



The Kennedy Center

OPENING STAGES

A Quarterly Newsletter for People with Disabilities Pursuing Careers in the
Performing Arts

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James Johnson, Chairman

Michael Kaiser, President

Derek Gordon, Vice President of Education

Betty Siegel, Manager of Accessibility

Edited by Paul Kahn

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IN THIS ISSUE

From the Editor -- The relevance of our work

Gotta dance! -- A feature section on wheelchair dance

Profile of AXIS Dance Company

Interview with Judith Smith of AXIS Dance Company

Catching up with CandoCo Dance Company: an interview with Celeste Dandeker

People.

Willy Conley

Organizations

American Alliance for Theatre and Education

Training Programs.

Limited Vision and Unlimited Challenges: The Experiences of a Blind Acting Student

Resources

Putting Creativity to Work -- a book review

Grant writing workshops

Career exploration websites

Disability related scholarships



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FROM THE EDITOR

Since September 11 many artists and cultural organizations have questioned the relevance of their work. They wonder: if they are not fighting terrorism with guns, if they are not bandaging the wounds of innocent victims, are they important? Will the public think that they are important or will its support go to more "practical" work like that of the Red Cross?

In response, our cultural leaders have vigorously re-asserted the centrality of the arts to a civilized society. For instance, Dr. Barbara Grossman, Chair of the Department of Drama and Dance at Tufts University, stated in a recent speech to the Boston theatre community, "We have to raise consciousness about the importance of the arts. We have to make people truly understand that the arts are part of our living cultural heritage, that they are deeply related to the quality of life we experience every day, and that they are integral to a civil society.... The arts have the potential to bring us together across socioeconomic lines, increasing understanding and communication, breaking down barriers of race, culture, age, gender, sexual orientation, disability and income."

I agree with Dr. Grossman's comments. And, I would add that, at this critical time in our country, the contributions of artists with disabilities are particularly important. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the anthrax poisonings, the widespread job losses and stock declines, the brutality of war and the uncertainty of our ultimate ability to vanquish terrorism have all led to a pervasive malaise. Most Americans no longer feel as certain as they once did that they are masters of their own fate. They are more inclined to feel they are at the mercy of ominous forces.

The experience of people with disabilities resonates with this existential uncertainty. On a daily basis they experience fear of the uncontrollable biological processes that inexorably weaken their bodies. They know anxiety because of their reliance on machines and other people for their very existence. And, they are well acquainted with the arbitrary nature of fate.

In their work, artists with disabilities ask tough questions. What does independence really mean? Why do people fear differences so much? How can we come to terms with our human frailty? What does it take to live fully in the present? How can we respond creatively to the inevitability of change?



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Now, more than ever, the country needs these questions. It needs the searching debate for values, for the essence of our common humanity that these questions force us to confront.

Paul Kahn

GOTTA DANCE !

*Wheelchair dance, mixed ability dance or whatever you want to call it is a vibrant art form that creates new aesthetics and challenges perceptions about disability with striking immediacy. In this section **Opening Stages** presents conversations with the artistic directors of two outstanding dance groups -- AXIS Dance Company and CandoCo Dance Company -- and an in-depth look at AXIS. We hope these features set your wheels and your thoughts spinning.*

ABOUT AXIS DANCE COMPANY (adapted from the AXIS web site)

Since 1987, AXIS Dance Company has created an innovative body of work, which has received acclaim from an international audience. AXIS has performed at its home base in Oakland, California on tour throughout United States, as well as in Germany and Siberia. AXIS has become an internationally known resource for physically integrated dance and is one of a handful of companies setting standards for professionalism in this emerging field. Currently a 10 member ensemble under the co-artistic direction of Judith Smith and Nicole Richter, the Company repertory includes new and signature works by choreographers Stephen Petronio, Bill T. Jones, Joe Goode, Joanna Haigood, and Sonya Delwaide.

To date, AXIS Dance Company has created nearly 30 repertory works, two evening length works and two works for young audiences. The Company was featured in WNET's nationally broadcast production of "People in Motion" and a documentary video, "Dancing from the Inside Out," which won over a dozen awards, including Dance on Camera in New York and the National Educational Film and Video Festival. AXIS dancers were consultants and models for the creation of Life Forms choreography software used to introduce disabled students to dance and choreography.

Among the Company's most notable achievements are performances at Dance Umbrella's International Festival of Aerial Dance in Boston; the First International Artistic Dance Workshop in Cologne, Germany; CAL performances/UAM/PFA in Berkeley; The Walker Art Center/Southern Theater "Out There Festival" in Minneapolis; FINiST in Novosibirsk, Siberia; and Central Park Summerstage in New York. AXIS worked with Dance Umbrella to plan and curate the


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International Festival of Wheelchair Dance in 1997. This was the first event of this magnitude and prestige in the history of this relatively new dance form. It was the beginning of an international dialogue about the quality, standards, forms, aesthetics and philosophy of physically integrated dance.

AXIS swept the Isadora Duncan Dance Awards for 1999/2000. The Company was honored with a "Goldie" for Dance from the San Francisco Bay Guardians's Outstanding Local Discovery Awards in 2000. Other awards include Performing Arts Fellowships from the Barkley Fund; Choreographers's Fellowships from the City of Oakland and the Bay Area Fund for Dance; and two nominations for a Cal Arts/Alpert Award in the Arts. The Company has been supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Rockefeller Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Creative Work Fund, the Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation, the Walter and Elise Haas Fund, the Zellerbach Family Fund, and many other foundations.

AXIS Dance Company maintains an extensive community outreach and education program, "Dance Access." For the past 11 years, it has been providing dance classes for children and adults with and without disabilities at its studio and in Bay area schools. Every month AXIS presents a wide variety of lecture demonstrations, workshops, teacher training intensives and residency activities locally and nationally.

But, AXIS is first and foremost in performing arts company. It has created a new audience for dance by bringing disabled people and others who are not regular dance goers into theaters for its performances and into its classes. AXIS has also earned recognition in the health and education fields. Its dance has a political, educational and social impact. The essence of its work, its philosophy and its style promotes a change in how people view disabilities. AXIS brings together the worlds of the dance community and the disability community, changing attitudes without "saying" anything at all.

Contact information

AXIS Dance Company
1428 Alice Street, Suite 201
Oakland, California 94612

Phone (510) 65-0110

www.axisdance.org

**JUDITH SMITH
SPINAL CORD INJURED DANCER FROM CALIFORNIA
CO-DIRECTOR OF AXIS DANCE COMPANY**


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OPENING STAGES: What are some of your most notable professional accomplishments?

SMITH: Surviving in this business for 15 years and keeping AXIS going after a difficult split with the founding artistic director. Co-curating and planning the International Festival of Wheelchair Dance with Jeremy Alliger in Boston in June 1997. Commissioning internationally known choreographers to create repertory works for AXIS, including Bill T. Jones, Stephen Petronio, Joanna Haigood, Joe Goode and Sonya Delwaide. Having AXIS receive three Isadora Duncan Dance Awards for our home season in June 2000. These were Outstanding Achievement in Company Performance, Outstanding Achievement in Choreography (Bill T. Jones for "Fantasy in C Major") and Outstanding Achievement in Individual Performance for dancer Uli Schmitz, who to our knowledge is the first disabled dancer ever to receive this award.

OS: How did you get interested in a career in dance?

SMITH: I met some of the original AXIS members in a martial arts class. They asked if I'd like to be in a dance piece and, knowing nothing, and I mean nothing, about dance, I naively said sure. I was hooked immediately.

OS: What have been the greatest rewards of doing your work? What, if any, have been the disappointments?

SMITH: The greatest rewards for me are to see AXIS succeeding and growing artistically, both through our own in-house work and through commissioning outside choreographers. We're becoming known not only in the integrated dance community, but in the modern dance community. Knowing and hearing that your artistic work moves and challenges people, opens minds and provokes changes in attitudes is gratifying. It's exciting to be involved in creative work that is new, unusual, passionate and has something to offer back to the community. The potential this dance form has for creating a dance vocabulary that can only happen because of the way disabled dancers move-- whether in wheelchairs, on crutches, with spasticity, on the floor, or in the air--is unlimited. But the reality is that this exciting dance form has a long way to go to be accepted into the dance world en masse and taken seriously as the artistic innovation that it is. Most people can't even imagine that a disabled person could or would even want to dance. Most dance teachers shriek at the thought of having someone disabled show up to take their classes. Some reviewers will not come to review dance performances that include dancers with disabilities, because it's "not really dance" or it's "victim art." Opportunities for disabled dancers to take classes and workshops outside their companies are extremely limited, which has been a constant source of frustration for myself and others. Companies pioneering this form of dance have a tremendous responsibility to create dance that will speak for itself. Dance that can "stand" on its own and not be applauded just because it's "special" art, that presenters will want to present and that choreographers, dancers and teachers will want to be involved in, because it's new, exciting and good.



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The greatest disappointment is the ongoing struggle of trying to grow a company in a country that is virtually unsupportive of live art. It's incredibly demoralizing on a daily basis.

OS: Where did you get your professional training? Do you know of other training programs in your field that are receptive and accessible to people with disabilities?

SMITH: I'm a C-6 quad. Almost all of my training has been on-the-job learning within AXIS, both as a dancer and an arts administrator. In the past four years, AXIS has been bringing in choreographers and dance teachers as a way for us to get professional development and training, since it's practically impossible otherwise. Various integrated companies have training programs. I'd highly recommend CandoCo in London.

OS: How did you break in professionally? Were there particular people, programs or services that helped you?

SMITH: Several mentors in the dance world have helped AXIS and me, most especially Jeremy Alliger in Boston, John Killacky and Nancy Martino in San Francisco, Sonya Delwaide in Berkeley, Stephen Petronio in New York. All have supported my morale, been incredibly generous with their time, knowledge and resources and have promoted AXIS within their circles.

OS: What have been the most serious impediments to the advancement of your career?

SMITH: Physical inaccessibility of theaters and studios; attitudes of critics, presenters and funders; and the ridiculous social security system, which makes it more trouble than it's worth to try to earn a living! I deal with all of these still.

OS: If you need any accommodations to practice your profession, who provides and pays for them?

SMITH: Sometimes AXIS covers them, sometimes I cover them myself.

OS: To what do you attribute your success? What generally does it take to succeed in the world of dance?

SMITH: I attribute AXIS' success to the many people who have been involved in this company and have believed in our vision—the dancers, staff, board volunteers, students, donors, funders, mentors, audience members. In general, you have to be highly self-motivated, gregarious, flexible, smart and an extremely hard worker.

OS: What advice would you give to other artists with disabilities who want to pursue a career in dance?

SMITH: Be prepared to work your butt off and don't expect regular hours or a 401k! This business is a labor of love.


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CATCHING UP WITH CANDOCO DANCE COMPANY OF LONDON: AN INTERVIEW WITH CELESTE DANDEKER, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

OPENING STAGES: What have been the major achievements of CandoCo since the International Festival of Wheelchair Dance?

DANDEKER: CandoCo celebrated its 10th anniversary in May 2001. Since the festival in Boston CandoCo has gone from strength to strength. It has become the world's leading integrated professional contemporary dance company. The company commissions work from a range of leading contemporary choreographers and creates new programmes of work every 18 months, delivering more performances than all but one of other comparable dance companies. Since 1997 CandoCo has commissioned a full evening's work called "Out of Here" from Annabel Arden (Theatre de Complicite) and Jos Houben (The Right Size). After the change of company members in 2000, we made the current double bill "I Hastened Through My Death Scene to Catch Your Last Act" by Javier De Frutos and "Sunbyrne" by Doug Elkins.

CandoCo has had a busy international tour schedule to Venezuela, Australia, Russia, Lithuania, Czech Republic, Romania, France, Germany, Italy, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Vancouver, Japan, Switzerland, Sardinia, Singapore, Croatia, Slovakia, Ireland and Great Britain of course - but not necessarily in that order!

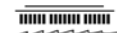
The company also conducts a year round programme of integrated dance education and training projects, ranging from one day workshops in conjunction with company performances through INSET and schools' work, international summer schools and professional development programmes that reach 22,000 participants. It has also set up and run an integrated youth dance company, Cando2 from its base in London.

The company is in the process of creating a new programme for 2002/03 making 3 new works; a trio (untitled as yet) by Jamie Watton (co-founder of Physical Recall Dance Company), a quartet "Sour Milk" (Javier De Frutos) and "Shadow" by Fin Walker (Walker Dance).

Awards include from 1997 The Prudential Award for the Arts and the Melbourne Festival Award also in 1997.

OS: Have there been any problems keeping the Company going?

DANDEKER: There has been no lack of enthusiasm for keeping the company going. But there have been problems, because the company grew so quickly, and the financial support has not kept pace. Also, the management team needs additional support for marketing, a second technician and a tour manager. This is being addressed at the moment with the funding bodies.



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OS: How do you think CandoCo is viewed in the dance world?

DANDEKER: I have always wanted CandoCo to be seen as a professional mainstream contemporary dance company and to aspire to excellence. I think the company is accepted as such and it appeals to a very wide audience.

OS: What changes have there been in the company?

DANDEKER: In 1999 I retired from performing to concentrate on directing the company. At the same time 5 of the dancers who had been with CandoCo almost from the beginning decided it was time to move on. This was a healthy change, as all of those dancers have stayed within dance or theatre as performers, teachers and choreographers and still remain as associate teachers for CandoCo.

In March 2000 we held auditions for new dancers to join the dancers that I had invited already. There was no shortage of applications, and we chose 2 male dancers, 1 wheelchair user (Andrew Mclay) with a theatre background and 1 non-disabled dancer (Jurg Koch) who had trained at Laban Centre London (LCL). I invited two female disabled dancers (Welly O'Brien and Kate Marsh) who had already had experience with us as associate teachers and had previously had taken part in many CandoCo workshops and residencies, too. One of them was a dancer with another integrated company called Tardis and had had formal training at college. I also invited a wheelchair user (Suzanne Cowan) who had auditioned via video from New Zealand. She had had some formal training as a dancer before an accident and had recently been performing with an integrated company called Touch Compass. I also invited another non-disabled graduate from LCL (Stine Nilsen), who had taken part in a choreographic course with us and caught my attention. So six new dancers joined Pedro Machado who had danced with CandoCo since 1998.

Andrew Mclay left the company in September 2001 and was replaced by David Lock also a wheelchair user, who has had quite a lot of experience from CandoCo workshops and residencies, but to some extent is training on the job.

OS: What are your goals for CandoCo and the future of wheelchair dance?

DANDEKER: To continue to work with choreographers and directors who inspire and challenge the company. Artistic quality has always been the most important thing that drives CandoCo, and it is gratifying to see that choreographers' and dancers' movement vocabulary is enriched by these experiences. I would like to see the company on firmer financial ground so that both the managerial and technical staff are adequately resourced to support it.

I also hope that there will be other integrated companies and that disabled dancers will have the opportunity to train in dance colleges and be able to pursue their chosen careers either as dancers, teachers or choreographers.



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Contact information
CandoCo Dance Company
21 Leroy House
436 Essex Road
London

Telephone: + 44 (0) 20 7704 6845
Fax: + 44 1645
E-mail: info@candoco.co.uk:

PEOPLE

WILLY CONLEY DEAF ACTOR, DIRECTOR AND PLAYWRIGHT

ABOUT WILLY (furnished by the artist)

Willy Conley of Hanover, Maryland is a professional actor, director, and award-winning playwright whose plays have been produced nationally and abroad. His most recent award was a National Theatre Artist Residency grant from Theatre Communications Group/PEW Charitable Trusts, allowing him to further develop his acting and playwriting at Center Stage in Baltimore. Conley's one-act play, "The Hearing Test," was published in *No Walls of Stone*, an anthology of literature by Deaf and hard-of-hearing writers. His article "From Lipreading Ants to Flying Over Cuckoo Nests" was featured in the April 2001 issue of *American Theatre*. He also published two chapters on Deaf Theatre in the NYU Press book, *Deaf World*. Conley holds a Master of Arts degree in Playwriting from Boston University, where he studied under Nobel Laureate Derek Walcott, and a Master of Fine Arts in Theatre from Towson University. Currently, he is an associate professor of Theatre Arts at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. He also maintains his status as an Associate Artist with Center Stage, an Affiliate Artist with Quest: Arts for Everyone, and a member of The Dramatists Guild.

A CONVERSATION WITH WILLY

OPENING STAGES: Why do you work in so many areas of theatre?

CONLEY: I believe that for theatre artists to be marketable in this day and age, they need to have a multidisciplinary approach to their work. A few years ago I graduated with an M.F.A. in Theatre from Towson University in Maryland. It was a non-traditional program designed for a theatre of the future, which was


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projected to have an interdisciplinary and intercultural nature. I work as an actor-director-playwright; I am also a professor of theatre arts at Gallaudet University in D.C.

OS: What are some of your most notable professional accomplishments?

CONLEY: Winning the VSA arts 2000 Playwrights Discovery Award, receiving a TCG/Pew Charitable Trusts National Theatre Artist Residency grant, being appointed Associate Artist with Center Stage in Baltimore, publishing an article "From Lipreading Ants to Flying Over Cuckoo Nests" in the April 2001 American Theatre magazine that focused on "Access, Activism, & Art"

OS: How did you get interested in a career in theatre?

CONLEY: When I was an undergrad at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at R.I.T. I saw my first play in sign language with Deaf actors on stage. It was the first time that theatre became accessible and artistic for me. I fell in love with its holistic, collaborative nature, and this made me want to be a part of it someday. Eventually, I broke away from my career as a biomedical photographer and got formal training in acting and playwriting.

OS: What have been the greatest rewards of doing your work?

CONLEY: Being able to travel worldwide, share and exchange my art with other arts-minded souls; and in the process of doing all of this, I get to enjoy learning more about other cultures, languages, and foods.

OS: Have there been any disappointments?

CONLEY: Disappointment only comes when able-bodied people doubt or oppress the vast artistic potential that people with disabilities have.

OS: Where did you get your professional training?

CONLEY: National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD), Professional Theatre School; Deaf Playwrights Conference playwriting workshop under Dennis Scott; Wesleyan University graduate courses in fiction and playwriting; Boston University; M.A. in playwriting (under Nobel laureate Derek Walcott); Towson University M.F.A. in Theatre.

OS: What was your training experience like? Did you get the same training and opportunities as other students? If you encountered problems, how did you solve them? Would you recommend this training program to other Deaf artists?

CONLEY: For the most part, my training experiences were outstanding. Without them, I'm scared to imagine what path my life would have gone down. I found that I received the same training and opportunities as other students. For example, when I took playwriting classes under Derek Walcott, he gave me the same treatment as the other students – he judged my work based on listening through that phenomenal poetic ear of his. My work is mostly visual – as you can guess, I have very little sense of writing for the ear, but Derek gave me honest,


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constructive feedback on my plays. He liked one of them enough to produce it in his Boston Playwrights Theatre. It was called, "The Hearing Test," and my favorite comment from him was, "Ironically, you have written a remarkable play that is very tonal in nature." That play ended up being published in a literary anthology by all Deaf writers called *No Walls of Stone*. Incidentally, I have been profoundly deaf in both ears since birth.

The problems faced during my training were minor and easy to solve – stuff like getting an incompetent sign language interpreter for class or having a note-taker not show up to take notes for me. I just had to be demanding and assertive to get better replacements.

I would highly recommend the above training programs; the only exception is that the Deaf Playwrights Conference is now defunct, and the NTD Professional Theatre School has changed to the Actors Academy now located in Hartford, which is NTD's new home.

OS: Do you know of other training programs in your field that are receptive and accessible to Deaf people?

CONLEY: I cannot vouch for programs receptive to all disabilities, but to my knowledge the following places with drama programs are the ones that have been known to be open to aspiring Deaf theatre artists (in addition to the ones listed above): American University, Arizona State University, California State University at Northridge, Catholic University, Connecticut College, New York University, SUNY Purchase, University of Maryland at College Park, University of Texas at Austin, and, of course, Gallaudet University.

OS: How did you break in professionally? Were there particular people, programs or services that helped you?

CONLEY: My first professional break came when I was invited to join "Sunshine Too," a national touring outreach troupe out of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf's former experimental education theatre program. As an undergrad, I auditioned for several sign language productions under the program, and was cast in a couple of them. The faculty – who all knew signs and were up on Deaf Culture – helped nurture me as an actor, which led to my first full-time, paying acting job with benefits.

OS: What have been the most serious impediments to the advancement of your career?

CONLEY: I sometimes wonder how much further along I would be in my career, if I had been accepted in the Yale School of Drama. In 1989, after three years of national tours with NTD, I decided to get formal training in playwriting. Yale seemed potentially ripe for accepting applicants from diverse backgrounds because of its track record with nurturing people of color. David Hays, the former Broadway lighting and set designer (NTD's artistic director at the time), wrote a


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glowing letter of recommendation. So did Dennis Scott, the chair of Yale's graduate directing program. He had previously been to New York City to see a play of mine off-off Broadway.

I made the first round of applications and was invited for a personal interview with Milan Stitt, the playwriting chair. For political reasons, I decided not to bring an interpreter along – it might make me look too dependent and needy. Despite some illegal, personal questions (such as “How did you become deaf?”), Stitt and I seemed to really hit it off. A few weeks later I received a personal rejection letter from Stitt, the principal tenet of which was the unfortunate comment that “we do not feel you have quite found your voice.”

One other serious impediment – submitting plays to grants organizations or theatres that have judges with no clue about how to evaluate the visual nuances in a script that involves sign language on stage.

OS: If you need any accommodations to practice your profession, who provides and pays for them?

CONLEY: The main accommodation I need is a sign language interpreter to translate what the director wants or what other actors are saying during the rehearsal process. Either the theatre pays for it out of pocket or there are grant monies involved.

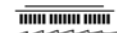
OS: To what do you attribute your success? What generally do you think it takes to succeed in theatre?

CONLEY: Stubborn, hardheadedness mixed with creative problem-solving, perseverance, a wild imagination, and an ability to get up again after I fall from failure or rejection. It's also important to develop interdisciplinary skills in the theatre arts. If you can't find work in one area, you can find jobs in areas where you've developed other skills.

ORGANIZATIONS

AMERICAN ALLIANCE FOR THEATRE AND EDUCATION (adapted from the Alliance Web site)

The mission of American Alliance for Theatre and Education is to promote standards of excellence in theatre and theatre education. It achieves this mission by disseminating quality practices in theatre and theatre education, connecting artists, educators, researchers and scholars with each other, and providing opportunities for its membership to learn from each other and to expand and diversify their work, their audience and their perspectives.



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The AATE values statement declares "The dramatic impulse is a vital thread in the tapestry of life." Serving a diverse population and representing a multiplicity of perspectives, interests and needs, AATE acts as a national voice in support of theatre aesthetics and practice. It creates forums for exchange and develops linkages with local, regional, national and international constituencies to promote theatre.

The purposes of AATE are:

- To foster high standards for drama/theatre education and theatre arts.
- To provide leadership in creative drama and theatre for youth in community, educational and professional settings throughout the country.
- To develop policies of theatre arts and drama/theatre education.
- To promote theatre and the arts in the educational process by all available means.
- To serve as a national resource network for professionals involved in theatre for youth and drama/theatre and education by publishing journals and resource materials, sponsoring conferences, promoting research in creative activity, establishing new awards and a support network for the global exchange ideas and information.
- To raise public awareness of the value of theatre arts.

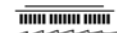
Members of AATE include playwrights, directors, teachers, artists, and other theatre professionals reaching out to young people of all ages. The benefits of membership include several free publications, discounts at national and regional conferences, participation in awards that recognize excellence and innovation in theatre education and advocacy for the value of theatre in the education of young people nationally and internationally. Conferences are accessible to participants with disabilities, but publications are not available in alternative formats.

To find out more about AATE visit its Web site www.aate.com, e-mail aate.info@asu.edu, call (480) 965-6064, or write
AATE

Theatre Department
Arizona State University
P.O. Box 872002
Tempe, Arizona 85287-2002

TRAINING PROGRAMS

LIMITED VISION AND UNLIMITED CHALLENGES: THE EXPERIENCES OF A BLIND ACTING STUDENT



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by Marilee Talkington

I am an actor. And I'm in my first year of the M.F.A. program at the American Conservatory Theatre (ACT) in San Francisco, which is one of the best professional actor training programs in the country. I am also legally blind.

As part of my artist's statement, I strive to create vital and provocative work that continually challenges me, and the sphere of what is possible for others and myself. Nowhere in my statement do I mention my disability. I believe the process of creative expression supercedes all definitions of physical, mental, and emotional capabilities. So, not being able to see has no relevance, right?

I practice this philosophy and yet, I still have moments in class when all of a sudden I remember I can't see my partner's face. I panic, feel foolish for trying so hard, and pray that nobody can tell how weak I feel. These moments are fleeting, but they strike like lightning. What ensue are fierce battles between the passionate idealist who believes art transcends all and the frustrated realist who wishes the challenge were someone else's.

ACT offers a three-year Master of Fine Arts program in Acting. Each year's class is made up of 18 actors, usually 10 men and 8 women, who spend all three years together. This particular program identifies itself as primarily text based, and the curriculum includes such classes as movement, voice, singing, Alexander Technique, speech, mask, clown, stage combat, cultural research, actor's research, and strategies of reading, just to name a few. We also have acting classes with the director of the program, Melissa Smith, the members of ACT's main stage company, and master acting teachers from around the world. The schedule of classes can run from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily with weekends off, unless we are in rehearsal for a project. In which case our weekends are also spent at the studios.

To be accepted by ACT, I had to fill out the standard application, essay, and provide letters of recommendation. But the bulk of the decision to accept is based on the audition. Every actor has five minutes to perform two monologues, one classical and one contemporary. If you get called back for a second audition, you usually work personally with Melissa Smith and the voice teacher Jeff Crockett for about ten to fifteen minutes. It's an incredibly intense and nerve wracking experience that shakes even the coolest of actors. Since ACT is ranked among the top programs, it is extremely competitive and difficult to get into. I've heard that each year between 400 and 700 actors audition.

The curriculum is tremendously intense and has demanded more presence and commitment from me than anything I've done previously. Although I'm often tired, I feel carried by the inspiration filling the halls. And at times I honestly forget I have the extra challenge of being disabled. I relish these moments, allow



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them to nourish me, and hope I'm not fooling myself by expecting it will happen more often.

Half of the program involves learning skills and techniques, which can be practically applied to one's acting, while the other more elusive half involves the examination of our selves and the dissection of habits we use to mask or cloud the truth of who we are. Exploring and discovering my power through this work has been thrilling. But the relentless exposing of my weaknesses and walls, especially in regard to my vision, has been terrifying.

All actors have blocks they need to work through if they want to continue to grow as artists. And like most of my classmates I've committed to this process of disarming and releasing these in hopes of fulfilling my greatest potential. What I've realized is that I haven't been quite honest with myself. My eye condition is such that I have no vision centrally and vision corrected to legal blindness peripherally. Throughout my life I've adhered to the social norm of maintaining eye contact while speaking or being spoken to. I admit with hesitation that I did this so as not to appear stupid, or distract and make others feel uncomfortable. And I feel even more hesitant admitting that I still do this today.

When I first started the program I began realizing that I was faking it a lot. I was pretending to see more than I could so as to "accommodate" my classmates' and teachers' possible discomfort and potential feelings that I may not be a good actor because of my vision. I know now that I was really just protecting my own feelings, not theirs. I used to think that no one knew I was trying so hard. But I was quickly corrected.

Before I relate what actually happened to bring me out of my delusional state, I think it's important to say how these ways of pretending can affect my work and possibly completely derail my progress. Most of the work we do to become great actors, in essence great communicators of stories, revolves around being able to speak from an honest place within ourselves. A place where personal habits of protection are abandoned. If I, as Marilee, have issues around my vision and my abilities and I don't deal with those before I go on stage, then every character I play will carry those same issues. And, if I continue to worry that I'm not looking directly at my scene partner on stage, how can I possibly be fully in the moment of the play? I'm caught up in Marilee's stuff, not the character's.

My mask was pulled off one day when I was in acting class reading a scene from Chekhov. My acting teacher, the director of ACT, stopped me. I had been struggling with reading the script and relating to my scene partner at the same time. I was trying to pretend there was no problem and, thus, became increasingly frustrated with myself and with the scene. I hadn't even been consciously aware of it, until Melissa said. "Marilee, we can't go on like this anymore." I didn't understand what she meant and just stared blankly ahead.



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“You’re having trouble reading the script, yes?” I nodded. “Then why are you pretending you’re not?” At that point she looked around the room to all my classmates and asked aloud, “Can everyone here tell that Marilee has had problems reading her script and has had difficulty seeing things for the past few months?” Every single person in class said yes. “You’re not fooling anyone, Marilee. And, if you continue to try to fool yourself, you will be stuck in the same place for the rest of your career.” This may sound harsh, but it was probably the boldest and best thing anyone has ever said to me. I was challenged to change my attitude toward my disability. I was asked in that moment to accept it, because everyone else in the room already had, except me.

The issue of not being able to pick up visually what my fellow actor is giving me on stage, does still creep in now and again. What I’ve come to realize though and have to often remind myself is that, although I may not catch everything they are doing visually, acting isn’t really about that. Acting is about listening and receiving what another actor is giving me, even if it’s just a certain energy, then letting that affect me and sending back what I’m experiencing in that moment. And when I’m really present and in the moment of the scene I could have my eyes closed, my hands tied behind my back, and my legs chained to a chair and I’d still be able to react honestly and powerfully to my partner.

I know my instructor’s believe this as well because they expect the same thing from me as they do from every other student. Sometimes I have needed accommodations to do some of those things, and my teachers have been sensitive and cooperative. But most of my instructors leave it up to me to tell them what I need, then they do their best to take care of it or help me figure out ways of working and then move on. For example, there was an exercise in acting class where we had to toss a little yellow ball to our scene partner from across the room. I was so anxiety-ridden about not being able to see the ball, that I was frozen stiff on stage and ended up dropping the ball or getting hit with it. The solution was merely this: I moved closer to my partner, I relaxed, I eliminated the pressure on myself to be perfect about catching the ball, I made a conscious effort to trust my partner not to hit me and then just felt my way through it. It worked. Although I couldn’t see the ball any better than I could before I started, I ended up catching 90% of the tosses, because I just allowed the ball to come to me. More basic examples of accommodations are: if I can’t see something that is on the board or being demonstrated, I’m invited and at times expected to come up close to see what’s going on and question if I’m missing something. The faculty has absolutely no problems with me sticking my nose to the board and asking for clarification, because honestly more often than not I’m not the only person confused.

I still have a truckload of other issues that I’m working through that have nothing to do with my vision, as does every student in my class. But right now I’m feeling so encouraged, so inspired, and truly ready to accept that it is totally my choice



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to allow my disability to hinder my work... or not. Hopefully, it's no surprise that I'm choosing the latter.

RESOURCES

GREAT NEW GUIDE FOR UNDERSTANDING CAREERS IN THE ARTS by Hobart Nichols and Neil McNeil

Putting Creativity to Work

Created by VSA arts

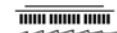
Paul Scribner, Editor and Lead Writer

Published by the Social Security Administration Office of Employment Support Programs

Whether you are a person with a disability or temporarily able-bodied Scribner's book *Putting Creativity to Work* is an outstanding resource. This well written guide should be on every rehabilitation counselor's desk, as it clearly describes the steps to thinking though a career in the arts, with a unique emphasis on helping persons with disabilities to pursue choices. In fact, a supply of this book was made available to vocational rehabilitation counselors in the Quincy Area Office of the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission, and the response was excellent. Every VR counselor wanted a copy of his or her own.

VR counselors are often stymied by consumers whose career interests are focused on the arts. It is difficult to link these interests to jobs, This carefully written guide hammers home both the challenges of pursuing a career as an artist -- such as the likely pressure of not having long-term job security and the possibility of low pay for long hours of work -- and yet points out the compensating joys of pursuing the life of a performing or visual artist.

Regardless of one's interests, we recommend this important guide for any student in the early stages of career development and planning. It covers all the generic steps of good vocational self-assessment. Though the use of personal stories of people with disabilities, this guide brings to life the struggles and successes of the artist's life and serves to inspire and stimulate readers. Of particular interest are the detailed descriptions of a wide variety of arts-related occupations. While emphasizing that not every actor will make it to Hollywood, the guide lists dozens of related jobs in the performing arts. These alternative job options are vitally important for vocational rehabilitation counselors to have in their tool kits so that they can better provide clients with a multitude of practical choices.



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Career decision-making is at best an art, not a science, so the need for fostering creativity in guiding students is by definition a “work in progress.” Nevertheless, this valuable book provides a structured process, a map, to help job seekers find their way through the maze of career choices.

You can obtain a free copy of *Putting Creativity to Work* by contacting VSA arts, 1300 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 700, Washington D.C. 20036. You can also download it free from <http://www.vsarts.org/resources/publications/careerguide/index.html>. It is also available in alternative formats for people with visual impairments. Write to the Social Security Administration Braille Services, 1-A-19 Operations Building, 6401 Security Boulevard, Baltimore, Maryland 21235 or call (410) 965-6414.

Neil McNeil is the Director of the Quincy Area Office of the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission. Hobart Nichols is the Director of the Commission's Brookline Area Office.

GRANT WRITING WORKSHOPS

Unfortunately today's artists often have to be as creative about finding financial support for their work as they are about doing the work itself. The Foundation Center offers several courses and seminars that can help you hone those vital money-fishing skills. These are listed on its Web site at http://fdncenter.org/marketplace/catalog/category_generic.jhtml?id=cat10020.

Topics include proposal writing, developing a fund-raising plan and grant seeking. They are held in many large cities around the country and usually cost around \$200. But, they are a good investment for anyone interested in developing these important skills.

CAREER EXPLORATION WEB SITES

Kansas State University Academic and Career Information Center

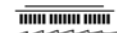
<http://www.ksu.edu/acic/career/options/Arts.html>

This web site guides visitors to career links in many areas of the arts. Links to the performing arts include organizations for professionals in cinema, theatre, TV, radio, dance, writing, composing and musicianship.

Kaleidoscope of Careers

<http://www.msj.edu/career/kocfields.htm>

This site provides information about many careers related to fields of study at the College of Mount St. Joseph. The fields of Fine Arts and Music have details about careers in the performing arts. Under each field is a list of occupational opportunities, potential employers and sources of additional information.



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SCHOLARSHIPS FOR DISABLED STUDENTS

This resource begins with general and disability specific sources of information on the web. Next is a list of scholarships available to disabled students pursuing higher education in the fine and performing arts.

General Scholarship sources on the web:

<http://www.scholarships.com/>

<http://www.finaid.org/>

<http://www.collegeboard.org/fundfinder/html/ssrchtop.html>

<http://www.collegescholarships.com/>

<http://www.srnexpress.com/scholarships/scholarships2.cfm>

<http://www.college-scholarships.com/100college.htm>

Disability related scholarships:

<http://www.gripvision.com/scholarship.html?#section1>

Scholarships for blind students:

Gladys C. Anderson Memorial Scholarship

American Foundation for the Blind

Attn: Scholarship Committee

11 Penn Plaza, Suite 300

New York, NY 10001

212-502-7600

Eligibility: legally blind women who are U.S citizens to study religious or classical music in college

Average Award: \$1000

Number Awarded: 1

Deadline: March

NFB Humanities Scholarship

Average award: \$2,500

Number of awards: 1

Deadline: March 31

College level: Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior, Master's, Doctoral

Majors/Fields of Study: Art, English, foreign languages, history, humanities, philosophy, religion
Criteria: Applicant must be legally blind and pursuing a full-time course of study. Selection is based upon academic excellence, service to the community, and financial need.

NFMC Music for the Blind Composition Awards

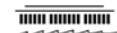
National Federation of Music Clubs

1336 North Delaware St

Indianapolis, IN 46202-2481

317-638-4003

Eligibility: blind composer members of NFMC ages 10-30



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Average Award: \$150--\$250
Number Awarded: 2
Deadline: February

NFMC Music for the Blind Performance Awards

National Federation of Music Clubs
1336 North Delaware St
Indianapolis, IN 46202-2481
317-638-4003

Eligibility: blind instrumentalist or vocalist members of NFMC under age 19 who are U.S. citizens

Average Award: \$200
Number Awarded: 8
Deadline: March

R.L. Gillette Scholarship

Average award: \$1,000
Number of awards: 2
Deadline: April 3

College level: Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior
Majors/Fields of Study: Literature, music

Criteria: Applicant must be a woman who is legally blind and is a U.S. citizen.
Selection is based upon transcript, three recommendations, and personal statement

Scholarships for students with any disability:

Joyce Walsh Junior Scholarship for the Handicapped

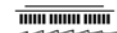
National Federation of Music Clubs
1336 North Delaware St
Indianapolis, IN 46202-2481
317-638-4003

Eligibility: disabled instrumentalists or vocalist members of NFMC who are U.S. citizens ages 12-18

Average Award: \$200--\$1000
Number Awarded: 6
Deadline: February

Panasonic Young Soloists Award

Very Special Arts
Attn: Education Office
John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts
Washington, D.C. 20566
202-628-2800
TDD: 202-737-0645



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Eligibility: vocalists or instrumentalists under age 25 who are permanently disabled and interested in studying music
Average Award: up to \$10000
Number Awarded: 1
Deadline: September

Stanley E. Jackson Scholarship

Maximum award: \$1,000
Maximum number of awards: 4
Deadline: February 1
College level: Freshman
Criteria: Applicant must be disabled and have demonstrated gifted and/or talented abilities in one or more of the following categories: general intellectual ability, specific academic aptitude, creativity, leadership, or visual or performing arts. One award is for a member of an ethnic minority group.

Stanley E. Jackson Scholarship for Students with Disabilities

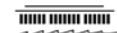
Maximum award: \$1,000
Maximum number of awards: 2
Deadline: February 1
College level: Freshman
Criteria: Applicant must be disabled and intend to enroll in a full-time undergraduate program or vocational, technical, or fine arts training programs. One award is for applicants who are members of an ethnic minority group.

NEWS AND NOTES

HIGH BEAM FESTIVAL: CONTEMPORARY EXPRESSIONS OF DISABILITY CULTURE TO BE HELD IN AUSTRALIA

High Beam Festival, a biennial international arts festival showcasing contemporary works influenced or inspired by the experience of disability, will take place on May 3 - 12 2002 in Adelaide, Australia. This ten day multi-arts festival will present the latest in disability arts -- new perceptions, innovations and visions. High Beam offers a spectacular program of music, comedy, theatre, dance, art, debate, workshops and community events.

The program covers community celebrations (generated primarily from Adelaide and South Australia) and a professional showcase that draws on accomplished talents from many corners of the globe including Nepal, South Africa, Russia, Canada, UK and Ireland.



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For more information contact

High Beam Festival
101 Halifax Street
Adelaide SA 5000
Tel: + 61 8 8224 0799
Fax: + 61 8 8224 0709
Email: highbeamfestival@artsinaction.asn.au
Website: www.artsinaction.asn.au

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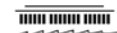
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