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Stepping into the unknown - welfare, disability, culture and theatre as an opportunity for equality?

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Stepping into the unknown – welfare, disability, culture and theatre as an opportunity for equality?

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This article shares the author's experiences with a political theatre employing 15 professional actors with learning disabilities. The theatre is now owned by the local municipality after a trial period of three years. In these three years, the authors have been project leaders at the theatre and were responsible for doing research and documenting the activity at the theatre. The research has been inspired by action research methodologies. The Norwegian welfare model is based upon the democratic values of equal rights for all to live in an inclusive society. In 1991, there was a decisive reform that transferred the responsibility for people with learning disabilities to the local municipality where they were borne. People with learning disabilities should have the same rights and obligations as other inhabitants, and the big institutions were closed. But still it is a fact that people with disabilities do not have the same access to the cultural field as others. One of the outspoken goals of this theatre company has been to be a political theatre to enable the voices and experiences of these actors to be heard in the official space. The paper questions whether theatre can contribute to democratic participation for people who are seldom heard and taken seriously in official debates. This article describes and discusses a theatre project and asks whether it might be an example of how actors with learning disabilities can participate on their own terms and be regarded as professional artists.

It is clear from the reports of the Department of Culture that people with disabilities in Norway do not have the same access to the cultural field as others (Kulturdepartementet 2011–2012). In this article, we want to describe and discuss a theatre project that might be an example of how people with learning disabilities might get access to professional theatre as actors. This article is based on our experiences with a professional theatre for 15 people with learning disabilities. Developing the theatre in artistic, organisational and political areas demands a great deal of collaboration between the health and culture departments. We want to contribute to the discussion by highlighting challenges that occur when theatre becomes an interdisciplinary arena for encounters between actors with learning disabilities, carers (here social education students) and professional artists. Since in Norway equal access to culture is founded in law, there is a requirement to find ways to realise these intents (Stortinget 2009). Establishing a theatre employing actors with learning disabilities raises some fundamental questions about what we consider as art and what position such a theatre can gain in the cultural field, both locally and even nationally and internationally.

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To analyse this exceptional theatre, we will use theories concerning normalisation and social role valorisation (Barnes and Mercer 2010; Kristiansen 1993), disability art and culture (Albright 1997; Barnes and Mercer 2010; Benjamin 2002; Darke 2003) and theories inspired by Foucault's governmentality studies (Kuppers 2003; Tremain 2005). We see coherence between these theories concerning how subjects are constituted and governed. In other words, we are being created and are creating ourselves as different subjects given different discourses we operate within (Rapley 2004). In this case, we claim that actors with learning disabilities are being regarded different within a health care discourse than in an art and culture discourse.

The aim of this particular theatre is to challenge stereotyped views of people with learning disabilities as unable, someone we pay tickets to watch as some kind of charity, not artistic interesting or some kind of social pornography where the audience come to watch other peoples misfortune and personal tragedy – as Riddle and Watson puts it:

Thus in art and literature, disabled people were presented as either super-heroes, villains or tragic individuals, but never as ordinary people trying to carve out meaningful lives, like everybody else. (Riddle and Watson 2003, 3)

Actors with learning disabilities are not given opportunities to become professional actors, and they don't get access to relevant education either. Darke claims that disability artists seems to be in a no-win situation because they often 'have no education and no training in the traditions of the art habitus and, if they do, they are only allowed within the inner sanctum of art production if they reinforce these values' (Darke 2003, 140). They have often been treated as children and put in unchallenging roles and asexual and apolitical plays. And they are not in the position to make artistic decisions themselves because they do not master the knowledge and language that is required to exercise power, resulting that they are in the hands of the able. This is inevitably so in the case we describe too. But even though people with disabilities traditionally have been put in stereotyped roles, Julie Allan also claims that 'through playful and disruptive boundary works, and it's subversion of the "normality genre"' (Darke 1998, 184), disability arts functions are a highly effective form of ideological critique' (Allan 2005, 290). The theatre we are presenting here is trying to position itself having this function as an ideological critique against a system that leaves people with learning disabilities out of the professional cultural scene. To do this, the concept of normalisation must be challenged. It is not only about having the possibility to live a 'normal' life but also to gain the possibility of life conditions that are socially valued. Socially valued roles (Wolfensberger, in Barnes and Mercer (Barnes and Mercer 2010, 74–75) could be discussed both not only in relation to people with learning disabilities in general but also according to what roles they are given to play onstage. Theatre can also contribute to devaluation, depending on what choices are made.

In this article, we want to explore how a theatre can be used to challenge traditional views both on disability, art and normalisation in trying to achieve a more equal access to the art and cultural area like it is founded in Norwegian legislation. And to do that, we are looking into how the actors are created as subjects with the choice of methods and repertoire as governmental tools and techniques? As Foucault claims, where there is power there is also counterpower (Foucault 1999), so do the actors have any possibility for resistance?

The welfare model and cultural politics

In Norway, based on the Nordic Welfare Model, the municipality has the main responsibility for all inhabitants, also people with learning disabilities. This is laid down in the Law of Health and Care in Municipality, Chapter 1 §1–1. Item 3, 24 June Nr. 30 2011 (<http://www.lovdatab.no/all/hl-20110624-030.html#1-1>). The preamble of the law defines the municipalities' responsibility to assist each individual to establish their own home and an independent life and take part in active and meaningful activities together with others. In the report to the *Storting* (Norwegian Parliament) nr. 10 2010/11 (Kulturdepartementet 2011–2012), *Culture, inclusion and participation*, the *Storting* asserts that the community has a duty to facilitate an increased participation in cultural life for all people regardless of race, social status, gender and disability:

Access to culture and the opportunity for individuals to express themselves in different creative ways is essential in a democratic society and provide the basis for freedom of thought and equality. Participation in cultural life has positive effects both for the individual and for society (...). There is a superior goal for the Government to even out the economic and social differences and to work for an inclusive society in which all can participate. A strong and dynamic cultural life which manifests itself in a diversity of cultural expressions is a core part of an inclusive society. Good art and culture sets the agenda, contributes to the opinion building in society and can give a voice to people who are otherwise not being heard. In this way art can contribute to change and inclusion in society.' (Our translation)

But when we look into this quotation, what does it really say? How can it be understood and used by our theatre? What we interpret as the core value here is the democratic right for everyone to express themselves and that diversity of expression is necessary to have an inclusive society. We are also stating that cultural activity can contribute to change. So the question for us is whether people with disabilities are given actual possibilities to carry out these intentions. The same report refers to research that still shows that people with disabilities are under-represented both as consumers of art and as performing artists. One important question for our theatre is, has this under-representation resulted from a lack of opportunity because they mainly are seen as the responsibility of the health and care services sectors?

In Norway, according to the Nordic Welfare Model, local councils are responsible for health and care and social welfare for all inhabitants, including people with learning disabilities. But when it comes to the cultural area, state, county and local government is responsible. The aim of the Norwegian law of culture is to determine the public authorities' responsibility to promote and facilitate a wide range of cultural activities so that everyone can have the opportunity to participate in cultural activities and experience a diversity of cultural expression (Stortinget 2009). Both local council, county council and the state have the responsibility to arrange so that the cultural life has good working conditions and help ensure that everyone can participate in cultural activities. When it comes to performing artists, the county councils and the state government have increased responsibility for organising and initiating the activity. But when it comes to people with disabilities, the cultural activity are often seen as leisure activities, medical training, social training, and not as art, and therefore, not obliged to cultural founding. Simultaneously, that the Norwegian government uses laws, reports and white papers to signal that participation in, and access to, various forms of cultural activities is something every

inhabitant is legally entitled to; it has recently released figures telling that today there are more pupils in segregated special schools than it was when the special schools were decided shut down in 1991 (www.utdanningsforbundet.no/upload/Publikasjoner/Faktaark/Faktaark%202011/Faktaark_2011_03.pdf). There are clearly different discourses influencing the lives of people with learning disabilities. One major theme that we have encountered in establishing a professional theatre is the challenge of interdisciplinary work and the relationship between health and care, on the one hand, and the cultural area on the other. We claim that both the health and care sector and the cultural sector must accept a responsibility to reach this group if they are to gain access to art and culture on equal terms.

Methodical approach

As the authors of this article, we have been employed at the University College and have been financed to do research and documentation of the theatre's activity. We are teachers and researchers affiliated to the Social Education Programme at the Department of Health and to the Department of Education. This theatre project is about developing new activity in collaboration with several partners. Alongside ensuring the development of the theatre, we conducted our research and documented the activities. To deal with this complex situation, which involves developing the theatre both artistically, organizationally and politically, we chose an action research approach, leaning on the emancipatory and critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal. Action research was chosen as research method as this is an approach suited for research where the researchers can make a difference by initiating change.

The purpose of action research is to generate living theories about how learning has improved practice and is informing new practices. (McNiff and Whitehead 2006)

The research is carried out together with the actors with disabilities, the students, professional artists and the project leaders. Being so close and involved in the daily activity of the theatre is, of course, a challenge for researchers, particularly in how we were able to benefit from this and, at the same time, be able to keep enough distance to have a critical stance from our own involvement. The research focuses on theatre, disability politics and education. Within the frame of action research, we also undertook ethnographic research through interviews, performance analyses and archive research, and we also are participants in both the organisation and participate in some of the productions as both actors and developing the plays (Denzin 1997).

Presentation of the theatre

This article is empirically based on our efforts to establish a theatre for 15 actors, all with a learning disability. In August 2009, they were employed as actors in a small Norwegian municipality. This municipality, with 12,906 inhabitants, is a part of a county with 131,555 inhabitants. The theatre was established for a project period of three and a half years, financed by the county council, the local municipality and the University College in the region. The University College that we represent is in charge of the research. Social education students from the University College participated in the theatre, both onstage and helping with practical matters, as a part of their

studies. The project is now over, and the theatre will continue in the ownership of the municipality from August 2012.

The actors have different levels of functionality. There are actors with Down's syndrome, Williams' syndrome and other diagnoses. The level of disability is not a criterion for being employed. Most of the actors live in group residences with care staff for support in daily activities. The actors must apply for the job at the theatre through regular job application channels in the municipality who are host to the theatre. Joining the theatre is their own decision, and it should not be a decision made by the care staff. We have experienced that it is difficult for many of our actors to become employed even in special enterprises in the municipality, this despite the fact that they seem to work well at the theatre. So we can say that the theatre also has become a new opportunity for employment. Ellingsen notes that this provides a real choice for someone who otherwise would have nothing to do, or just would have been placed at a day care centre (Ellingsen 2011). The main goals of the theatre are to provide an arena for actors with disabilities to communicate their experiences and view of the world using their own voice and to provide them with an opportunity to develop their own mode of expression. We consider this to be applied theatre in the sense that we use drama and theatre to improve the lives of individuals and create better societies (Johansen and Saur 2010; Nicholson 2005). The theatre collaborates with professional artists (musicians, dancers, choreographers and directors) and has staged four different productions. The productions have had very varied outward expressions. However, they all have in common an improvisatory methodical approach based on the individual actor's skills and expression, not on a pre-given script.

From our point of view, establishing this theatre is a political statement. The aim is to tell important stories from the lives of a group of people whose voices are seldom heard and to have each individual tell their own story, by themselves, from a stage. The performances and the actors themselves give the audience an opportunity to experience people with disabilities from a new perspective and in new roles. Onstage difference might be an advantage because it can contribute to creating new, interesting expressions. This experience will hopefully strengthen the socially valued roles for the actors outside stage. The official and primary stated aims of the theatre have been as follows:

The theatre shall be a professional theatre for actors with learning disabilities. The theatre will promote the aims and interests of the actors, both politically and artistic. This will imply developing methodical approaches that can serve this group in a way that their qualifications will be valued and their artistic interests given attention. The theatre will be a means of communication for the actors to communicate their own experiences and circumstances of life. The theatre will also contribute to making this group of people more visible in society.

The actors work part-time, an average of two days a week. A daily manager is employed by the municipality, and we, the two project leaders and authors of this article, have been financed by the University College. Between five and nine social education students have the theatre as their field of practical studies during their first year of studies. The theatre demands interdisciplinary collaboration, and the result is that working together at the theatre alters the balance of power between professional staff and those who need help. Everyone participates in the practical

and artistic work of the theatre. The theatre is organised as a professional theatre, not as an activity for education or health promotion. Our hypothesis is that by giving the opportunity to work professionally with theatre, we can contribute to what Richard Rorty describes as re-descriptions; in this case, re-description of the traditional understanding of having a learning disability by giving alternative experiences (Rorty 1989, 1999). Theatre and other artistic expressions are often used for therapeutic purposes or as leisure activity. *This theatre* is not to be seen in this tradition, and the Swedish researcher, Jens Ineland, describes the change from therapeutic to artistic justification in the disability area: 'In this sense, theatre groups as a form of municipally arranged daily activity can be viewed as representing an ideological shift for people with intellectual disabilities' (Ineland 2004, 136). The actors do, of course, require adjustments and care. However, in this theatre, adjustments, training and rehearsing are for enabling the actors to produce qualitative good art, not for the care and training itself. Nonetheless, the special needs these actors have demand that the theatre collaborates with the actors' care staff at their residences. A consequence of this situation is that different sectors within the municipality have to cooperate both from the cultural area and the health area. This collaboration can be both challenging and evolve existing views as we shall look into when we are describing and discussing the practice at the theatre.



Nonstop: Photographer, Willy Karlstrøm

The practice

In this part of the article, we want to describe how one can work practically with theatre to enable actors with learning disabilities to create not only qualitatively good art but also discuss what challenges that might be experienced.

The theatre wants to challenge the established normalisation discourses that constitute the disabled subject and the disabled body. One of the challenges for people with so-called 'disabled bodies' is that they are both not only very visible because of their difference but also made invisible because they are not taken seriously (Kuppers 2003, 49). And for people with learning disabilities, it might not be the visible body that is the most obvious disability, but the lack of language and concepts. Foucault's concept biopower can be useful to illuminate this process. Biopower comes to be seen first as an arrangement of meanings that is produced by social knowledge where the normal body is created through statistics about mortality rates, sexual practices, illness incidence and psychological development. Second, it can be seen as individuals disciplining themselves to fit the standards of being normal (Kuppers 2003; Tremain 2005). In disability art, one is on the contrary acknowledging the beauty in multiple bodies, shapes, movements and the unique and unpredictable – in opposition to the traditional view that art has traditionally privileged the able body (Albright 1997, 56). Using dance as an example, one can say that disabilities forces us to open our eyes for the new, for difference as a value if we dare cross the normality borders:

Watching disabled bodies dancing forces us to see with a double vision, and helps us to recognize that while a dance performance is grounded in the physical capacities of a dancer, it is not limited by them. (Albright 1997, 58)

At the theatre, the subjects will be influenced by what roles they are being given the chance to play, what repertoire and which artistic approaches being used. We will look closer into the practice of our theatre and the methodical choices made.

Daily life at the theatre

Wednesday is the theatre's ordinary working day. The daily manager and the social education students meet about half an hour before the actors arrive. The day's work is prepared. When the actors arrive, they start the day with a cup of coffee and a chat with the other actors and the students. 'Hi, how are you today?', 'What have you been doing?', 'Looking forward to work today?' This offers an important situation for each actor to be seen and be heard and for each of the involved parties to gauge where the others are at, to tune in to one another. The social education students, who have experienced the actors in other arenas, like day care centres, group residences, etc., experience this situation at the theatre as one of extreme 'normality'. This normality is dependent of the fact that they are in this together. They are colleagues, not carers and one who is in need of help. One student describes it like this:

I don't look at the actors at the theatre as clients; they are most of all friends and colleagues. I don't go around thinking that they have a learning disability. I think of 'Laila' as someone who needs help to get her shoes on, but also as a person it's good to laugh together with. She is so good at motivating the others.

This student seemed to have had a prejudiced view of the actor as a client, but in regarding the actor as a colleague, the student seem to regard the actor in a more equally and socially valued role, acknowledging the actor for her qualities beyond the disability. After the coffee break, we start the warm-ups. Warming up is important both physically and to get the chance to tune oneself into the work mentally. It is important that everyone clears away mental disturbances and concentrates on each other and the day's work. Everybody sits in a circle on the floor doing the same exercises, where warming up different parts of the body is the main issue. Framing the uncertainty in the artistic work with routines and tradition are very important.

After the warm-up, the professional choreographer or the theatre director who is in charge of the actual production starts working with the group. The activity is all within the discourse of the theatre. Her focus is on creating a good quality artistic product. Her language and way of behaving is clearly not connected to a health/care discourse. She is expecting the participants to behave like actors, she is regarding them as competent subjects. Artists with improvisation experience can utilise the particular, distinguishing outward expressions that disabled people can exhibit. They can visualise how this can contribute to creating new expressions, instead of regarding the disability as a hindrance. What otherwise is regarded as something negative, can become a resource. The musicians who participated in one of the productions are professional jazz musicians and also professors at a University Music Conservatory. They described their collaboration with the theatre in an interview with Norwegian television (NRK) as follows:

At the conservatory we spend years together with the students to learn how to improvise, here it is immediate (Sommerro 2012).

It becomes an artistic process which focuses on exploring, developing and creating movements responding to the music, each person on their own as well as each individual in relation to others. At the theatre, we have experienced that using improvisation as a method, requires a predictable frame, and when that frame is solid, the actors are able to be playful and unpredictable.

The productions

To describe more about the methodical approach developed at the theatre, we will look back upon the plays that have been produced. The theatre has had four major productions so far. One is an annual Christmas play, *Hunting for the Christmas snow*. This play is made through improvisation that has created a core story that is changed a bit every year. This play has the function of disciplining the social education students (that change every year) into our improvising method. What is special with this play is that the actors with learning disabilities have gained experience with this play through the years, and they are the experts telling the novice students how to do. This establishes more equal power positions and surely alters the expectations of the students that they are the helpers. Here they have to take instruction from those they thought they should help. One of the students gives a description of this collaboration:

I feel that the actors want to help us just as much as we want to help them, and that is exactly what is so important at the theatre, we are all on the same level, we are all helpers and all actors. (Student)

This exemplifies some of the challenges that the theatre faces. One of the artistic dilemmas is what benefit is there for the artistic product using inexperienced social education students? Probably none. Most probably the artistic product would have been better using theatre students (or professional actors) who would transfer their acting skills. On the other hand, professional actors might get in the way of the unique expression of the disabled actors with their own artistic ambitions. Untrained social education students are there mainly to be a scaffold, not to express their own artistic ambitions. Moreover, using social education students is a result of how the theatre was established because it grew out of project leaders at the University College leaders' interest in theatre that the project leaders' interest in seeing theatre as an arena to develop a more equal health care role. But it is an important issue to discuss further, whether this choice of using social education students as scaffolding is benefitting the artistic development at the theatre or whether in the future, it will be a hindrance. This visualises the sometimes problematic double intention of the theatre; theatre as an arena for educating health care students, developing their thoughts about normalisation and social valued roles on the one hand, and, on the other, being a professional theatre.

The second play was *The adventure about me*, written and directed by a known Norwegian director and now a head of one of the major theatres in Norway. Her idea was to get hold of the dreams and wants of the actors. The director interviewed the actors at their homes, asking them to bring artefacts that meant something special to them. These dreams and desires were then visualised onstage in contrast to the narrow borders of the group housings, the encounters with the helpers and society's narrow view of normality. Each actor had their own marked square onstage that they challenged with their dreams. The director worked with the actors own stories. She described this process in her own words:

Working with these actors has been exciting and instructive. It have demanded that I had to be very attentive for each of the actors needs and talent, and that I see possibilities instead of limitations. It has also been very important for me not to push the actors into traditional expectations of what theatre should be. We have searched for a more abstract vision, where pictures and fragmented scenes visualise the idea of the play.

As we see here, the director is working with the actors as a starting point, not a finished text. The actors are active parts of developing the play. But it should also be said that the director was very reluctant to take on this job because she was afraid that the actors would let themselves be manipulated (disciplined) because of her power position and their willingness to please her and not showing resistance if they did not agree. This opened for a discussion about what is concerning directing theatre and what is about disciplining the actors because of their disability? And, of course, that is not possible to separate. It's about ethics and about being sensitive to their special ways of being in the world. But it might not be ethical to silence their voices either because we are scared to step into the unknown. And what we experienced was that the actors resisted in their own ways. Not necessary vocally, but simply just not doing what told if they did not agree of the decisions.

The third production, *A cup of coffee, maybe?*, involved only one of the actors with learning disabilities in addition to the two of us writing this article. The theme of the play was this actor's experience with being sent to a school for disabled children far

away from home, when she was twelve years old. Playing herself in this play she was 65. What is regarded as normalisation and social valued roles are questioned in this play. Developing the play demanded a lot of research about the school, interviews with former employees at the school and the actor's sister, researching archive material together with the actor hearing her telling stories when starting to remember. What is interesting is that she had not wanted to tell about this harsh époque in her life before, even not to her family. But suddenly, she had found a medium that gave her enough space and distance and a safe environment to step into it. The actor has great difficulty with learning lines because she gets very distressed and afraid of making mistakes. This was solved with using a photo album (and showing the pictures on the wall behind for the audience), and then she could chat about the pictures, and they helped her remembering the theme she should talk about. And then it was the content that became important, not saying it right and using a lot of energy remembering. We have been touring with this play on high schools, and the pupils have had the opportunity to discuss the play with the actor herself. Many of the pupils in the audience said that seeing this play made them understand more about why it's important to have an inclusive school, but they also pointed out that this does not seem to be the case even today though it should be: 'How inclusive is the school when we, the ordinary pupils never meet or do something together with the pupils with learning disabilities because they have their classrooms far from the rest of us?' Because of this actors' courage telling her story from the stage, she appeared in a socially valued role for the pupils, questioning important issues they could recognise too.

The last production was a dance performance titled: *I-you, us-them, inside-outside*. The title of this production and the concept that underlies the performance let ordinary words reflect the distance society makes between people with learning disabilities and so-called 'normality' (Johansen and Saur 2010). In this production, the main focus is relationships. How do we relate to each other and to strangers we meet? How do we relate to space? Dancing with others includes listening to the body. Figuring out what the others' choices are whilst simultaneously working with your own body. It is a physical dialogue between two or more persons.

Earlier in the article, we have written that there are prejudices about who can dance and what dance can be. Body ideals and gender roles in our culture affect how we dance and how we understand dance. In our work, the starting point of the choreographers has been abstract dance, and the view that everybody can dance and that all movements can become dance. The work is anchored in a post-modern view of thinking, where post-modernism is regarded as an understanding that there is no universal understanding of culture and no singular way of framing reality. Instead, post-modernism accepts that there are multiple ways of being, experiencing and seeing the world.

The choreographers explain about body and dance and how one can communicate through dance. How dance can express words, emotions and different moods. The choreographer asks the group to move around in the room and to use the space. She gives instructions like high-low, quick-slow and inside-outside. Movements inspired by Laban's theory of effort, shape and space (Benjamin 2002; Bradley 2009; Sherborne 1990). These are explorations that will be important in the performance. Actors and students both have to search for bodily expressions for these words and their contradictions. The choreographer uses her artistic knowledge to look for

expressions that fit her artistic idea. The actors themselves develop the material, but working out from traditional dance exercises. In this process, the students supervise and assist each of the actors to adapt the instructions to their level of functionality. When sitting in a wheelchair, how can you do this movement in a way that embodies the intention of the choreographer, for example. What prompts must the students give the actors to create movements? To do this, the student must have knowledge of the actor's physical abilities and what the actor is able to understand.

One of the students has been exploring how her communication with the actors is influenced by her position in the room in relation to them:

What surprised me was that the ones, who had problems understanding me or misinterpreted me earlier, now seemed to understand. I experienced that for some of the actors it was very important how I was positioned. Sometimes it was beneficial to stand in front with eye contact, but for others that seemed to be scary or threatening in some way. Then I tried to stand by their side, shoulder by shoulder, and that worked much better. Of course I experienced how important my voice and vocabulary was too.

This student has experienced how important it is to look for the best individual approach to bring out specific expressions of movement for each actor, and find different means to express the choreographers instructions of high-low, strong-weak, etc. The students and the actors work together with these specific movements and link them together to build a dance form from the basic movements first introduced by the choreographer. This way of working has some similarities with what Jerome Bruner describes as scaffolding (Bruner 1996). One of the students describes this collaboration as follows:

We, the students, come with suggestions and ideas, and the actors go on developing them. This works well because I find the actors very creative, and I feel that the results we are creating together in the group are very good. The actors are the professionals, and I have a lot to learn from them, most of all in being creative. The actors are eager to practice, change and improve the moves to find the best expressions of the theme we are given from the choreographer. (Student)

Working in this way increases the authenticity and underlines the actors' own qualities. It is an important aim for the theatre to make the actors trust their own expressions and value their different ways of being in the world, challenging so-called 'normality'. This collaboration between the actor and the carer (in this case, the student) is, of course, a delicate balance. It is easy for the carer to take over the initiative and manipulate the actor. That is why it is so important to have professional artists in charge of the artistic production. This underlines the function of the carer as someone to help release the potential of the actor in accordance with the artistic intention of the director.

What is most decisive is that the actors are being regarded as competent subjects and that everyone involved expects that he/she is going to contribute with important participation. The actors are protesting against some of the decisions that are made. Our experience is that this resistance is being more forceful and meaningful for them because it is within a theatre discourse and related to the work and not to them as persons and the characteristics of their diagnosis. We have also seen that some are using the experiences from the theatre and start questioning the practise in their group residence. 'Who is actually going to decide whether I am allowed to go on tour with the theatre? Can the care staff deny me going?'



Bilde 4: Photographer, Martin Fossland

Can theatre contribute to a more equal society?

In this article, we have described how a theatre can be used to challenge traditional views both on disability, art and normalisation in trying to achieve more equal access to the art and cultural area like it is founded in Norwegian legislation.

In our eagerness to fulfil these good intentions, it might be necessary to remember the caution from Paul Darke:

Too many of us have forgotten the theoretical basis of the Disability Art movement, and the success of a few Disability Artists has been at the expense of the many. As a result, Disability Art and Disability Artists have become, largely through no fault of their own, a tool of the 'hidden forces' used against disabled people to legitimise their (our) continued mass exclusion from not just art culture but culture more widely. (Darke 2003, 141)

Especially when we're working together with actors with learning disabilities, we have to continually ask ourselves whether the decisions we make are for the benefit of us who are in charge instead of carrying out the wants and needs for the actors.

It is easy to fall back on traditional views of normality, where the actors are put in a discourse where access to art and culture are considered as leisure activities, medical and educational training and where the actors are not considered as employed with rights, but as social clients. Activities involving this group are traditionally too often considered initiatives for development and learning, not as valuable artistic contributions to society in general. The health and social work field has traditionally focused on training and adjusting the individual to a standard

normality. We must maintain our effort so that they can be taken seriously as members of a theatre company.

Even though we experience a lot of good will, we also feel that the force that is pulling in the direction of exclusion is strong. Why are not actors from this theatre asked to contribute when the municipality is performing a big theatre performance about the late history of the city? Were there no people with learning disabilities in the 1960s? Probably, there was, so why not use the well-known expertise in this performance? Maybe because they still are not regarded as professional actors. Our reference to actors with learning disabilities as professionals is controversial because they have no formal education. Nor are they likely to have the possibility of obtaining it because of their cognitive deficit. Through the theatre we have described, the traditional view of theatre can be challenged and hopefully, the consensus of what is professional art, and not, can be altered, and the actors eventually will be seen as a natural part of the city's cultural life. It is not so yet. To succeed with changing old fashion ways of thinking, it requires brave decisions both in the choice of repertoire that dare challenge both audience and actors. And in order to do that money is needed, both the local and the state cultural departments must contribute. We have experienced when we apply for funds that our theatre is not considered as a professional company, and that is problematic. The official cultural authority is not accustomed to consider people with learning disabilities as professional artists, but they are considered as health service clients.

We have wanted to look into whether a theatre establishment can contribute to recognising the artistic potential of people with learning disabilities and to see if letting them have access to official cultural arenas and cultural funding enables them to produce art that will be considered as professional on equal terms as others. If this happens, it will give recognition to the important stories they have to tell. For people with learning disabilities to be empowered and gain co-determination, their carers must let go of their unilateral power position. Health carers must, as we see it, clarify what is their specific contribution and, simultaneously, retain a critical view of their own limitations. Many people with learning disabilities need care and help to get access, both physically and mentally, but the carers must act on the terms of those who need help, not on their own. And they have to be prepared to collaborate with other disciplines, like professional artists. The artists who come into the theatre to collaborate in the artistic process of making performances must be prepared to challenge their own view of what they regard as professional theatre and open up for new and unknown expressions. In the encounter between these different disciplines lies the possibility for something new to emerge. But for that to happen, all participants must accept that people with learning disabilities can develop their own mode of expression, and they have to collaborate in order to make it possible for them to make an artistic expression that is different, but on equal terms. If we use the terms of Foucault, we must also be aware that there are two main discourses 'fighting' for hegemony – the health and the art discourse. And within these discourses, the actors with disabilities are constituted as different kind of subjects, with different possibilities and different choices because those who inhabit the different power positions within these different discourses will have different goals on behalf of the actors. The understanding of art, normalisation and disability must be an ongoing debate to provide socially valued roles for all. What is considered as a valued

role onstage, must be decided in dialogue, with awareness of the resistance and counterpower of actors with learning disabilities.

Keywords: theatre and disabilities; learning disabilities and professional theatre; theatre and health care

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