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<b>Paper Name:</b>	Unlimited, UK's Largest Ever Cultural Disability Forming Component of Cultural Olympiad for London 2012 Olympics	
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Disabled people are in a unique position in which to observe and artistically comment on society and the world we live in. This paper starts from the premises that disabled artist are proud of their journey toward excellence and that should we settle for anything less we immediately invalidate ourselves and revoke our right to be in the public domain. It is 2010 and it is my belief that there is no ground for us still to be patronised by people whose lack of imagination, understanding of inclusion and basic human rights prevent us from attaining excellence.

Many years ago I was in Figeac, a small town in France which hosts a learning disabled festival every year. The plays, music and art as all created by learning disabled artists from across the globe. In the art gallery there, I witnessed a woman showing a potential buyer a bold colourful abstract painting. The buyer asked to see the painter's biography but the woman tried to hide the information from him. Intrigued my interpreter and I moved closer to the action. The woman did not want the buyer to know the painter was a learning disabled artist. His response was 'this painting is excellence and I want to buy it'.

She allowed her prejudices to cloud her judgement but he allowed the art to speak for itself. For her, the right to be a painter, to be excellent and to be learning disabled could not exist in the same sentence.

The standard of excellence has been set by white middle class men and the very same men have governed the arts world for a long time. Until the mid 80's there was little room for difference or indeed any acknowledgement of difference and no real platforms to celebrate difference. As a result, the flourishing disability arts scene remained underground. The education institutions and the world at large had low expectations of what we could achieve. All engagement with art was through therapeutic means or part of a rehabilitation package. There is great value in the healing nature of art but this sits within the medical model of disability. The social model which places disabled people at the forefront created the framework we needed to rebrand our pursuit into the arts world as valid artists.

Deaf and disabled people had only each other as role models and critics, but like all ghettoised disenfranchised artists we built our own networks, supporting each other in artistic endeavour, always pushing the boundaries of expectation. In our independence we formed a body of extraordinary work encompassing a diversity of genres and styles.

The fight for acceptance in the wider world gave artists the drive, ambition and skill to parade their differences against a construct of set standards. As the community grew in numbers so did our vitality and energy until we were ready to dare place ourselves at centre stage.

The arts are a precarious and exposing profession presenting a relentless environment of opinion and judgement. The grit and determination of those who put themselves on the front line, in front of those who will judge, have had to develop coping mechanisms to deal with commentary and critique of their physicality, style of speech and style of communication.

The world of performing arts in itself presents an interesting divide. The contemporary dance world has been more accepting of the inclusion of disabled artists than the theatre world. Disabled dancers have a different point of gravity and work to redefine movement with individual skills set that make them unique in style and performance. Dance finds a language in the bodies it is given to work with. Theatre prescribes the language and is far more routed in traditional methods of delivery presenting more difficult barriers to inclusion. In creative response, disabled actors have learnt from the dance world and use their physical and sensory differences to reinvent the narrative.

Therein lays our excellence – the ability to unashamedly own who we are and to work with what we have. We establish our own sense of 'normal' into the work thus making it extraordinary. We also have a strict code of ethics, personal and political awareness of access and the need to ensure our work can be accessed by a diverse audience. No other community has displayed that enduring

commitment to profoundly understanding equality and rights as both a performer/artist and as an audience.

Diversity has been a key word within the Arts Council England (ACE) manifesto and over the last 15 years they have realised the impact that disability arts could have on the creative industry not only in terms of addressing issues of accessibility across the sector, but also to change the face of white middle class establishment forever.

ACE have invested time, money and energy in working across training institutes to push for inclusive training practice, mentoring opportunities for artists and accessible funding processes. ACE have worked within the creative sector to raise the profile a diversity of disabled artists on a range of performance platforms all over the country. The work is recognised within the realm of artistic excellence and we, as artists, are now in demand.

Heart and Soul, a huge learning disabled music company, are part of mainstream festivals and recently sold out at the Southbank Centre. Their core member Pino Frumineto has just been awarded an MBE, Cando Co regularly perform in the Queen Elizabeth Hall and Graeae will be performing outside the National Theatre.

Extant blind led company and Deafinitely deaf lead, Julie MacNamara and Liz Carr have become regularly funded by ACE.

The statue of Alison Lapper sat proudly on the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, Chanel 4 broadcast Cast Off's written by two disabled writers and featured six actors and this month Cherylee Houston became the first regular disabled character in Coronation Street one of UK's most popular soap operas.

The visibility and scope of the work has enabled us to challenge perceptions of disability through creativity and emotional engagement rather than through indoctrination.

The battle for recognition over the past few decades has meant that we are more than ready to take on our biggest challenge yet – the Olympic and Paralympics games. Deaf and disabled people will be hosting the Unlimited festival as part of the cultural programme which will run alongside the games.

No other Olympics and Paralympics have staged an event of this size or scale before and as far as we are aware this will be the world's largest celebration of arts and culture led by disabled and deaf people. We will be setting the artistic agenda, championing accessibility and creating work like we have never created before.

The investment to commission disabled and deaf artists in the UK is at present £1.5 million. By 2012 the total investment in this project will be £3.7 million which means we can really reach for the sky.

Unlimited is working in partnership with all the Arts Councils across the UK. Access and opportunity are at the heart of this partnership and all artists have equal access to the commissions programme and are able to seek advice and

support to develop their applications from Arts Council officers and advisors.

We are in talks with the Director of Ceremonies about how Unlimited commissions can be integrated into the torch relays and opening and closing ceremonies.

And most recently we have been in talks about a new Unlimited International programme in partnership with the British Council. This will allow us to work with disabled artists across the world and create a truly international exchange of work

The first round of commissions totalling £439,368 over 10 commissions was announced in UK on 17<sup>th</sup> March.

The range of work encompasses our commitment to diversity in the broadest sense ensuring that within disability we have an equal balance of gender and ethnicity. The work engages the non disabled arts community but the key criteria of Unlimited is it that disabled people lead the art and the decision making process.

All the work outlined below in London Olympics Committee press release will be showcased between June and October this year.

### **THE SCREAMING SILENCE OF THE WIND – MAURICE ORR (NORTHERN IRELAND)**

The Screaming Silence of the Wind will bring together sensory experiences to create a holistic feeling of place. The raw, barren landscapes, the elemental factors shaping the lives of the people of Iceland, the sea, the wind, the cold are not very far from our own environment on the western edge of Europe. Through sound, paint and natural material (fish leather) the piece will evoke some of that sense of being well as the connection between place and people. We do not have to look far here at home to find those same connections with the sea and the elements.

### **PERSONAL BEST: TURNING POINTS – CHRISS TALLY EVANS (WALES)**

A nationwide community storytelling project specifically designed for the Cultural Olympiad. The project focuses on Personal Best, those turning points in our lives when we realise what we can become – unique, resulting in a high quality audio-visual experience on web, translation and other public spaces and a touring installation.

### **THE D MONOLOGUES – THE LLANRARTH GROUP (WALES)**

The D Monologues will be a dramatic collection of monologues for deaf and disabled performers, inspired by the stories and experiences of disabled and deaf individuals across the whole of the UK, performed initially in their locality the presented via high profile platforms such as the National Theatres of England, Scotland and Wales.

### **PRIVATE DANCER – JANICE PARKER (SCOTLAND)**

'Private Dancer' is an artistically ambitious large scale performance event by professional and emergent disabled dancers. Performed in and around a real sized luminous 'house', purpose built with a series of individual rooms, each solo dancer invites audience members to enter their private performance domain. As well as the individual pieces, the hour long performance will include dancers (disabled and non disabled) performing throughout the structure encouraging audiences to walk and move around the house.

### **SNAILS AND KETCHUP – RAMESH MEYYAPPAN (SCOTLAND)**

Snails and Ketchup explores the turbulent relationships that prevail within dysfunctional families, inspired by Italo Calvino's 'Baron in the Trees'. This darkly comic tale poignantly highlights that despite familial love being unconditional; it is not always possible to exist within the same environment as those we hold dear.

The piece uses visual and physical theatre including circus skills in order to develop a visual language that is equally accessible for deaf and hearing audiences

### **CANDOCO UNLIMITED – CANDOCO DANCE COMPANY (LONDON)**

Candoco Dance Company will engage two disabled choreographers to each make a large middle-scale dance piece. The company will consist of 12 international disabled and non-disabled dancers. This pioneering concept will result in two world-class dance pieces that can then be performed as part of Unlimited Presents. Dancers will be invited from Beijing and Rio de Janeiro to be part of the extended company, reflecting the inclusive values of the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

### **THE GARDEN - GRAEAE THEATRE COMPANY (LONDON)**

This is the first of three Graeae/Greenwich and Docklands Festival (GDF) co-productions in partnership with Strange Fruit sway pole performance company. 'The Garden' inspired by the world of William Blake will be followed by 'The Iron Man' in 2011 and climax in 2012 with 'Choir of Angels'. These productions will focus on earth, fire and air in line with the themes of GDF.

The Garden will be performed at GDF in June by a deaf and disabled and non disabled ensemble of sway pole/street arts performers who will form a signed song chorus, alongside live music from a disabled musicians.

### **IRRESISTIBLE – JEREMY COLBORNE/MIND THE GAP (YORKSHIRE )**

Irresistible would be a 'siren symphony'. This live performance spectacular would involve projections on walls or rocks, original music and dramatic lighting. It will be presented in Yorkshire in Bradford City Centre and the Cow and Calf on Ilkley Moor.

## **BIPOLAR RINGMASTER (WITHOUT A CIRCUS) – STUMBLE DANCE CIRCUS (YORKSHIRE)**

Bipolar Ringmaster (without a Circus) will be a one man show that plays with the audiences expectations from their own perspective of mental health and performance. What is colourful character or delusional insanity? What is grand achievement or pointless obsession? The performance is linked to a film projection of virtuoso ariel choreography while the central character indulges his all-consuming love of Circus.

## **THE UGLY SPIRIT – FITTINGS MULTIMEDIA ARTS (NORTH WEST)**

This is a new performance piece with disabled and non- disabled practitioners, visually engaging, physical and visceral- certain to be controversial. This is to be developed with young people's collaboration looking at the divided self exploring disability and sexuality. This is viewed as a radical alliance of 'queer and crip' cultures, by leading cultural proponents, David Hoyle – radical drag performer and Fittings Director Garry Robson. This is a theatre based piece that builds on a week of experiment and script writing in 2009, using the trope of 'the divided self' in the lives of conjoined Siamese twins Chang and Eng Bunker, to explore issues of identity. A critically engaging concept that is entirely appropriate in exploring 'who we really are!

Extant, Heart and Soul, Deafinitely ,Orpheus, Lawnmowers and Free Wheelers are planning new work for next year and over 30 companies/individuals are waiting in the wings to apply for the second round of commissions in October.

The next two years are focussed on seed bedding new work, developing new talent through Unlimited Talent and showcasing work in preparation to have a presence across the whole the Cultural Olympiad and the Unlimited festival.

The handing over of artistic power to disabled people speaks volumes about our role and status within the sector. However, there is no time to be smug. We have a commitment to ensure the quality of Unlimited surpasses all expectation leave lasting legacy way beyond 2012. The next generation of deaf and disabled artists so need to be certain that the world remains their platform and that they have the absolute right to be excellent.

**Jenny Sealey MBE March 2010**