Choreographing the disabled spectator: Disrupting audience expectations in *Dancer* and *rampa landscape*

Abstract

Representation of 'differing bodyminds' in dance has expanded how dancing bodies are imagined. Examining two performances in Helsinki, Finland, *Dancer* and *rampa landscape: lazy, late, absent* through collaborative autoethnography we consider in what ways these works might choreograph for disabled spectators. We argue that choreography addressing disability and neurodivergence that does not consider the diverse access needs of spectators, risks creating hermeneutical injustice. This occurs when individuals experience harm due to their inability to understand or articulate their own experiences. Hermeneutical injustice is characterized by inequitable access to disability knowledge and a declarative approach to access where performances, venues and artists claim to be accessible for spectators without attention to what is necessary for access. Through this process, spectators without access needs have more access to the choreographic knowledge of disability. We alternate our experiences of these performances with reflections on spectator access and draw on framing materials to provide context. We focus on how the performance choreographs for disabled spectators – relating our own embodied experiences and observations as audience members. Ultimately, cripping choreography cannot just involve onstage representation; it must consider and welcome the disabled spectator.

Keywords: choreography, spectatorship, disability, relaxed performance, cripping, Finland

Introduction

In the last 30 years, the representation of 'differing body-minds' in dance has expanded how dancing bodies are imagined (Albright 2010; Van Goidsenhoven et al. 2022). The international disability arts movement emerged in the early 1980s and was closely connected to the disability rights movement (Solvang 2012). In Finland, the disability rights movement emerged among university students in the 1970s. Shortly thereafter, a cross-disability organization, Threshold Association (Kynnys ry), was established, aligning itself closely with the global disability rights movement (Katsui 2020). Companies of dancers with disabilities have emerged all over the globe, such as Sins Invalid and Dancing Wheels (United States), Candoco (United Kingdom), Propeller Dance (Canada) and Spinn (Sweden). In Finland, the dance group Rajat'on for persons with different mobilities was founded in 1993 as a branch of the course called 'Special Groups and Dance' at the Turku School of Art and Communication (Arts Academy at the Turku University of Applied Sciences since 1996). Since then, dance involving disabled artists has continued to develop. Starting in 2004, the Keskuspuisto Vocational College in Helsinki metropolitan area (now Live Vocational College) has offered vocational education in dance for students 'special needs' with a focus on contemporary dance (Väätäinen 2023: n.pag.). In Finland, the terminology regarding disability varies, but the phrase 'a person with special needs' is frequently employed to encompass a wide range of accommodations, impairments and disabilities. This is the term used by Live Vocational College.

Over the last decades, dance artists and collectives continue to bring unique impairment experiences to their productions. Slow progress has been made for spectators with access needs as venues around the world have developed and continue to develop practical interventions to address audience access. Ellcessor defines access as 'an individual's ability to engage meaningfully with a medium/technology and its content' (2016: 6). In the case of this study, access refers to the spectators' ability to engage meaningfully with choreographic content. Although everyone has access needs, Hamraie situates access knowledge, the work of 'knowing and making access' (2016: 5) as something arising from disability communities and demonstrates that access addressing 'everyone' is a way of erasing and decentring disabled people. While some research in theatre investigates audience access (Fryer and Cavallo 2022; Simpson 2018), dance research has focused on representations of disabled dancers (e.g. Ames 2015; Kuppers 2001, 2015; Whatley 2010) and dance training (e.g. Aujla and Redding 2013, 2014; Brand et al. 2011; Cheesman 2011; Østern and Øyen 2015). Artists and audiences exist

in a symbiotic relationship. Hadley (2020) argues for aesthetic allyship which shifts access towards new aesthetic outcomes. Consequently, in choreographic practices, both the representation on stage and audience access play equally important roles.

Choreography that engages disabled audiences must consider a wide variety of experiences and access needs. Therefore, we primarily use 'spectator' to reflect individual audience members (Phillips 2011). This is to acknowledge that audiences, particularly those that include disabled people, are not homogenous. To explore disabled spectatorship, we examine two performances through our own experiences as spectators: *Dancer* by choreographer Janina Rajakangas and *rampa landscape: lazy, late, absent* (later *rampa landscape*) by rampa productions, both staged in Helsinki, Finland, in autumn 2023. We chose these performances because they were about disability and were part of the mainstream arts programming, followed by media and audiences in Helsinki.

Dancer centred neurodiversity and was choreographed by non-disabled choreographer with an ensemble including neurodivergent dancers. *rampa landscape* was developed and performed by artists who describe themselves variously as '[d]isabled, sick, ill, in pain, deviant, crazy, not-abled-anymore, exhausted, traumatized, useless' (Baltic Circle A n.d.: par. 21) and 'crip' (Baltic Circle A n.d.: par. 31). The language of disability is complex and changes depending on the local context. All the words used by *Dancer* and *rampa landscape*, however, signal a resistance to normative practices that place value on some bodies and minds over others. Through *Dancer* and *rampa landscape*, we consider how choreographic choices and physical environment of performance choreographs for disabled spectatorship, particularly for spectators who have access needs. In the analysis, we use hermeneutical injustice as a conceptual tool to examine the potentialities of creating inaccessible performance events. Hermeneutical injustice is a form of epistemic injustice. It refers to the harm created when someone is unable to understand or express their own experiences. We determine that choreography that is not developed with disabled spectators in mind risks creating inequitable access to disabled people's stories and experiences, and a declarative approach to access where venues and artists declare that a performance is accessible without truly considering the audience's needs and the experiences. Cripping choreography is a practice which employs disability culture to disrupt normative performance expectations. We come to the conclusion that cripping choreography cannot simply mean onstage representation; it must consider and welcome the disabled spectator.

Choreography as a critical practice

In the recent decade, the conceptions of choreography have expanded (e.g. Leon 2022). They can 'describe processes of structuring and regulating movement, not necessarily only the movement of human beings, in highly diverse situations, both within and beyond theatre dance contexts' (Rouhiainen and Heimonen 2024: 19). We understand choreography as a creative practice of arranging movement in time and space that goes beyond dance practices. Viewing choreography this way, its methods and practices may apply to other ways of producing knowledge. With this broad understanding of the term, choreography is a 'creative act of setting the conditions for something to happen' (Kliën 2008: 40); it creates, transmits and communicates knowledge. Choreographing may refer to facilitating spaces or encounters, like performance events and the attendance of the audience members when this knowledge is produced collectively. Who does and has access to it is vital to its impact? Choreography, like other forms of knowledge, is political.

Similarly, Allsopp and Lepecki (2008) argue that contemporary performance can act as a place for questioning the practices they are part of by conceptualizing choreography as other than or additional to an arrangement of (bodily) movements. This broader understanding questions who is allowed or able to move and *under what circumstances* become relevant. Whose mobility is supported or prohibited in society? Drawing from these definitions, we understand choreography as a critical and reflexive way to work beyond bodies of movement, in relation to architectural spaces and conventions embedded in artistic processes and productions. In the analysis, we examine how choreography facilitates these encounters in the theatrical space and with the (disabled) spectators in it.

Recognizing the histories of disability/crip art

Like choreography, disability arts and crip arts are broad and contested categories. Regardless of whether artists position themselves in connection to disability art, there is a history of art by disabled people for their community (Kuppers 2014). Therefore, we argue that choreographing around disability without engaging the history of disability arts risks perpetuating hierarchies of knowledge. This risk is particularly present in mainstream choreographic productions, where non-disabled ideas and practices often hold more power than those of disability communities. Even though there are multiple definitions of disability and crip arts, understanding who is

creating the work and who is in the audience is essential. Barnes (2003) and Solvang (2012) divide the international disability arts movement into two stages, with the first characterized by disabled people making art for disabled people to develop pride through shared experiences (Barnes 2003).

In contrast, the second stage of the disability arts movement has seen disabled artists strive to be included in mainstream arts (Solvang 2012). Conversely, Sandahl does not make a similar distinction between different stages and states, '[d]isability art is created by and for disabled people, not merely about disabled people, and is accessible' (2018: 86). For Sandahl, considering a disabled audience and the diversity of experiences and access needs within the audience is essential. In Finland, there has been an ongoing debate about using the term 'disability art' as an all-encompassing term for all artistic practices that include disabled artists. Therefore, Väätäinen (2023) suggests (in relation to dance) that disability dance should be used only in relation to dance works that take disability as their subject. The two performances analysed in this article centre disability and neurodiversity and call for the use of the term disability/crip art.

Research on disability arts has often assumed a non-disabled audience. Garland-Thompson (2009) theorizes the roles of the *starer* (the person staring) and the *staree* (the person receiving the stare) as central to the relationship between non-disabled and disabled people. Staring is often motivated by the desire to understand the unknown, the *staree* who is often othered (perceived as different from the *starer*). Whatley (2007, 2010) discusses spectatorship in disability and dance in two articles. While Whatley (2007, 2010) does acknowledge disabled viewers of disability dance, her schematics of viewing strategies tend to presume non-disabled viewers who are unfamiliar with the movement of disabled dancers. The presumed spectator in disability performances significantly impacts how the audience experience is choreographed. We argue that the experience of disabled spectators should also be choreographed, which can be challenging when working with non-disabled allies and organizations.

Disability art can include non-disabled allies, but allyship can be challenging to navigate. Hadley uses the terms 'artist-lead "disability arts" practice' vs. 'ally-lead "arts and disability" practice' (2020: 180). All these practices involve disabled artists but with very different approaches to disability and the spectator. Often, spectators are assumed to be non-disabled or without access needs. Without access to the choreographic process, we cannot know for certain, but we see *rampa landscape* as an example of disabled-led work and *Dancer* as an example of ally-led work. Ally-led work may take disability as its subject without knowledge of the history and ethics of the international disability arts movement.

rampa landscape positions itself within the disability arts movement through its use of the term 'rampa' (a Finnish word for crip). Like the first stage of the disability arts movement, 'crip' or 'rampa' is explicitly politicized. For Sandahl, cripping is something that 'spins mainstream representations or practices to reveal able-bodied assumptions and exclusionary effects' (2003: 37). Crip has been further theorized by McRuer (2013) and others such as Fritsch (2012) who proposes that to crip is to desire what disability disrupts. Though Sandahl (2003) applied cripping to performers, we argue for cripping choreography for disabled spectators. Cripping choreography provides a platform to consider the ways crip performance and choreographic practices can disrupt oppressive normative assumptions of who is in the audience and how they engage with choreography. Or, more poetically, how can choreography desire a disabled spectator?

Hermeneutical injustice, a conceptual tool in revealing hierarchies of experiences

As stated above, choreography creates, transmits and communicates knowledge. Who has access to knowledge production is a question of justice? As authors, we argue that contemporary practices of disability arts, which often involve disabled artists performing for audiences that are assumed not to have access needs, may constitute a form of epistemic injustice. As Fricker lays out in her famous book on the topic, epistemic injustice is injustice related to knowledge. Hermeneutical injustice is one of its forms in which 'the subject is rendered unable to make communicatively intelligible something which it is particularly in his or her interests to be able to render intelligible' (Fricker 2007: 162).[1] To make sense of their experiences, including injustice, someone needs to be able to understand these experiences. Being denied access to knowledge in this sense-making process is hermeneutical injustice. Oppressed groups can be denied access to knowledge because broader society cannot understand their experiences as oppression or because they are denied access to places and resources that enable them to understand their own experiences.

The international disability arts movement has historically used disability arts as a form of consciousness-raising by sharing stories and experiences so that artists and audiences may recognize their shared experiences and oppression (Solvang 2012). Here, we argue that choreography that does not account for spectators with access needs constitutes a form of hermeneutical injustice. This particular hermeneutical injustice is exemplified by two traits:

1. Inequitable access to disabled artists' knowledge.
2. A declarative approach to access.

Inequitable access to disabled people's stories and experiences. In developing hermeneutical injustice, Fricker (2007) draws upon a number of examples from the feminist movement. She uses the example of workplace sexual harassment in 1950s America, where, due to the prevailing social attitudes of the time, neither the women experiencing harassment nor the men harassing can articulate these experiences as harassment. Neither party can understand or articulate the injustice of their experiences. What is striking is that in the case of disabled artists performing for audiences who are assumed to be non-disabled or not to have access needs, the hermeneutical injustice goes even further. In such cases, spectators without access needs have more access to disabled artists' choreographic knowledge of disability experiences than those with access needs that need to be met to attend performances. Spectators without access needs may lack the cultural knowledge to fully access the choreographic disability knowledge. Fricker (2007), however, draws attention to the inequitable effects of hermeneutic injustice. Hermeneutic injustice is often not a 'significant disadvantage' (Fricker 2007: 151) to those who already possess material and social power. Following this, spectators with access needs are more likely to be significantly disadvantaged by venues and artists that create barriers, preventing them from accessing disability knowledge about their own impairment and access experiences.

A declarative approach to access. Numerous scholars and activists have drawn attention to the potential dangers of treating access as a checklist (Dolmage 2017; Mingus 2011). Both Titchkosky (2011) and Dolmage (2017), for instance, investigate the use of access checklists in universities and found that checklists were shared on institutions' websites to signal access and inclusion. There was, however, no way of knowing if instructors used these access checklists, nor any way for students to raise concerns if these forms of access were not put in place or if they needed other forms of access. Access checklists on university websites are a declaration of access that may or may not exist in practice. Similarly, contemporary performance often declares its access, articulated through marketing and pre-performance information. These declarations, however, have uncertain or limited material reality. Access exists more as a statement of intention rather than as something enacted by artists and venues.

Recognizing the risks of hermeneutic injustice in contemporary performance by and with disabled artists does not erase the complexity of having diverse spectators with varied access needs in a space. Access clash occurs when one person's access needs create inaccessibility for another person. Access needs, however, do not exist within a vacuum. They exist within a

broader societal context that privileges access for some people over others. As Henner (2023) suggests, ethical engagement with conflicting access needs requires attention to those whose access needs are more often met in the broader societal context, and a conscious decision to prioritize those whose access needs are not often met.

Below, we explore the potential hermeneutic justice and injustice for spectators with access needs engaging with choreography. We consider *Dancer* by choreographer Janina Rajakangas and *rampa landscape* by rampa productions, from the perspective of spectators with access needs. These two particular performances and their relationship to spectators with access needs exemplify broader trends we have seen in our respective countries (Finland, the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States).

Collaborative autoethnography: Layering individual experiences onto broader contexts

We use collaborative autoethnography (CAE) as a method to explore the spectator experiences in the performances. Autoethnography (AE) is 'a qualitative research method that utilises ethnographic methods to bring cultural interpretation to autobiographical data of researcher with the intent of understanding self and its connection to others' (Chang 2008: 56). Autoethnography starts with the researcher's personal experience (*auto*) and aims to describe this experience analytically and systematically (*graphy*) to understand it in wider cultural context (*ethno*) (Ellis and Bochner 2000; Chang 2008; Ellis et al. 2011; Lapadat 2017). In contrast to AE, which focuses on one perspective, CAE offers an option to multiply and (possibly) diversify experiences on the research topic. It is simultaneously collaborative, autobiographical and ethnographic. Even though it dwells in the researcher's self-world, it also builds upon working together, layering each other's stories and aiming towards a common goal utilising multiple perspectives (Chang et al. 2012). In AE and CAE, personal experiences are intertwined with political and cultural norms and expectations. Self-reflection in the research process makes it possible to identify and examine the interfaces where personal and social life meet (Ellis et al. 2011).

Erlikh and Hannuksela are spectators with access needs who attended performances of *Dancer* and *rampa landscape*. In the spirit of CAE, we (Erlikh and Hannuksela) relate our experiences and reflect on them with Acton, a neurodivergent relaxed performance user. Relaxed performances are a collection of practices that involve providing comprehensive

performance information and relaxing expectations of audience behaviour, particularly the requirement that audiences are silent and still, to make performances welcoming to neurodivergent, disabled and other spectators (Thom 2016).

In the theatre...

Our experiences as spectators (Erlikh and Hannuksela) of Dancer and rampa landscape provide the specificity that grounds our exploration of choreography for disabled spectators. Here, we alternate our experiences of these performances with reflections on spectator access. We also draw upon framing materials such as programme notes and websites to provide context to our experiences. We focus on how the performance choreographs for disabled spectators - relating our own embodied experiences and observations as audience members rather than analysing the specifics of the choreography presented on stage.

Dancer

Riina

The premiere of Dancer *was on Friday, after a relatively intensive week. I met Sydney in the foyer of the Kiasma Theatre. Like always, the audience was full of colleagues and friends from performing arts. I was thrilled seeing young neurodivergent, professionally trained dancers on stage in Kiasma Theatre, one of the prestigious venues for contemporary performance in Helsinki felt like a significant change for Finnish dance.*

Dancer (*Tanssija* in Finnish) by Janina Rajakangas Project is the final part of the performance trilogy aiming to dismantle the patriarchy in everyday life. In the programme notes of the performance, choreographer Rajakangas states:

> It started from a need to be able to do more diverse and inclusive work as a choreographer. I live now and have lived in my childhood in a neurodiverse family. These experiences have raised the need to process the concept of being a dancer in a neurodiverse working group.
>
> (Janina Rajakangas Project n.d.: par. 1)

Dancer was choreographed with neurodivergent performers and engaged with themes of oppression in patriarchal societies. The piece included dancers who have graduated or are currently studying at the Live Vocational College. The production was co-produced by CODA Oslo International Dance Festival and Zodiak-Centre for New Dance (a venue and producer of

contemporary dance). Zodiak emphasizes neurodiversity through their marketing copy for *Dancer*. They state, '[i]n the creative process, the needs and experiential knowledge of the neurodivergent dancers has fed the choreographic process' (Zodiak n.d.: par. 8), and twice call it, 'a neurologically inclusive work of art' (Zodiak n.d.: pars 1, 5).

Neurodivergent as a term refers to having 'a mind that functions in ways which diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of "normal"' (Walker 2021: 37). This is in contrast to neurotypical, which refers to people whose minds function in ways that society deems normal. The language of neurotypical and neurodivergent comes from the neurodiversity paradigm developed by autistic communities in the 1990s (Botha et al. 2024). The neurodiversity paradigm rejects the pathologization of neurodivergent people and asserts that the dynamics of oppression for neurodivergent people are similar to those of other oppressed people (Walker 2021). While Walker (2021) does not specifically name this, the dynamics of oppression often include exclusion from public spaces, such as performance spaces.

Riina

Before entering the auditorium, one of the performers instructed us on the organization of the performance space and how the audience could make themselves comfortable, highlighting that the performance is 'rento esitys -tyyppinen*' ('relaxed performance type').*[2] *I am always delighted to experience performances considering the audience's access needs. It is still rare in Finland. The oral instructions are a lot to take in while entering the space. People are moving around, and I got distracted. The only thing that stuck in my mind from the instructions is that there would be one particular performance where the audience was allowed to make noises. This left me a little confused. Maybe in this performance, I should sit silently on my spot after all.*

The detailed oral instructions highlighted that the performance had no sensory adaptation, earplugs were provided and the other exit in the theatre space would stay lit during the performance. Despite this offering, the transition from the foyer to the theatre was so swift that it gave audience members little time to consider the adjustments they might need in the performance. We acknowledge that, as the premiere, the instructions were given for the first time to a live audience, which could affect how they were given. Over time, this moment of explaining the accessibility features available before the performance may evolve as the performers' interaction with the audience shifts. Further, as a co-produced production, the delivery of the accessibility features may be entirely different in their future performances in other venues.

Riina

The auditorium in the Kiasma Theatre is very steep and the staircase has uneven steps. A colleague in a wheelchair wants to sit close to the stage, and he is guided through another exit. When we chose seats in the third row. I saw personnel removing our colleague's wheelchair from the space, due to the fire hazard, theatres tend to say, as he prefers sitting in the regular seat. That makes me feel very uncomfortable. It would be impossible for him to get out of space if needed.

The environment of the theatre, including their policies, impacts the access and audience experience. Having steep and unevenly built stairs as well as removing someone's mobility device impacts the spectators' access during a performance. By doing so, the venue prioritizes the potential exit of others over the safety and convenience of wheelchair users in emergency situations.

Relaxed performances are a form of access performance. The term describes a collection of practices that emerged around 2010 in England, France and the United States (Dupagne 2020) from the autism-friendly cinema movement (Kempe 2015). Relaxed performances were developed in response to the (sometimes violent) exclusion of autistic people, other neurodivergent people, people with learning disabilities and their families from live performances (Porter 2013). Today, relaxed performances take place all over the world. As an umbrella term, defining the parameters of relaxed performance is difficult (Halliday et al. 2021). Around the world, however, relaxed performance always involves a relaxing of expectations around audience behaviour (Dupagne 2019), as acknowledged in both *Dancer* and *rampa landscape*. The welcome to the performance usually makes clear the adjustments to expectations around audience behaviour, including encouraging audience members to move, make noise and come and go as they need (Thom 2016). Audiences who are quiet, still and remain in their seats for the entire performance are a relatively new phenomenon (Heim 2016; Simpson 2018). Yet, insistence on this particular way of engaging with performance and choreography excludes a wide range of people, neurodivergent and otherwise, from engaging with performance. If choreography must address questions of who can move under what circumstances, relaxed performances extend this question to spectators.

Riina

The performance feels intense from the beginning, and it becomes apparent that no sensory adaptations are made. The design, from light and sound to scenography, created a powerful affective space. I enjoy the repetitive movements of the performers. I interpret them as the inner struggles of the dancers, trying to fit in or find one's place in the group. Performers' experiences about exclusion act as a driving force for creating the choreography on stage. It is

difficult to predict when the sensory load in a performance overwhelms me. I notice the growing discomfort in me. The performance starts to feel too much, and I recall what possibilities were given to the audience to make themselves comfortable. 'You can move, stim, and change place. You can come in and out as you like'. In the middle of the performance, the performers leave the stage and start to climb the auditorium stairs. On both sides of the auditorium are staircases, which are now occupied by the dancers. Still sitting on my seat, I feel that the dancers block my way out. I wait until the other staircase empties and whisper to Sydney that I am not feeling well and I have to get out. Luckily, I know the space well. I head towards the other exit. No dancers blocking it. But it was not the one defined in the oral instructions. The door is locked. Finally, I get the door open with my shaky hands and rush towards the empty foyer to calm down.

Sydney

On the closing performance of Dancer*, nerve pain makes it so I can no longer feel my foot and leg. I stand on the stairs along the wall so I don't block anyone by standing. The bass of the music is so loud that even with earplugs, I notice that my body is physically being thumped, uncomfortably. Someone comes over and asks me to move so the dancers can come up the stairs. They point to a section for me to move to. I misunderstood, and they walk me through an empty aisle reserved for the dancers and point to a row for standing, where everyone is sitting. There are open spots in the centre, and I try to step over people. But the theatre is dark. I trip over a woman's foot and fall onto the bench seating. I notice my embarrassment due to my lack of balance and physical pain. The dancers move up the stairs, approaching audience members and getting close to those in the aisle seats. The other dancers on stage begin to sing 'Come as You Are' by Nirvana. I wonder who can come as they are? The dancers, the audience, the staff?*

Sensory adjustments in relaxed performances can include removing flashing lights and sudden loud noises, and softening the overall sound levels (Potter 2013). This adjustment is not always put in place, which happened in Dancer. Some theatres, particularly in the United Kingdom, have opted for what is sometimes called 'relaxed environment' or 'chilled' performances (Thom 2023: n.pag.). Given that between 6% and 15% of the population may experience sensory processing differences (Miller et al. 2017) and 94.5% of autistic people report sensory sensitivities (MacLennan et al. 2021), these interventions may actually be a crucial component of relaxed performance. If some spectators of Dancer experience pain and are overwhelmed by the sensory intensity of the piece, they do not have the same access to the choreographic knowledge of the performance as a spectator without sensory sensitivities. As

Hannuksela points out in her description of her experiences, the relaxed approach to audience behaviour in this performance allowed spectators with sensory sensitivities (or other access needs) the option to leave the performance rather than remain in the performance space, in distress, for the entire performance. At the same time, positioning dancers on the theatre's stairs, removing spectators' mobility tools and keeping the lights low create an environment that limits spectators' ability to adjust their viewing experience. This signals that the audience access has not been considered crucial from the beginning of the choreographic process, and the assumed spectator does not need these adjustments.

Through the marketing materials for *Dancer*, it was unclear what the neurologically inclusive performance means in this particular context. After experiencing the work, it becomes evident that the focus of the choreographic process was in exploring accessible working methods with neurodivergent dancers, not an accessible performance. The process centred on the neurodivergent performers, the care and attention does not, however, extend to consideration of how choreographic choices may impact spectators, especially those with sensory sensitivities. We do not know what conversations took place between the choreographer and the venue around access. However, *Dancer* declares its intention by calling the performance a 'relaxed performance type', without critically considering the practicalities of a relaxed performance.

rampa landscape: lazy, late, absent

Riina

I was sick since Friday, so it was safest to stay home. I was pleased that there was an option to see the performance online. Lying in bed, sneezing, I watched my computer screen at how the audience entered the performance space. It would have been a pleasure to be on-site, which is usually part of the charm of this festival. Its events take place in various locations, some unconventional for performing arts. This time rampa landscape *takes place in the Iiris Centre, designed for people with visual impairments but also actively used by other organizations and NGOs. The performance begins with long and detailed instructions regarding what is to happen. The audience is encouraged to make themselves comfortable in the space. Simultaneously, the instructions scroll in the text on the screen in Finnish and English – one language on one side and another on the other. I noted that by considering and*

negotiating their needs, performers also consider the audience's needs. This way, they encourage the audience to do whatever they need to feel comfortable.

Sydney

Lying in a landscape of stacked mattresses, hanging chairs, pillows, bean bags, big aisles with spaces for wheelchairs and additional moveable chairs, I wiggled on the mattress. I was unafraid of making noise as the performers were modelling this by getting up, stepping out of the performance space and finding a new seat in the audience. As my ankle throbbed, I laid back on some pillows and looked up at the ceiling. I thought back to what my wheelchair-using friend said as he transferred onto a mattress when we arrived, 'to be like this is sooo good', and he was right. It felt like my first experience as a spectator in Finland that thought of crips.

The performance *rampa landscape* was created by rampa productions and produced by the Baltic Circle Theatre Festival. rampa productions is a Helsinki-based crip artistic working group with artist-facilitator Isa Hukka and artists Aku Meriläinen, Una Auri, Juti Saari, Vishnu Vardhani Rajan and Sophia Mitiku. The performance was a part of the four-year initiative *Coming Stage* of the festival. This initiative is funded by the Kone Foundation and aims to make stages more diverse by establishing sustainable practices in performance art in collaboration with marginalized communities (Baltic Circle D n.d.). The rampa productions collective already performed at the 2022's festival (then named Rampa Associations). According to the Festival website (Baltic Circle A n.d.), the artists had three goals this year. They aimed 'to crip the structures of performing arts in the context at hand' (Baltic Circle A n.d.), to work in dialogue with the festival organizers and to share some of their findings in the performance with the audience. By articulating their threefold aims, it is apparent that the artists and the performance operated in the sphere of expanded choreography. The choreographic work included the negotiations of the accessible conditions for both the artistic work and the performance event. This way the choreography questions and expands – crips – the practices they are part of.

Sydney

As I close my eyes, the performers stop and make an announcement about explicit sexual discussions, saying this was an option to leave the theatre. As they pause, someone by the door raises their hand. A performer acknowledges them, and they announced they would leave now to go lay out the dinner. It didn't feel staged, but on reflection, I think this modelling of leaving the theatre might have been set. Modelling access and leaving, showing others I am leaving, you don't have to do it alone, come with me. Though no one did, I might have if I had been uncomfortable.

As the performer started, I was lulled into relaxation by their story in Finnish. A friend whispered in my ear that the captions were on the wall, and I turned my head to watch the projections. Halfway through, another performer stopped their rapid speech and asked if they could wait for the captions to catch up and if they could speak slower. This stop-and-go is not perfect but models that access is always a conversation, never a perfect finished product.

The integration of access in *rampa landscape* is similar to the first stage of the disability art movement in which disabled artists experimented with access as an integral part of the performance (Kendrick 2011). 'Aesthetics of access' was initially developed by Graeae Theatre, in London, to describe their approach to performance access where access like sign language interpretation, captioning and audio description are 'a creative force central to the performance' (Graeae n.d.: par. 2). Kendrick goes further, suggesting that '[t]here's the sense that these aesthetics of access are also a critique of the banality of accessibility usually offered in theatre production' (2011: 179). In our experience, mainstream dance productions often treat access as an afterthought. In choreography striving to welcome a diversity of spectators, like *rampa landscape*, disabled spectators and their access needs are central to the creation of the work, influencing the aesthetics of the performance.

To show what is required to choreograph this way, rampa productions documented their decision-making process around access in the performance by featuring a recorded interview between Hukka and Hanna Parry, the artistic director of the Baltic Circle Festival. This discussion emphasizes the significance of making access labour in theatre productions visible. In the dialogue, accessed through an English translation handout, Parry articulates shedding light on the access work offers an opportunity for critical discussion, stating, 'making the things visible [...] gives us the chance to talk about those and modify them' (rampa productions 2024: 3). This way, the discussion about access becomes an explicit part of the performance.

By bringing attention to the negotiations surrounding the often overlooked access labour within the production, rampa productions challenges the standardized practices of access in theatre. By rendering the access and the process to put it in place visible and tangible, they choreograph for a disabled spectator. *rampa landscape* reveals the complex forces that shape the way choreography is shared: a consideration of the disabled spectator in the artistic process; the constraints and affordances of the performance space, and the role of the presenting organization. This affirmation of considering one's access needs is also explicitly stated on the website:

> [T]he performance is something else than traditional. When designing the audience experience, we have paid attention to extensive accessibility and care. We encourage the audience to witness the work in ways that suit them: How to experience a performance without leaving your bodymind in the coatroom?
>
> (Baltic Circle A n.d.: par. 2)

At each point of audience engagement, rampa productions communicated about access. A summary of accessibility features was outlined on the production's main website page, with additional detailed information on another accessibility page. The website clearly stated which accessibility features were not available, such as sign language interpretation. They also asked people to be fragrance-free, which could not be guaranteed. Guide dogs were not allowed due to allergies. Accessibility features included late entry, coming and going, moving throughout the performance space, earplugs, an induction loop and no flashing lights, haze or sudden sounds. The audience was also encouraged to e-mail with any accessibility questions or feedback (Baltic Circle B n.d.).

Lazard emphasizes that, '[t]he way organizations and their staff communicate with their public is the primary mode of accessibility in non-profit arts spaces' (2019: 17) and that, '[t]he only thing more inaccessible than an inaccessible space is not providing information [...] Listing access information requires that institutions address what they can accommodate and, especially, what they can't accommodate' (2019: 32). rampa productions are unflinching in their commitment to clearly communicating who they are and are not welcoming. They communicate about the access they offer multiple times – through the production website, and through the performance itself, to ensure that their audience knows what and what not to expect. Similarly, in *Dancer*, audience access is listed, but in a less specific manner on the web pages, programme notes and then shared orally before the performance. When comparing these two performances, the significance of venues' engagement with accessibility becomes apparent. As Karhunen points out, more fundamental changes are needed in Finland. Venues and other art institutions should take responsibility and commit to making these changes even after the tailored funding or specific projects end (Karhunen 2020).

rampa landscape is deeply concerned with audience access. There were multiple sensory ways to engage with the performance, through spoken words, captions, audio descriptions and even a touch tour to allow the audience a tactile experience of the space and costumes. The performers are attentive to the access experience, as demonstrated by the performer who paused to let the captioning catch up. In addition, they are aware of the power of audience norms of

sitting upright, still and silent. The power of these norms may mean that audiences doubt the truth of the offer to lie down, move, make noise and come and go as needed. By having performers model the range of acceptable behaviour within the performance, they make it clear to the audience that the invitations are real. This constant negotiation between different access needs and modelling how they could be met in the shared space is a choreographic choice, an invitation to 'set conditions' for everyone to choreograph their own participation in that given moment of the performance. By offering spectators with access needs the opportunity to choreograph their participation and by engaging with access in the performance, *rampa landscapes* choreographs access knowledge into the performance. It also enables a wide range of spectators with access needs to engage with the broader knowledge that the disabled performers and creators share in the performance.

Choreographing hermeneutic injustice

Our experiences with *Dancer* and *rampa landscape* are not isolated. Between the three of us, we have seen choreography by disabled performers in multiple countries and in multiple languages. We have many stories of places where we felt welcomed, where care and attention to audience access needs had been enacted. We all have stories of the reverse, where we came to the performance expecting that our access and that of our friends and community had been considered and been bitterly disappointed.

Even though performances like *Dancer* aim to consider disabled spectators, the way they are staged and performed still assumes that audiences do not have access needs. Access is not considered as a starting point for the choreographic process. This can result in the exclusion of disabled spectators. In their vignettes, Riina and Sydney spend much of the performance of *Dancer* managing sensory overload, negotiating the inaccessible space and worrying about their access and that of their communities. Under those circumstances, meaningful engagement with the choreography becomes difficult, even impossible. The inevitable end point of this exclusion is that disabled audiences are unable to access the ways of understanding disability experiences that performances like this explore. Disabled audiences are thereby subject to hermeneutical injustice, unable to access knowledge about disability experiences.

Choreography is a form of knowledge. The encounters it facilitates transmit knowledge. The work of creating *Dancer* and *rampa landscape* developed new knowledge about working with disabled performers and disability experiences. Their performances, one in a prestigious,

mainstream venue and one in a disability community space share knowledge about disabled people's experiences. In *Dancer*, the choreographic choices (having dancers moving in the aisles, the intense lights and sound, and darkness in the audience space) and the venue (ascending auditorium and staff that removed a spectator's mobility tool) still assumed that the community receiving that knowledge had no access needs. In *rampa landscape*, the choreographic choices assume that the audience has access needs, and yet *rampa landscape* does not account for all access. But instead of giving up, they put in place the kinds of access they could make possible. Further, they are clear and upfront about who they exclude, as in the case of spectators who need sign language interpretation.

Examining these two performances leads us to suggest that the contemporary turn towards performance that engages with subjects of disability while assuming that the audience mainly consists of spectators without access needs is a very specific form of hermeneutical injustice. In this form of hermeneutical injustice, spectators who do not need access to attend performances have more access to the choreographic knowledge of disabled artists than spectators who have access needs. Spectators with access needs are excluded from choreography that could affirm their experiences, speak back to the discrimination they experience and offer ways of imagining the world otherwise. Further, this form of hermeneutical injustice often involves artists and venues declaring that a performance or a venue is accessible, without practically enacting it.

Conclusion

In this article, we bring together our experiences as spectators with access needs to examine performances of *Dancer* and *rampa landscape: late, lazy, absent*. Both these performances take disability and neurodiversity as their subject matter and their choreography shares knowledge about disability experience. Examining the choreographic choices for the dance on stage, as well as analysing the performances themselves, is not part of the research. Rather, we focus on the experience of spectators. Following Hadley's (2020) definitions, *Dancer* is a performance created through an ally-led arts and disability practice. The choreographer Rajakangas positions herself as an ally, while some dancers identify as neurodivergent. In *rampa landscape*, we see a disabled artist-led disability art performance. In each of the performances, the choreographic practice was initiated from a very different viewpoint and was resourced differently.

Being ally-led, *Dancer* took place in a mainstream venue, offering opportunities for neurodivergent dancers to participate in professional, mainstream performances. We want to acknowledge that this enhances publicity and potential for future work for the dancers. The webpage for *Dancer* on Zodiac Centre's site and ensemble's online writing (e.g. Lindell 2023) emphasized the care taken around access in the choreographic process. The performance declared that it was a relaxed performance and yet made a number of choreographic choices (the lighting and sound, the dancers moving the audience) that limited the choice and mobility of the spectators. The physical space of the theatre and its policies (particularly the decision to remove a spectators' mobility tool) also limited the spectators' mobility and choice. In contrast, *rampa landscape* was created and performed by disabled artists (Baltic Circle C n.d.). The performance considers diverse spectators as well as making their decision-making around access transparent. Embedding dialogue discussing the work done around access into the performance makes it clear that rampa productions considered access throughout their creation process.

Access cannot be an optional element for the choreographic process but rather should serve as a foundational starting point. Speaking of animated film, Greenberg suggests, 'making spectatorship accessible to diverse audiences is not only a question of the physical screening conditions but derives from taking into consideration diverse viewers and recognizing their differences of experience from the very beginning of the creative process' (2023: 170). Not considering the disabled spectator risks creating hermeneutical injustice where spectators with access needs are denied access to art that engages with their own lived experiences.

Choreographers (and dancers, designers, producers, etc.) must assume that performances will be attended by disabled spectators with access needs. Choreography should desire a disabled spectator. It should be cripped. By cripping choreography, choreographers must consider not just the dancers they work with, but who might be in their audience. This might lead to questioning the conventions and the choreographic choices made to enable spectators to engage with the performance. This is not the venue's or the choreographer's responsibility alone but should be a collaborative effort to consider the multiple ways disability experiences and access may interact with the performance and the performance space.

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Notes

1. We want to acknowledge that Fricker has been critiqued by philosopher Tremain (2017) for failing to consider disability in her examples of epistemic injustice. Despite Fricker's failures to account for disability, we assert that disability communities regularly experience epistemic injustice.
2. This directly translates to 'relaxed performance type'. The English version of the framing materials stated that 'all performances are in accordance with a relaxed performance concept'. It is important to note that translations between Finnish and English often create confusion, and this is one example of such confusion. The way concepts translate into other languages can already create unclear promises about accessibility.

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