



From disability to capability
by Luke Prodromou

'Energy is eternal delight' (Blake).

The re-birth of the "Bits and Pieces" Theatre Group

We are all in one way or another disabled, if not physically then mentally, emotionally or simply by the remorseless passage of time. As age and its debilitating effects creep up on us, we are tempted to give up or at least to withdraw and, like the octogenarian King Lear:

'To shake all cares and business from our age;
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we
Unburthen'd crawl toward...retirement!.'

The older we get, the more intensely do we face the challenge of renewal - it is a constant struggle for regeneration.

As I approach my 34th year in the ELT profession, I sometimes wonder how I managed to fit so much activity in to my early years as a teacher. I was a full-time teacher, teacher trainer and soon became a father of three children and the father of numerous textbooks and countless articles for ELT News and other professional publications. One of the highlights of our youthful activity as language teachers in Thessaloniki in the early 80s was the foundation of an English Language Teaching Theatre Group, which we called Bits and Pieces. The name of the group reflected our desire to bring together heterogeneous members of the ELT world, teachers, students and friends, in a joint venture to create something together. Our collective skills produced many performances of sketches written especially for students of English (and their teachers) and a book of the best ten sketches with exercises, which others used to form their own groups or organise performances with their kids. Our modest efforts went forth and multiplied. A second group was created for performing plays from contemporary theatre: Pinter, Ayckbourn, Cumpion, Saunders et al. So the positive contagion spread from group to group.

We in turn had been inspired by similar groups of ELT actors in the UK. Thus, we stand on each other's shoulders, we build on the efforts of our active colleagues elsewhere.

It was with these memories of collective creativity that a few months ago I began to wonder whether, decades later, with some of our old comrades nearing retirement or already along the road opened up by Shakespeare's Lear, we had run out of steam. Where

had all our energy gone? As our societies lurched from one financial crisis to another and as working people found themselves working harder and harder to earn the same income there was little thought of having fun play acting - instead of doing things together, for others, we had started to withdraw into our individual worlds, our families, our jobs, making money or just making ends meet. The response to the occasional suggestion to revive our theatrical activities together was greeted with enthusiasm but also with an excuse that 'we don't have time'. So we all went our own way, bits and pieces, here and there, with little sense of purpose. apart from the very necessary need to survive and do our best for our families. I reckoned the recession and the inertia of age had 'disabled' our generation.

Then I had an Archimedes moment. As I wallowed in a hot bath, listening to music, Eureka! I thought: why not revive the theatre group and invite all those for who 'energy is eternal delight' to join in? I sent out feelers and the first taker soon appeared, a fellow teacher from the original group. But then I was approached by the Disabled Access Friendly Campaign inspired by and largely run by Paul Shaw and Katie Quartano to help with the campaign by, for example, writing appropriate material for the classroom to be made available on a new website for teachers

Then I had another Eureka moment - why not combine the two ideas of a theatre group and the Disabled Access campaign? My idea was to mobilize lovers of theatre *per se*, teachers of English through TESOL Northern Greece and members of the Disabled Access campaign in a joint venture - to provide pleasure for the participants and audiences but also to make a contribution to raising awareness of disability issues and improving the facilities available to our disabled fellow citizens in Thessaloniki, especially in the context of ELT education. We held a first meeting where thirty or so teachers turned up, declaring an interest in helping out by acting or in other ways and this was followed by a second meeting at the most recent PALSO conference in Thessaloniki, accompanied by a mini-performance by David Gibson and yours truly, as a taster.

We discussed the balance we would try to achieve between the various strands that made up the patchwork of the new group. We set out in search of a venue for rehearsals which would provide access to disabled people who wished to be a part of the new group. This has been quite difficult and we are currently in the process of forging co-operation with the University of Thessaloniki Arts Faculty. Once we have a place to rehearse I am sure we will continue to find new ways to transform disability into capability - and spread a little joy at the same time!

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