

Reimagining Virtuosity:

Discovering artistic excellence within disability dance aesthetics and practices

Molly Joyce

Disability Studies, City University of New York School of Professional Studies

DSAB 621 Disability and the Humanities

Dr. Cassandra Evans

December 15, 2020

Throughout artistic disciplines worldwide, there has been an increasing and vital presence of disability arts and an increasing resistance against normative notions of art-making and performance. Disability arts is seen across disciplines involving dance, literature, visual art, and Sutherland (2005) defines it as “art made by disabled people which reflects the experience of disability” (para. 2).

Within dance, disability has been cultivated to imagine new forms of physicality, sensation, and particularly virtuosity, evidenced by dancers including Marc Brew, Kayla Hamilton, and performance group Un-Label. Their practices redefine what skill and excellence mean within and beyond traditional movement, with Brew writing: “Disabled people have unique stories to tell and a different perspective on the world because of lived experiences and challenges,” he says. “This influences our making and the creative process, how and why we make work. It’s honest, it’s real, it’s diverse, it’s not pretending, and people relate to the work on a human level” (Searle, 2018, para. 3).

This paper will explore new virtuosities that resist normative notions in dance through a focus on a focus on three dance pieces ranging disability, aesthetic style, performative technique, and incorporation of accessibility, leading to a singular expression grounded in the disabled experience. As a disabled composer and performer, I have often experienced disability as something to be overcome and inspired by rather than appreciated for its creative offerings. I have longed to create a virtuosity unique to myself and based on physical absence, weakness, impairment, immovability, all of which are typically shunned in typical practices. Specifically within classical music, I feel that limited definitions of physicality and virtuosity are often

reinforced, promoting mastery based on extremely finite skill and showmanship rather than allowing a spectrum of abilities to emerge.

Therefore I investigate new and non-normative forms of virtuosity that disability offers, highlighting virtuosities learned from the three dancers and their respective pieces as case studies. I will highlight how each of these three works resists normative virtuosity and exemplifies: 1) Social Construction of Virtuosity: virtuosity occurring within relationships that connect various actors (David VanderHamm), 2) Inner (Leib) versus Outer (Körper) Body: Körper as the body seen by others, Leib the body one experiences (Carolien Hermans), 3) Realistic Cripple: Audience does not have to pity for the wound, it is as much design as substance (Leonard Kriegel), and 4) Narrative Prosthesis: disability as a crutch for “representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight” (Mitchell & Snyder, 2013, p. 224).

I. Marc Brew: *For Now, I am..*

Brew is a professional, ballet-trained dancer whose life significantly changed once he was involved in a car accident and became paralyzed from the chest down. *For Now, I am..* is the first time since the accident that Brew engages with his body on an intimate solo level, exploring themes of what it means to be broken, reborn, purified, and to reconcile being in the world in an entirely new way. Brew ultimately builds a dialogue with a transformed body, specifically without his wheelchair, and this case represents a personal interrogation of reinventing virtuosity for oneself (M. Brew, personal communication, December 8, 2020).

In relation to the social construction of virtuosity, *For Now, I am..* represents a “skill based on relation to material world in which the embodied object undertakes it” (VanderHamm,

2020, p. 288). Brew has a stage set-up with just himself and a large white sheet through which he interacts with throughout, along with an emphasis on lighting and projection to resemble a sterile, white hospital room in which he found himself following the car accident. Brew described this relationship as a “security blanket” that “made me feel secure and comfortable,” and how the journey through the piece he becomes more entwined in it (M. Brew, personal communication, December 8, 2020). Brew eventually breaks free from the fabric, and the skill to break away from it relates to virtuosity based on the material world he establishes for himself.

In relation to inner versus outer body, the focus on appearance is replaced by movement connected to self, with Brew embracing the self as he is, trauma and all, and with the Leib as imperfect. Brew incorporates an “aesthetic of difference” (Hermans, 2016, p. 16), and exposes the Leib’s values of scars, birthmarks, crookedness and more (p. 161). When he began working on the piece, Brew realized that it was not about his wheelchair, but rather about him and his body. He sought to explore how his body has transformed by the tragic life experience and trauma and how he had to rebuild from such experience. Brew wanted it to be an investigation, ultimately giving people permission to witness and view and question the body, bones, scars, and more (M. Brew, personal communication, December 8, 2020).

In relation to Leonard Kriegel’s realistic cripple concept, Brew’s accident claims “totality of condition and attention of audience” (Kriegel, 1987, p. 34). Brew’s disability is “neither his essence nor the reflection of his glory” but is simply there like the clothes he wears or food he eats (p. 37). Brew expressed the desire to create virtuous movement informed by his disability, exploring traveling across space as well as dragging one’s body and leaving it wrapped in the extensive fabric (M. Brew, personal communication, December 8, 2020).

In addition, Brew's work relates to narrative prosthesis in the narration of a disabled body through long-standing historical representation. Mitchell and Snyder (2013) articulate how nearly every culture views disability as a problem in need of a solution, and thus establishes "one of the major modes of historical address directed toward people with disabilities" (p. 222). Brew's work illustrates narration of the disabled body's meaning "through its longstanding historical representation as an overdetermined symbolic surface" (p. 234), ultimately offering a disabled body narrating its own movements, level of excellence, and new form of virtuosity.

II. Kayla Hamilton: *Nearly Sighted/unearthing the dark*

In *Nearly Sighted/unearthing the dark*, Kayla Hamilton reimagines dance from a visually-based to multi-sensorial experience, representing opposition to normative virtuosity and resisting emphasis on sight and expanding virtuosity to other senses. Hamilton de-centers normalized dance practice to embrace an inner-body aesthetic, allowing a new virtuosity to emerge through broadening our awareness of sightedness. Hamilton ultimately affords a unique virtuosity that allows audiences to question ocular assumptions about how bodies should dance, move, and be in the world.

Hamilton disrupts visual focuses by illustrating disability as not simply the opposite or absence of ability, but the "widespread practice of interrupting the word with some form of punctuation" (VanderHamm, 2020, p. 284). *Nearly Sighted/unearthing the dark* disrupts visual focuses of virtuosity with new sensory details, and although vision is not always necessary to experience the potential of virtuosity, VanderHamm (2020) expresses that "it continues to be particularly important as a way of unsettling the assumptions that people have" (p. 291). This specifically pertains to how dance can be accomplished, and Hamilton is therefore clearly

underlining what we perceive of virtuosity and dance altogether, as not only something to be seen but also felt, heard, and moved by.

With inner versus outer body, she is fostering the “Leib” of her body and countering normative dance focuses on the body as “Körper.” Hermans (2016) describes Körper as “the image of the body,” seen by others as a thing with physical qualities, while Leib is the body one experiences (p. 161). By abstracting the body with the lighted costume and further incorporation of accessibility, audio description, and lighting, Hamilton is offering a unique view and insight into her Leib, her “inner-felt, lived body” by questioning “cultural and normative standards of what a body should look and feel like” (p. 161).

Hamilton enacts the realistic cripple concept by having a deconstruction of the traditional divide between the performing artist and audience. Hamilton allows her “wound” or disability to not be viewed as an object of fear, charity or even the chief element in her fate (Kriegel, 1987, p. 37). Kriegel outlined such concept in relation to depiction of crippled characters in literature, and Hamilton’s dissolution of the artist/audience divide forces the audience to not have pity for or inspiration from her low-vision, but rather an equal recognition because her disability is “as much design as substance” (p. 37). Her disability informs the work’s artistic conception, production, and presentation of the work, and by inviting the audience into her sensory world Hamilton is breaking down the anticipated barrier between artist and audience and confronting ableist notions of sight and awareness.

Lastly, *Nearly Sighted/unearthing the dark* relates to narrative prosthesis in challenging cultural ideals of the “normal” body. Hamilton undermines one of the central assumptions of narrative prosthesis as disability foundational “to both cultural definition and to the literary

narratives that challenge normalizing prescriptive ideals” (Mitchell & Snyder, 2013, p. 225) and proves disability as “an important barometer by which to assess shifting values and norms imposed upon the body” (p. 225).

IV. Un-Label: *Gravity (and other attractions)*

Gravity (and other attractions) is a contemporary dance theatre performance created within the framework of Un-Label’s ImPArt project, which seeks to find new creative ways to allow all humans to have an equal experience of an artistic product (imPArt). Their primary question in undertaking the work was how to “use auxiliary means to become part of the performance, to become art themselves and to enrich the work of art through their own aesthetic possibilities?” (Greyson, 2019). *Gravity* originated from the idea of creating a theatre performance based on audio description, and in the descriptive language is both the inspiration and the spoken text of the performance. The description serves as the inspiration, verbal translation, and spoken text, and the work reconstructs the traditional stage to represent the confrontation and emergence of a Deaf and hearing person.

In regards to the social construction of virtuosity, the work relates to VanderHamm’s (2020) writing on “Accommodation does not remove individual effort or action; it provides the very structures through which people encounter their capacity to act” (p. 289). The accommodation of the description serves as the conceptual, procedural, and presentation for the work, ultimately allowing both artists and audiences alike to go beyond normative tropes of virtuosity and impressive performance where many assumptions are made of what the audience receives and does not receive in terms of artistic output.

The work relates to Hermans's writing on the inner versus outer body in emphasizing dance as "a social encounter" and where meanings are shared "with each other on a bodily level" (Hermans, 2016, p. 161). The audio description often represents the dancers' internal thoughts throughout the work, representing the intersection of internal and external narrative dialogue of their movement. With such phrases as "in our own time, in our own space, from our own perspective...we float...lose ourselves and our bodies as we lose our weight" (Greyson, 2019, p. 7) and "a barrier of silence is isolating me" (p. 10), resistance to overall gravity is represented and perhaps even a resistance to traditional virtuosity. It serves "to construct and deconstruct social meanings," having "the potential to create spaces in which fixed identities and normative standards suddenly become unstable and uncertain" (Hermans, 2016, p. 161), and contributes to the understanding the Leib as "the experience of sensing oneself as being sensed" (p. 161).

Furthermore, in relation to Leonard Kriegel's (1987) realistic cripple concept, the work illustrates the "wound as much design as substance" (p. 37) with the description at times seemingly guiding the choreographic movement, representing the dancers accepting "definition from outside the boundaries of his own existence" (p. 34). Lines such as "this is us walking different ways" (Greyson, 2019, p. 7) represent such illustration.

Additionally, the work relates to Mitchell and Snyder's (2013) writing on disability as narrative prosthesis in that the body becomes a "paramount device of characterization" (p. 234). Lines such as "you're standing next to me yet you're on the other side of the world...we have to break these invisible boxes" (Greyson, 2019, p. 10), perhaps represent the invisible boxes of that all-too-often divide disabled and nondisabled persons, and highlight how "disability serves as an interruptive force that confronts cultural truisms" (p. 223) and also how disability is used as a crutch upon which the narrative leans for its "representational power, disruptive potentiality, and

analytical insight” (p. 224). The work ultimately offers cross-disciplinary virtuosity with the poetic English audio description that is artistically integrated into the performance.

V. Conclusion

Within dance disability has been cultivated to imagine new forms of physicality, sensation, and particularly virtuosity, evidenced by dancers including Marc Brew, Kayla Hamilton, and performance group Un-Label. Their practices redefine what skill and excellence mean within and beyond traditional movement, and ultimately create new virtuosities that resist normative notions in dance are revealed, leading to a singular expression grounded in the disabled experience. The three works resist normative virtuosity and exemplify the social construction of virtuosity by virtuosity occurring within relationships that connect various actors, as theorized by David VanderHamm, inner (Leib) versus outer (Körper) as outlined by Carolien Hermans, Leonard Kriegel’s realistic cripple concept as theorized by, and narrative prosthesis as formulated by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder.

It is further interesting to reflect how the “realistic cripple” concept can perhaps be considered along with “inner v. outer body” ideas, in perhaps the realistic cripple realizing the wound/disability as much design as substance, can there in turn turn into the an outer realization of the inner body, of the inner body’s yearnings for its own artistic, virtuosic expressions. This leaves much to be explored within the realm of dance and further artistic forms, in truly creating original, new work from and through disability and not despite of, overcoming it, or inspired by such experience.

References

- Arika. (2019, April 13). *Nearly Sighted/unearthing the dark*. Arika. <https://arika.org.uk/programming/i-wanna-be-you-everywhere/programme/nearly-sighted/unearthing-dark>
- Brew, M. (2015). *For Now, I am...* Marc Brew Company. <http://www.marcbrew.com/productions/for-now-i-am>
- Greyson, M. (Writer). (2019). *Gravity (and other attractions)* [Script]. Un-Label.
- Hamilton, K. (2019). *Nearly Sighted*. Kayla Hamilton Projects. <https://www.khamiltonprojects.com/nearly-sighted>
- Hermans, C. (2016). Differences in itself: Redefining disability through dance. *Social Inclusion*, 4(4), 160-166. <https://doi:10.17645/si.v4i4.699>
- ImPArt. (n.d.). Retrieved December 14, 2020, from <https://un-label.eu/en/project/impart/>
- Kriegel, L. (1987). The cripple in literature. In A. Gartner & T. Joe (Eds.), *Images of the Disabled, Disabling Images* (pp. 31-46). Praeger.
- Kuppers, P. (2003). *Disability and contemporary performance*. Routledge.
- Mitchell, D., & Snyder, S. (2013). Narrative Prosthesis. In L. J. Davis (Ed.). *The Disability Studies Reader* (pp. 222-235). Routledge.
- Searle, T. (2018, July). Marc Brew, artistic director of Axis Dance, on being and dancing. *Dance Informa*. <https://dancemagazine.com.au/2018/06/the-australian-ballets-alice-topp-goes-from-corps-to-choreographer-in-verve/>
- Sutherland, A. (2005, July 1). What is Disability Arts?. *Disability Arts Online*. <https://www.disabilityartsonline.org.uk/what-is-disability-arts>

VanderHamm, D. (2020). "I'm just an armless guitarist": Tony Melendez, disability, and the social construction of virtuosity. *Journal of the Society for American Music*, 14(3), 280-307. <https://doi:10.1017/S1752196320000206>

Un-Label (2019). Gravity (and other attractions). Un-Label Performing Arts Company. <https://un-label.eu/en/project/gravity-and-other-attractions>