

Sometimes opportunities strike where you least expect them.

For Erik Ferguson, studying and performing dance was the last thing he imagined would change his life. Now, the Portlander is working as an intern for DanceAbility, a pioneering teaching and performance method that works with people of mixed abilities.

"I never really considered myself a group artist," says Ferguson, whose background is in visual arts and activism. But it turns out the program hits both those chords.

DanceAbility is a method for exploring movement improvisation. Created by Eugene's Joint Forces Dance Company, it enables discovery of commonalities between people and encourages and respects all people's potential for creative expression.

"The first time I tried a dance class it was a little scary," Ferguson admits. "I had to get out of my wheelchair to get into the building because there were no accessible ramps. ... Once in there, there were no disabled people in the class." Worse yet, all students were asked, he continues, "to go out into the middle of the circle and make a movement with our bodies."

Ferguson describes how his body "just reacted. It made a movement, and it felt really good. That night I went home and sort of danced around in my living room and really [thought] about my body in terms of what I could do as opposed to what it couldn't do."

According to Ferguson, DanceAbility strives to show there are wonderful movement possibilities inside the disabled body. "As someone with cerebral palsy, my body can make shapes that other people's can't. It's important to see these moves and movements as not

Breaking barriers

Think you have no dance ability? Think again.

BY JODI DARBY

being inferior to those of able-bodied people but recognize them as equally beautiful."

Last spring, Ferguson and Lark Jarvis, another Portland DanceAbility instructor, attended their first workshop and mixed-abilities performances. Both decided they wanted to continue this work and to share it with others, so they completed a monthlong DanceAbility teacher certification in Trier, Germany, taught by Joint Forces Dance Company artistic director Alito Alessi.

"It all happened very quickly," recalls Ferguson. "It was an amazing trip. We spent all day learning with Alito in the hottest summer on record in Germany, then at the end of a workshop we would take to the streets."

Not to be tourists, but to be artists. "In a lot of places there, disabled people aren't allowed in theaters. It sends a really strong message when you hold performances in public spaces," Ferguson says. "You break down a lot of social and class barriers when everyone has access to the performances."

Since getting certified, Ferguson and Jarvis have co-taught several introductory DanceAbility workshops in Portland. Ferguson, who is transgendered, also works with people who have disabilities in Portland State University's assistive technology office. Jarvis is trained as a body worker and has worked with people

who have HIV and other life-challenging illnesses.

Joan Guinness, DanceAbility's third Portland instructor, has worked as a yoga instructor and a dance teacher for 30 years.

The process that occurs through DanceAbility is profound for teachers and students. "To see the evolution of people's relationship with their bodies is amazing," attests Ferguson. Participants can't help but learn important lessons about themselves and others in their class.

"There are preconceived notions that people with disabilities should keep from using their bodies in any way because it will be embarrassing for them or because able-bodied people will find it ugly or will look at us with sympathy," Ferguson adds. "There needs to be a lot of work in both of those communities to dispel these notions and build a working model that appreciates everyone."

The diversity of DanceAbility is one of its many strengths. The method is simple: Participants begin to find a common denominator in a group. When everyone in the group is making a movement with their body, everyone else pays attention to what people around them are doing, and they all find a way to do the same



PHOTO BY MATT DAVIS

Erik Ferguson shatters preconceptions about the disabled body during a DanceAbility public performance March 28 at Portland State University

dance. It's based on inclusivity—the idea that everyone in the group holds the information that everyone else needs.

"We have people from all backgrounds, all experiences and all physical abilities," says Ferguson.

"Whether a member is able-bodied, in a wheelchair, queer or transgendered, the idea is to find commonalities that we all can work with."

Ferguson hopes this type of forum will serve to break down boundaries of ableism but also to shatter stereotypes

about queers, particularly trans people. "I never in my wildest dreams

thought that my work would be in dance," he laughs. "I think this work is really important for everyone—teachers, participants and observers. It's life-changing." ■

A series of DANCEABILITY classes begins April 3. For more information call 503-725-5664 or e-mail sdu@mail.pdx.edu.

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