



## **An Interview with Alito Alessi**

The following is from an interview with Alito Alessi in 2003, conducted by a University of Oregon dance student, Jenni Malarkey. It captures the essence of the DanceAbility process and mission.

*Why is working in the field of mixed-abilities important to you?*

Because it supports my basic politics as an artist. Ultimately, I believe in equality and democracy, and I can't continue my work in a way in which I target special people to work with. To support my beliefs, I need to be open to working with any person who has a desire to dance. Then I'm fulfilling my own criteria of creating projects based on equality. When you're open to everybody within your community, and all the resources they have to offer, then it's possible to create a democratic creative process based on equality. Besides encouraging freedom from habit, improvisation also expands our potential for expressing ourselves. It continuously presents us with new situations and new ways of moving, to respond to and be influenced by. It's especially easy to go beyond habit and find new ways to move and express yourself when there are many kinds of bodies and ways of moving and thinking in the room. When we're involved in unfamiliar situations our senses are heightened. (One of the typical responses to unfamiliar situations is fear. Therefore, a safe, supportive atmosphere is necessary for receptivity to be present.) In this receptive mode, we gather information that provides an opportunity for the wisdom of our bodies to respond. This combination of unfamiliarity and heightened senses increases the chances of coming up with new ways of acting beyond our usual patterns and habits. Studying improvisation in a supportive atmosphere guides people to open in places they didn't even realize they were closed.

*What is generally the make-up of your audience?*

The general public. We perform in schools for about 4,000 kids each year, usually between the ages of 5 and 12, sometimes older. We perform internationally for thousands of people in the dance milieu, rather than 'institutions, etc.' although we do work and perform in them as well. Often, shows and workshops are attended by about 20-40% 'disabled' people--although I hope the idea of splitting people into categories depending on whether or not they have disabilities will start to fade away.

*Could you highlight the main differences between integrated work and non-integrated work?*

The main difference for me is that I feel comfortable working with all people, and don't feel like I'm supporting segregation and isolation, which I believe to be a major cause of suffering in our dysfunctional society. The work also facilitates me to arrive with myself in the present.

*What are the methodologies, techniques, strategies you work with - what starting points do you employ and how do you develop ideas (What are the ideas behind the DanceAbility methodology that you created)?*

To respect diversity, empower self-expression, and build an artistic community through movement, we need to work with elements common to everybody: common denominators. By "common denominators" I mean the baseline of movement and communication that is accessible to everyone within the group. What are the capabilities of movement and perception that we, in this particular group, all share so that everybody can participate? It might be breath, movement of the eyes, or that everyone in a particular group can move their arms, or that everyone can hear. The variations from group to group are endless.

The DanceAbility Warm-Up and the Common Language Exercises which I usually begin workshops with are practices that everybody can do to explore the main elements of improvisation, regardless of a specific group's possibilities. We get introduced to our own and each other's movement, to basic concepts of improvising, and establishing a basis for communication. Early in a workshop, during the opening Circle, the Warm-up, and the Common Language

Exercises, the facilitator identifies a few people whose abilities are the greatest common denominators. This process ensures that we continue to explore in a way that includes everybody so we can all be connected and present. Basing our explorations on common denominators provides a groundwork of support and communication among everybody. Everybody's resources are accessed and used, and this facilitates the building of trust.

The exercises I use are based on my earlier (pre mixed-abilities) research in improvisation, performance-making, collective performance-making, and Contact Improvisation. But these have evolved and been adapted and new ones added as I've continued working in mixed groups. Much of it is improvisation-based: exploring specific elements like "timing" or "design" in structured improvisation exercises.

Almost all this work comes from observing people's unique movement possibilities and using the language of their individual bodies. The overall goal is to introduce people to their own movement language, facilitate them in dialogue with other people through movement, not words, awaken the community spirit of equality, and notice how an integrated community affects the environment.

*What are some of the difficulties you have encountered working in Integrated Arts and how have you overcome them?*

The first difficulty is how to assure non-isolation. I have overcome that by establishing a methodology for perceiving the common denominator, or common possibilities that include everybody. Earlier (10 to 15 years ago), funding was hard to get, because funders didn't believe that it was possible to create dance/movement programs or classes without isolating people or without creating small target groups. They also didn't believe in its value as an art form; they tended to think it could only be "therapeutic." This was overcome by persisting and turning out high quality performances and classes.

Funding is also difficult to obtain sometimes because of the

possible additional costs of working with people with disabilities; for example, shipping an electric wheelchair along with a dance tour, or hiring an aide to work with a dancer or dance teacher with a disability. We try to overcome this by convincing producers of the value and fairness of coming up with additional funds. Still, it is an obstacle.

The most difficult thing to overcome was, and still is, the attitudes of our general society. Generally, attitudes are based on people's prejudices that come from their assumptions, often due to segregation of "abilities." The way we've overcome that is to provide an experience that allows people to make educated choices.

Also, mainstream dance festivals and mainstream performing arts venues were slow to consider hosting this work. We've overcome this by producing high quality performance work where people see the art and don't focus on the disability. Now, if you look at the contemporary dance scene, you'll see more and more festivals around the world adding mixed-abilities work in with all able-bodied work.

Lastly, it has been hard for people with disabilities to obtain training in dance. Joint Forces addresses this by not only teaching beginners, but also teaching teachers how to create integrated classes and material. We still have a very far way to go in opening up conventional dance programs to people with various disabilities.

