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## Choreographing Difference

Ann Cooper Albright

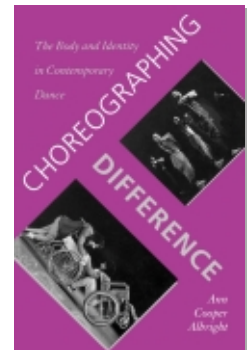
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# *Moving Across Difference*

Dance  
and Disability

In 1838 Théophile Gautier wrote the following sentences to describe the Romantic ballerina Marie Taglioni: “Mlle. Taglioni reminded you of cool and shaded valleys, where a white vision suddenly emerges from the bark of an oak to greet the eyes of a young, surprised, and blushing shepherd; she resembled unmistakably those fairies of Scotland of whom Walter Scott speaks, who roam in the moonlight near the mysterious fountain, with a necklace of dewdrops and golden thread for girdle.”<sup>1</sup> Gautier’s description of Taglioni’s dancing focuses on her grace, delicacy, and lightness, suggesting a sylph-like creature who transcends her own material body to provide a tantalizingly elusive vision of the spectator’s desire. The ultimate illusion, of course, is that of a perfect dancing body—one completely unhampered by sweat, pain, or the evidence of any physical negotiation with gravity.

As an expressive discourse comprised of physical movement, dance has traditionally privileged the able body. Generally, dancers are treated with a certain paradoxical awe that is an odd mixture of respect for the physical discipline of daily technique classes, fascination with what is often supposed to be a “natural” gracefulness (but is, of course, a result of intensive physical training), and plain old objectification. Although the “look” of dancers has indeed changed with the political, economic, intellectual, and aesthetic revolutions of the past 150 years of Western culture, the idealized image of the ballerina as well as the voyeurism implicit in the gaze of the balletomane still subtly in-

form most people's vision of professional dancing. How different, we must ask, is Lock's contemporary vision of his dancer-muse Louise Lecavalier as a punk Joan of Arc from Gautier's fantasy of Taglioni as an elusive fairy? Aren't the structures of representation, the frames surrounding these women's bodies, essentially the same? Yet if even the most powerful, visibly muscular body of a woman dancer can be easily commodified and incorporated into the economy of the male gaze, then what kind of body would it take to fracture this visual contract—a disabled one?

This is a chapter about disability—about the ways in which professional dance has traditionally been structured by an exclusionary mindset that projects a very narrow vision of a dancer as white, female, thin, long-limbed, flexible, able-bodied. This is also a chapter about the growing desire among various dance communities and professional companies to radically revise that paradigm by reconceiving just what kinds of movements can constitute a dance and, by extension, what kind of body can constitute a dancer. Because oppositional categories always figure the “other” within themselves, this chapter travels across the spectrum of representations of beauty and the grotesque, health and disease, alienation and community, autonomy and interdependence. In the following pages, I discuss performances that very few people have had the opportunity to see, as well as other dances that stand at the very center of contemporary debates about the role of politics and life in art. I look at dancing bodies that range from vigorously virtuosic to practically immobile. By demonstrating how some recent dances deconstruct the polarization of ability and disability, I will challenge the prevailing vision of professional dance that equates physical ability with aesthetic quality. In addition, I explore what kind of viewing gaze is implicit in different groups' aesthetic priorities, and examine the ways in which a traditionally voyeuristic gaze can be both fractured and reconstructed by looking at bodies that radically question the ideal image of a dancer's physique. Although most of my discussion will center on specific dances and the various critical responses to them, I also hope to reveal the complex ways in which the opposition of fit and frail bodies is implicated within many of our dominant cultural paradigms of health and self-determination.

Given that disability signifies the cultural antithesis of the fit, healthy body, what happens when visibly disabled people move into the role of dancer, the very same role that has been historically reserved for the glorification of an ideal body? Does the integration of disabled bodies into contemporary dance result in a disruption of ablist preconceptions about professional dance? Or does the disabled body “transcend” its disability to become a dancer? What is

at stake in these questions is not merely the physical definition of a dancer's body, but the larger (metaphysical) structure of dance as a form of representation. When dancers take their place in front of the spotlight, they are often displayed in ways that accentuate the double role of technical prowess and sexual desirability (the latter being implicit in the very fact of a body's visual availability). In contrast, the disabled body is supposed to be covered up or hidden from view, to be compensated for or overcome (either literally or metaphorically) in an attempt to live as "normal" a life as possible. When a disabled dancer enters the stage, he or she stakes claim to a radical space, an unruly location where disparate assumptions collide.

The intersection of dance and disability is an extraordinarily rich site at which to explore the overlapping constructions of the body's physical ability, subjectivity, and cultural visibility. Excavating the social meanings of these constructions is like an archeological dig into the deep psychic fears that disability creates. As Ynestra King puts it in her insightful essay "The Other Body": "Visibly disabled people (like women) in this culture are the scapegoats for resentments of the limitations of organic life."<sup>2</sup> In order to examine ablist preconceptions in the professional dance world, one must confront both the ideological and symbolic meanings that the disabled body holds in our culture, as well as the practical conditions of disability. Once again, we are in the position of having to negotiate between the theatrical representations of dancing bodies and the actuality of their physical experiences. Watching disabled bodies dancing forces us to see with a double vision, and helps us to recognize that while a dance performance is grounded in the physical capacities of a dancer, it is not limited by them.

Although I struggle (and ultimately feel uncomfortable) with the adjective *disabled*, I have come to appreciate the word *disability*, which I sometimes write as *dis/ability*. I have coined this new spelling in order to exaggerate the intellectual precipice implied by this word. The slash, for me, refuses the comfort of a stereotype. It is a symbol that marks a steep ravine, forcing the reader to pull up short and gasp in fear of sliding down it. It also functions as a mirror that reflects one's face as one's mouth tries to pronounce the state on the other side of the marker. Say it. *Dis/ability*. There is a certain snake-like s-s-s-s sound in that prefix which captures so much and yet which can, I believe, be imaginatively reinvented. Think, for instance, of all those other *dises* that are useful in shaking up the powers that be—*disabuse*, *disagree*, *disturb*, not to mention *disarm*. In a similar vein, popular culture has inverted the power dynamics of "You are dismissed young lady," by creating the wonderfully apt expression "dissed"—as in "I totally dissed her," or simply "dissed!" spoken with a tight

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lip and horizontal slash of the hand. Of course, these transgressive semantics are only part of the story. Playfully thinking about the possibilities of the *dis* in disability without acknowledging the bodies that mark that condition is too easy. So while the word *disability* rolls off my tongue with a certain beboppiness, the word *disabled* gets lodged in my throat. In our culture, disabled bodies mark so insistently the fragility of health, beauty, and autonomy that many people experience a distinct physical reaction when they encounter someone with a disability. Although the *dis* in *disability* obviously reflects negative stereotypes, I am wondering if it can be reinvigorated, chosen to name an area of inquiry that might very well end up rearranging people's lives.

The politics of naming are, needless to say, fraught through and through with the politics of identity. Who names whom is a difficult question for most cultural critics attempting to be respectful of the power of language. While, for instance, Nancy Mairs will embrace the term *cripple* in describing herself ("‘Cripple’ seems to me a clean word, straightforward and precise. . . . I like the accuracy with which it describes my condition"), she would never use the term to describe someone else.<sup>3</sup> In her essay, ironically entitled "On Being a Cripple," Mairs distinguishes among the many terms for disability, bemoaning the abstraction and consequent meaninglessness of their generality.

"Disabled" . . . suggests any incapacity, physical or mental. And I certainly don't like "handicapped," which implies that I have deliberately been put at a disadvantage, by whom I can't imagine (my God is not a Handicapper General). . . . These words seem to me to be moving away from my condition, to be widening the gap between word and reality. Most remote is the recently coined euphemism "differently abled," which partakes of that same semantic hopefulness that transformed countries from "undeveloped" to "underdeveloped," then to "less developed," and finally to "developing" nations. People have continued to starve in those countries during the shift.<sup>4</sup>

With this pointed analogy, Mairs underlines how the politically correct terms ("differently abled" and "physically challenged") very quickly become problematic precisely because they pass over important signifiers of difference. By being so general, they strip difference of all its disruptive power, washing it down to a milktoasty variety of "everybody is different and has challenges," which is a convenient way to simply say "we don't really need to pay attention to your issues." As Barbara Hillyer makes clear in a section on language and naming in her book *Feminism and Disability*, these general terms quickly become politically meaningless. "Such an identification of oneself as basically like everyone else blocks the possibility of a nonassimilationist political analy-

sis.”<sup>5</sup> Paradoxically, by embracing the term “crippled,” Mairs can claim defiantly: “As a cripple, I swagger.”<sup>6</sup>

Despite their theoretical romance with the body, contemporary cultural critics have paid little attention to issues of dis/ability. I suspect this is because the disabled body insistently refuses to be neatly packaged as metaphor. It is hard to abstract disability, the reality of its status “as is” breaks through the theoretical gloss to confront whomever is writing about it. Although the “absent” body—the body as performative and therefore temporary and transient—has frequently seduced contemporary theorists with its chic ephemerality, few have, as of yet, taken up the disabled body. Their reluctance comes from an unwillingness to touch a body that is neither entirely “present” nor intriguingly “absent,” but rather liminal, struggling somewhere between the shores of theoretical surefootedness. This fear is a primal one; the material realities of disability threaten to disrupt not merely cultural representations or theoretical precepts, but ways of living as well. King underscores this liminal quality of dis/ability when she writes: “The very condition of disability provides a vantage point of a certain lived experience in the body, a lifetime of opportunity for the observation of reaction to bodily deviance. It defies categories of ‘sickness’ and ‘health,’ ‘broken’ and ‘whole.’ It is inbetween.”<sup>7</sup>

But feminism ought to engage with the issues of dis/ability, for it seems to me that the body politics that serve as the foundation of much contemporary feminist thought have a lot in common with the political body of dis/ability. In the same way that women have historically been positioned as all body, their subjectivities weighed down with the raw matter of life, disabled bodies (particularly disabled female bodies) are seen as overwhelmingly material entities, unable to transcend the physical specificity of their daily needs. Like the female body, the disabled body is frightening and excessive, always threatening to ooze out of its appropriate containers. In a culture that works so anxiously to control the body’s functions, desires, and physical boundaries, the disabled body is immediately positioned as deviant, simply because it is a little messier, or because it takes a little longer and travels a little more circuitously to get to its destination. I believe that feminist work on representation and the disciplinary regimes of the body could very productively inform and, in turn, be reinvigorated by an engagement with dis/ability studies.

Of course, what feminism has to confront in disability studies is the simplistic association of disability with passivity. This was particularly true in the budding women’s movement of the seventies, where essentialist notions of what to wear, what to read (no pornography please), how to walk, how to have sex, etc., left little ideological room for the political contradictions involved in

the practical lives of disabled feminists. In the introduction to their collection of essays on women with disabilities, Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch recount an anecdote that is frightening (and all too common) in its peculiar brand of logic. "As one feminist academic said to the non-disabled coauthor of this essay: 'Why study women with disabilities? They reinforce traditional stereotypes of women being dependent, passive, and needy.'"<sup>8</sup> This response strikes me as so completely unimaginative that it actually warrants a closer look. Most feminists would never even think anything comparable about poor or illiterate women who are marginalized in our culture by social disabilities. But women with physical disabilities are readily seen as dysfunctional individuals, rather than as members of a marginalized social class. An interesting study done among college students revealed just how gendered this bias is. Most of the respondents attributed disability in men to accidents, work injuries, or war (it's not their fault, just bad luck), while they attributed disability in women to more internal causes such as diseases, revealing a gendered assumption that disability in women is a result of their own weakness or failure.<sup>9</sup>

Another issue that both feminism and dis/ability have in common is the deconstruction of existing notions of self and autonomy. The foundational political, philosophical, and psychological principles of Western culture are based on theories of individual subjectivity and state sovereignty that are predicated on simplistic ideals of independence and self-sufficiency. Even at the end of the twentieth century with its interdependent networks of information and global capital, we still believe that the primary moment of selfhood is when the child (or young adult) becomes independent from her parents or caretakers. This construction of the self as an autonomous individual has always been problematic for women and for men who are implicated in various threads of interdependence, but it is particularly so for people who need daily physical assistance with their lives.

With the help of writings by many feminists of color and women from developing countries where extended families and community interdependence have not completely eroded, contemporary feminist thought has finally begun to deconstruct this narrow-minded view that true selfhood is synonymous with independence from others, but it has yet to analyze the various ways that our society also conflates subjectivity and physical mobility. American culture was founded on a simplistic equation of selfhood with freedom and physical mobility (the frontier mentality), and I believe that many of the psychic and geographic dislocations of contemporary life can be traced to this deeply embedded notion. Early American modern dance shared with early feminists an interest in dress reform. Isadora Duncan, for instance, championed the belief

that intellectual and social, not to mention psychological, freedom was very much related to physical mobility—in this case the freedom from the elaborate restrictions of Victorian apparel. While I absolutely agree that freedom from the physical restraints of fashion was and is important for women, I think that we need to develop a more complex and self-critical discussion of physical freedom in order to recognize that the ability to move—anywhere at anytime—does not necessarily equal a true psychic liberty.

The compromising of the human body before its natural time is tragic. It forces terrible hardship on the individual to whom it occurs. But the added overlay of oppression on the disabled is intimately related to the fear of death, and the acknowledgment of our embeddedness in organic nature. We are finite, contingent, dependent creatures by our very nature; we will all eventually die. We will all experience compromises to our physical integrity. The aspiration to human wholeness is an oppressive idealism.<sup>10</sup>

My personal experiences with dance and disability have made me realize the extent to which one's identity is read through one's body, and have also given me an awareness of how simplistic our cultural definition of dis/ability as physical incapacity really is. Several years ago, I was temporarily yet rather severely disabled when two of my discs ruptured into my spinal cord. Not only did I find it difficult to endure the relentless physical pain, the exhaustion, and the difficulty of getting around, but I also found that the medical personnel who were treating me were particularly unimaginative about who I was and what I could continue to do. Their assumption was that because I was in a wheelchair or using a cane, it was time for me to think about retiring from dance altogether (at the ripe old age of thirty-four!). Although my disability colored my daily experience for quite some time, it never entirely defined who I was—even though most people who met me at that time found it hard to accept that I would still identify myself as a dancer. A year later, when I was facilitating a movement workshop at the "This ability" conference, I was struck (once again) at how simplistically we are trained to read cultural identity from the physical body.<sup>11</sup> When I asked a group of disabled and nondisabled participants to talk about their experiences of their bodies, it became clear that any disabled/nondisabled dichotomy set up on the basis of physical ability quickly fell apart. A number of the participants who seemed able-bodied spoke of their intensely disabling experiences of body image problems (including anorexia and bulimia), as well as sexual and physical abuse. And some of the people with physical limitations spoke of trusting and loving their body as it was. Although an experience of paralysis is more dif-



difficult to negotiate in terms of access, it isn't necessarily any more personally disempowering than an experience of a body image disorder, even though only one of these people would be considered "disabled" in our society.

Issues of disability eventually affect everybody's life. Yet even though many of us are familiar with the work of disabled writers, artists, and musicians, physically disabled dancers are still seen as a contradiction in terms. This is because dance, unlike other forms of cultural production such as books or paintings, makes the body visible within the representation itself. Thus when we look at dance with disabled dancers, we are looking at both the choreography and the disability. This insertion of bodies with real physical challenges can be extremely disconcerting to critics and audience members who are committed to an aesthetic of ideal beauty. Cracking the porcelain image of the female dancer as sylph, disabled dancers force the viewer to confront the cultural opposite of the classical body—the grotesque body. In my last chapter, I discussed how the binary logic so prevalent in our cultural discourses about bodies, health, and fitness pits fit bodies against frail ones. In the context of this chapter, that binary is redeployed as the opposition between the classical and the grotesque bodies. I am using the term "grotesque" as Bakhtin invokes it in his analysis of representation within Rabelais. In her discussion of carnival, spectacle, and Bakhtinian theory, Mary Russo identifies these two bodily tropes in the following manner: "The grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change. The grotesque body is opposed to the classical body, which is monumental, static, closed and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism; the grotesque body is connected to the rest of the world."<sup>12</sup> I realize, of course, that by using the term "grotesque" within a chapter on dis/ability, I risk invoking old stereotypes of disabled bodies as grotesque bodies. This is certainly not my intention. When I discuss the opposition of classical and grotesque bodies, it is not to describe specific bodies, but rather to call upon cultural constructs that deeply influence our attitudes toward bodies. As I have argued earlier in my discussion of naming and terminology, normalizing the disabled body doesn't serve to break down these dichotomies of social difference, it merely disguises them with an alternative discourse.

In this chapter, I would like to explore the transgressive nature of the "grotesque" body in order to see if and how the disabled body could deconstruct and radically reform the representational structures of dance performances. But, just as all disabilities are not created equal, dances made with disabled dancers are not completely alike. Many of these dances recreate the representational frames of traditional proscenium performances, emphasize

ing the elements of virtuosity and technical expertise to reaffirm a classical body in spite of its limitations. In contrast, some dances, particularly those influenced by Contact Improvisation, work to break down the very distinctions between the classical and the grotesque body, radically restructuring the traditional frames of dance representation in order to offer another way of seeing dancing bodies. As we shall see, while all dance created on disabled bodies must negotiate the palpable contradictions between the discourses of ideal bodies and those of deviant ones, each piece meets this challenge in a different way, establishing its own aesthetic concerns within the choreography and movement style, as well as within the overall context of the performance itself.

At the start of *Gypsy*, tall and elegant Todd Goodman enters pulling the ends of a long scarf wrapped around the shoulders of his partner, Mary Verdi-Fletcher, gliding behind him. To the Gypsy Kings, he winds her in and out with the scarf. Her bare shoulders tingle with the ecstasy of performing. She flings back her head with trusting abandon as he dips her deeply backward. Holding the fabric she glides like a skater, alternately releasing and regaining control. At the climax he swoops her up in her chair and whirls her around. Did I mention that Verdi-Fletcher dances in her wheelchair?<sup>13</sup>

This is Gus Solomons's description of a romantic duet that was one of the first choreographic ventures of Cleveland Ballet Dancing Wheels, a professional dance company comprising dancers on legs and dancers in wheelchairs. Essentially a pas de deux for legs and wheels, *Gypsy* extends the aesthetic heritage of nineteenth-century Romantic ballet in several intriguing new directions. Like a traditional balletic duet, *Gypsy* is built on an illusion of grace provided by the fluid movements and physics of partnering. The use of the fabric in conjunction with the wheels gives the movement a continuous quality that is difficult to achieve on legs. When Solomons describes Verdi-Fletcher's dancing as "gliding," he is not simply using a metaphor; rather he is transcribing the physical reality of her movement. Whether they are physically touching or connected by their silken umbilical cord, the dancers in this pas de deux partner one another with a combination of the delicacy of ballet and the mystery of tango.

Solomons is an African-American dance critic and independent choreographer who has been involved in the contemporary dance scene since his days dancing for Merce Cunningham in the 1970s. An active member of the Dance Critics Association, he is a dance critic who has spoken eloquently about the need to include diverse communities within our definitions of mainstream

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dance. And yet Solomons, like many other liberal cultural critics and arts reviewers, sets up a peculiar rhetoric in the above passage that tries to deny difference. His remark, “Did I mention that Verdi-Fletcher dances in her wheelchair?” suggests that the presence of a dancer in a wheelchair is merely an incidental detail that hardly interrupts the seamless flow of the romantic pas de deux. In assuming that disability does *not* make a (big) difference, this writer is, in fact, limiting the (real) difference that dis/ability can make in radically refiguring how we look at, conceive of, and organize bodies in the twenty-first century. Why, for instance, does Solomons begin with a description of Goodman’s able body as “tall and elegant,” and then fail to describe Verdi-Fletcher’s body at all? Why do most articles on Verdi-Fletcher’s seminal dance company spend so much time celebrating how she has “overcome” her disability to “become” a dancer rather than inquiring how her bodily presence might radically refigure the very category of dancer itself?

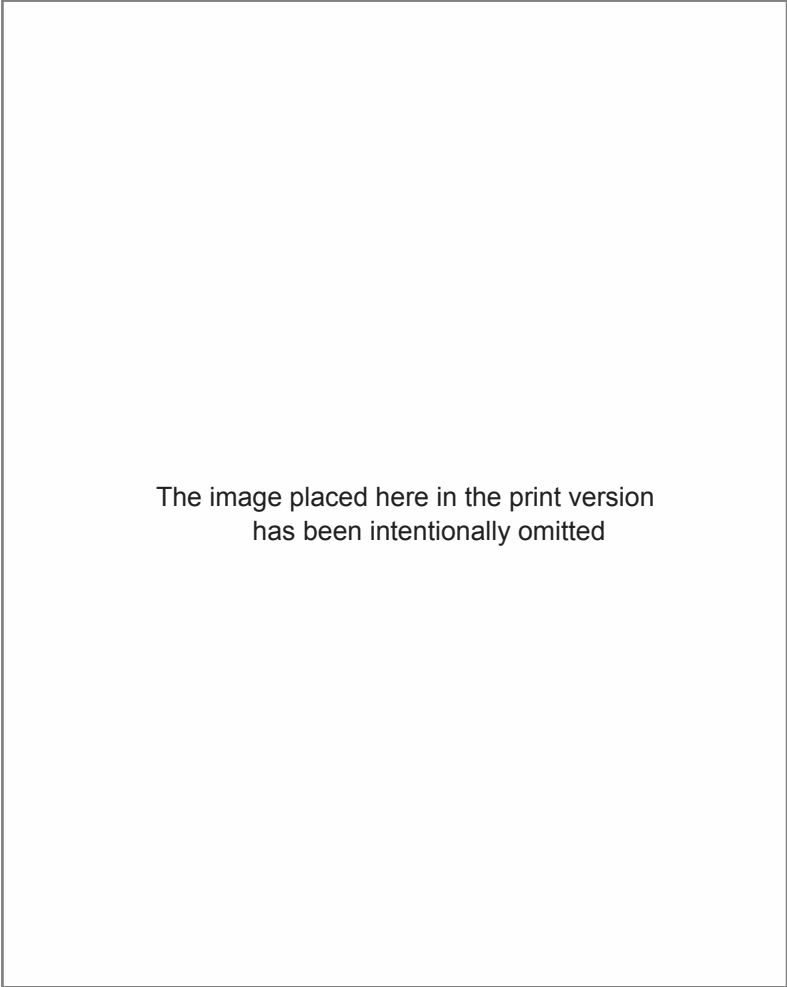
The answers to these questions lie not only in an examination of the critical reception of *Gypsy* and other choreographic ventures by Cleveland Ballet Dancing Wheels, but also in an analysis of the ways in which this company paradoxically acknowledges and then covers over the difference that dis/ability makes. In the section that follows, I articulate the contradictions embedded within this company’s differing aesthetic and social priorities; I argue that while their outreach work has laid important groundwork for the structural inclusion of people with disabilities in dance training programs and performance venues, the conservative aesthetic that guides much of Cleveland Ballet Dancing Wheels’ performance work paradoxically reinforces, rather than disrupts, the negative connotations of disability.

Dancing Wheels began as a joint adventure between Mary Verdi-Fletcher, who was born with spina bifida and now uses a wheelchair, and David Brewster, the husband of a friend who enjoyed social dancing as much as Mary did. In those heady days of “disco fever” they mostly competed in various social dance competitions. Soon, however, the notion of a dance company of dancers with and without disabilities crystalized. In 1980 Verdi-Fletcher founded Dancing Wheels and began concentrating on outreach and audience development, doing lecture-demonstrations at community centers and performances in schools and nursing homes. In 1990, Verdi-Fletcher and her (then) associate director Todd Goodman (who dances on legs) merged with Cleveland Ballet to form the present company, Cleveland Ballet Dancing Wheels. In its present form, however, Dancing Wheels does not perform in the Cleveland Ballet’s regular seasons—its primary contributions are to Cleveland Ballet’s outreach and educational program. Independently, the company collaborates with a

number of ballet and modern choreographers, performing their works in various theatrical venues across the country.

The genesis of the company was anecdotally related by Cleveland Ballet's artistic director Dennis Nahat. Nahat recalled meeting Verdi-Fletcher at a reception when Verdi-Fletcher introduced herself as a dancer and told him that she was interested in dancing with the Cleveland Ballet. In the annotated biography of Verdi-Fletcher's dance career that was commissioned for Dancing Wheels' fifteenth anniversary gala, Nahat is quoted as saying: "When I first saw Mary perform, I said 'That is a dancer.' . . . There was no mistake about it. She had the spark, the spirit that makes a dancer."<sup>14</sup> I am interested in pursuing this notion of "spirit" a bit, especially as it is used frequently within the company's own press literature. For instance, in the elaborate press packet assembled for a media event to celebrate the collaboration with Invacare Corporation's "Action Technology" (a line of wheelchairs designed for extra ease and mobility), there is a picture of the company with the caption "A Victory of Spirit over Body" underneath.

I find this notion of a dancing "spirit" that transcends the limitations of a disabled body actually rather troubling. Although it seems, at first, to signal liberatory language—one should not be "confined" by social definitions of identity based on bodily attributes (of race, gender, ability, etc.)—this rhetoric is actually based on ablist notions of overcoming physical handicaps (the "supercrip" theory) in order to become a "real" dancer, one whose "spirit" doesn't let the limitations of her body get in the way. Given that dancers' bodies are generally on display in a performance, this commitment to "spirit over body" risks covering over or erasing disabled bodies altogether. Just how do we represent spirit—smiling faces, joyful lifts into the air? The publicity photograph of the company on the same page gives us one example of the visual downplaying of disabled bodies. In this studio shot, the three dancers in wheelchairs are artistically surrounded by the able-bodied dancers in such a way that we can barely see the wheelchairs at all; in fact, Verdi-Fletcher is raised up and closely flanked by four men so that she looks as if she is standing in the third row. But what is most striking about this publicity shot is the way in which the ballerina sitting on the right has her long, slender legs extended across the bottom of the picture. The effect, oddly enough, is to fetishize these working legs while at the same time making the "other" mobility—the wheels—invisible. Now I am not suggesting that this photo was deliberately set up to minimize the visual representation of disability. But this example shows us that unless we consciously construct new images and ways of imaging the disabled body, we will inevitably end up reproducing an ablist aesthetic. Although the text



The image placed here in the print version  
has been intentionally omitted

Cleveland Ballet Dancing Wheels. Company photo by Al Fuchs.

jubilantly claims its identity, “Greetings from Cleveland Ballet Dancing Wheels,” the picture normalizes the “difference” in bodies, reassuring prospective presenters and the press that they won’t see anything too uncomfortable.

The first sentence of Cleveland Ballet Dancing Wheels’ mission statement claims that the company works to “Promote the collaboration and artistic talents of dancers with and without disabilities while demonstrating the diver-

sity of dance and the abilities of artists with physical challenges.”<sup>15</sup> This is truly an important mission. With their extensive outreach and educational programs, which include teaching dance classes to dancers with disabilities and presenting lecture-demonstrations in local schools and community centers as well as their performance work, Dancing Wheels has increased the visibility of differently abled dancers. Indeed, Mary Verdi-Fletcher is a powerful role model for aspiring young dancers on wheels. In a typical article documenting how Verdi-Fletcher’s work has inspired young girls to fulfill their dream of dancing, Steve Wright reports that “Melissa Holbrook and a few hundred of her schoolmates at Brown Elementary learned yesterday that you don’t need your legs to dance and that wheelchair users can be ballerinas.” The short feature ends by quoting Verdi-Fletcher as remarking that “her dance partners have ‘found it was much easier to drag a woman around on wheels than on heels.’”<sup>16</sup> While I appreciate the wonderful role model of cultural ambassador in which Verdi-Fletcher clearly excels, I am curious about the seemingly uncritical stance that she and the company seem to have toward representations of women and images of dis/ability. Certainly Cleveland Ballet Dancing Wheels has increased the visibility of dancers with various disabilities—but, we must ask, visible in what way, and at whose expense? For as long as the representational basis for their work is steeped in the ideological values of classic dance and formalist aesthetics (complete with the fetishization of “line”), their attempts to include dancers on wheels can very quickly get recast within the same old patronizing terms of abled and disabled bodies.<sup>17</sup>

*Flashback* (1992) is a choreographic collaboration between Tom Evert Dance and Dancing Wheels, and has been performed throughout Ohio as well as at the Marymount Manhattan Theater in New York City. This dance is a series of short vignettes creating a loose narrative that retraces time from the first scene celebrating adult love to the last section, which represents childhood play. The dancing idiom is a cross between classical technique and naturalistic acting, and each section is danced by both dancers on legs and dancers in wheelchairs. Mary Verdi-Fletcher is the only one of the wheelchair dancers, however, who is really physically disabled—the others “play the part” for the purposes of the story line. Although this dance was meant to deliver the message that disabled performers can be integrated into mainstream dance, a structural movement analysis reveals that each section, in fact, reinscribes the *d i s* of dis/ability, marking the “lack” of mobile legs rather than exploring the movement possibilities inherent in various kinds of bodies.

In the beginning of the dance, the dancers present themselves to the audience, moving in unison around the stage. The three dancers on legs weave

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among the dancers in wheelchairs, lending a hand here and there to swing their partner in an arcing circle on the floor. The physical relationship quickly becomes unequal, however, with the dancers on legs directing and motivating the movement of the wheelchairs while the dancers on wheels follow but never actually initiate any movement with their partners. The dancers on wheels perform a series of classically-based arm gestures that parallel those of the dancers on legs who, however, usually extend the movement through their torsos and into an arabesque. Often, the dancers on wheels are used like static architectural devices to frame the dancers on legs, who are busy presenting the “real” full-bodied dancing in the center of the stage.

Two duets follow this section, the first of which is a romantic waltz—wheelchair style. This section has some of the most imaginative use of wheelchair choreography, there being no dancers on legs to guide the wheelchairs through the space. One such instance is when the two dancers on wheels, Verdi-Fletcher and Nick Carlisle, approach one another with enough momentum to swing one another around in a circle. The choreographic significance of this duet is quickly undercut, however, when the two dancers on legs, Todd Goodman and Susanna Weingarten de Evert, enter the stage to perform their duet—a Latin tango, complete with seductive looks, a low-cut dress, and physically intimate partnering. The implication is clear: dancers on wheels can be sweetly romantic, but the sexy, exciting dancing is reserved for those with legs.

The next section begins with a melodramatic transition in which the male dancer on wheels arises like a ghost from his chair and leaves the stage as another male dancer takes his place. Suddenly, the time and place have shifted and we see an “invalid” and his perky nurse cavorting around the stage. This particular section strikes me as one of the most ideologically peculiar moments of the dance, for it seems to invoke all the worst stereotypes of disability in a completely uncritical manner. The man in the wheelchair is now clearly a “victim” of some accident. The nurse figure treats him like an infant, wiping his mouth and pushing him cheerfully around the stage. Sometimes she runs ahead, clapping her hands in approval when he follows her. Typically, it is she who directs all the movement action; she is the one who touches him, teasingly sits on him, and yet admonishes him with a slap of her hand when he reaches out to touch her in response.

*Flashback* was the beginning of Cleveland Ballet Dancing Wheels’ collaborations with various choreographers. In the summer of 1992, Dancing Wheels sponsored a choreographic workshop to encourage Ohio choreographers to create works for a mixed group of dancers with and without disabilities. The week-long event culminated in a showing of their works-in-progress. This

was the start of an ongoing series of workshops that has been very influential in exposing local choreographers to wheelchair-based movement possibilities.<sup>18</sup> Then, in 1994, the resident choreographer Todd Goodman (whose aesthetic was firmly grounded in the world of ballet and musical theater) left. He was replaced by Sabatino Verlezza, a choreographer from New York who worked with the company during the 1993 Celebration of Arts and Access.<sup>19</sup>

Verlezza's background in modern dance brings a welcome shift of physical vocabulary to Dancing Wheels. In August 1995, Cleveland Ballet Dancing Wheels presented a gala benefit performance at the Cleveland Playhouse's State Theater. The program opened with a reconstruction of a dance choreographed in 1959 by May O'Donnell, with whom Verlezza danced for many years. Originally a member of the Martha Graham dance company, O'Donnell has developed a choreographic style more reminiscent of Doris Humphrey and early modern dance's expressive, communal style of movement. In its use of space, fall and recovery, and breath rhythms, *Dance Energies* evoked Humphrey's great modern epic *New Dance*.

Although within his group pieces Verlezza often choreographs a central theme for dancers with legs, leaving the dancers on wheels to provide an architectural backdrop (a process that works against the democratic principles of the company's stated claims), he has begun to experiment with much more exciting movement for the wheelchair dancers. Whereas most of Dancing Wheels' previous choreography involved dancers on legs leading or swinging dancers on wheels around the stage, in the present repertory there is at least some effort to explore momentum and other movement possibilities unique to the wheelchairs. The premiere of *1420 MHZ* was one of the most physically challenging works and provided a very good opportunity to see what extraordinary moves were possible on wheels. The fact that the piece was made for three women on wheels allowed the audience to experience a truly enabling representation of difference without the physical comparisons inevitable when women on wheels dance with men on legs.

Another piece by Verlezza entitled *May Ring* completed the evening's program. I was absolutely stunned by the final image of this dance and I find it hard to believe that neither Verdi-Fletcher nor Verlezza was aware of how this image might read to some of their audience members. *May Ring* ends with a long fade as Verlezza lifts Verdi-Fletcher, arms spread wide and face beaming, out of her wheelchair and high above his head. This is clearly meant to be a final transcendent moment. Yet its unavoidably sexist and ablist implications—reinforced by the fact that Verlezza dances on legs and Verdi-Fletcher dances on wheels—deeply disappointed me. Like Disney narratives and pop songs of



my youth that promised salvation through love—this image portrays Verlezza as a prince charming, squiring Verdi-Fletcher out of her wheelchair in order to make her into a “real” woman. Now, it is possible to argue that this image is, in fact, a deconstruction of the ballerina’s role, a way of winking to the audience to say that, yes, a disabled woman can also fulfill that popular image. But the rest of the work doesn’t support this interpretation. Verdi-Fletcher’s smiling, childlike presence suggests little personal agency, much less the sense of defiance or *chutzpah* it would take to pull off this deconstruction.

In her essay “The Other Body,” King describes a disabled woman whom she sees on her way to work each day. “She can barely move. She has a pretty face, and tiny legs she could not possibly walk on. Yet she wears black lace stockings and spike high heels. . . . That she could ‘haunt’ her sexual being violates the code of acceptable appearance for a disabled woman.”<sup>20</sup> What appeals to King about this woman’s sartorial display is the way that she at once refuses her cultural position as an asexual being and deconstructs the icons of feminine sexuality (who can really walk in those spike heels anyway?). Watching Verdi-Fletcher in the final moments of *May Ring* brings us face to face with the contradictions involved in being positioned as both a classical dancer (at once sexualized and objectified) and a disabled woman (an asexual child who needs help). Yet instead of one position bringing tension to or fracturing the other (as in King’s example of the disabled woman with high heels and black lace stockings), Verdi-Fletcher seems here to be embracing a position that is doubly disempowering.

In the time since this performance, I have been searching for the reasons why, in the midst of an enormous publicity campaign that seeks to present Mary Verdi-Fletcher as an extraordinary woman who has overcome the challenges of spina bifida to realize her dream of becoming a professional dancer, she would allow herself to be presented in such a fashion. In retrospect, I think that this desire to position herself in the spotlight has everything to do with the powerfully seductive image of the Romantic ballerina as an unattainable sylph. It seems to me that when Verdi-Fletcher closes her eyes and dreams about becoming a dancer, she is still envisioning a sugarplum fairy. Although she has successfully opened up the field of professional dance to dancers on wheels, Verdi-Fletcher hasn’t challenged the myth of the sylph yet. Despite its recent forays into modern dance, *Dancing Wheels* still seems very much attached to a classical ideology of the “perfect” body.

Mary Verdi-Fletcher is a dancer and, like many other dancers, both disabled and nondisabled, she has internalized an aesthetic of beauty, grace, and line that, if not centered on a completely mobile body, is nonetheless beholden

to an idealized body image. There are very few professions where the struggle to maintain a “perfect” (or at least near-perfect) body has taken up as much psychic and physical struggle as in the dance field. With few exceptions, this is true whether one’s preferred technique is classical ballet, American modern dance, Bharata Natyam, or a form of African-American dance. Even though the styles and look of bodies favored by different dance cultures may allow for some degree of variation (for instance, the director of Urban Bush Women, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, talks about the freedom to have and to move one’s butt in African dance as being wonderfully liberating after years of being told to tuck it in in modern dance classes), most professional dance is still inundated by body image and weight issues. Even companies such as the Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane Dance Company, who pride themselves on the diversity of their dancers, rarely have much variation among the women dancers (all of whom are quite slim). Any time a dancer’s body is not completely svelte, the press usually picks up on it. In fact, the discourse of weight and dieting in dance is so pervasive (especially, but certainly not exclusively for women) that we often don’t even register it anymore. I am constantly amazed at dancers who have consciously deconstructed traditional images of female dancers in their choreographic work and yet still complain of their extra weight, wrinkles, gray hair, or sagging whatever. As a body on display, the dancer is subject to the regulating gaze of the choreographer and the public, but neither of these gazes is quite as debilitating or oppressive as the gaze that meets its own image in the mirror.

In the past twenty years, much has been written about the ways in which the dance profession has engendered an unhealthy atmosphere of intensive dieting, exercising, and drug use to acquire and keep an unnaturally thin body. This is particularly true of classical ballet schools and companies. Dr. L. M. Vincent’s seminal book *Competing with the Sylph: Dancers and the Pursuit of the Ideal Body Form* (1979) is filled with oral histories of the extreme diets and fasts that girls go through to stave off the physiological changes their bodies are going through.<sup>21</sup> Although less visible than mobility challenges, body image problems and the resultant eating disorders constitute one of the broadest issues of dis/ability within dance. Books such as Suzanne Gordon’s *Off Balance: The Real World of Ballet*, Christy Adair’s *Women and Dance*, and autobiographical accounts by the likes of New York City Ballet star Gelsey Kirkland (a particularly gruesome tale of addiction and self-hatred), document the full range of horrors that girls and women will subject themselves to in their pursuit of the ideal dancing body.<sup>22</sup> While modern and contemporary dance forms, as well as dance traditions from some other cultures, may have loosened the

tyranny of thinness, they have often replaced it with new expectations concerning the visibly muscled body. In fact, it is the rare professional dancer today who does not have well-sculpted biceps.

“[[J]]ust as society creates an ideal of beauty which is oppressive for us all, it creates an ideal model of the physically perfect person who is not beset with weakness, loss, or pain. . . . The disabled (and aging) woman poses a symbolic threat by reminding us how tenuous that model, ‘the myth of the perfect body,’ really is. . . .”<sup>23</sup> In her essay “The Myth of the Perfect Body,” Roberta Galler suggests that disabled women use the “symbolic threat” that their bodies pose to the reigning ideologies of beauty, health, and femininity in order to disrupt those oppressive ideals. Galler writes that “disabled (and aging) women are coming out; we are beginning to examine our issues publicly, forcing other women to address not only the issues of disability but to reexamine their attitudes towards their own limitations and lack of perfection, towards oppressive myths, standards, and social conditions which affect us all.”<sup>24</sup> This “coming out” of sorts includes mainstreaming in the schools, attending conferences, engaging in visible political acts, and writing. One of the most compelling contemporary essayists I have read recently is Nancy Mairs, whose autobiographical writings document the complexities of living with a degenerative disease (she has multiple sclerosis) and the dual forces of her growing self-esteem and awareness of her identity as a writer in the midst of a gradual loss of neurological control. In articulating her life, Mairs also articulates the ongoing negotiations between her physical experiences and their complete lack of public representation.<sup>25</sup> For instance, Mairs once asked an advertising agent why he never used disabled people in his detergent and cereal commercials. He replied that no one wanted to give the public the idea that these products were “just for the handicapped.” His answer, Mairs decides, “masked a deeper and more anxious rationale: to depict disabled people in the ordinary activities of daily life is to admit that there is something ordinary about disability itself, that it may enter anybody’s life.”<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, dis/ability is finally beginning to enter the public consciousness as the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) forces more and more institutions to make their spaces accessible.<sup>27</sup> Ironically, however, just as the independent living movement gains momentum and disabled people are becoming (somewhat) more visible, American culture is emphasizing with a passion heretofore unimagined the need for physical and bodily control.<sup>28</sup> As King makes clear in her essay “The Other Body,” this fetishization of control marks the disabled body as the social antithesis—a body out of control. “It is no longer enough to be thin; one must have ubiquitous muscle definition, noth-

ing loose, flabby, or ill defined, no fuzzy boundaries. And of course, there's the importance of control. Control over aging, bodily processes, weight, fertility, muscle tone, skin quality, and movement. Disabled women, regardless of how thin, are without full bodily control."<sup>29</sup>

This issue of control is, I am convinced, key to understanding not only the specific issues of prejudice against the disabled, but also the larger symbolic place that dis/ability holds in our culture's psychic imagination. In dance, this contrast between the classical and grotesque bodies is often framed in terms of physical control and technical virtuosity. Although the dancing body is moving and, in this sense, is always changing and in flux, the choreography or movement style can emphasize images resonant of the classical body. For instance, the statuesque poses of ballet are clear icons of the classical body. So too, however, are the dancers in some modern and contemporary companies that privilege an abstract body, such as those coolly elegant ones performing with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company these days. Based as it is in the live body, dance is rife with the cultural anxiety that the grotesque body will erupt (unexpectedly) through the image of the classical body, shattering the illusion of ease and grace by the disruptive presence of fleshy experience—heavy breathing, sweat, technical mistakes, physical injury, even evidence of a dancer's age or mortality.

The disruptive force represented by even the mere *thought* of seeing disabled, ailing, or dying bodies on a dance stage can be gauged by the tremendous controversy surrounding Arlene Croce's response to Bill T. Jones's epic work on terminal illness *Still/Here*. In a gesture certain to secure her a place in the annals of the so-called "culture wars," Croce (a dance critic for *The New Yorker*) claimed that she could not review a dance that contained the videotaped images of dying people. In her vituperative essay attacking "victim art" entitled "Discussing the Undiscussable," Croce slams "overweight dancers," "old dancers," "dancers with sickled feet," as well as "dancers with physical deformities who appear nightly in roles requiring beauty of line."<sup>30</sup> Railing against any politicized art that foregrounds the bodily identity of the artist ("Dissed blacks, abused women, or disfranchised homosexuals"), she laments the demise of theater as she knows it. "In theatre, one chooses what one will be. The cast members of *Still/Here*—the sick people whom Jones has signed up—have no choice other than to be sick."<sup>31</sup> The implication here is that the only bodies worth watching are those bodies that signify "choice," a code word for bodies that conform to idealized standards of health, fitness, and beauty. In this peculiar brand of logic, bodies marked by difference (does one "choose"

race, height, sexuality?) have no choice—their deviance at once defines and marginalizes them.

Croce's tirade had its genesis, I believe, in an earlier moment in 1989 when Jones carried Demian Acquavella, a company member so physically ravaged by AIDS that he could barely stand, onstage during a performance of *D-Man in the Waters*. This dance was dedicated to Acquavella (the epigraph in the program is a line from Jenny Holzer, "In a dream you saw a way to survive and you were full of joy"), and Jones supported Acquavella as he performed the arm gestures of what was to have been his solo in the dance. Although the dance was hailed as a brilliant synthesis of expressive and virtuosic dancing with a formally structured musical score (Mendelssohn's Octet in F for Strings), the critical establishment had mixed reactions to this last gesture, suggesting it was either emotional manipulation or flagrant self-promotion. For instance, at the end of an otherwise laudatory review, Marcia Siegel writes, "I think Jones has confused realism here with autobiography. . . . With Acquavella's participation, *D-Man in the Waters* sacrifices acute comment for immediate catharsis."<sup>32</sup> Like Croce's critical tirade, Siegel's comments reflect a deep fear that the emotional impact of the "real" (read grotesque) body will get in the way of a more intellectual appreciation of Jones's choreographic composition. As my chapter attests, however, I believe that the disruption of the real that disability symbolizes can provoke us to think differently about the relationship between representation and the actual history of bodies.

I remember seeing this performance at the Joyce Theater in New York City and being amazed at the stunning differences between the smooth, quick, powerful dancing of Arthur Aviles (who won a Bessie award for his dancing in this work) and the spasmodic gestures of Acquavella's upper body (he was suffering from milopathy, an AIDS-related condition that affects the nervous system). Watching his frail body struggle among all the glowing, healthy, virtuosic bodies of his fellow company members made me realize how deeply disability and the grotesque body are at once embedded (and repressed) in dance. Looking back at my journal comments about this performance, I noticed that after describing the dances I wrote: "God, it must be intense to dance in that company now. Art and Life." Like the 1989 version of *D-Man in the Waters* and *Still/Here*, much contemporary dance plays evocatively with the tension between art and life—between the classical and the grotesque body.<sup>33</sup>

Since dance in the West has traditionally privileged an able, contained, virtuosic body, it is small wonder that a number of dance companies with disabled and nondisabled dancers work very hard to foreground the classical

body, emphasizing that *all* their dancers' bodies are rigorously trained and technically in control. This integration of disabled bodies within an artform that has made an icon of the statuesque (and sculpted) body provides us with a wonderful opportunity to investigate the cultural dialogue between the classical and the grotesque body. This dialogue takes place anytime live bodies appear onstage, of course, but the fact that it is consciously articulated within the publicity, audience reaction, and critical appraisal of integrated dance groups, gives us the opportunity to trace the web of contradictory discourses about the body within dance.

How the disabled body gets positioned in terms of a classical discourse of technique and virtuosity is not unaffected by gender. Gender is inscribed very differently on a disabled body, and there has been a great deal written concerning the way disability can emasculate men (whose gendered identities are often contingent on displays of autonomy, independence, and strength), as well as desexualize women. Yet the social power that we accord representations of male bodies seems to give disabled men dancers (with a few exceptions) more freedom to display their bodies in dance. My own observations and research suggest that disabled men dancers can evoke the virtuosic, technically amazing body (even, as we shall see, without legs), and yet they also are able to deconstruct that classical body, allowing the audience to see their bodies in a different light. As we have seen in the case of Verdi-Fletcher and Cleveland Ballet Dancing Wheels, disabled women are more apt to hold onto the image of a classical female dancer as graceful, elegant, strong, and beautiful. In the section that follows, I will look at various dance groups whose work has, in different ways, revolutionized notions of ability in contemporary dance. Both *Candoco* (with the disabled male body) and *Light Motion* (with the disabled female body) have established new images of physical virtuosity and technical excellence—exploding assumptions that virtuosic dancing requires four working limbs. In addition, there is a growing form of mixed-ability dancing coming out of the Contact Improvisation community that embraces a thoroughly different aesthetic point of view. While *Candoco* and *Light Motion* redefine virtuosity in dance, Contact Improvisation redefines the body in dance, opening up the possibility that we can look at the dancing body as a body in process, a body *becoming*. This attention to the ever-changing flux of bodies and the open-endedness of the improvisation refocuses the audience's gaze, helping us to see the disabled body on its own terms.

*Candoco* is a professional British dance company that evolved from conversations between Celeste Dandeker, a former dancer with the London Contemporary Dance Theater who was paralyzed as a result of a spinal injury incurred

while performing, and Adam Benjamin, a dancer who was then teaching at the Heaffey Centre in London, a mixed-abilities recreation center connected to ASPIRE (The Association for Spinal Injury Research, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration). In 1991, these two dancers began a small dance class for disabled and nondisabled dancers. Since then, Benjamin and Dandeker have established a professional company that includes eight dancers and an extensive repertoire of works by some of the most interesting experimental choreographers in England today. *Candoco* has received various awards in recognition for its work and the company was selected for BBC's Dance for Camera series. Introducing the company's philosophy to the press and the general public, artistic director Adam Benjamin has chosen to redefine the term *integration*. In his manifesto of sorts about the company's history and goals, "In search of integrity," Benjamin writes:

Time and again one sees the use, or misuse of this word "integration" to describe a group or activity that has opened itself up to include people with disabilities. To integrate a group of people in this way of course implies a norm into which they need to be fitted. If however, you're using that word, integrate, from the Latin *integratus*, it forces you to acknowledge that they are already an integral part of the whole, even if you haven't found them a place yet.<sup>34</sup>

Although Benjamin's philosophy is quite radical in many ways and although *Candoco* has commissioned some very intriguing choreography that doesn't just "accommodate" the disabled dancers but, as we shall see, recasts cultural perceptions about an "able" physicality, Benjamin is still committed to classical elements of technical virtuosity. For Benjamin, true integration means insisting on high standards of professional excellence in order to create interesting choreographic works for *all* the dancers in the company. He criticizes companies "in which highly trained dancers 'dance circles round' those with disabilities who share the stage but little else, in which there has been no real attempt on the part of the choreographer to enable the performer to communicate. . . . Worse still are dances in which trained, able bodied dancers drift inconsequentially, as if embarrassed by their own skills, used instead to merely ferry about the bemused occupants of wheelchairs."<sup>35</sup> Recognizing the need to create their own style of dancing that will accommodate different physical possibilities, the dancers in *Candoco* are constantly trying out new ways of using momentum, working on a variety of levels including the floor, and coordinating legs and wheels. In a review of the fall 1992 London season, Chris de Marigny registers his own astonishment with *Candoco*'s work. "Indeed *all* the

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*Candoco* in *Cross Your Heart*. Photo by Chris Nash.

dancers perform with amazing skill. This is rendered possible by the extraordinary choreographic solutions which have been invented to allow these people with very different disabilities to create the most startling and beautiful images. New concepts of falling, leaning, and supporting have been created to make both lyrical and at other times energetic work.”<sup>36</sup> Reading the press discussions of *Candoco*’s first few seasons, there can be no doubt that this company has stretched people’s notions of what is possible in mixed-ability dance companies. Yet because it relies on one very exceptional disabled dancer to break down the public’s preconceptions about disability, *Candoco* sometimes recreates (unwittingly) new distinctions between the classical (virtuosic) and grotesque (passive) bodies within the company.

Victoria Marks was one of the first choreographers to work with *Candoco* (she was a member of their first class at the Heaffey Center, creating “The Edge of the Forest” for them in 1991), and it is her choreography that is showcased in Margaret Williams’s dance film for BBC, *Outside In*. A lyrical film that interweaves surreal pastoral landscapes with the urbane suspended rhythms of tango and the beat of world music, *Outside In* begins with an extended kiss that is passed from one company member to another. The camera lingers on



each face, registering everyone's delight in receiving the kiss and allowing the viewer to see how each kiss is transformed en route to the next person. A jumpcut transports the action to a cavernous space in which a single empty wheelchair rolls into the camera's focus. The company then quickly assembles and reassembles, creating a maze of chalk patterns on the floor. This is the first time the viewer sees the full bodies and individual styles of locomotion. One of the most striking is David Toole's ability to careen across the space with his arms. Toole is one of three disabled dancers, but he is the only one who moves easily in and out of his wheelchair. Toole has no legs. Instead, he relies on his strong arms to walk. Ironically, the fact that Toole has no lower body gives him an incredible freedom of movement. His presence is wonderfully quixotic and he can practically bounce from his chair to the floor and back up again within the blink of an eye.

Toole's abilities as a dancer are remarkable—and amply remarked on. Indeed, Toole's dancing is often the subject of extended discussions within reviews and preview articles about *Candoco*. Adjectives such as “amazing,” “incredible,” “stupefying” are liberally sprinkled throughout descriptions of his dancing. For instance, in an article in *Ballet International* that reviews the performances of several British dance companies during the spring 1993 season, Toole's dancing is the central focus of the short section on *Candoco*. “David Toole is a man with no legs who possesses more grace and presence than most dancers can even dream of. . . . Toole commands the stage with an athleticism that borders on the miraculous.”<sup>37</sup> This language of astonishment reflects both an evangelistic awakening (yes, a disabled man can swagger!) and traces of a freak-show voyeurism (see the amazing feats of the man with no legs!). David Toole's virtuosic dancing comes at a price—a physical price. Recently, Toole, on the advice of his doctors, had to quit dancing. His extraordinary mobility is predicated on his ability to support and carry his entire body weight on his arms, allowing him to walk, run, or even skip across the stage. These astonishing feats, unfortunately, are actually destroying his arms and shoulders. Because of his status as a virtuosic dancer, however, Toole would find it hard to continue performing in a way that would not hurt his body (such as in a wheelchair).<sup>38</sup>

Interestingly enough, one of the only articles to address self-consciously the issue of the gaze we use to watch a body like Toole's was written by a French reviewer. In the May 1994 issue of *Les Saisons de la Danse*, Delphine Goater wrote a short review of a *Candoco* concert that risks asking some uncomfortable questions. One of the first things to strike me about this piece was the way the French language has yet to accommodate politically correct terminology. For instance, the able-bodied dancers are described as *valide* (meaning both

valid and healthy). Then, too, there was the unabashed frankness with which Goater asked: "Does one look at the handicapped dancer with pity, with admiration for his performance, or as if he were an artist who is only part whole? Isn't there an element of voyeurism or curiosity here?"<sup>39</sup> Goater's questions call forth the dangers of looking at this kind of work, the possibility that the grotesque body might reassert itself as spectacle, but then she quickly assures her readers that Toole's performance is "stunning and beautiful."

Although the medium of film is notorious for its voyeuristic gaze and spectacle-making tendencies, and although Toole is one of the most visible dancers in *Outside In*, the combination of skillful cinematography and inventive choreography in this film actually directs our gaze away from the extraordinary sight of Toole's body to the interactive contexts of his dancing. Even when he is moving by himself, Toole is always in dialogue with another person's movements. For instance, in the second scene, after the group has left the space, one woman remains, stepping among the circular patterns created by the wheelchairs. We see her choosing an interesting pattern and improvising with it—a skip step here, a shimmy-shimmy there. That she is translating the pattern of the wheels onto her body only becomes fully clear when the camera jumps to Toole, who is approaching a similar task—that of translating cheeky Arthur Murray's learn-to-dance footprints onto his own body. At first he seems to hesitate, running his fingers across the black outlines of a shoe. But then he looks directly at the camera and, squaring his shoulders with a determined look, he launches into a dashing rendition of the tango. This solo leads, after a brief tango sequence with the full company, into an extended duet with Sue Smith. The usual negotiation of desire in a tango is replaced here by the respectful negotiation of level changes. From the moment Smith climbs aboard Toole's chair, to the last shot of them rolling away, the choreography refuses the implicit ideology of standing upright by placing most of the movement on the ground. The cinematography follows suit, filming them both at eye (that is to say ground) level. The camera's ability to shift viewpoints so seamlessly provides one of the most ingenious ways of breaking up (by literally breaking down) an ablist gaze—the one that is forever overlooking people who aren't standing (up) in front of its nose.

While the mobility of the camera itself allows for wonderful new ways of viewing dancers, the medium of film tends to reinforce images of the classical body by making everybody look so good. In *Outside In* we lose the experiential impact of breathing, the sound of thuds and falls, the sweat and physical evidence (hair out of place, costumes messed up, etc.) of this very kinesthetic dancing. This is particularly true for the women dancers, who all look exceed-

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Candoco in *Cross Your Heart*. Photo by Chris Nash.

ingly beautiful throughout the video. Then, too, given the innovative choreography of the earlier section, I was surprised by the mundaneness and passivity of the wheelchair choreography in the next part in which we see the able bodied dancers assist, roll, and tilt the chairs while Jonathan French and Celeste Dandeker perform a series of decorative arm movements in them. The marked difference between Toole's dancing and that of Dandeker and French struck me as reinforcing a notion that being in a wheelchair is physically less interesting than being outside one. Ironically enough, even though one is a man and the other is a woman, both of these dancers get defined within the context of the film as much more passive and feminized than Toole. Although *Outside In* liberates our notions of physical difference by giving us the opportunity to see different bodies in action, it has not sufficiently fractured the iconographic codes in which the wheelchair signifies dis/ability. To see how a wheelchair can effectively become part of the dancing body, we must turn to the work of another company, Light Motion.

Charlene Curtiss was a competitive gymnast and sports enthusiast when, at age seventeen, she was injured on a faulty set of uneven parallel bars. At first, Curtiss resisted the stigma of a wheelchair and struggled around with braces and crutches. Seeing the incredible possibilities of movement available to wheelchair users during a national wheelchair competition, however, she changed her attitude. In 1988, Curtiss established Light Motion to “develop the artistic expression of both disabled and nondisabled artists working together to enhance community awareness of disability issues through the arts.” Today, Curtiss teaches and performs as a wheelchair dancer, using the skills she acquired from athletic events, such as the wheelchair slalom, to fashion exciting new ways of moving through space on wheels. In August 1993, Curtiss performed her collaborative duet with Joanne Petroff entitled *The Laughing Game* as a guest artist on the Cleveland Ballet Dancing Wheels gala program.

*The Laughing Game* begins with two dancers (one on legs and one on wheels) approaching and circling one another, sometimes resting in moments of complementary stillness. After a minute or two, the music’s tempo quickens and becomes much more lively, and the dancers respond in kind with their motion. It is in mirroring the rhythmic complexity of the music that the choreography for wheels begins to get really interesting. Using techniques that she learned from the wheelchair slalom, Curtiss executes quick percussive changes of direction, deftly shifting from side to side. She can also spin like an iceskater and stop on a dime. Sometimes the wheelchair choreography is visually more intriguing than the choreography for legs, but most of the time the dancers’ partnering complements the physical or rhythmic emphasis of the other. For instance, when Curtiss begins to pick up momentum at one point, Petroff needs to really throw her weight in counterbalance just to keep her partner from flying off the stage. Seeing Petroff use her whole physicality in such a functional and nondecorative manner was both visually refreshing and kines-thetically exciting for me. So, too, was the moment when Curtiss wheeled over a prone Petroff. Later in *The Laughing Game*, the dancers echo the percussive dialogue of the music. In this section, Curtiss makes her chair strut in syncopation with Petroff’s own high stepping, showing us how the chair, known for its smooth gliding and spinning capacity, can also claim a rhythm of its own.

Curtiss’s dancing is different from other wheelchair dancing that I have seen. Because Curtiss works collaboratively on the choreography, she has been able to craft consciously the representation of dis/ability that is presented within the dancing. For Curtiss, “It’s important that the nondisabled person doesn’t try to take the disabled person through the moves. You are dancing with somebody with a disability, but you have to dance with them as themselves. . . .

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Charlene Curtiss and Joanne Petroff in *The Laughing Game*. Photo by Richard Roth.

You don't pull me through a pirouette. You let me pull myself through the pirouette."<sup>40</sup> What is interesting to me in her performance is how Curtiss claims the chair as an extension of her own body. The chair becomes more than just a device to facilitate getting from here to there. Rather, it is a part of her, expressive of her personality and movement style. This shift is accomplished because of the way that Curtiss can integrate her wheelchair into the musicality of her own body. Wheelchairs, even when gliding across the floor, can seem very static and disembodied, but Curtiss uses hers to match the rhythms of her upper body, rising in a demi-wheelie to step enthusiastically into the downbeat. The fact that Curtiss can bebop and groove with her wheelchair revises the cultural significance of the chair, expanding its legibility as a signal of the handicapped into a sign of embodiment.

Although companies such as *Candoco* and *Light Motion* are producing work that does not cover over disability, but rather uses the difference in physical ability to create new and inventive choreography, I feel that much of their work is still informed by an ethos that reinstates the classical body within the disabled one. Although embodied differently, cultural conceptions of grace, speed, strength, agility, and control nonetheless structure these companies' aesthetics. Thus, while all the groups that integrate disabled and nondisabled

dancers have surely broadened the cultural imagination about who can become a dancer, they have not, to my mind, fully deconstructed the privileging of ability within dance. That more radical cultural work is currently taking place within the Contact Improvisation community.

Giving a coherent description of Contact Improvisation is a tricky business, for the form has grown exponentially over time and has traveled through many countries and dance communities. Although it was developed in the seventies, Contact Improvisation has recognizable roots in the social and aesthetic revolutions of the sixties. Contact at once embraces the casual, individualistic, improvisatory ethos of social dancing in addition to the experimentation with pedestrian and task-like movement favored by early postmodern dance groups such as the Judson Church Dance Theater. Resisting both the idealized body of ballet and the dramatically expressive body of modern dance, Contact seeks to create what Cynthia Novack calls a “responsive” body, one based in the physical exchange of weight.<sup>41</sup> Unlike many genres of dance that stress the need to control one’s movement (with admonitions to pull up, tighten, and place the body), the physical training of Contact emphasizes the release of the body’s weight into the floor or into a partner’s body. In Contact, the experience of internal sensations and the flow of the movement between two bodies is more important than specific shapes or formal positions. Dancers learn to move with a consciousness of the physical communication implicit within the dancing. Curt Siddall, an early exponent of Contact Improvisation, describes the form as a combination of kinesthetic forces: “Contact Improvisation is a movement form, improvisational in nature, involving the two bodies in contact. Impulses, weight, and momentum are communicated through a point of physical contact that continually rolls across and around the bodies of the dancers.”<sup>42</sup>

But human bodies, especially bodies in physical contact with one another, are difficult to see *only* in terms of physical counterbalance, weight, and momentum. By interpreting the body as both literal and metaphoric, Contact exposes the interconnectedness of social, physical, and aesthetic concerns. Indeed, an important part of Contact Improvisation today is a willingness to allow the physical metaphors and narratives of love, power, and competition to evolve from the original emphasis on the workings of a physical interaction. On first seeing Contact, people often wonder whether this is, in fact, professional dancing or rather a recreational or therapeutic form. Gone are the formal lines of much classical dance. Gone are the traditional approaches to choreography and the conventions of the proscenium stage. In their place is an improvisational movement form based on the expressive communication in-

volved when two people begin to share their weight and physical support. Instead of privileging an ideal type of body or movement style, Contact Improvisation privileges a willingness to take physical and emotional risks, producing a certain psychic disorientation in which the seemingly stable categories of able and disabled become dislodged.

It is Contact Improvisation that provides the physical groundwork for a duet between Charlene Curtiss and Bruce Curtis, a dancer from San Francisco. Bruce Curtis is a quadriplegic dancer who has been involved with Contact Improvisation since the 1980s, when he began dancing with veteran Contacter Alan Ptashek. Bruce teaches dance and has become well known as a regular facilitator of workshops such as the DanceAbility event held annually in Eugene, Oregon. Produced by Joint Forces and run by Alito Alessi, this event has become a model for similar dance workshops all over the world. As Steve Paxton tersely put it in his essay reporting on the 1991 DanceAbility workshop, Bruce “is accepted as a performer, invited as a teacher. Have we heard of a quadriplegic dancer-teacher before? No we have not.”<sup>43</sup>

The improvised duet between Bruce and Charlene begins in classic Contact style with both dancers circling around one another, getting a sense of each other’s energy and movement preferences. (In or out of the wheelchair, that is the question.) At first they keep to their own kinespheres, but then Charlene stretches an arm over toward Bruce, who responds by leaning his head into her shoulder. After this brief moment of weight sharing, they circle and twirl around one another until Charlene wheels right up behind Bruce, who leans his whole body back, tilting his chair into Charlene’s lap. This moment provokes a physical exchange of weight back and forth that leads by degrees onto the floor. Bruce, whose dance experience is predominantly Contact-based, seems to be more willing to put himself in awkward positions, or place his body’s weight across his partner. In contrast, Charlene seems to want to keep the relationship visual, and she subtly shifts her body so that she can maintain an eye to eye (rather than body to body) contact. After several minutes on the floor, Charlene returns to the more easeful mobility provided by her chair, at one point circling around and around Bruce, pulling him into a floor spin. The physical negotiation of spatial levels and momentum necessary when Charlene is on wheels and Bruce is on the floor provides some of the most interesting interactions of their duet. It also gives us an example of two very differently disabled dancers, disrupting the classic able-bodied/disabled binary even further. This sight (site) of two disabled dancers working together is a radical vision and it is made possible, I believe, by the aesthetic and physical refigurings available within Contact Improvisation.

As I noted earlier, Contact Improvisation focuses on the physical relationship of one body to another, emphasizing the kinesthetic sensations and physics of weight and momentum rather than the visual picture of bodily shape within the stage space. In this way, Contact fosters an attention to the dancers' ongoing experience rather than positing a need to fit into an idealized image. Although it has developed, over its twenty-five-year history, a professional elite of renowned teachers and virtuosic dancers, Contact Improvisation is still primarily a casual, folk dance form, relying on its practitioners to spread the word and the dance. There is no one centralized institution that licenses, administers, certifies, or oversees the dissemination of this dance form. Instead, there are a variety of healthy communication networks in place, including jams, workshops, conferences, and the biannual journal *Contact Quarterly*. This open structure has allowed Contact Improvisation to grow in many different directions. During the time that I have been involved in dancing and teaching the form, I have seen Contact change its course several times, but the most dramatic shift occurred in the late eighties, when, at the height of a period of incredible virtuosity (in which everyone seemed to be flying at high speeds on one another's shoulders), there was a sudden shift of interest to exploring the physical exchange between people with very different kinds of abilities—a sea change that resulted in a very different priority in the dancing. It would be futile to attempt to explain all the reasons for this remarkable shift. I believe that it comes from a variety of historical factors, including the cultural moment of increased awareness of disability in the arts, as well as the desire in Contact Improvisation to refuse the known, the easy habit, the well-traveled path. Although it has resurged within different communities and with a new sense of timeliness, this focus has taken Contact Improvisation full cycle back to its earliest democratic roots.

Dis/ability in professional dance has often been a code for one type of disability—namely the paralysis of the lower body. Yet in Contact-based gatherings such as the annual DanceAbility workshop and the Breitenbush Jam, the dancers have a much wider range of disabilities, including visual impairments, deafness, and neurological conditions such as cerebral palsy. Paxton creates an apt metaphor for this mélange of talents when he writes: “A group including various disabilities is like a United Nations of the senses. Instructions must be translated into specifics appropriate for those on legs, wheels, crutches, and must be signed for the deaf. Demonstrations must be verbalized for those who can't see, which is in itself a translating skill, because English is not a very flexible language in terms of the body.”<sup>44</sup>

My first experience with this work occurred in the spring of 1992 when I



and my (then) five-month-old daughter went to the annual Breitenbush dance jam. Held in a hot springs retreat in Oregon, the Breitenbush Jam is not designed specifically for people with physical disabilities as the DanceAbility workshops are, so I take it to be a measure of the success of true integration within the Contact community that people with various movement styles and physical abilities come to participate as dancers. At the beginning of the jam, while we were introducing ourselves to the group, Bruce Curtis, who was facilitating this particular exercise, suggested that we go around in the circle to give each dancer an opportunity to talk about his or her own physical needs and desires for the week of nonstop dancing. Bruce was speaking from the point of view that lots of people have special needs—not just the most obviously “disabled” ones. This awareness of ability as a continuum and not as an either/or situation allowed everyone present to speak without the stigma of necessarily categorizing oneself as abled or disabled solely on the basis of physical capacity. For instance, my own special need was for some help in taking care of my baby so that I could get some dancing in. At one point, Emery Blackwell, a dancer with cerebral palsy, came to my rescue when he strapped her onto his front and wheeled her around outside on his motorized cart.

Since that jam, I have had many more experiences dancing with people (including children) who are physically disabled. Yet it would be disingenuous to suggest that my first dancing with Emery or Bruce was just like doing Contact with anybody else. It wasn't—a fact that had more to do with my perceptions than with their physicalities. At first, I was scared of crushing Emery's body. After seeing him dance with other people more familiar with him, I recognized that he was up for some pretty feisty dancing, and gradually I began to trust our physical communication enough to be able to release the internal alarm in my head that kept reminding me I was dancing with someone with a disability (i.e., a fragile body). My ability to move into a different dancing relationship with Emery was less a result of Contact Improvisation's open acceptance of any body, however, than of its training (both physical and psychic), which gave me the willingness to feel intensely awkward and uncomfortable. The issue was not whether I was dancing with a classical body or not, but whether I could release the classical expectations of my own body. Dancing with Emery was disorienting for me because I had to give up my expectations. Fortunately, the training in disorientation that is fundamental to Contact helped me recreate my body in response to his. As I move from my experiences as a dancer to my position as a critic, the question that remains for me is: does Contact Improvisation reorganize our viewing priorities in quite the same way?

The image placed here in the print version has been intentionally omitted

Alito Alessi and Emery Blackwell in *Wheels of Fortune*. Photo by Edis Jurcys.

Emery Blackwell and Alito Alessi both live in Eugene, Oregon, a city specifically designed to be wheelchair accessible. Blackwell was the president of OIL (Oregonians for Independent Living) until he resigned in order to devote himself to dance. Alessi, a veteran Contacter who has had various experiences with physical disabilities (including an accident that severed the tendons on one ankle), has been coordinating the DanceAbility workshops in Eugene for the last five years. In addition to their participation in this kind of forum, Blackwell and Alessi have been dancing together for the past eight years, creating both choreographic works such as their duet *Wheels of Fortune* and improvisational duets like the one I saw during a performance at Breitenbush Jam.

Blackwell and Alessi's duet begins with Alessi rolling around on the floor and Blackwell rolling around the periphery of the performance space in a wheelchair. Their eyes are focused on one another, creating a connection that gives their separate rolling motions a certain synchrony of purpose. After several circles of the space, Blackwell stops his wheelchair, all the while looking at his partner. The intensity of his gaze is reflected in the constant vibrations of movement impulses in his head and hands, and his stare draws Alessi closer to him. Blackwell offers Alessi a hand and initiates a series of weight exchanges

that begin with Alessi gently leaning away from Blackwell's center of weight, and ends with him riding upside down on Blackwell's lap. Later, Blackwell half slides, half wriggles out of his chair and walks on his knees over to Alessi. Arms outstretched, the two men mirror one another until an erratic impulse brings Blackwell and Alessi to the floor. They are rolling in tandem across the floor when all of a sudden Blackwell's movement frequency fires up and his body literally begins to bounce with excess energy. Alessi responds in kind and the two men briefly engage in a good-natured rough and tumble wrestling match. After a while they become exhausted and begin to settle down, slowly rolling side by side out of the performance space.

Earlier I argued that precisely because the disabled body is culturally coded as "grotesque," many integrated dance groups emphasize the "classical" dimensions of the disabled body's movements—the grace of a wheelchair's gliding, the strength and agility of people's upper bodies, etc. What intrigues me about Blackwell's dancing in the above duct is the fact that his movement at first evokes images of the grotesque and then leads our eyes through the spectacle of his body into the experience of his particular physicality. Paxton once wrote a detailed description of Blackwell's dancing that reveals just how much the viewer becomes aware of both the internal motivations and the external consequences of Blackwell's dancing.

Emery has said that to get his arm raised above his head requires about 20 seconds of imagining to accomplish. Extension and contraction impulses in his muscles fire frequently and unpredictably, and he must somehow select the right impulses consciously, or produce for himself a movement image of the correct quality to get the arm to respond as he wants. We observers can get entranced with what he is doing with his mind. More objectively, we can see that as he tries he excites his motor impulses and the random firing happens with more vigor. His dancing has a built-in Catch-22. And we feel the quandary and see that he is pitched against his nervous system and wins, with effort and a kind of mechanism in his mind we able-bodied have not had to learn. His facility with them allows us to feel them subtly in our own minds.<sup>45</sup>

Steve Paxton is considered by many people to be the father of Contact Improvisation, for it was his workshop and performance at Oberlin College in 1972 that first sparked the experimentations that later became this dance form. Given Paxton's engagement with Contact for twenty-five years, it makes sense that he would be an expert witness to Blackwell's dancing. Indeed, Paxton's description of Blackwell's movement captures the way in which Contact Improvisation focuses on the *becoming*—the improvisational process of evolving that never really reaches an endpoint. Contact Improvisation can represent



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Alito Alessi and Emery Blackwell in *Wheels of Fortune*. Photo by Edis Jurcys.

the disabled body differently precisely because it doesn't try to recreate the aesthetic frames of a classical body or a traditional dance context. For instance, the proscenium stage of most dance performances creates a visual frame that tends to focus on displays of virtuosity, uses of theatrical space, as well as the presentation of visual lines (such as an arabesque). Contact, on the other hand, refuses this frame by prioritizing the ongoing process—the becoming—of the dancing.<sup>46</sup> Put more simply, the issue here is not *what* the dancers can do, but *how* they do. By thus concentrating on the *becoming* of their dance, Blackwell and Alessi's duet refuses a static representation of dis/ability, pulling the audience in as witness to the ongoing negotiations of their physical experience. It is important to realize that Alessi's dancing, by being responsive but not precious, helps to provide the context for this kind of witnessing engagement as well. In their duet, Alessi and Blackwell are engaged in an improvisational movement dialogue in which both partners are moving and being moved by the other. I find this duet compelling because it demonstrates the extraordinary potential in bringing two people with very different physical abilities together to share in one another's motion. In this space between social dancing,

combat, and physical intimacy lies a dance form whose open aesthetic and attentiveness to the flexibility of movement identities can inform and be informed by any body's movement.

We obviously have come very far from Gautier's description of Taglioni, with which I began this chapter. Over the course of mapping the choreographic route from the Romantic ballerina to the disabled Contact dancer—from the classical body to the grotesque one—we seem to have left women behind. With the exception of Charlene Curtiss (who usually performs choreographic rather than improvisational work), I know of few disabled women dancing in the genre of Contact Improvisation. Why aren't there more disabled women active in teaching and performing this work? The question is a tough one, and it may be that there are women out there with whom I am unfamiliar. Yet I believe the answer has something to do with the double jeopardy women (particularly disabled women) put themselves in when they display their bodies without the protective trappings of the classical body's demeanor, costumes, movements, or frames.

Mary Russo begins her essay "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory" with a phrase that resonates from her childhood: "She [the other woman] is making a spectacle out of herself."<sup>47</sup> Russo explains what this phrase really means: "For a woman, making a spectacle out of herself had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries: the possessors of large, aging, and dimpled thighs displayed at the public beach, of overly rouged cheeks, of a voice shrill in laughter, or of a sliding bra strap—a loose, dingy bra strap especially—were at once caught out by fate and blameworthy." What we have here are two contradictory notions of spectacle. "Making a spectacle out of herself" is not, ironically, inviting the voyeuristic gaze (which in dance is usually reserved for representations of the classical body), for that desiring gaze is dependent on a spatial and psychic separation of self and other. The grotesque female body, in contrast, confronts and challenges this gaze. The loss of boundaries that Russo describes as socially reprehensible provokes a fear of contagion, the fear that the visible presence of someone else's "large, aging, and dimpled thighs" will unloose one's own.

The interweavings of representation and bodily experience are as interesting here as they are contradictory. For the grotesque body (which Bakhtin sees embodied in the ancient clay figurines of old, laughing, and pregnant hags) is more likely than not defined as a female body (porous, dripping, sexual) that exceeds its socially defined boundaries (a body out of [state] control). Add dis-

ability into this discursive mix, and the intersections are particularly fascinating and complex. For disabled women are doubly defined by their transgressive bodies, blamed for their physical excesses (sagging breasts, big hips) or flaws. Russo's childhood admonition *not* "to make a spectacle out of oneself" is an injunction that most disabled women still feel with unmitigated force.