

# **Inclusion of the Disabled Theatre Artist**

Thesis

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## **Introduction**

The topic of this thesis paper addresses the inclusion of the disabled American theatre artist both onstage and backstage. Presently, in American theatre, one does not come across many disabled actors, designers, and technicians working professionally. As a costume designer and technician with a disability it is hard for me to know where my place is in the industry. This had led me to seek out why this is the case and what disabled people in the theatre have already accomplished this endeavor. In my research I have found that there is a lack of education about inclusion of differently-abled designers not only in theatre but also in society as a whole. I feel that in order for inclusion to take place, society needs a greater understanding of what it is to be disabled. To achieve this, many layers of discrimination first need to be recognized. How both parties react to the subject of disabilities needs to be explored and altered. The stares that the disabled receive by the able bodied plays a part in the lack of social tolerance for the disabled. This will lead me to how performance can be a vehicle for social change in the inclusion of the disabled.

Through my investigation I have discovered that there are few performance companies, television shows and films that are actively seeking the addition of differently-abled artists. The exclusion of the differently-abled is becoming controversial by society's standards because of the media attention it has been receiving recently. I believe that in the future when disabled actors

become an accepted and proportionate part of performance, there will be a strong need for disabled designers to accompany these artists to assist in the transition to full inclusion. In my research I have found few differently-abled designers and technicians working in the professional theatre industry. I hope that through my investigation of how these few artists are accomplishing the task of finding appropriate accommodations for their needs, I can encourage others to enter the industry without the preconception that they will be judged by their disability and not their talent. Overall, the inclusion of the disabled artist in American theatre is desirable. We are one of the largest minority groups and bring rich meaning to the collective view of the human condition and to the diversity of theatre.

### **Understanding Perceptions and Influences about Disabilities**

Few people think about disabilities unless they are disabled themselves. Only rarely will a person encounter someone with a disability that requires special assistance beyond common courtesy. This leads to misunderstandings about what it is like to be differently-abled and the unseen choices that a person with a disability makes on a day-to-day basis. To comprehend the complexities of disabilities and theatre, one must first have a baseline understanding of what it is to be disabled.

### **Reality of American Disabilities**

There are more disabled people in America than one might realize. Tobin Seibers, a professor of English at the University of Michigan, in his book on *Disability Theory*, states, “At nearly 20 percent, people with disabilities make up the largest minority population in the United

States” (71). To put that into perspective, The Kennedy Center holds 2400 audience members; on average, 480 audience members would be differently-abled. These disabilities are sometimes visible but a majority of them are not. Most people become disabled due to injury or old age and, “only 15 percent of people with disabilities were born with their impairment” (Seibers, 71).

In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law. The ADA was written to break down barriers of access for the disabled to employment, transportation, public accommodations, public services, and telecommunications. Before the ADA it was difficult to know, as a differently-abled audience member, if it was even possible to patronize a theatre. Despite the work of the ADA, many places continue to be inaccessible. Wheelchair user, costume designer, and teacher, Frances Maggio says that she can’t see a majority of her students design work in the city of Chicago due to the lack of access for the disabled in many of the small theatres (interview).

Architecture is a major obstacle, “the social narrative of disability sees it as negativity,” that public spaces must be accessed by special means, “and the social world excludes disabled people through environmental and attitudinal barriers” (Kupper, 91). Many buildings do not have ramps for wheelchairs, Braille for the visually impaired, or elevators. And, since many buildings are historical landmarks, there is a bias against changing the architecture to include ramps and elevators. In addition to historic buildings, any businesses in existence before the ADA did not have to make changes. When buildings are renovated, ramps are generally added to the back of the building, out of the public’s view and by the trash. A person in a wheelchair is only disabled because of the architectural intricacies that go unmet.

Not only is access to public spaces denied to many people with disabilities, but employment is a major concern. According to Seibers, “disabled people are among the highest

unemployed and the lowest in income due to discrimination in the workplace” (Seibers, 190).

Discrimination is hard to recognize because these cases can be passed off simply as not being the right person for the job. Even with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, enforcing federal laws that make it illegal to discriminate against the differently-abled, many higher paying jobs are out of reach. Despite the educational systems that are in place to train for the workplace, this training usually focuses on menial jobs or has a disability advocacy focus. This inequity blocks access to the wide interests or opportunities that non-disabled enjoy.

### **Perceptions about Disability**

Society wants the individual with disabilities to conform to the group. In Philip Auslander and Carrie Sandahl’s book, *Bodies in Commotion*, they state that, “it is the ideology of ableism that tells us we should all look the same” (40). People don’t all look the same. We have variations in skin tones, facial features, height, weight, why would we not have different ways of moving and living? Why does this lead to the idea of what constitutes normal movement? Putting one foot in front of the other isn’t the only way to move forward, so does it have to be the normal way? For example by today’s standards, a working mother is perfectly normal, however in the 1950’s that would have been unusual. The fact that what is considered normal changes over time suggests that with time and effort it might be considered perfectly normal for a person to be in a wheelchair or otherwise differently mobile.

The idea of what it is to be disabled must change in society. Presently, “the experience of disability is often figured as a moment of rupture, as a tragic loss of certainty about bodily status, social and economic future” (Kupper, 87). This isn’t a healthy or normal way to be

perceived. Instead disability should be regarded as an individual trait, like hair color. Many people with disabilities try to fit into societal current expectation of norms, or “pass” as able-bodied, even when it isn’t in their best interest in terms of health and safety. The action of passing “fail[s] to change the existing system of social privilege and economic distribution,” even though, “those who pass improve their own life” (Seibers, 117). This need to pass as normal probably will not change, but the definition of what normal is, changes constantly. The term normal is inclusive to those who are seen as the majority. Adding people with disabilities into what is thought of as the majority’s opinion of normal will lead to an inclusive society with a stronger drive towards the good of the community and make the people comfortable with their own physical traits rather than making them feel diminished in the expectations of normalcy.

### How the Word Disability Plays a Part

As Aimee Mullins, an athlete, actress, fashion model, and double amputee, has noted; the word disability is synonymous with such terms as crippled, helpless, useless, wrecked, stalled, maimed, wounded, mangled, lame, mutilated, run-down, worn-out, weakened, impotent, castrated, paralyzed, handicapped, decrepit, laid up, done up, done for, done in, cracked up, and counted out. No one would want to be labeled with one of these terms. Mullins is working to redefine the word disability. In a TED talk (Technology, Entertainment, Design: conference devoted to ideas worth spreading), Mullins recount how this definition doesn’t define her and how the language we use to describe people also describes our society. Mullins was not told that a girl who is missing two legs couldn’t become an athlete or a model. Because of this it has led her on a life journey that is redefining what it is to be differently-abled. She thinks that, “the only true disability is a crushed spirit; a spirit that’s been crushed doesn’t have hope, it doesn’t

see beauty, it no longer has our natural child-like curiosity and our innate ability to imagine” (“Aimee Mullins”). The negative connotations attached to the word “disability” create a miscommunication about who a person actually is. No one walks into a job interview and tells their potential employer that they are useless, but in our culture being called disabled does just that. How is a minority group ever going to see the change it needs in order to thrive when the label “disability” is more debilitating than the actual disability? Telory Davies, Assistant Professor of Performance Studies at Missouri State University, emphasizes in her book, *Performing Disability: Staging the Actual, that*, “in essence, 'impairment' and 'illness' are about bodily differences, whereas 'disability' is about the social and political context in which our bodies operate” (19). Educating people about the misinterpretation of the distinction between bodily difference and ability would be a good starting point. Disability studies are still new to higher education and have yet to become routinely taught. It is now being taken into account that a disability is not just a medical issue but also a social one. (Seibers, 3) The word “disability” cannot encompass the diversity of this minority and contains many social stigmas that make this label difficult to overcome.

### **Understanding the Choices a Disabled Person Makes**

Beginning to tackle the negative connotations of the term “disability” is a matter of understanding more about what it feels like to be disabled and how a disabled person makes decisions based on their limits. Here are some examples of the challenges and choices that a person with a disability faces. Sieber uses the example of his mentor Irving Zola, who is a leader in disability studies and is disabled himself: having the ability to walk but needing to negotiate the distance he can achieve without risking his health or safety.

Zola is able to make his way through the airport at the beginning and end of trips, but the overuse of energy may mean that he will not have enough strength later in the day or the next day to meet his obligations. He turns to the wheelchair because traveling requires overcompensation, and people with disabilities are never more disabled than when they are overcompensating. "Just because an individual can do something physical;" Zola argues, "does not mean that he should. (Seibers, 107)

Overcompensating goes unnoticed by the able-bodied. What a person can physically achieve or do isn't always in his or her best interest. In some cases, getting help would be the better action.

People are capable of assisting others, but they seem to lack the ability to put it into action when it comes to those with disabilities. It is the lack of awareness of others that seems to get in the way of being of assistance. Even friends who are aware of a disability can fall short. Seibers personal example of this is,

We come to the stairs, and my friends, all fitness buffs, instinctively head for them. The elevator is in view. I fight my way up the stairs because I am too embarrassed to ask the others to take the elevator with me and too much in love with good conversation to take it alone. Let it be recognized that physical barriers are each and every one of them psychic barriers as well. (Seibers, 51)

Although it seems simple to ask for assistance, mental barriers exist and requests for aid are often met with negative responses. Therefore, a person with disabilities spends time and energy judging the gestures of people who could help them, weighing the guilt of inconveniencing someone against the difficulty of doing the task on their own, if it is even possible.

As a society it is the responsibility of both the community and the disabled person to foster awareness and take action. It is important to "bring disability out of the shadow of the ideology of ability, to increase awareness about disability, and to illuminate [it's] kinds, values, and realities" (Seibers, 9). In order to evolve into a more accepting society, people need to be

made aware that the way they live is not currently inclusive of all levels of ability. Allowing society to maintain the expectation that each and every person whom one may come into contact with walks on two legs, can hear and speak is not an actuality and should not be addressed as such.

Performance is a solution to the problem of social transformation. The act of performance and storytelling was one of the first ways society shared and educated and is still a major way of reaching the masses. Sandahl writes, “earlier scholars within disability studies looked askance at the arts, seeing them mainly as purveyors of negative images of people with disabilities” (Sandahl and Auslander, 6). Performance could be equally successful at propagating positive images of disabilities. The sharing of knowledge has always been at the forefront of what it is to be human and providing a venue such as performance to give greater insight into how inclusion can be accomplished starts the process. Creating awareness of societal exclusivity and what inclusion looks like is a beginning.

### **Changing Viewpoints through Performance**

Society must learn how to include people with disabilities to create an environment where both the differently-abled and non-disabled can coexist on equal terms. From the time of the Greeks until now, plays have included characters with disabilities, but these characters have been outcasts. Seibers finds many flaws with the present representation of disabled characters and believes that, “if people with disabilities are to enjoy full access to society, they will need to find theories that will advance literacy about disability to the next stage” (81).

A disabled person has the same rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as any other American. These inalienable rights don't seem to change how the handicapped are being treated. "All this is to say that the U.S. still does not know quite what to make of disability, and this is where performance can be of vital assistance" (Davies 14). Davies' book is one of few books on the subject of disability and performance on the modern stage. All of these books seek to exemplify people with disabilities as a positive, contributing, and normal part of society who valiantly fight the battle for inclusion. Disability advocacy has been attempting this impossible task for decades and, "only in the past ten years have the arts joined the conversation to any significant degree" (Sandahl and Auslander, 6). Inclusion requires participation by both parties in order to tell an accurate story. Only a person with a disability can help a person without a disability better understand who he or she is.

People obtain understanding through investigation and study of a subject. 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 the disabled in a performance setting puts the subject on the table to begin discussion and promotes conversation.

Disabled people need to be seen as individuals with certain limitations, as opposed to crippling impairments. Only then will they be a fully functioning part of society and not just a statistic. Sarah Bernhardt, who became disabled during her career, proved to be more than just a statistic. After the amputation of her leg in 1911, she continued to perform (Moses, 530). She was one of the greatest actresses of her time, and that was more important than the constraints of her missing limb. She went on to show the world that a disability didn't change who she was. She performed from a seated position; set pieces were designed for her.

Another ground-breaking contributor to the inclusion of disabilities is Joseph Chaikin. Even though he dealt with complications from rheumatic fever and a stroke that left him with partial aphasia, he was one of America's great playwrights and directors of the 1960s. Even with difficulty communicating, he went on to work with Mira Rafalowicz and Michael Posnic. Chaikin also worked with John Belluso, whose disability-themed plays were produced at the Mark Taper Forum and the New York Shakespeare Festival. "Half the battle is getting your foot, cane, crutch, or wheel in the door. Chaikin did this for disability." (Davies, 12) He is proof of how inclusion can create a better society and better art.

These trailblazers in the fight for disability in performance have proven how performance can help in society's understanding of the differently-abled. These leaders weren't people who expected the world to change for them but found a path that embraced who they were. Performance is a setting where in differences can change the viewers mind.

## **Counterproductive Representations**

Historically, disabled people have been confined to freak shows (Kupper, 31). These performance venues were not positive atmospheres for developing societal inclusion. The freak show gave audiences the opportunity to stare in exchange for money, "without recrimination or guilt at bodies that were markedly different" (Davies, 21). These shows were not intended to help provide an understanding of what a disability is but to satisfy the viewers' curiosity of otherness. The shows certainly did not allow the spectators to focus on the performer's value to

society. Freak shows kept people with disabilities on the fringe of social norms and provided a reason not to include them in every day activities.

In an era of social transformation and economic reorganization, the nineteenth-century freak show was a cultural ritual that dramatized the era's physical and social hierarchy by spotlighting bodily stigmata that could be choreographed as an absolute contrast to 'normal' American embodiment and authenticated as corporeal truth. (Garland Thomson, 1997: 63) (Kupper, 34).

Many freak show acts included people with disabilities who were not able to find other means of income. This was especially the case during the Great Depression of the 1930s. For many who wanted to perform it was a rare opportunity to be seen on stage. Eventually it became viewed as disgraceful to showcase the misfortunes of disabled people and the, “sideshowes were shut down in the 1970s in the US, a way of life and a way of making a living was taken away from performers all over the nation” (Kupper, 31). While this was a step in the right direction in terms of ridding society of negative stereotypes, there was no consideration of creating other, positive venues for these performers.

### **Misinforming Stereotypes in Performance**

Society has progressed from the voyeurism of the freak show and may be on the threshold of embracing the disabled as legitimate performers. Still, a disability is not considered part of a satisfactory or ordinary way of life. Any character with a disability is written to focus on their struggle, hardships and is seeking pity from their audience. Basically, “the disabled person in film is a stereotyping device that manages to convey narrational meanings economically and emphatically” (Kupper, 65). As such, the current representation of the

differently-abled character leaves much to be desired. The expectation that a person with a disability should be striving solely to escape the physical turmoil of dependency, suffering, and loss, does not allow for pursuing other substantial possibilities. Christopher Reeve in my opinion is a prime example. Although his disability led to more research to improve the lives of people with disabilities, he never embraced his existence as a disabled person and spent his energy trying to escape it. Most stories about the disabled focus on this inner sense of turmoil, not normality and inclusion.

In the past, stories have focused on the limiting factors of disability and not on existence as a human being. Performance scholars would like to believe that they are all inclusive in their studies but, “traditionally paid little attention to people with disabilities as a minoritarian identity” (Sandahl and Auslander, 7). The problem is, “performance studies has generally assumed the body it studies is a normative one,” and because of this, “disability, unlike race, class, and gender, escaped recognition as an important identity rubric for performance scholars” (Sandahl and Auslander, 7). This idea of disabled performance gets excluded from study, right along-side disability studies. It is up to the disabled to make certain that characters that represent their own normative state of being are included in this discussion. They need to “introduce the reality of disability identity into the public imagination” (Seibers, 48). Seibers recommends that, “to accomplish this task is to tell stories in a way that allows people without disabilities to recognize our reality and theirs as a common one” (48). A disabled person is a person and as a person has events in his or her life not solely defined by their disability. Yet more often than not, disability in theater represents not a person who is disabled but rather “disabledness” in the form of a person. Celestine Ranney-Howes, believes that all people want equal access and representation, but “when they’re actually faced with an issue [of difference] it makes them

uneasy and they don't know how to deal with it" (interview). Petra Kuppers, a disability culture activist, and teacher in performance and disability studies at the University of Michigan, writes in her book *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge* that, "Performers can perform disability, and this performance has currency, tradition and weight in the social sphere of popular culture." Going on to say that "film actors playing disabled characters have carried off a number of Oscars, making it seem that acting disabled is the highest achievement possible" (12).

Regan Linton is a wheelchair user and actress, who performs regionally in Denver, Colorado. She has been struggling to pursue a career in acting. Not only is she turned down for roles that people can't imagine a person in a wheelchair playing, she only seems to find work as characters that have been injured in a car accident. Without room to show their skills in the roles afforded them, society isn't going to get the bigger picture; handicapped actors can also play characters that don't have disabilities. Costume designer Angela Lampe has difficulties with little people that play unintelligent or court jester-like characters like "Mini Me" in *Austin Powers* or "Wee-man" in *Jackass* (interview). She finds it is hard to be an actor when you're limited to these characters. She believes in doing things with dignity and hopes for the time when it doesn't matter that an actor is in a wheelchair, or has dwarfism, or is missing an arm. Currently, performance practices have a narrow viewpoint and are not representative of true inclusiveness.

### **Non-Disabled Actors Playing Disabled Roles**

Whether it is acceptable to cast an actor who does not have a disability in the role of a differently-abled character is the latest controversy for inclusion. The traditional arguments are that the production needs a star name to sell the show or there isn't an actor with a disability as talented as a non-disabled actor. Just as this argument is made today previously, black actors were not allowed on stage in the days of segregation, and only men could perform in the time of Shakespeare. Over time, these view points changed, just as casting an able-bodied actor to play a disabled character may one day not be acceptable when full inclusion of disabled actors is realized.

What makes the issue of non-bias casting so problematic is that movies and television shows rarely if ever cast the disabled. Likewise very few theatre companies are hiring differently-abled actors. Disabled characters are one of the few places in a show that most directors can even start to imagine casting a person who is differently able. Michael Maag, a wheelchair using theatre artisan, feels that this lack of opportunity for a disabled actor is, "just unacceptable." If the industry thinks it's acceptable for an able-bodied actor to play a disabled role, then, as Maag states, "it becomes gender blind and color blind and able blind." The same able-blindness must work in reverse and apply to casting disabled actors in roles otherwise assumed to be an able-bodied character.

If society is going to view disabilities in a positive light, there needs to be more normalization. Although great actors can strive to play disabled characters, no amount of method acting can display the permanent inability to get out of a wheelchair. This is where truth to the performance is lost. Nor can an able-bodied actor accurately simulate the muscle atrophy of a disabled person. In the performance industry, being true to a story and a character is the highest achievement, yet achievement is greatly tarnished by this misrepresentation.

Robert David Hall is a disabled actor, who walks on two prosthetic legs, and is best known for his character on *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*. He claims that he is one of three actors on American television working full time with a disability (“I AM PWD”). Hall plays a character that you don’t even think of as disabled. Presently, he is the national chairman for *I AM PWD: Inclusion of the Arts & Media of People with Disabilities*, a global civil rights organization seeking equal employment opportunities for artists and professionals with disabilities (“I AM PWD”). Less than two percent of actors on television have a disability (“I AM PWD”). *I AM PWD* is frustrated that the industry is not willing to take action to change this imbalance. “In the theater world, advocacy groups for the disabled recently objected to the casting of Abigail Breslin...as young Helen Keller in a Broadway revival of ‘The Miracle Worker,’ and a the selection of a hearing actor for a deaf role in the off-Broadway play ‘The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter’”(“‘Glee’ Wheelchair Episode Hits Bump with Disabled”). Regan Linton still finds it frustrating that, “actors with disabilities just don’t get cast in general enough [roles], so it becomes more apparent when you have a character with a disability that’s not played by an actor with a disability” (interview). She states that, when it comes to casting disabled actors in disabled roles, “If it were happening at all...it wouldn’t be as big an issue, but actors with disabilities just don’t get the opportunities to play [great] characters, and not [just] characters that are written to have disabilities, but characters who do not have disabilities” (interview). Actors with disabilities simply do not have equal access to performance opportunities, and this injustice must be recognized and changed in the future if full inclusion is to be realized. Maggio goes on to say, “Particularly in film... [they] must have the resources to find somebody that’s actually disabled to do this” (interview). The desire of the public to see

more disabled actors is justified by the current media buzz and the number of disabled roles being written for film and television.

*Glee* is one of the biggest of all the current culprits of not casting disabled actors in disabled roles. Artie is wheelchair-bound; this is a substantial step forward in the social view of a person with a disability. It is an outstanding effort that the producers and writers for this television show have put forth by creating a character that is not centered on the negative connotations of being physically different but the positive ideas of group inclusion. The one fault, however, is that the actor playing Artie, Kevin McHale, doesn't need a wheelchair for he is not disabled. Did the producers of this show make an effort to be true to the character? While the show insists that there was a push for a differently mobile actor in the casting stage, the producers of the show insisted that they couldn't pass up such a talent like Kevin. ("Should Able-Bodied Actors Play Disabled Characters") The widespread media attention paid to this casting choice shows how far the debate—and society's views—have progressed.

The movie *Love and Other Drugs* purposefully sought to cast a disabled actor as a disabled character, succeeding in inclusion where *Glee* failed. They found Lucy Roucis, a talented actress, who had begun to get television and film roles before she was diagnosed with Parkinson's. After the diagnosis, her agent promptly dropped her but the production stood by her. This is just one of the many talented actors that have been confronted with discrimination. The producers on *Love and other Drugs* are to be commended for their leadership in changing society's view of disability-- by disability advocacy groups and the media.

## **The Core Issue**

When an able-bodied actor can leave his or her assumed disability behind when exiting the theater, this can impact the character's portrayal and detracts from the authenticity of the performance. This isn't to say that playing physically different isn't possible, but in turn it should also be considered possible for an actor with a disability to play a character that isn't written as differently-able. Perhaps in time, with the full inclusion of actors of all degrees of ability, actors with disabilities will be allowed to take roles that are Oscar worthy just as able-bodied actors win awards for their portrayal of disability. Actors with disabilities can play parts originally written without disabilities – that way while the actor's disability might become the character's disability, it isn't the focus of the character and doesn't change what the author intended. At the same time there are many actors with disabilities who don't show visual signs of actually being disabled, just like Hall, who even with his own success doesn't feel that people with hidden disabilities are being cast. With the possibility of inclusion for all differently-abled artists gaining ground, many areas, such as backstage and educational institutes, will need to participate in making change for full inclusion to be realized. In order to assist in the transition of more differently-abled actors being cast they will need differently-abled designers. Although ideally differently-abled designers and actors should be trained simultaneously both for practical reasons and in principle, in all likelihood it will be the visibility of disabled actors that blazes the path for disabled designers.

Tobin Seibers, the author of *Disability Theory*, points out that portraying a disabled character is a type of drag. He uses Dustin Hoffman's rolls in *Tootsie* and *Rain Man* as examples of similar narratives that illicit two different reactions from the audience.

Dustin Hoffman does not pass as a woman in *Tootsie* (1982). Nor does he pass as disabled in *Rain Man* (1988). Audiences nevertheless have entirely different reactions to the two performances--they know the first

performance is a fake but accept the second one as Oscar worthy--and yet Hoffman's performance in *Rain Man* is as much a drag performance as his work in *Tootsie*. (Seibers, 115)

This idea of disabled drag is apparent in *I Am Sam*, a movie in which Sean Penn plays an adult character with a juvenile level of intelligence. Although many of the supporting roles in the movie are played by actors with disabilities, the main character, Sam, is played by an actor that audiences know is not differently-abled. People look at his performance as empowering and walk away, as does the actor, with a feeling of triumph in the face of adversity. In a *Jezebel* magazine article entitled "Should Able-Bodied Actors Play Disabled Characters?" the question of authenticity of differently-abled performance is brought up, "Sean Penn's performance as Sam made me uncomfortable, probably because seeing someone pretend to be disabled reminds me of playground mockery of actual disabled kids" ("Should Able-Bodied Actors Play Disabled Characters?"). Playground mockery is thought to be a child's game of making fun of someone who is different. This raises the interesting question of whether a well-known non-disabled actor playing a disabled role routinely brings up this notion of "mockery" whether consciously or subconsciously, in the audience at large.

This perception can be rather misleading regarding the realities of disabilities. The disadvantage of these portrayals is that they show disability as a "façade over-laying able-bodiedness" (Seibers, 116). The skilled performance of these able-bodied actors only emphasizes their lack of disability by their ability to act disabled. Seibers argues that, "it renders disability invisible because able-bodied people substitute for people with disabilities" (116). The disconnect between reality and acting ability just shows how inefficient the portrayals are. Both the performance and the audience are trying to substitute a palpable fantasy for the reality that

the actor actually lives in everyday. Oftentimes an able-bodied person who becomes disabled ceases to function in society due to disconnect between the reality of being disabled and the fantasy created on film. This becomes particularly cutting when unthinking strangers mention “I could not do it if I were you.” This leads to a vicious and unhealthy circle of misperceptions for able-bodied audience members that are a direct result of the lack of inclusion that is present.

In addition to difficulties finding roles for disabled actors, there is a problem supplying talented, adequately trained disabled actors. If actors like Tekki Lomnicki hadn't been discouraged early on, there would be more actors to play these roles and to inform the public what disability means. In Lomnicki's experience, “In college in 1974, I chose to go to college for English and for writing, as opposed to theatre because I really felt that in those days, in that climate, I would not get a job” (interview). Rather than give up on theatre, she informed the college drama instructor of her high school experience in theatre and that she wanted to audition but, “He just completely dismissed me, and I was very discouraged in doing any theatre in college, so I didn't” (interview). Dismissal of differently-abled people seeking training still continues to this day. Many drama programs question how they could accommodate a disabled student as many of the classes require dance and movement. Unfortunately, this occurs because drama schools do not have examples showing how others have succeeded in making these accommodations in the past.

If differently-abled actors think they have difficulty receiving training, differently-abled designers and technicians find it equally frustrating to gain access to proper professional preparation. Presently, this is not even recognized as an issue but will need to be addressed when the disabled community is accurately represented in performance.

## **Backstage**

### **Companies that are leading the way in Disabled Performance**

Currently, there are not many theaters that include the disabled in their production staff. This trend, however, is changing because many new inclusive companies have been created in the last decade. There are two primary philosophies that have dominated efforts to include people with disabilities in the realm of performance. One integrates both able-bodied and differently-abled actors; the other focuses on developing full companies of differently-abled actors. There has yet to be a “fully disabled” company that has reached the professional standard set by non-disabled theatre companies. However some companies are setting the standard of what will someday be acceptable and expected for inclusion in the performing arts.

To start, there are only a handful of professional companies that include disabled actors in the regular season, such as Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Victory Gardens in Chicago, and Des Moines Playhouse. In addition, there are many dance companies that have integrated performers with disabilities, such as AXIS and Dancing Wheels. While the dance scene may be thought of as the last place one would see a disabled performer because of the reliance on the movement of the body that is expected, it has proven to be a medium that can strip away the preconceived expectations of what being differently-abled represents. “They focus on the 'ability' portion of the word 'disability' and encourage audiences to see disabled performers as differently-abled rather than non-abled” (Davies, 12). There is no choice but for a character in dance to take part in the action and become something more than an illness. As Davies puts it, “there is an element of the unexpected in physically integrated dance that can unsettle an audience because they do not know what disabled bodies are capable of doing on stage” (65). These dance companies are promoting the somewhat revolutionary idea that someone with a

disability can move with grace, and that disability isn't akin to weakness. Such an idea is also slowly making inroads in the theatre community.

AXIS began in 1987 in Oakland, California. Founding artistic director Thais Mazur had the creative vision to gather a group of dancers, with and without disabilities, to explore dance and create performance pieces. The company's mission is "to create and perform contemporary dance that is developed through the collaboration of dancers with and without disabilities, to teach dance and educate about collaboration and disability through community education and outreach programs, to promote and support physically integrated dance locally, nationally and internationally" ("AXIS"). Judith Smith, current artistic director of AXIS, commissions new works by internationally recognized and emerging choreographers, composers and designers. They also create works 'in-house' as "many of their dancers are also strong" ("AXIS"). The company currently engages three non-disabled performers for every four disabled performers. Types of disabilities represented in the dancing company have included polio, spinal cord injuries, muscular dystrophy, neuromuscular disease and amputees. This unique dance company has gained success on the International stage, challenging the perception of what dance can be and what inclusion really means. It has also gone through its share of growing pains. "The first thing that we wanted to do [to grow as a company] was to commission work from outside choreographers because we really felt we needed to improve the quality of the work" (Smith interview). The external collaborators caused strife within the close-knit company and the founder left. Still, bringing in internationally known choreographers to devise pieces for their performances was a major turning point for AXIS. It not only improved the quality of their work, but has also given recognized choreographers the opportunity to work and explore possibilities with differently-abled performers. This is a successful example of what full

inclusion in performance can look like with able-bodied artist and artists with disabilities working together for the sake of the arts.

Smith shared that, “We would like, at some point, to get a degree program in physically integrated dance going at one of the universities, or one of the community colleges” (interview). Creating an educational venue where disabled dancers can learn alongside able bodied dancers would not only provide the opportunity to train more dancers for their company, but would also result in more professionally trained disabled dancers who could perform in any company. Smith also says, “one of our long-term goals [is] to get everyone supported with a living wage” (interview). Overall, AXIS is one of the most successful integrated dance companies in America, and has played a big part in informing audiences that disability can be meaningful and rewarding. Smith states, “we hope they go away with a good experience and maybe a different idea about ability and about dance.”

Dancing Wheels is another professional, physically integrated dance company uniting the talents of dancers both with and without disabilities. Mary Verdi-Fletcher, the first professional wheelchair dancer in the U.S., founded the Dancing Wheels Company in Cleveland in 1980. Mary wanted to offer others with disabilities full and equal access into the world of dance. The company’s lifelong mission, “to educate, advocate and entertain through compelling, innovative dance was born of the goals that each of our team members shares a heartfelt commitment” (“Dancing Wheels”). They also want to enhance integration and diversity in the arts with works uniting people of all abilities, and provide successful, independent and creative role models for those with disabilities. “This is to erase negative stereotypes about people with disabilities in professional careers, primarily in the arts” (“Dancing Wheels”). Many of this company’s dance pieces erase disability as something unusual, and use the unique body shapes and movement to

create a more dynamic stage image. The ability to create diversity on stage with the aid of wheelchairs and other mobility devices allows for there to be a feeling of normalcy. Succeeding in creating this feeling of normalcy with the inclusion of wheelchairs makes this company exceptional. These pieces would not look or feel the same without the involvement of the disabled dancers. Dancing Wheels reaches professional standards through rigorous training of their dancers, pushing for movement in ways wheelchair users may never have imagined based on the images they receive through current cultural illustrations.

The idea of exploring disability in dance has even made it to one of the best-known popular entertainments, *Cirque du Soleil*. In their 2002 piece, *Varekai*, Bill Shannon, a disabled hip hop crutch dancer, was brought in to choreograph a piece on crutches (Davies, 61). The dance created a character of power, one that would be less interesting if it wasn't for the multifaceted movement that crutches allow. The street artist Bill Shannon is breaking down barriers of what is expected from someone with a disability. "His crutch dancing at times achieved fluidity paralleled only by mechanical motion and demonstrated a movement freedom that challenges his medical prognosis" (Davies, 61).

The success that these companies have had removes their bodies from the term 'other', and puts the audience in a place to, "investigate the familiar," which in turn, "can challenge what it means to dance every time they take the stage they perform the mobilization of the 'trapped body', which disability as discourse of tragedy enacts so powerfully in our society" (Kupper, 68).

AXIS, Dancing Wheels and *Cirque du Soleil* are supporting the move towards inclusion and are showing how society's viewpoint can be changed.

DisAbility Project is an umbrella group of Uppity Theatre of St Louis. Since 1996, The Uppity Theatre Company has “focused on developing projects that bring together amateur performers with professional artists to create innovative material based on lived experience” (“DisAbility Project”). Co-founded by Joan Lipkin and Fran Cohen, The DisAbility Project represents one of the most comprehensive creative endeavors in the Midwest that addresses issues of disability and creativity. This group “empowers individuals, honors their stories, sparks imaginations, fosters community, encourages civic dialogue, and enhances public awareness about disability through innovative theatre of the highest quality” (“DisAbility Project”). Unique among many of the disabled companies founded in America, the company fosters performers with disabilities. Joan Lipkin “had worked with the legendary late theatre director Joe Chaikin at the Atlantic Center for the Arts on a similar short-term project and realized she wanted to come back to St. Louis to create a local version.” (“DisAbility Project”) The way in which this company has chosen to take steps towards inclusion of artists with disabilities is a good model for other professional companies to follow.

Chicago’s Tall’in Tales Theatre, founded in 1994 by Tekki Lomnicki, is also at the forefront of disability performance. They state that their mission is to build community through the art of storytelling, gathering the stories of groups or individuals with disabilities and creating theatrically innovative performances (“Tall’in Tales”). Lomnicki feels that, “it’s one way of showing the non-disabled population that we really do have a lot in common” (interview). She believes that finding similarities between the disabled and non-disabled is a way to bridge the two populations and create an inclusive community. Lomnicki has several pieces that she thinks have been successful in accomplishing this. She says, for example:

I do a piece, “Clothing Optional.” It’s a 25-minute piece when I went to a clothing option spa in California. I talk about how I was really intimidated

about taking my clothes off because of my disability. Throughout the piece I talk about my observations of everyone and towards the end, what happens is I see a woman who has only one breast. And her daughters' had brought her to this hot springs spa for the healing. And I really get that it doesn't really matter that my body is different. (interview)

The growth that she experiences in this piece is the same growth that she hopes for her audiences to gain.

The Physically Handicapped Actors and Musical Artists League (“PHAMALY”) of Denver, Colorado, and housed in the Denver Center, is a theatre group and touring company formed in 1989 when a group of performers grew frustrated with the lack of theatrical opportunities for people living with disabilities, and decided to create a theatre company that would provide individuals with disabilities the opportunity to perform. They strive to empower their actors as they acquire and improve their acting skills and educate theater professionals in methods of adapting their own productions to the needs of people with disabilities.

This company is unique from Tall'in Tales and many other disabled companies because of its integration of differently-abled performers into classic plays and musicals. In their recent production of *Man of La Mancha* they cast Regan Linton, a wheelchair using actress, 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.

Each of these companies, and numerous others with similar stories, has taken different approaches in their creation and growth. Through the activities of these organizations it is easy to see that there are many ways of establishing inclusion. With more and more audiences being exposed to performances featuring differently-abled actors and dancers, inclusion in the rest of society will likely follow.

### **Designing for Disabilities**

Just as disabled actors have a difficult time getting the roles they want on stage, the backstage scene for disabled designers and technicians is not much better. It is hard to bring awareness to the exclusion that goes on backstage, as the backstage is out of the public eye. As so many theaters are in older buildings with little space for accommodation, the backstage is not expected to be made accessible. Even when the front of the house is being renovated to accommodate differently-abled audience members, the theatre community does not think about the same issue occurring backstage for its technicians, because these are not public spaces. However, when disabled actors become more commonplace, the accessibility issues backstage will directly impact productions, particularly as they will also inhibit the inclusion of disabled technicians, who are needed to help with the transition of full inclusion because they can add insight to the social, physical, personal, emotional, psychological challenges associated with disabilities.

Davies discusses a production of *Teatro Visión*, directed by Alma Martinez, in which the central character acts as a disembodied head. This production put the character in a wheelchair and covered the actor's body to assist in creating the illusion of disembodiment. "Alma Martinez

complained that the company...didn't hire a chair designer, and we needed a chair designer” (Davies, 85). Presently, design that understands disabled access often begins with a disabled designer. Telory also writes about a dance production that needed the visibility of the disability of a performer to expose the novelty of her movement.

...her solo movement as a sort of natural break dancing was dependent on her leg visibility. The popping motion of her leg joints was fully visible in this rehearsal. In production, the costume designer for Petronio's piece, Mario Alonzo, covered all the dancers, including Adame, in glittery eveningwear that obscured the lower half of their bodies. Skirts worn over leggings disguised the motionless limbs of the wheelchair dancers and obscured Adame's leg movements in her cane solo. (Davies, 66)

The able-bodied designer's reaction was to correct or hide a body's imperfections. This design removed much of the uniqueness that the disability of the performer brought to this piece. Although these choices were made because of concerns for the audience's comfort level, it removed the compelling original story of “a woman's loss of mobility and the development of a communal support system” (Davies, 66). As a differently-abled designer, if I were to approach designing costumes for this production, my first instinct would have been to remark on the unique quality of the dancer's body and lent my perspective fittingly to the story. These productions are direct examples of where a designer with a disability is more acutely adept currently in this transitional period towards full inclusion.

The Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland added a deaf actor to the company for their 2010 season. This decision might have been due to the insight the company received when one of their technicians, Michael Maag, became a wheelchair user and needed accommodations to continue to work (interview). Working backstage with a technician who uses a wheelchair

helped open their minds to the possibility of disabilities onstage as well. The company has treated the accommodation and addition of disabled performers, technicians, and designers with open arms, due largely to the opportunity of working backstage first with Maag.

My own work with PHAMALY has given me many opportunities to expand what design can do to put disabilities into a positive light. When PHAMALY did *The Wiz* as the 2005 summer musical, Dorothy's journey was to be designed around the different disabilities of the cast. The Tin Man was an actress in a manual wheelchair. I designed a costume that made the wheelchair part of the character's body, rather than it serving as just a means of transportation. The character of Eveline, played by an actress in an electric wheelchair, did not need to touch her wheels to move. I designed a hoopskirt that went around her waist and chair, again making the chair integrated into that character as a whole. This also distinguished Eveline's movements from the characters that are seen as positively helping Dorothy on her journey. When I designed costumes for *Urinetown* with PHAMALY, an actress who is a double amputee in a wheelchair played the character of Pennywise. Pennywise mans the urinals in the poorest part of town; this character naturally uses a toilet scrub brush and plunger as part of her action in the production. For a comical effect, this character's legs became the very tools she uses in her work.

While my disability allows for unconventional thought about design, it also opens up a line of trust between disabled actors and able-bodied ones, which is one thing that, with more inclusion of disabled performers, is a direction more designers can discover. In past productions, the actress playing Pennywise had been uncomfortable with the audience seeing her without legs. With my support, she embraced the idea of having a toilet scrub brush and plunger as legs. Many of the actors in PHAMALY find great relief in having a costume designer with a

disability, as I am aware of their unique concerns and can foresee potential difficulties better than an able-bodied designer might be able to.

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 a 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.

Actress Regan Linton feels that a disabled designer is more willing to ask the questions that are a concern to her as a performer. As she puts it, “I’ve found that technicians and designers with disabilities just have a little bit more understanding, or a little more experience with thinking beyond the body” (Linton interview). She believes that “because they’ve had to be creative in their own lives, they have a little bit more ability to be creative designing too” (Linton interview). Living with physical limitations in turn gives a person more comfort in dealing with physical challenges in design. Just as more disabled actors are needed, these actors will need disabled designers to help them realize their true potential.

Frances Maggio, a costume designer who uses a wheelchair, said that, “Before being disabled, dealing with disabled actors [gave me a reaction] of feeling uncomfortable” (interview). Alongside Maggio, costume designer Angela Lampe says, “I think it can make you

more sensitive to the difficulties people are having” (interview). Until full inclusion is realized, being able to ask questions and have the sensitivity to help a disabled actor is invaluable.

In the case with Ali Zimmerman, a hearing impaired actress, and Matthew Swartz, able-bodied sound designer, they found that communication was the key to improving Zimmerman’s performance and concerns about being able to hear her fellow actors. Swartz recognized and became educated on the fact that, “Most hearing-impaired people do not simply hear things at a lower volume, they may also hear things with distortion, causing pitches to be misinterpreted” (Swartz). He took it upon himself to create a system that allowed him to mix a signal specifically designed for Zimmerman’s hearing needs. One of the remarkable things about the solutions Swartz found was that the tools he needed to accomplish the task were already available in his theatre. The feeling of inclusion that Zimmerman found in working with Swartz allowed for her to perform seamlessly in PHAMALY’s production of *Once Upon a Mattress*. This is the type of communication that is needed for the inclusion of the disabled artist.

## **Designing with Disabilities**

Inclusion of the designer with a disability has yet to take place in very few instances of a designer with a disability designing for the disabled in the theatre community; because their impact on design is unknown. There are only a handful of designers with a disability working professionally. Very few were disabled before going into their profession. I was fortunate enough to interview several of these designers. Some have faced situations that prevent them from getting the job done because of limitations; however, many have found welcoming homes at theatres that allow their abilities to shine. Overall they bring a new perspective to

performance, “It is the experience of being different. It is the experience of living life from another point of view” (Sandahl and Auslander, 22). These theatre professionals have not expected the industry to change for them, but rather make a few accommodations in order for them to do their work. Shouldn’t artists who give so freely and uncomplainingly of their time and talents be given certain accommodations that allow them to do their jobs more effectively and efficiently?

To understand the stories of these professionals, some background information about each of them is necessary.

- Frances Maggio is the professor of costume design at Columbia College. She broke her neck at the C6, C7 level and can walk a little bit. Her right hand is good, and her left hand is paralyzed. She uses a wheelchair and has for 13 years. She was already in her current position when the accident happened.
- Angela Lampe is a costume designer at Des Moines Playhouse. She also is the shop manager and fills in where needed. She 4’4” and has been in theatre since 1990.
- Celestine Ranney-Howes is a costume designer, shop manager, and teacher at the University of Maryland. She had polio as an infant which left her with post-polio syndrome. Ranney-Howes has been in theatre for 38 years and has worked in the San Francisco Bay area, The Western Stage, and California State University.
- Michael Maag is the master electrician at Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF). He discovered theatre in 1979 as he was a sophomore in high school. He went on to get his BS in theatre at the University of Northern Colorado. Maag has been using a wheelchair for 6 years. He does both lighting design and projection.

- Todd Wren is a designer in his last year of the lighting design MFA program at Carnegie Mellon University. He was in a car accident in 2004 and is now a quadriplegic. He doesn't use a wheelchair but has problems with balance and standing. He has been a lighting designer most of his life and went back to school to help set himself up for a better retirement.
- Bruce S. Auerbach is the Chair of the Department of Dance and Theatre at the University of North Carolina. He lost his arm in an accident before entering college. Auerbach has been working in the profession since 1982. His main area of design is sets and lighting. He has worked in many other theatres across the country. Some of these include Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey and other regional theatres in Madison, New Jersey

None of these designers approach the theatre with a primary interest in disability advocacy; they are all artists and storytellers first. But because they are disabled and represent the inclusion possible behind the scenes, they function as advocates all the same.

### **Physical and Emotional Limitations**

There are many limitations that a designer with a disability has to deal with in pursuing his or her career. As many costume shops and scene shops are not wheelchair-accessible, this can limit job options. This is an issue when Frances Maggio is designing a show, "As a designer, I think my only limitations are getting into squirrely little stores that I used to be able to get in. And there are some theaters I just can't get in, which is irritating" (Maggio interview). Along with accessibility in stores, Maggio cannot search and dig through a shop's costume stock.

This puts her in a position where she relies on help from her assistants more than she did before she became disabled.

Angela Lampe does not deal with the same issues as Maggio. Her height has been a limiting factor her whole life; she started her career with her disability. Lampe has dealt with a majority of her limitations by using stepladders. Lampe states that, “My limitations are that I can’t reach things” (Lampe interview). She also has issues with her hands, as they are not strong enough to do some tasks. She compensates by delegating certain tasks to her assistants. To find resolutions to these limitations, communication is crucial.

Also, knowing what a person is physically capable of needs to become an easier conversation. Actress Regan Linton says, “People don’t know what limitations a person with [a disability] has, and they’re kind of hesitant to ask” (interview). Her strategy is to be forthright about what she can and cannot do, along with how she does it. For example, she will say, “Okay, here’s what I can do. Here’s what I can’t do. Here’s how I move. Here’s how I pee. Here’s how I change” (Linton interview). Linton tries to start these conversations, a helpful personality trait. However, this ease of self-expression is not the case for every disabled person, which can cause a breakdown in communication.

Even when a disabled designer is up front with communicating his or her needs, the employer can have difficulty understanding the implications of these needs, such as reserving energy. Maggio notes, “Unless you are used to it or have worked with it, people don’t get the whole thing, ‘Oh, you just can’t get up the one step?’” (interview). This type of issue highlights a lack of understanding by the public about what being a wheelchair user means and points out the need for education. Maggio notes,

I took a [job on a] dance piece, I'm suppose to go watch a rehearsal and I get there and [there is] no way in. There's about a 10" step into the building and nothing else it was too high of a step for me to manage, so I couldn't get in. They said, oh, we have a ramp but it's not here right now. So come back, and I came back a week later and they had a ramp, so I took the ramp up to the door and there's about a 3" gap between the ramp and the step, which I think I probably would have made, but then there was only about 10" between the end of the ramp and the end of the sidewalk. It was unbelievable to me, that someone had created this ramp that was totally nonfunctional. People just don't get the whole thing.  
(interview)

Often technicians think they have been clear with their accommodation needs, yet those needs still go unmet. As many theatre professionals know, jobs like this are few and far between that believe in full inclusion.

Unfortunately, companies cannot always accommodate a person with a disability. This has been the case for Ranney-Howes, a former costume shop manager at *Arena Stage*. She found the daily amount of stairs necessary was no longer a possibility due to the progression of her post polio syndrome. She had to leave the company.

I left because of my disability...the Arena Stage schedule, which was basically 60 to 80 hours a week, for nine months, it was exhausting. Part of it was the exhaustion level, I would get around to 1 or 2pm and I would just feel like I was walking around in a haze. I knew I had to be there till midnight – it was more then I could physically manage. (Ranney- Howes interview)

Everyone must cope with exhaustion and long hours in a theatre career. But it is unfair to be excluded from this industry because, on top of the hours, a person with a disability has the added stress of climbing stairs and walking long distances between her office and the storage facilities. (Note: Ranny-Howes did not request any accommodations as *Arena Stage* was in the process of building a new wheelchair-accessible facility. In her particular case, making alterations to the existing space while money was being spent to construct a new one was not in her best interest or the company's.) Ranny-Howes has not always had to make career choices based on her disability. It was only at the age of 35 that her disability became strong enough to have a real impact. It was then that she went from a cane to full-leg braces. Because Ranny-Howes has not had to deal with these restrictions as much in her past, she finds difficulty in communicating them, "With post-polio survivors, we don't want to admit that we can't do anything," but she "think[s] it's probably anyone with disabilities" (interview). This mentality is actually speeding up the breakdown of her body. At some point, she will be forced to face life from the perspective of a wheelchair.

Michael Maag already lives this situation; he cannot reach many of his lighting instruments from his wheelchair. "There are very few theatres that have that kind of access [and] none of the theatres here at the Shakespeare Festival have anywhere near complete access" (interview). For a master electrician, holding this position is remarkable as accessing lighting instruments is part of the job description. To accommodate Maag, OSF rewrote the job description, distributing certain duties to members of his team. Maag is an example of what can be achieved when preconceived notions about job roles are put aside. What he brings to the company is more important. One wonders if the Oregon Shakespeare Festival would have made

these arrangements if Maag had not already been working there before his accident. In Maag's opinion,

I don't think they would have. I think that they, like just about everybody else, talks a good talk about diversity but the consideration of diversity when it comes to – it's so hard for people, I think, to wrap their heads around. The idea of someone [who] is physically disabled doing a job, [that] in their minds, is primarily physical. I don't think that they would have been able initially to make that jump if they didn't know me and didn't recognize I had skills that would allow us to continue getting things done by keeping me in the position I was in. (interview)

The important thing is that the company did make accommodations. However it is important to recognize that the expectation that most theatres would set aside prejudice and hire a Master Electrician in a wheelchair is far-fetched as of today. Even with the accommodations that have been made so he can get the job done, Maag still has concerns for his own limits, such as keeping up with the long hours and grueling schedule. This problem is compounded as he is seated for most of the day as his legs are completely paralyzed. The benefit that the able bodied people get from walking and stretching is something that is more complicated for him and cannot be achieved when he is in the theater.

Some solutions to the limitations imposed by disabilities can also cause problems. Todd Wren is a middle-aged man; it is hard to keep up with younger people who are his peers at school. But people don't know that "...Some of the medication I take in order to control discomfort, tingling, neuropathy, it makes me sleepy" (interview). Along with these limitations, Wren has only been differently-abled since 2004. He doesn't feel that he can do the same quality of work as before and that he does not, "fine-tune a project" (interview), as far as he has

previously in his lighting design work. He believes that he is not as “detailed-oriented,” and this comes into play, “when the fulfillment of correcting those details involves direct physical action” (Wren interview). These limitations make it difficult for employers to view disabled people as a viable part of a design team.

Limitations come in many forms for a person with disability and need to be addressed on a person-by-person basis. Fortunately the more limitations that get addressed, the easier it becomes for these conversations to be had. Efforts are never in vain. While one may not be able to directly help the person in need, the learning experience better prepares all parties for future issues. A limitation is only a description of a particular issue, not an unsolvable problem.

## **Accommodations**

Accommodation is the word used in situations in which a task needs changes in order to be accomplished by a disabled artist. Having accommodations made for someone with disabilities is an ever-changing and ongoing process. Some adaptations are as simple as adding a step stool or building a counter rake for a wheelchair to sit flat in the audience during tech rehearsal. There aren't many rules when it comes to making a work environment accessible. It takes innovation and good communication to meet the needs of both the employee and employer. Thinking with an open mind is a critical aspect in making adaptations for someone with a disability. It is hard not to go on the defensive when a change is needed in a job that has been done in a certain way since the theater's start. Actress Regan Linton adds, “One thing I still have a problem with is that people get offended when you talk about accommodations, or they think

it's being way too sensitive, being too PC, or just the ADA bullshit" (interview). Many of the adaptations made benefit all the people in a building, such as making buildings accessible with ramps and elevators. Moving costumes from a basement storage to the second-floor costume shop via an elevator is something all can appreciate disabled or not. Taking scenery into a building via a ramp rather than stairs is safer for technicians no matter their mobility status.

The difficulty that many theatres face with making buildings accessible is the expense. Budgets at many theaters are small and so after all the season's necessities are paid, what little of the budget is left isn't used for making facilities more accessible, likely due to lower returns on investment. That is, beautification of a facility will likely bring in more patrons than an equal amount spent on accessibility. These types of costs range from wheelchair accessibility to all areas of the stage or rooms which equipment or costumes are stored in. They also can be the addition of brail, automatic door openers, and accessible bathrooms. Maggio feels that "There aren't that many people who need to get back stage who are in wheelchairs. So, I don't know, unless you bring it up, a lot of theatre companies are not going to make that happen" (interview). Due to the cost and other logistical issues, many theatres would rather deal with accommodation issues as they arise, an understandable but unwelcoming stance. As Maggio puts it, "Like most things in ADA, it's a place to get around making it accessible, like most things it's expensive" (Maggio interview). The Americans with Disabilities Act often isn't enough as many theatres are in old buildings that have been grandfathered in, avoiding the new building requirements. The theatres with the greatest problems in terms of disabled access are the smaller ones, those that use buildings that weren't originally built to hold an audience, let alone a wheelchair. And as many young designers start their careers in these smaller theaters, this is a major obstacle for differently-abled artists to overcome. Maggio explains that "in a lot of the companies that are

the bread and butter of young designers, it's just not very accessible" (interview). Different tactics need to be found for a designer with a disability to get his or her foot, crutch, or wheel in the door.

Since Maggio began her career in theater well before she became disabled, she has been able to get work based on her prior accomplishments. Most of the accommodations have been to sustain the career she was already in. Maggio explains, "When we set up the shop, we thought about that, and I have a table that's sitting height, rather than standing height" (interview). She benefited from using an electric wheelchair, "One thing I really like about it is for shopping. I'm all over downtown Chicago; it takes me 15 min to get from one end to the other. I used to not shop downtown as much because of the walking" (Maggio interview). Another perk she states is "in terms of carrying stuff, actually my chair works really well as a trucking tool. We hang bags off it all the time" (Maggio interview). Maggio has found balance between the modifications needed to be made and how some aspects of her work are actually easier since becoming disabled.

For Lampe, accommodations mean a stepstool. "I've had a number of companies buy things for me" (Lampe interview) says Lampe. She hasn't had much difficulty in having her needs met, but sometimes it is easier to take matters into her own hands. Lampe said, "I walked in with my own stepstool, and that is something that's easy, to have your own equipment. You don't have to go through all that rigmarole and try to explain what you need and what you don't. So that's how I approach it" (Lampe interview). In many cases, the best solution is to be prepared.

On the other hand, many of Lampe's tools could be cumbersome to someone in a wheelchair. In Lampe's costume shop, the stepstools she uses would cause navigation difficulties for those in wheelchairs. As she puts it, "if I had to make room for a wheelchair it would be like, look at this mess I have, it would take some work". She suggests, "Maybe if you're running your own shop, you can set it up to accommodate that" (Lampe interview). Luckily, in many of the places Lampe has worked, they have been up front about asking her what she needed. Lampe notes, "But sometimes you just have to educate people, you just have to say, hey, did you know?" (Lampe interview). This leads back to the ability to communicate needs without fear of repercussion.

Todd Wren tells an excellent story about the determination to communicate.

...there is a carpenter that worked for Ford Repertory Company, who's deaf. He was a great carpenter and worked as a finish carpenter for 8 or 10 years, and heard about this opening and just liked to throw around lumber, and build crap. And this TD really went the extra mile to be able to communicate. At first, it was sort of rocky, they had this very permanent sort of thing going on, and then they got, he could read lips, so you could talk to him. He was hard pressed to be able to communicate back to you; you really had to work to be able to understand him. But the way he and that TD interacted, because he was also sort of a surly little cuss. He knew what he was doing but he also had an attitude. The technical director had the greatest respect for his skills and the carpenter had the greatest respect for the technical director's desire, willingness, and ability to learn how to communicate. He learned some sign language, actually, he may have learned quite a bit of sign language. They used a lot of paper. And they got work done. (interview)

Since his accident, Wren has learned to improve his communication skills. He says, "I do not have the ability anymore to jump in and fix something. I used to be able to say, 'come down off the ladder and let me'. Now I have to communicate much better. And I have to be much more

patient. I rely more on people” (Wren interview). Wren also has to plan his whole day out, and he no longer has the energy and time to backtrack for forgotten items or tasks. As he puts it, “it’s behavior modification” (Wren interview).

Like Frances Maggio, Michael Maag already worked at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) at the time of his accident. Because he was an important part of their team, they put in elevators, ramps, and automatic doors. Maag mentioned that, “One of the middle lines in the job description is ‘must be physically able to climb ladders and access catwalks.’ They’ve allowed me to take that out of my job description” (interview). However, he’s added other tasks within his physical capabilities to compensate. As Maag puts it, “The fact that they’re allowing me to do that has really allowed me to continue working in a field that I’ve spent my whole life in” (interview). The effort the OSF put into these accommodations makes them a model in the theatre community for others to emulate. One challenge Maag faces is accessing the tech table in a wheelchair. The lighting tech table is generally put in the center of the house so the master electrician can see what the audience is seeing. It wasn’t possible to move the table to the side so that a wheelchair could more easily reach. Maag explains how they solved this:

...we’ve come up with nice little systems. Moving the seats in the house for me was really difficult. The seats had to be individually removed and had to be carried by two people with a third person kind of balancing them. And we built a little rig with wheels, these seats basically pop-up, they disengage, they’re on wheels, they roll out into the lobby and I can roll right in. We’ve figured out technically some fast and easy ways to take care of stuff and that kind of information is easy to share, those kinds of ideas are easy to implement. (Maag interview)

To many, it is astonishing that the OSF made these accommodations. This level of inclusion should be the basic expectation for all theatres. There have even been times when other technicians in the theater have come up with workarounds for Maag. In his words,

The way the rig of the house was, it tilted my wheelchair forward, so I was constantly leaning forward and I don't have very good abs. I was kind of leaning forward and falling into my desk and they quickly built a counter rake and solved the problem for me. Nobody complained, it wasn't a problem. They said, "oh, here's something that needs to change," so they fixed it. Very accommodating and very willing to recognize that there was problems. They could see obviously that this wasn't working for me.

This is the kind of work environment where the job is allowed to come first because all the frustrations of the disability are addressed and resolved.

Still, it isn't possible to make every desired modification. As Auerbach puts it, "I think some of the accommodations are inappropriate. There comes a point in time, and this is from someone with a disability, where making an accommodation for every possible different person who walks through the door, just doesn't seem quite right for me" (Auerbach interview). This statement rings true for me; to cut out fabric comfortably, I would need to hang from a flying rig in the ceiling. This accommodation is a little extreme; it might be best to find something I'm better at and is more accessible. Maag said that, "These accommodations that don't feel all that weird [to the disabled] and we'd be willing to accept so it would allow us to do our work ...creeps out the other people in a sense are a little bit not accommodating because of that" (interview).

It comes down to what accommodations work for the community and the individual with the disability. A few universally beneficial steps such as elevators, ramps, and automatic doors would make all theatres more accommodating for everyone. But in terms of a specific individual's needs, the disabled employee and employer must communicate.

## **Frustrations**

Even after limitations have been assessed and accommodations made, there are many frustrations related to working in the theatre industry. Some frustrations include dealing with ignorance; some assume that having a physical disability means also having mental disability. Then there is the issue of expense, working out how feasible a job is when a paid assistant is required. When assistance is given there is still concern for misusing the time that he or she offers. The choice of whether or not to take on a job based on if they are the best person for the job, rather than if the space is accessible. Health concerns are also more present for people that have a disability with work place injuries taking a greater toll on the ability to do the job. Disabled designers, technicians and actors constantly need to make these kinds of negotiations.

Even though Lampe's major impairment is her height, she encounters situations in which people assume that she can't do the job. Lampe says, "Once in a while you run in to someone who thinks that you won't be able to do this, and I'm like, ah, yeah I can" (interview). A person with a disability is his or her own best judge on what they are competent of and an employer's personal assessment of their abilities produces prejudices. As Frances Maggio puts it, "There's a large frustration in that I believe people think I am not capable of things that I am capable of,

[and] that's tiresome" (interview). It is exhausting having to deal with a disability; having people second guess your abilities just adds to the difficulty. Maggio adds, "This notion that if you're not acting in the way that everyone expects then there's nothing going on in your brain" (interview). It should be easy to recognize that a physical disability is just that, physical, not mental. This is not often the case.

A surprisingly frustrating aspect is how able-bodied people are unaware of people with disabilities. Ranney-Howes sometimes uses an electric scooter for longer distances. She says, "I find myself actually getting a little angrier at the world when I'm in that because doors are difficult to open [and] people don't see you and walk right in front of you." (Ranney-Howes interview) In Michael Maag's situation, even his fellow technicians can be completely oblivious. He shares an office with two other colleagues and he says, "It's inevitable that when they get up from their desk, they pull their chair out, and they push their chair into the common space" (Maag interview). This action makes it harder for him to reach his desk and solving the problem really comes down to an issue of over all social awareness; people are not adequately educated about the needs of the disabled.

Maggio is also frustrated that she is unable to take on smaller jobs. She doesn't sew as well as she used to before the accident and isn't able to do the leg-work. This leads to the need for an assistant. Many shows that Maggio is offered only have budget for a costume designer and not an assistant and she won't make any money taking the show because she ends up paying an assistant at least half (interview). Although many designers make choices on whether it is feasible to take on a job based on the work load and the time allowed it takes a stronger effect on a person whom is in need of more assistance to achieve the goal. This is where funding from the government could assist but isn't easily found.

One of the more difficult issues facing those differently-abled is feeling guilty about obtaining assistance. It is often difficult to negotiate getting their needs met verses making the experience worthwhile for the other party. Maag says:

I haven't been able to find a way for myself to deal with that really well. I would like for that to be something that isn't an issue for me, but it still is, I don't have that much time where I have dedicated people – when I was in Seattle they had a lighting intern that they basically just gave to me – here's Tess, she's here to do whatever you need when you need it. Because I was doing projections, once we got set-up, the projector was in place the work I was doing was all computer, just programming my projection, Tess was basically my taxicab and that was what she was doing for her internship and I felt really crappy. (interview)

Having a person that is readily available to assist without prejudice is needed in many cases but negotiating the finite details of how to best spend their time is still difficult.

Celestine Ranney-Howes, a long-time costume designer, is just now finding that she has to make choices based on her disability. She has had difficulty in being accommodated because,

Unfortunately, right now, because I've only been in this area for nine years...and I'm not working [in] places yet that have shops other than the University of Maryland. So I tend to be a one-woman design/construction person at this point and for most of my freelance work. I don't think they really think about my disability at all. (Ranney-Howes interview)

This leads her to make choices about what shows she can and can't take on because of what she can physically do.

With his left arm amputated, Bruce Auerbach thinks about how his life is changing due to a stress injury to his right arm. Auerbach stated, “I have to have surgery in May and my right arm is going to be unusable for four to six weeks. So that’s going to be very interesting” (interview). When someone is already disabled, what would be a minor injury for an able-bodied person can become something frightfully difficult to overcome.

## **Approaches**

The best way to bring up a disability when applying for a job is a rather artful task. It is difficult to negotiate whether one is being judged first on their abilities and not on their disabilities. The evidence leans both ways on whether it should be brought up immediately or if it can be addressed after a job offer is made. Over all communication still plays a very important part in these conversations and the hope is that there isn’t any preexisting prejudice before the dialogue starts.

Frances Maggio has a substantial body of work, both as an able-bodied designer and as a disabled designer. She thinks, “If they hire me based on the work I’ve done, and as long as the work I’ve done is represented by work I’ve done since I’ve been in a wheelchair, I don’t feel any particular need to tell them about it” (Maggio interview). For her, this conversation happens after a job has been offered. When she considers a job before she accepts it she finds out if their storage is accessible and whatever accommodations they make are acceptable. As she puts it, “I would never get off in some place without making sure everything was hunky-dory” (Maggio interview). Hopefully, it can be as simple as letting someone know they use a wheelchair. One

of Maggio's goals is, "to branch out more outside of Chicago. I would like to work at some new theatre companies that I haven't worked at before" (interview). Like many designers in the industry, working in just one city isn't how they find the most exciting projects to work on. Maggio will need to figure out how she can manage the traveling and if a particular job is worth the trek. She will also need to work with unfamiliar theaters and staff, testing her communication skills. With every job she takes, another theatre will learn how possible it is to accommodate someone with a disability.

When wheelchair access isn't what needs to be accommodated a further discussion is required. Celestine Ranney-Howes ran into this when she was diagnosed with post-polio syndrome. She said, "When I was diagnosed [while I was] at the Arena, I went directly to my supervisor and said 'this is the issue'" (interview). They were only semi-accommodating because they weren't educated on how to deal with the situation. Because she doesn't look disabled, it is hard for her employer to know what she needs which leads to frustration.

Michael Maag has had many of his needs met because his employer believes in inclusion.

This is part of the company's mission:

Bill Rouch is the artistic director and is very much about diversity. If we hadn't had this experience together, the Oregon Festival and me, of learning what happens when somebody has a spinal cord injury and how it affects their life and how it affects their work... this place that is pretty opened minded, and very accommodating. I think young people applying and people with a disability applying here would have as fair a shake as anybody else. (Maag interview)

He remarks on how they made things work by saying, "Everybody was on board with ideas that this is just something we have to do to make it work" (Maag interview). The open-minded way

that Maag's employer and team have handled the problems that have arisen provides an optimistic outlook for disabled people seeking successful careers in theatre.

Knowing what is needed is helpful in these conversations about accommodation. Aware of his needs, Bruce Auerbach says, "I've approached employers asking for special equipment, and I found they were forthcoming every time" (interview). As he puts it, "they don't understand at first glance how to respond to that—so sometimes I have to educate my employer on the rules and regulations are in their own institution" (Auerbach interview). This is why the disabled person must typically approach the employer, and not vice versa. Even if the disabled person does not yet have a solution in mind, knowing the needs and arriving with ideas of what accommodations can be made helps both parties move the conversation forward.

These disabled designers and technicians have been paving the way for others in the theatre industry when it comes to accommodations for the differently-abled. Overall they feel that an artist with a disability should pursue his career. If he has the talent to be a good actor, designer or technician he should be in the industry. This doesn't mean that a person with a disability won't come up against others who believe he's fighting windmills. These designers believe that having ideas on how to solve the problem assists in the process because the disabled artist himself is the best person to know how to deal with his limitations. It also helps for the artist to be aware of his own disability and not ignore unmet needs but rather be an advocate for himself. The first major task is educating people about disabilities and how inclusion of all benefits all. These designers are saying that it is time to break down the barriers of the performance industry and work towards full inclusion.

## **Conclusion**

The inclusion of the disabled artist in theatre both onstage and backstage is presently calling for social consciousness. With Aimee Mullins' call for redefining the word disability, this can be achieved. Performance is the exact venue that education of disability studies can make this goal a reality. Along with including actors, designers, and technicians in professional theatres and accommodating for their needs, the expansion of companies solely devoted to differently-abled performers should also be expanded. This expansion will not occur until there are more artists to fill these roles. Proper education of these differently-abled artists is necessary for them to achieve a professional standard. With the understanding of how current professionals are achieving success in the theatre industry one can easily envision a path for oneself. I feel that raising the social consciousness of the inclusion of disabled artist in American theatre will in turn change communal values positively.

With designers and companies such as I have mentioned paving the way, the promise of inclusion is within reach. With more people who have disabilities entering the industry, valuable players in bringing about change will come to the surface. So as long as these companies and more continue to strive for full inclusion, the possibilities are endless as to what the effect on society will be. This path is uncharted and it is up to young, differently-abled artists to move ahead boldly. Like any journey to points unknown there is the potential for immense pain but also, more importantly, for greatness. We are beginning our journey in a dark and fearful, a "disabled" mindset and it is my hope that my journey as an artist-advocate will help guide

society to a destination where differently-abled is seen, clearly and fearlessly as another colorful piece in the patchwork of our strong society.

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