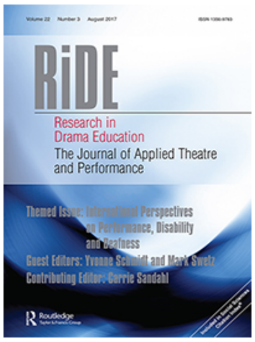

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Reinforcing Zionist ableism in Israeli wheelchair folk dancing

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ABSTRACT

This article examines a culturally specific case study of integrated dance. While integrated dance must constantly combat what I termed as *disdance* to earn legitimacy, each project might do this differently in its particular context. Based on documentary analysis and ethnography, I argue that in the Israeli context, wheelchair folk dancing utilises a Zionist version of ableism to promote cultural approval. The reinforcement of Zionist ableism includes: national hierarchy, militaristic myth, and exclusion of those who fail to represent overcoming. I conclude that public acceptance of Israeli disabled participants as dancers relies on their symbolic status as soldiers and/or overcomers.

KEYWORDS

Zionism; Israeli folk dance; disabled veterans; overcoming; the chosen body

Integrated dance, in general, challenges what I termed as ‘disdance’ (Broyer 2012). Disdance, I suggest, is a label used to indicate a distortion of what is considered appropriate dance and which receives no legitimacy and thus is immediately rejected. It seems that the disabled body is usually restricted to disdance. The common assumption that disabled people lack the ability to dance (Whatley 2007) creates an almost unbridgeable distance between the impaired body and the dancing body. These two bodies are loaded with conflicting cultural meanings to the extent that attempting to connect them generates an epistemological collision. As a result, integrated dance groups are continuously required to defy this dismissive claim of disdance.

Smith (2005), who researches the British integrated dance group CandoCo, notes that their shows were received by critics with hesitation and not widely recognised as a legitimate dance form. He explains that a 300-year tradition of aesthetics prioritises the standing body. He elaborates that classical ballet is associated with a noble and upright body image, and hence its choreography is based on a vertical line. Smith claims that, consequently, the disabled body ‘disturbs the ground’ (76) of performative dance and challenges its hegemonic aesthetic. But is it possible that integrated dance troupes around the world negotiate disdance by preserving ableist notions?

In this paper, I leverage cultural studies and disability studies frameworks to critically examine Israeli wheelchair folk dancing (‘IWFD’ from here on) as a culturally specific case study of integrated dance. My study is based on documentary analysis and on participant observation in an IWFD class during the years 2004–2005. Both global and local contexts supply each integrated dance initiative with a specific symbolic map in which to manoeuver. In the Israeli context, I argue that elements in IWFD demonstrate a Zionist

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version of ableism to advance cultural approval. First, I note that dominant national disability hierarchy is reproduced so the privileged status of disabled Israel Defense Forces (IDF) veterans legitimises integration of disabled people into the circle of dancers. Second, I point to overcoming as a militaristic myth aimed to symbolically remove the tangible presence of disability from sight. Third, I recognise an exclusion of disabled bodies whose performance subverts the narrative of triumph through struggle.

The chosen disabled body and integrated folk dance

IWFD was developed in the 1980s by Orly Baor, a dance therapist and choreographer. Baor adjusted folk dancing into integrated dance pairing wheelchair users (mainly men) with non-disabled dancers (mainly women). According to dance researchers, folk dance played a significant role in shaping Israeli nationalism. To illustrate the strong connection between folk dance and Zionism, it is worth mentioning that the declaration of the establishment of the State of Israel was followed by folk dancing in the streets of Tel Aviv. This popular image is etched in national memory and illustrates the local symbolic power of folk dance. Entry into the circle of folk dancing forms an image of belonging and blending into a cohesive and unified society. The line of the circle actualises the group, and simultaneously creates its borders. In this respect, attempting to integrate disabled people into Israeli folk dancing extends national boundaries.

Yet, the Zionist national circle was meant, historically, to exclude disabled bodies from the emerging collective. From an anti-Semitic viewpoint, the Jewish body was portrayed as weak, ill, and disabled. Internalizing this stereotypical imagery, Zionism's effort to confront it was shaped by an attempt 'to "cure" the Jewish people' (Sufian 2007a, 25). The national mission to heal the Diaspora Jew in Zion involved the creation of an alternative representation of the New Jew. The Zionist leadership envisioned that 'a new, Hebrew man (perceived as strictly male) would be born, healthy in body and mind: muscular, strong, virile, proud, and productive' (Sufian 2007b). Weiss (2002), a feminist anthropologist, coined a name for the contemporary ideal Israeli: 'the Chosen Body', personified as a young, able-bodied, heterosexual, Ashkenazi Jewish man. Weiss argues that the imaginable chosen body screens and moulds Israeli bodies throughout their life cycle. Under this culturally specific ableism, the disabled body becomes a symbolic threat to be managed, rejected, and erased. Therefore, attempting to integrate disabled people into Israeli folk dancing disrupts the Zionist symbolic order.

However, I argue that the initial inclusion of wheelchair users into Israeli folk dance significantly confirmed and even reinforced Zionist ideology. Baor's integrated folk dance was applied first in a class for disabled Israeli army veterans in 'Beit Halochem' (the Warriors Home) in Tel Aviv. In 1986 Baor also founded a dance troupe called 'Hora Galgalim' (Hora Wheels) from the members of her class, which performed for audiences in Israel and abroad. Weiss states that the image of the IDF soldier represents the chosen body. In that sense, Baor's initiative to widen the circle of dancers with disabled veterans actualised the chosen body. Roginsky (2004), a sociologist studying Israeli folk dance, explains that 'the same people that expressed "the complete Israeli body" […] were injured while performing their duties for their country continue to represent, even in their damaged bodies, the national practice' (377). Seemingly, the symbolism Israeli society places on the soldiers' bodies allowed Baor to insert the impaired body into the circle of dancers.

Since the disabled veterans continue to signify the chosen body, I suggest they transform into a hybrid ‘chosen disabled body’. As such, the IDF disabled gain the highest status in the Israeli hierarchy of disability, and in comparison with other disabled, they indeed have the best access to resources (Ben-Moshe 2016, 51–52). In her study about Israeli disability allowances, the disability legal studies scholar Mor (2011) indicates that disabled veterans are identified as the most deserving disabled; those ‘who deserve economic dignity’ (186). But dignity goes beyond financial class and so I claim that IWFD was designed to earn the disabled veterans ‘cultural dignity’. In order to enable cultural dignity there is a need to confront the stigma that taints their identities.

To triumph the disabled body

> Despite that the dancer is supposed to represent the perfect body while the disabled’s body is impaired and he has physical limitations, the movement and choreography adjusted for these ‘limitations’ express *the triumph of the spirit over the body*. (Baor 2004, 5. Italics added)

The above quote exemplifies Baor’s consciousness of the automatic framing of disabled dancing as disdance. While confronting it, she emphasises the message of ‘the triumph of the spirit over the body’. In Western culture, this well-known dictum symbolises the positive meaning of mental strength and determination in overcoming obstacles. But within disability studies, this concept of ‘overcoming’ is understood quite differently. Linton (1998), a disability studies scholar, discusses overcoming as ‘a wish fulfillment generated from the outside’ (18), meaning from an ableist society rather than the disability community. As a reflection of ‘the individual model’ (Oliver 1990) approach, overcoming embedded the dominant perception that disability is a personal tragedy that must be triumphed on an individual level. Although not yet described as overcoming, the sociologist Goffman (1963, 10) identifies this manoeuver in his influential book *Stigma*. According to him, a person with visible impairment might try to manage stigma by gaining control in areas of activity in which he is not expected to take part. This could be achieved by participating in hyper-physical activities, such as extreme sports and dance. Disabled activists and scholars who acknowledge the problem with this strategy, critique images of disabled overcomers and disparagingly name them ‘supercrips’ or refer to them as a case of ‘inspiration porn’.

Based on research of disabled Second World War veterans, Linton (1998, 19) resonates that overcoming was a specifically prevalent strategy among veterans. Gerber (2003), a disability historian, mentions that ‘The dependence on inspirational stories […] was the principal method by which military, medical and rehabilitation authorities sought to create a positive frame-of-mind among disabled military personnel through the two World Wars’. These overcoming stories were ‘intended to illustrate the possibility of normalization’ (906). Thus on the one hand, war veterans are the preferred population of people with disabilities that the state and society at large are opened to reintegrate; but on the other hand, this acceptance is conditional to their ability to ‘overcome’ and assimilate within mainstream society. I claim that Baor exemplifies this ambivalent approach toward disabled veterans. She prioritises the strategy of overcoming and offers Israeli disabled veterans a way to be rehabilitated to normalcy through IWFD.

Baor’s approach perpetuates normalcy at the expense of disrespecting the disabled body and its own movement and aesthetic. In that sense, her statement about ‘the triumph of the spirit over the body' illustrates the common ideology of 'virtuosity *in spite of*' (Harari 2016, 162. Italics in original) the disability. Furthermore, I interpret this motto as a militaristic image transforming the disabled body into a battlefield. The disabled veterans are once again called to fight, this time against their own bodies. Viewed as an obstacle, the veteran's body merits recognition only when it has been conquered and defeated in the imagined battle between mind and body. Paradoxically, the wheelchair user's physical movement can be accepted as a dance only after he seemingly overcomes his body.

> The example of the 'Hora Galgalim' troupe emphasizes the high importance attributed to the symbolic body of the disabled soldiers, which overshadows their physical body until its flaws do not repulse the viewers but instead become transparent for them. (Roginsky 2012, 318–319)

Here Roginsky articulates the way that Zionist symbolic order actively intervenes and reshapes spectators' view of the IDF disabled veterans' bodies. The audience's refusal to acknowledge the dancers' apparent impairments requires them to become transparent and invisible. Thus, I claim that the ableist gaze is trained to translate social recognition of disabled dancers as their ability to triumph the body. This paradoxical view reinforces the disability stereotype of the heroic overcomer through a complete denial of visible and corporeal impairments. In his study of the disabled body in the visual field, Davis (1995, 135), an English and disability studies scholar, identifies a similar dynamic. He argues that art historians imagine the fragmented sculpture of Venus de Milo to be whole so it can be perceived as beautiful and erotic. It seems that in both cases, the hegemonic symbolic meaning is required to 'triumph' the concrete visual reality. As a result, the subject learns to identify these disabled figures as a representation of a non-disabled body, that is, as a complete statue which arouses desire or as the chosen body performing a dance.

Screening out disabled bodies

Following Baor's first integrated folk dance group, classes for other disabled populations began opening. According to Roginsky (2004), the inclusion of additional disabled joiners was enabled as integrated folk dance was implemented during a period in which the values of the state had eroded and the prestige of folk dancing had declined. Nevertheless, I found that even after IWFD spread outside the realm of the army, ableism continued to operate within it.

During 2004–2005 I carried out an ethnography in an IWFD class. The class's instructor was a student of Baor's with a background in special education and training in various styles of dance. Among all the IWFD classes existing then, our group was considered the most diverse. It included a wide range of disabilities and wheelchair users of various bureaucratic status. Disabled veteran men danced side by side with other disabled men and women who acquired their impairments from an accident, disease or from birth. I joined this class from its beginning as a participant observer and was included as a motorised wheelchair user. My study there developed into an exploration of disdance; the reoccurrence of the rejecting label marking wheelchair dancing as a movement that cannot be conceived as dance. The tainting of disability dance as disdance reappeared at different times by various social actors in the field, including myself, the class instructor, and participants with and without disability (sometimes in the name of a perceived imaginable audience). Two main outcomes of the negotiation over the label of disdance were the restoring of the Israeli hierarchy of disability and the re-configuration of the disabled folk dancer as overcomer. In addition, disabled participants whose performances subverted the overcoming narrative, were excluded from shows.

Ableism became clearest when we were invited to perform at the Karmiel Dance Festival, an annual national dance festival that originated in 1988 as an Israeli folk dance event. At a relatively early stage of our preparations for the prestigious festival, discussions about splitting the group into a professional troupe and a recreational class began. A conversation I had with another wheelchair user dancer illustrates this.

> He explains that the dance troupe will include people who are 'progressive,' and it will be the one to perform, while the class will consist of the 'slow' ones. I express doubt, I feel uncomfortable. He continues: 'I am not ashamed to say this, let's call a spade a spade, the severely disabled hold us back. They prevent us from reaching the level that we can reach. Each person's desire is to do the best they can, and reach their top. It is like in a basketball competition. The strong people go up to the court and play. I am not saying that they will not perform, but rather, in a different setting, like in friendly games, it is all for their enjoyment. But in real performances, that are open [to the public] they will not perform. The people who I think should be performing are [names of three men who are IDF disabled veterans], me and you. The class should continue for everyone, enjoy a little, it will do them good. But the real group will be the one in which we will perform, progress, and learn.'

The potential dancing troupe presented to me in the conversation included a triad of disabled IDF veterans. As the paper indicates, Zionist ideology demanded their preference over the other disabled participants in the class. The suggested troupe was also composed of me and the speaker. Due to lack of space, I will not address here his decision to include me in the troupe (more on that, see: Broyer 2012). Instead, it is more relevant to try and explain his own suggested inclusion. The speaker himself was a polio survivor who in daily life walked with a limp. He had an athletic upper body and to support his walk, wore a steel leg brace under his pants. During the IWFD class, he sat on his sports wheelchair, used also for playing basketball. Although not a disabled veteran, he performed the overcoming narrative and therefore could pass as a chosen disabled body.

Ultimately, the instructor did not divide the class into two; instead she chose those performing at the festival and those not. She decided to include those same five members the above speaker had designated for his imagined troupe. In addition to us, she included another disabled man with cerebral palsy and a relatively light upper body disability. Other less appropriate disabled bodies underwent both a physical and symbolic erasure. The audience was invited to view the dancing disabled body only after a process of sorting and censoring. While this act of selection, which I witnessed firsthand, is not unusual in performative dance, I wish to emphasise the essential role of ableism in shaping this process in integrated dance. When the stakes became high, the disabled participants who failed to perform the overcoming narrative were required to remain outside the circle of dancers.

Conclusion

Both widespread Western ideology and local Zionist ideology contributed to the formation of IWFD. Together they generated an ableist module of integrated dance that geared towards the Israeli chosen body. In an effort to gain cultural legitimation, IWFD reinforced three mechanisms, well established in Israeli Zionist context. First, IWFD reinstates the national hierarchy that privileges war veterans. Second, it recaptures a militaristic overcoming myth heralding 'triumph of the spirit over the body'. Last, disability integration is conditional and accompanied by exclusion of the disabled bodies who fail to represent the heroic overcomer. I conclude that public approval of IWFD is dependent on symbolic and physical removal of disability from sight. By clinging to another set of imagery, the heroic soldier is used to overshadow disability and justify integration. Still, since the erasure of disability is never complete, its already restricted presence is reframed as evidence of a great triumph. In that sense, the participation of disabled people in IWFD depends on their capacity to perform the role of the soldier and/or overcomer. If not, the entire project of acceptance is jeopardised.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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