

# Case Study 7

## Moving dancers into the professional sphere

### Inclusion in dance performance

#### STRUT Dance

Dance performances by troupes of dancers with disabilities and performances by able-bodied dancers have historically been programmed as separate events. Although performance spaces have been designed to provide access for people with disabilities, simply constructing the spaces as accessible has rarely engaged the possibility of a combined production.

Through the DAII Pilot Project, STRUT Dance developed a performance that incorporated dancers with Down Syndrome, dancing with able-bodied professional dancers. This interpretation of German choreographer Thomas Lehmen's **Schreibstück** marked the first production of the work in Australia and the first integrated performance.

STRUT Dance Company director Agnès Michelet tells of her experience working on this production.

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The objective of the project was to produce a professional contemporary dance work with four dancers with Down Syndrome. It marks the first time in STRUT's program that a performance has been inclusive in this way.

"This project was actually first suggested to me, not through talking about the work with disability but generally speaking," Ms Michelet says. "When we first started talking about **Schreibstück** I didn't know it would take that direction. I just knew that it was a great concept which would enable the choreographers in Perth to show their talent and match the international benchmark,

because that concept has been produced and developed before in Europe with quite well known choreographers."

The **Schreibstück** performance revolves around a book of rules written by German choreographer Thomas Lehmen. It calls for three teams to perform a set of tasks three times before the teams come together on stage. The guidelines and rules, while inspiring a freedom in interpretation, must be followed precisely otherwise chaos unfolds on stage when the three teams come together.

### Getting started

Two Western Australian choreographers behind the project, Sete Tele and Rachel Ogle had previously worked with groups of dancers with Down Syndrome through projects with Disability in the Arts Disadvantage in the Arts WA (DADAA).



Photo courtesy of STRUT Dance

“We still had to find the number three team, explains Ms Michelet, “and that’s where we came up with the adaptation – proposing that one of the three versions be performed by the dancers with disabilities that Sete and Rachel had previous experience working with.

“It’s very clear that this would never have happened if Rachel and Sete hadn’t had an opportunity to do all these workshops with DADAA and gotten to know the dancers,” Ms Michelet says, “and also to have had an opportunity to make a selection from the dancers that they knew they could work with. They chose the dancers with the knowledge that they would be better equipped to do this project. In the end it was a rough learning curve for them because they were pushed straight into every day rehearsals for five weeks and then on stage so the achievements were massive.”

An inclusive program had never been attempted at STRUT, mainly due to the company’s structure.

“STRUT is about professional dancing so our members are professional dancers and choreographers and that’s where the project was very challenging for us. For the first time we were taking on amateur dancers and pushing them to do what is required from a professional dancer and in the end I think they did very well.

“I think the work DADAA is doing is fantastic because it allows those workshops to take place, which then allows the leaders of those dance workshops to create their own projects. The whole challenge is the sustainability of the project,” explains Ms Michelet.

One of the dancers Sete and Rachel had worked with at DADAA and drew into the **Schreibstück** performance was 26-year-old Virginia Calabrese. Her mother Lynn Churchill says the support Virginia experienced and the benefits of dance for people with Down Syndrome were incredible.

“Sete and Rachel are just amazing people,” Ms Churchill says. “They have a history with DADAA where the dancers are given a lot of opportunities for development. In one instance one girl had a stroke and she kind of communicated through dance for a long time. Another fellow who was actually in this performance, was almost unable to move at first and now he’s the star of the show. It’s taken about 10 years of dancing with Sete and Rachel, so they’re incredibly supportive.”

## Flexible approach

While the concept of **Schreibstück** was flexible, the performance needed just a little adaptation to fit with the dancers’ ability.

“We actually asked Thomas Lehman, the author of the book, if he would agree to the slight changes we needed to make in order to allow the dancers to come on stage,” Ms Michelet says. “It was also a discussion we needed to have with the choreographer, and he was delighted that we were doing it because I think it had gone from Europe to Asia and to Australia and ours was the only version with dancers with disabilities. It worked. It was fantastic because the context was professional so the rules were the same as the other teams.”

The rehearsals were held daily over five weeks, as is the demands of a professional dancer.

“What we realised however was when the other teams had five weeks we should have allowed for more with this team, just because of the reality of rehearsing for a full day – they could not do that. We should have made it half a day. We recognised the abilities of the dancers, which were different from the other professional dancers such as how long they can remain having attention going through the artistic process. I think there are two things; obviously one was to do with the fact they have Down Syndrome, but it was also to do with the fact that they had little ongoing professional training,” says Ms Michelet.

“I think it triggered a lot of discussion about what comes with the fact they have Down Syndrome and what comes from not being an ongoing trained dancer, with less opportunities to come to a regular class. I think it also gave us an idea of the obstacles

that are very true for any independent dancer, but possibly 10 times more for a dancer that has Down Syndrome.”

Other unexpected demands STRUT encountered involved the additional support that can sometimes be asked of not only those involved directly in the project but others who may be present. As was the case with one of Strut’s regular professional dancers, who was called upon to help while he was rehearsing his own material.

“We are lucky in a way that one of our dancers, who was not involved with this project, had actually been working with people with Down Syndrome and knew some of the dancers. At the time of the project he was working on a dance theatre project and he said he had the difficult situation of making himself available if the **Schreibstück** choreographers were slightly late or if they were taking care of another dancer,” Ms Michelet explains.



Photo courtesy of STRUT Dance

**“It was the additional support that we hadn’t planned for. Something more than just being there as a choreographer was required – it’s that emotional support.”**

## Positive progress

While the demands of working at the level of a professional dancer posed problems for some of the dancers with disabilities, there were many benefits for the dancers, least of all an increase in confidence.

“At the time Virginia was unbelievably unwell,” Ms Churchill explains. “We don’t actually know what happened. She’s normally a very active, socially engaged, lively person but she had about a year in almost a comatose state. Her whole body shut down and **Schreibstück** was about in the middle of it. For Virginia it was a big deal, we had to cut down on her other activities so she had the energy for doing that.

“She had a lot of behavioural problems at the time, obsessive compulsive things like putting her hands in the air and walking on her toes, completely unusual. She’s usually not like that. Sete and Rachel got her down off her toes and working in collaboration with the other dancers.”

Audience reaction to the performances was positive, with the interpretation of Lehman’s tasks and rules taking on new depth with these dancers.

**“It was very interesting because they had never seen dancers with disability in such context where the focus was not on the disability,” Ms Michelet says. “So it was like watching another interpretation.”**



Photo courtesy of STRUT Dance

“The way you looked at it was, ‘well, let’s see how they have completed the task,’ and see the disability in the quality of its interpretation and difference. The appreciation was that difference through the achievement.

“Obviously the audience couldn’t see the progress night after night, but for those few who came twice – the parents came a few times so they could definitely see progress. For example, there was a task where one of the dancers had to say a text and each night the text was said louder with more confidence to a point where it became a real dialogue and everyone was really comfortable and enjoying the performance,” recalls Ms Michelet.

## Lessons learned

STRUT is considering the possibility of following up with another project. Agnes

Michelet has several ideas that would aid the next project including making sure the rehearsals have additional support people.

Also the structure of the pilot project meant that much more time was demanded from STRUT and the choreographers in regards to reporting and training.

“There were many meetings and many times where we were invited to go to conferences (to talk about our experiences), but because it’s not our core business and we are a very small business, time is so restricted for all of us that we did keep thinking that we didn’t have the time to spend on the research part of the project. If we were commissioning a piece from the choreographers for another project like this, we would ask for them to be paid for the preparation time, which is bigger than in other projects,” Ms Michelet says.



Photo courtesy of STRUT Dance

## Outline of project

To progress dancers with Down Syndrome into a professional dance environment.

## Partners

**STRUT Dance** offers support to independent dance artists so they can create and produce their own work. The flexibility of artistic direction and breadth of membership allows STRUT to support emerging and established artists who work across a range of contemporary dance practices.

## Outcome

Four dancers with disabilities performed in the Australian premiere production of Thomas Lehmen’s **Schreibstück**. One of the dancers, Maria Lisa Hill was included as part of Ausdance’s Dance Dialect program in November 2009.

Choreographer Sete Tele presented a duet with another of the **Schreibstück** dancers David Guhl in July 2008 at PICA as part of Putting on an Act, which was reviewed very positively as a highlight of the program.