

Case Study 9

Integrating dancers of all abilities

Ausdance in partnership with Disability in the Arts Disadvantage in the Arts WA (DADAA) and the Mandurah Disabled Support & Recreational Respite Inc.

Ausdance, a national voice for dance in Australia, has a large and inclusive dream for the dance sector, but until the Australian Youth Dance Festival (AYDF) took place in Mandurah in April 2009, they did not realise to what extent they would be able to integrate dancers with disabilities.

As part of the festival, Ausdance and DADAA formed a partnership to commission a new dance theatre work to be developed by Daniel Daw and Jacob Lehrer, with the intention of integrating dancers with disabilities with able-bodied dancers. The work was included into the AYDF performance showcase at the Mandurah Performing Arts Centre.

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Claudia Alessi, Artistic Director of the AYDF 2009, had a vision to build upon AYDF's previous work with people with disabilities.

The festival

"The last AYDF, held two years ago in Horsham, Victoria, had worked with people with disabilities. Restless Dance Company (a professional dance theatre company from Adelaide who predominantly works with young people with intellectual disabilities) had participated in the festival," explains Ms Alessi.

"This was something I wanted to develop upon the last festival, to not just have a small amount of representation, but to have a feeling of inclusion throughout the festival. So I was looking at it being as inclusive as possible and the festival not just being open to the usual group of young people who are from the city or large regional centres who



Photo courtesy of Ausdance

always get to travel to these amazing events. It was born out of the desire for inclusion.”

The DAII Pilot Program required the arts organisation to partner up with a disability services organisation with the support of the Department of Culture and the Arts (DCA) and the Disability Services Commission.

“I was mentored along the way by DCA. This was really instrumental in contributing to the development of the partnership,” Ms Alessi says. “At one point I almost threw my hands up and went, ‘this is just too hard, I’m out of my league’ but the Department staff advised, ‘no, work with your partners, it’s all about the partnerships. Work as well as you can with these partners and keep forging forward.

“I think it was a great initiative by DCA to have the foresight to see the possibilities. I don’t think we ever dreamed of where it would go for Ausdance. We didn’t realise just how much we would be able to work with people with disabilities. It went from not knowing or understanding how to work with people with disabilities, to facilitating projects with them.”

Getting started

Able-bodied dancers were sourced through a massive call out throughout Australia to young people involved in youth dance centres and schools to attend AYDF.

Dancers with disabilities came from a group DADAA had been working with for a number of years. All dancers were aged between 14 and 19 years.

“The people with intellectual disabilities were able to showcase two works: one piece

that was instigated through Daniel Daw and Jacob Lehrer and the other, a work by choreographers Sete Tele and Rachel Ogle, who had previously held successful seasons of two dance theatre works with the DADAA dancers,” says Ms Alessi.

Alessi met Daw a few years prior to the festival and she was astounded by his tenacity and ability as a professional dancer with cerebral palsy.

“Upon having conversations with Daniel and working with DADAA as a partner, I had this idea to bring Daniel to work with able-bodied choreographer, Jacob Lehrer, and for Daniel to direct a work that was specifically made with and for DADAA and that this work be showcased in the public performance at the AYDF,” she explains.

“DADAA produced two fantastic works separately that were performed and showcased on a Tuesday and Thursday evening. Then on Saturday, the participants who had worked tirelessly all week in the workshops were integrated into other performances with the rest of the crew.”

Ausdance also tapped into remote communities through the Michael Leslie Foundation, bringing six young Indigenous people to Perth from the remote Pilbara and Kimberley.

Positive inclusion

“The AYDF included two public performances and an outdoor free performance where daily workshops led into a massive performance piece where all 160 young people participating in the festival performed,” Ms Alessi says.

“The whole process was extremely positive, in fact it was the most positive outcome they’d had in the history of the AYDF. This generation of kids were so inclusive of the remote kids from the Indigenous crew and from DADAA – it was quite mind blowing.

“I wasn’t nervous, I just didn’t know what to expect, so when the most positive outcome was achieved, I was flabbergasted.”

One of the quintessential moments for Ausdance was the final evening after-party.

“In the closing of it all, everyone was embracing, exchanging emails and phone numbers,” Ms Alessi recalls. “There were two girls, one who’s an independent living

Down Syndrome girl and the other, one of the youngest Aboriginal girls from the remote Pilbara, who gave each other a hug and exchanged words like, ‘wow I can’t believe we did this together and I can’t believe you move like that - you’re amazing!’ And the other girl would respond, ‘no it’s you who’s amazing’.

“Just that connection of exchanging praise and embracing was a sight to be behold. If it were not for the festival and the DAI Pilot Program we wouldn’t have witnessed that. It’s not very often that it happens, because I don’t feel that either girl would have been exposed to each other otherwise.”

However, the whole project would not have come together without hours of painstaking preparation to ensure that every aspect was considered with inclusion in mind.



Photo courtesy of Ausdance



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“The most important thing for me was that it was complete inclusion,” Ms Alessi says. “I led a yoga class every morning at 9am and I made sure that the carers were really fastidious at making sure everybody arrived and did what they did to the best of their ability.”

An email sent by one of the parents of the dancers from DADAA highlights the success of the project.

“Thank you for the wonderful support you gave my daughter,” the parent writes. “My family thought the week was superb from beginning to end. The performances were brilliant and the atmosphere was warm and congenial...she tells us she loved her teachers and that the other dancers were friendly, welcoming and inclusive.”

Chris Williams, Manager of Arts Development at DADAA, was also impressed with the results.

“I think the participants were extremely comfortable in the festival, which was good to see,” Mr Williams says. “They weren’t afraid of getting up or dancing with the other dancers – they never felt inadequate at any point in time. I think there was a sense that they were as good as the other dancers, and they didn’t identify their disability as limiting in that situation at all. All of them were extremely confident and they were getting up and talking and dancing when some of the other kids from the AYDF were shying away from doing things.”

“I think the biggest thing was that the young people, who were the able-bodied dancers, were so welcoming of the dancers with disabilities. There wasn't any blocking out of other people or putting them on the sideline. It was really inclusive and that's not something you can plan with so many different personalities,” Mr Williams continues.

The future

An unexpected outcome as a result of the AYDF was that Daniel Daw, whilst on a world tour with Kate Champion and the reputable Force Majeure Theatre Company, decided to use Perth as his base.

“After the AYDF, Daniel moved to Perth and continued to work with DADAA as well as performing in Dance Dialects, an Ausdance WA project. Daniel created a duet for Dance Dialects for himself and one of the DADAA dancers he first met at the AYDF,” Ms Alessi says. “So it has just gone from strength-to-strength and the project has instigated a lot of fantastic smaller projects that will go on to blossom.”



Photo courtesy of Ausdance

Outline of project

The Australian Youth Dance Festival (AYDF) wanted to integrate dancers with disabilities with able-bodied dancers in the festival. AYDF targeted teenagers at local schools and TAFE's Access and Participation programs. DADAA dancers with disabilities worked with professional choreographers prior to the festival.

Partners

Ausdance aims to provide leadership and to be a national voice for dance in Australia through promoting awareness and access to dance; providing opportunities for debate, advocacy and policy development; and fostering international links.

Disability in the Arts, Disadvantage in the Arts WA (DADAA) is a not-for-profit community cultural development organisation, which has been a catalyst for the development of an inclusive approach to the arts and culture of Western Australia for more than 10 years. Their focus is on creating opportunities and significant beneficial social change with people who have a disability and / or mental health issue.

Mandurah Disabled Support & Recreational Respite Inc is a recreational and support service providing approximately two to three hours support per week for up to 25 individuals with disabilities in the Mandurah region.

Outcomes

Ausdance has instigated another two projects with Daniel Daw including a new work for the 2009 Dance Dialects program. Daniel Daw has moved to Perth permanently in the hope of creating an inclusive dance company and an access dance plan with Ausdance WA.



Photographer Janusz Strzelecki



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