

Dua Space Dance Theatre of Malaysia: Exploring Wheelchair Dance

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ABSTRACT

Dua Space Dance Theatre, founded by Anthony Meh and Aman Yap in 1998, is a full-time contemporary dance company emphasising technical virtuosity and narrative choreography and often selecting themes centred on the local Chinese community. The dance company is highly associated with highlighting intercultural collaboration and embracing diversity. In 2006, with the nebular concept of Shang Jian Yi Jia (one family regardless of whether disabled or normal), Anthony and Aman were invited to establish a wheelchair dance troupe, Shuang Fu Performing Arts Troupe. This article explores the interaction between Dua Space Dance Theatre and Shuang Fu Performing Arts Troupe in terms of dance training, performance, artistic development, and its contribution to the collaboration of international disabled dance practitioners and producers. Their collaboration promotes innovation in dance-making, advocates accessibility to dance appreciation, and challenges disability stereotypes. Through interviews and archival research, this article re-visits the direction concept of Shang Jian Yi Jia, which has been practised since 2006. Through the lens of the four dimensions of social inclusion within the context of performing arts, this article identifies the Dua Space Dance Theatre's expertise in making and performing wheelchair dance and suggests its potential for development that creates space for the visibility of disabled dancers.

Keywords: *wheelchair dance, disability, social inclusion, Dua Space Dance Theatre*

INTRODUCTION

Dua Space Dance Theatre (DSDT) was co-founded by Anthony Meh Kim Chuan and Aman Yap Choong Boon in 1998 and was then established as a full-time contemporary dance company in 2003. Over the years, the company has evolved from hiring ad hoc project-based part-time dancers to employing nine full-time staff with specific job designations ranging from directors to trainee dancers. Their performances emphasise virtuosity and accuracy in terms of technique and prioritise the accessible choreographic narrative that the general public can comprehend. The themes of their works are varied, from the biographical narration of local Chinese public figures to site-specific dance and from the inspiration from Buddhist scripture to the embracement of multicultural society.

Based on the true story of the late Taiwanese Liu Hsia (1942–2003), Anthony choreographed a dance work, *Cloud on a Wheelchair* (2003), to pay tribute and respect to her. Liu Hsia was a wheelchair writer who published several inspirational writings under the pseudonym Xin Lin Zi. She was a devout Christian who devoted herself entirely to community welfare. She founded Eden Social Welfare Foundation, which provides vocational training to disabled people. The researcher was

one of the dancers in the work. The researcher still remembers it was the first contemporary dance performance that had ever seen so many wheelchair users in a theatre. The piece touched certain audiences deeply, including Taiwanese Shen Chiu-Hsiang, a student of Liu Hsia. Shen and her Malaysian husband, Ch'ng Joo Beng co-founded Eden Handicap Service Centre in Penang (1991) and Shuang Fu Disabled Independent Living Association in Kuala Lumpur (2001) as an extension of Taiwan's Eden Social Welfare Foundation. Shuang Fu Disabled Independent Living Association is a non-profit organisation that provides occupational training, education, and comprehensive care for the disabled and advocates social awareness campaigns. The organisation later spreads its wings to Penang (2004) and Johor (2007).

Shen thought that dance could be used to promote equality of access, enjoyment, and expression for disabled people. She invited Anthony and Aman to establish the Shuang Fu Performing Arts Troupe (SFPAT) in 2006, which is attached to the association. The dance work, *Cloud on a Wheelchair*, has brought the two groups together to experiment with new methods of dance-making and performing between the non-disabled and wheelchair dancers in Kuala Lumpur. Anthony served as the artistic director of SFPAT. He started to implement the concept of *Shang Jian Yi Jia* (one family regardless of whether disabled or normal), which tries to gain a more comprehensive understanding of such collaboration performance. Since 2006, the nebular concept of *Shang Jian Yi Jia* that DSDT developed was in the trial and error phase because of the inconsistency of training between DSDT and SFPAT. However, DSDT clearly sees that the concept is part of their social responsibility based on several elements, such as inclusivity, diversity, community engagement, accessibility, and innovation. As time went by, the concept of *Shang Jian Yi Jia* slowly developed into a systematic dance training system, becoming a performance style that can bring charitable fund donations from corporates and involve collaborations at the international level among the performing arts groups of people with disabilities.

In the realm of dance, the inclusion of disabled individuals is often overlooked, leading to a lack of representation and opportunities for participation. While there has been progress in promoting inclusivity, there remains a need for greater awareness and advocacy to address the systemic barriers that prevent disabled and non-disabled individuals from dancing together on equal footing. This article investigates the barriers to inclusive dance practices by both disabled and non-disabled individuals, including limited accessibility and institutionalised discrimination. By highlighting the collaboration of DSDT and SFPAT initiatives and sharing insights from practitioners in the field, it advocates for greater inclusion and accessibility in the dance world, emphasising the embracement of social inclusion for disabled people.

Collins et al. (2021) identify four barriers to social inclusion for disabled people, particularly in the context of performing arts, which range from physical to attitudinal. These barriers come across four dimensions: access, participation, representation, and empowerment (APRE), which draw upon the social model of disability. The barriers are closely interdependent; if the barriers are removed, arts can empower disabled people to carry out more complex and meaningful functions. The researcher examines the combination of DSDT and SFPAT as one entity that supports social inclusion within the arts and displays how both parties can take away the four barriers, even for a short and temporary time, in order to allow visibility on both local and international stages. This study explores the shared principles of *Shang Jian Yi Jia* that enable positive local engagement and international alliances for disabled dancers.

Literature Review and the Overview of Social Inclusion for Disabled People

Historically, the medical model of disability places the disabled person as a “problem” that needs to be fixed or cured by the medical profession. The medical model constructs how it should be perceived and discussed. International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps, categorised by the World Health Organization (1980), is a good example that validates the medical model. The manual categorises disability into three key domains: (1) impairment refers to the losses or abnormalities of

body structure or body parts at the level of the organ, (2) disability is concerned with any restriction or lack resulting from impairment and thus caused difficulties at the level of the person, (3) handicap is related to the disadvantages of an individual caused by the impairments or disabilities, and prevents the accomplishment of a role, and interaction with surroundings.

The classification reflected the common understanding of disabilities, and it has been widely criticised, especially by disabled people who were keen to improve their opportunities and equality like other citizens. The notion of the medical model remained until the emergence of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) as a standard framework for describing and organising information to measure health and disability (World Health Organization 2001). ICF redefines disability by moving away from the narrow minority impairment-based. It recognises human functioning at the level of the body (or body parts), the whole person, and the whole person in their complex environment. ICF provides a framework and common language for health functioning information and data that can help improve policy development, economic analysis, research uses, intervention studies, and environmental factors (Üstün et al. 2003).

The new concept of disability is associated with developing the social model of disability. The social model of disability challenges the medical model by emphasising that societal barriers disable people and not by their impairment or disabilities. The social model suggests that society is built according to the needs of the non-disabled person, and the disabled person has been marginalised. The model seeks equal participation and access for disabled people. Hence, society must remove barriers for everyone to achieve everyone's valuable functioning. The model wants to change society rather than try to change the special needs people to accommodate the society.

The movement for human rights leads to the change in promoting and protecting disabled people from the medical model to the social model of disability. The United Nations established the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) and its Optional Protocol in 2006 in response to the disability rights movement. Malaysia became a signatory of the Convention and later ratified it in 2010. Following the ratification, Malaysia enacted the Persons With Disabilities (PWD) Act 2008 (Ikmal Hisham and Khairil Azmin 2016). The Act now prohibits us from excluding the access and participation of disabled people in the premise of arts just because of their impairment. Under the purview of the PWD Act 2008, two primary institutions, the National Council for PWD and the Department for the Development of PWD were established. The Act grants the Council numerous functions and powers, including coordinating, overseeing, monitoring, and making recommendations regarding the laws, policies, programmes, and activities related to PWD and encouraging and promoting research and development. The Federal Constitution, any written laws, and the government's financial commitment must all be taken into account while promoting and protecting individuals with disabilities. To facilitate access to the theatre or performance space by disabled people, premises in Kuala Lumpur such as Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre, Petaling Jaya Performing Arts Centre, Damansara Performing Arts Centre, Garden Theatre, and PJ Live Arts have provided ramps, disabled-friendly toilets, disabled parking space, and special audience seats/space in the theatres. Performance organisers who allow the presence of special people or children, such as those with Tourette Syndrome or hyperactivity, will announce either verbally or in writing to the audience before the performance so that they are aware and ready to tolerate the situation.

Social science and medical research dominated the field of disability studies in Malaysia. People with disabilities have become increasingly important and involved in the national economic agenda since the country's industrialisation in the 1990s (Jayasooria 1999). Several disability studies and research in major fields in Malaysia have been done, as in employment and education (Jayasooria et al. 1997; Armstrong 1993, Zalizan and Manisah 2014; Haq 2003; Ang 2012). However, academic studies on disability in performing arts are lacking, especially in dance. The ethnography research trajectory of dance studies in Malaysia addresses a wide range of topics mainly to discuss the related structured movement system and its meanings that are practised by a community (Premalatha 2017; Quintero and Mohd Anis 2016; Mohd Anis 2011; Mumtaz Begum 2007; Mohd Anis 2003). The mainstream of dance research less perceives the voices of the dance makers with disabilities. As

observed by Islam (2015), those with disabilities are not included in mainstream development and face challenging socioeconomic circumstances in Malaysia, even though there are disability acts, social exclusion acts, and welfare policies that accomplish the needs and rights of disabled people.

Despite progress in advocating for inclusivity and understanding in dance, misconceptions persist, reinforcing harmful assumptions about what it means to live with a disability. One common stereotype is the belief that disabled dancers are limited in their movements or abilities compared to non-disabled dancers. This misconception overlooks the adaptability, innovation, and unique expression that disabled dancers bring to their performances. Another stereotype is the idea that disabled dancers are only performing for inspiration or pity rather than being recognised for their artistic talent and contribution to the dance community. This paper aims to investigate the challenges, benefits, and transformative potentials of inclusive dance partnerships, explicitly focusing on the experiences of non-disabled and disabled dancers as they navigate movement, communication, and artistic expression together through the case study of the collaboration of DSDT and SFPAT. This research seeks to acknowledge the artistic practices and the initiations done by the grassroots that promote greater accessibility, diversity, and equity in the dance community.

METHODOLOGY

The research is interested in examining the experiences of those involved in the dance creation and training of people with disabilities. Because the research is intrinsically small-scale and people-centred, the researcher deals with a small number of respondents and their social contexts. The researcher employs qualitative methods mainly. The researcher uses ethnographic methodologies to investigate people's experiences. Ethnography as a methodology is appropriate for the study since it can be reinterpreted and recontextualised in various ways to address particular circumstances (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 4).

Drawing on the researcher's experiences as a DSDT formal dancer allows the researcher to comprehend the DSDT's choreographic methodologies, stylistic narratives, and event management skills. Because of the researcher's prior knowledge and current practice, the researcher was able to analyse and critique the performance connected to aesthetics for the general audience and technique instruction for dancers.

During the rehearsal, non-participant observation is conducted. The researcher presents an objective and a distanced viewpoint of the creation process. This is also due to researchers with no prior experience in this type of movement exploration and collaboration being inappropriate in the creation process for both DSDT dancers and wheelchair dancers. During the observations, it's crucial to pay attention to what people are doing and what they are not doing, for example, challenging the instructions or declining offers of assistance, as well as the body language and gestures of the dancers and choreographer, and sometimes, the audience.

In-depth conversations and interviews were always held after or before the rehearsals. Primary data was gathered through conversations and interviews. As a company's formal dancer, the researcher earns the respondents' trust, mainly DSDT dancers, allowing them to talk responsively, express their opinions directly, and feel ownership of their contribution to the findings.

The researcher is fortunate in terms of archival research because DSDT has a complete archive system, and most of the materials have been digitised, such as programme brochures, performance posters, articles published in periodicals and newspapers, and footage either in personal storage or in social media. Many archival materials need to be shown as evidence or references during the fieldwork, especially in conversations with the DSDT's artistic director and dancers. The researcher was authorised to view such materials. The researcher keeps listings of individuals, organisations, events, places, dates, databases, and pertinent keywords.

The obtained data can be divided into at least two categories. The first category is the movement analysis in performance and training, which is technical because it involves observing the structure of the movement, which refers to the change from one shape to another shape of position,

as well as the dynamics of movement, which refers to the time of the movement execution whether sustained or fast, and the coverage of space whether outside or inside the kinesphere. The other data category is the analysis of the meaning behind the phenomenon of combined performance technique by DSDT–SFPAT through thematic analysis, which started with predefined themes based on existing literature or theory, namely the APRE framework for this research. The researcher continually compared new data to previously coded data to refine and develop an understanding of the integration of disabled and non-disabled dancers. Finally, researchers interpret the findings with the research objectives. This involves synthesising the themes and drawing conclusions about what the data reveal.

Ethical Considerations

As the research is based mostly on people's experiences, thoughts, observations, and perceptions, it is essential to address ethical considerations. Transparency of the study and the researcher are crucial considerations in ethnographic research. During the fieldwork, the researcher offered a clear explanation of the overall study and obtained agreement from the respondents and participants, which was especially important when dealing with the introverted wheelchair dancers. Special care was taken when working with the disabled dancers to avoid associated risks reinforcing stereotypes. The researcher uses clear, concise language with visual aids such as diagrams and illustrations to convey complex information. The researcher informed the participants so that they understood the nature of the research, their roles in it, and any potential consequences. They are voluntary and free to withdraw from the study at any time.

Through DSDT, the researcher tried to build trust and rapport with the participants, demonstrating humbleness and willingness to learn from them. The researcher sought permission to reveal observations or comments made outside of "formal" research. This information will be made available to all those engaged by providing opportunities to view the study objectives and make it available in various ways. The researcher received all research materials, including video and audio, from DSDT. The researcher did not personally record videos and audio to avoid participants' discomfort. DSDT selected the related video material for the researcher. The researcher aims to provide insight into current dance theory and practice concerning social inclusions. It will take a broadly qualitative approach, focusing largely on individuals, their experiences, perspectives, aspirations, and expectations for the future of this matter of dance.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Collins et al. (2021) established the APRE framework to identify the barriers to social inclusion for disabled people in the performing arts. Initiated from the modification of accessible facilities to enter the museum, "access" here refers to physical and financial barriers that can prevent people from entering the performing arts premises. "Participation" relates to audience and performer engagement in performance, including audience development programmes and interpretive resources that use physical ways such as books, brochures, signs, pictures, and others. Barriers to participation are also associated with ignorance or inexperience and bias of the dominant able-bodied culture. "Representation" is defined as who speaks and how people are spoken of (Bacchi 2009). People with disabilities carry various stereotypes and are often associated with purposes of entertainment, charity, and scam. Thus, it is important that disabled people have a space to speak; their voices are heard, and their representation is changed from the general view. "Empowerment" enables disabled people to develop skills, enhance independence, and contribute to society through the arts. The four dimensions are interconnected, and it is not a linear progression (A→P→R→E) where it can happen in reverse depending on various factors. Failure in one dimension can affect the development of other dimensions.

The transformation takes time and depends heavily on the voluntary initiation from NGOs or private performing arts institutions keen to change (Collins et al. 2021). This study, which combines

performing arts organisations and disabled people organisations with social inclusion, is uncommon in local studies. The study is relevant considering the increasing number of performing arts programmes in higher education institutions and the increasing number of theatres (mainly in Kuala Lumpur). The institutions and the theatres could play a major role in building up the visibility and welfare of disabled people. With the human rights movement gradually moving away from the medical model of disability, the researcher believes that there are more disabled artists who can contribute to society in various ways.

In this article, the researcher claims that Dua Space Dance Theatre is both a dance company and a performing arts organisation that supports the social inclusion of people with disabilities by consciously breaking down the barriers from the dimensions of access, participation, representation, and empowerment even before the implementation of the Disability Act 2008, as demonstrated by the works and performances in which DSDT and SFPAT collaborated and produced.

THE MAKING OF WHEELCHAIR DANCE

Since the establishment of SFPAT, Anthony, the artistic director, started his pioneer exploration in wheelchair dance. Wheelchair dance was selected instead of other disabilities for this initial disabled dance programme because the current wheelchair users are more committed and can communicate ideas and feedback. In exploring movement in wheelchair dance, Anthony needs assistance from the abled-bodies dancers, which is one of the principles of the concept of *Shang Jian Yi Jia*, literally translated as “one family regardless of able-bodied or disabled.” Thus, the rehearsal and performance sessions are not conducted through a top-down approach that refers to the choreographer and dancers but engages various levels of communication between the DSDT-trained non-disabled dancers, the SFPAT wheelchair dancers and the choreographer-cum-artistic director.

The safety of wheelchair dancers is the primary concern. Both DSDT and SFPAT exercise safe dance practices regarding the various levels of injuries on different body parts. Numerous discussions, observations, and evaluations of the various injuries are conducted and shared before, during, and after the training sessions. SFPAT dancers need to give clear feedback on their movements, such as if the hand can touch your calf/toe. Can the torso twist backwards? What is the range of head mobility? Does it pain when doing certain exercises? How do the DSDT dancers help to facilitate the execution of dance movements? Checking the function of different body parts in performing various types of movement is a routine for them.

Apart from the physical aspect, both face more unexpected technical challenges, such as various levels of beat deafness, inadequate movement coordination and inability to memorise movements. This technical difficulty can be overcome by having additional training. Organising or staging a public performance as a learning outcome is a suitable encouragement to motivate SFPAT dancers to make an effort to complete and refine their performance as best as possible. Most of their stage performance opportunities are from corporate invitations for charity and fundraising purposes.

Another challenge for conducting rehearsals and performances is the passiveness, shyness, and stage fright of the wheelchair dancers. Non-disable dancers, including DSDT dancers, play an important role in reducing these feelings of weakness and helplessness among wheelchair dancers and ensuring a supportive atmosphere for learning and teaching.

Dancers of DSDT and SFPAT do warm-up and regular dance classes together before the rehearsal sessions start. Both cooperate to understand their situation bodily and rehearse new forms of being and performing together. Anthony and Aman designed specific warm-up exercises and regular dance class works for wheelchair dancers, which included centre work and cross-floor travelling. Centre work focuses on the movement of the upper torso, arms, hands and heads, and cross-floor travelling concentrates on how they move from one point to another by various types of wheelchair manipulation. The training system included the exploration of spatial elements as directions, levels, and relationships; exercises for rhythmic awareness as body percussion; codified dance training with

related terminologies and contextual information as ballet arms positions; improvisation of pedestrian actions, mime, and extension of movement within or beyond the kinesphere.

At the initial stage, performances by the wheelchair dancers were led by the DSDT dancers to alleviate the stage fright and shyness of the SFPAT dancers. SFPAT dancers could imitate and receive cues of movement execution. DSDT dancers can move the wheelchairs to allow the SFPAT dancers to freely move their heads, arms, shoulders, and torsos without having to roll their wheelchairs. SFPAT dancers can travel fast to form various formations on time. In certain ways, SFPAT dancers can be lifted and removed from the wheelchairs, followed by short performances highlighting their unique movement, and returned safely by the trained DSDT dancers to the wheelchairs.

Findings and negotiations on the technique, competency, and limitations of integrated able-bodied and disabled dance are reviewed from time to time. Training methods and various approaches to choreography relevant to expressing one's feelings and emotions have been discovered and refined through action-oriented dance practices.

Anthony and Aman are keen to find ways to utilise the wheelchair as part of the disabled bodies, and it should not be treated as a burden to them. The wheelchair dancers are encouraged to reach beyond the conventional response to a movement task and to express and communicate their feelings and understanding through movement. They keep experimenting and exploring various possibilities of wheelchairs' usages in dance; pivot turn, self-lifting with arms, jumping with the wheelchair, and many more movement vocabularies were explored within the capability of dancers and affordability of the wheelchairs. Certain parts of the wheelchairs need to be modified or strengthened mechanically.

Anthony decides the dance repertoire's type, duration, and direction for various occasions, from short pieces to middle-length works combined with speech and drama, according to the requests of corporates who invited them. In artistic development, the integrated dance works choreographed by Anthony are highly melodramatic and lyrical, and they are easily accessible and resonate with the public. Pieces like *Call Grandma Once More* (2008) and *I Want to Fly* (2008) share a common theme: disabled people can help themselves and others. The wheelchair dancers often play the characters who are initially depressed and marginalised, but then they are cheered and encouraged by the



Figure 1 Performance by DSDT and SFPAT, featuring Shen Chiu-Hsiang (centre).

Source: Photo courtesy of DSDT.

non-disabled dancers. In order to demonstrate the expression based on the theme, Anthony likes to manipulate movement motifs and create images that are easy for the audience to understand, such as dancers isolating themselves and running away from the crowd, supporting each other from falling, pushing away obstacles aggressively, praying with faith, flying freely and embracing each other. The non-disabled dancers dancing with the SFPAT dancers are not necessarily DSDT dancers. Sometimes, they are general volunteers who want to help. In that case, the volunteers are required to commit to their performance. Since their debut in 2006, the partnership of SFPAT and DSDT has gained high respect from society, especially in the Chinese-speaking community. Such works are usually used for charity, fundraising, or awareness campaigns. The works can be performed indoors or outdoors, whether as part of an existing corporate event or a special staging just for them.

INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION

SFPAT–DSDT has performed in Taipei, Taiwan, in conjunction with The Disabled Talent Performance: *The Beauty of Crescent Moon* several times. Through the performances, Anthony and DSDT connected to Taiwan’s Joyce-Apage Association, a polio care centre. Similar to SFPAT, the Joyce-Apage Association formed the Extreme Wheelchair Dance Company (EWDC), which incorporates street dance, popular dance, and acrobatic moves into its performance. However, incorporating such aggressive dance elements exposed great danger to wheelchair dancers. EWDC invited Anthony to train their dancers with his moderate approach, and he was commissioned to create works for EWDC. Experience and skills in making the Malaysian integrated wheelchair dance have now been transferred to Taiwan. Besides EWDC, a Taiwanese representative of the International Paralympic Committee for para dance sport, Lin Hsiu-Hsia, is in touch with Anthony and DSDT for collaboration and exchange programmes. Since 2012, dancers of SFPAT, DSDT, EWDC and Lin Hsiu-Hsia have met regularly in Taiwan or Malaysia to create and perform together to raise funds for several charity institutions in both countries. The production team has received critical acclaim from Taiwanese government agencies and television broadcasters. In Malaysia, they have performed in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Kedah, Johor and Sarawak. In September 2016, the alliance of DSDT, Joyce-Apage and Lin Hsiu-Hsia were invited to tour South America, and they performed in Argentina, Chile, Peru, and Paraguay for charity purposes.

From the close collaboration with Taiwan, DSDT’s keenness and expertise in developing disabled dance have also received attention from the Japanese International Communication Centre for Persons with Disabilities or its abbreviated name, BiG-i. BiG-i is an organisation that promotes the welfare and well-being of people with disabilities, especially at the international level. Since early



Figure 2 Promotion material of performance by DSDT and EWDC.

Source: Photo courtesy of DSDT.

2020, BiG-i has planned an international collaboration performance, *Dance Drama "Breakthrough Journey"* that features disabled-dance-related collaborators from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia. DSDT was chosen for the unique project. The performance involved approximately 80 dancers, and a tour performance will be held in Japan. Each representative from a different country is responsible for producing their own choreography according to the plots set in the dance drama's storyline.

The choreographer was Aman Yap. In preparation, DSDT held an audition to get dancers willing to work together, especially disabled people. Nerosha Krishnan, a wheelchair dancer, was chosen and has demonstrated a high commitment during the choreography process. She has overcome many challenges and prepared as much as possible to make this international performance successful. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has prevented international touring, and the performance has had to change the way of presenting. DSDT recorded the choreography in Kuala Lumpur, and the Japanese dancers learned the choreography. The same situation happened to dancers from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. The premiere performance of this drama was performed live on 30 January 2021 in Osaka. The initial plan that wanted to engage international dancers to perform together has now been replaced with a line-up of Japanese dancers only.

障害者の文化芸術創造拠点形成プロジェクト

DANCE DRAMA

BREAK THROUGH JOURNEY

日本とアジア、多様な人と文化の共創。新たな表現が今ここから生まれる

作・演出：長谷川達也 (DAZZLE)

2022年10/1 (土) ①13:00開演 ②18:00開演 10/2 (日) ③13:00開演

全3公演 / 各回45分前開場 / 全席指定

東京芸術劇場プレイハウス 東京都豊島区西池袋1-8-1

チケット料金 前売 3,000円 高校生以下 1,000円
 ※全席指定 / 未成年入場不可
 ※前売券はなくなり次第、販売終了となります。
 ※当日券は前売券の残数がある場合のみ販売いたします。

8月5日(金) 10:00発売開始

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 車いす席 移動支援、同行支援、行動支援の同伴1名無料

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主催：文化庁 / 独立行政法人日本芸術文化振興会
 主催・実施主体：国際障害者交流センター ビッグ・アイ
 連携：大阪府
 共催：公益財団法人東京都歴史文化財団 東京芸術劇場 / フェニーチェ堺
 協力：ダンススタジオ ONEMOVE / SOCIAL WORKEEERZ / 公益財団法人しまね文化振興財団 / 真工ミュージアム 分室 /
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Figure 3 Poster for dance drama *Breakthrough Journey* performed on 1–2 October 2022 in Japan.

Source: <https://hululu.jp/2022/08/dance-drama%E3%80%8Cbreakthrough-journey%E3%80%8D/>

Despite not being able to perform in Japan, DSDT still celebrated this unique project through screening. The screening was held on 27 February 2022 at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre. In addition, a pre-recorded sharing session that talked about the choreography process and the performing arts of people with disabilities was screened. The sharing session was facilitated by Amandus Paul Panan, a Malaysian dance lecturer who pays attention to disabled dancers. The speakers were dancers and choreographers from Japan, Singapore, and Malaysia.

The journey of this dance drama is not over even though it has been screened. In the latest developments, BiG-i still wants to make its initial intention happen: to perform the dance drama together in Japan. Recently, international travel has been allowed, and BiG-i once again invites the original cast from various countries to gather and perform in Japan in October 2022. Choreography and training methods explored by the DSDT for the integrated dance of wheelchair and able-bodied dancers are now shared internationally, and the opportunity to exchange information with the performing arts troupes and organising bodies is also available.

DISCUSSIONS

This article explains how DSDT promotes social inclusion for disabled dancers by intentionally removing the barriers from the dimensions of access, participation, representation, and empowerment. Evidence is collected from interviews, archival studies, and observation to identify the barriers to social inclusion.

Removing the Barriers to Access

This discussion of access starts from the spaces for rehearsals and performances. Usually, the rehearsals of SFPAT are conducted in the Shuang Fu Disabled Independent Living Association. Shuang Fu Disabled Independent Living Association, as a training centre for disabled people, is located on the ground floor, where wheelchair users can access the premises easily. Concrete-built or portable ramps are provided for wheelchair users. The association has a fairly spacious foyer for various activities. Chairs and tables will be moved aside when dance practice is conducted. The cement floor is flat. The space is suitable for physical exercise.

DSDT studio is located on the second floor of a building, which is only accessible via stairs. When the dancers reach the ground floor of the premises, they need to contact DSDT staff to come down and help them up to the second floor. Some wheelchair dancers are able to take the stairs on their own by supporting themselves with their arms or using crutches, depending on the level of their disabilities. Some of them need to be lifted. Whether a disabled dancer is able to take the stairs or needs someone else's help, his/her wheelchair needs to be lifted to the second floor and come down to the ground floor after the rehearsal.

The dance technique of lifting and moving disabled dancers from one place to another by the non-disabled dancers requires high trust and confidence in the partners. Senior dancer of DSDT, Kenny Leow Thiam Aik, considered that helping the wheelchair dancers go up and down the stairs is an excellent opportunity to get to know each other, establish trust and build confidence. Both parties should feel firm and comfortable touching each other to facilitate the transfer of weight.

DSDT took caution in examining the performance space, ranging from the outdoor platform to the multipurpose hall and theatre. They must ensure that the locations are accessible for people with disabilities and the stage floor is totally flattened with a not-too-slippery or rough surface. Sometimes, they need to add ramps, cover the floor with mats, or fix some minor problems on the carpet or floor by themselves, with the help of the volunteers. Occasionally, dance works need to be altered according to the layout and setting of the performance space. Props and sets used for stage decoration, such as flower vases, standing banners, extra lights, extra seats for unexpected overflow of the audience, etc., at the last minute, can cause insecure feelings for the wheelchair dancers. Event organisers commonly overlook these matters when they invite people with disabilities to perform: the access to the stage,



Figure 4 Rehearsal at the Shuang Fu Disabled Independent Living Association.

Source: Photo courtesy of DSDT.

the condition of the floor, and the layout of the performance space. DSDT insists on conducting full technical rehearsals in the actual performance space to avoid all these miscommunications and remove access barriers.

Barriers to access among people with disabilities involve financial difficulties. DSDT marketing team is always looking for sponsors willing to fund a certain amount of money as entry tickets for less fortunate people such as orphans, single parents and people with disabilities. DSDT tries to lower this access barrier financially. Although this action shows less significance in the audience development programme's long term, it can allow some people with disabilities to recognise the live theatre experience.

Removing the Barriers to Participation

The wheelchair dancers may not be able to participate even though sometimes access is available. Participation depends on the assistance of the organising committee, event company staff, and the stage crew. The wheelchair dancers may be treated as a "burden" as they may need more help, affecting the workload distribution among the organising staff and the stage crew. For example, normative standards for performance halls/stages rarely consider the needs of wheelchair users. The wheelchair dancers have to get ready very early at backstage or at the side of the stage because they are not able to enter the stage area immediately when it is their turn, just like the non-disabled performers. They will take up a large waiting area. Their presence behind or side of the stage can block the crew's working path, or the audience can see it. The situation gets worse if the space is cramped and dark. They need extra hands, space, time, and light to appear on stage, and this can be a "hustle" for the crew, organising committee, and other cast. They may encounter reactions or assistance with attitudinal issues such as impoliteness, coldness, or reluctance. Usually, wheelchair dancers are highly tolerant of completing a

performance and do not want to jeopardise their relationship with the organiser (mostly the sponsors or the corporates that initiate fundraising).

DSDT identifies this problem. To lower the barriers to participation, the stage crew and the organising committee need to be educated in a moderate way. DSDT's insistence on conducting full rehearsals on the exact performance space is not only for technical adjustment but also to introduce the special needs dancers to the organisers and crew. This encounter is very important in informing the requirements and rules of disabled performances directly or indirectly. In a direct way, DSDT will notify the organiser about the precautionary measures that should be taken verbally or in writing. The notification can be sent via email or text before they meet in the performance space. Indirectly, DSDT, with their internal volunteers, will "perform" the examination and alteration of the stage area and waiting room, such as adding floor mats, removing staple wire or nails on the floor, ensuring the work path of the stage crew, to apply carbonated soft drinks on the wheel if the floor is slippery and other more in order to demonstrate their serious concern and attention for the safety of the dancers. Their actions often draw attention from the organisers and crews to the importance of safety measures and, hence, to being more cautious and patient when handling their performances. Sometimes, their actions also often earned respect from the stage crew.

Under the *Shang Jian Yi Jia* concept, education is crucial in promoting social inclusion for disabled people to participate in performing arts. The awareness of the needs of wheelchair dancers is not only through direct communication but through the practice of "walk the talk" by DSDT, which implements what is said and demonstrates what is desired. The fact that the performance space is built to meet the normative standard of able-bodied people needs to be recognised by the state holders, especially the event company and the crew. DSDT takes an important step in stating the facts of inequality and differences. At the same time, they assert and demonstrate that changes and modifications should be made to remove the barriers to participation.

Removing the Barriers to Representation

Nerosha Krishnan is a wheelchair dancer selected through the audition for the dance drama *Breakthrough Journey*. She is working hard to recall and refine all the work movements in preparation for leaving for Japan. She feels very encouraged working with DSDT as they are experienced in caring for wheelchair dancers and do not see her as a burden. She always expresses gratitude for such meaningful training, performance and friendship. She hopes that disabled people will be brave enough to showcase their talents so that their efforts can be seen and appreciated.

This disclosure from Nerosha has informed us that DSDT tries not to overlook her special needs in their event planning. Apart from the performance aspect, Nerosha's other special daily needs, such as medicine, electronic medical devices, and the minimum space needed for Nerosha's wheelchair, are also listed so that she will not have a hard time touring Japan. DSDT tries to make her representation as an individual artist more important than her disability, as she is talented, committed, and serious about artistic practice and its outcome.

On 10 March 2022, DSDT organised a webinar titled PHAB Integration in Art and Entrepreneurship. PHAB here refers to "physically handicapped" and "able-bodied," respectively. For this sharing, DSDT has invited individuals who have collaborated in the integration of wheelchair dance performances for fundraising and charity promotion. They were Chen Chung Tseng (the chief executive officer of Joyce-Polio Care Association, Taiwan), Shen Chiu-Hsiang (the founder of Shuang Fu Disabled Independent Living Association), Lin Hsiu-Hsia (the Taiwanese para dance sports representative), and Teng Ho Cheng (the senior dancer of EWDC). They share their experiences in developing their dance careers and how they got involved in the field of entrepreneurship and volunteer service. This webinar was also one of the initiatives to react to art awareness during the pandemic. This webinar offers a platform to change the public's perception of the functioning of people with disabilities (which usually consists of negative concepts and stereotypes) through successful career cases that actually happened in performing arts, entrepreneurship, and volunteer service.

Representation is not about how people are spoken of but who does the speaking. Based on the two earlier examples, DSDT develops the representation of disabled people by creating a platform for them to voice and hope that they are heard.

Removing the Barriers to Empowerment

The barriers to access, participation, representation, and empowerment are interconnected. Barriers to access, participation, and representation strengthen the barrier to empowerment. Marsh (2016) suggests the inconsistency of effort in disabled dance due to the naivety and artlessness of leaders toward people with disabilities. She emphasised that the presence of disabled leaders in the dance field can improve the social inclusion associated with the social model of disability. These leaders refer to choreographers, directors, producers, organisers, lecturers, academics, researchers, and other authority positions. Their first-hand valuable experience in dealing with the disabled performing arts should be acknowledged and applied to the management and administration of the performing arts.

None of the DSDT staff is disabled (even though they once hired a full-time wheelchair dancer-cum-administrator). However, due to their almost 20 years of experience working with disabled dancers, they can lead the wheelchair dance troupe in various aspects, including the training system, procedures for staging, and management. They have brought their integrated dance to the international level. They consistently try to create new images and techniques for disabled bodies through collaboration rather than reproducing the normative aesthetic of disabled bodies. Making decisions together through various trials and errors in the studio is one way to empower the dancers with disabilities. The dancers should have equal rights in the creation process, which is the basic



Figure 5 A scene in rehearsal of the *Breakthrough Journey* in which Nerosha Krishnan and her wheelchair are lifted.

Source: Photo courtesy of DSDT.

principle of empowerment, regardless of the technical hierarchy of skill abilities and physical condition.

From the findings of the programmes initiated by DSDT to promote social inclusion for disabled dancers via the APRE framework, this paper also wants to address and conclude a few systemic barriers within the dance community and society at large that require a multifaceted approach. These systemic barriers include:

1. Prejudice about the capabilities and limitations of disabled dancers, as well as attitudes that devalue their contributions to the art form just to perform pity.
2. Limited opportunities for both casual and professional training and performance for disabled dancers due to the lack of access to dance programmes, workshops, and performance opportunities organised by dance professionals with inadequate teaching methods, choreographic approaches, and organisational policies that fail to address the needs of disabled dancers. Limited professional opportunities for employment, career advancement, and artistic development can cause disabled dancers to be underrepresented in dance companies, festivals, and other performance platforms.
3. The representation and visibility of disabled dancers may be underrepresented and marginalised within the dance community and media representations of dance. This lack of visibility can reinforce stereotypes and perpetuate misconceptions about the abilities of disabled dancers.
4. Financial barriers, including the cost of adaptive equipment, transportation to and from dance classes and performances, and healthcare expenses, can pose significant challenges for disabled dancers and their families.
5. Inaccessible dance spaces and facilities that do not accommodate the needs of disabled dancers, such as accessible entrances, dressing rooms, and bathrooms.

By recognising and actively working to dismantle these barriers, the dance community can create a more inclusive and equitable environment for disabled dancers to thrive.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article supports the notion of the social model of disability by examining the disabled dance-making and performing that was explored by DSDT along with SFPAT under the conceptual direction of *Shang Jian Yi Jia*. This article explains how DSDT tries to remove the barriers to social inclusion from four interlocked dimensions: access, participation, representation, and empowerment (APRE). Hence, the article argues that DSDT is a catalyst in promoting wheelchair dance not only in Kuala Lumpur but also shares their experience conducting and directing such dance genre to the international disabled community. By identifying the experience of DSDT, the framework of APRE here provides nuances in terms of considerations, cautions, and advocacies related to disabled people in the context of local performing arts.

Apart from DSDT, several individuals or groups have been or are currently working with people with disabilities for social inclusion, such as Lim Shin Hui, Low Mee Li, Chung H'ng Tsin and Malaysia International Dance Organization, who worked/work with wheelchair dancers, as well as Hands Percussion who worked with deaf people. However, their voice is less heard, and their stories are less documented in local performing arts studies because they are not in the mainstream. This article acknowledges the initial and humble steps by DSDT in the social inclusion movement for disabled dancers, and there is more to be documented in the field.

There are a few ideas that could address the systemic barriers mentioned above. The organisation of an educational awareness movement via workshops, seminars, and training

programmes within the dance community and society can be done to inform both dancers and the broader public about the obstacles faced by disabled dancers. The educational awareness movement needs to encourage dialogue and reflection on how ableism and discrimination manifest in dance and work toward creating a more inclusive and equitable environment for all dancers. The educational awareness movement could also promote generic language that encourages inclusivity and avoids stigmatising or marginalising disabled dancers. In terms of representation matters, dance organisations need to ensure that disabled dancers are represented in marketing materials, performances, and media coverage of dance events. Dance festival curators will possibly diversify programming to include works by choreographers with disabilities and feature disabled dancers in leading roles. This not only provides opportunities for disabled dancers to showcase their talent but also challenges stereotypes and expands perceptions of what is possible in dance. Policymakers, development practitioners, and related NGO workers could play a major role in the advocacy for policy changes and funding to support programmes and initiatives that promote inclusivity and accessibility in dance. This may involve lobbying government agencies, arts organisations, and funding bodies to prioritise inclusive dance programmes and allocate resources accordingly. The arts premises need to ensure that the training and performance spaces are accessible to disabled dancers by implementing inclusive design principles in the properties. Learning from DSDT, fostering collaborative partnerships between dance organisations, disability advocacy groups, and community organisations to promote inclusivity and accessibility in dance is strategic to leverage the resources and expertise to create more opportunities for disabled dancers. At the same time, establishing mentorship programmes and support networks by pairing body-abled dancers and dancers with disabilities can provide valuable support, guidance, and encouragement.

The earlier mentioned potential solutions address the systemic barriers faced by disabled dance artists who are barred from the mainstream and whose rights should be heard, which has become a big national concern. This matter has not yet been discussed either in the studies of performing arts or related to people with disabilities.

There is still a long distance in the journey to social inclusion for disabled artists. As a final note, we should kickstart to create a disabled-friendly environment that can encourage disabled dancers to create, perform, and participate in the wider scope of society to construct their own identity as artists that eventually could generate income and become the source of empowerment.

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