



in



clusion



We all have so many stories to bear
Cry, laugh, sing, and despair;
how will our children learn and compare
if we're too timid to dare
to raise the flare
share that we care.

Tell your story.

Steven Brown, from "Surprised to be Standing"



Not “Separate But Equal”

When the Australian band Rudely Interrupted took over the stage at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, attendees heard raw, unapologetic rock music echoing through the hall. Enthralled by the band’s magnetic music and engaging on-stage presence, the audience quickly filled the seats only to abandon them to dance in place. Like the charismatic musicians, people wanted to rock.

Rudely Interrupted is an indie rock band whose members share a variety of intellectual and physical disabilities. The group has toured the world, and their album, “Tragedy of the Commons,” was reviewed by the likes of the *Village Voice* and the *London Times*. “It’s a great honor to show the world what I’m capable of musically, and that disability presents no barrier when it comes to musical talent,” stated Rory Burnside, lead singer and guitarist, in a television interview.





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Rory Burnside, musician

PREVIOUS PAGE:
Rudely Interrupted

ABOVE: Rory Burnside, Marcus Stone, Rudely Interrupted

RIGHT, FROM TOP: Marleena Coulston Barber; Blessing Offor; Aria Stiles; Forró No Escuro; MO2 Productions; AXIS Dance Company



Rudely Interrupted's joining together of different abilities and talents to create a unique rock sound is emblematic of the success of inclusion. Their music touches its audience not because of or in spite of disability; it resonates through the universal timbre of music.

The artists of the 2010 International VSA Festival demonstrated the power of artistry in all people and the heights arts can reach in an inclusive society, from elementary school students to award-winning artists.

The writer Maya Angelou said, "We all should know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry, and we must understand that all the threads of the tapestry are equal in value no matter what their color." Disability, a part of the fabric of humankind, has evolved into one of many ways the world is made more interesting and dynamic through diversity. If art is a means of communicating the human experience in its many forms, then the more voices that tell their stories, the richer the cultural landscape.

The 2010 festival represented a moment in history when art and artists were lauded for their artistic achievements, not labeled as "separate" or "different." This embrace of art for its own sake, regardless of the artist's personal story, represents the progress made through inclusive practices.

The word inclusion means more than accepting a person with a disability, "mainstreaming" a student,





“Music is powerful in that no matter what your background is, what languages you speak, what your perspectives are, you will react and respond to it.”

Catherine Branch, musician





or creating an environment where people with specific needs are given access. It is a state of being and perceiving the world wherein all people have the right to participate in and bring their unique personalities to bear on a joyful and respectful society.

The festival was the celebratory interpretation of VSA's core mission: that everyone, regardless of ability or disability, is entitled to equal access to the arts and arts education. VSA works to promote access on the stage, in museums and galleries, in concert halls, through street performances, on the page, and in classrooms. Many of VSA's efforts in support of inclusive classrooms and opportunities for artists are rooted in the early days of the organization when there was an acute need for artists with disabilities to have a voice. Today, opportunities to present at top venues like The Armory Show in New York City (a leading international fine art fair), or on stage at the Kennedy Center exemplify VSA's vision for the new century.

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The first VSA festival took place in Washington, D.C., in 1979. While it has evolved over the years, the festival remains an opportunity for VSA's mission to shine as the artists and educators demonstrate the success of inclusion.

For choreographer Tamar Rogoff, performer Gregg Mozgala was the catalyst for her dance-theater piece *Diagnosis of a Faun*, which was commissioned









by VSA and performed during the festival at the Kennedy Center. “[Tamar and I] were talking about my perceptions of myself, and for a long time, it was that I thought of myself in two halves. My upper body was much more developed, and I could rely on it more than my legs due to my cerebral palsy,” says Mozgala. “This sparked in Tamar this idea of the faun. It’s really wonderful to play this fantastic character who’s in control of everything and everyone on the stage.”

Diagnosis of a Faun was a powerful performance because it capitalized on its dancers’ different body types and abilities. Similarly, performances by troupes such as the UK’s Blue Eyed Soul Dance Company, Portugal’s CIM–Integrated Multidisciplinary Company, and Greece’s Dagipoli Dance Company illustrated the levels of innovation achieved when dancers with and without disabilities create together. In these performances, wheelchairs are integrated into dance, dancers reinvent movement, and choreography literally soars through the air.

The concept of including all people is being embraced by society more than ever. VSA is a vehicle for this movement, to bring systemic change. It is why VSA promotes programming that spans all generations, like the family-focused Start with the Arts Festival. In the skylit atrium of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, children and their families created art, explored its value, and worked side by side with people of all abilities.



The day-long event was filled with hands-on workshops led by VSA's Teaching Artist Fellows.

The Start with the Arts Festival is named after VSA's signature educational resource that integrates arts into early-childhood learning. The Teaching Artist Fellowship offers professional teaching artists with disabilities coaching and educational resources that help refine their classroom practices. By bringing these two programs together, VSA puts the principles behind inclusion into practice.

Throughout the festival day, tables bustled with creative activity as children made one-of-a-kind tote bags featuring custom collages under the tutelage of Marquette Bell Johnson, who uses a wheelchair, or sketched a cartoon with Richard Jenkins, who is Deaf. On stage, performers such as the mixed-ability jazz-pop trio Lake Rise Place kept up a festive vibe with live music. An inclusive environment was created where art-making, performance, and arts education were presented in a thoughtful and fun way. And the gluey fingers, wonderfully colorful pieces, great music, and entertaining performances proved inclusion works.

The universality of art allows it to transcend ethnicity, gender, age, and disability. When those limitations fall away, the concept of "separate but equal," is dispelled and the important exercise that art prompts—to ask thoughtful questions, seek answers, and foster a deeper

Children participating in Start with the Arts Family Day (TOP AND BOTTOM LEFT, MIDDLE RIGHT); Perlman Theater Group, *The Lion and the Mouse* (TOP RIGHT); Jose, age 9, *Tamales*, from Arte Postale (MIDDLE LEFT); Lake Rise Place (BOTTOM RIGHT)



understanding of the self and of others—takes place. In exploring the University of California Riverside/California Museum of Photography’s *Sight Unseen*, the first major exhibition of work by photographers who are blind or have low vision, the question evolved from “How can someone with limited vision take a photograph?” to considerations about the nature of vision, different perceptions of subject matter, scene, light, and the diversity of seeing.

As flutist Catherine Branch says about her classical performance, *Music of Difference*, “Music is powerful in that no matter what your background is, what languages you speak, what your perspectives are, you will react and respond to it... [It’s important] to help people who don’t have an experience of disability to know what it’s like so that misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and stereotyping doesn’t happen.”