The performance of disability histories: remembrance and transmission

The purpose of this innovative workshop programme is to explore disability history and culture through the relationship between performance and text. Three workshops will provide the basis for dialogue and devised performance involving academics and practitioners. The stimulus is provided by biographical research data generated from life history conversations with past and present generations of young disabled people growing up in Britain. By engaging creatively as well as critically with these oral remembrances and embodied histories, the workshops explore the boundaries and ambiguities of textual and non-textual meaning.

The programme draws inspiration from two key themes in the Beyond Text Research Programme – ‘transmission and memory’ and ‘performance, improvisation and embodied knowledge’. Disability history, until recently, remained largely unspoken, unwritten, unperformed. Disability studies and disability arts have therefore emphasised the importance of preserving and communicating disabled people’s life experiences. The predominant mechanism for this transmission, and the creation of a new social memory, has been text. However, there is also a growing interest in the artefacts, images and performance of disability. The workshops will explore how textual and non-textual tools of transmission can be combined in performance. The will be achieved by devising a proto-performance inspired by the biographical research data through an academic-practitioner dialogic process.

There is some overlap with a third theme in the programme, that of ‘making and unmaking’. The workshops will ‘unmake’ the fixed texts generated from ‘performed’ research interviews and remake a new performance in their place. Hence, the workshops continue a process of (de-re)construction involving: the transmission of memory and embodiment (life experiences of disability) into performances (recorded interviews) into texts (interview transcripts) into conversation and improvisation (the workshops) into text, movement, images, sounds (script and devising) into performance (micro-play) into artefact (an audio-visual-textual record).

The three events will include elements of the academic workshop and the performance workshop, emulating stages of a creative devising process. Before each workshop we will share stimulus material, including extracts from recordings and transcripts (of life history research interviews with disabled people born in the 1940s and the 1980s) together with examples of contemporaneous visual images (e.g. of places, people or artefacts suggested by the stories). Each workshop will then include three components: an academic methodological paper; a presentation by a disability arts practitioner; and a dialogic process of performance devising.

For example, the first workshop will begin with an academic paper examining the ‘performance’ of biographical research interviews (autoethnographies), and their textual disembodiment in interview transcripts. This will be followed by a presentation on the emergence of disability theatre as embodied expression and counter culture. Using these ideas, together with the stimulus material, the participants will explore how disabled people’s remembrances, generated through research, might be transmitted to next generation audiences through devised performance. This will be achieved predominantly through creative dramatic process rather than academic discussion. The second workshop will contest the individualism and linear chronology of biographical interview research - unmaking the texts and devising performance elements for a more multi-modal transmission of remembrance. The final workshop
will conclude the process by examining connections between the lives ‘performed’ in
disability research interviews and techniques of live performance capable of
transmitting such remembrances to a new generation. The culmination in this final
day will include performance of a proto-play.

Disability arts (and ‘crip culture’) have grown in parallel with an explosion of
academic disability studies, yet there has been little purposeful dialogue between the
two. The workshops will redress this, facilitating an innovative and multi-modal
collaboration between researchers and performance practitioners, to engage with: (a)
cutting edge para/post-textual research methods, and (b) a process of devised theatre
performance. The workshops and their outcomes will be of interest to academics and
students in performance studies, critical disability studies, cultural studies, social
history, and education. They will have methodological interest for those engaged with
biographical, qualitative longitudinal, non-textual, and performative methodologies.
They will be of interest to practitioners in disability, community and youth arts. For
the principal participants, the workshops will build on existing relationships and
generate new ones with the aim of piloting methods for a future and larger-scale
devised performance project (this would be targeted for funding in 2009 to create a
devised performance for schools based on the applicants’ current life history research
with disabled people). The workshops will involve academics (from diverse
disciplines), students and young researchers, disability and youth theatre practitioners.

**Aims and Objectives**

The aim of the workshop programme is to inspire academic-practitioner
collaboration towards the transmission of disabled people’s history to new generation
audiences, using multi-modal devised performance based on biographical research.
More immediately, the objectives of the workshops are:

- To bring together academics from different disciplines, arts practitioners and
  students to examine the performance potential of life history research with
disabled people.

- To explore the impact of performance on the transmitted meanings of disabled
  people’s remembrances, for researchers and practitioners.

- To advance the use of para/post-textual methods in arts and social research and to
  promote the value of performance in research practice.

- To demonstrate the potential of innovative collaborations and methods for the
  creation of a future and larger-scale devised performance aimed at new generation
  audiences.

**Timetable of Activities**

The programme will consist of three distinct but related workshops. Each will be a
one day event involving preparatory and follow-up work.

Preparation of stimulus material from research data
(September/October 2008)

Workshop 1: Histories, biographies, performances
(November/December 2008)
Venue: London Metropolitan University

Workshop 2: Revising texts, devising histories
(January/February 2009)
Venue: Nottingham Playhouse

Workshop 3: Performing lives, live performance
(March/April 2009)
Venue: Stage @ Leeds

Dissemination and development
(May-September 2009)

Key speakers or participants

Diverse City will provide the primary practitioner and technical input for the preparation and management of the devising process. The three workshops will be hosted by the key performing arts participants in London, Nottingham and Leeds. Their collaboration is indicated in the letters of support.

Diverse City was founded in 2005 to promote diversity, equality and opportunity within the performing arts industry. The company offers performing arts workshops for schools, colleges, community groups and other organisations, as well as consultancy and training to educational institutions, delivering training for tutors of leading drama schools on curriculum and assessment in relation to disabled students.

AAA is a choreographer and director, and formerly Senior Lecturer and Head of Performing Arts at London Metropolitan University where she has been academic co-ordinator for ‘The Missing Piece’, a course for students with physical and sensory impairments delivered jointly with Graeae Theatre company. Her primary research interests are in disability and performance, alternative theatre practices, and cultural identity and performance. She is co-director of Diverse City.

BBB has been Director of Roundabout and Education at Nottingham Playhouse since 1999. In that time he has been responsible for co-ordinating and directing the extensive output of the department, which has gained an international reputation for its work with children and young people. He has worked in theatre production for, and with, young people for many years.

XXX is Professor of at the University of Leeds. His interests include theatre pedagogy, performance theory and cultural histories of performance (including both practice-based and paper-based productions). He developed interests in participatory and embodied arts experience for people with severe access needs through a National Teaching Fellowship and the Arts Work With People Project project (in collaboration with Salamanda Tandem, Nottingham).

Support for the devising performance process will be provided by:

YYY is a disabled actor, writer and director. His TV and film credits include Skalligrigg, Quills, I.D., Carrie's War and The Egg. He was formerly Associate
Director at Graeae Theatre Company (a disability theatre company) with particular responsibility for the company's education and new writing work (e.g. teaching on the ‘Missing Piece’ course, leading workshops and writing/developing forum projects). His recent disability-inspired piece *The Last Freakshow* was widely acclaimed. He is Associate Director of Diverse City

** CCC is a musician, composer, sound designer and Lecturer in Music Technology at London Metropolitan University. He has worked on a number of arts projects developed for groups under-represented in higher education. He has composed music for BBC and Channel 4 television, and for leading British and international theatre and dance companies, and is a co-director of Diverse City.

In addition, the following individuals are indicative of key speakers/participants:

** DDDD is a disability activist and award-winning director, screenwriter and photographer (including films for BBC2 on *The Disabled Century*). He is also an academic and critic, including his seminal work *The Creatures Time Forgot: Rethinking Disability Representation*. He has lectured and given keynote addresses at the ICA and the Hayward Gallery and was a member of the Arts Council’s Visual Arts Committee.

** EEEE is a dancer, singer, composer, choreographer and director with 18 years experience of making arts work with people. She is Artistic Director and founder of Salamanda Tandem in Nottingham. Her work brings together disabled and non-disabled sensory experts, dancers, sensory artists, writers, visual artists, and musicians, to research and redefine the boundaries between people and art forms.

** FFFF is Professor of Psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University, specialising in the field of disability studies. In his work with disabled people he has explored innovative modes of ethnography, performing arts, narrative, life story and discourse analysis.

** GGGG is Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Leeds with methodological expertise in image-based research. His has been an editor of Visual Studies and is an Executive Board Member of the International Visual Sociology Association. He is currently director of the ESRC Researcher Development Initiative Building Capacity in Visual Methods.

** HHHH is Reader in Qualitative Social Science at Bournemouth University. His interests are in new methods for the dissemination of qualitative evidence, developing tools from the arts and humanities for use by social scientists. He founded the JISCmail online forum for Performatve Social Science in 2005 and is co-editing a special issue of FQS (Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung) on this approach.

** IIII is a Research Fellow in the Centre for Disability Studies at the University of Leeds whose specialism lies in emancipatory research methods, disability and citizenship. She is currently working on a Lottery funded project with CHANGE (a user-led organisation of disabled people) using creative dramatic methods to explore the knowledge, experiences and views of young disabled people around relationships.
**Management and co-ordination**

The project will be managed in collaboration between the principal applicant and Diverse City, with academic support from the co-applicant, and administrative support from the host department at Leeds. In negotiation with Diverse City, the applicants will be responsible for developing source material from the interview recordings and transcripts. Diverse City will plan and prepare the practice and performance elements of the workshops. The principal applicant will brief the key presenters. In each location, the key contact person will arrange the venue. Invitations, publicity and dissemination will be facilitated by the clerical support worker.

**Dissemination**

A project website will be created within the domain of the Centre for Disability Studies (the pre-eminent research web resource in its field) and publicised via the disability-research discussion list, of which the co-applicant is the owner (750+ members in 50+ countries). The website will host text from the key paper presentations and images/audio from the performance workshops. With the agreement of the original interviewees, examples of the stimulus material may also be published. Linking papers to the online Disability Archive at Leeds (400+ research and practice papers) will ensure accessible archiving and wide public access (c1000 visitors per month). The principal applicant will co-author a paper on the process, and submit a proposal for a special issue of the American journal *Review of Disability Studies*. On the basis of the pilot collaboration, the key participants will plan the submission of a funding proposal for larger scale performance-based project aimed at the transmission of disabled people’s remembrances to next generation audiences.