

United Strengths in Motion

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Pictured at right: Alito Alessi and Emery Blackwell in
The Black and the Blue by K. Fleige



A Performance Festival by Disabled and Able-bodied Artists

Tentatively, the man feels out the space around him, turning his head from side to side, twisting round, fixing his gaze on the far distance. An unknown but unavoidable path seems to lie before him. He hesitates; he is alone. Finally, he begins to gather momentum, curling up and rolling - and this elementary means of motion makes clear the difficulty of a journey whose end is unforeseeable. He comes to rest centre stage; slowly he draws himself into a squatting position. Raising his torso to the vertical, his arms almost fail him; at last he manages to open them and raise them high; it seems as if they'd touch the highest heavens. The man's head is sunk deep between his shoulders and from his twitching but erect body streams a sense of abandonment and happiness. Victory is already achieved; this self-presentation has nothing exhibitionist or humiliating about it but is imbued with pride and inner freedom. A concentrated, powerful solo, as interpreted by the American dancer Emery Blackwell, who suffers from cerebral palsy.

'Vereinte Kräfte in Bewegung' (United Strengths in Motion) was the title of a dance/performance festival staged in Hanover at the end of January by the Schute für neuen Tanz & Theater (TUT) which brought able-bodied and disabled artists together for the first project of its kind in Germany. The varied program offered performances, lectures and film shows and also invited guests to take an active part in workshops, open evenings and discussion. "We want to provide a forum for public debate of the whole issue of dance and disability," was how the school's head and festival organizer Christiane Meyer-Barlag described the motives behind their project. Collaborators from the USA, Israel, Belgium and the Netherlands were invited - amateurs and professionals with and without disabilities were equally welcome. It took no time for the disabled artists and their work to become the focus of public interest which, for Christiane Meyer-Barlag, went to prove that the festival was new ground for many visitors but also that the artistic roots of 'New Dance' are largely unknown to the wider public. This movement which arose in America during the 60's and 70's stems from an anti-formalistic youth revolt aimed at breaking out of rigid political patterns and the prevailing order. In this phase, artists also sought new forms of aesthetic communication; in dance this led to the development by Steve Paxton of Contact Improvisation. The main characteristic of this dance form, which made Paxton a key figure of postmodernist dance, is the recognition of the body in all its reality and an inquiry into all the possibilities of physical

motion. The starting point of the creative process is the perception of one's physical and emotional state and not a striving for externally-defined forms or movement repertoire. This facilitates a preparedness for communication and reflection, demands that the limits be pushed outwards and with them the dancer's sense of personal responsibility. Such a means of motion thereby transfers to demands for social equality and, in taking leave of pre-choreographed steps, demands a culture that that is embodied in each individual. This brings a political dimension into dance that articulates itself especially in radical questioning of aesthetic conventions.

For about six years now New Dance has been tried out as an art form for disabled and able-bodied people together. One of the biggest projects of this kind was 1988's 'DanceAbility Project' set up by American dancer, performer and teacher Alito Alessi. He and his partner Emery Blackwell were guests at Hanover's 'Pavilion' arts venue. For Alessi, who's been working with Contact Improvisation since the end of the seventies, this movement form is essentially a means of communication that helps him to experience himself and others, to perceive their needs and thus learn 'to overcome the obstacles of life'. However, despite these fundamental experiences, after some years he had begun to feel 'fixed and restricted'. Alessi started to look for other ways of breaking out of his movement, perception and thought structures and found "this moment of transformation" in large measure through working with disabled artists.

Alessi and Blackwell have been collaborating for five years now, and their performances are marked by a deep trust in the partner and in one's own body. They convey homogeneity without erasing their individuality, but what's most striking is their self-reliance. There's never a trace of shame or false consideration; the disabled Blackwell is put to the test as much as the able-bodied Alessi. The work isn't dragged down by doubt or self-questioning but fired with power and dynamism, served up with an ample helping of humor and irony into a thrilling piece of choreography.



Pictured left: Emery Blackwell by K. Fleige

All the pieces arise from intensive improvisation and research that forces things to the edges of self-expression - where art begins. "When, within the working process, a new physical experience exposes my prejudices or inner conflicts, that is the moment when the piece is capable of becoming fit for the stage," is how Alessi describes the complex exchanges between

internal and external forces upon which his work with Blackwell touches, adding that their pieces which begin very privately can only grow to be of interest to the public when they manage to make their previously felt experience 'sensually accessible'.

Alessi and Blackwell's work is indisputably based on touching, closeness and intimacy - but also on an unbelievable fecundity of ideas and a consistent exploitation of all the

means at their disposal. Thus the wheelchair, this steel monstrosity, becomes a prop that connects the two performers and gives rise to a range of dramatic and comic situations. The main interest of the two artists nevertheless remains communication through body language, this non-verbal dialogue with oneself, one's partner and the audience, conducted through sensual experience, is perfectly suited to opening up perspectives, to 'seeing, from a different angle, the things which are at the root of marginalizing people.'

Pictured right: 'Betty van der Schueren ... Wahnsinn' by Bernd Schonberger



Another impressive demonstration of art by disabled artists was presented by Belgium's Teater Tader under the leadership of Toon Baro. This group of eight mentally handicapped women hadn't promised too much with their declared intention of 'giving craziness its own dignity'. A clear dramatic structure, precise use of space and a play that emphasized the total individuality of each actress and lost nothing of its expressive force makes the piece 'Betty van der Schuren' a new theatrical experience. With tremendous self-assurance, the cast gave us striking images veering between lethargy and manic out-breaks, wretched rigidity and driven gesticulation. They shout at the wall, are seized and shaken by cramps and take endless trouble to be tender with each other. Sucking thumbs, mechanical pacing up and down, senseless, repeated statements: before long the spectators don't know if they're being confronted with a theatrical performance or a parade of their own prejudices.



Betty van der Schueren ... Wahnsinn' by Bernd Schonberger

Accompanying all this was a panel discussion of choreographers, dancers, journalists and sociologists from various countries (among them were Aat Hougeé, head of the European Dance Development Center in Arnhem, Steve Paxton, dancer, choreographer and inventor of Contact Improvisation from the USA and Peter Radtke, actor, editor and manager of the 'AG Behinderte

in den Medien e.V.', an association for disabled people working in media. Integrative workshops offered visitors the opportunity to put the expectations of New Dance Developments into concrete physical forms and follow them up and there were also open evenings which offered space for spontaneous actions and presentation of the resulting pieces. This all threw up questions of the definition of art and non-art; aesthetic and form, standards and norms were called into question: What are images of the body supposed to look like? What about the expectations of perfection and dancer professionalism? After attending the festival these and other questions certainly won't be answerable in the usual way for many spectators. The organizers are convinced of

this; they talk of a "very good, very warm reception" by the audiences. It's too early to say what the festival's position in Hanover's cultural world is, but it's clear that 'taboo areas have been touched on and communications have been improved' - for instance, the Outsiders group have found a private sponsor to finance a teacher for them.

From a circle of Hanoverian visitors has grown a new dance group with disabled people. Both as festival organizer and teacher at a school for the disabled, Christiane Meyer-Barlag sees her work as a necessary step toward a 'multi-cultural society' which will cross not just national but internal borders. Artistic encounters with disabled people is particularly suitable for attaining new perceptions of reality on the way to overcoming these 'internal limits' or, in the words of Alito Alessi, to recognize that "it's not the person, but the society, which is disabled."

- Simone David