

The Culture Project



Welcome to the 6th Edition of The Culture Project! We start with a thought-provoking article from long-time company member, [Michela Meazza](#). Michela shares her personal journey of navigating identity as both a mother and a dance artist.

This edition also features an insightful interview with Erin Fletcher, who shares her experiences of being disabled in theatre spaces. Erin's honesty in discussing her journey will open your eyes to the importance of inclusivity and accessibility in the arts. Furthermore, a guide to the Social Model of disability indicates how we can help to create an accessible space in theatre.

We end this edition by celebrating and acknowledging Pride month, sharing some incredible highlights from our Swan Lake panel and LGBTQ+ community response piece. In addition, we have highlighted some notable books on the topics discussed in this issue if you wish to learn more about any of these areas; these books will be available to borrow from the New Adventures office library.

As always, Your feedback is so valuable. Share thoughts and ideas for future editions on our [comments board](#). This will help us enhance the development of the project in the future.

Glenn & The Equity, Diversity, Inclusion & Access Group x

P.S. The Culture Project Resources and Toolkit can be found [here on the website](#). This includes links to information and training to support you and your understanding of Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Access.

Michela Meazza on Artistic Identity: A Journey of Self-Expression and Cultural Reflection

Longtime New Adventures principal dancer, devoted mother, visionary choreographer, and dynamic movement director, Michela Meazza shares her invaluable insights on the intricate tapestry of identity in the arts. She delves into the depths of artistic expression and the profound impact it has on shaping our sense of self.

The question of identity for a performer/artist is an interesting one. I have had many conversations about it with colleagues, students, and friends. One of the major events that made me reflect on my identity as a performer was the 2020 Covid lockdown. We were all dealing with the gravity of the situation, but the possibility of theatres being closed for many years was hard to digest. Apart from the financial worry, lots of other questions started flooding in: "Who am I if I am not doing what I love?" So many of us experienced a proper identity crisis.

It made me reflect a lot on how our 'identity' is so strongly weaved into our passion for dance, part of our genetic make-up. Dance is how dancers express themselves and having that taken away is like losing one's voice. So much of our lives revolve around this form of expression and so much commitment is poured into what we do, that when we are not doing it, it is disorientating.

During my pregnancy and early motherhood, I had the "wobbly" moment: "What is my identity now that I am not dancing full time?"

With time and reflection, I have come to understand that



my identity is at the core of my passion, and that what propels me into things is the excitement of being creative. I would like to think of myself as "a creative artist" and this identity can shift and morph into many forms: as well as an artist, I am also a woman, a mother, a teacher... and I am Italian....and many other things! I try and move between all these various roles without preconceptions, and I expect the same towards me.

In some environments there are still stigmas attached to being a working mother or a foreigner, I try to be neutral and matter-of-fact about things: if my availability is limited due to childcare, I state that as a fact and not in the form of an apology. We can apologise for the last-minute, unpredictable changes but we cannot apologise for the choice of having children. The same with my nationality: there are situations where being a foreigner makes people treat me differently or make me feel excluded.

I am excited to see that our industry is changing, and the norms and expectations are shifting. I didn't think I would be able to have a family and still carry on dancing. It was challenging at times, but clear and honest communication is always key to progress. One of the values I try to include in my practice is compassion and listening. I believe in creating a safe environment without judgment or comparison. I consider this essential to creativity, and especially apply this when teaching young people, when the change in their creative confidence is palpable.



As an established performer and workshop practitioner I have the chance to talk to young people and share my journey with them. I try and let them see how every journey in this industry is very different; there is no right or wrong way. What we can keep as a constant is our “curiosity, commitment and integrity of choices.”

Another tricky thing to navigate in our industry and life in general is criticism. We can choose to be deeply affected by criticism or we can choose to take what we think is valuable from it and leave the rest. We also have the choice to focus on the feedback that makes us feel good. This is a skill that takes practice, but it is so important, as we often focus on the negative and forget the positive comments.

We are in a very vulnerable place when we are onstage and are exposed to everyone’s opinion, but I focus on what theatre is about: it’s a shared experience, a magical moment when energy is exchanged between the stage and the audience. If that connection happens, I am satisfied, and I can live with the fact that not everyone will like it.

We live in a society that defines our identity by what we do, what environment we live/work in or how much we earn. It’s so easy to fall into this narrow way of thinking: “I am not currently dancing or earning so am I still technically a dancer?” It’s so hard to navigate these questions. Identity is about making a choice and owning it. When we choose to follow this path (training as dancers,

auditioning etc.) we need to commit to that choice. I often say to students: once a dancer, always a dancer!

It’s part of this profession to have many gaps between jobs, and that is when we need to work harder at reminding ourselves of this. What I find useful is using those stints to invest in my artistic growth: you would often find me at an art gallery, at an open dance class, a workshop, or a concert, shortly after finishing a contract to feel inspired and challenged. I think about my career as something that keeps evolving as I keep growing through it artistically. Learning and educating myself all the time is what keeps my identity intact.

We are reminded of our identity when we spend time with people who know us well and understand our world, so it’s particularly important to stay in touch with them (I call them my Artistic Family). After having my first child I made a point of reaching out to my friends from my dance world as it kept me grounded and connected. I always recommend reaching out to your family and community.

As my career started shifting, I held on to the knowledge that any future choices had to feed my creative identity. This is how I moved into movement direction and choreography. I can still express myself and my creativity through this type of work and I can see how all the work I put towards my artistic growth in my younger years is now incredibly useful. I try to see all the various aspects of my identity as assets that allow me to have a deeper understanding of the people around me and their journey. It has taught me a lot about empathy and compassion.

‘IDENTITY IS ABOUT MAKING A CHOICE AND OWNING IT’

Erin Fletcher on Disability and Accessibility in Theatre



Erin Fletcher, the cover show caller on Edward Scissorhands, talks about her experience as a disabled person working in theatre.

Could you share with us what your disability is, and how New Adventures have supported you?

I have two chronic illnesses, Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome (POTS) and Ehlers Danlos Syndrome (EDS).

Since joining the show, I have felt supported and accepted by everyone, but particularly the stage management team and the company manager. I have been treated as a person first and offered support with my disability when needed. It is rare to come across a team that is so accepting.

How do you feel the theatre industry is addressing the inclusion of professionals with disabilities, and what improvements would you like to see?

I feel the industry has a long way to go in improving the inclusion of those with disabilities. Prior to Edward Scissorhands I had left the industry in June 2023 because I was badly treated by an employer who couldn't see past the disability. They judged what I could or couldn't do and told me consistently I was a danger to others.

What I would like to see change is for people to learn to see past a disability. This will only happen with education.

I can still do my job; I just have to do things slightly differently. Being involved in conversations where we talk through things that could be potentially challenging makes you feel like your employer doesn't see you as an obstruction and values your differences.

There also needs to be accessibility information given out about the venue. For touring, this can be done when the calls go out about the next venue, or in advance if it's a position in a static venue. This needs to include the following types of information:

- Is Stage Door on ground level?
- Is there an accessible entrance?
- Is there a lift at the venue?
- What level is the stage on?
- What are the evacuation procedures for the venue?
- Is the venue accessible? Most door handles are a standard height, which is above what a wheelchair user can reach, lots of doors at theatres now can be particularly heavy, this can affect daily pain levels, do they have a disabled toilet backstage? Etc.

There also needs to be a conversation with producers/management about finding appropriate accommodation to stay in.

I think it's also important to know, that as a disabled person we also face additional challenges from members of the general public that we've never met. This can include abuse, unthoughtful comments, and also genuine accidents. I was knocked over in Cardiff after work, this was an accident, however its effect on me is still quite prominent. I felt deeply humiliated, and I had bruising down my right-hand side, and it also elevated my pain levels. Its effect on a disabled person can last months or years or never go away. These are all additional battles that we deal with on a daily basis. I was lucky enough to be working with this company at the time and received invaluable support.

What are some of the biggest challenges you face as a theatre professional with a disability, and how do you overcome them?

There are two main challenges you face at work, those being ignorance and accessibility. Theatres are very old buildings, finding ones which are accessible can be a difficult task.

Firstly, I'll address ignorance, I am an open and chatty person and am always happy to educate or answer questions about the disability I have. I have provided previous employers with written material that describes what the illness is and what adjustments I may potentially need. I will happily engage in any positive conversation that will help an employer, my colleagues or myself. When that positive becomes negative, this is very difficult to hear, and affects me being able to live with the condition and accept the limitations on my life. So, in those moments, I eject myself in order to protect my wellbeing.

The second, is accessibility in venues. This is a tough one, unless I have been to a venue before I don't know what challenges face me upon arrival. I have to look after myself as well as I can. I live in constant daily pain, and with the other symptoms I suffer (fast heart rate, drops in blood pressure, blood pooling) I also suffer daily fatigue and mobility issues. The way I overcome this is I stay as close to the venue as I can to minimise travel before and after work. If it is venues I have not been to before, I try to find out what I can in advance, I also keep social activities to a minimum till I know what I need to adjust or how I can manage symptoms as best I can. Feeling supported by your employer and team also has a big impact on facing those challenges, and my experience on this show has been a really positive one.

What kind of support systems are in place for professionals with disabilities in your theatre community, and how could they be improved?

I reached out to a charity called Applause for thought. From there, I see a therapist who helps me work out those difficult things that come with chronic illness and working in theatre. I also attend a support group when I can, this is run by a team of volunteers through POTS UK who also have the same condition, so it's helpful to know you're not alone.

I think things like this are a really good way forward. Unless you live it or experience it, understanding can be difficult, but educating people on the everyday difficulties people with disabilities face

will make a difference and drive inclusivity and change.

What are your aspirations for the future of disability in theatre, and how do you plan to contribute to this vision?

I would like to see theatre excel in inclusion for all departments. Theatre is a platform that entertains, educates and makes audiences feel something. It should also have the same ethic for the people who create and fulfil these productions. Requirements for shows are different for each one, there is a creative element in the job, so working around disabilities should be something that creative people can come together, talk about and work through. Health and safety companies also need to be a part of this, drive inclusivity and not label people with disabilities as not being safe.

I am willing to do what I can to help drive change, I'm happy to advocate, and educate employers and producers in a way that will help them grow. I am also happy to share my experiences, so lessons can be learnt.

'What I would like to see change is for people to learn to see past a disability. This will only happen with education.'

What is the Social Model of Disability?

The Social Model of Disability focuses on the barriers that people face within our society rather than the impairments or differences of the individuals. It states that it is the world around us that ‘disables’ people, rather than a person’s medical history.

The Social Model was devised by disability activists and groups in the late 20th century, and the term was coined in 1983 by disabled academic Mike Oliver. It is in direct contrast to the Medical Model of Disability which suggests that it is the impairments that disable a person – that the problem is with the individual rather than the physical, social and attitudinal barriers in society.

So, in a theatre setting, how could the Social Model be followed?

Sensory adapted performances remove the:

Physical barriers by offering increased wheelchair spaces, quiet rooms and removal of flashing lights.

Social and attitudinal barriers by saying it’s okay to make noise, leaving auditorium doors open if anyone wants to take a break, and offering an experience where all staff and audiences are understanding of differences.

Audio description removes the:

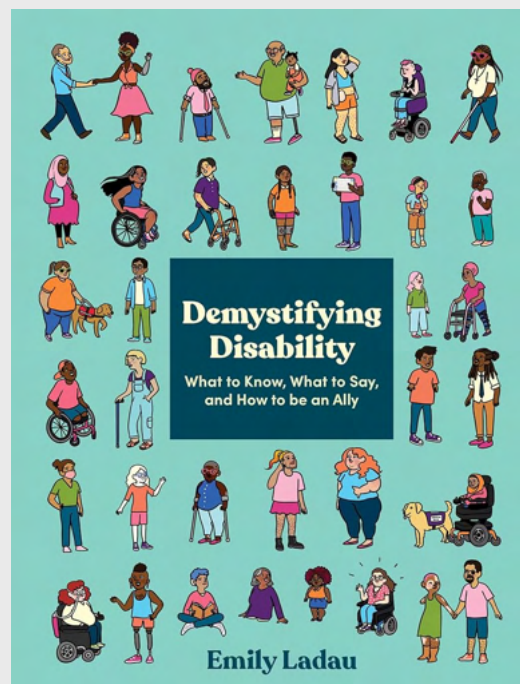
Physical barriers by providing an alternative way to experience the show that doesn’t rely on sight, and a touch tour to give people time and space to familiarise themselves with the set

Social and attitudinal barriers by having a welcoming venue and company staff to encourage a pleasant experience.

Not all disabled people identify with the Social Model for lots of reasons. We need to do what we can to remove barriers that are in our control so that more people can experience what New Adventures has to offer if they want to.

Book recommendation: Demystifying Disability- Emily Ladau

Emily Ladau has written a practical guide that offers readers a welcoming place to understand disability as part of the human experience. It offers an approachable guide to being a thoughtful, informed ally to disabled people, with actionable steps for what to say and do (and what not to do) and how you can help make the world a more inclusive place.



PRIDE

Taking Pride in New Adventures

Last month was Pride month, and the theme of Pride 2024 was #WeAreEverywhere. Here at New Adventures, that couldn't be more accurate, as we highlight some of the many queer stories that shape us. We embody these stories year-round and worldwide; with Romeo and Juliet's international tour carrying on through September, and Edward Scissorhands showing in cinemas from 25 September 2024. Both productions feature storylines that depict the queer experience, and the wider themes of Edward Scissorhands proved so poignant to our LGBTQ+ response piece group.

During Pride month we invited stars of Swan Lake to participate in a panel discussion exploring the impact of the show on their lives, wider culture, and the LGBTQ+ community. We were joined by members of the original 1995 cast: Isabel Mortimer who played the Queen, and Steve Kirkham who was one of the original cygnets; along with Glenn Graham who has played the Swan/Stranger several times over the past 20 years, and Andrew Monaghan who danced the role of the Prince in 2013/2024 and 2019/2020. The discussion was chaired by Daisy Reeves, BCLP's inaugural Global Inclusion & Diversity Client Relationship Partner. They discussed key memories of Swan Lake, from dancing the role of the Swan for the first time, to the reception of the show when it was first performed in 1995. This 30th anniversary pride panel truly explored the evolution and impact of Swan Lake over the last 30 years!

[Watch the Swan Lake panel here.](#)



We also celebrated a Pride Month reunion with our LGBTQ+ community response piece participants. Earlier in the year, nine LGBTQ+ people in Surrey and dance artist Paul Smethurst created a community response piece inspired by Edward Scissorhands called 'The Othered' based on the themes of inclusion, exclusion, community and difference that are explored in the show.

Over the course of several weekend and evening sessions, the participants wrote poetry to their younger selves, took part in a drag costume making workshop, and devised movement that made up the final piece.

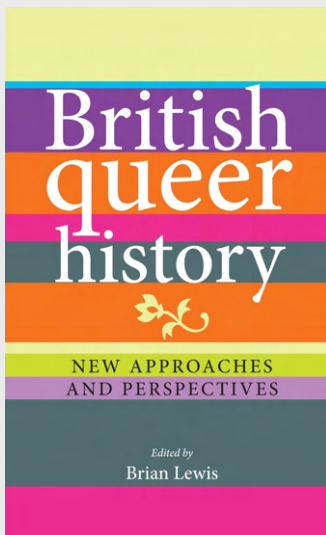
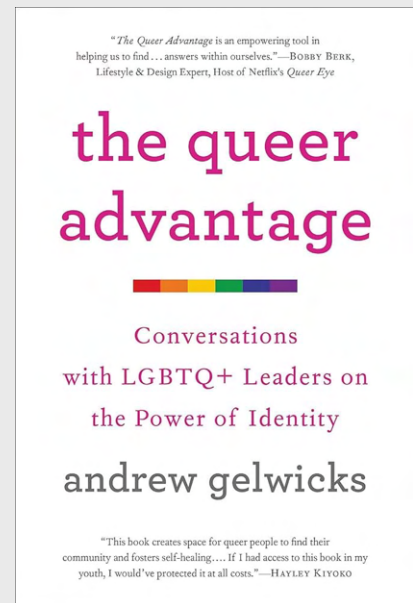
In June, the participants reunited. After a check in on what everyone has been up to in the last few months, Paul led a workshop on nature and queerness. This was followed by a workshop with guest artist Dre Spisto on queer clowning. The group has continued to stay in touch and are looking forward to meeting again in the autumn.

[Hear the participants talk about the experience here.](#)

Noted Books

1. The Queer Advantage- Andrew Gelwicks

Meet the LGBTQ+ dealmakers, trailblazers, and glass-ceiling breakers in business, politics, and beyond. The people who are creating national public policy, running billion-dollar tech enterprises, and winning Olympic medals. Andrew Gelwicks interviews the leaders who have forged their own paths and changed the world, showing how you can too.

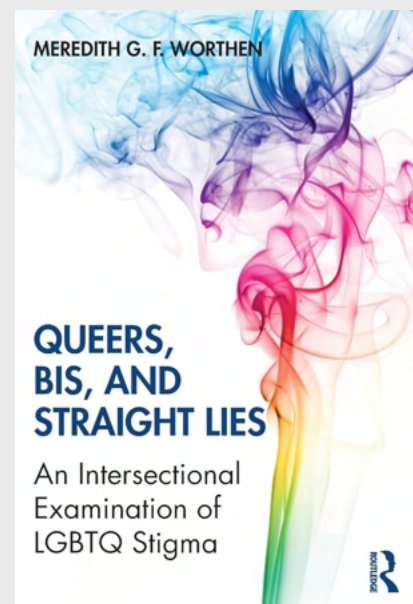


2. British Queer History – Brian Lewis

This collection of essays takes stock of the 'new British queer history'. It is intended both for scholars and students of British social and cultural history and of the history of sexuality, and for a broader readership interested in queer issues. In offering a snapshot of the field, this volume demonstrates the richness and promise of one of the most vibrant areas of modern British history and the complexity and breadth of discussion, debate and approach.

3. QUEERS BIs, and straight LIES - Meredith Worthen

Though there have been great advances for LGBTQ people in recent years, stigma, intolerance, and prejudice remain. Queers, Bis, and Straight Lies: An Intersectional Examination of LGBTQ Stigma offers an in-depth exploration of LGBTQ negativity through its ground-breaking use of Norm-Centered Stigma Theory (NCST), the first ever theory about stigma that is both testable and well-positioned in existing stigma scholarship.



Note: these books are available to borrow from the New Adventures office library, please contact office@new-adventures.net if you would like to borrow any of the books suggested by The Culture Project