

Hannah Dupré

“Dance Is Nature”

Moving Bodies: Diversity and Ableism in Dance

The room starts to fill with students, all of them have decided that dancing is what they want to do, no matter the reason. At some point in their lives, they all realized that dancing would enable them to express their feelings to the world, themselves, their peers, or to just find confidence in who they actually are.

This class will be given by Inge Blockmans, qualitative researcher, creative consciousness coach, and above all: dancer. The music starts, the beat develops and Blockmans explains and shows the choreography from her wheelchair. Not much later, one of her pupils, confused and focused on copying the instructor asks, “but what am I supposed to do with my legs? This demonstration is not complete.” Instead of interpreting dance as a flow of energy, Blockmans notices that many were just focused on copying every single one of her movements. And at that moment, it was clear: the idea of the traditional perfect dance body still exists, if not consciously, then unconsciously. Issues of diversity are still prevalent within the dance world, Blockmans says.

Recently, these issues of diversity are increasingly discussed, says Dr Eva Fotiadi, historian and theorist of art. “Diversity is higher on the art agenda, as well as the education agenda, than it has ever been before.” The only problem, Fotiadi says, is that when it comes to issues of diversity, disability is not considered first. It is not the first thing people think about. Diversity generally is first concerned with the colour of skin, then the colonial background, then maybe gender, socioeconomic class, and only then disability. Fotiadi believes that change has been made since art is so high on the agenda, but structural funding could improve the situation more.

Blockmans also notices that change has been made and is optimistic when it comes to the future and does everything she can to contribute. She has a vision, which shows dancers that let go of mastering the exact same techniques and movements. Dancers should look for new possibilities with their own bodies, listening to and feeling their own bodies. Blockmans says that the focus should be more on giving the body space to find its own way and its own movements, instead of following others. “It is about letting go of the illusion that all people should move in the same way. For one person, reaching high is reaching with their fingers towards the ceiling. For someone else, it’s reaching their finger right above their shoulder.”



Aki Saito and her dance partner Wim van Lessen rehearse for their performance “Artifact” with the Royal Ballet Flanders. Both are professional ballet dancers for over 25 years and know the dance world and its demands better than anyone else.



Inge Blockmans dances together with singer and presenter Koen Wauters at a competition for a Belgian television program “Over Winnaars.” With her work, Inge Blockmans wants to draw attention to an inclusive dance world.

In the professional world, the time pressure also makes a huge difference, according to Blockmans. A product needs to be delivered in a certain amount of time, there is not that much time left for the process. Blockmans believes that a standard is still very important. Reaching a certain level of performance is part of what dance is. Nonetheless, a clear focus on the process, like in Blockmans classes, gives people a platform to express themselves.

And expressing ourselves is what all art is about, according to Aki Saito, ex-principal of the Ballet of Flanders and now a teacher at the Royal Ballet School of Antwerp. She describes dancing as a flow of energy, “like being in a trance.” Adhering to the norm of a perfect body simply belongs to dancing, she says. “This pressure for the perfect body? Yes, I felt it, always. But I don’t think it is such a negative thing as many other people think.” Even though, for Saito, a certain body belongs to the professional dance world, it definitely does not define dance.

As she is so used to working with classical ballet bodies, she participated in a project with dancers with Down Syndrome last year. There lies an overwhelming sense of power in bringing different and unique people together, Saito says. Dancers are trained to feel and understand their bodies, they recognize very small differences in their bodies. Through helping and teaching each other and by taking the time and space to focus on the process, the dancers gained much creativity. A definition of dance? “Dance is nature”, Saito says determinedly, “No matter where you go in any culture, one thing we have in common is human dance. I see dance as a communication skill.” Being aware of your body changes everything about yourself. It connects you with yourself and with others.

From another perspective, Dr Sofie Sergeant, Senior Lecturer Citizenship and Inclusion at HU University of Applied Science in Utrecht, adds that what is often called an inclusive encounter, is technically just an encounter. The moment one chooses to call it inclusive, mistakes have been made already. “It simply shows human diversity.” And that is what makes this point so difficult, in her opinion. Changing the norm is what the goal is,

while still understanding that we are talking about professional dance and not just something that was randomly put on stage. “The corset should not sit so tight; diversity should not only be allowed, but also celebrated,” Sergeant concludes.

Inge Blockmans agrees: “Everyone who breathes, also dances. For me, dance also lies in silence, it lies in everything. Dance is expression. The more I let go of the idea that dance is different movements put together, the more I feel like I am getting to know what dance is really about.” She explains that in the end, everyone deserves to get the opportunity to dance and experience this form of expression, no one should feel like they do not belong. “Dancing is the pinnacle of coming home in your body.”

“It is about letting go of the illusion that all people should move in the same way.” – Inge Blockmans

She also says that she does not see herself as a wheelchair dancer, she is just a dancer. “Someone can dance with their feet, head, or toes, one simply dances with everything the body has to give.” Practically, it is still not really the case that inclusive dance is considered to be part of the regular dance scene but the first steps have been made to make it more accessible to come to dance performances, to give the opportunity to everyone to watch dance and get inspired, that is where it all starts in the end.

During Inge Blockmans’ classes, the focus is on asking what is possible, not what is not. By starting with the possibilities of the body and not its flaws, and at the same time giving space and time to the creative process, dance is looked at in a collective view. What can we do together? The students in her class learnt to focus on their bodies and their possibilities and their energy, not on copying what other bodies do.