

Disability Arts, Disability Politics

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Good morning, everybody. I'm afraid I have to warn you that the disability movement is about to receive a severe setback. This week, in London, thousands of disabled people will be taking time that could be spent on the Movement and frittering it away enjoying themselves. Watching plays, listening to music, looking at paintings and photographs, even listening to stand-up comedy. Whereas they should, as you know, be attending committee meetings, sub-committee meetings and seminars. They should be taking minutes and writing discussion papers, not having a good time.

Fortunately for us all, the London Disability Arts Forum has spotted the danger, and organised an appropriately serious and highly boring one-day conference.

I suspect there are still a lot of people in the disability movement who think like this, seeing disability arts as a sort of frivolous extra, not part of the serious business of disability politics. After all, anything so enjoyable can't really be important, can it?

Personally, I disagree with this outlook. I think disability arts and disability politics are extremely intimately connected. I also think that the development of a disability culture is the most important thing that is going on in the disability movement at the moment. In this paper, I would like to explain why.

I don't think that disability arts would have been possible without disability politics coming first. It's what makes a disability artist different from an artist with a disability. We don't see our disabilities as obstacles that we have to overcome before we try to make our way in the non-disabled cultural world. Our politics teach us that we are oppressed, not inferior. We may be second-class citizens, but that doesn't make us second-rate people. We have the right to celebrate who we are. And as we wouldn't be us without our disabilities, we have the right to celebrate being disabled.

Our politics have given us self-esteem. They have taught us, not simply to value ourselves, but to value ourselves as disabled people. That's why we can have disability art: because we realise that our disabilities give us something important to make art about. And I'm not talking about tales of personal tragedy. Art has to be measured in terms of what it values. And stories about how dreadful it is to be disabled value being able-bodied, not disability.

We have also learnt the importance of taking control of the things that affect our lives. Just as we must have organisations of rather than for disabled people, so we must have art that is of disabled people. That is why it is so important to distance ourselves from art therapy.

The term 'art therapy' is one of those phrases, like 'military intelligence' that contains an internal contradiction. Art therapy uses the forms of art for entirely unartistic ends. In particular, it leaves out communication, for it assumes we have nothing to communicate. We, of course, know better, but as in so much else, we have had to reclaim our very right to existence.

What we communicate, and how, is obviously going to differ from person to person, if only because one of the things we have been fighting for it's the right to individuality, As artists, we have distinct individual outlooks and approaches - not to mention the fact that we work in a great variety of media. But the way we make our art is also bound to be affected by our different experiences of disability, and the different politics we each develop in relation to our own disabilities as well as disability in general.

Thus, one of the major reasons that I like to work as a stand-up comedian is that it gives me the opportunity to come out epileptic in a very bold, very public way. That's an issue that has particular importance for me, as an epileptic, that wouldn't apply to someone with a more immediately visible disability. But they might, for example, feel it important to explore issues of physical attractiveness, challenging stereotypical ideas around that theme.

Obviously, coming out epileptic is important to me as part of my personal politics. But there is also a wider politics of epilepsy involved. Epileptics are a very isolated group: I was twenty-seven before I knowingly met someone else with my disability. That was someone I'd known for two years before he told me his secret. So one reason for me to stand up on a stage, or in front of a television camera, rather than just retain the comfortable anonymity of being a writer, is to show other people with my disability what another epileptic looks like.

(I know this suggests the appalling possibility of a whole generation of epileptics growing up with Allan Sutherland as a role model. Still, it could be worse - it might have been David Hevey!)

There are not many epileptics in the disability movement. That's

one reason I have started trying to perform on the regular cabaret circuit. But that brings us to the issue of how disability arts relates to a wider culture. That is something we are going to have to consider very carefully, but it's also too large a topic for me to discuss now.

The relationship between disability arts and disability politics is a two-way one. Our art draws upon our politics, but it also feeds back into it. We are gradually starting to create a shared culture, discovering through our art how much we have in common. It gives us opportunities to see how we may have very different disabilities, yet similar experience. We talk about 'we', meaning disabled people in general. Our arts, our culture, enable us to understand what that 'we' consists of.

If we want to explain ourselves to the outside world, or simply to announce our presence, then we need to define ourselves as different from the pathetic cripples that are created by the media and by charity fundraising. One of the fastest and most effective ways of demonstrating that difference is through our arts and culture.

When I perform on the ordinary cabaret circuit, and I go out on a stage following some idiot who's been making jokes about spastics and blind people and epileptic liquorice and getting laughs doing it, I'm looking to get more laughs and come off that stage in a storm of applause - if only from the people who weren't laughing at the spastic jokes. If that happens, then I've won something for disabled people. Most important of all, there's a good chance that that audience may contain somebody who is disabled, and who may still be isolated from other disabled people. If I've given them a glimpse of their strength, then I've done my job. Because the single most important thing that being

a disability artist involves is addressing other disabled people.

But perhaps the most important way our art contributes to our politics is the one that Johnny Crescendo described to me recently. 'It enables us to dream', he said. When Johnny sings, 'We don't need your special schools', abolition may be twenty years off. But by sharing that dream of change, we are taking the first steps towards making change happen.