

DISABILITY AND AERIAL DANCE INTENSIVE

CONTENT WARNING: ABLEISM AND RACISM

ERIN BALL

Kingston Circus Arts

Ce texte accompagne le documentaire vidéo sur un atelier co-animé par Erin Ball en juillet 2022 à l'intention de la communauté des personnes handicapées (et plus particulièrement des personnes sourdes, neurodivergentes, atteintes de pathologies mentales et/ou handicapées). Dans ce texte, Erin Ball, une artiste de cirque qui est aussi amputée des deux jambes sous le genou, analyse le rôle de la cognition incarnée en tant que praticienne et animatrice d'ateliers dans un domaine émergent – les disciplines aériennes – qui recherche une plus grande inclusivité. Erin décrit les approches philosophiques et pédagogiques qui tendent à rendre les ateliers aériens plus accessibles aux communautés le plus souvent exclues des arts du cirque.

Mots clés: Cirque-esthétique, cosmopolitisme, artification, Amérique latine, contemporain

This writing accompanies the documentary video of a workshop that Erin Ball helped to facilitate in July 2022 for the Disability community (including but not limited to Mad, Deaf, Neurodivergent, and/or Disabled). In this text, Erin Ball, a circus artist who is a double below-knee amputee, discusses embodied personal knowledge as a practitioner and workshop leader in the emerging area of aerial arts that strives for inclusion. Erin describes the philosophical and pedagogical approaches taken to making the aerial workshops more accessible to communities often excluded from circus arts.

Keywords: circus, aesthetics, cosmopolitanism, artification, Latin America, contemporary

My name is Erin Ball (*ze/zir*), and I am a white demifemme and double below-knee amputee. I am a circus artist and coach. I have experienced circus arts both as a non-Disabled person and as a Disabled person. I noticed a

Contact: Erin Ball <kingstoncircusarts@gmail.com>

big gap in knowledge on how to work with Disabled people when I collaborated with coaches, choreographers, directors, etc. Because of this gap, I did a lot of exploring on my own and prioritized working with the Disability community. I eventually created an ever-evolving course based on my discoveries. Mélissa Colello and Sophie Oldfield (both former aerial artists with Cirque du Soleil, now collectively working as Montreal Aerial Dance) took the course online in 2020 after approaching me about the idea of an aerial dance exploration. The exploration was of course postponed, as most things were, but in July 2022, we made it happen, and this process has enabled the emergence of a new approach to teaching circus arts within the Disability community. The following writing uses terms from Critical Disability Studies. You can find definitions of terms used in this writing at the Critical Disability Studies Collective page hosted by the University of Minnesota (cdsc.umn.edu/cds/terms). Folks who identified as Mad, Deaf, Neurodivergent and/or Disabled were invited to participate.

I love offering workshops like this exploration (in collaboration with Montreal Aerial Dance) for several reasons:

1. Working outside of the standard circus norms is such a fun and creative puzzle. It's so rewarding to discover pathways and apparatuses that work for Disabled people, often in non-traditional ways.
2. We need much more Disability representation in circus, especially if we consider our ableist and racist history of sideshows and freakshows, and then if we consider that today, Disabled people often cannot even get in the door of circus spaces. I think it imperative that we do the work to change this. Disabled people can offer so much in terms of storytelling, creativity, shapes and movements that are rarely, if ever, seen. We are often experts at thinking outside the box, and we often know our bodies extremely well, which can make for great communicative and safe explorations.
3. Accessibility as an aesthetic and core practice embedded in practices and driving the creation of new work demands specific care and attention. It is Disability Justice.¹ It is a way forward.

Some of the priorities of the exploration and its setup included:

Crip time: A term coined by Disability theorist Alison Kafer, "Crip time" is the idea that Disabled bodyminds do not conform to capitalist standard time.

Relaxed process: Stimming (the repetition of physical movements or sounds), moving, making noise, taking breaks, sending access notes and starting each day with an access check-in. People were welcome

in the space however it worked for them. We recognized that access needs change. Lateness was welcomed, and changes of plans were embraced. People did not need to be there at the same times. It was a fluid and flexible process.

Collaboration: We recognized and prioritized that each person is the expert, is their bodymind. They have the information about themselves, and the coaches have information about the apparatuses, movement and keeping people safe. Only together could we explore and accomplish what we did.

Our process involved access check-ins at the start of each session and group warmups that prioritized each person getting what they needed before we worked in smaller groups or individually with Mélissa and Sophie. Brandy Leary and I were there as supports during that time and also participated. Each day ended with a check-out. Food was provided to the group as another form of access.

Reflections of workshop participants:

Sophie Oldfield: My reflections on the weekend: the coming together of Disabled people with everyone's generosity and understanding, in a low-pressure environment and with Erin's thoughtful (and funny!) guidance, was like a kind of magic to me. Making aerial dance accessible and finding individual pathways was enriching and enjoyable. Being someone with a background of intense and structured training, dismantling the norm and finding solutions was truly refreshing. There is so much potential and fun to be had! We've only just scratched the surface!

Annie Peace-Fast: And we played, dangled and danced, climbed ropes and walked up walls, spinning on the end of cables and swinging through the air. It was a joyful time. A huge smile on my face thinking about it. Thankful to all involved.

Brennan Roy: I wanted to share that it was really impactful to have a space to explore. It was really great that the weekend was focused on exploration and research rather than an outcome. I think I appreciated that most of all, it felt like a rare opportunity, especially with access to such high-level aerial equipment. As Disabled folks, it feels special to have the opportunity to discover and research in our bodies and with community

without that pressure—AND with the needed support to be there, with transportation, lodging and food. I wouldn't have been able to do it without that support. I was able to discover a new strapping position during the weekend that I have been working on for years with the collaboration of folks in the room, namely Brandy Leary. My straps are what connect me with my chair during my practice, and their placement and how they line up with my physical body is really important to the way my energy moves from my physical body through to my chair body. Being able to spend the time researching a new strapping placement meant that all the positions I explored in the air and on the ground with my chair connected to me had monumentally more movement potential. This is a discovery I am excited to carry forward with me in my practice.

This exploration was just a beginning into what is possible when we let accessibility lead the way and embrace Disability. I think we are all excited for more. Thank you to the Canada Council for providing a travel grant; to Montreal Aerial Dance for gear, rigging and time; to Kingston Circus Arts for the space; to Anandam Dance Company, Inside Out Theatre and Springboard Performance for the support; to everyone who helped fundraise to pay for access; and to all of the collaborators: Brett Babcock, Chelsea Edgell, Drew Cumpson, Brennan Roy, Annie Peace-Fast, Luca Tucker, Erin Ball, Brandy Leary, Sophie Oldfield and Mélissa Colello.

Note

1. For more information about the concept of Disability Justice, see sinsinvalid.org. See also Berne et al., p. 227–230.

References

- Berne, Patricia et al. "Ten Principles of Disability Justice." *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 46, no. 1–2, 2018, pp. 227–230.
- Critical Disability Studies Collective*, University of Minnesota. cdsc.umn.edu. Accessed 30 October 2022.
- Kafer, Alison. *Feminist, Queer, Crip*. Indiana University Press, 2013.
- Oldfield, Sophie. Interview with Erin Ball. 28 September 2022.
- Peace-Fast, Annie. Interview with Erin Ball. 29 September 2022.
- Roy, Brennan. Interview with Erin Ball. 9 October 2022.
- Sins Invalid*. www.sinsinvalid.org. Accessed 30 Oct. 2022.