

# Disability and Dance. Possible Theoretical Approaches to Analyse CandoCo's First Guest Performance in Hungary

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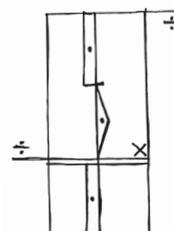
## ABSTRACT

In this essay, I outline a few possible points of connection between disability studies and theatrical dance. I then draw on the theories presented to analyse the first performance of the CandoCo company in Hungary. I present two models that can be used fruitfully for the analysis of dance performances. The first, the 'misfit' model refers to an approach that focuses not on the individual but on their relation to the environment. The second model draws on Sarah Whatley's (2007) division of five strategies of inclusion in dance performances, featuring dancers with disabilities. The choice of each strategy may depend on the viewer's initial attitude and prior performance experiences, while any production can elicit either one of them. Whatley considers two viewer attitudes that approach a conservative, solid aesthetic: a view that simply ignores disabilities and a view that evokes new aesthetic approaches.

CandoCo has performed three times in Hungary, first at the Sziget Festival in 2002 with the *Triple Bill* show. Triple Bill included three excitingly different choreographies (CandoCo 2002a, 2002b, 2002c). In *Phasing*, choreographed by Jamie Watton, David Lock performed in his wheelchair appearing as a misfit in the series of scenes that featured three performers, which triggered mainly conservative viewer strategies. Conversely, Javier de Frutos' *Sour Milk* urged the audience to view the seated position associated with wheelchairs in a novel way. Finally, in *Shadow*, choreographed by Fin Walker, we could analyse the relations between disability and choreography through physical contacts between the dancers.

## KEYWORDS

Disability studies; theatrical dance; choreography; inclusion; CandoCo.



## Introduction

Placing disability and dance side by side, as in the title, seems to define the scope of examining the bodies on scene without question. However, as soon as we open Petra Kupperts's *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on the Edge*, a classic in the field, we see that the author consciously avoids defining disability, with the clear aim to eliminate the concept by the end of the book (Kupperts 2013). I discuss the difficulty of defining disability further below. The works of Jérôme Bel, which we examine in this study, show how ephemeral the concept of dance is. Demarcating the field raises further questions. If we assume that bodily otherness comes into existence during the performance, through the breaching of social and theatrical conventions (Hajnal 2020),<sup>1</sup> it means that disability

works differently in everyday life and in the theatre's special, heterotopic space. People with disabilities are a socially constructed minority, encompassing individuals who live with different conditions. To think of them as a homogeneous group is problematic in any context, but it is even more so on the dance stage than in other walks of life.

Nevertheless, as dance studies discourse examines performances through the concept of disability, for "strategic reasons" it is worth taking this as our starting point in examining the ways in which disability is present in various productions. I will, however, not begin my analysis from the perspective of the minority group, but rather from that of dance. As a result, the focus will be on the visible presence of disability from the viewer's perspective. Disabilities that go unnoticed will therefore not be included—for example, I will not discuss the dance of a mute artist whose condition is not apparent for most viewers. Nor will I include performances where disability is visible but is not central, such as in Emanuel Gat's *Sunny* (2019), where Annie Hanauer, one of the dancers, had an artificial arm—a fact that was not emphasised in the performance or in the reviews.

First, I will shortly summarise theories of disability and the relation between disability and dance. Next, I will present the twin concepts of *fit/misfit* used by Rosemarie Garland Thomson and the viewing strategies as defined by Sarah Whatley. These concepts will draft a possible approach to analyse contemporary performances that can be seen live in Hungary. Finally, I will analyse CandoCo Dance Company's<sup>2</sup> first Hungarian guest performance using the concepts presented above.

I want to state from the beginning that I am only indirectly related to disability; so, when I write about its experienced, real aspects, I primarily rely on the referenced sources. As a result, even though I hope that the external perspective of this study contributes to the Hungarian discourse, it cannot be complete without the reflections of the insiders. Many artists with disabilities engage in reflective theoretical work in Hungary and beyond (for example, Károly Tóth<sup>3</sup> who dances in ArtMan Association's Tánceánia Ensemble).



## Theoretical approaches

### *Approaches to disability*

Disability allows for a wide array of interpretations, as it relates to countless contemporary discourses, including those on minority movements, identity, posthumanism, cybernetics, essentialism, constructivism, performativity, and situationism. Disability is complex and multifaceted and has been described as "the quintessence of the postmodern concept" (Antal et al. 2018). As I will point out later, these approaches influence how performers with disabilities perform on the dance stage, making the topic worth examining.

I have already mentioned that disability is a constructed concept, as there is not necessarily much in common between a girl with Down syndrome and a man whose leg has been amputated, except for how society treats them (Wendell 1996). The seemingly precise definitions are repeatedly created by the authorities to provide a legal basis for healthcare and government actors to implement the necessary support measures (Goodley 2011). However, the problems of definition are visible in the census results. For example, visual impairment seems to be easier to define than intellectual disability. Nonetheless, surveys employing different approaches have remarkably different results: in Hungary, the number of people who consider to have a disability ranges between 8,000 and 450,000 (Bass 2009).<sup>4</sup>

But equally noteworthy is the fact that recent surveys show a decline in the number of people with disabilities in Hungary, which is probably due to methodological reasons rather than any significant changes in the actual number (Petri and Hruskó 2023). Responding to these uncertainties, contemporary critical disability studies describe disability as embedded in specific situations, merging with many other identities present in a person, and lacking a well-defined outline. Thus, in recent years, disability as a concept has increasingly been reinterpreted as an “alternative quality of life,” while some authors regard disability as another and equal form of the human body’s diversity. This perspective is present in the concept of *dismodernism*—created from the words “disability” and “modern” and theorised by Lennard J. Davis (1997). Over time, everyone will eventually live with disabilities (as reflected in the expression *temporarily able-bodied*). These approaches draw attention to the fact that disability simply makes visible the elusive and uncontrollable nature of our bodies and our constant dependency on various technologies and prostheses (Shildrick 2019). At the same time, critical disability studies emphasise the reality of physical suffering that no social change or theory can fully alleviate (Siebers 2008, 57).

In relation to disability, we can observe certain approaches and topoi which have been associated with people living with bodily or mental “difference” for decades. The concept of disability was created in opposition to the normative “able,” specifically, to make it easier to define what “able” means. Here, I should mention that the term *ableism* describes discrimination based on abilities. The term is less common in Hungary. As Bill Hughes, an influential researcher in the field, points out, there have been two main approaches to disability since the very beginning. Both approaches force people with disabilities into a passive role: they are either mistreated by people without disabilities or treated as subjects of charity. The first approach is linked to abjection, freakishness, dehumanisation, and exclusion, while the second approach evokes the idea of vulnerability, pity, and compassion (Hughes 2019). The topos of disability is a recurring theme in art. One of the best-known theoretical approaches is the so-called “narrative prosthesis,” where disability is used to move the plot forward and make it more comprehensible (Snyder and Mitchell 2001). Classic examples include the villains in the James Bond films, who often have some physical impairment as a distinguishing mark.

Throughout history, various approaches have attempted to make sense of disability, and today’s concept of the term is shaped by the latest ones. The moral approach interprets bodily difference as a sign of certain ethical and spiritual qualities and has been present in our culture since antiquity. This was replaced in the nineteenth century by the medical approach that defined disability as an individual bodily attribute. It is important to emphasise that both models remain influential today. However, disability studies can be traced back to the rise of the social construction approach, developed in the twentieth century and based on the theories of Erving Goffman, Michel Foucault, and other well-known researchers. This approach is still popular today and leads to disability being seen as a phenomenon fundamentally shaped by society rather than as an individual’s private matter (Goodley 2011). Social construction has two main directions: one originating in the United Kingdom, which is more related to the theory of social construction, and one coming from the United States, which emerged as a minority political aspiration (Goodley 2011). The second direction is organised in the footsteps of other minority groups, primarily the black empowerment movements (Skrentny 2009). The social and sociological changes of the 2000s made use of critical disability studies, which led researchers to deconstruct the concept of disability (see the previously mentioned concepts of *dismodern* and *temporarily able-bodied*) and to acknowledge that the very term *disability* is culturally determined.

In this context, a Hungarian speciality is—as Viktor Kiss claims—that the medical discourse was replaced by the social model only in the 2000s. At the same time, the integration of people living with disabilities began (Kiss 2013). What is particularly relevant for our topic is that, as part of these integration efforts worldwide, “equivalents” of certain activities (such as sports or dance) are developed and tailored for people with disabilities—thus, in some sense, relieving society from the burden of a more comprehensive integration. Kiss refers to the legacy of the communist Kádár regime which he characterises as a “caring-hiding” approach because despite the regime’s integration efforts, the general discourse in Hungary remained unchanged. Moreover, while globally the question of disability has increasingly moved towards self-assertion in a political sense, in Hungary it is common to depoliticise people with disabilities and to present them as passive. This passivity is reflected in many social discourses that restrict people with disabilities to certain roles and activities within the Hungarian society. It is important to highlight the compensatory discourse that, according to Kiss, is especially typical in Hungary, and which compensates for the perceived tragedy of disability by presenting people with disabilities as super-humans and role models. This is related to Stella Young’s expression “inspiration porn,” where achievements made “despite” bodily difference become a source of motivation for non-disabled people (Grue 2016).

Finally, it is important to mention discourses about cyborgs and prostheses, which have initiated scholarly debates related to, for example, dancers in wheelchairs (Quinlan and Bates 2014). Even though the concept of a cyborg, introduced in social sciences by Donna Haraway (1985) seemingly coincides in many ways with disability manifested at the boundary between technology and human organism, Tobin Siebers rightfully protests against this interpretation. Instead, he describes the cyborg, well-known from sci-fi, as a form of mystifying disability by turning it into a superpower—a cultural topos that has nothing to do with the real experiences of people living with disabilities (Siebers 2008). Donna Reeve highlights other aspects of a cyborg and describes the inner experiences of people with disabilities. Just like a cyborg which, based on Haraway’s work, questions the boundaries of body and identity, disability can also be understood as a deconstruction of normality. The uncertain boundaries of the body are a daily experience for many people living with disabilities through the experience of phantom body parts and prostheses (Reeve 2012). Another example shows that achievements are traditionally connected to “able” body parts, even though, based on the world record, a Paralympian in a wheelchair can outrun a runner without disabilities. Moreover, Shildrick explains that both a wheelchair and running shoes are prostheses, the only difference being that the former is usually understood to be a replacement for something missing, even though all prostheses are substitutes (Shildrick 2019). In stage dance, which in Europe was dominated for centuries by ballet and the ideal body, the question is not whether a person in a wheelchair or a person without disabilities dances better, but rather what we actually mean by “better.”

### *Disability and stage dance*

The relationship between disability and stage dance can be approached from multiple aspects depending on the narrative we use to describe it. On the one hand, we can start from the fact that exhibiting people with non-normative bodies, putting them on stage, has a centuries-old history (Garland Thomson 1997). Although unusual bodies were in the spotlight of these productions, performers whose presence relied solely on being stared at did not sustain long careers, as audiences soon lost interest. Most freaks entertained the audience with some programmes such as dance (Durbach 2009). Although the freak shows

and medical theatre performances once presented sick and disabled people within a scientific framing that was created apparently within a different cultural register from, for example, the contemporary performances of Trafó House of Contemporary Arts<sup>5</sup> that also feature people living with disabilities,<sup>6</sup> audiences often react in strikingly similar ways. For want of space, I can only mention that one of the most graphic examples of this lack of change, according to Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell's analysis, was provided by actor-performer Mat Fraser. In his performance, Mat Fraser confronted the audience alternately with the persona of the personified freak (Sealo) and the actor living with disabilities (Tam). This strategy highlighted the unchanged relationship between the audience and bodily otherness presented on stage (Mitchell and Snyder 2005).

Dance productions staged with performers living with disabilities can also be approached through "external" discourses—for example, when we think of dance as a form of therapy. Two closely related approaches can be distinguished. First, a group of people without disabilities guides the others. In the second approach, equality, mutuality, and exchange are placed in the foreground of the production (McGrath 2012). The converging and divergent ambitions of pedagogy, healing, social work, and aesthetics take shape in applied theatre. I further examine the issue from another perspective: that of dance itself.

In Western culture, stage dance was for decades dominated by ballet, which placed at its centre an ideal, ethereal body image defined in multiple ways. The expectations of both institutions and audiences were connected to this ideal, as were the mirrors placed in front of the students or the distance between stage and auditorium, which was designed to make the unwanted smells and sounds of the body unnoticeable (Thomas 2003). This body image excluded people living with disabilities from dance.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the deconstruction of the concept of dance included interpreting all performers' movements as dance, allowing non-professionals to step on stage and transforming the role of the choreographer and the dancer. Together with the integration of social work, pedagogy, and special education into performing arts it opened new horizons for performers living with disabilities. The emergence of contact improvisation was a milestone in this process because, unlike ballet, dance does not operate with a set body image or a rigorous and closed set of moves. As a result, everyone, including people living with disabilities, can participate in creative processes as equals. Later, internationally acclaimed integrated companies were formed, such as the American Axis or the British CandoCo.

The appearance of people living with disabilities in "official" dance art soon raised two general problems. First, dancers with disabilities were rarely trained as thoroughly as their non-disabled colleagues, as performances "opened up" to them earlier than educational institutions did (McGrath 2012). Of course, the problem does not exclusively lie in the lack of intention to be inclusive on the part of the directors of dance institutions, but rather, as Carrie Sandahl (2005) shows in her paper, in the fact that every classical training system, regardless of the school of thought, assumes a "neutral" body as opposed to the a priori meaning of a disabled body. The second problem concerns the ways in which, and at what cost, people living with disabilities are present on stage. Ann Cooper Albright (2010), for example, uses structural movement analysis to show how performers in wheelchairs often merely frame the dance of non-disabled dancers in supposedly integrated performances.

Dance performances featuring people with disabilities can be placed on a spectrum between two extremes, depending on whether the body in academic discourse is understood as either: 1) a passive surface for social and political inscription, constructed either at the level of stereotypes or at a deeper, pre-linguistic level; or 2) a natural, authentic gift of the performers which escapes construction (Kuppers 2013). Though constructedness has



mostly prevailed over the body's "honesty" today, Cooper Albright (2010), amongst others, argues that this duality can be overcome through dance.

At the "authentic" end of the spectrum, the dancers with disabilities present themselves as they are, which may have a therapeutic purpose both for them and for the audience. For example, the dancers encourage the audience to see disability differently and maybe rethink their views. In a similar vein, there are the accounts that view dance as a more direct form of self-expression for people with disabilities. McGrath (2012), for example, approaches the viewer's experience through attachment theories, arguing that the spectators can experience the physical and mental states of the dancers with disabilities due to mirror neurones, thus creating a "clean" relationship between the two. This kind of relationship would be impossible in everyday life because of prejudices towards disability (idem). A similarly authentic experience is produced when companies like Societas Raffaello Sanzio achieve shock value when featuring performers with disabilities. In doing so, the performances liberate the mythic and instinctive, pre-rational, energies of life (Kuppers 2013). In the case of similar dance companies, performers with disabilities are mostly used as instruments of the director in the sense that the "gut reaction" provoked by their bodily "otherness" is part of an artistic concept and serves, for example, to emphasise physical presence or to unsettle the theatre semiotic interpretation.

From the 1980s onwards, reflecting on the constructed nature of bodies became widespread. From this point, the spotlight shifted away from the physical aspect of the body (Fuchs 2007). The aim of such performances is to question or deconstruct stereotypes. However, they do not replace the stereotypes with a "real" interpretation or a body image. In this vein, Kuppers (2013) analyses Bill Shannon's street performances. The condition of Bill Shannon makes it impossible for him to walk, but his virtuous skills allow for spectacular and acrobatic performances. Shannon often exploits people's prejudices, pretending to be vulnerable and in need of help, thus involving viewers in the creative process. Using Siebers' term, we can call this a form of masquerade, a case in which someone, whether disabled or non-disabled, enacts or exaggerates disability (Siebers 2008). A typical dance example is when a wheelchair dancer remains at some point during the performance without their wheelchair, making the audience wonder about the dancer's vulnerability.

It is important to mention that not every performance created with performers living with disabilities focuses on disability or requires spectators to pay special attention to the disability itself. Thus, analysis methods described below highlight certain aspects of the performances, which could also be analysed from many other perspectives. Moreover, it would be highly desirable if reviews of works featuring people living with disabilities were not focused on disability.

### *Methods of analysis*

The discourses presented provide a wider context in which to interpret dance performances created with artists with disabilities, as well as the theoretical-critical texts—accounts written about these shows. I recommend two further methods for interpretation. The first is Rosemarie Garland Thomson's theory, which builds on the contrast between the concepts of *fit* and *misfit*, describing disability in relation to the environment. This approach, in my view, can help us analyse dance performances, as we frame disability in relation to space, physical gestures, the audience, and other elements of the performance. The second method is Sarah Whatley's classification (Whatley 2007), in which she describes five different viewing strategies related to dancers with disabilities.

## Misfit

*Misfit* refers to a theoretical approach that focuses on the relationship between the individual and their environment, rather than on the individual's traits. The importance of this distinction is well reflected in studies where psychologists examine the effect of individual status in a group. Jack C. Wright and colleagues highlight that for decades after the first research was conducted, popularity and rejection were attributed exclusively to individual characteristics (for example, prosocial behaviour or cooperation), but the studies often found the opposite was true (Wright et al. 1986). For this reason, Wright and colleagues included a third variable in their scope: the similarity of the individual to the group. Examining a sample of 87 and later 79 teenage boys living with behavioural disorders in small groups, they found a significant correlation between an individual's status within the group and the similarity of the individual's certain character traits to the majority of group members. This is not merely about liking those who are similar to oneself, but rather—as one example of the research explains—the way an “aggressive” child sees a “reserved” child depends on the extent to which the group itself is either “aggressive” or “reserved” (533). Garland Thomson recommends a similar approach to disability.

Garland Thomson is one of, if not the, most influential figures in the cultural aspect of critical disability studies. Her writings on freak shows and act of staring at the performers during these shows made her work an essential reference in the field. Even though she usually connects her theories on disability with works of art, in her 2011 article, *Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept*, only a few art references appear.

Garland Thomson joins the leading trend of critical disability studies and considers the lived reality of pain and functional limitations of people living with disabilities, while at the same time combining this perspective with the view of disability as a social construct. In her study (2011), the concepts *fit* and *misfit* reflect how non-normative interacts with the outside world. Garland Thomson illustrates the misfit phenomenon with a child's toy in which a cube does not fit into a round hole. The problem is not the cube nor the hole, but their relationship. In this way, disability is not an inherent and permanent characteristic of an individual; rather, it is created by the situation. Thus, many interactions (or, to reference Judith Butler, performative acts) with a similar outcome result in a disabled identity (Garland Thomson 2011). A typical example is the “encounter” between a wheelchair used and a staircase or between a visually impaired person and a board that only conveys information visually.

Krystal Cleary (2016) uses the concept of misfit by moving beyond the personal experiences of people with disabilities to analyse art. She examines reality TV shows that focus on people living with disabilities or other non-normative bodies. Cleary understands environment not only as physical space but also in terms of genre's conventions. According to her study, the TV series about the life of Siamese twins, *Abby & Brittany* by Beth Glover (2012), aptly illustrates that the protagonists are well suited to the genre of reality shows that aims to amaze precisely because they do not fit into everyday life.

In my opinion, this approach can be applied even more fruitfully to the analysis of stage dance because the interaction is created in a real space within an art form that places the living human body at its centre. In this case, we can look at how a dancer with disability fits with the theatre, stage, genre, role, partners, audience, and many other components. Even though in her 2019 show, Garland Thomson herself analysed a dance production—a ballet version of *Frankenstein* that dealt with disability in an abstract way—I believe this performance provided very limited opportunity to apply her theory, as it did not involve actors with disabilities. To give a hypothetical example, a dancer who uses a wheelchair

participating in a classical ballet performance enters into interaction with the theatre's institutional system, the stairs and ramps of the building, the classical ballet movements, the audience's expectations, and so on. Whereas a normative ballet dancer "fits well enough" into the performance and is thus "visually anonymous" on stage, conveying the choreography seemingly more precisely, this is not the case for their fellow dancer who uses a wheelchair (Garland Thomson 2011). This means that the essence of integrated performances should not (only) be researched by measuring creators and spectators' attitudes (for example, with questionnaires), but also by examining the special, physical aspects of dance itself. Indeed, exclusion and inequality created by social construction ultimately operates on this material level. As Garland Thomson argues, it is possible to imagine an employer who is fundamentally open to hire wheelchair users. However, if the office building has no lift (the systemic, "real" manifestation of the social construct), it makes inclusion impossible.

A further important result of Garland Thomson's theory is that, as it describes disability embedded in a situation rather than in a physical condition, it highlights positive aspects that are "useful" for non-disabled people, for example their capacity to adapt to certain situations. Fitting, for instance, demands a person without arms to manage more daily tasks with their legs or a blind person to orient themselves, while these may support other performers. A favourite example of the author is Monet, who was able to rejuvenate his art by adapting it to his continuously deteriorating eyesight (Garland Thomson 2011). Without falling into the trap of the previously described views of the "supercrip" or "inspiration porn," and while doubting that a non-disabled dancer can fully experience and interpret the movements of a colleague with disability, it is undeniable that the dance of performers with disabilities can inspire the moves of non-disabled dancers. DV8's<sup>7</sup> dance film *The Cost of Living* (2004) offers multiple great examples of this. For instance, in one scene dancers on their feet imitate the hand-walking dance of David Toole, who performs without legs, in an open field (min. 19:30 – 21:00).

One of the most expressive examples of fitting is Jérôme Bel's production, *Gala* (Bel 2018). In every country, Bel recruits people with different, predefined conditions and qualifications (including, among others, a dancer who uses a wheelchair). These people first reproduce classical and well-known dance moves and then imitate each other's particular dance moves. The audience can witness how certain bodies, conditioned by their physique and the fitness level, as well as other capabilities, fit certain moves—for example, are able to execute a pirouette, to jump, or to perform folk dances. From another perspective, the "failure" of imitation deconstructs what we traditionally think of choreography and dancers who, in this way, do not align with the tradition of "classical" stage dance. At the same time, dancers with different abilities can appear on stage precisely because they fit into the categories of Bel's conceptual framework and the structures of conceptualist dance. The presence of a dancer using a wheelchair implies a stage that is accessible (in this case, it is empty and flat). By placing the wheelchair on stage, it becomes a symbol of the possible variations of the human body, which underline Bel's egalitarian message: the wheelchair dancer is the only dancer who cannot jump in the traditional sense (as shown in one scene), but nonetheless appears as an equal member of the ensemble. As this argument shows, the concept of *misfit* offers a valuable lens to examine the bodies of dancers with disabilities in relation to the "usual" aspects of performance analysis (e.g., the director's concept, movement, set, and genre).

### *Viewing strategies*

As a result of the diversity of the previously presented discourses on disability, the reception of a performance featuring dancers with disability largely depends on the viewer. Some

performances can be interpreted from the perspective of compensatory discourse, social construction, contemporary dance trends, other discourses, or a combination of these. This is true even when the choreography itself suggests certain perspectives by the way it presents disability. For instance, it may aim to shock or unsettle by probing the boundaries between disability and ability— as when dancers without disabilities imitate their colleague who uses a wheelchair in Bel's *Gala*. Finally, it also matters whether we, as spectators, tend to engage with a choreography primarily through interpretation or through somatic experience. Sarah Whatley aptly categorised all these aspects in the second half of her article *Dance and disability: the dancer, the viewer and the presumption of difference* (2007).<sup>8</sup> Based on the opinions of dancers, as well as the work of Cooper Albright (2010) and Kupperts (2017), Whatley differentiates five viewing strategies (2007, 18-21):

- Passive Oppressive, when emphasis is placed on the disabled dancer's otherness, with attention focused on staring and curiosity, which can stem from prejudices, pity, or aversion;
- Passive Conservative, when the dance of people with disabilities is compared to classical or "able-bodied" aesthetics, thereby accentuating their otherness;
- Post-Passive, when the viewer ignores disability altogether, or as a critic chooses not to write about it;
- Active Witness, when the dance of people with disabilities is approached through new aesthetic and interpretive strategies;
- Immersion, when the viewer relates what they see to their own body, similar to McGrath's previously cited approach based on attachment theories.

As Whatley (2007) emphasises, the individual strategies are not neatly separated from one another, nor do they depend solely on the spectators' attitude; the choreography itself can also intentionally shape them. Thus, the role of the analyst is not to choose between categories, but to reflect on their own viewing experience inspired by the performance, even if this often involves ethically sensitive issues. It is also important to note that the names and order of Whatley's strategies seem to convey judgement, as if the Passive Oppressive strategy was reprehensible and "negative" and the subsequent strategies were increasingly "positive." However, in my view, this judgement assumes that a person with disabilities would always discourage curiosity about the body on stage. Counterexamples prove otherwise, and in fact our experience and discretion suffice: the first reaction to a performer making their disability visible will almost always fall into the Passive Oppressive strategy, as it confronts the viewer to an experience that is unusual in everyday life. On the other hand, the goal of a dancer living with disabilities can be to "overcome their disability" and have their performance judged according to the standards of an "able-bodied" aesthetic. In such cases, it can be problematic if an alternative aesthetic is automatically projected onto their work.

Choreographies influence strategies in numerous manners. In *Questo buio feroce* [This Fierce Darkness] by Pippo Delbono (2009), for instance, we observe a parade reminiscent of a fashion show, featuring performers who are ill or live with visible or invisible disabilities, all framed by the director's surreal, grotesque, and carnivalesque vision. The distinctive qualities of these bodies are emphasised to the extreme, compelling the audience to fix their gaze at the parade. It is no coincidence that Hungarian critics often respond with a sense of wonder akin to the Passive Oppressive strategy, using various topoi and similes to describe the performers' physiques—for example "torsos of David Lynch" (Király 2005), "disrupted, fragile yet alive cadaver" (Kovács 2010), and "bizarre collection of beasts" (Jászay 2009).

Conversely, the Tánceánia Ensemble, a trailblazer in Hungary inspired by the DanceAbility movement,<sup>9</sup> aims to achieve a sort of psychological accessibility. In their seemingly abstract movements rooted in therapeutic work, “the vitality of the able-bodied and disabled dancers” (Berecz 2017, 12) encourages the Active Witness and Immersion strategies.

### *CandoCo: Triple Bill*

In this section, I analyse the first CandoCo guest appearance in Hungary, mainly using the methods outlined above. Using the *fit/misfit* conceptual pair, I examine how the Triple Bill fits into the social context of the early 2000s and into the specific performance venue. I then discuss the three choreographies in more detail. I examine how disability interacts with other elements of the dance, and how the choreography itself offers viewing strategies. It is important to note that viewing strategies emerge through interaction. Therefore, even if the analysis below highlights, for example, the Active Witness strategy, a spectator may adopt a different strategy depending on their prior experiences or attitudes. For similar reasons, such an analysis ultimately reflects the author’s subjective experience.

In the early 2000s, there was a growing professional interest in theatre performers with disabilities. In Hungary, 1998 marked a turning point in disability issues with a long-awaited and favourable change in legislation. At the same time, several major professional and amateur companies were founded, for example the Baltazár Theatre, Tánceánia Ensemble, MásSzínház, Vakrepülés Theatre Association, and Gördülő Foundation—many of which also created dance performances. In the field of dance, Tánceánia (and its umbrella organisation, the ArtMan Association) received the most significant reception. The group was founded by Ildikó Bóta, initially with a therapeutic focus, but increasingly emphasising stage performances. Among other things, they used Body Mind Centering, psychodynamic movement, dance therapy, contact improvisation, and the Skinner Releasing Technique.

Their performances were familiar to Trafó’s regular audience, but they typically received more serious attention in co-productions. In addition, guest choreographers and directors were also occasionally invited to work with performers living with disabilities, including renowned artists such as Yvette Bozsik (2008), Pál Frenák (2019), or Adrienn Hód (*Harmonia and Idol*) who is the creator of the two most important performances on this topic in recent years. In contrast to companies that regularly produce new works with members who live with disabilities, the vision of guest directors typically focused on “otherness.” An excellent example is *Lélektánc* [Souldance] by Yvette Bozsik (2008), which practically provides an overview of various disabilities, ranging from the use of a wheelchair to audio narration and to a guide dog. At the same time, even though it is worth analysing the individual characteristics of each artist, we should not forget that there are significant overlaps among the staff of the various groups and productions.<sup>10</sup> In this context, it is worth referring to Napsugár Trömböczky’s rightful insight about ArtMenők (a group within the ArtMan Association), which sums up the prospects of similar performances: “Can an ArtMenők performance find a place anywhere other than on the Trafó stage without a renowned director (...)?” (Lőrinc et al. 2025). This thought is instructive even if we consider that another major company, the Baltazar Theatre, owns its own building.

The Hungarian reception of these companies and productions, however, has been rather rare until recently. The performances were typically produced for a single performance. As Benjamin Wihstutz (2015) writes in an article related to the reviews of Bel’s *Disabled Theatre*, theatre is, on the one hand, a form of social encounter, on the other, a special,

aesthetically meaningful work of art. Yet, the critics of *Disabled Theatre* primarily emphasise the social encounter—being confronted with disability, a relatively rarely experienced aspect of everyday life—and less on the aesthetic-artistic aspects of dance. Although Hungarian critics often analyse performances from an aesthetic-artistic perspective (Muntag 2020), the encounter with people living with disabilities remains a recurring and central theme of the reviews, as does the emphasis on the “therapeutic” or “tearjerking” effects of the encounter itself (Wihstutz 2015, 36).<sup>11</sup>

To sum up, CandoCo's guest appearance in 2002 aligned with a burgeoning professional interest in the field, which favoured social aspects and novelty over analysis, even though the analytical discourse was still in its infancy. To some extent, this is reflected in the choice of the venue and in the reviews published.

In Hungary, CandoCo did not initially perform in a traditional theatre space, but at the Sziget Festival in 2002, in the Theatre and Dance Tent, as part of a colourful programme that featured, amongst others, Compagnie Revolution, TÁP Theatre, Hólyagcirkusz, The Forman Brothers, and Illyés Gyula Hungarian National Theatre of Beregszász (Marik 2002). This was a more experimental, progressive way of presenting the guest appearance.<sup>12</sup> As for their first guest performance, *Triple Bill*, contemporary accounts reported that the audience received the production with great enthusiasm. The organisers provided travel and tickets to the performance for people with disabilities. This was an exemplary gesture that also reflected society's growing attention to disability.

The more difficult question is how well the production fits into the professional discourse on contemporary dance. The critics wrote in a very positive tone about *Triple Bill* and other performances at Sziget. The reviews by Tamás Halász and Noémi Marik are worth highlighting. In a short report published in the daily *Népszabadság* after the performance, Halász (2002b) adopted a rather dramatic tone, searching for the right words to describe the condition of the artists. A month later, he wrote a more serious analysis, covering the three performances separately in the theatre journal *Színház* (Halász 2002a). Similarly, Noémi Marik (2002) wrote about the performances in the journal *Critikai Lapok*. Both authors highlighted the professionalism of the performers, and Halász considered the invitation of CandoCo at Sziget as an event in dance history.<sup>13</sup>

Let's take a closer look at the performances and the viewing strategies they can evoke. First, it is worth noting that the CandoCo production can also be described through different spectator strategies. The company had to work hard to be accepted, as critics were reluctant to acknowledge their shows as “high” art. Instead, their shows were considered by a part of the public and critics as freak shows (in the pejorative sense), spectacles of voyeurism, or at best as disability dance (also in a derogatory sense) (Owen 2005, 80).<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the aim of Celeste Dandeker and Adam Benjamin when founding the dance company in 1991 was that dancers without disabilities would not “dance rings around” people with disabilities, but instead assign them equal and engaging roles, impressing the audiences through virtuoso techniques. For this reason, company members (both those with and without disabilities) continuously train themselves, incorporate various trends of contemporary dance into their performances, and invite renowned professionals to create choreographies (for example, Javier de Frutos, the director of *Sour Milk*, which I analyse below). A few years later, more “professional” criticism recognised exactly this aspect. Critics argued that the performances of CandoCo are comparable to the work of mainstream contemporary dance artists (Cooper Albright 2010). In doing so, they encouraged the spectators to adopt the Passive Conservative viewing strategy. At the same time, audiences indisputably acknowledged the virtuosity of CandoCo.,

*Back to Triple Bill, Phasing*, choreographed by Jamie Watton, builds on the repetition of shorter and longer sections, for example using just a few notes, continuously restarting tunes, and recurring elements of the choreography, such as slowly crossing the back of the stage. Two non-disabled dancers, Jurg Koch and Stine Nilsen, play in this performance, together with the wheelchair user David Lock, who gradually fits less and less with the choreography's spectacular jumps. At the beginning of the piece, the three dancers mostly dance the same movement sequences with some phase delay. They mostly move their upper bodies, and they rarely interact with each other. When they do interact with each other, they barely "push each other," similar to Newton's pendulum, where the ball at the end of the row hits the next ball, passing on its kinetic energy. As legs play little role in the choreography, Lock is equal to the other two dancers in terms of stage time on stage and use of body parts. What makes him stand out is the fact that his head is lower than his peers', a difference visible from the initial, horizontal setup on. Even though the choreography does not emphasise this difference, Koch's ideal-normative male body and Nilsen's skirt highlight gender differences, which can make Lock an asexual third (a common cultural topos attached to people living with disabilities).

In the second half of the performance, this difference becomes more pronounced: Koch and Nilsen often lie on the ground, and later Lock leaves the stage for a while. When he returns, legs and aerial jumps play a greater role in the choreography, against which Lock's movements—rolling the wheels—seem cumbersome. From this point on, the wheelchair acts as a clear disadvantage, limiting the range of motion. It does not fit in with the airy ease of the other dancers and may prompt the spectator to adopt the Passive Conservative viewing strategy—questioning whether Lock is equal to the non-disabled dancers. If the spectator concludes he is not, Lock can appear to be a mandatory "integration" element in an otherwise professional and fascinating performance, encouraging the viewer to stare and assume a Passive Oppressive strategy instead of engaging in an aesthetic appreciation. Thus, the piece exemplifies the "dancing rings around" dynamic that the artists specifically sought to avoid. In other words, the performance does not fit our expectations of CandoCo.<sup>15</sup>

As much as disability and asexuality are evoked in *Phasing*, the overflowing eroticism of Javier de Frutos' *Sour Milk* is the complete opposite. The performance is dominated by intense Chinese drum music, and we see four dancers on stage, all dressed in white: three women (Suzanne Cowan, Kate Marsh, and Welly O'Brien) in elegant nineteenth-century costumes sit on the ground, while a male "chief" (Pedro Machado) stands above his "harem." Movements mimic rituals and intercourse, and the performance radiates energy to the audience, primarily due to the drums, while the movements are small and quick. Regarding viewing strategies, it depends a lot on the background knowledge: two of the three sitting women live with disabilities, and they cannot stand. If the spectator knows this, the fact that the "harem" remains seated for most of the performance appears to be a necessary, "technical" solution, and the audience is most probably curious to see whether the choreography can accommodate this aptitude. If the spectator is unaware of the disabled performers, then most of the dance hides the disabilities from them, and therefore, a Post-Passive viewing strategy may prevail. In addition, there is an opportunity for Active Witness and Immersion: the traditionally passive sitting here becomes an active, energetic, and erotic position that the (also sitting) spectator, drawn in by the music, may also experience. In this way, disability integrates with the choreography, even towards the end, when the women change position by sliding on their hips, which may reinforce their subordinate position to the standing man. In this sense, bowing becomes important: during the claps, when the dancers with disabilities appear differently, in their wheelchairs, "naturally" rolling

with ease compared to their earlier sliding. Rather than reinforcing the belief that actors with disabilities can only be “authentic” on stage, this final moment introduces a sense of distance: the wheelchair confirms that sliding on the ground and appearing subordinate was simply part of a constructed role, not a direct result of the performers’ disabilities.

Both *Phasing* and *Sour Milk* operate with bodies that freeze motionless for short periods of time. In the choreography *Shadow* by Fin Walker, motionless practically becomes the central theme. The seven dancers of different constitutions (two use wheelchairs and one has a single leg) first freeze in the choreography and then break the photo-like stillness, creating continuous disharmony. In Walker’s choreography the performers mostly dance in pairs, with their upper bodies and arms wriggling around each other. In contrast to *Phasing*, the large number of dancers and the constant swirl of movement create a diverse dynamic that does not make the dancers’ bodily difference disappear, but rather attenuates this difference compared to when only one wheelchair dancer was present on stage. In this way, the spatial aspect of *fitting/ not fitting* brings an interesting realisation. During the dancers’ seemingly random re-arrangements, we notice that the two wheelchair users almost never dance together—presumably because the wheelchairs would create too much distance between their upper bodies, which would make them ‘stand out’ during the dance. At the same time, non-disabled dancers sit in the laps of their partners who use wheelchairs and lift them out of their wheelchairs, which creates contact between upper bodies.

However, the most attention is drawn to Welly O’Brien, the dancer with one leg. The fact that the audience sees someone who uses a wheelchair in everyday life performing without it (what is more, dancing), is seen as novelty. This can urge the audience to first assume a Passive Oppressive viewing strategy, and later Immersion, as O’Brien’s balance and the wide, original range of her movements evoke the illusion of immersion.



### Closing remarks

The theoretical approaches and methods of analysis outlined above could, of course, be further extended. However, I believe that by framing *fitting* in a theoretical manner, it becomes possible to explain why people living with disabilities fit better in certain dance productions than in others. The five viewing strategies I have discussed can provide a useful framework for analysing viewers’ reactions and reviews. Even though I only examined three choreographies by CandoCo in this article, I believe I managed to show that it is possible to identify examples for nearly all the strategies.

The advantage of these methods is that they provide an opportunity to articulate personal impressions. Considering that both disability and dance have blurred boundaries and their perception is greatly influenced by individual perspectives, describing our personal impressions is perhaps the best way to enrich the discourse. Such a theoretical shift has begun in recent years.

The other direction, however, of which we have not yet seen many examples, is the scholarly examination of the history of relevant Hungarian associations. The history of the Tánceánaia Ensemble, the Baltazar Theatre, and other companies goes back several decades, yet few comprehensive overviews of their work exist. A review of their performances could provide a fascinating picture of a rapidly developing field in terms of vocabulary and nuanced analysis. In such a future study, it is hoped that the theoretical tools presented above could be applied successfully.



## NOTES

1. Some physical characteristics (for example, age, gender, skin colour, or noticeable signs of certain disabilities) “pass” certain roles under current theatre conventions, whereas an “unusual” cast may place them in the spotlight. I will discuss this further in relation to the concept of *misfit*.
2. Founded in 1991, CandoCo Dance Company is an integrated dance company based in the UK. Its internationally recognised pioneering work and the collaborations with renowned choreographers has made CandoCo a key reference point in their field. The company has been instrumental in challenging the perception that disability and dance/performance are mutually exclusive.
3. Tóth is the author of one of the most original analyses of Bel’s performance (Bel 2013), *Disabled Theatre* (Tóth 2018).
4. If we aim to define dancers living with disabilities, the situation becomes even more complex as they may have access to a limited number of trainings only, so it is questionable who exactly counts as a “dancer” (Whatley 2007, 9).
5. A performance venue in Budapest.
6. The Bel choreographies and CandoCo performances, which I refer to in my paper, as well as the (contemporary) circus production *Extrémítás*.
7. DV8 was a physical theatre company founded in 1986.
8. The first part, on the training of dancers living with disabilities, is also intriguing but less relevant for the current topic.
9. The movement was founded in the 1980s by Alito Alessi. The expression challenges the term *disability* because it conveys limitations, by asserting that everyone who can breathe can also dance and is therefore able to express themselves.
10. For example, one of the choreographers of Baltazár Theatre’s dance performances was Dorka Farkas who works in ArtMan. At the same time, the previously mentioned *Souldance* was created in collaboration with artists from the Gördülő Foundation and ArtMan.
11. It is important to note, however, that there has been significant “progress” in recent years in this aspect. In the Hodworks’ dossier on performances published in *Színház* magazine’s in 2025, performances are analysed in depth and with nuanced by guest experts. Based on my own research, this was not at all the case ten years before.
12. The company returned to Budapest in 2004, this time at Trafó House of Contemporary Arts, where they held a workshop and gave two performances. In 2006, the company held another workshop and gave two more performances at Trafó.
13. Halász also writes in his memoirs of the explosive success of the 2006 performance. His exemplary and nuanced approach is evident when he describes one of the 2006 CandoCo performances as a failure, after analysing the structure of the performance (Halász 2006).
14. Following Owen’s line of thought, “disability dance” implies a form of segregation: it implies that the work of dancers with disabilities is not comparable to “mainstream” dance. CandoCo aims to renew contemporary dance. However, this cannot be achieved if the company’s members are “excluded” in this way.
15. In his cited critiques, Tamás Halász draws the opposite conclusion: he argues that the three characters are of equal importance and embody the essence of CandoCo. His conclusions point to a broader social integration, thus supporting my earlier assertion that the performance was part of a wider social process (Halász 2002b, 46).

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