mirror daily. A reflection on the impact of the impossibility for a blind child to go through the (Freudian) mirror stage could be interesting. This phase enables us to go from a fragmented apprehension of our body towards a holistic image of our being, of our uniqueness. It cannot be experienced by a blind child through the reflection in the mirror. The child has to rely on the sound of his/her voice, on his/her name for this holistic image to form... A born blind child does thus not develop a mental representation of his/her body the same way as a sighted child. S/he is facing the difficulty of instantaneously representing his/her body in its entirety: tactile exploration only allows the discovery of an object fragment by fragment. Building a mental representation then becomes a necessary task.

From the foetal period onwards, somaesthetic perception, the first one to become active, allows the foetus to control gestures like sucking one's thumb. The control of gestures and developing a mental representation of the body are body functioning of a very different kind. A number of mechanisms related to awareness of the body schema remain unconscious, others are conscious. These different levels are present in dance practice and need to be mobilised.

## VISUAL AND TACTILE APPROACH: DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

→ Vision goes with a **constant stream of visual stimuli**. Tactile perception is sequential and is based on active information seeking.

→ **Peripheral vision allows for a wide field of visual perception, while at the same time focalisation is made possible through central vision.** Vision allows both the analysis of detail and a constant, more diffuse, perception of the wider visual field.

→ Owing to their size, textures and materials, **few objects lend themselves to be completely and instantly perceived and known by touch.** A mental image of an object is being built progressively from the different moments of tactile exploration and comes together only at the end of the process. Tactile exploration needs to be encouraged, and this ideally includes


small size objects, models and raised images that can be grasped almost instantly in their entirety, with one hand, with both hands.

It may be interesting to produce a large size raised image of the detail of a particular posture of a dancer (the maximum size of raised images being approx. A3 size, depending on the method). It will be advantageous to first explore a small size tactile representation of the body parts represented in its principal axes, no bigger than 15 cm (6 inches), which provides an 'overall view'.

→ Tactile exploration is much slower than visual perception. Like attentive looking, it is absorbing and takes concentration. **The teacher will bear this in mind and allow space for tactile exploration.** These explorations of

authentic objects by touch will also enrich the perceptions of sighted students with new insights.

→ Many blind people are not familiar or fluent with tactile images. **Experiment the use of tactile images** with the student, responses will vary. At any rate, it is well worth trying.

 *Please note: touch is important for the understanding of the exercises and for postural work. However, once a spatial position with tactile markers has been recognised, a tactile approach can also stand in the way of the self-appropriation of space by the student. From then on, other senses and capabilities will take over: e.g. the mental visualisation (metaphorically speaking) of the room, the trajectories, as well as the awareness and perception of the other dancers, kinaesthetic memory, and the various sounds generated by their movements, their breathing.*

## EXAMPLES OF LEARNING PATHS

- **Propose exercises for the exploration of fixed and mobile points of the body:** encourage awareness of the various articulations, their amplitude and the plane in which movement is expressed.
- **Mobilise** the various regions and the anatomical planes of **the vertebral column**.
- **Nurture awareness of the notion of anatomical planes** for movement, for touching oneself and then others, and for bodily perception.
- At times, it may be necessary to **introduce the use of objects** in the exercises with born blind students.
- **Use an articulated mannequin** of approx. 15 cm (6 inches) to support born blind students develop a mental image of their whole body.
- **Encourage the representation of the image of the body**, its volumes, while in a resting position, and in movement. Invite tactile exploration of the student's own body, and that of other students.
- **Propose breathing exercises**, and involve hands to make the effect of breathing on the body felt, e.g. the hands of the student or the teacher resting on the belly or on the ribs, to nurture awareness of parts of the body that are difficult to mobilise.
- **Use the Laban notation via acaJOUET®** as a support for helping the development of a mental image of the whole body in movement.

## MANAGING TIME, DURATION, SPEED AND MUSICALITY

The conscious choice of the sound environment of each part of the course can support the student's learning. On the one hand, certain music genres, such as traditional music, encourage dancing in a line, in pairs, as well as jumping. Silence, on the other hand, stimulates listening to oneself, and to others.

## EXAMPLES OF LEARNING PATHS

- **Dancing with music:** use music of various types, tempos, instrumental arrangements, from various ages, with a variety of words or songs.
- **Dancing with live music:** sound emitted, and its source, is clearer and easier to perceive, the musician(s) can be responsive and the relation to music can evolve in the course of the exercise or improvisation.
- **Dancing in silence** encourages inner listening and draws attention to bodily sensations.

Steve Paxton, one of the three founders of contact improvisation said: 'In our work with visually impaired people, we value body intelligence and seek ways of bodily communication (...); the core of our work centres on the kinaesthetic (...). We

work with the "internal ear" and, for this reason, we do not use music during exercises or during improvisation. The frame imposed by a musical rhythm distracts from the objective of "internal listening". In teaching, we often use touch as a modality. Learning takes place in the body'.<sup>5</sup>

- **Use percussion by the body**, as this allows one to sense one's body (and to memorise gestures). Make students tap rhythms or produce them with the sound of their voice, play the role of the 'conductor' using very simple rhythms to build gradual awareness of the musicality of the movement.

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**'IN OUR WORK WITH VISUALLY IMPAIRED PEOPLE, we value body intelligence and seek ways of bodily communication (...)'**

Steve Paxton

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Acajou suggests the following exercise to children: they are taught two or three very simple movements (e.g.: to huddle together and uncoil in one direction with the whole body or starting from a single body part); two different sounds are being performed: tapping in one's hands /rubbing hands. The 'tapping' sound means that you need to do the movement all at once, the 'rubbing' sound means that the movement lasts as long as the sound.

One can associate two sounds to convey the idea of emphasis and resonance in movement. The teacher first plays the conductor, to nurture awareness of silence, and then asks the students to play conductor for the other students.

- **Experiment with stops** such as silences in music, in synchrony, with the music or without.
- **Experiment with basic musical notions:** fast, acceleration, slowing down, counting rhythm, tempo.

Acajou suggests the following exercise to students: 'We propose a movement or a sequence of movements on a precise rhythm, either given by us or freely chosen by the students, but clearly defined. We ask students to find the same rhythm again while making other movements, and moments of silence between them, to see if the memory of the rhythm in their body is retained'.

- **Use soundtracks with sounds of nature** (sound of the sea, plants, animals...). The to-and-fro of the waves can be a pretext to do gestural work based on rhythmical cycles.
- **Running towards, launching oneself towards or coming very close to one's partner** in response to a musical signal, depending on the rhythm.

## RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS

To be open to meeting the other helps develop a sense of presence. The use of supports (fixed ones, such as objects or mobile ones, such as another dancer) can help the student in his/her work. Those aids can later be dispensed with, leaving the student to dance with the sensory memory of the experiences gathered. They can even become the starting point for a dance, as happens in many choreographies (Alwin Nikolais, Merce Cunningham...).

### EXAMPLES OF LEARNING PATHS

→ **Use cushions, hula hoops, sticks, ribbons, cubes, small and big balls...**

→ **Lead the group to gradually generate an atmosphere of stillness**, which then allows everyone to concentrate exclusively on the production of sound or on listening to sound, on the feeling of sensations arising from a neutral and reassuring first hand-shoulder contact.

→ **Dance with the other, while using touch** and hearing, encouraging moments of silence to make this relationship easier.

The main duo in *Trois boléros* (Three boleros) by Odile Duboc has been created by two of her dancers, Boris Charmatz and Emmanuelle Huynh, in improvisation, eyes shut, following an exercise called 'contact without leader' proposed by the choreographer. This exercise generates an 'attention and an openness towards the other and engenders a subtle awareness of one's own body, and invites students to go onto a deep exploration: two dancers, one behind the other, connected by a light touch, eyes shut, start moving, very slowly first, without any of them ever imposing the movement. A subtle balance establishes itself in this exchange between two dancers, between following, indicating a direction, between suggesting and doing'.<sup>6</sup> Talking about the creation of *Trois boléros*, Emmanuelle Huynh says: 'Skin becomes the major point of transmission and yet, at the same time, there is an infinite softness in what arises at that moment (...). One of us manipulates the other who tries to respond eyes shut with precision, simplicity and attentiveness to minimal muscular engagement and to articulation isolation (...)'.<sup>7</sup>

→ **Take support on breath, breathing hot air, cold air...** The student may be particularly attentive to that.

→ **Vary the ways of relating to the other:** s/he can be a fixed or mobile fulcrum, initiator of the movement, a reflection of oneself.

→ **Create situations** such as: turning around a toy balloon pressed against the wall without letting it come off, without using one's hands. Start the same game again in pairs, with the ball being placed between the two players who have to move in space without losing the ball.

→ **Propose various contact exercises** to the dancers (tip of the fingers, toes, back to back, arms...).

→ **Get the partners to dance in direct contact with each other, then in a spatially distant relationship** with the help of a rope or string, and finally without any contact and connection.

## CREATION AND IMPROVISATION

Dancing involves our personal histories, skills and uniqueness. Working with an object and/or a dancer can allow everyone to explore one's own choreographic material. It is essential to leave an important place to creation and improvisation within a dance curriculum. The teacher may alternate moments of letting go and moments of individual exploration. The confidence that will grow from this will enable students to take ownership of dance as a means of self-expression.

### EXAMPLES OF LEARNING PATHS

→ **Make room for free improvisation or improvisation based on codes**, with the movement or the sentence/words being repeated by the group.

→ **Take time** to let students discover bodily expression by themselves.

To Acajou, the aim is for everyone to be able to propose movements and to be responsible for their body and their dance, and to avoid creating situations of dependency when one moves from working in pairs to group work.

'You propel yourself into space to do a movement you have never seen before in your life!' exclaims Marie-Hélène Ménard to summarise the experience of the participants. You may just as well throw yourself in the void. And yet, this entirely neutral void (without environmental obstacles), and available only to them, has offered a space of great freedom and release to those who are 'always on their guard', says Jonathan Belgarde in the documentary 'Let's dance' (by Circuit-Est choreographic centre).

✓ *More information:* < [www.circuit-est.qc.ca](http://www.circuit-est.qc.ca) >.

Carol Penn: 'We hope, that movement becomes a key for the student with a disability to find a way to strengthen self-confidence, and to experience a sense of wholeness and happiness. We mostly do improvisation work and create movements around a theme. (...) Dance is not solely a creative experience for the students. It enhances their independence in everyday life. It helps having an improved self-image. Some who had limited independent mobility have developed more confidence and fluency. Children who are shy and withdrawn at the start, become little by little expressive and ready to meet new people and situations'.<sup>8</sup>

## ACAJOU COMPANY: IMPROVISATION WORKSHOPS AND ACAJOUET®

**The French company Acajou proposes contemporary dance workshops open to people with a visual impairment.** In these improvisation workshops, every participant, visually impaired or not, progresses according to his/her own level of technique and imagination. In this context, **Delphine Demont and José Luis Pagés** work on three themes responding to particularly strong difficulties experienced by visually impaired participants (and which may be cumulated):

1. Moving and wayfinding in space;
2. Awareness of one's body schema and coordination of movements;
3. Ability to step out of commonly used movement patterns in daily life, which develops with progress in dance techniques.

To develop a dance technique and a dance imagination, Delphine Demont and José Luis Pagés propose work on fine-tuning sensory perceptions and sensations of movement, which are closely related to mental representations of this movement.

The objective is to increase bodily and spatial awareness, while at the same time nurturing the bodily and choreographic imagination of the participants.

Every workshop starts with 'engaging in physical situations: Feldenkrais® exercises, manipulations or initiation of movement through rhythm, breathing, concentration on one specific sense or repetitions'.

This is followed by a dialogue, to allow for exchange and verbalisation of felt sense experiences, discoveries made and questions. 'We are careful to make essential time available for students to integrate new learning and to discover later on how they use it', writes Delphine Demont. 'Once an openness to new sensations is there, we introduce exercises to create a connection between these new felt sense experiences and a form of mental representation, partial or not'.

These experiences with students with a visual impairment have led Acajou to conceive a range of exercises and aids that support the development of images

of the body in movement, based on non-visual references<sup>9</sup>. One of these, the acaJOUET®, is an adaptation in raised line drawings of the notation system of movement developed in the nineteen-twenties by choreographer and theorist Rudolf Laban. It consists of empty raised line grid patterns onto which 'dancers and teachers can place signs to indicate directions in which to move this or that body part (...). The stave is vertically organised around a central line that separates the left and the right half of the body (...). It is therefore an analytical representation that requires you to develop an accurate perception of the body in movement, through the dissociation of its parts'. acaJOUET® allows to break down the steps, to clarify the movement, to imagine, to create and hand down the dance. As it structures bodily and spatial awareness efficiently, it also frees up the dancers' creativity 'getting them to reflect on everything else they could have written or read than what they did: the free spaces of the dance score reveal infinite possibilities'.

## CONTACT IMPROVISATION

**Contact improvisation is at once a learning path and a style of dance. It brings out the value of the senses beyond sight. Katy Dymoke, a member of Touchdown Dance (see p. 13), describes the workshops she organises with visually impaired people.**

'Dance is not a purely visual art form. More and more, dance education includes listening skills, and puts less emphasis on the peripheral vision of the movement of limbs, and more emphasis on "sensing" the source of

the movement from the centre of one's body. The proprioceptive sense informs us on our whereabouts in space, how we are seated or standing, and on our relation to gravity.

We do not need sight or hearing to know our position or to feel subtle changes. I work with the proprioception of movement when I work with people with a sensory impairment and use a form of movement called contact improvisation. Contact improvisation balances the tactile, non-visual learning process, modelling movement,

and through awareness of space. Participants guide each other in a dialogue, which takes place through physical contact, which is maintained throughout. Through physical contact, they learn to read the intention of their partner, to follow or to initiate a change of direction. This may involve crouching in preparation of the lift, or a sudden increase of energy before bursting into an energetic dance, a roulade or a somersault'.



## MOBILISING DIFFERENT FORMS OF MEMORY FOR DANCE

**Memory is a key element in every learning process. It is important that teachers are aware of the different forms of memory that support the transmission of knowledge. Their use can be optimised and made to suit the individual visually impaired student's ways of learning.**

In dance education, the memorisation of a movement and its specific technique requires support before, during and after the class, until it is memorised.

Memory relies essentially on three processes: acquiring new information, remembering information and being able to retrieve it at will. In recent years, progress has been made in the understanding of processes of memorisation in neurosciences, but questions remain.

The memorisation of body exercises, of danced movements, of steps, of codified figures almost always mobilises many sensory channels simultaneously, as well as different types of memory. It is true in a number of contexts: observing, listening to instructions and explanations provided by the teacher during practice. Knowledge about processes of memorisation enhances the teaching and any adjustments that may be made for individual students.

### FORMS OF MEMORY AND LEARNING TO DANCE

#### Temporal and semantic information treatment

##### → Short-term memory or working memory

This memory enables access to information for a duration of 20 to 30 seconds, if it is not being repeated mentally or verbally. Information will then be stored in long-term memory or erased, depending on the situation.

Short-term memory can store approximately seven elements at the same time. Working memory is a permanent space and allows the performance of complex operations

on the basis of various information connected together. A student will connect a large number of information which is indispensable for the performance of an exercise in a short period of time. After the exercise some of the information will return to long-term memory where it comes from, and new information that is judged to be useful will also get stored.

##### → Long-term memory

This memory gives us the possibility to store information for a very long period of time, some even a lifetime. It includes several forms of memory: perceptual, procedural and semantic.

##### → Episodic memory (descriptive, declarative)

This stores all key elements of our existence, which are often linked to places or particular emotions. It plays a major role in the memorisation of dances. Memories of dance can be connected with very personal, intimate moments. When these memories are activated, it becomes possible to retrieve the memories of dance and vice versa.

##### → Procedural memory (implicit)

We are all capable of learning by immersion, without tuition and analysis. This is how we learn to walk and to cycle, but it is also the way many people learn to dance. Most dimensions of culture are transmitted in this implicit way. This form of memory is the most solid. It is the case with the learning of folk and current dances that are being learned by simple immersion, and not in the context of a class. This form of memory is the most mobilised in the acquisition and conservation of what is called character, spirit, groove, etc. in music and dance. It is also the element at the core of dance which is the most difficult to acquire without a long period of immersion. It is the case of dances that are deeply embedded in cultural traditions, such as salsa, flamenco, tango etc.

#### 'BLIND AND PARTIALLY SIGHTED PEOPLE

have a great ability to memorise the patterns of movements, of journeys (...) because every instant in their lives depends on this faculty'.

Carol Penn

##### → Semantic memory

This is concerned with the conservation of knowledge acquired. This form of memory is associated with language. Its content is associated with a particular group of humans, with one or several cultures. It plays an important role in dance for people who have learned choreographic writing and culture.

#### Sensory memories

##### → Visual memory

It is the sense that is most mentioned in dance, sometimes wrongly, for it is far from being alone in playing a central role.

It is actively involved in the perception of workspaces, postures, movements, trajectories, the expressions of teachers, students, videos used to study, choreographic scores, etc. Sight works on two very different levels that need to be taken into account: central vision, which enables to focalise on the very small zone and to bring one's attention to it, and peripheral vision which maintains us permanently in contact with our environment. The latter helps us have a global approach to what we perceive.

As mentioned earlier on, some visually impaired people have tunnel vision. They then have very little or no remaining peripheral vision. Some people do not have central vision any longer and have their peripheral field

of vision preserved. In this case, the person can usually move about without difficulties and with ease. The disability may not be visible and a person with peripheral vision will only faintly see the detail of gestures to be performed, for example: is the hand turned towards the sky or towards the floor, is the foot open or straight, etc. Tunnel vision still allows seeing minute detail, even at a distance. A person with tunnel vision will see the details of the fingers' position. A great effort has to be made, however, to focalise on the location of the object at the right time. A person with tunnel vision can find it very difficult to move and to respond to the dancer who comes towards him/her, especially so when the movement is fast. When lighting is weak, s/he will be in a situation close to blindness. Regarding lighting, the adjustments needed are similar to those for blind people.

#### → Auditory memory

Auditory memory plays a considerable role in our lives. We recall certain phrases or texts repeated over and over again. Oral traditions have created an entire intangible heritage this way. In our 'oculo-centric' civilisation, however, sight has become dominant (e.g. television and Internet).

However, unlike vision, hearing does not require that attention be focalised. It is indeed rather difficult to concentrate one's auditory attention in a very focused way, for example to listen to the double bass part in symphonic music, which has dozens of instrumental parts. We permanently

bathe in an acoustic environment that nourishes us pleasantly or not. To use auditory memory profitably, it is often indispensable for blind students to be aware of the difficulty of it. Attention will be paid to create favourable conditions for hearing the teacher's voice. It may also be useful to provide the student with audio materials to enable him/her to repeat and remember the exercises mentally, and to work on them outside the course. Auditory memory has unsuspected capacities. In oral traditions, very long texts were learned by heart only through auditory memory, of course, by relying on e.g. associating rhythm with text, which facilitates memorisation. It may be interesting to transpose this approach to the case of dance. It will make learning easier. Without doubt, it helps memorise instructions given by the teacher. It plays an essential role, because danced movements are often associated with a specific music. Just as it is easier to learn a text by chanting it, it will be easier to memorise a dance when it is closely associated with some music, with rhythmical structures, melodies and harmonies. This dimension will of course be very useful for blind students.

#### → Kinaesthetic memory

This is the perception of internal sensations linked to body movements, as a performer or as an audience responding to the sight of the choreography or the practice of dance. Many people have experienced that they could kinaesthetically remember the door access code on the keypad at

the entry of their building, even though they had forgotten it. Their memory has stored the gestures needed to open the door. It is as if the fingers go to the right buttons all by themselves. Choreographic practice is no different: dances can be performed relying essentially on kinaesthetic memory without needing to rely on visual or auditory memory. For blind students, more so than for other students, it is a precious resource.

#### → Tactile memory

This form of memory is active throughout our lives, with variations in different cultures, e.g. in the cuddles of early childhood, in amorous embrace and in handshaking. It's a memory linked to tactile contact one had with other dancers, as well as sculptures, and raised images representing dancers. This memory can be active whether one is an audience member or a performer.

#### → Olfactory memory

This memory remains little talked about, because it is linked with taboos. Many scientific studies show that it plays an important role in inter-human relationships. This memory can facilitate the identification of different dancers by blind students, as well as wayfinding in some parts of the space, depending on materials, floor surfaces and their smell.

When many sensory stimuli come into play and different sense modalities are used, it helps make up for loss of vision.

# 5 | Communication skills and making visible

**LEARNING ONE'S STEPS, EXPRESSIONS OR POSTURES OFTEN RELIES ON THE REPRODUCTION OF VISUAL MIMESIS IN DANCE TEACHING.** This aspect of learning can create real difficulties for blind students, as they depend on the ability to faithfully reproduce instructions which have a strong visual component, and which rely on mental representations that are difficult to access by them. The teacher needs to be attentive as to how the student can develop mental images of the body at standstill and in movement, and how s/he memorises them to the point of being able to perform them. These difficulties can be addressed in different ways.

## VERBAL WAYS

Instructions based on visual perception are often not understood by blind people. This includes e.g. geometrical terms and forms (e.g. certain symbols). The teacher will often add clarifying gestures to his/her explanations, which may not be well perceived visually by the visually impaired student.

## EXAMPLES OF LEARNING PATHS

- **Provide clear verbal explanations**, without going into too much detail, as a complement to the demonstrations. Avoid saying 'do like this', 'put your foot there', 'move in that direction', 'trace circles, spirals'... without having ascertained that the students know these forms, that e.g. they differentiate between trajectory and form.
- **Clearly indicate which part of the body enters into action**, right turn or left turn, interior or exterior move. Describe the technique or the exercise, the speed at which they are to be executed, so as to convey a clear sense of its rhythm.
- **Ask for confirmation that the verbal instructions and messages have been understood** by born blind people.
- **Use a mental image** such as the clock face (in horizontal position) to indicate precisely the movements to be performed, for example arms or legs are lifted at '2 o'clock', at '11 am'... The method of the 'clock code' has been borrowed from pilots; it is used to guide skiers. The teacher can use it, if the visually impaired student and his/her guide understand it well: 3: to the right, 9: to the left, 0 (same as 12): straight on.

This system can be used, for example, to describe the opening of the legs. It is also possible to use a system that relies on the four directions and to choose an element that is easy to locate in the dance studio as being e.g. the central axis, the north, the south, etc. This way, the blind person can easily move in the direction indicated, or lift a leg, an arm, turn his/her head, etc.

→ **Use resources that allow the use of a more precise vocabulary** to describe the body's actions, rather than codified gestures, such as Rudolf Laban's vocabulary of action verbs.

It is possible to use the Laban dance notation via acaJOUE® as an aid, or to use notions that go with (for example levels or the symbolisation of the danced movement). In a similar vein, it would be possible to draw inspiration from the methods of choreographic writing developed by Pierre Conté or Rudolf Benesh.

- **Use videos**, describing and/or commenting its content.
- **Build a lexicon of the dance vocabulary** used during the class with sufficiently precise explanations for blind and partially sighted students.
- **Make sure that the student is familiar with the vocabulary used.**

Fernanda Bianchini, ballet professor in Brazil, tells that her visually impaired students do not understand certain expressions such as 'escaped', 'jumped' or do not know the meaning of words she uses, such as 'tub' or 'sink'.

✓ *More information:* Brazilian ballet school teaching the blind, video on Dailymotion.

## BY TOUCH

## EXAMPLES OF LEARNING PATHS

- **As soon as possible, multiply body movement exercises and tactile discovery.** For example, moving one's toes while at the same time exploring them by touch...
- **Propose a way of jumping** in pairs or in groups (being held, being protected).
- **Teaching expressions**, intentions and energy can make a

tactile exploration of the faces of other dancers, of their posture and their gestures necessary.

→ **Invite the student as partner** in demonstrations.

→ **Reproduce precise technical gestures** such as the arm position or *pliés* with your hands to draw the outline of the movement; then invite to explore by feeling it, by touching it. The teacher can also transpose the movement of a part of his/her body, such as bending the vertebral column, into a movement represented by the hand, which can be touched by the student.

‘To teach codified figures such as how holding arms and folding, I reproduce their form with my hands to show the shape. I invite the students to feel these models by palpating and touching them. If this is not enough, I place their arms or legs into the desired position’.<sup>10</sup> (Carol Penn, dancer).

Inspired by Buse Gowda, one of his students, Ashok Kumar devised a method of teaching dance to visually impaired people: while attending his class, Buse Gowda did not understand the demonstration given by his teacher. He approached him and touched the arms and feet of his professor to ‘see’ his movements, so as to be able to reproduce them. It was the beginnings of Kumar’s method called ‘touch and feel’.

→ **Help the student through contact** to place him/herself into the desired position, ensuring that s/he can find back to the position later on his/her own.

## SOUND OBJECTS

### EXAMPLES OF LEARNING PATHS

→ **Use maracas, castanets, bells, bodily percussions, etc.**

→ **Use sound as a non-verbal communication:** bodily percussions, noises generated by the movement on the floor when walking, crawling, tapping and scratching during warm-up, which allows playing on various registers (tonic, calm, fast, slow, fluid...).

Kathak dancer Pali Chandra shakes the bell bracelets on her wrists, so children understand what gesture is to be performed, she touches the palm of the child’s hand to check that the student bends the right fingers, and makes him/her bring his/her hands together to sign a greeting (Namaste).

✓ *More information: video of a workshop led by Pali Chandra, Indian Kathak dancer who teaches visually impaired children at Acharya Sri Rakum School in Bangalore (India). <[www.palichandra.org](http://www.palichandra.org)>, <[www.rakum.org](http://www.rakum.org)>, and <[www.mulamoottileyehospital.com](http://www.mulamoottileyehospital.com)>.*

## USING OBJECTS AS MEDIATORS

### EXAMPLES OF LEARNING PATHS

→ **Invite playing with, around, and inside** an object. Example: turning around a chair or a case, coming close to it to discover it by touch, sitting, getting up, walking away, returning to it, pushing it, climbing, jumping inside it, jumping outside of it...

→ **Use objects with different forms and textures** (textile, hula hoop, etc.).

→ **To represent a sphere**, propose an exercise in which students will move the ball holding it in their hands in the space. Repeat the exercise without the ball.

→ **Use objects that are easy** (cross, sphere, circle, pyramid, etc.) **to explore by touch** the relationship to the other and then to one’s own body.

→ **Introduce spheres, cubes, pyramids, flowers, mannequins, puppets from puppet theatre, figures etc.**, to allow a tactile approach to understand archetypal forms, volumes, postures, and figures to be performed.

→ **Use objects and intermediaries:** mannequins, puppets from puppet theatre... Think of highlighting the body segments explored in exercise on the object.

→ **Use raised images as a support for certain forms of dance** (e.g. drawings by Matisse) or reproductions of sculptures (e.g. by Degas...), or tactile discovery replicas of sculptures representing Indian classical dance, etc.

→ **Make connections with works of art** (e.g. workshops in museums), or with everyday objects, to feel the trajectory of touch and reproduce it ‘in the void’, and then extend its dimensions.



## 6 | Assessment and individual support

**EVEN THOUGH THE FORM OF THE ASSESSMENT MAY VARY, IT MUST ALWAYS TAKE PLACE, whatever the structures and modalities of the course. It is essential to think of it in relation to the individual guidance received by the student. Modalities for providing support can be put in place and depend on the content of the course, and the specific difficulties experienced by the student.**

### EVALUATION

Depending on the structure and modalities of the course, the assessment can take different forms. Each school has its own method of assessing dancers. However, assessments are essential, as they give students the possibility of measuring their skills and their progress, as well as the effort still to be made. Progress can be observed on non-linear rhythms and as 'stepping stones'. It is important to look at the way of individualising the assessment of students, and to be responsive to their learning rhythm.

### INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT

It is essential to think of the assessment in the context of individual support that can be provided. Different modalities of support and/or assistance can be put in place regarding access to the content of the course. Some students who are involved as facilitators of the student with a disability can provide support to the teacher, as assistants. It will then be necessary to think and plan it ahead of the dance class:

- **Make time for a prior discussion** between the professor and his/her assistant(s).
- **Determine the role and position** of everyone.
- **Reflect together ahead of the class** on the terminology to use, to better support the participants.

There is also the possibility of involving other professionals or volunteers who can support people with disabilities to access cultural services: family helpers, support teachers, social workers, volunteers doing civil service, volunteers from various organisations, professionals from the social medical sector, cultural sector professionals. It can be interesting to bring this possibility up with the institution that provides the dance course.

Example of the local authority music conservatory of the 16<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris: the music school looked for one or

several volunteers or students on placement to assist with learning support during a dance course that took place in 2012-2013 for a young student with a disability aged ten.

The student progressed both with the class and also sometimes at her own pace. During the class, she needed the continuous presence of an adult, who could provide her with learning support and respond to every need that might arise. This person worked under the responsibility of the dance teacher in charge of the class (and of mine, as the school's director).

The volunteer or the student on placement thus attended the two weekly classical dance classes lasting 1h30 each. These took place on Wednesday and Saturday afternoons. S/he also had to attend events, deadlines, assessment or performances that punctuated the course that took place between 12 September 2012 and 27 June 2013.


If the duration of the course is long, several volunteers or students on placement may perform the role of the assistant in succession.


The profile of the person to be recruited can be fairly diverse: someone seeking a work placement in a music school, or in the domain of dance, therapy, disability, education, in the running of art/leisure activities. Examples of learning paths


### BUILDING CONFIDENCE

Receiving individual support calls for building up the student's confidence. In everyday life, blind and partially sighted people face risks all the time. Therefore, they are not always in relaxed state, and commonly experience apprehension. Dance practice will take them beyond schemas and representations of body movement they are familiar with. Their bodily engagement will be dependent on these very specific experiences. It seems that

some blind and severely visually impaired people continuously retain their sense of transition between prehensile space and locomotor space even while walking. It may therefore be a challenge to work on the fluidity and fullness of danced gestures. This comes with letting go and tapping into new energies, by which to sense the inner drive that will propel the student into dancing and making space his/her own.

 *Please note: running may appear simple for a sighted person, however, for some blind people, confidence needs building first.*

 *Please note: experiences gathered in the field of sports and disability can yield some lessons. Blind people do compete in races and in blind football (practiced with a ball with ball bearings that produce a noise).*

 *For further reading on evaluation, see: Anne-Marie Bastien, "Enseignements artistiques : évaluer pour évoluer", La Nouvelle Revue de l'AIS, n° 32, 4<sup>e</sup> trimestre 2005, p. 135-142.*

## EXAMPLES OF LEARNING PATHS

→ Give students the **time to share their experiences of an exercise, a movement or a difficulty** they had. It is important that such sharing takes place in the group, as the visually im-

paired person may not see the progress of students and cannot therefore measure his/her own progress. Make time for this every session. When exercises are being done again, ask the students if they feel a difference, etc. Pay attention to telling them about the progress they have accomplished, as they may not themselves be aware of it.

→ **Anticipate the difficulties that may arise** and define a frame for discussing progress with the student. This allows stocktaking and avoids one just saying 'all is going well'.

→ **Pay particular attention to group dynamics** and value mutual support in all its forms.

→ **Distrust preconceived ideas** on your own limitations and those of the student.

→ **Value disability** as a source of creative riches and openness to new ways of doing.

→ **Assess progress and abilities cautiously** and precisely, but also limitations, throughout the course.

→ **Organise the role of the students** in the provision of support.

→ **Co-ordinate the individual support** provided by the teacher, the teacher's assistant and the group dynamics.

## AN EXPERIENCE REPORT BY BRUNO DANJOUX

French choreographer Bruno Danjoux shares his experience of the creation **La Nuit du corps (Night of the body) (1998)**, a choreographic invitation to four visually impaired members of the Valentin Haüy association (Lyon, France).

'I nearly gave up on the performance at the end of the project. When I got started, I thought I could work with the participants on the theme of the night, as I do at Odile Buboc's workshop. I assumed, that blind and partially sighted people develop other senses, as they don't see. But in reality, things are much

more complex. I wanted to work on races. I tried out a system of ropes. But they never took to running.

Touch is also a big problem. Contact takes place with objects, but here it's about touching other bodies, and that gets very problematic. They had a very preconceived idea of dance. Ballroom dance was their idea of dance. They did not know about contemporary dance. Therefore, I worked with them on basic steps, which they all knew. Another difficulty was to accept showing oneself. However, the moment I thought this wouldn't end up in a performance, they

began to take to it and to believe in their potential.

(...) I wanted to give classes with a regular schedule. But there too, there was a barrier to overcome with the volunteers who assist visually impaired people. During this first experience, I had the impression that I was a thief who had come to steal something, or that I was just one of those who like lecturing others. I hope that this project helps change attitudes'.

**Interview by Marie-Christine Vernay.**  
*Libération*. 26 May 1998.

## CONCLUSION

Beyond the learning paths and reflections presented here, a number of questions will remain for teachers, in particular regarding the way blind people represent dancing bodies, space, stage decoration, costumes or the scenography of a choreography. Many sense perceptions are at play in dance, as are the ways they combine. This makes for an infinite number of possibilities for initiating and transmitting dance knowledge, and, above all, for supporting the student, so s/he can discover her/his own riches. Without trying to name everything—for dance is much about the unspeakable—the teacher will endeavour to be a ‘bridge’ between seeing and not seeing.

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9 Workshops in museums and art centres around works of art (Musée du Quai-Branly, Centre Pompidou, Musée d'Art moderne, Palais de Tokyo), tactile teaching aids developed by Acajou (acaJOUET© and Coffret Giselle), the use of objects...

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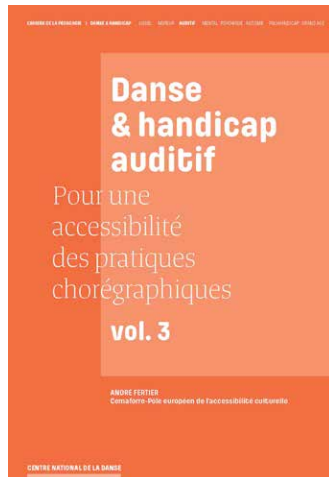
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Also in this series  
(only in French)



André Fertier, *Danse & handicap moteur : pour une accessibilité des pratiques chorégraphiques*, vol. 2, 2015.



André Fertier, *Danse & handicap auditif : pour une accessibilité des pratiques chorégraphiques*, vol. 3, 2016.