

Theatre & Disability **By Mallory Kay Nelson**

Introduction

Theatre and performance exist as places for storytelling. Disability has had its place in this system, but it has often been a mistaken representation. The acts of performance and storytelling were one of the first ways society shared and educated, and is still a major way of reaching mass audiences. From the time of the ancient Greeks, plays have included characters with disabilities, but these characters have been outcasts and undesirables. Most characters with a disability are written to focus on their hardships and rouse feelings of pity or disgust in the audience. Here, the focus is on this inner sense of turmoil, not normality and inclusion. Disability in theater often presents “disabledness” in the form of a person, rather than a person who also has a disability.

Background

Tobin Seibers, the author of *Disability Theory*, points out that an abled bodied performer portraying a disabled character is a type of drag. This disability-drag is often seen as acceptable in theater. Often such performances are considered particularly award-worthy, as evidence of an actor’s skill. For example, Alex Sharp won a Tony for his role as Christopher Boone in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night -Time* in 2015, playing a character with autism when he himself is not autistic. That same year, Bradley Cooper, who played *The Elephant Man*, was also nominated for a Tony. The disconnect between reality and acting ability shows how inefficient the portrayals are. Both the performance and the audience attempt to substitute a palpable fantasy for the reality that the actor actually lives. Casting disabled actors helps align these performances with reality, but this is rarely done.

Disability at the Theater

Before the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 it was difficult to know, as a disabled audience member, if it was even possible to patronize a theatre. Despite the work of the ADA, many places continue to be inaccessible. Accessible stages, backstages, and audience seating need to be part of how society thinks about inclusion of disabled people in all areas of theater.

It is rare to find disabled designers, technicians, and managers in the theatre industry. There are few of these professionals working and making a living in the field. Prejudice and discrimination play a major factor in the employment of people with disabilities in the theater industry as well as the lack of access behind the scenes. One organization having this conversation is the U.S. Institute for Theatre Technology. This organization has included disability in their diversity initiative and in their Gateway Mentorship Program. This program is bridging the connection between education and employment for the underrepresented people behind the scenes.

Inclusive Disability Theater

Currently, it is not common practice to include disability in a theatre’s inclusion and diversity initiative. However, one company that does include disability in their diversity initiative is the *Oregon Shakespeare Festival*. This company, based out of Ashland, Oregon, not only casts actors with disabilities, but also includes technicians with disabilities in their staff. Working backstage with a wheelchair user technician helped open their minds to the possibility of disabilities onstage as well.

Smaller community theatre organizations that have been developed just for disability inclusion include: *Tell'in Tales Theatre*, in Chicago, founded by Tekki Lomnicki in 1994, *Axis Dance*, in Oakland, founded by Thais Mazur in 1987, *The DisAbility Project*, in Saint Louis, co-founded by Joan Lipkin and Fran Cohen in 1996, and *PHAMALY Theatre Company*, in Denver, founded by five disabled actors who wanted to perform in 1989. Day programs for adults with intellectual disabilities around the country have also developed acting programs to develop social skills and life skills.

Case Study: PHAMALY Theatre Company

In the PHAMALY Theatre Company, all of the performers have disabilities. In their production of *Man of La Mancha*, Regan Linton was cast as the character of Dulcinea. They used her physical situation to add new depth to the character by ripping the actress out of her wheelchair during the scene in which Dulcinea is raped. This made the audience unquestionably aware of how vulnerable she was with her inability to escape the situation due to her paralyzed legs. This was followed by dragging herself back on stage to sing "Aldonza." From this perspective, the lines, "to a creature who'll never do better than crawl," are more invested with meaning than as originally written – exhibiting how PHAMALY has found ways to imbue originality into plays that may be thought to have been done in every way possible.

Designing for Disability

All designers bring their individual perspective to a production, and a designer with a disability is not any different. In the case of a designer with a disability, working with a performer with a disability means aspects of understanding can be easily navigated. Most able-bodied designer reactions are to correct or hide a body's imperfections. Such design removes much of the uniqueness that the disability of the performer brings to a piece.

When designing for the disabled actor, awareness of the technicalities of a disability is critical. For instance, a person with a spinal cord injury may have difficulty regulating his or her body temperature. This may mean that the actor is unable to wear hats or wigs due to potential overheating. When sign language is the primary method of communication, easy hand visibility in front of the costume necessitates wise color and pattern choices. Wheelchairs can go up ramps, but the set designer needs to be aware of what that movement looks like and the energy it takes. People with visual impairments are often talented at moving easily through space, but knowing how they do this can help a scenic designer. There are only a handful of designers with a disability who are currently working professionally, and who understand these nuances. Very few were disabled before going into their profession.

Conclusion

Witnessing a performer with a missing a limb, or in a wheelchair is only distracting for a short period of time until the viewer becomes familiarized – this is where normalizing disability starts. Having disabled artists in a performance setting puts the subject on the table to begin discussion and to promote conversation. Without room to show their skills in the roles afforded them, society's understanding of disability will not progress. Disabled theatre professionals have not expected the industry to change for them, but only ask for accommodations so they may access

their craft. Theatre, performance, and entertainment are powerful educational tools that can make the goal of social inclusion a reality.

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