Re-Storying Disability through the Arts: Providing a Counterpoint to Mainstream Narratives

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Abstract
The arts can counter powerful cultural narratives that regulate the lives and bodies of disabled people. But, the performing arts practices that disabled people typically participate in are themselves enmeshed within such problematic narratives. As a result they can play a role in reproducing stigmatised identities and inequitable social relations. In some international contexts, conflicting narratives of disability have meant that the relationship between different areas of arts practice has been either non-existent or fraught with tensions. In this paper, we suggest that the performing arts can contribute significantly to the vision and aspirations articulated in New Zealand’s Disability Strategy if different areas of practice find common ground on which to engage in dialogue and work in coalition. This paper is a reflective report on Re-storying Disability Through the Arts, an event that aimed to provide a space for productive conversation between students, researchers, artists, educators and practitioners with different involvements or interests in disability arts (broadly conceived). It begins with a story that introduces some of the tensions this event evoked. This is followed by a critical commentary that unpacks these tensions, examining the three examples of community-based arts practice that were presented. In each instance we identify the ways in which these different forms of performance engage in a strategy of re-storying disability. The paper concludes by identifying some of the key issues that arose in the discussion that ended Re-storying Disability and from our reflection on the event. These include pressing structural issues and questions for consideration by those involved in disability arts in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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Biography
Molly Mullen is a lecturer in applied theatre at the University of Auckland’s Faculty of Education and Social Work. To this role she brings over ten years of experience producing theatre education, youth theatre, community arts and children’s theatre projects in the UK and New Zealand. She has ongoing research interests in funding, organisational practice and management in applied theatre. Other current research projects focus on applied performance and ecology, and drama and performance in early childhood education settings.

Rod Wills is a senior lecturer in Education Studies (Disability) at the School of Critical Studies in Education, Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland. His research interests are in areas of education and health policy; advocacy and inclusive education, and the use of disability arts as a vehicle for adult education. He is affiliated with the Menzies Health Research Institute of Griffith University and is completing a doctoral study that examines areas of cognitive dependency, parental caregiving and medical education. She has held leadership roles in the disability sector for over 25 years. For the last six years he has been the chairman of the Interacting Disability Theatre Trust and takes an active role in the delivery of disability theatre, and disability arts in the Auckland region. He is the parent of a woman with Down syndrome. Meow the cat likes to get in close for warmth.
A story of an afternoon encounter, seen two ways

Thirty or so in the circle – sitting and then talk began in turns, going around. Their names first, and the eyes all follow. Who and where, what and how – the usual polite, half-engaged, expected ritual. The introductory performance passes around the group, toward the end of the circle—the couple seated, she with her red dyed hair and he with the look of someone worn down, like his shoes. Looking for their guesses to be confirmed—her speech not as clear, look again, at her—ah yes, it’s in the eyes. And just look at him too—the shoes and his clothes, worn, well worn, too worn really. The clothing says what he has not, no real income and a label. Well it is all about labels really and the stories that go with them. No one really notices the infant as she sleeps. Her mother knows, so do a few others in the room. She sleeps—through and on into the afternoon.

In days gone by, the asylum down across the river at the Whau1, would be their home. He with the worn out shoes, and her with the red dyed hair, and the infant too. The moron, the idiot, the imbecile … those ‘others’ in the room.

The thirty or so in the circle listen to three who speak. The first, by way of Canada: Hank, the community film maker; with his soft slow drawl. He works capturing ideas, actions and episodes. Edits, assembles and plays back – lives retold as fictions, half-truths. Posting onto YouTube for an unknown audience to view. He sets his devices into action, laptop and projector, the circle reshapes itself—all eyes forward to the screen as the retelling emerges. Two short films with people like her with the red dyed hair and him with the worn down shoes, all ‘others’—re-storying disability in a way that echoes lives, as ‘more like ours than not’. The infant wakes and is taken out by her mother.

The story making, facilitated by Hank, is with young adults and teenagers, all labelled as disabled and separated for schooling. All captured in the shadow of meaning around words so easily spoken—special education, special school, special people. No vision, no future, no contribution, a burden on others. Two short films play back the re-worked narratives of the participants so as to deflect and overturn many of these assumptions about ‘their disability’.

A second member of the circle speaks. From the North of England but now Auckland is her home. Paula works with story making and theatre with adults who once had been called mentally handicapped, then intellectually disabled, now with learning disabilities. With time and care, performance work is developed. With strengthened voice, posture, greater certainty and presence, individuals deliver their stories. A group of seven has developed an ensemble narrative that reveals the sometimes humorous and often painful dimensions of their lives—not known but hidden behind the walls and doors of places not so unlike the asylum down at the Whau River. The stories and play scripts challenge perceptions of audiences and bring their lives into focus.

Every year, for many years. Keith comes a very long way for a holiday. Visiting family ‘over the ditch’, and friends here in Aotearoa. He is known, here and there, for telling stories that include, integrate and, in their way, interrupt whatever it is that holds people in place day-in-day-out. Still easing out of holiday mode he begins and the room comes to life. Keith can’t help but draw all eyes to where he stands. In return, he looks to check that the people making up this circle are ready as he begins to call, and … yes, they respond. Name spoken, repeated, recognised, greeted, cut up, dissected, and differently inflected. Voices raise, bodies move, faces relax into smiles or laughter. We encounter verse and prose through voice, hands, and feet, the resonating floor. For the Red Shoes—relocated—we dance across Auckland; for Othello we chant in Arabic, English and Makaton; the Nativity mixes Cockney rhyming slang with our kiwi accents; and always, always, we are given a generous portion of panto. Irresistibly, irreverent, we cannot not look, checking in, are we all giving it our all? The room buzzes.

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1 The Whau Lunatic Asylum was built on the Oakley Farm Estate in the area near Waterview and Point Chevalier, Auckland. The building is now occupied by Unitec Institute of Technology and the Mason Clinic.
Figure 1: Re-storying in the circle with Keith Park.

Where, previously art or ‘the arts’ had been a diversion, a therapy or treatment. Perhaps smoothed on like some balm or salve, to soothe and ease the pain or irritation. The thirty or so in the circle come here to discuss ideas of voice, recognition and acknowledgement, not so routinely extended to ‘the disabled’.

Characters in order of appearance:

The mother with her child – doctoral student and director
The young women with dyed red hair – education support worker and actor
Young man with worn shoes – assistant groundsman, trust board member and actor
Hank Snell – videographer and community film maker
Paula Crimmens – artistic director, Interacting Disability Theatre
Keith Park – story teller and educator.

Introduction

New Zealand aspires to remove all barriers, physical and attitudinal, that limit the lives of disabled people (Ministry of Health, 2001). This article invites and encourages lively, wide-reaching conversation about the role that the performing arts can play in achieving the vision of New Zealand as “A society that highly values” the lives of disabled people and “continually enhances … full participation” (Ministry of Health, 2001, p.1). The focus is on the ways in which performance can counter powerful cultural narratives that regulate the lives and bodies of disabled people. All areas of the performing arts can contribute significantly to the vision and aspirations articulated by The New Zealand Disability Strategy by presenting narratives that are affirmative of difference.

The theories and arguments outlined above emerge from our critical reflections on an event we organised in August 2014: Re-storying Disability Through the Arts. This was a half-day symposium at the University of Auckland’s Faculty of Education and Social Work, hosted by the School of Critical Studies in Education and Critical Research Unit in Applied Theatre (CRUAT). The event included presentations and workshops by Keith Park, Paula Crimmens and Hank Snell. These three artists predominantly work with people defined as having intellectual impairments and so this area of practice was foregrounded at the event. In response to the presentations, attendees were invited to discuss the ways in which the arts can provide a counterpoint to mainstream narratives about disability and what this might mean in their own professional contexts and/or practices. The event aimed to provide a space for productive discussion between people with different perspectives on and experiences of disability and the arts. The 32 attendees included under- and postgraduate students, disabled people, academics from tertiary institutions, drama therapists, teachers and community-arts practitioners.

Mullen & Wills, 2016
Participation in the arts in New Zealand: An emerging picture

The New Zealand Disability Strategy (Ministry of Health, 2001) presents 15 objectives, each with a series of action statements. Three action areas are identified in the area of the arts and disability. The most direct is 9.2: “Provide opportunities for disabled people to create, perform and develop their own arts, and to access arts activities” (p. 23). The two subsequent action statements focus on the education of arts administrators and organisations about disability, and supporting the development of arts projects by and for disabled people. In 2016, government and sector representatives are reviewing and updating the strategy, and so these actions around the arts can be expected to change.

Discrimination against individuals in New Zealand on the basis of disability is illegal. The Human Rights Amendment Act 1993 prohibits discrimination on the grounds of disability. However, unlike the legislative and regulatory environments of the United States or Great Britain there are no statements that are prescriptive in the inclusion of disabled people in arts and cultural activities. And while the Building Code establishes guidelines for access to some locations where activities are offered to the public, the arrangements for access may still be less than optimal with respect to an individual’s needs.

The last action from the government agency responsible for implementing The Disability Strategy, the Office of Disability Issues, was reported in its Disability Action Plan 2014–2018. This stated that the Office was investigating the introduction of “a companion card programme to reduce the cost barrier for disabled people who require a companion to attend paid-entry activities” (Office for Disability Issues, 2014). Aside from this, there is no other action reported by the government that relates to progress in providing opportunities for accessing or producing performing arts.

Likewise, there is little information currently in the public domain that gives a full picture of disabled people’s participation in the arts in New Zealand, or insight into the histories and traditions of different areas of arts practice. This paucity has been similarly noted at an international level by the American researchers, Braddock and Parish (2001), who pinpointed the lack of scholarship drawing from the literary and artistic archives. They proposed that the providers of services offer much of the history of disability. Reflecting this, many of the accounts in the public domain in New Zealand originate as commissioned histories, such as that of Touch Compass: Celebrating Integrated Dance (Powles, 2007).

The national umbrella organisation Arts Access Aotearoa advocates for people who experience barriers to participation in the arts. Their Creative Spaces Directory lists 49 community organisations across New Zealand that provide resources, facilities and support for people to participate in the arts (Arts Access Aotearoa, n.d.). Of the organisations listed, 14 are arts organisations. The other 35 are health and disability service providers with an arts element in their range of services. The majority of these (20) cater for people with disabilities, and seven identify individuals with mental illness as their focus. From the information available, a total of three organisations offer dance or theatre as a mode of arts practice at a public performance level. There are other instances of performance practices, past and current, from across Aotearoa New Zealand, involving disabled people that have gained national and international recognition. But still, the partial picture offered by the database indicates the significant under representation of opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in the performing arts. It could be argued that the ‘hands off’ nature of government policy in this area is linked to this under representation.

Looking abroad to understand Aotearoa

Disability studies scholars from the United Kingdom, Goodley and Moore (2002), identify four “performing arts forums with which disabled people are connected in different ways” (p. 13). Each ‘forum’ is shaped by different narratives of disability and within each there are barriers to full participation. The “mainstream arts”, for example, are defined as arts for disabled people by nondisabled people that reproduce the disabling conditions, unequal social relations and problematic representations of disabled people that prevail in society at large (p. 13). “Community arts” are participatory, encompassing art-making by and with different groups that have social as well as
artistic purposes. Community, or applied arts, are often led by non-disabled facilitators, artists and managers so issues of control, ownership and representation are prominent (p. 14). “Disability arts” describes any art created by disabled artists that “articulate[s] something about the condition of disability” (p. 15). In the UK, disability arts (or disability-led arts) are highly politicised and strongly connected with the disabled peoples’ movement (Conroy, 2009; Masefield, 2006). Goodley and Moore place disability arts under critical scrutiny for devaluing and in some cases excluding the art of people with learning disabilities/intellectual impairments although this issue has been addressed to some extent since their book was published (see, for example, Mackey & Terret, 2015). Finally, “Service-sponsored arts” includes art making that takes place as part of wider service provision for disabled people, including special schools, and might include workshop programmes or arts-therapy sessions but also, and this is where these categories start to blur, where mainstream and community arts organisations take contracts to deliver services for or partnership with service providers (Goodley & Moore, 2002, p. 17). Much service provision is informed by a medicalised narrative of disability that legitimates corrective interventions by experts into the lives, and bodies, of disabled people.

What is apparent is that there are tensions within these areas of practice and there are also tensions between them. Also discussing the UK context, Conroy (2009) identifies the lack of discursive “meeting place” between applied or community-based arts and disability arts (p. 12). There is a perception that community and service-sponsored arts reproduce the narratives of charitable, medical and social care systems that the disabled peoples’ movement has challenged (Conroy, 2009, pp. 11–12). The three examples of practice presented at Re-storying Disability most comfortably sit within Goodley and Moore’s category of community arts. However, it may well be that the four forums identified by Goodley and Moore do not map onto the Aotearoa New Zealand context. Underlying the Re-storying Disabilities event was the argument promoted by Goodley and Moore (2002) that progress can be made in all areas of the performing arts practice towards removing barriers to participation and challenging cultural narratives that cast disabled people into socially devalued roles. Given the small scale of New Zealand’s arts sector and the level of competition for scarce resources, these aims might be best achieved through debate, exchange and coalition, rather than attempting to establish which area of practice is “the best”.

Critical Commentary

We open with a combined critical reflection on the Re-storying Disability event. It started as a narrative response written by Rod Wills shortly after the symposium took place, written as he reflected on his experience and the photographs he took throughout the afternoon. We began to discuss our different interpretations of what took place and to identify key tensions. We contextualised and theorised these using the literature of our respective academic territories: applied theatre (Molly) and disability studies (Rod). What follows is a critical commentary in which we unpack these tensions and look at how they play out in art practice.

Storying disability: Language, narrative and identity

In the opening story, various terms are used to describe people that were present in the room. Many of the terms carry negative connotations. This is most apparent in terms like ‘imbecile’ or ‘idiot’ that once were accepted terminology. Much of the language around disability has its roots in the medical and professional practice of a particular context. As time passes, the aggregated impact of oral and written communication remains and “new definitions of difference absolve older ones that have become ‘polluted’ by accumulated negative connotations. Again and again, the defined differences become outmoded by changing times and new definitions” (Devlieger, 2003, p. 173). The language used to talk about disability, and the word disability itself, is not neutral. Debates about how to define disability are ongoing. Disability activists, scholars and performers have reacted against the way in which language and terminology has dehumanised, devalued and oppressed.

The people-first movement advocates for putting the person before the disability, hence: “people with disabilities” (People First, 2016). For some disability theorists and activists, however, this is problematic as it still suggests the ‘disability’ belongs to the individual (Cameron, 2007). The social model of disability argues that people are not disabled by their impairment, but by the physical and attitudinal barriers present in the environment (Cameron, 2007). These barriers exist when
societies are built and run in a way that assumes a particular body type and way of perceiving and thinking is the norm – this is identified as ableism. In the social model, disability defines something that is done to the individual. The social model informs The New Zealand’s Disability Strategy and we use this language in this article. What we want to highlight primarily, however, is that the language of disability is part of what feminist disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thompson (2005a) calls the “disability system” (p. 1565), meaning “a system of exclusions that stigmatizes human difference” (p. 1557). Or, as Rod says in the story, “it was all about labels really, and the stories that went with them”.

The stories we collectively know shape the material world, inform human relations, and mold our senses of who we are. Because prevailing narratives constrict disabilities complexities, they not only restrict the lives and govern the bodies of the people we think of as disabled, but they limit the imaginings of those who think of themselves as nondisabled. Stereotypical, often unexamined narratives ultimately undegird exclusionary environments, employment discrimination, and social marginalisation. (Garland-Thompson, 2005a, p. 1567)

Garland-Thompson (2002, 2005a, 2005b) and some disability performance scholars including Kuppers (2001), have drawn on Judith Butler’s theory of gender, to argue that cultural narratives play an important role in producing bodies, identities, meanings, relations and institutions. Cultural narratives are the place in which a society imagines itself; they are stories that establish and sustain meanings, values and norms. It is through these narratives and within particular environments that people experience and understand their bodies and selfhood (Garland-Thompson, 2002, p. 20). Cultural narratives are powerful because they assign people to particular identity categories, positioning them within the social order that does not serve everyone equally. As both Garland-Thompson and Kuppers explain, the dominant narrative of disability “others” a whole group of people by casting them in social roles that are different from an idealised norm. These are typically identity positions with negative associations and the lives of disabled people are perceived to be less valuable and desirable. The result being that people’s identities and lives become defined in a negative way by their impairment:

the phenomenon of ‘identity spread’ means that the person’s individuality - both their personality, but also other aspects of their identity . . . can be ignored, as their impairment label becomes the most prominent and relevant feature of their lives, dominating interactions. (Shakespeare, 2014, p. 95)

By re-storying disability, the arts have the potential to counter what Shakespeare identifies here as ‘identity spread’.

**Re-storying disability through the arts**

The idea that the arts, and performance in particular, can challenge powerful cultural narratives and imaginings of disability is now well established (Cameron, 2011a, 2011b; Garland-Thompson, 2005b; Hickey-Moody, 2009; Kuppers, 2001; Roulstone, 2010; Sandahl & Auslander, 2005). In the 2005 introduction to Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance, Sandahl and Auslander (2005) suggest that in performance, both conventional performances and performances in everyday life, disabled people challenge norms and expectations by appropriating and subverting common narratives and stereotypes. They also identify performance work where disabled performers have engaged in a version of what Garland-Thomson (2005) calls “narrative retrievals” (p. 1560), creating performances “based on their own experiences, challenging both tired narrative conventions and aesthetic practices” (Sandahl & Auslander, 2005, p. 4). Reviewing the 2009 themed edition of RiDE: On Disability: Creative Tensions in Applied Theatre, disability scholar Roulstone (2010) identifies “Re-presenting disability and impairment in new ways, ways that challenge given orthodoxies” as one of the key themes of the edition (p. 431). Many of the participatory practices presented in this edition engage in some form of re-storying, confronting and revising dominant narratives.

The disruption of cultural narratives through performance, however, is neither straightforward nor the ultimate solution to social injustices related to disability. Kuppers (2001), for example, shows
how dominant narratives persist even when challenged. Performances by disabled people are interpreted as being ‘about disability’, whether or not that is what the performer intended. Dominant meanings, then, are hard to overcome and the binaries that underpin them [disabled/non-disabled] persistently reassert themselves (Kuppers, 2001).

In the early 2000s, Swain and French (2000) suggested that “a new model of disability was emerging within the literature by disabled people and within disability culture, expressed most clearly by the Disability Arts Movement” (p. 569). The ‘affirmation model’ challenges the view of disability as a personal tragedy and disabled people as victims. Building on the work of Swain and French (2000), Cameron (2011a) posits the argument that the oppression created by ‘normalcy’ can be addressed, in part, by changing the language that is used to express the understanding of disability as difference rather than an inferior identity. He offers the following definitions to reset the language used in the talk about difference:

- **Impairment**: physical, sensory, emotional and cognitive difference to be expected and respected on its own terms in a diverse society.
- **Disability**: a personal and social role which simultaneously invalidates the subject position of people with impairments and validates the subject position of those identified as normal. (Cameron, 2011b, p. 20)

In particular, Cameron (2011b) sees the change in language as a tool to make sense of everyday interactions which place people with impairments in the role of deficiency. He suggests an audience’s exposure to disability arts can bring about a better understanding of “the meaning of disability and the meaning of the lived experience as people with impairments in a disabling society” (Cameron, 2011b, p. 2).

In her introduction to a themed edition of RiDE, Conroy (2009) acknowledges the political significance of disabled people representing themselves and their experiences through performance, particularly given that the production of representations of disabled people is often beyond their control (p. 10). But she also points to the limits of identity politics, where representation is posited as the primary cause of and solution to injustices experienced by disabled people. She questions the extent to which “representation in art and media and representation in democracy are read together” (p. 10). While re-storying problematic narratives and producing affirmative identities may not be the entire solution, we would argue that it is still an important strategy available to those involved in all areas of the performing arts.

As we proceed with the critical commentary, we will first examine the dominant narratives of disability that inform the areas of practice in which Paula, Hank and Keith work. We then theorise briefly how each of their practices re-stories disability, subverting social expectations of disabled people and creating affirmative identities.

**Hank Snell: Participatory filmmaking**

Hank’s work is best understood as participatory video. A facilitation approach is used to aid a group or community in producing their own film. Short projects are completed by making the use of the video camera and sound recording easy and accessible and supporting people to come together to share their interests and stories. Two ‘classes’ are offered each week in different locations in Auckland; both of the settings provide a range of buildings and grounds that are frequently used in the film projects. One is a disused winery complex and the other an early homestead and grounds, Corban Estate and Nathan Homestead. Both are operated by the Auckland Council as community arts centres. Participants usually join the class for a 10-week period during which time the group takes a collective approach to building and telling a story that may reflect a direct issue or concern they hold or respond to an interest arising from other projects they have completed. The structuring of projects is relatively fluid, with tasks and related skills being developed across the group membership over a number of films. Aside from the individuals joining the class, a number of other people identified as disabled are routinely involved. The voice-over commentary, sound and film editing functions across most of the projects are undertaken by a core group of young adults. Many of the films include original music by The Mutes from Mars, a group of disabled musicians. The skill of Hank as a facilitator in combining the input of the different participants is crucial to the success of the work.
Hank typically works under the auspices of Interacting Disability Theatre. His film projects and other work by Interacting appear on the YouTube channel InteractingVideo, where there are 31 films completed over four years. Two films were selected for the Re-storying Disability event. The first, The Tiger Sleeps, was finished in three days during the annual InterACT Disability Arts Festival in 2013. Complementing this was Blind Alley, which was made in the last school term of 2014. While the narratives of many of Snell’s film projects reflect the everyday encounters of disabled people, other themes emerge from the use of stylisation or genre. For example, film noir is evident in a number of detective themed films made with students from Homai College, where all have a vision impairment. Subtle humour and interplay often casts them into sighted roles—as detectives for example. Another theme explored is the apocalypse, forecasting the end of the world as we know it. This emerges in various spy/spionage narratives as well as several films set in royal households, with characters costumed in Elizabethan style. Another popular genre is spaghetti western, and the character ‘cowboy’ now appears in other films. In many films special effects are achieved with green screen work.

Analyses of contemporary visual culture suggest that most mainstream film makers have “come to rely on an audience’s knowledge of [visual] codes in order to make damage to the body [or mind] of the character a statement about the character” (Evans, 2009, p. 276). Snell is interested in unsettling such filmic codes (Evans, 2009) and letting his participants reset meanings of disability. In Snell’s films, the guy does get his girl, and the unexpected will occur rather than the obvious. Snell’s facilitation goes far beyond breaking the code with some of his work, the most blatant overturning being where the topic of charity giving is tackled head on to further provoke the audience. In Blind Alley:

There is a structurally necessary relationship between the portrayal of disability as a disaster or a tragic loss, and the function of raising money. This means that any critique of representation must also link that critique to the institutional practices and ideologies of charity. (Evans, 2009, p. 278)

Enabling the students from Homai College to reverse the charity roles that they are routinely subjected to creates a superb counternarrative to that of blind individuals being the subject of charity and pity.

Important for the participants in community film projects is the collaborative and cooperative approach taken. Where individuals have a range of skills and a mix of needs arising from their impairment the move away from an overt focus on high competence in self-expression opens up a broader range of participatory opportunities. One of the techniques used by Hank is to have another participant ‘voice’ for one less competent in speech. Both individual identity and group interaction are affirmed by the generative processes involved and the reframing of identity in the community film.

Paula Crimmens: Interacting Disability Theatre

Interacting was first established as a charitable trust in 2007 and now provides disability theatre classes and performance works, and organises an annual disability arts festival. In addition, a number of tutors are employed to provide term-long classes in music, community film, wearable arts and hip-hop. At Re-storying Disability, Paula spoke particularly of the theatre work and the ensemble group production Into the Naughty Corner (2009–2010). During this phase of the trust’s work, most
of the outputs were being developed with the residents and some staff from a disability service provider in West Auckland. The ensemble group worked independently of the larger class that was offered once a week. The larger group was supported by two people making costumes, props and, later, projections and production effects. Both the ensemble production and the work of the large group were performed on a number of occasions, in festival contexts and for short seasons. Into the Naughty Corner was the subject of television news and current affairs programmes three times over the two years it was being presented. The relationship with the disability service changed as the activities programme was re-focused. The high demand and high output level work that interacting had been delivering shifted and a range of open community classes were developed. These were offered across many locations and were to reach a far wider group.

The social and individual gains by participants from community arts practice are reported as providing multiple benefits including: personal development, social cohesion, community empowerment and self-determination, local image and identity, imagination and vision, health and wellbeing (Goodley & Moore, 2002). In Auckland, however, the nature of what is essentially a purchaser model of service provision strongly favours the funder or commissioning agency. Under these conditions tensions can emerge. The value experienced by individuals participating in the arts can be displaced as a result of a focus on economic value, or in some cases gain, from such activity. In this narrative, the disabled are cast as consumers of services that compete with each other. Bluntly put, the divided thinking of ‘value for money’ that dominates the public sector in New Zealand leaves involvement in this type of funded arts service in a precarious position.

The power and importance of the ensemble work, Into the Naughty Corner was achieved through the development and use of storytelling and narrative. When presented with the authenticity that this work carried, the power of the stories was inescapable. Linked to drama therapy approaches where storytelling and storymaking lead to increased self-esteem and self-mastery, the outcomes in the domains of social and communication skills are evidenced by gains in participants’ capability.

The importance of the work that Hank and Paula develop and present can be reflected upon when considering the role and function that narrative holds in societal groups. This is proposed by Bruner (2002): “We are a species whose main purpose is to tell each other about the expected and the surprises that upset the expected, and we do that through the stories we tell” (p. 4). Re-storying the disability narrative creates a feedback loop that enables the resetting of the popular understandings of difference.

**Keith Park: Interactive storytelling**

Interactive storytelling involves the adaptation of cultural texts into call and response form to make them accessible for diverse groups. This based on a commitment to enabling increased participation in literature, culture and cultural spaces (Grove & Park, 1996, p. 1). Keith adapts classic, folk, traditional and contemporary texts into interactive scripts. These are often texts that would typically be considered ‘too difficult’ for the groups he works with. In Keith’s highly engaging workshops, these texts become interactive, multisensory collective performances, which combine
spoken word, Makaton signs, resonance (created through clapping, stamping or drumming), movement, drama, visual images, props and costume. As they become familiar with the form, groups begin to adapt Keith’s stories, changing the words and actions, adding new elements, and shifting genre or style. Participation also takes the lead, individually and collaboratively, in generating new call and response stories. Keith works predominantly in special schools, but also brings groups together to share and perform in public spaces, including theatres, museums, galleries and cathedrals.

Keith’s stories use language in its richest diversity. Keith and his early collaborator, Nicola Grove, refute the idea that “verbal comprehension [is necessary] to the understanding of poetry and literature” (Grove & Park, 1996, p. 2). Instead they argue that “meaning” can be “grasped through a kind of atmosphere created through sound and vision” and that great enjoyment can be found in this embodied experience of poetry and story (Grove & Park, p. 2). Keith’s adaptations of Shakespeare, for example, use the original text, often combined with other languages – Othello in Arabic for example – and Makaton, adding, rather than removing, layers of complexity. This is an enabling approach to making performance (Roulstone, 2010). The use of multiple modes of communication and engagement of multiple senses enables the participation and creativity of people with a range of cognitive, physical and sensory impairments.

Typically an interactive storytelling session takes place in the closed environment of a special school classroom. One dominant narrative operating in this setting casts disabled students as “defective individual pathologies in need of special provision to support their own specific educational needs” (Slee, 1997, p. 408). Keith’s work may certainly be intended by some schools to function as a remedial intervention directed at students’ particular needs, and this is reflected in some of his earlier books that emphasise the development of communication skills (Grove & Park, 1996). But, interactive storying also contributes to re-storying elements of this problematic narrative. The mode of call and response, in which fluid or shared leadership is encouraged, generates a strong sense of collaborative creativity within a group. This collaborative mode of participation, and the playful, hilarious, irreverent ‘atmosphere’ of an interactive storytelling session, subvert hierarchical, remedial, individualising ways of relating and educating, at least for the duration of the session. Traditional classroom etiquette is suspended, calling and acting out is celebrated, unpredictability is invited; colloquial speech, multiple forms of language and communication are encouraged, and anyone can take the lead. Everyone and everything becomes a potential source of creativity and humour. Keith’s work suspends the norms of the institutional settings he works in, enabling participants, and sometimes those institutions, to inhabit other narratives and, perhaps, imagine themselves towards becoming otherwise.

**Focusing forward: The beginning of a conversation**

To counter powerful cultural narratives that regulate the lives and bodies of disabled people the performing arts need to contribute significantly to the vision and aspirations articulated by New Zealand’s *Disability Strategy* by presenting narratives that are affirmative of difference. The practices discussed in this article offer some ways in which this might happen in different sectors. But this is, we hope, just the start of a wider conversation.

The discussion that ended *Re-storying Disability* highlighted a number of barriers to full participation in the arts across most of the sectors represented. Some of these were located in the curriculum of tertiary institutions, and this poses a series of questions about access to training that cannot go unaddressed. Alongside this was the indication that in some instances the predominant delivery of arts activities by the disability sector had displaced momentum for the mainstream to become more inclusive or for disability-led arts to flourish. So, while re-storying is an important strategy, which we argue all arts practices can engage in, other factors should not be overlooked. In his review of the 2009 edition of RiDE, for example, Roulstone (2010) points out that what we are calling re-storying, is not the only, nor the most important, outcome of disability performance/art. He also discussed the importance of developing enabling aesthetics, creating spaces for relationships between disabled people and nondisabled people to be supported, addressing issues of exclusion and
access in training and professional performance, and challenging divisions between elite and ‘special’ arts.

One emerging threat to disability arts flourishing and the goal of a society that “highly values our lives and continually enhances our full participation” (Ministry of Health, 2001, p. 3) is the move to a consumer model of service provision. This is a situation where “welfare and social well-being are viewed as products of individual choice. . . within a free market economy” (Peters, 2001, p. 124). In these circumstances “young people with learning disabilities have their identities constructed by what they are not, by what they do not do, and by what they cannot afford” (Gladstone, 2014, p. 230). Given this context, there is an urgent need to address questions such as: What does equal access and representation within democratic capitalism bring? (Garland-Thompson, 2002). There is a risk that Aotearoa New Zealand’s current policy context will undermine the potential for multiple valued identities to emerge, as the only identity that seems to be valued in this cultural narrative is that of the consumer.

References


