

12 “I Am a Professional Dancer”

The Case of Professionalization in Disability Arts

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Introduction

Previous academic literature has largely overlooked professionalization in disability arts. There is little literature discussing the career progression of artists with disability. Many studies explore the therapeutic and recreational roles of the arts for people with disabilities rather than focusing on the arts as a career for such individuals. This study explores different roles and meanings of the arts for artists with disability. It also reviews the literature on professionalization and professionalism in the arts based on the general concepts introduced by DiMaggio (1987). The study aims to conceptualize professionalization in disability arts at the individual and organizational levels through qualitative analysis; 17 individuals are interviewed, including artists, artists' carers, and other internal and external stakeholders of an inclusive arts organization working with artists both with and without disability. The results from the study suggest three significant aspects of professionalization in the disability arts.

The findings indicate, first, that there are both commonalities and differences in professionalism between artists with and without disability. Thus, it is essential to broaden the definition of professionalism in the arts to encapsulate the particular characteristics of artists with disability (Bain, 2005; Svensson, 2015; Throsby & Petetskaya, 2017; Wyszomirski & Chang, 2017). Second, there are both inhibiting and enabling factors at both individual and organizational levels that influence the development of the professional careers of artists with disabilities. In particular, we find that inclusive arts organizations play multiple roles in the professional development of artists with disability. For instance, inclusive arts organizations create alternative educational pathways for artists with disability by providing professional skills training programs and workshops for those who are often unable to undertake tertiary-level education due to their disabilities, thus enhancing their career opportunities. Third, the study provides insights which suggest professional development strategies for artists with disabilities at the individual and organizational levels.

Professionalization

The terms professionalization and professionalism sometimes have been used interchangeably, but they are different concepts. Professionalization is the process of becoming professional (Pitman, 2012). According to DiMaggio (1987), “sociologists define *professionalism* as a form of self-organization that enables practitioners of an occupation to defend the importance of their contribution and the legitimacy of their decisions” (p. 52). DiMaggio (1987) also identifies two aspects of professionalization: (1) The ideological and cognitive capacity to establish the legitimacy of professional claims to authority, autonomy, and expertise; and (2) the behavioral and organizational means to provide a framework by which professionals can interact with their colleagues, learn and develop new ideas and reputations, and make public contributions in their field. In the past, the recognized professions mostly concerned vocational disciplines, such as engineering, architecture, law, medicine, and theology (Wyszomirski & Chang, 2017). In this chapter, we use the term professionalization in relation to disability arts becoming professional, as it encapsulates the process disability and the arts are undergoing. In the twenty-first century, however, the concept of the profession has been broadened to include the development of education and training and creative and social intelligence in less traditional areas, such as the arts and information technology (Collins et al., 2022; Wyszomirski & Chang, 2017). This study seeks to identify how the professionalization process was achieved in an inclusive arts organization, at both the individual and organizational levels.

Professionalization in the Arts

The process of professionalization in the arts is ambiguous because the definitions of the arts vary depending on whether interpretations are based on philosophical, sociological, psychological, economic, or historical perspectives (Currie, 2010; Fokt, 2017; Monseré, 2016). Despite these differences, there are recognized commonalities in different definitions of professionalization in the arts. The first commonality is education and training. The institutional definition has predominantly governed the professional status of artists who wish to be accepted as members of the art world (Fokt, 2017). The criterion for classification as a work of art is that it is appreciated by people acting for social institutions (i.e., the art world) (Dickie, 1974). For example, according to the Canadian Artists' Representation le Front des Artistes Canadiens (CAR-FAC), the conditions for acceptance as a professional artist require educational qualifications in the arts (Bain, 2005). The second commonality is career progression, which refers to a period in which an artist strengthens personal skills and knowledge to achieve a level of professional acceptance with a degree of commitment (Bain, 2005; Svensson, 2015; Throsby & Petetskaya, 2017). It also aims to generate a regular source

of income for artists by gaining a grant or some other financial assistance for living by establishing artistic careers and professions in mainstream arts (Bain, 2005; Svensson, 2015; Throsby & Petetskaya, 2017). Being paid for one’s arts practice entitles an artist to claim professional status regardless of whether the remuneration received amounts to a living wage or is paid by one employer.

The third commonality is act of creation, which includes individual freedom of artistic expression, creative production in an artistic form, and pursuing artistic activity beyond ordinary thoughts and behaviors (Bain, 2005; Svensson, 2015). The nature of creativity is intrinsically driven by the power of individual imagination (Bain, 2005). The last commonality is cultural capital, which means achieving recognition as a professional artist pursuing a more important social and cultural motive than material reward or profit (Bain, 2005; Wyszomirski & Chang, 2017). Professional artists tend to cultivate diverse perspectives and interpretations that contribute to enhancing their status as members of the social elite (Bain, 2005; Wyszomirski & Chang, 2017).

Over time, professionalization in the arts has come to entail obtaining (1) knowledge, technique, and the abilities of individual artists that indicate a certain level of specialization and performance, for example, as exhibited by a professional dance company; (2) the capacity and competency for organizational management and operations; and (3) an expectation of quality in the product produced and presented to audiences, for example, onstage performances (DiMaggio, 1987; Wyszomirski & Chang, 2017). All three dimensions of professionalization are ideally, but not necessarily, mutually reinforcing.

Professionalization in Disability Arts

Professionalization can create another level of artistic space in a variety of ways for artists with disabilities. Initially, the arts were offered through therapy, first, to people with disability to whom it was thought that it might prove beneficial either educationally or in terms of well-being; and, second, to people with disability unable to obtain employment. More recently, it has been offered with the aim of enhancing employment opportunities (Lee et al., 2022). Given a continuum of participation, the relationship between the arts and people with disability has moved from therapy to recreation to community arts to employment. These four components have enabled artists with disabilities to find places where they might belong, be trusted, and obtain recognition for their professional achievements. Engaging with the arts has become a means of generating change for people with disabilities (Collins et al., 2022; Fujimoto et al., 2013). However, career prospects for professional artists with disability remain challenging. This study, first of all, explores the professionalization of artists with disability by exploring different roles of the arts in disability. Two distinct roles of the arts in disability

can be distinguished: disability and arts and disability arts. These two distinguishing roles are now discussed.

Disability and Arts

Disability and arts can be categorized in two ways theoretically, depending on the interpretation of artists' roles: the medical model and the social model. The medical model describes the conventional concept of disability as "an objective medical condition in need of treatment and rehabilitation" (Dirth & Branscombe, 2017, p. 414). In contrast to the medical model, the social model interprets disability as imposing a barrier or difficulty upon a person's environmental and social circumstances rather than resulting from medical diagnosis (Dirth & Branscombe, 2017).

The four categories of engaging with disability and arts are (1) therapeutic arts; (2) recreational arts; (3) community arts; and (4) disability arts (Richards et al., 2019; Sandahl, 2018; Solvang, 2012, 2018). Each category of disability and arts focuses on different goals and criteria in relation to how professional the artists and arts organizations are perceived to be. Therapeutic arts entail using art as a therapeutic intervention to analyze and/or comprehend clients or patients through a process of assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation based on the medical model (Evans et al., 2017; Solvang, 2018). Therapeutic arts intervention has two main purposes: (1) Utilizing arts practice as an intervention component to treat a medical condition, such as psychological issues based on psychotherapeutic theories; and (2) providing a valued social practice by applying the social model, which aims to create socially accessible environmental circumstances for artists with disabilities (Argyle, 2003; Dirth & Branscombe, 2017).

Recreational arts focus on the improvement of individual well-being by enhancing self-satisfaction, self-enrichment, self-expression, feeling of accomplishment, and social interaction through participation in arts creation in a positive environment (Chandler et al., 2018; Cohen-Gewerc, 2013; Solvang, 2018). The process of self-development through recreational arts unlocks the individuality of people with disability and enables them to explore various dimensions of themselves, with the aim of encouraging artistic outcomes (Cohen-Gewerc, 2013; Collins et al., 2022; Fujimoto et al., 2013).

Community arts create opportunities for developing artistic skills and expression within a group of individuals with disabilities, leading to transformative social change (Richards et al., 2019; Vick & Sexton-Radek, 2008). Sandahl (2018) states that community arts entail: "participating in meaningful community activities based on personal interests;" "working and earning a living wage;" "having relationships with friends, family and significant others;" and "being physically and emotionally healthy" (p. 83). Community arts tend to create a supportive and artistic environment for emerging artists with disability, thus facilitating their professional development.

Disability Arts

Disability arts is defined as an arts and cultural movement led by artists with disability with the objective of sharing their disability experience and culture as an artistic and expressive form (Sandahl, 2018; Solvang, 2018). Disability arts originated as a political agenda through protests for equal rights and pride in identity through disability (Stöckl, 2014). The disability arts movement became an ongoing activity of cultural expression to realize "unity and pride among disabled people" (Stöckl, 2014, p. 179). Disability arts are now institutionalized by inclusive arts organizations through artistic events in order to sustain the movement (Solvang, 2012). Nevertheless, art as therapy is still perceived to be the predominant role of the arts in disability, although professional artists with disability emphasize that they do not identify themselves as disabled persons who engage in art as therapy (Barnes, 2003). In disability arts, disability becomes a valuable and significant subjective asset, not a burden or problem to overcome (Sandahl, 2018; Solvang, 2012; Stöckl, 2014). Disability arts as a cultural movement has empowered artists with disabilities to express their demand to be "equal but different" creatively (Stöckl, 2014, p. 39). It is seen as a form of professionalism by artists with disabilities since they are considered to be artists primarily rather than people with disabilities. There is little literature specifically discussing professionalization in disability arts in terms of definition or career progression.

Research Approach

Case Study Setting: Restless Dance Theatre

Restless Dance Theatre Incorporated (hereafter, Restless), established in 1991, is a nonprofit organization located in Adelaide, a city of 1.3 million people in South Australia. Restless is an award-winning, contemporary dance company. It developed from a Carclew Youth Arts Centre project with a strong education character. Its mission is to present "unexpectedly real" dance theater works in multiple media in order to develop audience appreciation of the arts, nationally and internationally (Restless Dance Theatre, 2019). Restless is an integrated dance company, meaning that it works with dancers with and without disabilities, either physical or intellectual. Some dancers are in wheelchairs, others are partially blind while still others have intellectual disabilities. Restless creates collaborative "outstanding inclusive work informed by disability" with their artists enlivening and diversifying Australian dance (Restless Dance Theatre, 2016, p. 2).

One of their award-winning performances, *Intimate Space*, is a site-specific dance theater production that involves a series of experiential site-specific solo and duet works within a hotel. The sites include the hotel lobby, bedroom, kitchen, laundry, and bar, each of which represents a transient everyday business experience in a hotel. A group of ten audience members are simultaneously invited to become immersed in the sites, guided by an

evocative soundscape and choreography delivered by performers of different physical and intellectual abilities. *Intimate Space* delivers challenging themes of visibility, authority, self-worth, and relationships *informed by* disability rather than being *about disability* (Restless Dance Theatre, 2019).

Intimate Space was extremely well received and enjoyed a sell-out season and five-star reviews for its novelty, creativity, and quality when it first premiered at the Adelaide Festival 2017, one of the world's major annual arts festivals and a curated preeminent cultural event in Australia. Subsequently, it was invited to the 2018 Bleach* The Gold Coast Festival, as well as the 2019 Seoul Street Arts Festival in South Korea, with both events boosting the national and international profiles of Restless. Table 12.1 illustrates the trajectory of *Intimate Space* together with selected critics' reviews.

Table 12.1 Trajectory of Intimate Space

Year	Stage	Location	Specification	Selected Critic Reviews
2017	Adelaide Festival	Adelaide, Australia	Curated national festival	"5 STARS. Innovative, potent, bold and beautiful, <i>Intimate Space</i> is an extraordinary and highly entertaining experience." <i>Limelight</i> , 3 Mar 2017.
2018	Bleach* Festival 2018 as part of the Commonwealth Games Arts and Culture Program	Gold Coast, Australia	Curated national festival	" <i>Intimate Space</i> is a beautifully crafted piece of theater—tender, witty, challenging, and whimsical." <i>Dance Australia</i> , April 10, 2018
2019	Seoul Street Arts Festival	Seoul, South Korea	Curated International festival	"An elegant and humorous performance, <i>Intimate space</i> was presented at the Seoul Street Arts Festival by 4 Korean and 8 Australian artists with disability. . . . it invites audiences to a hotel. . . . Such artistic exchange develops the capacity of individual artists as well as creating more opportunities for Korean artists to be showcased to international audiences." <i>Kukminilbo</i> , October 2, 2019

Table 12.2 Professional and Public Workshops

	Category	Specification	Age	Female/ Male	With Disability	Without Disability	Total Number
Company membership by invitation only	The Company	Core dancers	18 to 35	17%	4	2	6
	Impulse	Young artists group	15 to 26	75%	7	1	8
	Junction	Graduates from Impulse	26+	40%	10	0	10
Public workshops	Central	A series of charged dance workshops	15 to 26	67%	13	2	15
	Links	A series of charged dance theater workshops	8–14	60%	10	0	10
	Total	5 Professional and public workshops			44	5	49

Table 12.2 summarizes the professional and public workshops provided by Restless, and their specification, target age range, gender distribution, and as to whether the participating dancers are with or without disability.

The core dancers in the company are 18 to 35 years of age while the younger dancers in Impulse are aged 15 to 26. Restless also provides an additional program for those who are 26 years of age or older, with the assistance of the federal government-initiated National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), which provides financial support to individuals with disabilities.

Restless supports the professional development of their artists. From 2008 to 2016, Restless presented a *Debut: The dancers direct* series each year which presented five short works directed by the Restless Youth and Senior Company dancers with intellectual disability. *Debut: The dancers direct* provided an opportunity for the dancers to showcase their choreographed work and gain experience in directing while receiving guidance and direct feedback from their mentors. Restless also pays their professional artists who are invited as company members on a per project basis, and six out of 12 employed tutors are company dancers with disability (as of 2020). Some dancers with disabilities have moved on from Restless and are performing as independent artists at other dance or theater companies.

Key remunerated back-of-house staff include the artistic director, artistic manager, company manager, and development and marketing managers. The volunteer board of nine brings together skills in law, disability, education, community development, philanthropy, choreography, marketing, management, and festivals. The turnover is less than A\$1 million per year;

nonetheless, the 2017 annual report includes a long list of supporters and sponsors, including government agencies, individuals, and businesses.

Restless believes that the individuality of their artists is a major strength of the company. They may not fit the stereotypical dancer image reflected by traditional and classic art forms such as ballet, but Restless considers that their different qualities create exquisite performance experiences that have the capacity to surprise audiences by “their astounding beauty and vigorous creativity” (Restless Dance Theatre, 2019). The Restless web site further states that:

Restless has developed a way of working that produces unique, distinctive and striking dance through a process that nurtures the creative voices of the performers, artists and participants. We offer life-changing opportunities for young people through exposure to high quality arts experiences and significant professional development opportunities. Our hope is to continue to transform lives, touch audiences, inspire greatness and help to shift perceptions about disability well into the future.

(Restless Dance Theatre, 2019)

Data Collection and Analysis

A case study provides an interpretive framework in a domain where there is little research and the phenomena under study are poorly understood (Eisenhardt, 1989; Fujimoto et al., 2013; Yin, 2014). A qualitative methodology is often used in order to obtain a deep and rich understanding of the context of the arts and disability. Interviews comprise the principal focus of this study. We interviewed volunteer board members, staff, artists, and industry leaders of Restless, with and without disabilities. Interviewee demographics are provided in Table 12.3. Each interview lasted around 45 minutes and was recorded and transcribed. Interviews were analyzed thematically, according to themes that emerged from the other sources including observations, related documents from web sites, media material, strategic plans, internal business materials, and annual reports, and the results were triangulated (Rentschler et al., 2021a, 2021b). These related sources illuminate how Restless introduced dance and disability to its industry leaders. This study was undertaken with university ethics approval. Restless Dance Theatre staff and dancers have approved this case study.

Findings

Professionalization in Disability Arts

The study finds three significant factors influencing the process of professionalization in disability arts at the individual and organizational levels: (1) Artistic development; (2) establishing both individual and organizational reputation and recognition; and (3) changing public perceptions by breaking down disability stereotypes.

Table 12.3 Profile of Interview Participants

	<i>Category</i>	<i>Alias</i>	<i>Disability</i>	<i>Profession</i>
1	Board member	Amy	No	Philanthropy manager
2	Board member	Celine	No	Academic
3	Board member	Nash	No	Lawyer
4	Board member	Sam	No	Lawyer
5	Industry leader	Lilly	Yes	Chair, inclusive arts organization, with disability
6	Industry leader	Vicky	No	CEO, inclusive arts organization
7	Industry leader	Janet	No	Former chair, arts manager
8	Industry leader	Mark	Yes	Director, disability arts related organization, with disability
9	Industry leader	Tina	No	CEO, arts funding body
10	Industry leader	Cathy	No	CEO, Industry partner
11	Carer	Morag	No	Carer, Raylene
12	Artist	Raylene	Yes	Performer, with disability
13	Artist	Moses	Yes	Performer, with disability
14	Staff	Nathan	No	Company Manager
15	Staff	Mary	Yes	Artistic director, with disability
16	Staff	Bessie	No	Marketing and fundraising executive
17	Staff	Rosemary	No	Artistic Manager

Artistic Development

Respondents believed that engaging with therapeutic arts influences the artistic capacity of artists with disabilities (Dirth & Branscombe, 2017; Evans et al., 2017; Solvang, 2018). Artistic capacity is developed through funding accessibility and inclusive environmental settings. Mark, an external stakeholder, suggested that disability arts are a development of therapeutic arts. While not wishing to denigrate or belittle the value of therapeutic arts, as they create a supportive environment to enable artists with disabilities to develop their artistic potential, he recognizes their limitations.

Disability arts has come from a place of therapy. Keep them busy, give them something to do. I don't want to disparage that there's therapeutic value. But it's more how we create an environment that supports deaf and disabled artists to flourish and grow.

(Mark, stakeholder, director at a disability arts organization)

Five interviewees, including board members, external stakeholders, and artistic staff, explained that disability arts organizations are confronted with challenging factors in their efforts to move forward, beyond merely therapeutic or recreational arts, in developing artistic skills and capabilities. For example, there is a shortage of trained dancers while prejudice remains a

barrier. Furthermore, Mary, an artistic director, was concerned that they need to train more young artists to improve their technical skills and quality of performance.

We've had a stable group of young performers, up to 26. They are now becoming seniors. So, it's about working with those younger dancers, to build their technique and performance skill, so that they are the next cohort to come through.

(Mary, staff, artistic director)

However, four interviewees agreed that financial support is a challenge for the sustainability of the artistic program. Tina, the CEO of an arts funding body, explains that the additional cost of having a paid carer to support artists with disabilities can be a financial challenge for them and their families, despite government funding (e.g., NDIS). For example, some artists with disabilities need personal assistance, such as personal care, drop-off, and pick-up. Such support is a key ingredient in empowering artists with disabilities. Professional capacity development of artists with disabilities might be limited without such assistance from their carers. "A simple challenge would be the financial cost of additional support workers" (Tina, stakeholder, CEO of an arts funding body).

Restless has provided consistent opportunities for artistic development despite these challenges. Rosemary, an artistic manager, and Mary, an artistic director, both suggest that Restless creates a supportive and positive environment for artists with disabilities by providing creative and broad opportunities within the company as well as externally. They also believe that Restless creates a direct or alternative pathway for young people with disabilities to become independent artists.

The dancers would often follow a dancer without disability. Whereas, Mary [the artistic director] really encourages independence in the dance... encouraging them to become makers, artists in their own right, and be responsible for their programs.

(Rosemary, staff, artistic manager)

Mary also notes: "Some of our dancers are starting to do work outside Restless. They can see a direct pathway in the arts for people with disability as performers" (staff, artistic director).

Raylene and Moses, both artists with disabilities, believe that their experiences working with Restless, as well as other national and international resident opportunities, have not only improved their artistic skills but also enhanced their professional careers. For example, Raylene points out that her skills have expanded from dance performance to also add teaching dance. She is now studying at the university to challenge herself further. Morag, the carer of Raylene, adds that Raylene now enjoys improved independence,

self-confidence and self-determination. “Restless enhances my skills to do teaching as well as dancing in the theater area. I’ve been doing teaching at Restless” (Raylene, artist with disability). “It [Restless] offered Raylene the opportunity for independence . . . it adds self-confidence. . . . It helped her to make changes” (Morag, carer for Raylene).

Janet, a former chair of Restless, and Mary both agree that some partnership between parents of artists with disabilities and a professional tutor is critical in order to extend the artistic skills of the individual artists with disability. Janet, however, states that the company should not be expected to function as quasi-parents of children with disability in order to improve their professional development.

Our performers need to have the highest skilled tutors, to build on technique. If we feel we need to have a conversation with the parents, to see if there’s a holistic approach for both families and us, we do so. They become independent.

(Mary, staff, artistic director)

“There had to be a lot of letting go of some of the functions of the parent that we typically see in parents with children with disability” (Janet, stakeholder, former chair).

In summary, there are four significant findings regarding artistic development at the individual and organizational levels: (1) The company provides creative and performing opportunities for artists with disability as a pathway to developing their professional practice; (2) the company creates opportunities for artistic skills and technique development not only by involving professional tutors but also by working collaboratively with parents of artists with disability; (3) the company and individual artists with disabilities aim to deliver quality and authentic performances to audiences at a professional level; and (4) individual artists build their independence, self-confidence, and self-determination through their artistic development as independent artists.

Establishing Reputation and Recognition

The findings indicate that establishing the reputation of, and recognition of, artists with disability as professionals is a critical component of professionalization in disability arts at both individual and organizational levels. The essence of establishing recognition as professionals depends on how artists with disabilities identify themselves since showcasing the artistic value and integrity of artists with disability can improve public perceptions of disability. Mary and Nathan, company manager, argue that artists with disability identify themselves as artists rather than as individuals with disability who participate in the arts. “Participants envisage themselves as professional dancers, which wasn’t possible before” (Nathan, staff, company

manager). “At Restless, they are seen as artists. And that’s something that I have quite a passion about. I joke saying I get wheeled out. I get asked to talk quite regularly, if someone’s dealing with disability” (Mary, staff, artistic director).

Janet, a former chair of Restless, explains that artists with disability do not deny having a disability or feel ashamed of identifying themselves as such; they are proud of disability as part of their identity. “They were not trying to reform or reshape the person with disability into something else. They were celebrating the person with disability, for their expression to be witnessed and observed as something that was as eloquent as mainstream ballet” (Janet, stakeholder, former chair).

Restless commits to offering a diverse creative experience for audiences through performances presented collaboratively by artists with and without disabilities; this is something that mainstream dance companies are unable to do. Sam, a board member, proudly describes the quality of performance that Restless delivers to audiences as authentic and professional rather than as primarily an artistic outcome of therapy. Bessie, a marketing and fundraising executive, agrees with Sam and argues that the quality of the performance genuinely reflects the artists’ disabilities. “Restless, it’s a place to give people with disability that don’t necessarily get opportunities in mainstream dance companies to perform with creative integrity. It’s not just therapy for people with disability but a legitimate forum to perform” (Sam, board member). “The works that we make come from the performers” (Bessie, marketing and fundraising executive)

At the organizational level, financial management and ways of utilizing funding are significant in relation to building reputation and recognition as a professional arts organization. Depending on how the organization funding has been spent, management intent can be interpreted in different ways, but the outcome of funding usage can also be varied. Tina, CEO of an arts funding body, explains that the funding body assesses a group’s financial needs based on the expenditure plan for artistic development, including artistic programs, management, and administration for artistic projects. “They present a budget and a program to us each year. We manage an assessment process which examines the quality of the artistic program, management decisions and governance” (Tina, stakeholder, CEO at an arts funding body). Funding is supposed to be spent on the artistic development of artists with disability rather than on care or support for specifically disability matters. Nash, a board member, explains that the company aims to create a high-level reputation as a professional dance theater under the guidance of the qualified artistic director. He adds, proudly, that the company has been nominated for multiple awards.

The role of Restless can’t be fulfilled by any one individual. Restless’ role is to create high quality dance theater informed by disability. Restless is getting stronger and stronger under the guidance of the artistic

director. The artistic quality that’s coming out of the company is incredible. We’ve been nominated for numerous awards.

(Nash, chair of the board)

Celine, a board member, also states that the company pursues the consistent development of artistic potential to raise the artistic quality of performances and to reach broader audiences in events at national and international stages.

We never envisioned it being exactly what it is today, but it continues to grow and develop. It hasn’t yet hit its potential. It continues to push the boundaries. *Intimate Space* and the Commonwealth Games are good examples of that.

(Celine, board member)

Establishing a high-level, professional reputation for any company is challenging, but it is an important component of building professional value at the individual and organizational levels. In this study, we found three significant approaches by which individual artists with disabilities and the company integrate in order to build their reputations and recognition as professionals: (1) Individual artists identify themselves as artists with artistic integrity; (2) management seeks to be well-structured in terms of finance, funding expenditure, and artistic programs, including those for professional artistic staff; and (3) individual artists with disabilities and the company pursue the consistent development of artistic potential by presenting their artistic performances in national and international events.

Changing Perceptions by Breaking Stereotypes

This study demonstrates that for the process of professionalization in disability arts, changing the stereotypical perceptions of the public toward disability in term of its professionalism is significant. There is a gradual positive change toward the better understanding of disability and greater social inclusion, although public perception of disability is still strongly rooted in socially devalued images of people with disabilities as incapable or dysfunctional (Aubry et al., 2013; Solvang, 2012). Sometimes stakeholders bring their own stereotypical views on disability to a performance. Restless sees its role as changing such views by enabling them to view joyous, quality performances, thus overcoming what is expected through unique storytelling and even sometimes the imperfection of performance. This approach creates an aesthetic value for their performances. For example, Mary, the artistic director, explains the audience’s emotional journey to overcome the tendency to focus on the performers’ disabilities rather than on their art. Nash, chair of the Board, shares his thoughts about how the label of disability becomes a social stigma, which tends to lower audience expectations of the artistic quality of performances by artists with disability. He points out, however,

that audiences are surprised at the quality of artistic performance when they experience it. “They do have an emotional journey. The performance made the audience question their perception of art, but also of disability” (Mary, artistic director).

Disability has a stigma in society, and so people going to a performance that’s informed by disability or viewing art by people with disability come to it not expecting as much. And universally, when I’ve been in the role of audience, or in a place where I’m viewing the audience’s reaction, people are universally surprised at the quality.

(Nash, board member)

Sam, a Board Member, shares her views as an audience member by explaining that people in general do not expect people with disabilities to be proficient at dancing; rather they might come to *Restless* to see more than just ballet.

You’re coming to it with a different perspective. I, as an audience member, I’m just being honest. Sure, I hope I don’t come across as being putrid or anything like that but I suppose I’m not going to a *Restless* Dance piece to see the ballet.

(Sam, board member)

Another viewer, Cathy, points out that audience’s perceptions will be improved by having more opportunities to see performances by artists with disabilities who might have particular physical and mental characteristics. Cathy suggests that anyone who makes art is an artist, and audiences eventually begin to identify artists with disabilities as professional artists rather than persons with disability working in the performing arts. Nathan agrees that the aim of broadening the public’s perception of diversity in dance can create greater opportunities to come into contact with people who do not expect to see artists with disabilities.

She provides audiences with a broader opportunity of who artists are, and what they might look like. . . . It’s the audience that gives people a broader look at who they can identify with, as an artist. . . . People have different definitions of the term artist, but certainly, everyone performing onstage, or engaging in making art, is an artist.

(Cathy, stakeholder)

So that means that in terms of being able to widen people’s perceptions of what dance can be, it put us into contact with more people. It put us into contact with people who were not expecting to see us. . . . I’m always really impressed by the people without disability who come

to Restless. They are extraordinary people. They're not scared of disability, they usually have some familiarity with disability, probably for family reasons. But they are open and supportive.

(Nathan, company manager)

Vicky, CEO of an inclusive arts organization, explains the nature of the culture in the arts sector as a "competitive cannibalistic culture" and laments the lack of innovation and collaboration that prohibits the inclusion of artists with disabilities and the cultivation of their professional careers. Such a view, held at least by some leaders in arts organizations, highlights the tensions that exist in arts organizations that need to be navigated by those who seek to make their careers in them. It also indicates that professionalization is still developing in the arts ecology, including in disability arts organizations. Lilly, chair of an inclusive arts organization, points out despite Australia being a culturally diverse nation, there are few artistic roles for people who do not fit traditional views of normality. "The arts are based on a competitive cannibalistic culture where one survives on the back of another's failure. There is a lack of innovation in the sector to collaborate" (Vicky, Stakeholder, CEO of an inclusive arts organization).

We are a culturally diverse nation. Why aren't the diverse people in our society getting artistic roles? They aren't seen. . . . The arts are integral to the way you look at the world. It's not about telling stories or something you watch. There is a disjoint in our society.

(Lilly, stakeholder, chair of an inclusive arts organization)

Breaking the stereotypical perception of disability is the greatest challenge to improving the professional status of artists with disability. Professional artistic staff and stakeholders interviewed, including artistic directors and board members, agree that the key to making the change is presenting high-quality artistic performances by artists with disability. Restless provides a high-quality artistic experience, including performances by artists with and without disabilities and diverse artistic interpretations. Mary, the artistic director, emphasizes that presenting and celebrating diversity in mainstream theater is an important step for the Australian artistic landscape.

The role of Restless, is to celebrate diversity on stage. We have an important role, in mainstream theater, to have people with disability represented. But also, to present work where the artists are celebrated in the best possible light for their skill. It has a role in the Australian artistic landscape.

(Mary, Artistic director)

Janet, a former chair of an inclusive arts organization, states that professional, quality performance and creative expression by artists with disabilities play a key role in shifting people's attitudes and changing prejudices

toward disability in society. Amy, a philanthropy manager, also comments that the high level of the artistic work performed by artists with disabilities is inspirational and can challenge people's perceptions.

Professional, quality performance and creative expression by people with disability is helpful in society. We can provide a retrospective gaze on that, if we look back at some of our famous composers and visual artists. It plays a key role in shifting people's attitudes towards disability, shifting prejudice.

(Janet, former chair)

What Mary does in terms of her choreography is amazing. They're on a world stage, they're in festivals and they just lift the soul. So then, we're not talking something where they're just doing, and it's not, the whole principle they do is not to educate, just to educate, it's to inspire. They are presenting work at a level that is actually inspirational and does make you think and does challenge your perceptions.

(Amy, philanthropy manager)

Celine, a board member, points out the importance of positive interactions between people from diverse backgrounds, including social, cultural, physical, mental, and sexual diversity. Celine also argues that people should stop looking at disability as a tragedy since living with an impairment is not tragic or something to feel sorry about.

It's having that interaction. That's one of the things that Restless does. . . . And it stops people looking at disability as being a tragedy, which is one of the key things I teach. Living with an impairment is not a tragedy, it's not something to feel sorry for, we don't want pity.

(Celine, board member)

Changing perceptions of disability is a long-term project for individuals with disabilities as well as for the community. This study identified three significant suggestions or arguments from the interviews with professional staff and stakeholders. Those suggestions entail changing public perceptions by (1) creating more opportunities for artists with disability to perform and present to audiences; (2) presenting quality artistic productions and creative expression by diverse artists with and without disability in mainstream theater; and (3) creating opportunities for positive interactions between audiences and artists from diverse backgrounds, including those with social, cultural, physical, mental, and sexual diversity.

Discussion

The findings identified commonalities and differences in the ways in which professionalization in disability arts was reviewed compared to earlier

studies. These themes emerged when conducting interviews with a variety of people with and without disabilities. Four components of professionalization in the arts were identified: education and training; career progression; action of creation; and cultural capital (Bain, 2005; Svensson, 2015; Throsby & Petetskaya, 2017; Wyszomirski & Chang, 2017). The themes of artistic development and establishing recognition and reputation identified in our findings align with the two components of education and training and career progression in professionalizing the careers of artists with disabilities at the individual and organizational levels. The key agenda in disability arts is to shift the perception of disability from being culturally devalued to being socially and culturally valued through the professionalization of disability arts at individual and organizational levels.

Developing professionalization in disability arts can be an effective way to shift negative perceptions of disability (Collins et al., 2022; Fujimoto et al., 2013). The study discovered two significant differences in order to develop professionalization in the disability arts compared to professionalization in the arts more generally. First, the role of an inclusive arts organization is critical and must operate in a multifunctional manner for artists with disabilities. Inclusive arts organizations are not only employers for artists with disabilities but also provide professional training services as an alternative career pathway, replacing colleges and universities. They support the artistic development of artists with disabilities by providing training, mentoring, and networking. They also play a producer role in creating performing opportunities nationally and internationally through marketing and promotion. Second, the involvement of individual supporters (e.g., paid carers and family members) of artists with disabilities is significant because these artists may require extra personal support given their physical condition or (and) cognitive challenges.

The study found that the public understanding and perceptions of professionalization in disability arts require improvement. Furthermore, longitudinal research on the progression toward developing public perceptions of disability arts may be valuable for the professional development of disability arts at the individual and organizational levels.

Conclusion

Based on a case study of Restless Dance Theatre, this chapter highlights the important role that inclusive arts organizations play in promoting the professional development of artists with disabilities. The role of inclusive arts organizations is complex and multifunctional and is intertwined with that of their personal supporters, paid carers, or family members of artists with disabilities in the promotion of their professional artistic careers. The nature of disability is complex, and the role that these other stakeholders play in alleviating the physical and cognitive challenges of artists with disabilities is critical. Nevertheless, the artistic quality of performances presented by artists with disabilities cannot be compared or reviewed based on the physical

or cognitive conditions of the artist. The professional recognition and reputation of artists with disabilities should be based on the artistic value and quality of the individual act of creation, not on the disability with which artists live.

Finally, the study argues that improving public understanding and perception toward disability is a major long-term project and one that constitutes a significant challenge in relation to the development and professionalization of disability arts. All interviewees emphasized the need to create more opportunities to demonstrate the artistic and cultural value of disability arts to a wider audience. Understandings of professionalization have broadened and varied as cultures and structures of society have changed. Public perceptions of disability, however, have not improved in line with this wider social change. These are two facets of professionalization juxtaposed one against the other in the realm of the arts and disability. Similar challenges may confront emerging contemporary artists who are still developing their reputation and struggling to build professional careers (Fillis et al., 2015; Lee, Fraser et al., 2018; Lee, Fillis et al., 2018). Diversifying arts and culture can be an effective way of improving public perceptions and familiarizing people with the diversity of humankind by presenting artists working with diverse social, cultural, and physical conditions.

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