



Utrecht University

# DIVERSE THEATER AND EVER CHANGING HORIZONS

an investigation on three inclusive art companies:

Theater Thikwa, Stopgap Dance Company and Speels Collectief



DE HOEKSTEEN VAN DE SAMENLEVING, performance by Speels Collectief (2021)

Thesis MA Gender Studies

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is an investigation on the contradictions and the difficulties inclusive art companies in a western context face. My focus is on three companies in which disabled and non-disabled artists work together to make theater and dance performances within a professional context: Theater Thikwa based in Germany, Stopgap Dance Company based in the UK and Speels Collectief, which I founded myself, based in the Netherlands. I conducted interviews with disabled and non-disabled members of each company. From there, I distilled six themes that I elaborate on in order to answer my research question: the companies' vision when it comes to the meaning of dis/ability, their view on inclusion and diversity, the position of the companies in the arts field, difficulties regarding company management, the financial structure of the companies and questions surrounding selection criteria. Throughout this thesis I argue for a political/relational model of disability read through feminist and queer perspectives. As a theoretical framework, I will make use of the different models of disability outlined by Alison Kafer (2013), and crip and queer theory. In this thesis I do not aim to provide definitive answers, instead I argue for contradictions and discrepancies to be held together in tension. My attempt with this research is to stimulate debate on the meaning of dis/ability and to consider the consequence of this meaning for the art world, and for society as a whole.

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# Introduction

## What I can say with certainty

1. Speels Collectief is the theater company founded by me and my colleague Sanne Arbouw.
2. The company exists since 2015.
3. Since our inception, we have been constantly evolving.

This thesis is mainly about Speels Collectief. It is about our practice, our ideals, and about the difficulties and the contradictions we face. The above is all I can say with certainty about Speels Collectief at this point. I have the feeling all the rest can be questioned.

It is Wednesday, March 10, 2021. All around me are piles of books and printed articles. Several search engines are open on my laptop, and dozens of tabs with academic literature. It is the umpteenth day that I have immersed myself in queer theory, affect theory, disability studies, crip theory, feminist art history and literature about contemporary art. Outside it is gray and rainy, inside it is warm and wonderfully quiet. My cat is curled up on the couch as always, does not worry about anything.

I do. I did not sleep last night.

In recent weeks I have devised a hundred research directions and asked a hundred different research questions. This is, I guess, my hundredth introduction. Every time I get stuck, and last night I understood why: in every introduction so far, I did not describe Speels Collectief as it is. I described Speels Collectief as I want it to be, and there is a difference between them.

Since our inception, we have faced many contradictions. For the past few weeks I have been trying to understand, resolve, eliminate those contradictions. I find them

uncomfortable. My naive intention was to eliminate all my questions and to present irrefutable conclusions in this thesis. But if I am honest, I do not believe those conclusions exist. The best thing I learned both at the theater academy and at Gender Studies is: there is no such thing as a definitive answer. Countless truths can co-exist. We may doubt and not know. It took me a while to let go of my hopes of comfortable certainty, but last night I understood I have to focus on the doubt. I have to make the doubt insightful.

In this thesis I will find myself in the midst of contradictions. I will present the factual and the conceivable. I will compare our daily practice to our ideals. I will discuss the sometimes unbridgeable gap between practice and theory. I have been trying to think, write and theorize away the tension between who we are and who we would like to be. Instead, I will do the opposite: I stay with the contradictions and I will try to make these, and the tension they create, productive.

### **Research question, methodology and research design**

To investigate the contradictions I am speaking about above, I will focus on three art companies: Theater Thikwa, Stopgap Dance Company and Speels Collectief. In all three companies disabled and non-disabled<sup>1</sup> artists work together to make performances within a professional context. Theater Thikwa is a theater company based in Berlin, Germany. Stopgap Dance Company is based in Farnham, Surrey in the UK. Speels Collectief is the theater company I founded myself, based in Arnhem, the Netherlands. My main question will be: What contradictions and what difficulties do inclusive<sup>2</sup> art companies face, and how do they deal with them?

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<sup>1</sup> The discourse on disability and the dis/ablism binary play a main role in this research. In this thesis, I will use different linguistic constructs to describe disabled and non-disabled people. In my theoretical framework I use the terminology of the theorists I quote. In the description of the three companies I research, as well as in the analysis that follows, I will use the terminology that my researched companies themselves prefer.

During this research, I myself developed a preference for the terms “disabled” and “non-disabled”, because it puts “disabled” at the center, from which “non-disabled” is derived (as opposed to the usual centralization of the “abled”). If I am not quoting anyone and not writing specifically about one of the companies, I therefore use this terminology.

<sup>2</sup> In order to formulate a proper research question, I choose to call the companies I investigate “inclusive”. Throughout the rest of my thesis, sometimes I use “inclusive” (since this is currently the common terminology in Europe to describe companies like ours) and sometimes I use other terms (depending on what my researched companies prefer, or what I myself find most accurate).

In order to answer this question I will do qualitative research, in which I relate academic literature to the practice of the companies I examine. As a theoretical framework I will make use of the political/relational model of disability, crip theory and queer theory. To explain the political/relational model of disability, I will elaborate on different models of disability outlined in *Feminist, Queer, Crip* by feminist and disability scholar Alison Kafer (2013). Since I consider the framework she outlines appropriate to theorize the ideals of my researched companies and the struggles they face, also throughout the rest of my research Kafer's theorization of disability and explanation of crip theory will be central. To put them in a broader context, I will complement Kafer's reasonings with argumentations from other scholars in the field. All the academic literature I will use is from a feminist tradition.

The data about the companies themselves I gain from interviews<sup>3</sup> that I conducted with members of each company.<sup>4</sup> Per company I conducted two interviews, each time I spoke with the artistic director(s) and with one or two disabled performers. I chose to conduct interviews in order to answer my research question, because in this research I am interested in what is usually not published. As mentioned, my focus is on the contradictions and difficulties that arise within inclusive companies. Therefore, in addition to discussing factual data, my interviewees and I focused on our personal questions and experiences, and on contradictions in reconciling our daily practice with our ideals. Due to the distance and the current pandemic, all my interviews took place via Zoom. Beforehand, I have been concerned that conducting interviews online would disrupt the confidentiality of the conversations. This turned out not to be the case. In every interview, I was delighted by the mutual recognition and the amount of similarities in the search that is going on at Theater Thikwa, Stopgap Dance Company and Speels Collectief. In my analysis I will describe these similarities and discuss nuance differences between the companies.

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<sup>3</sup> Actual details about the interviews (where and when they took place, how they were processed, etc.) can be found in the appendix.

<sup>4</sup> My interviews with members from Theater Thikwa and Stopgap Dance Company were in English. My interviews with members from Speels Collectief were in Dutch. For this thesis I have translated all quotations into English, the original Dutch quote is always added as a footnote.

In investigating a company based in Germany, a company based in England, and my own company based in the Netherlands, I conduct research within a European context. Contradictions and difficulties we face with Speels Collectief are regularly related to the dominant social and political discourse on disability in the Netherlands. In comparing Speels Collectief with two other companies based in Europe, I examine how companies in a similar discourse deal with mechanisms of exclusion. My hope is to make the findings of my research productive by describing them in my thesis, but also by applying them in the practice of Speels Collectief. Therefore, I consciously chose to focus on companies that conduct their practice in a similar discourse.

### **My positionality as researcher and founder of Speels Collectief**

In doing this research, my positionality needs to be taken into account. I have written about myself as the founder of Speels Collectief, but in this thesis I am founder as well as researcher. In recent years Sanne, co-founder of Speels Collectief, and I have found ourselves easily falling into the trap of “we, the able-bodied”, speaking about “them, the disable-bodied”. Therefore, I want to highlight that in this thesis I am the one describing our vision, our development, and our current struggles. Every member of our company, including Sanne, would give different words to what we do and what we question, and everyone experiences other difficulties and contradictions in this. In addition, since the establishment of Speels Collectief the organization and the composition of our company have changed continuously, especially because our vision has evolved over time. We will keep changing, developing and questioning in the future. Throughout this thesis, I will try to make tangible that what I write is never final, nor will it be universal or complete. My intention with this research is to stimulate debate on the meanings and interpretations of dis/ability and on companies like ours, not to provide definitive answers. Nevertheless, my attempt is to write an enlightening and constructive document that can offer a small contribution to the development of an inclusive theater landscape.

## Theoretical framework

### Different models of disability

In *Introduction: Imagined Futures* Alison Kafer (2013) argues that disability is presented as natural instead of cultural, and thus depoliticized. In line with Kafer, in this thesis I argue for a hybrid political/relational model of disability read through feminist and queer perspectives. In this paragraph, I will elaborate on different academic models to explain disablism.<sup>5</sup>

The meaning of disability is regularly presumed to be self-evident, but multiple understandings of disability exist. The framework for dominant understandings of disability and disabled people is formed by the very closely aligned individual model and medical model of disability. Within these models atypical bodies and minds are framed as deviant, pathological, and defective. What characterizes the medical model is the positioning of disability as an exclusively medical problem and the conceptualization of such positioning as an objective fact. In both the individual and the medical model ‘disability is cast as a problematic characteristic inherent in particular bodies and minds. Solving the problem of disability, then, means correcting, normalizing, or eliminating the pathological individual’ (Kafer, 2013, p.5). The appropriate approach to disability within this framework is therefore medical treatment of the person and their condition. The future of disability is understood in terms of medical research and treatment of the disabled individual.

Another way to understand the future of disability is in terms of increased social supports or widespread social change. Instead of casting disability as a natural, self-evident sign of pathology, disability could be seen as a product of social relations. A model that contrasts the individual/medical model, is the social model of disability. The social model argues for a conceptual distinction between “impairment” and “disability”. Impairment refers to ‘any physical or mental limitation, while disability signals the social exclusions based on, and social meanings attributed to, that impairment’ (Kafer, 2013, p.7). Within the social model an appropriate approach to disability is to rearrange

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<sup>5</sup> I have worked out an elaboration on different models of disability in relation to Critical Disability Studies in my essay *Speels Collectief - a collective claiming crip* (2020).

social processes and policies that constrict disabled people's lives.

Kafer critiques the distinction between impairment and disability on which the social model relies. She (2013, p.7) argues that 'people with impairments are disabled by their environments; or, to put it differently, impairments aren't disabling, social and architectural barriers are.' Both impairment and disability are social, Kafer states, because what we understand as impairment shifts across time and place. Impairment can thus not exist apart from social understandings. Another critique on drawing a hard line between impairment and disability, is that the conceptual distinction makes it difficult to explore the ways in which 'notions of disability and able-bodiedness affect everyone, not just people with impairments' (Kafer, 2013, p.8). In my introduction, I wrote about my sleepless nights when I started this research, my anxiety about not *being able* to describe an unambiguous conclusion in this thesis. At the end of my conclusion, I will describe a theatrical moment that confronted me with my own attempt to conform to a certain image of femininity and beauty. Although I am not regarded as disabled, these examples can both be seen as a symptom of compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness. I am, and I do believe we all are, certainly affected by cultural ideals of normalcy and ideal form and function. Besides that, 'friends and family members of disabled people are often affected by ableist attitudes and barriers, even if they are not themselves disabled' (Kafer, 2013, p.8). In other words, disability does not occur in isolation. It is experienced in and through relationships, and in relation to the dominant ableist discourse that frames disability.

In the political/relational model of disability the problem of disability (or impairment) 'no longer resides in the minds or bodies of individuals but in built environments and social patterns that exclude or stigmatize particular kinds of bodies, minds, and ways of being' (Kafer, 2013, p.6). Since disability is experienced in and through relationships, it can only exist in relation to able-bodiedness/able-mindedness, such that "disabled" and "abled" form a constitutive binary. According to feminist and disability theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, this hierarchical division of bodies and minds is used to legitimate 'an unequal distribution of resources, status, and power within a biased social and architectural environment' (quoted in Kafer, 2013, p.6). Kafer juxtaposes the medical model with the political one. In doing so, she is not suggesting

that the medical model is not political. On the contrary, she argues for increased recognition of the political nature of a medical framing of disability. In this thesis, I argue that the three companies I investigate think and (try to) act in line with the political/relational model of disability.

In *Genealogies*, feminist and critical disability scholar Margrit Shildrick (2009, p.42) argues that against the dominant standard ‘the construction of physical difference as a failing, incomplete and inferior, marks disabled embodiment as deeply devalued, not so much for what it is, but for what it fails to be. Its status, value, and meaning are from the start relational, rather than having autonomous standing.’ Feminist scholar and philosopher Donna Haraway (1991) in *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century* even further problematizes the dichotomous relationship between ability/disability and normal/abnormal by arguing that the boundaries between organism and machine are blurred. There is, she states, no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic. The possibility to reconstitute our bodies means that we could ‘embrace new technologies with positive identities rather than feeling victims of inadequate functioning’ (Meekosha and Shuttleworth, 2009, p.60). These arguments are in line with the political/relational model of disability, and they relate to the reality of my three investigated companies. To give a simple, practical example: Theater Thikwa, Stopgap Dance Company and Speels Collectief do not regard their performers who use a wheelchair, a walker or crutches as functioning inadequately. On the contrary, the wheelchair, the walker or the crutches are seen as an extension of the body that could be used theatrically.

### **Collective affinities and claiming crip<sup>6</sup>**

The political/relational model does not rely on a fixed definition of “disability” and “disabled person” but recognizes the parameters of both terms as always open to debate. Kafer introduces the notion of “collective affinity” and the possibility of “claiming crip”. She argues that if we move away from a medical/individual model of disability,

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<sup>6</sup> Part of this elaboration I have worked out earlier in my essay *Speels Collectief - a collective claiming crip* (2020).

identification with disability cannot be solely linked to diagnosis. Disability can be seen less as a diagnostic category, and more as a collective affinity. Drawing on the cyborg theory of Haraway, historian Joan Wallach Scott describes collective affinities as ‘playing on identifications that have been attributed to individuals by their societies, and that have served to exclude them or subordinate them’ (quoted in Kafer, 2013, p.11). Collective affinities in terms of disability could encompass everyone from people with mobility impairments, to people with mental illness, to people with Down syndrome, to people with learning disabilities. All these people can be discussed in terms of disability politics, ‘not because of any essential similarities among them, but because all have been labeled as disabled or sick and have faced discrimination as a result’ (Kafer, 2013, p.11). Disability activist and artist Simi Linton (quoted in Kafer, 2013, p.11) writes:

We are everywhere these days, wheeling and loping down the street, tapping our canes, sucking on our breathing tubes, following our guide dogs, puffing and sipping on the mouth sticks that propel our motorized chairs. We may drool, hear voices, speak in staccato syllables, wear catheters to collect our urine, or live with a compromised immune system. We are all bound together, not by this list of our collective symptoms but by the social and political circumstances that have forged us as a group.

Kafer argues for an expansive disability movement that engages in a critical reading of identities, locations and bodies. She aims for theorizing disability in a way that is accountable for, and traces the ways in which, disabled people have been ‘forged as a group’, to use Linton’s words. But, Kafer (2013, p.12) highlights, theorization of disability also needs to ‘trace the ways in which those forgings have been incomplete, or contested, or refused. We need to recognize that these forgings have always already been inflected by histories of race, gender, sexuality, class, and nation.’ In other words, we must think through the assumptions and erasures of “disability” as a category, and we must consider the ways in which this category has been used and with what effect. Kafer suggests imagining a “we” that includes folks who identify as or with disabled people, but do not have a disability themselves. Even people lacking any symptoms of impairment could identify with disability, or claim crip, thereby presenting disability as

a collective affinity instead of a diagnostic category. Attention to questions about the histories and effects of disability claims and the varying availability and viability of disability identification, distinguishes the non-disabled claim to crip I am discussing here from the, in Kafers (2013, p.13) words, ‘well-intentioned but deeply ableist declaration that “we are *all* disabled”.’ This declaration obscures specificities of the lived experience of disabled bodies, conflating all experiences of physical, mental, or sensory limitation without regard to structural inequality or patterns of exclusion and discrimination. To claim crip critically, is to recognize the ethical, epistemic, and political responsibilities behind such a claim. A non-disabled individual, or - as I argue in this thesis - a theater company, could claim crip as ‘a way of acknowledging that we all have bodies and minds with shifting abilities, and wrestling with the political meanings and histories of such shifts’ (Kafer, 2013, p.13). Without all of them necessarily being familiar with crip theory, I would argue that Theater Thikwa, Stopgap Dance Company and Speels Collectief could be regarded as claiming crip, since they very consciously offer a refusal of simplistic binaries like abled/disabled and wrestle with the political meanings of such binaries.

Terminologies like “cripple” and “claiming crip” might seem offensive and harsh to communities outside feminist culture and disability activism, but exactly that harshness may be a part of its appeal. Feminist writer and disability activist Nancy Mairs (quoted in Kafer, 2013, p.15) suggests: ‘People - crippled or not - wince at the word “crippled” as they do not at “handicapped” or “disabled”. Perhaps I want them to wince.’ The desire to make people wince could be seen as an urge to shake things up, ‘to jolt people out of their everyday understandings of bodies and minds, of normalcy and deviance’ (Kafer, 2013, p.15). With their semblance of harshness words like “queer”, “crip” and “cripple” evoke a response that illuminates common responses of the normative to the deviant. Queer and crip theorist Carrie Sandahl prefers the terms “crip studies” and “crip theory” over “disability studies”, since ‘crip theory is more contestatory than disability studies, more willing to explore the potential risks and exclusions of identity politics’ (Kafer, 2013, p.15). I choose to relate crip theory to my researched companies, because I recognize the appeal of the term’s harshness. In general, I argue, theater makers do not have the aim to reassure or to lull to sleep, but to

ask questions, to denounce and to shake things up.

### **Queer theory and ever changing horizons**

As mentioned in my elaboration on the different models of disability, in this thesis I argue for a hybrid political/relational model of disability read through feminist and queer perspectives. Although this thesis is not extensive enough to go very deeply into queer theory itself, a feminist framework and a queer perspective will be present throughout my whole research. Therefore, I will briefly discuss how queer theory relates to crip theory.

In *Introduction: Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence*, queer and crip theorist Robert McRuer (2006, p.1) indicates a ‘growing awareness of the intersection between queer theory and disability studies.’ Both queer and crip theory are contested terrain, with theorists and activists continuing to debate what and whom queer and crip encompass or exclude. Feminist scholar and philosopher Judith Butler (quoted in Kafer, 2013, p.16) argues for queer as a ‘site of collective contestation’ to be ‘always and only redeployed, twisted, queered’. Queerness, according to Butler, is thus something to be queered itself. In *Introduction: Feeling Utopia*, performance studies and queer theory scholar José Esteban Muñoz (2009, p.1) states:

Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness’s domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present.

Queer theory could be positioned as kin to crip theory, since both queer and crip are fluid and ever changing, claimed by those whom it did not originally define. According to Kafer (2013, p.16) ‘critical examinations of compulsory able-bodiedness and compulsory able-mindedness are queer and crip projects.’ To be enacted without flattening out or stabilizing “crip” and “queer”, these examinations need

critical attempts to trace the ways in which compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness and compulsory heterosexuality intertwine in the service of normativity; to examine how terms such as “defective”, “deviant”, and “sick” have been used to justify discrimination against people whose bodies, minds, desires, and practices differ from the unmarked norm; to speculate how norms of gendered behavior - proper masculinity and femininity - are based on non-disabled bodies; and to map potential points of connection among, and departure between, queer (and) disability activists. (Kafer, 2013, p.17)

This argument relates to intersectional theory, which refers to the interactivity of social identity structures such as race, class, sexuality and gender in experiences of privilege and oppression. According to feminist theorist and culture critic Aimee Carrillo Rowe (2005, p.30) intersections between normalizing discourses such as masculinity, whiteness, heterosexuality and ableism need attention ‘in order to more adequately map the production of normative privilege and how it wields power to hail subjects into hegemonic forms of belonging.’ In line with arguments about the interactivity of social identity structures, also queer and crip cannot be seen as discrete, fixed identities. In this research, I will not approach them as a fixed positioning. On the contrary, my aim is to trouble and to question identification with disability, crip and queer. I argue for thinking disability differently, for seeing disability as contested and contestable. To question disability - or, to put it differently, to queer disability - opens up the possibilities of new, shifting or unforeseen answers.

### **Three inclusive art companies**

Before going deeper into the data I have collected in my interviews and linking the vision and practice of the investigated companies to my theoretical framework, I will briefly introduce each company individually.

#### **Theater Thikwa**

Theater Thikwa is a theater company based in Berlin, Germany, where artists with and

without so-called disabilities make theater together. Thikwa presents dance theater, text-based theater and music theater in its own performance venues in Berlin and in guest performances around the world. Thikwa searches for new forms of expression in which personal characteristics of the performers play a main role. The current ensemble of Theater Thikwa consists of forty-four permanent performers. In addition, Thikwa has fifteen employees.

Theater Thikwa was founded in 1990. At that time inclusive theater, or diverse theater as the members of Thikwa prefer to call it, did not exist in Germany on a professional level. Thikwa's approach in which it brought together performers with and without a disability was revolutionary, as well as the fact that Thikwa regarded all performers with a disability as professional artists. When Thikwa was founded, the discussion was *if* people with disabilities were able to produce art. According to Gerd Hartmann, artistic director of Theater Thikwa, 'that question is not thinkable anymore. Thikwa is now totally accepted in the German theater scene.'

All permanent members of the ensemble of Theater Thikwa are people who officially have a disability. They are educated at Thikwa within special workshops. Within their performances, Thikwa collaborates with external artists from the independent performing arts community. Artists with classical educations and artists with educations at Thikwa are thus mixed, which is one of the main principles of Thikwa. For this research I interviewed Nicole Hummel and Gerd Hartmann, the two artistic directors of Theater Thikwa. I also interviewed Hannah Grzimek and Max Edgar Freitag, two performers from Thikwa's ensemble.

### **Stopgap Dance Company**

Stopgap Dance Company is based in Farnham, Surrey in the UK. The company creates dance productions in which disabled and non-disabled artists collaborate. Stopgap works from the belief that each dancer's unique and individual strengths can be developed, and that diverse dancers can form an integrated group if they share their strengths and establish a sense of togetherness.

Stopgap Dance Company was founded in 1995 as a community dance project. It was the first project in the UK that integrated learning disabled, physically disabled and

non-disabled dancers. According to artistic director Lucy Bennett ‘Stopgap started like most inclusive companies do: unpaid, not having any space for many years, fighting for recognition.’ Stopgap gradually transitioned from a community group to a professional company, developing its own dance technique and inclusive choreographies. In 2006 Stopgap Dance Company became a Regularly Funded Organization, meaning that since then it received regular funding from the arts council.

Stopgap Dance Company currently employs approximately thirty people, including performers, educators, producers, and management. The company consists of an artistic side, including the professional company and its performances, and a community side, consisting of community and advocacy projects. Laura Jones, dancer at the company, explains: ‘Artistically we’re interested in quality art, in something that has an artistic myriad. But the side we also have in our company is advocacy for better inclusive practice, better opportunities for training and development of diverse artists.’ By different learning projects and by training dance teachers and artists to be able to work inclusively, Stopgap enlarges the opportunities for people who do not have access to mainstream dance. For this research I interviewed the two women mentioned above, who both played an important role in the development of Stopgap Dance Company: Lucy Bennett, as said Stopgap’s artistic director, and Laura Jones, dancer and head of talent development.

### **Speels Collectief**

Speels Collectief is based in Arnhem, the Netherlands. The search for how to describe ourselves is ongoing, but this is how I would describe our company today: Speels Collectief is a diverse theater company, consisting of disabled and non-disabled performers. Together we make interdisciplinary theater performances. We value all individual capabilities equally, because we believe our mutual differences are our greatest strength.

Sanne Arbouw and I founded Speels Collectief in 2015. We perceived the Dutch art world as fairly homogeneous and normative. In an attempt to change that, we started a theater company for people with a physical or a mental disability. Pretty soon we felt uncomfortable with the fact that we had founded a theater company especially for

“people with disabilities”. Why should our performers be considered a specific group of people? We wanted to resist the dichotomy of people “with” and people “without” disabilities because, as we reasoned, we all have disabilities, don't we? We discovered: yes, we do all have disabilities, but for us to claim disablism obscures the discrimination people *regarded* as disabled face. With the formation of our company we did not want to reinstate the dichotomy of able-bodied and disable-bodied individuals, so we became a theater company for people “with” and people “without” disabilities. We chose to keep naming the two different categories in an attempt to do justice to the structural inequality and the patterns of exclusion when it comes to dis/ablism.

Today, Speels Collectief consists of fifteen permanent performers and three employees. Every year we have more opportunities to involve professional artists in our productions and more venues to perform. In 2020 we established Stichting Speels Collectief, a foundation with its own statutes. Our objectives<sup>7</sup> are formulated as follows:

- To promote opportunities to participate in and to make art and culture accessible to anyone facing social exclusion for any reason;
- Destigmatization of people with physical, mental and/or social disabilities;
- Destigmatization of art in which people with physical, mental and/or social disabilities participate.

For this research I interviewed Sanne Arbouw, co-founder and co-artistic director of Speels Collectief, and Beppie Jansen, one of our permanent performers.

## **Six themes causing contradictions or difficulties**

Now that I have introduced the three companies I investigate, I will focus on my research question: What contradictions and what difficulties do inclusive art companies face, and how do they deal with them? In answering this question, I will elaborate on different aspects that came up throughout the conversations with my interviewees. After

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<sup>7</sup> Our objectives were originally formulated in Dutch, for this thesis they have been translated into English.

having collected all my data, I could identify six themes that I consider relevant to answering my question. In the first place, I will highlight the companies' vision when it comes to the meaning of dis/ability. Secondly, I will go into their ideals and practices with regard to inclusion and diversity within theater. Thirdly, I will discuss the companies' position in the arts field and their relation to critics. After having elaborated on these three aspects, I will focus on how the companies are organized. In the first place, who is in charge of the companies and why? In the second place, how are the companies organized financially? And finally, on what basis do inclusive art companies select the people who are part of it? I will link all themes to facts and certainties within each company, but more emphatically I will focus on the difficulties and contradictions that my interviewees encounter in each of them.

### **The companies' vision when it comes to the meaning of dis/ability**

In this paragraph I will elaborate on the companies' view on the dominant framing of disability, and on the meaning of disability according to my interviewees themselves. In general, my interviewees argue for a framing of disability in line with the political/relational model. Since current, western society is based on a fixed dis/ablism binary, there is a discrepancy between the dominant discourse and how my interviewees perceive disability, which causes questions or difficulties in their daily practice.

My first interviewee is Beppie Jansen, performer at Speels Collectief. She states: 'I am someone with a disability, but in my view everyone has a disability.'<sup>8</sup> If everybody has a disability, I ask her, why do you call yourself someone with a disability? 'I have learned to call myself like that. People want clarity, they think they understand better who I am if I call myself disabled.'<sup>9</sup> According to Beppie, the term "disability" is created in order to divide society into clear categories, not because there are any essential similarities between disabled people. Sanne Arbouw, co-artistic director of Speels Collectief, exposes a difficulty that I myself also experience in working in our company. She explains that she strives for an elimination of the dis/

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<sup>8</sup> 'Ik ben iemand met een beperking, maar in mijn ogen heeft iedereen een beperking.'

<sup>9</sup> 'Ik heb geleerd om mezelf zo te noemen. Mensen willen duidelijkheid, ze denken dat ze beter begrijpen wie ik ben als ik mezelf beperkt noem.'

ablism dichotomy, but that she sometimes experiences a dichotomy on a personal level: ‘I am now only talking about our performers with a mental disability, but I notice that they communicate in a different way than you and me. This ensures that I have not become friends with them, for example. Even though I find that painful.’<sup>10</sup> So Sanne explains that she does experience a dichotomy between our disabled and our non-disabled performers, which is in contrast to our argument that an essential dichotomy does not exist. ‘However,’ Sanne emphasizes, ‘the difference in itself is not the problem. The hierarchy attached to it is the problem.’<sup>11</sup> According to Sanne, the social norm and our behavior in this regard must change: ‘When we realize that someone is different, as a society we can shrink back or move towards it. We often shrink back, but we have to move towards it. We must ensure that the difference does not lead to discrimination.’<sup>12</sup> Sanne argues that it is precisely in the arts that we can show the beauty of mutual differences, without having to measure them against social norms.

According to Gerd Hartmann, one of the artistic directors of Theater Thikwa, German society puts much effort into finding politically correct words in order to avoid words like “disabled” and “disability”: ‘All these words just don't describe what it is. Some people are different, that's it. We don't have to wrap that.’ Gerd argues for admitting, even celebrating mutual differences: ‘Within Thikwa we are all different, and that's perfect! Some things are possible to approach, some things aren't. Sometimes there are misunderstandings, sometimes there's no understanding at all. With all of the contradictions and limits we have to deal, and we want to deal.’ Nicole Hummel, co-artistic director of Thikwa, adds: ‘Show me one person that's not crazy, do you understand? It's not possible to categorize people, whatever words we use.’ I ask Nicole if she ever uses the word disability when she explains what Theater Thikwa is: ‘Our performers have different abilities, so I prefer to say mixed-abled.’

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Ik heb het nu alleen over onze performers met een verstandelijke beperking, maar ik merk dat zij op een andere manier communiceren dan jij en ik. Dit zorgt ervoor dat ik bijvoorbeeld geen vrienden met ze ben geworden. Ook al vind ik dat pijnlijk.’

<sup>11</sup> ‘Het verschil op zichzelf is niet het probleem. De hiërarchie die eraan verbonden wordt is het probleem.’

<sup>12</sup> ‘Bij het besef dat iemand anders is, kunnen we als maatschappij terugdeinzen of eropaf gaan. We deinzen vaak terug, maar we moeten eropaf gaan. We moeten ervoor zorgen dat het verschil niet leidt tot discriminatie.’

Like in the Netherlands, in Germany there are special workshops for disabled people. Since only disabled people work there, the workshops systematically reaffirm a dichotomy. Max Freitag, one of the performers at Thikwa, has serious reservations about these workshops:

I want to say that I am a very intelligent person. Very many people in the workshops are intelligent too, very intelligent. If you are an intelligent person and you do things like bouncing with a hammer all the time, it's not good for your brain. It's not good for your creativity, it's not good for your soul, it's not good for your feelings. If you do it too long, it can cause psychological pain. Even people who aren't as fit as me, they don't like it, but they have to do it. They have to say that they don't like it, because otherwise you always have to do what you don't want to do. You have to stay in the workshop and you don't have access to another thing.

I understand from Max's words that the workshops not only reconfirm the dichotomy, but also fail to see the potential of disabled people. The workshops prevent these people from developing their potential, and in line with Max I argue that especially this creates a dichotomy. To put it differently, by constructing a dichotomy and arranging the system accordingly, the dichotomy becomes reality. I ask Max about his job at Theater Thikwa:

Well, I'm just an actor like you. Yes, I have a handicap, but I don't say that, it's not a big thing. Handicap is only the norm. People always say: 'You are handicapped.' But who is allowed to say it's a handicap? I could say: 'I am a woman, that's a handicap.' I could say: 'I am a black man, that's a handicap.' Nothing is a handicap and anything is a handicap for me.

Max's answer is in line with the political/relational model of disability, regarding disability as a site of questions rather than firm definitions. Hannah Grzimek, performer at Thikwa as well, agrees with Max: 'People always think they are normal, but they are actually not normal. They are crazy too, they have some stuff too, but they don't say

they have it.’ I ask Hannah and Max if according to them, a handicap is nothing but a norm. Max considers it for a moment: ‘Yes... and a handicap is an opportunity, of course. But I think we talk too much about handicaps and disability, let’s talk about theater!’

Whereas my interviewees from Theater Thikwa advocate for not emphasizing disability, Lucy Bennett, artistic director of Stopgap Dance Company, argues: ‘We are really proud of the fact that disability culture is part of our company. We wouldn’t have developed our dance style or choreographic methods without disabled people in the company.’ Like in Germany, in the UK words to describe disabled people change quite regularly: ‘Nowadays we don’t say “a person with a disability”. We say “a disabled person”, because it’s their identity, you can’t separate the person from the disability. We also have people saying: “I self-identify as disabled.” There’s an ownership in that.’ Lucy argues that within Stopgap ‘we just have to always check in with our dancers how they want to identify.’ Lucy’s emphasis on Stopgap’s pride in disability culture could be related to crip theory, as well as her view on disability as something that can be claimed and identified with.

Laura Jones, dancer at Stopgap Dance Company, teaches the models of disability outlined above in Stopgap’s learning projects: ‘An important reference point for Stopgap, is that as a society we all have the responsibility to work towards making society more accessible, and to work towards more equitability.’ According to Laura, disability needs to be named because of the barriers disabled people face: ‘There is an enormous lack of opportunities for disabled people. Therefore, when you make something that is designed to not have barriers for them, you have to mention that specifically. We need to name it in order to be able to address it.’ In her plea to keep naming disability, Laura emphasizes the importance of an awareness of why you name and categorize: ‘Are you naming in order to segregate or to put something in combat, or is it in order to figure out opportunities?’

My interviewees have been actively researching the meaning of disability inside and outside their companies. Within their company, disability is framed differently than in the rest of society. This creates difficulties in the organization of the companies, which I will elaborate on more specifically in following paragraphs. In line with the

political/relational model, my interviewees position disability as a set of practices and associations that can be critiqued, contested, and transformed. They argue that disability is implicated in relations of power, and that those relations, their assumptions and their effects are open to dissent and debate. My interviewees advocate for celebrating differences as an integral part of what makes us human, and argue that mutual differences can enrich the art world and society as a whole. Theater Thikwa emphatically tries to avoid “disabled” as a term, while Stopgap Dance Company claims and celebrates the term as something to identify with and to be proud of. Speels Collectief is still searching for the right words to describe the performers and itself as a company. I would argue that, although the companies deal with word choice differently, in each company one could speak of a collective affinity with regard to disability. According to my interviewees, the differences between people framed through the dis/ablism binary are being framed through ableist understandings of the body taken as common sense. They aim for an awareness that these ableist understandings circulate widely in society and within contemporary theater, and advocate for change therein.

### **The meaning of inclusion and diversity**

In this section, I will discuss the researched companies’ ideals and practices with regard to inclusion and diversity. I will start by highlighting the term inclusion. By elaborating on what my interviewees said about it, I will outline debates and contradictions surrounding this term. Then I will elaborate on how inclusion and diversity take shape in the companies’ daily practice.

#### The term inclusion and what it expresses

The common terminology in Europe to describe companies like the three I am researching is currently “inclusive”. I myself have always felt uncomfortable with that term and I try to avoid calling Speels Collectief an “inclusive theater company”. I have the feeling it expresses that we work with people who do not actually belong. Besides that, for me calling ourselves “inclusive” seems to shift the focus from artistry to charity or welfare. I ask Sanne what inclusion means to her: ‘Inclusion... actually that’s nothing. The term exists because something is *not* there. Because there are people who

are excluded, who are not given opportunities.’<sup>13</sup> She adds: ‘But in this world we have to mention that we are “inclusive”, because most places are not. There are only a few companies that consciously try not to be racist, not to be sexist, not to be ableist, so therefore those companies should be called inclusive.’<sup>14</sup> Gerd interrupts when I ask him a question about his “inclusive” company: ‘We prefer to call Thikwa diverse, since inclusive is a very exclusive word. Diverse means that we are open to every facet of being human. We are open to all colors of life, to put it another way.’ In line with Gerd, I argue that the term diverse is more open and less categorizing than the term inclusive. The political/relational framework I elaborated on, recognizes the difficulty in determining who is *included* in the term disabled. It refuses ‘any assumption that it refers to a discrete group of particular people with certain similar essential qualities’ (Kafer, 2013, p.10). “Inclusive” seems to refer to a discrete group of people that should be “included”, and this is exactly what some of my interviewees and I find problematic about the term.

Lucy from Stopgap shines a different light on the term inclusive: ‘We’ve gone through many phases in describing ourselves as a company. Now we’ve come into the phase that disabled people have reclaimed the word disabled, and within Stopgap we’ve acknowledged that we wouldn’t be who we are without disability culture. Therefore we’re proud of and recognizing the fact that we’re inclusive.’ Above I outlined the main aspects of crip theory. In doing so, I have related claiming crip to claiming disability, and to the possibility of critical identification with disability. Lucy seems to apply this critical claim to inclusion. Whereas Sanne, Gerd and I try to avoid “inclusive” as the term to describe our companies, Lucy consciously reclaims the word. She is aware of the mechanism of exclusion that goes with the term, but she seems to disclose this mechanism by consciously choosing to call Stopgap an inclusive company. She describes different phases, in which claiming inclusion comes after being aware of the exclusivity of the term: ‘We’ve also had the phase in which naming inclusion was

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<sup>13</sup> ‘Inclusie... eigenlijk is dat niks. Het is een begrip omdat er iets *niet* is. Omdat er mensen zijn die worden uitgesloten, die geen kansen krijgen.’

<sup>14</sup> ‘Maar in deze wereld moeten we benoemen dat we “inclusief” zijn, omdat de meeste plekken dat niet zijn. Er zijn maar een paar gezelschappen die heel bewust proberen niet racistisch, niet seksistisch, niet “ableist” te zijn, en dus moeten die gezelschappen inclusief genoemd worden.’

avoided, the phase of saying: “No, we just dance, we’re just like any other dance company.” And we’ve visited companies in other countries where it’s still like that, but that’s fine. You have to go through that phase.’

All my interviewees recognize the difficulty in describing themselves as a company. Whereas some of my interviewees argue that the term inclusion expresses exclusion, others claim the word as something to be proud of and something that other companies should learn from. The debate about language is never ending, but since words shape reality, questions about word choice are considered relevant and topical by all my interviewees.

### Inclusion with regard to the companies’ working methods

Inclusivity does not only concern who is part of the companies, it is also about their working methods. In this section, I will explore how inclusion and diversity take shape in the companies’ daily practice.

With Speels Collectief, we believe art is pre-eminently a means of showing new perspectives. Therefore, we argue, it is important that everyone has the opportunity to be part of it in a professional context. We argue that in theater, like in the rest of society, many perspectives are excluded. Speels Collectief tries to create theater from those excluded perspectives, which means that the creative process is always a collective quest. One person is in charge of each performance and makes the final decisions, but during the process everyone provides input from their perspective. I ask Sanne why she tries to integrate the voices of our performers into her pieces: ‘All voices should be heard and seen, but I can never have someone else’s perspective. As a theater maker, I can only tell “all” stories if “everyone” takes part.’<sup>15</sup> According to Sanne, theater is the best way to engage with all these different voices and to make them accessible to the audience: ‘By interweaving different stories and making them theatrical, the people who watch it get different insights, they go along with the imagination.’<sup>16</sup> Sanne thus also involves the audience when we talk about inclusion: ‘We make theater *with* everyone,

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Alle stemmen moeten gehoord en gezien worden, maar ik kan nooit het perspectief van iemand anders hebben. Alleen als “iedereen” deelneemt, kan ik als theatermaker “alle” verhalen vertellen.’

<sup>16</sup> ‘Door verschillende verhalen te verweven en theateraal te maken, krijgen de mensen die ernaar kijken andere inzichten, ze gaan mee in de verbeelding.’

but also *for* everyone. It's also about who can see it, who comes into contact with it. We want to be accessible not only to those who are excluded, but also to those who do not normally see the excluded.'<sup>17</sup>

Theater Thikwa works in a similar manner to Speels Collectief. Gerd explains: 'We work with different choreographers and directors. They visit our workshops, and they discuss a lot with our people. In this exchange new topics occur. Thikwa isn't a place where you should come to with a fixed concept. The working process is a process of exploration, and of being open to anything that can happen. All the work we do is created by the whole team.' Max states in line with Gerd: 'It's not like someone comes up to us like: you have to do this and this and this, and now learn it. No, we make the performances together. I've got ideas, another performer has ideas, the scenographer has ideas. All of our ideas, our creativity, our visions come together, and we mix it.' Hannah explains that the qualities of the people in the group have a major influence on what ultimately becomes the performance: 'If we *have* this and this, we can *do* this and this, so we *make* this and this performance. Do you understand? It's great that we have so many different people with strangenesses and weaknesses, because on that basis Thikwa decides what the performance will be.' Also Nicole highlights the necessity of showing different perspectives in theater: 'We have a position that's conscious and critical of power structures and dominant narratives. The topics we cover in our performances are treated by people with a different perception of life.'

Laura from Stopgap Dance Company states that particularly Stopgap's community work is inclusive, 'because in that literally everyone is included. We welcome everyone and want to make sure that everyone is able to participate, and that there's equity within that. We want everyone to be able to work towards their full potential.' When it comes to inclusivity in Stopgap's working method and performances, Laura addresses the irreplaceability of each individual: 'Our performances are made on the dancers and with the dancers. We've had situations in which we had a cast change, but most of the time it's impossible to recast somebody without completely reworking

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<sup>17</sup> 'We maken theater *met* iedereen, maar ook *voor* iedereen. Het gaat ook over wie het kan zien, wie er mee in aanraking komt. We willen niet alleen toegankelijk zijn voor degenen die worden uitgesloten, ook voor degenen die de uitgeslotenen normaal niet zien.'

the piece.’ Laura prefers to call Stopgap’s performances “integrated” instead of “inclusive”, since ‘every individual is integral to the work.’

The companies I researched have a similar working method when it comes to inclusion. In all three one person is responsible for the end result, but during the process each company works as collectively as possible and the perspective of each individual performer is included in the making of theatrical material.

### **The companies’ position in the arts field and their relation to critics**

Aspects that came up extensively in every interview, were the companies’ position in the arts field and the way critics and audiences in general react to their performances. My interviewees notice a discrepancy between how they view themselves as a company, and how they are viewed by the outside world. In this paragraph, I will elaborate on this.

With Speels Collectief, we perform for students and teachers at academies in the arts sector and in the healthcare sector, at healthcare institutions for disabled residents and their caregivers, and at festivals dedicated to art made with and by disabled people. However, we never perform in a regular theater. Our performances are received with enthusiasm. The audience tells us the pleasure of the people on stage is contagious, people love to see how we work together, we get compliments for doing a noble job. However, we hardly receive any comment on the artistic quality of our performances. We wonder: when will someone criticize the scenography of our performances, or the light and sound? When will someone discuss the musicality of the spoken text, or the movement quality of our performers? The fact that these aspects are not criticized shows, I argue, that we are not taken seriously as an art company. When I ask Beppie about her view on this phenomenon, she underlines that Speels Collectief is not taken seriously in the art world. Beppie is convinced that this has to do with the fact that our company consists largely of disabled people: ‘At ArtEZ, the art academy where we rehearse, I sometimes notice that we are watched, or stared after, like: what are they doing here?’<sup>18</sup> Beppie stresses that inclusion does exist within Speels Collectief, but not

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<sup>18</sup> ‘Op ArtEZ, de kunstacademie waar we repeteren, merk ik weleens dat we bekeken worden, of nagestaard, zo van: wat doen zij nou hier?’

in the world outside our own company. She mentions the art academy again: 'It's great that we can rehearse there, but why aren't we involved in the normal stuff? For example, if there is an open day, why are we not invited?'<sup>19</sup> I am moved when I ask Beppie why we should be taken as seriously as any other company: 'Because we have just as much to say!'<sup>20</sup>

According to Sanne, what we do with Speels Collectief is still seen as a separate genre: 'Whether we're making a tragedy, a comedy, or documentary theater, we are categorized as "inclusive theater" anyway. Inclusion should be taken for granted, it shouldn't be seen as a separate category.'<sup>21</sup> In my view, art companies that include disabled people in the Netherlands are stigmatized as well-intentioned initiatives instead of artistically qualitative and professional. I ask Gerd if he thinks this counts for Thikwa as well: 'Well, Theater Thikwa is still one of the "inclusive theaters" in Germany, but in many critics it's not mentioned anymore, for heavens sake. We've been fighting for that for decades. We want to be taken seriously in the current theatre scene, because we produce art, as every other theatre does.' When I tell Gerd about our hope to be critiqued artistically, he immediately answers: 'I get that! We've had critics that were devastating, and I liked it! No... of course I didn't like it at that moment, but when they dare to say that a performance was really shitty, that's a form of being taken seriously.' Nicole adds: 'We've received prizes that big "regular" theaters in Germany received before. That's still very important for us, to be seen as a... well, I don't like to say as a "normal" theater, but as a theater that works at the same level as others do.'

Theater Thikwa and Stopgap Dance Company do perform in regular theaters, and according to Lucy many people are interested in inclusive dance today. She adds: 'However, as an inclusive company we still must be very careful about our reputation. We always have to work four times as hard, and we often fall into this trap of thinking that we have to do virtuosic stuff all the time, just to prove that we can. We're almost still proving that we can dance.' Lucy, who has also regularly worked in the

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<sup>19</sup> 'Het is geweldig dat we daar mogen repeteren, maar waarom worden we niet betrokken bij de normale dingen? Als er een open dag is bijvoorbeeld, waarom worden wij dan niet uitgenodigd?'

<sup>20</sup> 'Omdat wij evenveel te vertellen hebben!'

<sup>21</sup> 'Of we nu een tragedie, een komedie, of documentair theater maken, we vallen hoe dan ook onder "inclusief theater". Inclusie zou een vanzelfsprekendheid moeten zijn, geen aparte categorie.'

Netherlands, argues that ‘the UK is a bit ahead of the Netherlands with criticism and all that. However, it’s still hard to get the big papers to review our work. They prefer the classical ballet companies.’ In line with Lucy, Laura indicates that Stopgap is now taken seriously when it comes to the artistry of their work, but ‘when it comes to disabled people, we’ve definitely had challenges with the patronizing “they are doing so well”. We have to push harder for the quality of the art in order to be appreciated on the artistic myriad, rather than for doing a good job for including disabled people.’ Laura adds something interesting to the conversation about critics: ‘It’s hard, indeed, to get much genuine, critical feedback. I think people don’t dare to criticize, but they also don’t know how to. People don’t understand that you can be disabled and be an excellent dancer, but you can also be disabled and not be a good dancer.’

The difficulties that my interviewees expose with regard to getting critical feedback, and specifically this last comment from Laura, show the dominance of ableism in the current discourse. The fact that public and reviewers do not want or dare to criticize disabled people, exposes how society is perceived as being divided into fixed identities of abled versus disabled. The fact that people do not even know *how* to criticize disabled performers, shows how this perspective is reflected in the art world.

### **Questions and visions for the future with regard to company management**

In this section, I will discuss the management of the companies. I will focus on questions and difficulties that arise within each company when it comes to who is in charge. In addition, I will outline my interviewees’ visions for the future.

When Sanne and I founded Speels Collectief, we were not yet aware of the framing of disability as a political category rather than as an individual pathology. Feminist theories about the stigmatization of bodily variation and the ways in which assumptions about disability lead to resource inequalities and social discrimination, in recent years have led me to struggle with the fact that I, a non-disabled person, am in charge of Speels Collectief. I ask Beppie what she thinks about the fact that Sanne and I, two non-disabled individuals, lead our company. Beppie refers to a moment a few days earlier: ‘Do you remember Sanne’s reaction when we were not allowed in the ballet hall with our wheelchairs? She was furious. This example shows that you are very capable

of putting yourselves in our place.’<sup>22</sup> As long as Sanne and I continue to listen carefully to everyone, Beppie sees no problem in Sanne and I making the decisions for the entire company. Sanne states: ‘As a company we want to relate to society as it is today. Therefore, we constantly have to build a bridge between our company and the patriarchal, capitalist system. That takes a certain language that you and I speak. Society is not at all set up for our performers to take the lead.’<sup>23</sup> Also the management of Theater Thikwa does not include people with disabilities. I ask Gerd if he thinks that would be something to strive for: ‘I can’t imagine somebody with the possibilities of our people as the leading director of our theater. If you change the whole system it would be possible, but in the situation in which we are now, with all the bureaucracy, I am afraid it isn’t.’ Nicole adds: ‘In the leading team we don’t have people with disabilities, but we educate our people in a way that they can give their own workshops.’ With Speels Collectief we do the same: we train people to make them work as independently as possible, and we investigate everyone’s possibilities to give their own lessons or to make performances themselves. But like Nicole and Gerd, I do not see our performers in leadership roles in the Dutch system as it is. In fact, when we set up our foundation in 2020, I tried to have one of our performers be part of the board of our foundation, but in the Dutch system most of them are not allowed to sit on an official board.

At Stopgap Dance Company a few disabled people are in management positions, but also there everyone at the top is non-disabled. Lucy states that the next phase of the company is ‘to make sure that the disabled people that are actively developing and progressing the company start to take over the leadership.’ According to Lucy, in the UK this would be possible today: ‘We’ve come to a place in the country where there are enough disabled people who have experience in dance and in working in theaters. They can now speak up on behalf of dance and disability. Ten years ago they weren’t ready, they were emerging performers, but now we’ve reached a point where disabled artists

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<sup>22</sup> Weet je nog, de reactie van Sanne toen we niet met onze rolstoelen in de balletzaal mochten? Ze was woedend. Daaraan kun je zien dat jullie heel goed in staat zijn om je te verplaatsen in ons.

<sup>23</sup> Als gezelschap willen wij ons verhouden tot de samenleving zoals die nu is. We moeten dus steeds een brug slaan tussen ons gezelschap en het patriarchale, kapitalistische systeem. Daar is een bepaalde taal voor nodig die jij en ik spreken. De samenleving is er totaal niet op ingericht dat onze performers de leiding zouden nemen.

need to take over.’ Lucy and I discuss what skills a person needs to be able to be in charge of an inclusive company: ‘Our artistic director needs to be somebody that has a good understanding of the broad spectrum of disability and the needs of lots of different people, including the needs of our non-disabled dancers.’ According to Lucy one of Stopgap’s learning disabled dancers with Down syndrome ‘does have the potential to lead as an artistic director. However, whether the world is ready for that... I don’t know.’ Lucy also advocates for a non-disabled person in the lead, because non-disabled dancers outside of Stopgap sometimes need her to lead the conversation: ‘Many people don’t really believe that disabled people can dance. Then I have to be the person telling them they’ve been conditioned, because I was conditioned too. Our disabled dancers have never been through a classical training, so they do not have that context.’

When I ask Laura about the main difference between what Stopgap is right now and what it should be according to her, she also mentions the issue of leadership: ‘We should have disabled people at the top. The main reason that we have no disabled people in charge of our company, is that most of them didn’t have the chance to be educated to occupy a leadership role. It takes time to get there.’ Like Lucy, Laura highlights that there should be both disabled and non-disabled people to lead the conversation on why disabled dancers should be represented in the theater world: ‘It’s important that there is disabled leadership within the company, but I wouldn’t go the other way and only have disabled people. That would be segregation as well. But I think, because so often there haven’t been opportunities for disabled artists, we do have to do a bit of positive discrimination in order to restore the balance.’

According to Kafer (2013), practices and institutions that divide the “able-bodied”, “sane”, and “whole” from the “impaired”, “mentally ill”, and “deficient” create the conditions under which all of us live. They structure the situation within which each one of us comes to terms with ourselves and creates a way of life. The companies I research aim to overcome the division referred to in this argument, either by trying to overcome the dis/ablism dichotomy, or by trying to move away from the hierarchy attached to it. My interviewees confirm that maintaining a management of only non-disabled individuals endorses the hierarchical dichotomy. However, most of them emphasize the difficulty of changing this, because society is based on this dichotomy

and therefore not accustomed to disabled people in higher positions. In order to fulfill a bridging function between the companies themselves and the ableist world beyond, my interviewees highlight the need to also keep a non-disabled person in charge.

### **Financial structure of the companies in relation to the discourse on disability**

In line with Kafer (2013), I argue that the energy put into defining disability and impairment, and especially the desire for fixed definitions, cannot be divorced from the economic interests of such fixing. My researched companies face the reality of this argument on a daily basis. In this paragraph, I will elaborate on the companies' financial organization. Firstly, I will outline how the companies obtain their financing. Secondly, I will discuss the distribution of wages for the company members.

#### How the companies obtain their financing

The Dutch government pays a certain amount per day to institutions that "take care" of disabled people. The amount depends on the "severity" of the disability. The main income of Speels Collectief consists of money that our disabled performers bring with them when they join our company. Also Theater Thikwa's main income comes from funds made available for disabled people. Their permanent performers work within special workshops for people with disabilities, called Thikwa Werkstatt für Theater und Kunst. This is a cooperation between Theater Thikwa and a classical workshop for people with disabilities, the Nordberliner Werkgemeinschaft (NBW). In this cooperation Theater Thikwa is responsible for the artistic part, the NBW provides the organizational framework and the financial resources. Besides the income from the workshops for people with disabilities, Thikwa is financed by regular cultural funds. 'We are very happy with that,' Gerd explains, 'because in that regard we're really part of the "regular" German theater scene.'

Stopgap Dance Company is entirely funded by the arts council. When I ask Laura what she thinks is the greatest development of Stopgap since she joined it, she mentions this breakthrough in 2006: 'Then we got awarded this funding. We became what was called a Regularly Funded Organization.' According to Laura, receiving regular funding from the arts council has played a main role for Stopgap. From then on,

the company could focus on the artistic side and improve the quality of its productions. In addition, Laura emphasizes the role regular funding has played in being taken seriously in the art world. Becoming a Regularly Funded Organization ‘has given us stability, but also recognition. The arts council regarded what we were doing as good work, as something valuable for the theater landscape. That influenced how we were perceived.’

Since a few years, Speels Collectief has been partially funded by subsidy schemes that are aimed at allowing more people to participate in art and culture. We hope that in the future we will be funded by grants that do not just focus on participation, but on the art itself. This appears to be of importance for all three companies, since the nature of the financing partly determines the direction of the company as well as the recognition it receives in the professional field. Personally, I find it contradictory and inconvenient that Speels Collectief currently exists mainly because of the amounts that are made available for disabled people. One could argue that we exist due to the dichotomy we want to resist.

### The distribution of wages

Now that I have explained how the companies get their financing, I will discuss how the companies’ income is distributed among their members. This aspect is found to be of great importance in each company. For Theater Thikwa and Speels Collectief it causes discomfort, because the distribution of wages goes against their vision.

In my view, the only objective similarity between the disabled people within Speels Collectief, is that they come under the same funding stream. Speels Collectief receives money from the government for the people “with” a disability, and not for the people “without”. Besides that, we are only able to pay the people “without”. The way we are organized financially gives, against our will, the appearance of a clear dividing line between disabled and non-disabled individuals. Gerd recognizes these difficulties: ‘For us, even though we want to, it’s impossible to pay our performers with a disability. If we paid them, they would have to give what they earn to the social welfare system.’ Nicole and Gerd argue that this system at large scale must change: ‘The way Thikwa is financially organized is very old fashioned, but we don’t see a possibility to leave the

system as it is.’

I ask Max for how long he has been performing at Thikwa: ‘I’m here for ten years, so I received a gift-card: one hundred euros. When I’m twenty years here: two hundred euros.’ His answer implies that he attaches importance to the financial appreciation he received for having worked at Thikwa for ten years. Hannah and Max also emphasize the market value of what they do when I ask them when they think a performance is successful: ‘It’s up to the audience to decide. They come to see us, they pay. Like if we’re a baker: you come to us to buy a bread. If you don’t like the bread, it’s not a good bread. We do a job, like a baker, a normal job.’ Hannah and Max consider what they do a “normal” job, as do Nicole and Gerd. However, the German system is organized in such a way that only the latter get paid for their jobs.

Within Stopgap Dance Company everyone is officially employed. A pay scale is used depending on experience and time spent at the company. This scale applies equally to disabled and non-disabled people. Lucy stresses that ‘it’s really important that people are employed and paid. Sometimes our disabled people lose benefits because they’re earning a full-time wage, but it’s much better to earn your own money than getting your money from the government.’

I realize that I did not ask Beppie, one of our own company members who we never paid, anything about finance. We spoke about whether she regards Speels Collectief as a professional theater company: ‘Yes, we definitely could be.’<sup>24</sup> But then I did not go into our financial structure. Is that because of my own inconvenience? What does Beppie mean with *could* be? When I ask her, Beppie is willing to discuss the distribution of wages within Speels Collectief with me. Initially, she states that she should not be paid: ‘I feel appreciated by you, that cannot be expressed in money. Besides, only the professionals get paid.’<sup>25</sup> Later on in the conversation, she mentions something very essential: ‘If I was trained professionally, I would have to get paid. So that’s much more important, that the art academy is open to educating people like me.

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<sup>24</sup> ‘Jazeker, dat zouden we best kunnen zijn.’

<sup>25</sup> ‘Ik voel me gewaardeerd door jullie, dat is niet in geld uit te drukken. Bovendien, alleen de professionals krijgen betaald.’

That I get the opportunity to become a paid professional.’<sup>26</sup>

My researched companies strive to blur the line between disabled and non-disabled individuals. However, only at Stopgap Dance Company this dividing line is not reaffirmed by the way they earn their income and divide their wages. At Theater Thikwa and Speels Collectief, the financial organization underlines the dichotomy. This is the result of the dominant discourse on disability to which inclusive companies, contrary to their own views, have to adapt.

### **Questions surrounding selection criteria within inclusive companies**

With my interviewees I talked about the selection criteria used within their companies, and about questions and difficulties they encounter in the selection process. In this section, I take a closer look at this sixth and final theme that I address in relation to contradictions and difficulties faced by inclusive companies.

In recent years when I told people about Speels Collectief, I heard myself say: ‘We stretch the social and the artistic norm, since we question who can be part of an artistic product and who cannot.’ Since a while I wonder: do we really question who can be part of an artistic product? I doubt that, because our answer has always been: everyone. So far, everyone was welcome to join our company. As we strive for high artistic quality in our performances, I think we must select the people that are part of it. This is something I find difficult, because with Speels Collectief we want to resist the way people are admitted or excluded from the art world. However, I now argue, perhaps we should not reject selection in general. Perhaps we should reject *normative selection*, selection based on political and social mechanisms of exclusion. The question that arises is: if we do not follow the normative selection standards and aim for a group as diverse as possible, then on what basis should we select?

When I talk to Sanne about this topic, she does not agree with me stating that we have had no selection procedure at all: ‘We select people based on their urge to make something. People really have to want to work.’<sup>27</sup> In line with Sanne, Beppie states: ‘If

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<sup>26</sup> ‘Als ik wel professioneel was opgeleid, zou ik betaald moeten krijgen. Dus dat is veel belangrijker, dat de kunstacademie ervoor open staat om mensen zoals ik op te leiden. Dat ik de kans krijg om een betaalde professional te worden.’

<sup>27</sup> ‘We selecteren mensen op hun drang om iets te maken. Mensen moeten echt willen werken.’

you want to join Speels Collectief, you have to have the guts to show yourself.’<sup>28</sup> According to Sanne and Beppie, there has always been some form of selection at Speels Collectief, but they agree with me that so far we did not select on artistic qualities. According to Sanne, in the future ‘we need to select based on artistic skills and possibilities. Someone must have a talent for theater, but talent by our standards, not by the standards of the outside world.’<sup>29</sup> I ask Sanne about the difference between talent according to us, and talent according to the outside world: ‘Perhaps the talent is the same, but with us you don’t have to meet certain standards before we recognize that talent. If you have a talent for dance, you have a talent for dance. That doesn’t just apply to people with two legs and two arms, you know. Also someone who is in a wheelchair or someone who has spasms can have a talent for dance.’<sup>30</sup> According to Sanne, we are thus not looking for talent that matches a predetermined standard, but for talent for a form of art that has not yet been established. Perhaps that is why I find it so difficult to determine on what basis we should select. No standard has yet been set, and it may never be set because we consciously choose to think outside fixed frames and norms.

Theater Thikwa does have a selection procedure. Nicole explains: ‘Many people would like to join Thikwa, but our workplaces are limited. Like any other theater, Theater Thikwa searches for talented people.’ Gerd criticizes the current tendency in Germany when it comes to talent: ‘We’re almost not allowed to speak about talent anymore, because “everybody is talented”. But that’s just not true! There are people who have possibilities on stage and there are people who don’t have.’ I ask Gerd for Thikwa’s selection criteria: ‘For us it’s important that someone is able to work in a team, so that’s one criterium. But it’s hard to talk about other criteria, we just search for people who have these possibilities on stage, people who have something special.’ Nicole adds: ‘The real criterium is the willingness to make art, the will for artistic expression.’ When I ask Hannah and Max about Thikwa’s selection criteria, Max

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<sup>28</sup> ‘Als je bij Speels Collectief wilt komen, moet je het lef hebben om jezelf te laten zien.’

<sup>29</sup> ‘We moeten selecteren op basis van artistieke vaardigheden en mogelijkheden. Iemand moet talent hebben voor theater, maar talent naar onze maatstaven, niet naar de maatstaven van de buitenwereld.’

<sup>30</sup> ‘Misschien is het talent hetzelfde, maar bij ons hoef je niet aan bepaalde normen te voldoen voordat we dat talent erkennen. Als je talent hebt voor dans, heb je talent voor dans. Dat geldt niet alleen voor mensen met twee benen en twee armen, snap je. Ook iemand die in een rolstoel zit of iemand die spasmes heeft kan talent hebben voor dans.’

answers after taking a deep breath:

This is really a good question... We are all very different people, we may not really have anything in common. We have people who don't speak, but they can dance perfectly. We have people who can speak, but they are not so good at dancing. We have a person in a wheelchair, André, he can't move, he can't speak, but if he smiles... his face brings a thousand more emotions than I do when I tell a thousand sentences.

In line with Theater Thikwa, according to Laura, Stopgap Dance Company is interested in different bodies, in different ways of thinking and moving: 'For us, it's certainly not about technique in a traditional sense of the word.' Laura indicates:

It's always difficult to put your finger on why someone exactly is watchable, or engaging, or interesting. But one of the most important aspects for Stopgap, is that someone understands their own body. We talk about being a "master of your own body", or "finding your own virtuosity". For us, virtuosity doesn't necessarily mean getting your leg up till here. You can find virtuosity in presence, or in stillness.

All my interviewees find it difficult to describe the exact criteria in the selection procedure of their company. The companies strive for diversity in the group, and therefore mainly select people who add something to that diversity. A big difference between Theater Thikwa and Stopgap Dance Company on the one hand, and Speels Collectief on the other, is that the first two have been around for much longer and have built up financial stability. This puts them in a position to choose who they want to work with. Speels Collectief has not yet acquired financial stability. As mentioned before, disabled people who become part of our company generate income. We must allow many disabled people into our company in order to generate sufficient income, so we will not easily reject a disabled person. Conversely, a similar situation applies to non-disabled people. We have little budget to pay people, which means that we cannot easily

bind professionally trained artists to us. Therefore, non-disabled people who want to join our company voluntarily are admitted quite easily, because with them we are a more diverse group. There is a complicated and uncomfortable contradiction in this: we want to stand for artistic quality, but on the condition that we are an inclusive, diverse company. However, that condition prevents us from making choices based on artistic quality. Due to financial structures inclusion and artistic quality thus get in each other's way, while we strive for them to reinforce each other.

Should we ever find ourselves in the situation where we no longer have to take financial issues into account, I argue that when it comes to artistry or talent, the selection criteria to join Speels Collectief should be more or less the same as to join other companies. However, I would argue that at Speels Collectief positive discrimination should apply to people who structurally get fewer opportunities, because we believe they should be represented. I would say: with equal qualities, we choose the people with perspectives that do not tell the dominant narrative. At the end of our conversation, Beppie poignantly remarks: 'We aren't as diverse as we should be. For example, at Speels Collectief there are almost no people who come from another country. We have so many people of foreign origin in Arnhem, people who have fled. Or what I would also find a challenge, is to work with people who are homeless. We could tell their stories.'<sup>31</sup> Beppie is not familiar with the concept of intersectionality that I briefly outlined at the end of my theoretical framework. Here, however, she addresses the single-issue analysis that intersectional theory challenges. Although we are less ableist than many other theater companies, institutional racism and classism also penetrate us, causing that we are indeed not yet working with 'people who come from another country' or 'people who are homeless'. This exposes a final, very important aspect when it comes to difficulties and contradictions within selection procedures of inclusive companies. With Speels Collectief and in this research, my focus has been on the notion of disability in an ableist discourse. Also the focus of my interviewees is on ableism as the dominant discourse to be resisted within their company. However,

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<sup>31</sup> 'We zijn niet zo divers als we zouden moeten zijn. Bijvoorbeeld, bij Speels Collectief zijn bijna geen mensen die uit een ander land komen. We hebben in Arnhem zoveel mensen van buitenlandse afkomst, mensen die gevlucht zijn. Of wat ik ook een uitdaging zou vinden, is om een keer te werken met mensen die dakloos zijn. We zouden hun verhaal kunnen vertellen.'

ableism intersects with other normalizing discourses of belonging. These intersections need attention in order to map the production of normative privilege. In my experience the recognition of disability as a category of analysis alongside gender, race, class, and sexuality gets too little attention within inclusive companies. My goal for Speels Collectief in the future, is to more emphatically focus on mechanisms of exclusion when it comes to other categories of difference, as well as to address how disability is figured in and through these categories.

## **Utopia or future?**

I have now discussed my interviewees' vision when it comes to the meaning of dis/ability, their view on inclusion and diversity, the position of the companies in the arts field, questions and suggestions regarding company management, the financial structure of the companies and issues surrounding selection criteria. These six themes came up in the conversations because they raise questions from my interviewees and contradictions in the companies' daily practice. In my introduction, I stated that in this thesis I would find myself in the midst of contradictions. I would compare daily practice with ideals, and I would present the factual as well as the conceivable. In order to complete this promise, I would like to conclude by addressing what, according to my interviewees themselves, is the difference between the factual and the conceivable. What do they see as the greatest difficulty for their company? And what is their hope for the future?

When I ask Sanne to describe Speels Collectief as it is right now, she laughs and struggles with the answer: 'Speels Collectief is not yet what I would like it to be, since we strive for something that is not yet achieved. We want to overcome the categorization of people with art, which may be utopian. I think I should answer: Speels Collectief is a movement, an endeavor. I like that we are not standing still, that it's always a quest.'<sup>32</sup> According to Sanne, the main contradiction we encounter in working towards our goal is that 'we strive for no dichotomy between people with and people

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<sup>32</sup> 'Speels Collectief is nog niet wat ik zou willen dat het is, aangezien we streven naar iets dat nog niet bereikt is. We willen de categorisering van mensen opheffen met kunst, wat misschien utopisch is. Ik denk dat ik moet antwoorden: Speels Collectief is een beweging, een streven. Ik vind het mooi dat we niet stilstaan, dat het altijd een zoektocht is.'

without disabilities, but this dichotomy does exist in the rest of society. As a result, we ourselves again and again end up in that dichotomy.’<sup>33</sup>

I also ask Nicole and Gerd if there is a difference between Theater Thikwa as it is, and Theater Thikwa as they would like it to be. Nicole answers: ‘We’re content in the present, but there’s a lot of work to do.’ Gerd adds: ‘The system we have in Germany, with special workshops for people with disabilities, must change. And we hope for a future in which we have equal pay. To put it a bit provocatively: in the long term we should work towards abolishing ourselves as an institution.’ Hannah and Max have wishes for the future of Theater Thikwa as well: ‘More chances to go on stage, the audience must see us! The “normal” people have to know that we are not just people with disabilities, that’s our quest. People have to know our existence!’

When I ask Lucy if there is a difference between what Stopgap Dance Company is and what it should be, she answers:

Stopgap’s got it pretty good. However, there’s a lot of work to do in the industry. There are not enough disabled people training, because dance academies are just not taking them on. And the big companies don’t employ disabled people. Why? There are disabled people out there, and they are good! They should be in their pieces! And then there’s the audience, people still don’t come to see our work. I think Stopgap’s on course, but changes need to happen in the wider world.

At the end of our conversation, I thank Sanne for her time and her openness. She sighs: ‘We’ve only talked about political and social systems, not about theater at all! I know that we are almost forced to keep thinking about the system, but I also want to talk about what I find beautiful, what makes my heart beat faster as a theater maker.’<sup>34</sup> What Sanne says here is very meaningful. With my research questions and in my interviews I have gone into political discourses, into financial systems, I have discussed

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<sup>33</sup> ‘We streven naar geen tweedeling tussen mensen met en mensen zonder beperking, maar in rest van de maatschappij is die tweedeling er wel. Daardoor komen we zelf ook steeds weer in die tweedeling terecht.’

<sup>34</sup> ‘We hebben het alleen gehad over politieke en maatschappelijke systemen, helemaal niet over theater! Ik weet dat we bijna gedwongen worden om steeds over het systeem na te denken, maar ik wil het ook hebben over wat ik mooi vind, over waarvan mijn hart sneller gaat kloppen als theatermaker.’

organizational questions and struggles. I criticize the fact that when it comes to inclusive companies people place little focus on the art itself, but Sanne points out to me that within this research I myself have reproduced the idea that our focus cannot be on the artistic. In part I blame myself for that, in part it reveals how extensive the difficulties and contradictions in our work are. Some of my interviewees have briefly touched on the theater profession, but much more comprehensively they spoke about the social and political structures they encounter. For me, the fight for being taken seriously as a theater company, the fight for recognition on an artistic level, sometimes takes over from the art itself. In my view, this is the main contradiction Speels Collectief is dealing with.

All my interviewees long for a future in which disability is understood as valuable and integral in the art world and in society as a whole. According to Kafer (2013, p.16) ‘such expansiveness - mind and body, a crip of us all - can never be fully or finally achieved, but serves as a kind of hopeful horizon, “fluid and ever-changing” [...], and used in ways unimagined in advance.’ Is there a future conceivable in which inclusive companies and their theater practice set an example for other companies? Perhaps even a future in which they are the norm? A world in which companies like Theater Thikwa, Stopgap Dance Company and Speels Collectief coincide with the dominant political discourse. Our utopia or our future?

## **Conclusion**

### **Reflection on methodology, research design and findings**

In this research, I examined the contradictions and difficulties inclusive art companies face, and how they deal with them. In order to answer my research question, I have chosen to do qualitative research in which I conducted interviews that I related to academic literature. In our conversations, my interviewees and I focused on questions that arise within our companies, and on difficulties in reconciling our daily practice with our ideals. In doing so, I was able to collect stories of people who try to find solutions to social and political challenges that are discussed in my theoretical framework as well.

During the interviews, I experienced mutual recognition when it comes to the way in which members of each company think about and deal with these challenges. The six themes that I highlighted are topical for Theater Thikwa, as well as for Stopgap Dance Company and Speels Collectief, either because they cause difficulties or contradictions in their daily practice, or because they raise questions due to a discrepancy between the companies' view and the dominant discourse.

As a theoretical framework I made use of different models of disability, crip theory and queer theory. The different models of disability helped me to consider the dominant framing of disability in relation to the framing of disability by my researched companies. I have indicated that my researched companies think in line with the political/relational model, arguing that disability should be seen as contested and contestable. Crip theory and the notion of collective affinities helped me analyzing the meaning of identification with disability. I have stated that critical identification with disability and a claim to crip are possible for each individual as well as for my researched companies as a whole. Queer theory and the framing of queerness as an ideality, a way to imagine a future, helped me considering this research and the quest of inclusive companies as work in progress. It helped me not to strive for definitive conclusions or solutions, but to remain in the midst of contradictions and to build on the questions they raise. With this research, my intention has been to stimulate debate on the meanings and interpretations of dis/ability and of inclusive theater, and to increase recognition of the extensive role the dominant discourse on disability plays in western contemporary theater. I hope this thesis will offer a small contribution to the blurring of the constructed dis/ablism dichotomy in the art world, and in society as a whole.

In between the lines, I have given several suggestions for further research. To conclude this paragraph, I will mention them specifically. In the first place, since this research only focuses on companies in Europe, it would be relevant to examine the contradictions and difficulties for inclusive companies in a non-western context. A different political and social discourse will undoubtedly yield enriching insights. Secondly, it would be relevant to conduct a follow-up study that focuses more specifically on mechanisms of exclusion in the theater world when it comes to categories of difference other than disability, or a study that examines how disability in

theater is figured in and through these categories. My final proposal would be a research that focuses entirely on the artistic work of inclusive companies. An investigation in which their working methods are analyzed and made transparent for other companies in order to inspire their practice.

### **What I can say right now**

I chose to begin this thesis with three objective facts about Speels Collectief, because I felt that everything else could be questioned. In doing this research many questions have been asked, answers have been given, and new questions have emerged. Since I am writing in a culture in which inconsistency about disability is commonplace, I state that contradictions and unanswered questions are inevitable. As queer theorist Jasbir Puar (quoted in Kafer, 2013, p.19) argues: ‘Contradictions and discrepancies are not to be reconciled or synthesized but held together in tension. They are less a sign of wavering intellectual commitment than symptoms of the political impossibility to be on one side or the other.’ Questions can keep us focussed on the inconclusiveness of all conclusions, on the desire to think otherwise. In this thesis and with Speels Collectief, I argue for a crip and a queer politics as work in progress, open-ended, striving for but never reaching the horizon.

At the end of my conversation with Sanne, we spoke about moments that moved us. I close my thesis with two theatrical moments in which diversity is not a utopia, but a rich reality.

Merel: Let’s close with theater then. Would you like to describe a moment when you were touched by our performers?

Sanne: During the movement sequence at the start of our last performance, DE HOEKSTEEN VAN DE SAMENLEVING. A long line of people appeared very slowly. They did a series of four movements. Everything was meant to happen in sync, but because they are such different people, they did it all in their own way. And exactly that was the beauty of it, all those different interpretations of one

movement. It gave the suggestion of universal humanity. The idea: this is all of society, they are all human.

Merel: Shall I also tell you my best moment?

Sanne: Please!

Merel: That was during HAPPILY EVER AFTER, our performance about sexuality.

Joanne, one of our performers who is barely able to walk and has difficulty moving her arms, was lying on the floor. An artificial arm lay next to her. With that arm, Joanne began to caress herself very slowly. She pulled the arm over her body, so that the hand moved slowly from her forehead and cheek to her neck.

There was so much meaning in that! It was painful, because it wasn't a real arm or a real hand, so she had to do the stroking herself. But it was also very aesthetic, and sexy. The hand moved slowly down her neck to her breasts, to her navel and then along her genitals. It suggested a woman pleasuring herself in a very attentive, sensual way. It was beautiful because... we never see that.

Someone with legs that don't walk, with a curved back, who is sexy, who makes you gasp for a moment... That moves me, because then I see what it is all about. Because what I see is also about me. I can be politically engaged and activist, I can be academically educated, but at the same time I try to be a woman who lives up to all standards. I try to be beautiful enough, sexy enough, feminine enough. So when I saw that woman on stage, enjoying her own body, and incredibly sexy... It showed me that everyone can be. Walking or rolling, with or without an artificial arm. All those limiting standards that everyone tries to conform to were swept away. Joanne taught me something there. Our company taught me something.<sup>35</sup>



HAPPILY EVER AFTER, performance by Speels Collectief (2020)

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<sup>35</sup> Merel: Laten we dan afsluiten met theater. Wil je een moment beschrijven waarop je werd geraakt door onze performers?

Sanne: Tijdens de bewegingsreeks aan het begin van onze laatste voorstelling, DE HOEKSTEEN VAN DE SAMENLEVING. Heel traag kwam een lange rij mensen op. Ze deden een reeks van vier bewegingen. Alles moest synchroon gebeuren, maar omdat het zulke verschillende mensen zijn, deden ze het allemaal op hun eigen manier. En juist dat was de schoonheid ervan, al die verschillende invullingen van één beweging. Het gaf de suggestie van de universele mensheid. Het idee: dit is de hele samenleving, zij zijn allemaal mens.

Merel: Zal ik je ook mijn mooiste moment vertellen?

Sanne: Graag!

Merel: Dat was tijdens HAPPILY EVER AFTER, onze voorstelling over seksualiteit. Joanne, één van onze performers die bijna niet kan lopen en haar armen moeilijk kan bewegen, lag op de grond. Naast haar lag een kunstarm. Met die arm begon Joanne zichzelf heel langzaam te strelen. Ze trok de arm over haar lichaam, zodat de hand traag van haar voorhoofd en haar wang naar haar hals bewoog. Daar zat zoveel betekenis in! Het was pijnlijk, omdat het geen echte arm was en geen echte hand, en ze het strelen dus zelf moest doen. Maar het was ook heel esthetisch, en sexy. De hand ging langzaam via haar hals naar haar borsten, naar haar navel en daarna ook langs haar geslacht. Het gaf de suggestie van een vrouw die zichzelf bevredigt op een hele aandachtige, sensuele manier. Het was prachtig, want... we zien dat nooit. Iemand met benen die niet lopen, met een kromgegroeide rug, die sexy is, die ervoor zorgt dat je adem even stopt... Dat ontroert me, omdat ik dan zie waar het allemaal om gaat. Omdat wat ik zie ook over mij gaat. Ik kan politiek geëngageerd en activistisch zijn, ik kan academisch geschoold zijn, maar tegelijkertijd probeer ik een vrouw te zijn die voldoet aan alle normen. Ik probeer mooi genoeg te zijn, sexy genoeg, vrouwelijk genoeg. Dus toen ik die vrouw zag op het podium, genietend van haar eigen lichaam, en ongelofelijk sexy... Het liet mij zien dat iedereen dat mag zijn. Lopend of rollend, met of zonder kunstarm. Al die beperkende normen waar iedereen zich aan probeert te conformeren werden weggevaagd. Joanne leerde mij daar iets. Ons gezelschap leerde mij iets.

## **Acknowledgment**

First of all, thanks to all my interviewees for your time and your openness. You have thought, doubted, questioned and searched with me, and with that you have given me enough to write this thesis, but also to continue to build on Speels Collectief.

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Lucas and Orpheus, I must not forget to thank you a lot for your listening ear and your patience with my nervous nights.

Finally, I would like to thank all the performers of Speels Collectief, who keep showing me new perspectives. A special thanks to Sanne, who sometimes fights even harder than I do to make what seems like a utopia, our future.

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- Nicole Hummel and Gerd Hartmann, interviewed by Merel van Lieshout (13 April 2021)
- Hannah Grzimek and Max Freitag, interviewed by Merel van Lieshout (15 April 2021)
- Lucy Bennett, interviewed by Merel van Lieshout (05 May 2021)
- Laura Jones, interviewed by Merel van Lieshout (10 May 2021)

## **Additional**

- Statuten Stichting Speels Collectief (2020) signed by mr. Y. R. Hoekstra, notary in Tilburg (pp. 1-7)

## Appendix

The interviews for this research were conducted in March, April and May 2021. They all took place via Zoom and lasted 50 to 70 minutes. My interviews with Theater Thikwa and Stopgap Dance Company were in English. My interviews with Speels Collectief were in Dutch. During the conversation, my interviewees from Theater Thikwa were in their theater building in Berlin. I interviewed Nicole and Gerd together, as well as Hannah and Max. My interviews with Stopgap Dance Company and Speels Collectief were all one-on-one conversations. Lucy and Laura were both at home in the UK, Sanne and Beppie were at home in the Netherlands. I myself was at home every interview as well, switching between different rooms and different chairs to be able to change position every now and then, and to stay alert in what I feel was an eternal period of pandemic working from home.

With every interview I had my research question in mind, and a number of themes that I wanted to discuss. Sometimes we stayed more or less with these themes, but often the interviews became more of a conversation than just question and answer. My interviewees and I then guided the conversation together.

All interviews have been recorded and fully transcribed. A rough version of it was sent to my interviewees. At their request, I made minor adjustments to some transcripts. The fully elaborated version of all interviews was subsequently approved by them and can be requested from me via [contact@speelscollectief.nl](mailto:contact@speelscollectief.nl)