



Reflections on Creative Audio Description training with Holly Thomas and Raquel Meseguer Zafe; and our next steps to offering live audio description access support as part of our dance programmes.

'..you have to survive this..'

Holly Thomas, Bristol-based Dancer and Choreographer, describes her experiences of attempting to enter into a studio and take part in a dance class or workshop that involves learning technique, forms and set material. She shares about the regularity of being in survival mode to make it through a dance session, and how this can impact her wellbeing. Attending a class or workshop can come with feelings of isolation and exhaustion from being in this continual surviving in the attempt to connect with the dancing practice being shared and connect with the other participants.

Currently the majority of spaces for contemporary dance training and practice in the UK are not set up to include blind or visually impaired (B/VI) dancers. Access to training, that involves learning set material and technical forms, is often not provided but expected of the B/VI dancer's responsibility to arrange, fund and self-manage.

In our artist-led GATHER UP programmes, run for the development of people working with contemporary dance practices, we are attending to

holding and hosting spaces where dancers can access and attend to training and practicing dancing without the need to survive the dancing and without it being detrimental.

Our collaboration with artists Holly Thomas and Raquel Meseguer Zafe began in 2021 when we invited them into conversations to assess how we could improve access to our programmes. During this period of consultation Raquel and Holly became recipients of a funding grant from Bristol Dance Futures and approached us at the beginning of 2022 with an idea to use this funding to train a group of Bristol based dance artists that could then provide their services as Creative Audio Describers within our programme. We contributed some funds towards their one day workshop lab which took place in July 2022.

What happened at the workshop lab?

Holly and Raquel's Creative Audio Description (CAD) workshop lab was a really exciting time. It was full to the brim with conversation, sharing experiences and questions. We listened to accounts of Holly's personal experiences of studio dance practice, got to grips with AD best practice i.e. top tips and things to avoid and explore, and tested ways for live AD to assist with learning a technical dance phrase in the moment. We also explored how live CAD could involve vocal sounding and consensual touch guidance.

We collectively noticed the importance of being able to break down a motif into shorter patterns and pathways to learn in smaller chunks before

adding additional layers of AD information such as how the weight shifts, the quality and dynamics or emotive expression in the movement.

Something that I enjoyed about the workshop lab was how Holly and Raquel held space for sharing in knowns and unknowns. I remember moments where it didn't feel like the workshop structure or content was fixed and instead a space for liveness, experimenting and testing out ideas for the CAD role and which drew on the strength of bringing our different experiences together to find best practice. It felt important that we were all being equally paid to be in the room and that part of the invitation was to co-discover greater access support together.

We reconnected with access being a shared navigation and responsibility.

We were reminded of what collective or collaborative experiment and thinking affords us.

Introducing CAD support to our programmes

Following the workshop lab, we decided to trial offering 1-1 CAD support in our classes and workshops. Though the lab was limited to 1 day, we felt that our dancing community were able to continue the development of this access support by testing and putting it into practice within the contexts of our offerings.

We introduced CAD support in September 2022. Any B/VI dancer who wishes to attend a morning class, workshops or other parts of our

programmes can book a Creative Audio Describer (who also has a dancing practice) to work with them 1-1 during the session they are attending. We are committed to ensuring this support remains available for free in all our future programmes.

We currently ask the artist providing CAD support to:

- Check in with the teaching/lead artist and host ahead of the session.
- Wear clothes and socks which contrast against the black or grey studio floor.
- Be on time to meet and greet the B/VI dancer on arrival at the venue and offer guidance to the studio if needed.
- Check in and spend a moment with the B/VI dancer to orientate in the studio before the class, workshop or session begins.
- Navigate on the day with teaching artist, host and B/VI dancer when and how introductions including self-descriptions to everyone present could take place near the beginning of the class, workshop or session.
- Be mindful of touch being a rolling consensual practice. Regularly check in with the B/VI dancer if they are open to touch guidance and if it is comfortable for them.
- Record any useful learning (shorthand/patterns/cues/language discovered or accumulated instructions) to support future sessions.

We understand that each B/VI dancer who approaches us to book CAD support will have different needs and different ways of working with AD. Alongside this, we notice the uniqueness and differences that arise within

the practice of offering CAD, especially with the involvement of an individual's perspectives and life experience when translating live movement into live AD.

To navigate the relationship between the CAD role and B/VI dancer, we are noticing that it can help to first gather what approaches the B/VI dancer currently needs or likes, if known, when working with AD in studio practice so that the CAD artist can enter the 1-1 support centering the B/VI dancer's preferences before introducing other AD or studio practice support approaches.

'Having the opportunity to work one to one with a trained dancer/describer has enabled me to learn material in class at a pace that is accessible to me. It means that I am able to regularly access training for professional dancers. (...) This is invaluable to me as a visually impaired dancer. I think this is a model that could be rolled out more widely through the sector.'

- Holly Thomas: Dance Artist, choreographer, audio description practitioner on her use of our Creative Audio Description offer.

We are reflecting on how due to the low provision of CAD across dance training in the UK, there is much yet to discover of what CAD practice can be, and that this knowledge can only be found in practice between the CAD artists and B/VI dancers in the studio. We intend to continue to provide a space for this testing, finding and knowledge co-building and we acknowledge the importance of keeping checking in on the artist

community that we are nurturing, investing and also part of. To not be distant. To keep with and alongside. We are all experts here, we can all learn from each other.

How can we continue to reduce the extra 'surviving' work for some dancers?

We are working on unlearning our hidden assumptions and removing the automatic expectations upon participants that occur in the way that we curate, organise, and hold space for dance practice in our programmes.

We are reviewing how we can continue to reduce the extra 'surviving' work for some dancers in the lead up to, during or after a studio session, which Holly speaks of. We hope that by giving as much attention to access support surrounding as well as during the activities within our programmes, that we will be contributing towards a more equitable and inclusive dancing ecology.

As a small artist-led programme we are discovering and learning about the best practice for online communications, particularly with class and workshop descriptions so that B/VI participants are able to make informed decisions about what activity feels suitable for their dancing practices.

One of our roles as hosts and organisers of access support and participatory dance, is to take care of the communications and the first encounters ie. the class description, the communications, the introductions and the experience of arriving at the venue and into the studio. We

recognise that our provision of CAD support begins with the B/VI dancer at home, where they can make a choice to book to participate in our activity. Inspired by an account that Holly shared in the workshop lab, of her journey from home to venue to studio to taking part in a class or workshop, we have made a simple adjustment in how we set up the studio. At every session our host (this is a role that is present in all of our studio activity) will be stationed near the entrance door to the venue and into the studio to meet and greet all participants, instead of being located elsewhere in a distant corner making it a challenge to be identified. These considerations and shifts to the way we host studio practice, and that are so local to our programme activity are significant to co-building a welcoming and including community that we exist to support.

We value rest as necessary to the practice of dancing.

Inspired by Raquel's outstanding work in advocating for access to resting to be an integrated offer in Bristol's cultural venues city-wide, we are working towards hosting spaces for learning, being, resting, developing our dancing practices at our own paces, and that are resistant to demand, and pressure on our bodies.

Since September 2022, we have made efforts to have resting spaces accessible within and adjacent to the studio during the dance practising and training in our morning class and workshops. These rest spaces are available for any participant and we don't require disclosure of needs or reason.

We notice that these additional shifts in how we are holding studio space are also made possible by the recent improvements in engagement and audience experience for B/VI and people with invisible disabilities or conditions occurring in the two venues where we host our programme. We acknowledge the support of Bristol Old Vic and Arnolfini and are aware that the developments of our programme such as introducing CAD support to dance training in this way would be less possible if we were not being supported by these institutions.

Different perspectives in our CAD provision and the wider ripple effect

We are continuing to consider how the access support that we arrange for a B/VI dancer does not restrict, reduce, or create further barriers in accessing the dancing or other parts of our programme due to the perspectives that we employ to offer the CAD support.

As we test and evolve the provision of CAD support in our projects, we know that it is vital that the CAD we offer is not provided by one or two people, or only available in English, or via a singular perspective, i.e via a specific aged person for example. We currently have ten artists signed up to be invited to offer CAD 1-1 support, when it is requested. Eight of these artists attended Holly and Raquel's training day and two have joined the group bringing their CAD experience from other dance and art projects. Our group of 10 CAD artists are diverse in their race, heritage, spoken languages, gender, age, financial status and dancing experience, though we

intend to increase our pool of CAD artists to make greater space for a diversity of perspectives offering CAD support within our programmes.

Alongside being able to draw on these multiple perspectives, an additional strength of having a pool of artists able to deliver CAD support is that the artists are a part of the Bristol dancing community. They are not a service being brought in from an external place to patch up a lack of access support. Instead, they are each a part of our dancing community, who are aware of, feel and are alongside the inequities in contemporary dance practices and experience barriers to dance work in Bristol and across the UK. They are invested, passionate and care about contributing to an inclusive evolution of dance practices and of a dance community in Bristol where disabled artists' agency is understood as paramount.

By investing, supporting and introducing this new training to this group of dance artists within our community, we notice the slow shifts and wider ripple effect in each of the dance careers and dance practices of the artists who are part of our CAD group.

'..Since attending the GATHER UP supported training on Creative Audio Description, I have received employment involving my skills as an audio describer/performer for companies nationally, developing ongoing relationships with many organisations, venues and makers in the southwest region and beyond. A direct impact has been an expansion of the communities I am now intersecting with, including new audiences within the visually impaired and blind community,

queer audiences and intergenerational audiences new to movement and dance.'

- Linzy Na Nakorn: Dancer, Movement Director and Community Facilitator working across the sectors of dance, theatre, film and socially engaged arts practices.

It is a challenge to reflect on improving access support within our work, without thinking about the ever growing challenge to acquire yet an essential resource: money.

Time and money to integrate the CAD role into our offerings, to allow for trial and error to find best practices and for growth of what this access support can be, has been and is essential.

Since we began GATHER UP in 2018, one of our main aims in all of our work has been to value and pay artists for all of their time and for fees to be in line with Artist Union, Independent Theatre Council and Equity recommended rates as minimum standard.

To be transparent, we are currently offering a £75.00 fee for artists to provide CAD support in morning class and £130.00 fee for a one day workshop. We acknowledge that these current fees are low and we are constantly reviewing within our granted funding and alongside reviews of how the CAD support is working.

Nearly a year into introducing CAD support, we are noticing how different dancers' practices, forms and techniques that we are inviting artists to

share in our programme sometimes require a different practice of CAD. Some classes and workshop material would suit being recorded in advance by the lead artist and sent to the CAD artist to learn ahead of working with the B/VI dancer in the session, whilst some sessions involve material that partners well with live audio description. Some CAD artists would find it useful to meet and work in the studio with the teacher to have an embodied sense of their teaching practice ahead of working with the B/VI artist, whilst some CAD artists prefer to arrive and work with the liveness of dance and words meeting.

In reflecting on this, within the current model that we are using to provide CAD support, I wonder about whose agency or which dancer's development and practice we are mostly prioritising and supporting. Between the B/VI dancer participant, the teaching artist, the CAD artist and us the leaders of this project; who is benefiting most from this model and arrangement of access support?

So far in this past year of our offer of CAD, we have noticed how, at the moment, mainly due to limited funding, we have chosen for this access support to be offered as a subscription service, a support that a participant has to book for us to arrange. This is far from our wishes of hosting a studio practice space where any/all access support is consistently provided. Provision instead of or as well as subscription.

I wonder what would become of your or our dancing if we were granted enough financial support for all access support to always be on offer, to be provided, instead of an artist having to ask for it?

Questions that we are moving with now

'How do the futures we hope for determine the relations we create, or the practices we enact now in the present. How do they determine which pasts we mark as worth remembering. As we think about health, about flourishing and thriving, about creating liveable lives on a liveable earth, what are our commitments to bringing others along with us or.....how can we imagine a future space in revolutionary love.'

- Dr. Alison Kafer, 2017 (speaking at 13:00-14:00 mins) [Health Rebels: A Crip Manifesto for Social Justice](#)

There is crucial infrastructural work needed to be done, not in the future some time, but beginning now, with inviting disabled artists at all moments of their creative practice and career to be able to make choices about what training and development they would like to access.

We are joining the call for a sector-wide shift to support disabled artists to be leaders, to be involved in programming, to be employed to deliver dance training, and to be given agency to make choices on the dance training that they could have access to participate in. It's this agency that we intend to support the rise of.

As GATHER UP moves into running our third programme and continues to host spaces for dance practice development we return to and commit to gathering around these following list of questions in the hope to contribute

to creating the futures that Dr. Alison Kafer speaks of, the futures which bring everyone along:

- How and why are we excluding?
- What are the hidden assumptions we have eaten, absorbed, learnt and made our own? (inspired by words spoken by Audre Lorde at the Combahee River Collective retreat in 1977, quoted by Dr. Alison Kafer in 2017 (speaking at 13:50-14:45 mins [Health Rebels: A Crip Manifesto for Social Justice](#))
- What are the barriers to our activity that we are still upholding? How can we remove and reduce these?
- How can we be careful and responsible as we work within the limitations of a granted budget, and be aware of the impact of our choice-making?
- How do we cost for varying B/VI needs and varying CAD practice?
- How can we be part of supporting and exchanging best practices for CAD access support in the UK?
- How can we host a training space which is not driven by ideals of “wellness” or requiring dancers to perform “wellness” in our activities?
- How can we support our disabled artist peers in our local community to be the leaders and the decision-makers? How can we better support their creative agency?
- How can we celebrate, challenge and contribute to the growth of contemporary dance practices through different perspectives?

- How can all of us bring everyone's dancing along and into the future, the future that is now?

We continue with this work and look forward to more questions arising.

A special thanks to Holly Thomas and Raquel Meseguer Zafe.

If you would like to find out more about Holly and Raquel's Creative Audio Description training you can listen to or read their resource 'Pathways into Dance: Creative Audio Describer for Contemporary Dance Class' here:

<https://uncharteredcollective.com/pathways-into-dance-cad>



ID: Seven dance artists, wearing brightly coloured clothing, are gathered around listening to Holly who is sitting at the edge of a long white sheet of paper. Holly is sharing thoughts from the handwritten notes on the paper.

Image: Raquel Meseguer Zafe

You can find out more about Holly Thomas' work here:

www.hollythomasdance.co.uk

www.twitter.com/ilext

You can find out more about Raquel Meseguer Zafe's work here:

www.uncharteredcollective.com

www.mayk.org.uk/artists/raquel-meseguer-zafe

www.instagram.com/cloudspottinguk